



Beyond assumptions: How humanitarians make operational decisions

(88 mins)

Leah Campbell: Hello everyone, and welcome to today's webinar. My name is Leah Campbell, I am a Senior Research Officer here at ALNAP, and I will be both chairing and also presenting within this webinar today.

As we get started, I'd like to do some introductions to who we have on the line, but we would also like to know who is in the room. We have about 100 of you so far, and a few more will probably join in the next few minutes. So we're going to launch a quick poll for you to let us know who you are and how much experience you have with this topic, as I tell you a bit about who we have on the line today.

So as I mentioned, my name is Leah Campbell. I am a Senior Research Officer at ALNAP, and I am a co-author of this research we are going to be sharing with you today about humanitarian decision making. Here at ALNAP, I also lead our work on urban humanitarian response, and I've been here at ALNAP for the past seven years.

So my co-author of this report and co-presenting the research today is Paul Knox Clarke, who is a humanitarian professional and researcher with experience working in humanitarian response in countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Mali and Sri Lanka, and is particularly interested in humanitarian performance and how this is affected by the structure, culture and processes of the humanitarian system, and of humanitarian organisations and how that performance can be improved. He spent some time within the UN, and then led an organisational effectiveness consultancy, specialising in working with international organisations, and he was ALNAP's Head of Research until quite recently and as I say, is the co-author of this report.

So Paul and I will be presenting the webinar, and we are joined today as well by two additional panellists, who are both members of our advisory group. So I will introduce those individuals to you and we will hear from them in a little bit as well.

First I'd like to introduce Alexandra Levaditis, who is a Senior Director with World Vision's disaster management team, where she is responsible for overseeing a team of humanitarian professionals to provide technical leadership and monitoring evaluation accountability and learning, research, programming strategy, digital capabilities and information management. She has also been co-leading a global stream of work to develop and embed World Vision's new programming approach, based on principles of the Nexus in fragile contexts. Previous to this role, Alexandra was responsible for capacity building of humanitarian staff, as well as

organisational development and humanitarian accountability. And as part of World Vision's Sri Lanka tsunami response, she managed the first humanitarian accountability team, and programme in the organisation. Prior to her time at World Vision, Alexandra worked primarily in the field of democracy and governance, supporting projects which promoted good governance, election administration and the development of civil society.

And finally we also have Jon Beloe, Senior Director of Strategy, Learning and Innovation for IRC. Over the past 18 years, Jon has worked in 23 different countries, across four continents, and prior to this most recent position, he was IRC's director of adaptive programmes, and deputy regional director for West Africa. Prior to joining the IRC, Jon designed and implemented community development, disaster risk reduction and WASH programmes, and he transitioned into the humanitarian sector from a human rights background, where he worked as a senior legal advisor for asylum seekers. Jon holds an MA in human rights law and an MSc in development studies.

So before we get started, we'll close the poll and find out who everyone is in terms of our audience here today. So we have quite a mixture of you, although most of you have a humanitarian background, but haven't really thought too much, or done too much work, or had much experience in decision making. So that's good to know, and we will take that into account as we go forward with the presentation.

I am going to turn over to Paul to kick us off with why this research, from the author perspective.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you Leah, and thanks so much Jon and Alexandra and everyone else for participating today. I hope it's going to be interesting and useful for everyone. Many of-, I think the majority you mentioned of our colleagues online today have not perhaps thought explicitly a lot about decision making, but I am sure that you've all made a lot of decisions, because that's the nature of life. The constant flow of decisions that one has to take, and particularly this is true of course in humanitarian contexts.

Which is why we really got involved in the decision making area. On the screen you can see that Leah and I had been working for some years around a variety of issues in leadership, humanitarian leadership, and a constant thing that kept coming up, nibbling around the edges of the work that we were doing, if you like, and sometimes putting itself front and centre, was this issue of decisions. How are decisions are being made, what decisions are being made, how do people make good decisions?

This became particularly an issue when, I think, Leah started to try and transform some of the research into useful training and learning materials, because a lot of the kind of things that we felt people could usefully get, needed quite a lot of fine-grain detail on if you're going to lead successfully, how are you successfully going to make decisions, and we became very aware that the leadership work to-date had not gone in great depth into that question, and so that's really where we started with this.

We started as often with a literature review, before going into the method that Leah will outline in just a second. And it was really interesting that we found that overall, there was very little written explicitly about decisions and how decisions are made in humanitarian operations, that perhaps more at the policy level, little bit more at the policy level, but in the actually getting things done level, very little. There were some notable exceptions to that, but there wasn't a big corpus of literature.

On the other hand, there was a lot of evaluative literature, a lot of evaluations that suggested decision making was a big problem. Unfortunately, they very seldom, if ever, went further than that to explain exactly what had gone wrong. The other thing that we found in the literature review, was that although the humanitarians may not have done a lot of research in this area, other disaster management professionals, particularly in the blue light services, fire, ambulance, police, and also in the military, and also in things like sort of the oil industry, oil rig fires and so on, had done an awful lot of thinking about how decisions are made. And so we started this in a situation where we had some ideas that were coming out of crises, but we had no idea about how relevant that research actually was to the humanitarian world, and while we knew there was a problem in the humanitarian world, we really didn't know what that problem was, and so we needed to dig deeper. Leah I will hand back to you for a description of what we did in a minute.

Leah Campbell: Thanks, Paul. Before we get into the method, we're going to hear from our two panellists about the why from their perspective. So I will turn first to Jon to hear your thoughts about what the need is for this research.

Jon Beloe: Thanks so much, Leah, and I should say from the start, had I taken that poll, I wouldn't have associated with the 11% that consider themselves experts in decision making. In fact, I think the more I learnt about this project, this area, the more self-critical I've become about my own decisions.

So I was really eager to be part of the advisory group for three main reasons. Firstly, because decision making is a complex area to navigate, and yet it's also a core humanitarian skill. So it's exciting to hear of this ambitious effort to better understand this area, which I think has been lacking in analysis for some time.

Secondly, I was intrigued by the innovative methodology using app-based diaries to capture quality of information, and I think Leah, you may be explaining this a little later on, so I won't give too many spoilers. But this together with the focus on humanitarian leaders working in countries affected by crisis I think was really exciting, and this type of real time and in-country operational research, I think has great potential to inform practice.

And then lastly, over the last few years, in particular, IRC has taken steps to improve decision making, and so learning alongside ALNAP was too good an opportunity to miss.

Leah Campbell: Thanks so much, Jon. And we'll turn over to Alexandra for your thoughts as well.

Alexandra Levaditis: Thanks, Leah. So World Vision had been engaged with past research on operational leadership, the research that Paul highlighted, in particularly the leadership paper that was done, and we worked with the findings after those papers were published around the benefits, particularly of collective decision making, which was one of the findings from one of the papers, the importance of collective decision making, and ensuring that leadership teams are collectively engaged in making important decisions, as well as the criticality of effective information management, which both the previous studies, as well as this study point out, is really closely tied to effective decision making.

My interest in participating in the advisory group was really to dig deeper into those topics and to help empower us as an organisation, but also the sector with more specific information in terms of how we can better prepare our staff to make good decisions.

So we know generally that we think quick decision making is important in humanitarian responses. Generally, we believe that a lot of the decisions that we make is based on little information, or fractured information, but that doesn't mean the decisions are good. So it was important, I think for me, to participate and for this research to really look at what are the specific components that we can help our staff, and we can train our staff on to be more effective in leadership positions.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks so much everyone. So hopefully all of our audience agree with all of us that this is an important topic to have done some research on. We're going to move now into the main presentation, and I'll start and then turn over to Paul after a few slides.

We thought it might be interesting to share with you a bit about the methodology to start off with. So as Paul mentioned, we did start with a literature review of 40 humanitarian evaluations from the past three years, as well as 60 academic and grey literature documents, and the literature review was published in 2018, and is also available on our website.

The literature review helped us to form the research questions and also generate some hypotheses, which we could use for this study, and we then came up with a methodology, which was that of a diary study. So the reason we went with a diary study is that it offered us a few things. On the one hand, we were able to capture people's decision making, humanitarian decisions, in real time as they were being made, rather than having people try and recollect months later what decisions they had made and how. We were getting people to submit diaries very shortly after making a decision, so we could really get accurate information about the situation the decision was being made in and other details.

Also importantly, it allowed us to work remotely with participants in crisis-affected countries, so we could have participants from a range of different contexts, and as researchers, we could work with the participants from afar. It also allowed something called ecological validity, which is an academic way of saying we were understanding actual decisions being made, rather than giving people, for example, a kind of made-up scenario, which might not be

applicable to their actual work. We were actually looking at decisions that humanitarians were actually making in their roles.

Finally, the diary study method offered us the chance to kind of co-produce the research with participants, because we were able to engage them over and over again, and have them regularly contribute to the decisions we were having.

So the diary study used an app called CrowdLab, and that's how people submitted their decisions, through this app which allowed them to submit whether or not they were online, and sent the data over to us right away and allowed us to do a number of the analysis. We had a mixture of open text questions, as well as questions on a one to six scale, which resulted in a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information.

To accompany the diary entries, we also interviewed each of the participants twice and also asked them to submit a number of additional questionnaires and forms, and then finally we did both statistical and qualitative analysis using the data that we had.

In terms of who the participants were, we had 55 different participants submit decisions through the diary study. Not all of them submitted the full amount. We had asked each participant to submit up to 30 decisions and ultimately, 32 of them we consider to have completed the study by submitting at least 15. Quite a few did reach 30, and there's a few actually who ended up submitting a couple more than 30. But overall we have 55 different individuals who have submitted decisions.

They came from a range of different contexts that are listed there on the screen. When we had a look at the statistics afterwards, we found that 42% were national staff, 58% international. 40% were female, 60% male, and they had a range of different length of service in the humanitarian sector. 40% of them had had over ten years' experience, and 11% of them or so had less than two years, but again that was in the humanitarian sector, a number of whom, particularly for national staff, had been working in development or human rights contexts before, and so did have some relevant experience, just not humanitarian experience.

So ultimately, we ended up with over 1,000 decisions submitted to the study by these 55 individuals. This graph here just quickly shows you what these decisions were about. So the important thing that I want to emphasise here is really the variety of decisions that are getting made. A lot of the work that we found that did reference humanitarian decision making, when we did the lit review, really focused only on decisions about response options and targeting, which are the bottom two categories there. And ultimately, we found that this is actually kind of a small number. Only about 1/5 of the decisions that are being made by humanitarians about the operation and this is important to note.

It's also important to note that because of the huge variety here, it was difficult for us to identify any statistical relationships between the various things that we were looking at, and the type of decision because there were so many different categories.

Moving on, I'll tell you a little bit about who makes the decision. Decision making in the humanitarian sector is largely social. Even those decisions that are made by individuals alone, according to them, when we asked people about them, or when they described where they had gotten information from, for example, they often indicated that even these kind of solo decisions do have an element of involving others. So quite a few decisions were made by groups or following some sort of consultation.

Humanitarian operational decisions are also often very inter-agency. 59% of the decisions submitted involved some degree of coordination between different organisations, which is quite a significant number.

On to the next slide, this graph is going to show you also just the variety of length of time, in terms of how long a decision took. So we had about 20% which took under an hour, and 10% which ended up taking over a month. We've grouped this all together, but there was two or three decisions that got close to a year ultimately. So there's quite a lot of variety there as well.

The last thing that I'm going to tell you a bit about is around the conditions in which decisions are made. When we did the literature review, and also as we've continued to kind of talk to people about these things, there's often an assumption that decision making in humanitarian context takes place under situations of great urgency, high levels of uncertainty, that these are kind of life and death situations, and there's also a lot of stress. These are things we try to look for in the literature review as a result of that, to find out more about what work was out there about decision making in these sorts of context.

So one of the things that we did in the study was be able to take a look at how many of the decisions were urgent and how many were stressful and so on. So the results of that will pop up now. As you can see, in some cases, the results are kind of what we would expect, or what the kind of commonly held assumption might be. Most decisions did seem to take place under some degree of urgency, as well as being quite significant decisions. But there was, on other aspects, less decisions were being made that were uncertain, or that were taking place under stressful conditions, and the study explores, and I won't go into too much detail, because I think there's some great quotes and examples in the study itself about the nature of these conditions, but it was interesting that while we often hear the assumption that most decisions are urgent, uncertain and significant, actually only 27% of the decisions that were submitted to the study, ticked all three of those boxes. So we need to kind of rethink some of the assumptions that we might have about especially the uncertainty of the conditions that we're making decisions in.

So with that, I'm going to turn over to Paul to continue to share findings from the study.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you, Leah. So before I do, I would just like to talk about the broad categories of decisions that we looked at for this study, and this was really something that we took largely from the literature review, and then carried forward through discussions with humanitarian colleagues into the primary research, which you've just outlined.

Really we were looking at three broad categories of decision making, decision making method. Within each of these categories, there are many subcategories, but I think it does work essentially to look at these three, and recognise that they have other things within them. So let me describe three of them.

The first one, analytical decision making, is I think the form of decision making that most of us are most familiar with. It's the one that's taught in most business schools, and in many trainings, leadership trainings and so on about decision making, and it's also the one that's used for a lot of public policy, when governments are deciding whether to invest in something or in something else, they will generally use an analytical approach. This is very much, if you like, the dominant approach.

So what is it? Basically, it's a method whereby the decision makers, first of all, identify the issue, secondly, come up with a variety of different options for addressing that issue. We can do either this or this or this or this, then they gather information about potential consequences of these options, so option A will cost so many million, but the benefits will be these, whereas option B will cost less but will have fewer benefits and so on. And then on the basis of that, they choose the best option, that is the option that provides the most value. So in a shorthand, the analytical approach is based around getting the single best result through options, through choosing options.

Let me now talk about the second approach. The second approach is the experience-based or naturalistic. Now this came up largely in the field of emergency management and disaster management, and it came out of the observation of many researchers that when they actually looked at and observed skilled disaster management professionals making decisions, they weren't using an analytical approach. Instead, what these disaster management professionals tended to do was they would look at a situation, then match that with a situation that they had encountered in the past, and then take a course of action, so decide what to do on the basis of what had worked in previous situations that worked in the past. Try that out, and then if it didn't work, go back and look for another activity that had worked in the past and try that.

So I think you can immediately see how very different this is. It's not based on options, it's based on matching. You just say, okay, what's this situation like, what did we do that worked before? And it's also not really intended to find the best possible solution. It's intended to find a solution that works. And so in those two ways, it's very different from the analytical approach.

And then the third approach that we looked at, although in slightly less detail, is what we call the procedural approach, which is really where the decision maker allows the decisions to be made for her by these standard operating procedures. So rather than actually sitting down and making a decision at all, you just do what the SOPs say you do in these kind of circumstances. It's, if you like, an alternative to having to make the decision yourself, and there are certain benefits in doing that.

So these were the three approaches. The procedural approach, the approach based on experience and the approach based on weighing up options.

Now if we move on to look at what we found about those things, the first thing, the question was what works in a humanitarian concept, and the thing that stood out to us was when we talked to the participants in the study, and I'd like at this point to make a huge shout out to the participants in the study, if any of you are taking part in this webinar, because of the massive amount of time that you dedicated to this. Many thanks. When we talked to people, the majority of the participants definitely preferred an analytical approach. It was their preferred way of making decisions.

But what was really interesting was that analytical approaches did not correlate with higher quality, perceived higher quality decisions. So although people preferred doing them, when we looked at the decisions that had been made this way, they were generally not better than decisions that had been made other ways. And that was really interesting to us, because it went very much against what we had assumed going into the research, where we thought okay, naturalistic, experiential decisions might be better when you don't have very much time, for example, you don't have time for the analytical, but generally the analytical would be preferable where time was available. So this surprised us that actually analytical decisions did worse.

We need to be cautious about that, I think. Measuring the quality of any decision is notoriously difficult to do, and for those of you who are interested, I am sure Leah can speak a bit more about the approach we took to doing that. So we can't put a huge, too massive amount of weight on this, but it was a consistent finding.

And we can't say why this is the case, why this surprise occurred, but I would like to make a couple of conjectures. The first is as Leah has outlined, the nature of the decisions that we were looking at. When decision making is taught and studied, it is often allocation type decisions that are looked at. Should we invest here or there? The kind of decisions that would have been in our outline, would have been the sort of response method decisions, and actually, as Leah has shown, only a minority of the decisions that we were looking at, were that kind of decision. So it might be one of the reasons we generally tend to feel that analytical decisions are better, is because they are better for a certain, sort of decision, and that was a minority type of decision in the humanitarian context.

The second reason why analytical decisions might have fared less well, is perhaps because our participants were not fully following effective, analytical approaches. That is the analytical method was broadly being used, but it wasn't being used particularly well, and we did see in the interviews consistently, that participants did not actually spend a lot of time generating a wide variety of options. Normally, or very often, it was only two or three options that were come up with very quickly. And if the generation of options bit of the analytical approach is not done, the whole method becomes weaker. So those are two potential reasons why the analytical approach may have scored less well.

Another surprise were the findings about information. Because again, and as a former ALNAP secretariat member, I was sort of slightly shocked by this, what we found in the research was that more information gathering did not correlate with better quality decisions. We might have expected the more information you have, the better the decision. That did not appear to be the case.

Now it was only partially unexpected, in as much as I understand that there has been other research, particularly in the military, which has also correlated this idea, that beyond a certain level of information collection, actually more information becomes redundant. But again, we can't really explain this finding. We can say it's out there, but further work would be required to explain why it's the case. I will put forward again some conjectures, based on the interviews, but we can't guarantee that this is why that was true.

The first was about the nature of the information that was sought. Basically, when we dug down to ask people what information were you looking, were you getting, it was very often information that was social. It was asking peers for their opinion. So rather than looking for primary data, evidential data based on information collection from the ground, or even from research reports, it was very much asking other people in the same situation what they thought. So it might be that the information was not as good as it could have been, or as broad as it could have been.

Also, the sort of information people seem to be collecting was often about what's going on, and not information about what are the consequences if we do this. So it might have been the nature of the information that was collected, which explains why more information didn't make for better decisions.

But there's something else that I think is quite interesting from the interviews, which is that while participants supported, and again, as with the analytical approach, we're very keen on collecting information, when asked why it wasn't always collecting information to make better decisions, it was often very largely, people were collecting information because they wanted to generate support for any decision that was made, among a group, or because they wanted to spread accountability for the decision across a number of people. And so maybe the reason that better information, more information didn't lead to better decisions, is because the reason for collecting the information was never really about the quality of the decision, it was more about getting the decision implemented and about accountability. But again, that's a conjecture.

Moving on, which approaches work best in which circumstances? Well, as we've said, we thought that different approaches would work in different contexts, but actually found that the naturalistic, experiential approach to decision making, if you remember that's the one where you think, have I seen something like this before? What worked then? Tended to be better in all circumstances. However, the analytical approach did perform relatively better in situations that were less urgent, which would sort of make sense, because there was more time then to gather information about options and weigh our options. Whereas the naturalistic

approach was relatively better in situations that were more urgent and more familiar, which would also make sense, because those are situations where you'd seen it before and you didn't have much time to make a decision.

The procedural approach, our survey design didn't allow us to really balance, to stack that up against analytical and naturalistic, but the interviews did suggest that it was also better in familiar situations, and that procedures did work, but they worked best where they were not followed rigidly but were adapted to specific contexts.

One concern is that none of the approaches that we looked at seemed to be particularly well adapted to working in situations of uncertainty, where you don't have enough information about what's happened in the past and what's going to happen in the future, and of course, many humanitarian situations are very uncertain, so there's a question still out there about what works in situations of uncertainty.

Finally, a whirlwind summary of how the study challenged at least our assumptions. It might not be challenging yours, but this is how it challenged Leah and mine. And I think the assumptions also that were made by a number of people on the advisory group as well.

First challenge, we had to really, through the interviews, rethink what decision making actually meant. We had started, I think, assuming that decision making was if you like, a moment. It was the bit where we're going to do that, not that. But actually, what we found is that decision making was often a much longer process, and it was hard to identify a specific moment. It was much more a process of developing a way of responding to a situation, and that process was about so much more than the decision. It was also about recognising the decision had to be made, determining exactly what decision had to be made, and then interacting with other people. And sometimes that process could go on for a few minutes, sometimes for several days or even months.

The second assumption that was challenged, was about how decisions are made. I think one learning that we came out with with this study, and something that we all need to be aware of, is the vast majority of decisions that our colleagues were making were being made reactively. That is, something happened and the humanitarian decision maker responded to it. Or in some cases, a procedure required it from the organisation. Only a minority of decisions were actually proactive. Only a minority were coming out of someone looking around saying, hm-mm, there's a problem that might emerge here, what should we do about it?

This, I think, reflects on a lot that's been written and observed about the way the humanitarian system and humanitarian culture works. We see the kind of problems that we're looking for, and these are perhaps a concern that should be followed up in the future.

The third set of assumptions, and Leah has spoken to this already, is I think we went in thinking, as a lot of the literature appears to do, that humanitarian decisions are urgent, they're uncertain, they're lifesaving, high significance, and as Leah has said, only around a

quarter of the decisions fulfilled all of those criteria. A lot of them were not particularly uncertain, and a lot of the people felt quite certain about the situation.

What's also interesting there is that when we looked at how those conditions impacted the decision, the assumptions we made didn't hold up. For example, we assumed that stressful decisions would generally be less good quality. But actually, what we found was the higher the level of stress, the more the correlation, the higher the quality of the decision. So stress seemed to lead to better rather than worse decisions.

The fourth set of assumptions that were challenged, and you can see, quite a lot of assumptions got challenged here, were about what's the right way to make a decision. I think, again, we kind of went in, as many of us do, with this idea that the gold standard is the analytical, evidence-based approach, but what we found is that there isn't necessarily a single right way, there are a variety of ways of making decisions that should be strongly related to the circumstances. So the effective method will depend on the circumstance. And that in some circumstances, there seems to be a good argument that we should take naturalistic, experienced-based decision making much more seriously.

Finally, the assumption that was challenged was who is making the decision and whose responsibility is it to make a good decision? And there, as with our previous work in leadership, we found that decision making is about more than the individual who has the (? 40.37), it's about more than that person who is making the decision at the time. Humanitarian decision making is very social and often involves groups, as Leah said, and as a result, the group dynamics, as much as the individual behaviour are very, very important in effective decision making.

Also, things that the organisation does have a really strong impact, appear to have a really strong impact on decision quality. For example, is it clear in the organisation who makes which decisions? To the degree that it is, the decision quality improves. Are there procedures for commonly made decisions? Again, good standard operating procedures seem to help, so we should think, as we move forward with this, that decision making is all about 'a' decision maker, it's about her, it's about the team around her and it's about the organisation, for which she works.

So I don't know about you, but we certainly were challenged by the results and found them quite interesting and important.

Leah Campbell: Great. So before we turn to your questions to our audience, by the way keep submitting those, we're going to pose a few questions to our panellists to get their reflections on the presentation and from reading the study in full, and we thought we would phrase this in a few different ways. The first question we want to ask to them is what did you find surprising in the findings of the study? What was unexpected for you? We'll turn first to Alexandra and then after that to Jon.

Alexandra Levaditis: The two main areas that I found surprising were actually areas that Paul already highlighted, and I think probably most readers would have found the first area surprising, which was the fact that analytical decisions were not viewed as superior. In fact, naturalistic decisions were viewed as superior, and while those of us that have worked in responses certainly have used a lot of naturalistic decision making, I think our bias is probably, as the paper highlights, to think that information empowers good decision making, and it was interesting, even with all the caveats and the explanations that Paul highlighted earlier, that this wasn't in fact the case.

That was quite unexpected for me. The other one was really the nature of decisions, which again, Paul talked about a little bit, but primarily the fact that while I expected reactive decision making to be the majority of decisions, and we know that we often kind of get bogged down in the day-to-day urgency of different sorts of decisions that are immediate, I was surprised that only, I think it was 8% of decisions were actually proactive in nature, had expected that to be significantly higher.

And that really made me wonder then, where's the space for things like innovation? We talk about innovation quite a lot in the sector, and while you could have innovation, certainly in reactive decision making, often innovation does come from necessity. I think it really needs the space and the thinking process to really think about how you build innovation into a programme or into a response. So that left me with some questions. What do we need to do to try and build that space and try to build the ability for more proactive decision making in our programmes?

And the other area was around what are the implications of the lack of proactive decision making around considering feedback from affected people in substantive ways, so we know we can have more reactive decision making on more operational issues, more minor issues around being included on a list or receiving some kind of assistance, or not receiving some kind of assistance, but in thinking of how we really make big changes to our programme or think about how we plan our programme in larger ways using feedback from affected people, that needs space and that needs time and that needs more proactive decision making, so how do we do that if it looks like the majority of the bandwidth (ph 45.04) is taken up by day-to-day urgent, reactive decisions.

And the paper talks quite a bit about missed decisions, which is an interesting term that really highlights the fact that there's a lot of things that kind of just don't get considered because of the busyness of the urgent.

Jon Beloe: I would also like to echo Alexandra's thoughts around analytical decision making and the surprise findings there. IRC's really striving to make more data-driven decisions, and so the finding that there was no relationship between the use of information and the quality of decision is something I am really eager to dig into, because this represents a challenge to our implicit theory of change, around how we improve decision making.

Second thing I'd like to mention is not perhaps surprising, but I found quite reaffirming. I think oftentimes, humanitarian decision making is sometimes characterised as a lone individual making urgent decisions quickly, largely based on instinct, and in fact this characterisation could be

expanded to human experience, because our minds are geared towards making a vast number of decisions quickly. So slowing that process down and making more analytical and consultative decisions isn't necessarily easy, but what was exciting I thought from the research was that while urgent decisions are most common, and experience comes out as a key factor in how we make decisions, the research also points to decision making not being an activity of an individual in isolation, but very much a social endeavour, with, I think it was 81% of decisions made through some form of consultation, I think that's exciting.

And then finally, something that I found concerning, and I think deserves further research, is that for almost half of all of the decisions made, decision makers reported feeling stressed at the time of decision making. Now Paul has rightly referenced that this actually can have a positive impact on the quality of the decision, and it's not clear exactly why the decision makers were stressed at this moment, whether it was the security environment, the gravity of the decision, or perhaps enabling environment for making that decision. But the fact that so many decision makers felt stressed, I think, deserves pause for reflection from a duty of care perspective on the stress related impact of decision making, and the situation in which people find themselves. Thanks.

Leah Campbell: Great. Many thanks to you both. I am going to turn back to you both again, in reverse order. Jon, you're up again in a moment. The next question we wanted to ask you is are there any things that you found were a gap in the paper? Paul mentioned for us, uncertainty was something that we didn't end up having many strong findings about in terms of an effective approach to make decisions within uncertainty. Are there any other things that you identified as gaps or potentials for further research?

Jon Beloe: Thanks, Leah. So this paper is bursting at the seams with findings, and it's hugely ambitious in its scope, so I don't feel as though there are gaps per se, but I do think there are opportunities for more focused research in the future. The main area that really struck me was around external and internal factors that influence decisions and more precisely, incentives and bias.

My experience has been that incentives, such as wanting to please your boss, or fear of what the donor may say, or noble incentives such as humanitarian imperative have really profound impact on many decisions and so I think better understanding the interplay between incentives would help us to both navigate them, or indeed perhaps realign them in order to promote better decision making. So that would be the first area.

Secondly, I think bias, which is certainly more difficult to navigate, however being aware of how mental shortcuts impact our decisions, I think is really important. So for example, I am prone to confirmation bias. I read The Guardian and watch Channel 4 searching for any

evidence that I can cling to that Brexit may not happen, but knowing this really helps me to seek out opposing views and maybe even one day to reading the Telegraph to look at different views. But certainly, digging into bias and how it affects humanitarian decision making I think would be something very worthwhile.

The findings also didn't show any statistical significance between the relationship between the decision maker's gender, and their approach to decision making. And I think further research on how gender dynamics and implicit gender bias impact humanitarian decision making, both in the sense of who is making the decisions, and also their experience of decision making could be a very rich vein of research.

Alexandra Levaditis: So for me I would probably echo what Jon said around not being a gap necessarily, but I think the way the research was setup, it was when we were working primarily with the decision makers, and the biggest challenge I would have for the research is that it was the decision makers that actually ranked the quality of those decisions that they made, so there was no consultation with those that were ultimately affected by the outcomes of that decision, and I wonder if that was in part the reason why naturalistic decisions were rated so much higher, or rated higher, in terms of quality, because people would view decisions that they took from instinct or from their own experience probably much more personally than a decision that was based on information provided by others or data or information collected from elsewhere. So I think that naturally created bias in terms of the ranking of the quality of decisions towards more naturalistic decisions being viewed more favourably.

So ultimately there was no, particularly in terms of feedback from affected people, who are the ultimate beneficiaries, good or bad, of our decisions. There was no feedback from them, how they felt different decisions affected their recovery, affected their daily lives. So that would probably be the biggest challenge that I would have to the research, in addition to what you had highlighted around the fact that situations like the Ebola response, for example, where many agencies had little experience, there was unclear information, and where the reliance on naturalistic decision making wasn't possible, as well as analytical decision making in many cases.

It's in those situations probably that we need to have more information around how to prepare people to make decisions in the circumstances, and it's in that space where we do have the least information from this paper.

Leah Campbell: Great, thank you again both for letting us know about the gaps and potentials for further research. A final question for you both before we turn to the Q&A from our audience today in the last half hour, what practical use does this research have? How do you think your organisations might use it, and what advice might you have for others listening along about the degree to which there's findings in this lengthy study that they might find useful?

Alexandra Levaditis: As I said at the beginning of the webinar, the reason we participated in the research and I was on the advisory group, is really to answer that question, how do we use this information? How do we make better decisions as an organisation? And some concrete plans that we have within World Vision, first, just to share the findings broadly, so just on this call we have many of the humanitarian leaders that are part of our talent development programme participating, and we're intending to share the webinar with graduates of that programme as

well as more broad in the humanitarian networks, I think. Just being aware of the need for intentionality and thinking around how you make a decision is probably the first step in being able to make an effective decision.

Another thing that we're planning to do is really to continue to expand our mentor deployment programme for those in our talent pool. So if naturalistic decisions are, if not superior, according to the research, at least equally important decision making processes, then that means we need to give our staff more opportunities to be in situations where they develop the experience, develop the mental models to rely on for future decision making, so we need to put them in those situations more frequently, and that's something that we're intending to do, to expand on, that we already do quite intentionally right now.

A third area that we're looking at, and this goes back to the analytical decision making piece on the proactive decision making, is how do we actually do that better? How do we create the space for more proactive decision making? How do we create the space for potentially looking at how we make decisions and use analytical approaches where they're appropriate and use other approaches where they're perhaps not so appropriate?

We have an upcoming meeting of our global rapid response team, which is our global surge capacity team and we're planning to incorporate, as a result of this research, some space to really think about these issues, how do we build more time for proactive decision making? What are the sorts of issues that we want to focus on, that lend themselves to more proactive decision making? What are the things that have been blocking us now for making more proactive decision making? What's the role, for example, of better information and providing information to allow us to be more proactive in our decision making? Does the use of visualised data or digital data that's more real-time, would that help us in actually being more proactive in making decisions?

And then I think finally the fourth area I would say that was highlighted in the paper is really looking at more clarity on decision roles. So this is particularly relevant in World Vision right now where we're looking at a new programming approach for working in fragile context that is very much built around Nexus thinking, where we're working much more closely with our development colleagues, and we often have different ways of making decisions, so thinking through decision making approaches really intentionally and thinking through decision rights (ph 56.24) really intentionally using this research and using our experience will be really important.

Jon Beloe: So partly inspired by this research, last month IRC dedicated a day at an international programmes retreat for 150 senior humanitarian leaders to look at how we make decisions, and we decided to run a simulation based on a project in Pakistan, divided all of these colleagues into 13 different teams, gave them incomplete data from a project dashboard and insufficient time, connected them to remote partners and technical advisors, and asked them to really dig into the project, determine its status and identify how it can move forward.

So we used this as a basis for reflection, and as you'd expect from a group of experienced humanitarian professionals, each team did a really exceptional job of identifying the issues and deciding what was most important and how to move the project forward. But the simulation also raised some really important issues about how we can create a better environment in which decisions can be made, and particularly how we can learn from failure.

Building from this, we've also established, as part of our programme quality framework, a set of standards of a number of different aspects of our work, and included in this is decision making and learning, and I think it's important that these two go hand in hand. Under this, we're encouraging colleagues to be more systematic and analytical in the decisions they make. Systematic in the sense that we don't miss decision points, and analytical in that we strive to make more use of data and appropriate consultations.

So we've tested this approach and incorporated it into our project management routines, and it's essentially a light-touch analytical framework, which we're calling an ABC framework, analyse, brainstorm and choose, so very much along the lines of what Paul articulated. But we've also tried to under-engineer this, to give space to experience-based decision making, and I think the important point here that I would like to communicate is that I wouldn't see these two approaches, analytical and naturalistic, to be mutually exclusive, and I think that when you combine the two, they can be a really powerful combination.

The challenge that this research poses to us is exactly how to bring best value to the analytical approach, given some of the findings. Thank you.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks so much to our panellists, and to all of you who have been submitting Q&A so far. So we've got a number of questions and we're going to jump into them. I thought I would just start by taking the liberty to answer a couple ones that I can do quite quickly, quite specific questions that people have asked, and then I will turn over to others on the call to get into some of the more discursive ones.

The first one, someone wanted to know how we define stress, or stressful environments. Quite straightforward, this one was a question on a one to six point scale, that individuals submitting a decision indicated where on that scale they would place themselves at the time of submitting the decision, and the question they were asked to rank on the scale was how much stress were you experiencing at the time of making this decision. So it was self-reported and what was considered stressful, we did find in the interviews between one person and another did vary,

but we asked each individual to indicate how stressful they found that moment of making the decision.

Someone asked whether there were any differences between the decision making between national and international staff. Here we did not find any statistical relationships between being from the place where you were working or being international, however there was a significant

finding between understanding the context and making better decisions. So the more someone understood the context, the better their decision making was. There's a section on that towards the end of the report about the value of experience, and familiarity.

Someone asked whether people referred to the humanitarian principles. We didn't ask specifically each individual to let us know about the principles in the diary study, but we did actually ask this in the interviews, and there's a box in the study that talks about the participants various thoughts about the humanitarian principles and refers to some further literature there.

And finally, someone asked what level of staff were included in the study. So the scope of this report was to look at operational decision making. So we looked at-, and all of our participants were in country decision makers, making decisions about the operational response. So we asked them to exclude any strategic decisions that they might be involved in, such as the country strategy for the next five years, as well as any technical decisions they might be contributing to, for example if they were involved in the revision of standards for a global shelter, standard approach of doing something within a certain sector. We asked them to exclude those as well, as well as their personal decisions.

So we focused on operational decisions made by in country decision makers, and we didn't restrict people's exact job titles. We asked them to be involved in making decisions, and so we ended up with quite a range of people, which is highlighted through the levels of experience that different people have, and many of these were country managers, or head of mission, or a project lead, or somehow otherwise involved in decision making team, so not necessarily just the kind of head of an organisation and country, but quite a range.

So hopefully those briefly answer some of your specific questions. And now we'll go into one of the questions that's been asked by our audience in advance, and then I will get to the ones submitted live.

One of the questions that we've been asked is a bit outside of the scope of the research, but I thought given the expertise that we have on the line in the M&E sphere, I will turn to Alexandra and then Paul on this one to give you a heads up. The question is, how can M&E support good decision making in the sector? And I guess you can base this either on your own reflections in your organisation, or the findings of the study. What role do you think monitoring and evaluation can have in supporting good decision making for humanitarians? So over to Alexandra.

Alexandra Levaditis: Well, I think that's kind of the question that I posed myself after looking at the outcomes of the paper, in terms of the analytical decision making piece. Again, I think similar to what Paul reflected on, M&E certainly is critical in terms of making certain kinds of decisions. So it wouldn't necessarily be something that would be consulted for HR decisions or security decisions necessarily, which often were the decisions that were reviewed in this paper, but certainly M&E is critical to making any kind of targeting decisions or programming decisions and

I think it's in that space that we really need to spend some more time reflecting how information from MEAL processes is used for analytical decision making.

The paper talks a bit about the need for more really digestible forms of information, so it may be that part of the reason why analytical approaches didn't work so well in this study was the fact that we tend to write big papers, or have too much information that we present to decision makers and what we really need to focus on an invest on is not just a collection of good data, but actually the processing of that data, in ways that can be more useful for decision makers. So in more real-time ways, or in more digestible formats, more visual, integrated with other kinds of reporting processes that decision makers see, because often we know M&E data tends to stay sort of in the programming space and doesn't always go to a response leadership space. So I think all of these things need to be reflected on, not just the getting good data, but actually making the data accessible to decision makers.

Paul Knox Clarke: Maybe one for M and one for E. The E piece, the evaluative piece, I would just like to underline and agree with what you've just said there, Alexandra. Given that the overwhelming source of information for participants was other humanitarians, any work I think which aims, including our own work, which aims to improve the humanitarian condition, will only work where it becomes socialised. Where rather being a report or something that is something people are talking about, so the big question for evaluations is, always has been, how do you move them off the shelf, and get them into general discussion about what works. And I think in some places that's been done very successfully, for example, cash. But there are other issues where maybe the lessons from cash and accountability and other issues could be learnt by other elements.

For the M piece I think, you know, I was really struck by the point about why do we make decisions, and what are we paying attention to. And how this, given the number of different things that are going on in a situation like this, it's understandable that there's only a certain amount of attention that can be paid. The danger with that, is we tend to pay attention only to those things which perhaps directly relate to our organisational mandate, or to those things which remind us of things that we've seen before, or we see the things we expect to see, we look for the things we expect to see.

I think the danger then is we only make decisions about the things that we expect to make decisions about, and might miss really important emerging situations. I think the role for M is to expand to the degree possible, to be looking at monitoring not just the response, but the situation. And the relationship the response is having on the situation, so that humanitarians

can make good decisions in time. As Jon has pointed out already, a lot of that is just asking people who live there what's going on. Thank you.

Leah Campbell: Great. Thanks. A couple of people have asked a couple of different questions about the difference between risk and uncertainty, and I thought it would be helpful, I'll do a first stab at this one and then maybe turn back to Paul for anything I've missed here, to go back to

something that we outlined in the decision making literature review, so we haven't repeated it in this study, so if this is of interest to you then take a look at the original lit review, which is also available on our website, because these terms often get used as if they're the same thing, and actually there is a difference.

We find that often the humanitarian sector uses the term 'risk' to be synonymous with negative consequences, and the decisions get described as kind of risky whenever they have potentially extreme outcomes, or there's a lot of uncertainty, but actually, risk, it does mean something different. This is an important distinction when it comes into decision making, and which approaches might be most effective.

So just to kind of outline what we've put in the literature review, we define threat as something that might happen, an event or situation which could occur, and if it occurred it would lead to a negative outcome, for example, a fire.

When we talk about a threat, this is kind of a general statement, but we're not necessarily saying if it's likely to happen, or what the consequence would be, just that there could be a negative outcome if something happened.

Risk is a bit more precise. It's the chance that that event or outcome could actually happen, combined with what the impact would be if it did happen. So risk, if you want to have a short definition, is the probability times the impact of a potential threat. So going back to the fire, it would be a risk, but only if you were able to quantify the likelihood and consequence of that happening. Otherwise it remains a threat, something that you generally want to avoid, but not something that you really quantify and measure.

So when people talk about risk aversion, they often actually mean threat aversion, just wanting to avoid bad things, and when we often talk about risk management, this is where we kind of blur the lines, and we actually often mean uncertainty management. We talk about risk management, meaning actually that we want to manage a situation where a threat exists, but where the likelihood of it happening or the consequences of it happening are not known, and actually probably cannot be known or even estimated.

So the important thing I am emphasising here is that there is a difference between risk which is something we can kind of quantify, and uncertainty which is something that we know would have a potential negative impact, but which we actually don't know how likely it is that it might happen, or what the potential consequences could be, and so in the study, when we're talking about uncertainty, we are not talking about things that can be quantified. If we had all the information about risks, that would be a context where an analytical approach could be

quite effective, because, for example, if you have something like the insurance agency, they make a kind of business out of being able to calculate the risk of something happening, so that they can make decisions about what premium levels to offer people and so on, based on the huge amount of data that they have about events happening.

However, with uncertainty, because we don't know the likelihood or the possible impact, a different sort of approach might be needed, and unfortunately, as we've discussed, none of the decision making approach that we often use, tend to be extremely effective in uncertainty.

But that's a kind of brief on the difference between risk and uncertainty. And maybe in the interest of time, I will ask my next question, but then if anyone has anything to add to that one, then please go ahead.

The next question focuses on evidence, and this is something that came up. Obviously we mentioned it in the study, and our panellists mentioned it as something that they wanted to kind of dig into a bit deeper. So I will turn first to Paul and then maybe to Jon afterwards, because I know this is something that you are particularly interested in. Given the findings of the study, maybe we can just reiterate what those are, because I think there is a potential for misunderstanding what we're saying. We want to be clear here. What role does evidence play in decision making, and what is the way forward for the kind of evidence community taking into consideration the findings of the study? Over to you, Paul.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thanks. It's a big but very important question. I will do my best to answer it briefly.

We need to be careful, I think, not to assume that evidence and information are the same thing, because often evidence, I think, is still used as a generic kind of thing when actually people are just talking about information.

In ALNAP, we've always said that evidence is information which is relevant to supporting or refuting a specific proposition. So information doesn't become evidence until you have a question. And then some of the information you have, will be relevant to answering that question, and it will become evidence for or against.

Given that, I think we need to be clear, and this goes back to what you were just saying, about the difference in uncertainty and risk, that there are some kinds of questions where it would be a terrible mistake not to be looking at the information that can be used as evidence.

So if, for example, it's response choice, we have a situation like this, what works? What works to reduce child mortality, or acute malnutrition in these kind of situations? There's lots of information that relates to that, and it is the kind of question where that information is useful. But there are other questions where the answer is too uncertain, yeah? Where it would be very hard to collect information about it, and even if we had the information about the various options, there's a question as to whether it would be useful.

And so an operational question there might be, in a situation of conflict, where there are a variety of movement options, where a population might stay in one place or might move in a variety of different directions, it's quite hard to get evidence to say where are people going to go? And

there it might be better to be using other approaches. So there is a role for evidence, it's centrally important, but it's more important for certain kinds of questions than for others.

Jon Beloe: So, building on what Paul has just said, I think I would like to take it in a slightly different direction, and look at holistic decision making, and how not just evidence but data and information can be balanced in a decision making process. So at the IRC, we are committed to having evidence informed design of projects and indeed evidence generating projects as well.

I think evidence for IRC is very important in terms of directing the choice of response, so that the theory of change behind a particular intervention, and that's based on randomised control trials from a whole series of different instances, to inform what works in a particular context.

But then that also needs to be balanced with data, in the sense of needs assessment data, and monitoring data, but also information and perspectives. So what is it that the clients' are saying is most important to them, what is the analysis of the contextual situation?

So I don't think it's a question of to what extent evidence should play a role in decision making, rather, for me, it's the balance between evidence, data and different perspectives and how you weigh those and how you sequence them in response choice.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks to you both. One of the things that both Alexandra and Jon, you mentioned in your comments about how you might be able to take the findings forward into your organisations, kind of relate to one of the questions that's come in, and I am going to paraphrase it, but it's about the potential for things like serious gaming, the scenario example that you described Jon, and these sorts of innovative approaches and to what degree you think they might be a good option to support capacity building, especially when we are looking at being able to develop people's proactive decision making skills, as well as their kind of ability to respond with experience and so on. Over to you Alexandra and then Jon about any thoughts you have about the utility of these sorts of innovative, capacity building, scenario-based or serious gaming based approaches.

Alexandra Levaditis: At World Vision we've been using simulations for many, many years, just like many organisations, because they are an effective tool at replicating as best you can a response situation, so that staff can practice different things. Certainly decision making is one of the areas that we've focused on, particularly in our simulations and in a lot of our face-to-face staff development programmes, and that can certainly be applied online. So the same principles can be applied online where you create scenarios and staff that replicate real-life and stuff have to make decisions and then manage the consequences of those decisions.

So I think anything that allows more practice, particularly in line with building the kind of naturalistic muscle of staff is something that's beneficial, so the more you practice something,

the better you are at, the better you are exposed to different sorts of situations. I would say certainly that would be a really effective, both of those, face-to-face and virtual scenarios, and gaming would be effective ways to build those skills.

Jon Beloe: Yes, fully endorse what Alexandra said. Certainly simulations we found to be a really great tool for capacity building. I think the more experiential the learning can be, the better. Of course decision making isn't an academic exercise, so the closer you can have the situation to real life in which people can learn, the better.

I would also say there was a utility to scenario planning beyond just capacity building. I think it's actually a very relevant tool for decision making, and in a number of contexts, for example in Diffa in Niger we found scenario planning to be an incredibly effective tool for decision making in a proactive sense.

Leah Campbell: Great. We might only have time for one or two more, I will try and squeeze in two if I can. I am going to turn to you, Paul, to see if you can remember an example of a procedural decision, or if you can give an illustrative one, someone has asked if we can provide an example of what would be a kind of decision made by procedure, either I guess if you can recall one from the study, or if you can give an illustrative example. Over to you.

Paul Knox Clarke: Yeah, there was one which was about distributions, making food distributions. I don't remember the exact procedures that were involved, but it was basically that in a situation where there is evidence supporting the need for food, the procedure is you do a blanket distribution for the first, I can't remember how many days it was, while collecting more information around targeting.

Now it's not rocket science, but what that decision does, I think, what that procedure does, there's a couple of things. Three things. First of all, it gives confidence to the decision makers in a challenging place, which is both significant and urgent, as to what to do. This is just how the organisation does it.

Secondly, it means that they are not wasting bandwidth and energy on what is actually a fairly obvious approach. They can take their fairly limited amount of capacity, in terms of time, and focus it on more important decisions. And thirdly, it allows evidence into-, processes can be very good ways of taking evidence of what works, and putting them into the decision making process, because you basically do-, the process is basically what the evidence tells you works in a situation.

So that one was a very simple and obvious one about how to respond in the first 72 hours of a response where there was acute malnutrition, danger of mortality, but there were also a number of others from areas of security and a lot of HR stuff, which was not always supported because often it was too slow, but these are the ways that you go about hiring staff, or these are procurement things, these are the ways you go about ensuring you've done due diligence and procurement.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks Paul and thanks to everyone. I am going to answer the final couple of questions myself, by directing you to sections in the report and then close out.

A couple of people have asked to get a bit more information about how we defined quality, and this is something we didn't go into in much depth, because the answer is quite a long one, and

we wanted to conserve the precious time we have with you today. But there is quite a detailed explanation of how we assess decision quality scores, and why we made the decisions that we did in the annex to this study.

As you can imagine, with a study like this, the methodology is quite long and involved, so the study itself only includes a short description of methodology, but there's a separate pdf that's also available on our website and it's linked to from the main report, called the annex, and in there you can find a section called 'assessing decision quality scores', which walks you through how we did this and why we made the decisions that we did, which was after a literature review of how one does assess decision quality. So we based it on common good practice.

To wrap up, I wanted to thank all of our speakers today, my co-author Paul and our two panellists, Jon and Alexandra. I would also like to thank my colleagues who have been behind the scenes here from ALNAP, Maria, Grace and Jamie, for all of their work behind the scenes, as well as, as Paul mentioned, all of the 55 decision makers, in particular the 32 who finished the study, and gave so much of their time and experience to us to be able to put something together.

For those of you who would like to know more, or who think they have colleagues who might be interested in hearing this presentation, or engaging more with this material, we're going to be doing a series of in country events. A number of them are coming up this year, those ones between November and December are listed there and you'll find links to the events on our website if you go to the events page on the ALNAP website, and there will be more events in 2020 as well in other locations.

We also have a number of supplementary materials that will be published between this month and into the new year, which focus on particular audiences. For example, we're going to write a blog just for the evidence folks to sum up some of the points that Paul and Jon made in that Q&A question earlier, as well as having a kind of so what do I do to make my decision making better, or which approach should I use for in country decision makers themselves, and so on and there's also going to be a more detailed report about the study methodology, the diary study approach, and more detail on decision quality and other sorts of things that we had to figure out how to deal with in the study.

We're also generally interested in just hearing from you. If you would like to know more information, if you want more information on anything we've talked about today, or if you think your organisation would be interested in a presentation or to get a copy of the report, please do get in touch.

Thank you all so much for sticking with us through this hour and a half. I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day. Take care, bye.