

Capstone Project 2021

Executive Summary

Aid Effectiveness and Humanitarian
Action: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

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The research was conducted in the period from March 2021 to December 2021 as part of an applied research project (ARP). The deliverable of the ARP is a 10,000 word report responding to HERE-Geneva's project proposal with the guidance of the partner organisation and academic supervisions from the Institute.

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The following document provides a short summary of the research and findings, if you would like to read the full report, please feel free to contact Marta Quadrini Mosca Moschini at marta.quadrini@graduateinstitute.ch

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Over the years, considerable attention has been allocated to the questions of impactfulness and effectiveness of international and humanitarian aid. Among the most important developments of the last few decades, was the creation of the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) by the OECD Organisation for (Economic Co-operation and Development), which has become the “gold standard” of foreign aid in the humanitarian and development sectors since its inception in 1969, and remains the primary source of funding for development aid. To evaluate the extent to which ODA was meeting the objectives envisioned for each development project overseas, the OECD-DAC (OECD-Development Assistance Committee) criteria was introduced in 1991. The introduction of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria gave evaluators the opportunity to investigate the notion of humanitarian and developmental aid effectiveness and assisted the experts and practitioners in further navigating the humanitarian and development sectors towards more effective evaluations of aid projects.

In 2019, the revised OECD-DAC evaluation criteria was released, in an attempt to improve the quality and usefulness of the evaluation and strengthen the contribution of evaluation to sustainable development (OECD 2019). In the new criteria, the five core domains - *Effectiveness, Impact, Relevance, Efficiency, and Sustainability* remain unchanged, but a sixth element was added - *Coherence* - to include the evaluation question of “How well does the intervention fit?”.

Nonetheless, with the concept of aid encompassing such diverse programmatic tools and goals - from more development-focused goals (such as poverty alleviation) to more humanitarian-focused goals (such as crisis response) - the distinction between the development and humanitarian fields appeared to merge more over time under the umbrella term of “international aid”. Therefore, evaluators and practitioners have been struggling to grapple with the OECD-DAC criteria, which was needed as a standard for evaluation but also obscured many of the complexities of conducting proper and timely evaluations in the humanitarian field, compared to the development sector.

This report aims to investigate the evolution of the disjunction between the development and humanitarian fields and their aid evaluations, by looking at the extent to which the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria can be applied to humanitarian action. Our approach in answering this question was three-fold, each one aimed at unpacking a concept of interest:

- 1) the notion of aid effectiveness and its evaluation criteria
- 2) the notion of humanitarian effectiveness; and finally
- 3) the link between aid effectiveness and humanitarian effectiveness

The methodological approach of this study lies in two parts: a comprehensive desk review and the qualitative analysis of the input from our key informants from the humanitarian and development sectors. Through our analytical section, we also examined how humanitarian aid evaluation can be refined and improved.

The full report includes five main sections: Section 1 contextualises the research question and positions it in the picture of aid effectiveness versus humanitarian effectiveness; Section 2 discusses the overarching research question and the sub-questions according to the three-fold approach; Section 3 outlines and justifies the methodological approach; Section 4 elaborates on the history of aid, with special attention to the convergence and divergence between development and humanitarian aid; and finally, Section 5 analyses the OECD-DAC criteria and presents the opinions on the applicability of the aid evaluation criteria from the literature and the key informants. It also highlights areas relating to aid evaluation that underlied the conduct of evaluation and gives examples to approach the current bottleneck.

The outcomes of this research are as follows:

Our desk review focuses on the convergence and divergence of the concepts of development aid and humanitarian, as presented in three distinct sections: an analysis of the definitions of these terms; an overview of the chronological developments and the historical evolutions of these terms; and finally, the characteristics and roles of humanitarian aid, and its link to development aid. What can be drawn from our desk review, is that the notions of development aid and humanitarian aid are indeed distinct, and that the convergence of these fields over the years has prompted the humanitarian field to react through a proliferation of forums, summits, and guides tailored to its specific needs in the context of carrying out projects.

Our subsequent analytical section drew on the data collected via semi-structured interviews with key informants to discuss in greater detail: the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria themselves and how they are perceived by the experts, including researchers, evaluators, and practitioners within the development and humanitarian fields; as well as the evaluation of humanitarian effectiveness. The latter was done via a thematic analysis that reflected on two prominent issues that came up during our discussions with our informants namely *coordination* - including data coordination and interagency coordination - and *the political economy of humanitarian action*, illustrated by a case study example of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Through this analytical section, we wanted to highlight the external factors - beyond the criteria themselves - that require further assessment, based on the different disciplines of our informants that spanned different fields and were thus able to offer us diverse and holistic perspectives.

The OECD-DAC criteria possess weaknesses and limitations, despite having been a “gold standard” of evaluation. In the context of humanitarian action, some of the issues have been addressed by the ALNAP guide (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance). The ALNAP adapted evaluation criteria dedicated a specific criterion to address this issue. Nevertheless, coordination remains one of “the biggest problems seen in humanitarian action since the 1990s” (ALNAP 2016, 111). Nevertheless, the question remains: is the ALNAP-adapted OECD-DAC criteria an adequate framework for evaluators and practitioners to use in measuring the performance of all projects? Our findings point out that there is a spectrum of opinions, which are not specifically regarding the validity of the ALNAP-adapted OECD-DAC criteria per se, as the literature suggests that it nonetheless represents a solid approach to evaluation. Our informants point out that, regardless of which evaluative criterion is used, it’s not the criteria themselves that are inadequate as a tool for evaluation but it’s rather their instrumentalisation that is defined when conducting evaluations. This relates back to the fine-tuning required to correctly capture the on-the-ground realities, thus going above and beyond the criteria themselves.

In the interviews with our key informants, the questions were raised for all the elements of the OECD-DAC criteria. Are humanitarian projects really relevant or are there additional motives? Is it effective or is it solely portrayed as such? Is it sustainable or is that just a stance being claimed? Furthermore, there were additional exploratory questions on their perspectives on effective aid evaluations and how to articulate and fill the gaps between the evaluations they use and the effectiveness of humanitarian and development projects. We found that the extent to which the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria is applicable to humanitarian action depends largely on the amount of pressure that these external factors can exert on the design, execution and evaluation of humanitarian projects, and on humanitarian organisations themselves.

In conclusion, our research shows that there remains a division between the two branches of foreign aid that originates from the difference in the principles and the perception of effectiveness. This difference prevents the two disciplines from being fully compatible with each other in terms of aim, execution and thus, evaluation. The OECD-DAC evaluation criteria represent an effort to further merge them. Nevertheless, the applicability of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria is dependent on the *understanding* and *interpretation* of the criteria that the actor conducting the evaluation has, and that can be shaped by external factors such as the level of coordination and shared understanding of the political economy. We conclude that it is not the *substance* of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria

that is obfuscating the complexities of providing humanitarian assistance, but rather the *art* of conducting evaluations that is hindering the success of humanitarian action.

The interviews were conducted with the purpose of including various actors, with different areas of expertise within the fields we were investigating, in order to present the broadest range possible of opinions. Nevertheless, we are noting that these actors do not represent the whole network and that it is possible that different actors would express different opinions and highlight different challenges. Our sample for the interviews also featured too small a number of practitioners, and we are aware that this imbalance may have affected our findings.

References

1. ALNAP (2019). ALNAP Governance, Management and Membership.
2. OECD (2019). Better Criteria For Better Evaluation. Revised and updated evaluation criteria.