

3 steps to improve your decision-making

Making good decisions in the field is vital to effective humanitarian response. Drawing on our recent [ALNAP study on how humanitarian decision-makers make decisions in the field](#), we outline three evidence-informed steps to help humanitarian decision-makers working in country to improve their decision-making. Refer to the [‘How should I make this decision?’](#) flow chart that accompanies this note to help guide your decision-making.





1. Strengthen your situation awareness

At its simplest, situation awareness means knowing what’s happening. Situation awareness is helpful in decision-making for many reasons. It can help you to:

- understand the circumstances – how urgent or important things actually are
- generate all feasible options (see [step 3](#))
- know whether your experience is relevant
- determine who else may need to be involved or consulted
- and, critically, make decisions more proactively.

Situation awareness requires a steady flow of new information. It is critical to have regular access to a diverse range of sources. For example, continuous monitoring data can help to ensure that your awareness of what’s going on is up to date.

Helpful resources

-  Resources for situational awareness in humanitarian emergencies | Report RJ Rei and Andrej Verity, 2019
-  Improving UN situational awareness Report | Haid Willmott, 2017 (PDF)
-  Shared situational awareness in emergency management mitigation and response Conference paper | John Harrald and Theresa Jefferson, 2007
-  Designing for Situation Awareness: An Approach to User-Centered Design Book | Mica R. Endsley, 2011

2. Consciously choose how you are going to make the decision

There are various approaches you can use to make a decision. As a decision-maker, you should use these approaches according to what is right for the particular circumstances of the decision. You can refer to the [‘How should I make this decision’](#) flow chart to help you choose – and use – the most appropriate decision-making approach.

Many decision-makers assume that analytical approaches are always best and they prefer to make all decisions using analysis. In many cases, a good

analytical process (see [step 3](#)) will be appropriate. But good analytical decision-making takes time – and information. So, in some circumstances, other approaches may be better.

For example, our study found that, when decision-makers tried to use analysis in urgent and uncertain circumstances, it resulted in lower-quality decisions than decisions made using other approaches. On the other hand, experience-based decision-making is most effective in urgent, familiar circumstances.

3. Use a good process

Selecting an appropriate decision-making approach is important – but whichever approach you choose, you need to use a good process.

When using **procedure** to make a decision






Procedures and protocols can be helpful when making decisions. They are often most successful when adapted to the local context and to the specific situation. You might use procedures alongside analytical or experience-based approaches.

When using **analysis** to make a decision

Analytical decision-making is most appropriate in situations that are less urgent and have low levels of uncertainty. But, in the ALNAP study, even when analytical decision-making was used in these situations, the quality of the decisions made was marginally lower than that of decisions made using other approaches. One explanation for this may be that a proper analytical process is rarely followed.

For analytical decision-making to be effective, you need to identify all reasonable options and establish a set of clearly-defined criteria against which to compare them. If you do not have the time to do this, analytical decision-making may not be appropriate (see [step 2](#)).

Helpful resources

-  How to generate options for your decision-making | Online article | Dawna Jones
-  Generating alternatives | Online article | Decision Innovation, Inc.
-  Criteria matrix | Online article | Ava S. Butler, 2014
-  Guidance for successful evaluation [of criteria] | Document | MITRE Corporation (PDF)
-  What is a decision matrix? | Online article | ASQ





Having identified options and criteria, you then need to collect information so that you can make your comparison to decide which option is best. You should gather information for each of the reasonable options, based on the agreed criteria. For example, if cost is one of your criteria, you will need to find out what the financial implications of each option are. If the information you need is not available, and is unlikely to become available, you may need to use a different decision-making approach.

When using your **experience** to make a decision

Decision-makers are often hesitant to rely on their experience when taking a decision. But this sort of decision-making is a valid approach in certain circumstances – specifically when the decision situation is urgent and familiar to the decision-maker.

You can improve your naturalistic decision-making skills in several ways: by building confidence in using this approach; by improving your situation and context awareness ([step 1](#)); and by approaching these decisions reflexively. Before making a decision, you should ask yourself, ‘How do I know my experience is appropriate here?’ After a decision, you should reflect on what worked and what didn’t work. Over time, you will build your experience and improve the quality of your decision-making.

Helpful resources

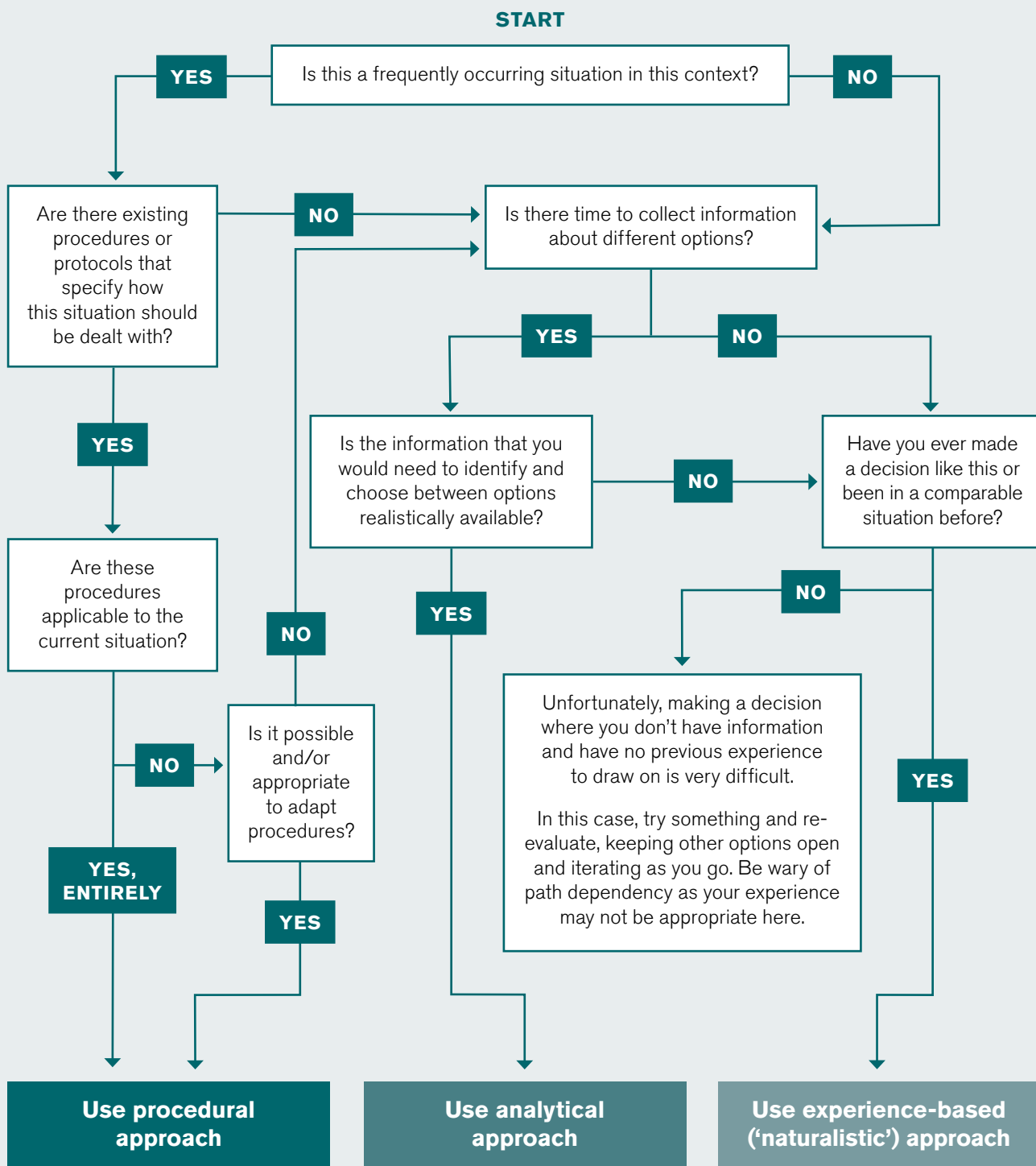
-  Risk Savvy | Book | Gerd Gigerenzer, 2015
-  Gut Feelings | Book | Gerd Gigerenzer, 2008
-  Naturalistic decision making | Journal article | Gary Klein, 2008 (PDF)
-  A naturalistic decision making perspective on studying intuitive decision making | Journal article | Gary Klein, 2015

You can find additional materials related to this research including an interactive quiz and a policy brief on the ‘Leadership’ topic page of the ALNAP website.

How should I make this decision?

1. Before you figure out how to make a decision, you first need to recognise the need for a decision to be made. This step is often overlooked by humanitarian decision-makers. Staying mindful of your understanding of the context and constantly seeking to improve this can help to make sure you do not miss the signs or information that indicates a decision is needed.

2. It is important to make a conscious selection of which decision-making approach is most suitable for the circumstances. You can use this flow chart to help you decide, but remember: it is a guide, rather than a rule; there will be circumstances in which this doesn't apply.



3. Whichever approach you determine most appropriate, you then need to use it well, employing a clear and thorough process.

Procedural approach

Procedures are often most helpful when adapted to the local context and situation.

Procedures can be used in combination with other decision-making approaches.

Analytical approach

1. Determine the criteria for a good decision
2. Identify all reasonable decision options
3. Collect information about each option
4. Compare each option against the criteria
5. Implement the option which best meets the criteria
6. Check if it's working.

If yes: Objective realised; reflect and learn.

If not: Return to step 2.

Experience-based approach

1. Identify what you did that worked previously
2. Consider what would happen if you did that now

It could work: Go to step 3.

It won't work: Return to the flowchart question 'Have you ever made a decision like this or been in a comparable situation before?'

3. Implement

4. Check if it's working.

If yes: Objective realised; reflect and learn.

If not: Return to the flowchart question 'Have you ever made a decision like this or been in a comparable situation before?'

