

# Making Better Decisions:

## How can organisations support field-based leaders?

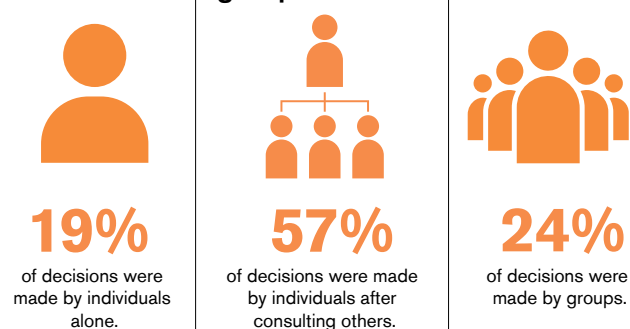
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**Good leadership is central to effective humanitarian response. Since 2010, ALNAP has focussed on the topic of leadership, making research-based recommendations to improve the quality of leadership in country offices and inter-agency fora such as HCTs and Clusters.**

A key element of effective leadership is decision-making. In this, the latest piece of research on humanitarian leadership, the ALNAP Secretariat took an in-depth look at: the types of decisions humanitarians make; the conditions under which these decisions are taken; and the processes that are most effective in making decisions. The research was based on review and statistical analysis of over 1,000 decisions made by 55 humanitarians in eight countries over a six month period.

This policy brief provides an overview of key results and makes some recommendations for the headquarters, policy and HR functions of humanitarian organisations.

**Figure 1: Percentage of decisions made by individuals and groups**



### Overview of key findings

The study found that senior humanitarian staff in country operations take decisions on a wide variety of topics, including: staffing and resource allocation (23% of total decisions); whether and how to work with other agencies (19% of total decisions); and logistics and ways of working (15% of total decisions).

**These decisions are made in a wide range of conditions.** While there is a commonly-held idea that most humanitarian decisions are made in circumstances that are urgent, ‘high-stakes’, uncertain and stressful, the majority of decisions in the study were actually taken in low stress circumstances, and in situations where the decision-maker was fairly certain about what was happening. Though circumstances contradicted popular belief, most of the decisions (80%) were still urgent and had significant consequences (78%).

**Decision-making in humanitarian operations is a social activity:** only 19% of decisions in the study were made by an individual acting alone, while 24% were made by groups and 57% by individuals in consultation with others. When decision-makers looked for information to support decisions, they tended to get this information from colleagues in their own or other organisations, and not from sources such as reports, evaluations or websites.

**Decision-making is largely reactive:** over 90% of decisions in the study were made because the individual was told to make a decision; because procedures called for a decision; or in response to an event or situation that had just occurred. Only 8% of decisions were made because the individual or group recognised a potential problem and took action to prevent or address it.

**The study considered the two main approaches for decision-making in emergency conditions: the ‘analytical’ and ‘naturalistic’.** Analytical decisions require the decision-maker to identify a range of options, and then to collect and analyse information to enable the selection of the single best option. This is the ‘classical’ approach to decision-making, and is frequently used in many areas of public policy. Naturalistic decisions, on the other hand, are based on the decision-maker’s experience. In a naturalistic decision process, the decision-maker compares the situation to similar situations they have encountered in the past, and then identifies a course of action that was successful in those situations. This approach to decision-making has been observed among experienced professionals in many urgent and high-pressure situations (such as firefighting, policing and military activities).

**Most decision-makers in the study prefer to use analytical approaches, but naturalistic approaches seem to be more effective – at least in certain circumstances.** The appeal of analytical approaches lies in the fact that they are information-based, rational, transparent and accountable. However, previous research has suggested that analytical decision-making may not be effective in urgent situations where there is not time to collect information, or in situations where information is not available to guide the selection of the best option. This research broadly supported these findings. Overall, the naturalistic decisions in the study were perceived as being better quality than the analytical decisions. The gap between naturalistic decision quality and analytical decision quality became larger the more urgent the decision became, and the more familiar the situation was to the decision-maker.

The relatively poor performance of analytical decision-making in the study might be explained by the fact that many decision makers were not following an ideal analytic decision process. In many cases, little time or attention was given to generating options and the information collected to test options was mainly from colleagues, and may not have been of good quality.

**Organisational procedures can help decision-makers – if they are well written.** In addition to the two decision-making styles outlined above, decision-makers also used organisational procedures to help make around half of the decisions in the study. In 16% of cases these procedures were followed as written, while in 37% of cases they were adapted to the context. Decision-makers generally found organisational procedures useful, but often complained that they were too long, too detailed or too cumbersome.



Decision-makers generally found organisational procedures useful, but often complained that they were too long, too detailed or too cumbersome. Photo credit: nerovivo/flickr.

## Implications for humanitarian organisations

The focus of the study was on the people making decisions in country programmes, however findings suggest that actions taken at Headquarters play an important part in decision-making at country-level. Organisational policies and structures create the conditions within which decisions are made and can go a long way in making country-level decision making more or less effective.

Organisations could create better conditions for effective country-level decision-making by:

1. **Clarifying the scope of the country representative / director to make decisions:** which decisions she is authorised and expected to make. The country representative should be encouraged, in turn, to clarify the scope of managers in the country office to make decisions. In the study, a number of interviewees suggested that they had not made important decisions because it was not clear to them who had responsibility for taking the decision: the issue effectively ‘fell into the cracks’.
2. **Ensuring that mechanisms are in place to provide decision-makers with the information that they need.** In particular, monitoring systems should provide information on changes in the immediate situation, and on the outcomes of humanitarian activities, as well as information on humanitarian outputs. A better understanding of the emergency situation would allow decision-makers to recognise when decisions might be required and make more proactive decisions.
3. **Clarifying the circumstances under which they are prepared to allow country-level leaders to make decisions based on their experience or intuition.** The study found that decisions of this type can be effective, particularly in urgent situations. However many decision-makers were uncomfortable using these ‘naturalistic’ decision approaches, in part because they felt they would not be able to defend these decisions to their organisation if they led to negative results.
4. **Providing training in decision-making to country-level staff.** This training should: encourage participants to consider the situation in which any given decision is being made (is it urgent? How much information is available? How similar is this situation to previous situations in which I have been involved?); clarify which decision style is best to use under which circumstances; make participants aware of the key steps of analytical and of naturalistic decision-making; and encourage participants to consider how these different decision styles can be used in group settings.
5. **Providing simple, standardised operating procedures.** For commonly encountered situations, country offices should be encouraged to make use of standard operating procedures (SOPs) once adapted to local conditions.
6. **Changing processes and procedures to ensure greater use of evidence and information in humanitarian decision-making** The study suggested that humanitarian leaders were unlikely to look for documentary evidence before making a decision. To address this, evidence-related steps should be embedded in decision processes (e.g. when requesting funding for an operation, the decision-maker should be able to provide assessment evidence of current or anticipated need; as well as evidence that the proposed response ‘works’ in meeting that need). SOPs should also be reviewed to ensure that they are based on evidence of ‘what works’. As humanitarians tend to source information from their peers, measures should also be taken to ‘socialise’ evidence of what works (through training courses, meetings and accessible media such as short films distributed via social media).
7. **Encouraging country-level staff to conduct after-action reviews and consider evaluation findings.** There was some evidence in the study that people who reflected on previous responses were more likely to make anticipatory and proactive decisions.