Using Diaries to Explore Humanitarian Decision-Making

A methods note

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UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/
Crescent Movement, donors, academics
and consultants dedicated to learning how
to improve response to humanitarian crises.

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1 Introduction to this methods note

1.1 Background and objectives

In November 2019, ALNAP published the study '**Beyond Assumptions: How humanitarians make operational decisions**' (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2019a). The study was the culmination of more than two years of research that began with a **scoping literature review**, published in April 2018 (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2018). This focus on decision-making emerged from ALNAP's ongoing work on humanitarian leadership, which revealed the critical importance of effective decision making – see, for example, the 2014 study '**Between Chaos and Control**' (Knox Clarke, 2014).

'Beyond Assumptions' outlines a range of findings about humanitarian decision-making. It focuses on challenges that operational leaders in humanitarian responses face because of the conditions in which they often find themselves (where time and information are often scarce). It considers the approaches humanitarian leaders can use to make decisions, particularly in the context of these circumstances.

A detailed account of the methodology used in the 'Beyond Assumptions' study, including the statistical tests and samples of participant briefing sheets, can be found within the **methodological annex** that accompanies it (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2019b).

This methods note does not seek to replicate the details of the methodology used in ALNAP's 'Beyond Assumptions' study; rather it aims to complement it by offering a discursive consideration of some of the choices the research team made and of how some of the key challenges were addressed. In particular, the methods note will focus on the use of a diary approach.

This methods note will be of use to researchers who may be interested in undertaking similar research. As such, this note will not outline any findings on humanitarian decision-making – these can be found in the 'Beyond Assumptions' study itself or the various accompanying resources on **humanitarian leadership**.

2 Defining the research questions

The decision to research humanitarian decision-making was influenced by ALNAP's previous work on leadership. During the course of this work, researchers noted that decision-making was frequently criticised within humanitarian evaluations and studies - particularly those consulted for ALNAP's **State of the Humanitarian System** reports. At the same time, effective decision-making was identified in our previous research as key to good leadership in the sector.

It was clear that there was room for decision-making in the sector to improve, but more background was needed. The first step was therefore to conduct a scoping literature review. This review looked to answer the following questions:

- What sorts of operational decisions do humanitarians make?
- Are there elements of the humanitarian context that place specific demands or requirements on the process of decision-making?
- What challenges do these elements pose for decision-making in operational humanitarian response?
- What approaches to decision-making does the literature propose, and how relevant are they for operational humanitarian response, given the challenges of the humanitarian context?

ALNAP's previous leadership research had found value in drawing not just from humanitarian literature but also from the world of emergency management. While different to humanitarian response in many ways, emergency management does share some similarities, particularly in relation to the urgency, uncertainty and severity of the circumstances in which leaders find themselves. For this reason, the literature review included not just humanitarian literature but any literature relating to decisions made in emergency contexts.

During the course of the literature review, it became clear that little previous academic attention had been paid to humanitarian decision-making, and that one of the core aims of ALNAP's forthcoming study should be to add to the documented body of evidence about how decisions are made in the sector.

There also appeared to be a disconnect between academic literature, which described various decision-making approaches, and other sources, such as humanitarian evaluations. And it was not clear to what extent the approaches outlined in the literature would be effective in the conditions within which humanitarian leaders were working.

With this in mind, the study authors identified the following questions for further research:

- What is the nature of humanitarian decision-making? (What decisions are made? How are decisions made? Under what conditions?)
- Do certain decision-approaches achieve higher quality decisions? Under what conditions?
- How can those decision-making approaches be used most effectively by humanitarians?
- What needs to change (for organisations, information managers, individual decision-makers, leadership teams, etc.)?

3 Selecting the research method

3.1 Why a diary study?

The research questions demanded a methodology that would:
- accurately record the nature of decisions being made by humanitarian decisionmakers, in particular the conditions they were made within (how urgent, stressful, etc.) and how the decision was made
- be able to measure the quality of each decision
- provide consistent information about each decision so they could be compared against one another
- be user friendly and not place a burden on decision-makers taking part.

ALNAP considered a number of methods (including interviews and questionnaires) that had been used in its previous leadership research, as well as lab-based experiments using scenarios or vignettes. Ultimately, however, the researchers wanted to take a more ethnographic approach – one that would identify peoples' habits and customs. In particular, they needed a methodology that would facilitate an accurate understanding of operational decisions as they were being made. For these reasons, ALNAP used a diary study combined with participant interviews and questionnaires to provide additional information.

3.2 Introduction to diary studies

While they do not appear to have been used previously in research on the humanitarian sector, diary methods are an established practice, particularly in studies of human behaviour (Van Eerde et al., 2005).

Diaries can collect both qualitative and quantitative information and can be either structured, whereby participants answer specific questions or open for participants to record whatever they want to. ALNAP used the former, structured approach. Diaries can be completed in paper or electronic format. ALNAP used CrowdLab, an app allowing offline submission, and typed and audio submissions.

Diary methods have a number of advantages:

Ecological validity: Whereas lab experiments or surveys can be criticised for not being generalisable to real life, diary studies collect information about situations that participants are actually encountering, in their own contexts (Runyan et al., 2013).

Data collection in real time: Diaries allow for an experience to be documented immediately, which is important for data accuracy. The approach has been credited with getting a 'more accurate' understanding that is 'closer to the truth' (Hyers, 2018: 24) than approaches that rely on participants to recall experiences after the fact, or to hypothesise about what they might do in future (Van Eerde et al., 2005; Sapounakis, 2011)

Longitudinal data: In a diary study, information is collected regularly, which provides multiple inputs from the same participant over time (Bolger et al., 2003; Snowden, 2015; Sapounakis, 2011)

Remote access: By their nature, diary studies allow participants to document 'situations which researchers cannot access' (Elliott, 1997). In ALNAP's study, participants in eight countries simultaneously submitted diary entries via a smartphone app.

Participant role: Diary studies allow for a degree of participant 'co-creation' (Hyers, 2018). This is particularly the case where participants are offered space in which to share their own perception of their experiences (Radcliffe, 2013).

More about diary studies: key resources

- Hyers, L. (2018) *Diary Methods: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Symon, G. (2004) 'Qualitative research diaries', in Cassell, C. and Symon, G. (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Bolger, N., Davis, A. and Rafaeli, E. (2003) 'Diary methods: capturing life as it is lived'. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54(February): 579–616.

- Snowden, M. (2015) 'Use of diaries in research'. *Nursing Standard*, 29(44): 36–41.

4 Overcoming methodological challenges

A great deal of researcher time is required for a successful diary study – first to recruit and brief participants but also throughout the data collection phase. Entries should be checked throughout the study to ensure that participants have a shared understanding and provide sufficient level of detail, and participants may need reminders and support during the process. If these efforts are successful, researchers can find themselves with a large data set to then make sense of (Hyers, 2018).

In addition to the considerable amount of researcher time required, ALNAP faced three other particular challenges.

4.1 Identifying participants – and retaining them

The study design asked a lot from participants. Each diary submission could take up to 20 minutes, so with 30 entries, some participants spent more than 10 hours simply submitting their entries. Additionally, participants attended a briefing session, were interviewed twice and completed several questionnaires. Potential participants were informed of this at the start, and as a result most people contacted chose not to be involved. Many of the participants who did ultimately choose to take part found that the study was more demanding on their time than they had anticipated. Participants in the study found submitting the diaries on a regular basis quite challenging: 23 out of 32 participants surveyed at the end of the study reported the most challenging part of participating was finding the time to submit decisions.
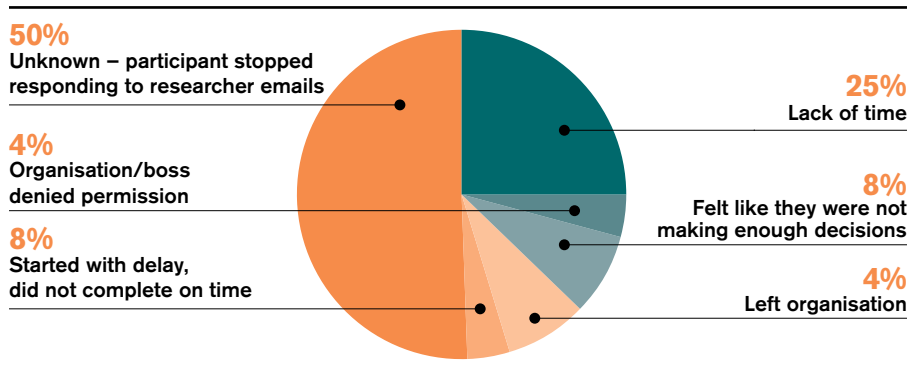
Most participants asked to be sent regular reminders about submitting diary entries. These had to be administered manually by the research team and did not always prove effective. The 32 participants who completed the study demonstrated monumental commitment to the study, given how difficult they found it.

It is no surprise that a number of participants dropped out. Of the original 55 participants, only 32 'completed' the study (and 8 of these didn't quite reach the initial goal of 30 decisions). A total of 7 participants dropped out immediately after the briefing session, suggesting that once they understood the nature of the study they were not willing to continue, and a further 15 participants dropped out after submitting between three and seventeen decisions. There were 2 participants who started the study significantly later than the others and, while regularly submitting decisions

at the end of the study period, did not reach the required minimum 15 decisions to be considered to have 'completed' the study.

Participants who dropped out were asked why they couldn't continue. As indicated in Figure 1, the single biggest reason for dropping out was lack of time.

Figure 1: Reasons for dropping out of the study

50%
Unknown – participant stopped responding to researcher emails

4%
Organisation/boss denied permission

8%
Started with delay, did not complete on time

25%
Lack of time

8%
Felt like they were not making enough decisions

4%
Left organisation

Source: Campbell and Knox Clark (2019b).

Unfortunately, participants from national NGOs were significantly more likely to drop out. Of the 14 NGO participants who began the study, only 3 completed it – and of the 11 dropouts, 8 left immediately after the briefing. One possible explanation is a lack of clarity about the 'ask' of the research and the purpose of the briefing session, which may have been due to language barriers

Despite the amount of time requested of participants, ultimately 32 individuals stuck with it and collectively submitted over 1,000 decisions to the study. In fact, the dropout rate for this study was lower than expected. The research team's review of other diary studies identified that dropout rates are often much higher than this for studies with similar requirements for participants. The research team had hoped to recruit 50 participants and have 20 complete the study; ultimately 55, were recruited and 32 completed.

Participants who completed the study received three, one hour-long remote coaching sessions from independent, confidential coaches, contracted by ALNAP, as a thank-you for their participation. This incentive was greatly valued by participants. However, when asked after study what the best part about participating had been, across the board, participants indicated that in fact it was the practice of self-reflection throughout the study itself that offered the most value. One explained, 'It made me start to question and really think about myself and to reflect on how I make decisions', and another said, 'It made me more aware about the decisions I have to make on a daily basis, type, importance, etc. I became more reflective about my decision-making process and my behaviour in situations that require decisions.'

4.2 Subjectivity of responses

The methodology used meant that the decisions submitted were done so through the lens of the participant and cannot be considered objective truth. Individuals react differently to the same circumstances: one person may record a situation as highly stressful, whereas another wouldn't find it stressful at all. Participants also varied considerably in the detail of their diary submissions. The researchers controlled for this in three ways:

▪ The methodology used for statistical analysis controlled for the potential of one individual to sway the trends observed.
▪ The findings from the diary studies were triangulated with literature review and interviews.
▪ The research questions were designed with data subjectivity in mind.

4.3 Assessing the quality of a decision

One of the most difficult challenges facing the researchers was how to establish the quality of each decision submitted to the diary study. This was a critical piece of information without which the team would be unable to comment on the effectiveness of the different decision-making approaches.

To establish how best to approach this, the authors identified 70 documents on the topic, of which 50 were relevant. The documents were initially identified through a Google Scholar search for "assessing decision quality" and similar search terms, and through a snowball search of documents, which proved useful. Documents were then coded in MaxQDA software, with codes emerging iteratively from the literature itself. Many of the documents identified were from the medical field or from behavioural science. The literature review conducted was not systematic; rather the aim was to identify a purposive sample of relevant literature from which to draw.

The first key finding from the literature was the sheer difficulty of the task. Determining the quality of a decision has been described as an 'inherently complex and difficult task' in the literature (Elwyn et al, 2009), a problem for which 'there is no unequivocal answer' (Keren and de Bruin, 2003). The topic has been covered to some degree in a wide range of literature. However, each definition of 'decision quality can be (and has been) argued to be inadequate in some way. And there is clearly no universal agreement' (Yates et al., 2003: 51).

Based on this, the authors understood there was no single agreed 'best' way to approach the challenge. Instead, the task would be to make choices informed by the literature that seemed the best fit for the circumstances, recognising that each choice would have its limitations. The literature on decision quality focused on three particular areas in which choices would need to be made.

4.3.1 The quality of what? Decision process vs decision outcome

It may seem common sense that a good decision is one that results in a good outcome. Several authors emphasise the importance of looking at decision outcome when assessing quality (Higgins, 2000; Dowding and Thompson, 2003; Davern et al., 2008; Geisler and Allwood, 2015). But outcomes can be determined by factors outside the decision-maker's control: you can do everything 'right' and still have a bad outcome, or do everything 'wrong' and get lucky with a good outcome (Elwyn et al, 2009; Meissner and Wulf, 2014; Dholakia, 2017). Leaders can end up being 'blamed for negative outcomes even when they had good intentions and used a thoughtful decision-making process' (Gino, 2016). As it is impossible to retrospectively determine the potential outcome of decision choices not taken, one cannot compare the cost–benefit of a decision outcome, or how it measures up to alternatives that were available to the decision-maker (Edwards, 1984; Wilson and Arvai, 2006; Elwyn et al, 2009).

The literature gives somewhat more support to an assessment of decision-making that considers not the outcome but the quality of the process used to make a decision (Pauker and Pauker, 1999; Sox, 1999; Dowding and Thompson, 2003; Wilson and Arvai, 2006; Davern et al., 2008; Elwyn et al., 2009; Arvai and Froschauer, 2010; NHS, 2012; Meissner and Wulf, 2014; Geisler and Allwood, 2015; Gino, 2016). However, most of these authors make some fundamental assumptions about what a 'good process' for decision-making would be: namely, they assume an analytical approach. For ALNAP's research, which sought to compare the quality of different decision-making approaches, it was important to find a method that could be applied fairly across the board.

So, the first choice the research team had to make in terms of how to assess the quality of each decision in the study was whether to evaluate on the basis of quality of process, or quality of outcome. Ultimately, the authors chose a combination of these two measures, including outcome indicators such as whether the decision had ultimately been implemented and whether the result was satisfactory,[1] as well as process indicators such as whether the decision had been made within an appropriate amount of time and whether the situation requiring a decision had been correctly understood.[2]

4.3.2 Quality according to whom?

One of the most commonly asked questions of the authors since publishing 'Beyond Assumptions' is who was responsible for assessing the quality of the decision. The literature outlines two possibilities. The first would involve a third-party judge. While this approach is arguably more objective and could provide a fresh look at the situation, a third party would not have access to much of the information that may be required to assess decision quality – such as how the decision-maker carried out the process, what their aims or values were, etc. (Hershey and Baron, 1992; Skinner, 1999).

The other option is for the decision-maker to assess quality themselves. There are obviously significant concerns about subjectivity and bias with this approach (Spetzler et al., 2016). ALNAP's research aim was to look at

differences between the quality of decisions made in different circumstances and with different approaches, rather than to assess the quality of humanitarian decision-making to generate findings about the state of humanitarian decision-making overall. For this reason, the research team chose to have the decision-maker answer questions that, when combined, formed the decision quality score.

4.3.3 When to assess decision quality?

Finally, there is also disagreement about the best time to assess the quality of a decision. There is considerable support, particularly among those who focus on assessing the quality of the decision-making process, for assessing quality at the time a decision is made (Hershey and Baron, 1992; Spetzler et al., 2016). However, if decision quality is measured in whole or partially by the outcome of a decision, some time is required for that outcome to emerge.

The literature cautions about the practicalities of 'withholding judgement until everything there is to know about the result becomes available' (Spetzler et al., 2016). It also warms about the risk of hindsight bias, whereby information becomes available, after a decision has been made, that was not available to the decision-maker and is used unfairly to judge the decision-maker's choice (Baron and Hershey, 1988).

As ALNAP chose to use a mixture of process and outcome indicators, the research team chose to assess the quality of each decision approximately two months after the decision had been made.[3] This amount of time would be enough to allow the decision-maker to have reflected on their satisfaction and to know whether the decision had or would be implemented, while being recent enough that they could still recall who had been involved, how information had been used, and so on.

4.3.4 A scale to measure decision quality

Most of the decision quality measures identified in the literature used a scale to consider multiple components of decision quality at once. As none had been used for humanitarian decisions and because most focused either on process or outcome (whereas ALNAP's study would use both), the research team identified their own scale. This scale comprised seven statements that the decision-maker would rate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These numbers were then averaged to create an overall decision quality score. The statements were:
1. 'I correctly understood the problem/situation before making this decision'
2. 'I used relevant information/experience appropriately when making this decision'
3. 'This decision was made in an appropriate amount of time for the situation'
4. 'The level to which other people were involved in making this decision was appropriate for the situation'
5. 'The chosen course of action was appropriate given the original problem/situation'
6. 'The decision was implemented/followed through'
7. 'I am satisfied with this decision'

Conclusion

This methods note has attempted to explain some of the decisions the research team had to make while working on the study '**Beyond Assumptions: How humanitarians make operational decisions**' (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2019a). From identifying the research question and method to figuring out how to assess the quality of decisions, there are a number of key learning points this process has raised.

The value of scoping before moving ahead cannot be underestimated. In particular, the **scoping literature review** (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2018) helped the researchers to understand evidence gaps as well as dominant theories and assumptions, which they used to identify research questions that could really add value. Similarly, the scoping work undertaken to learn more about diary method was time well spent. From this, researchers knew early on how much of their time would be needed, and that participant motivation and retention would be an obstacle.

The study method did ask for a lot of each participant's time. While in hindsight the estimates researchers provided during the briefing session were reasonably accurate, participants who completed the study overwhelmingly felt it had taken more time than they had anticipated. On reflection, the research method might have worked just as well with more participants, each submitting fewer decisions (though this would have had a further impact on researcher time, as it would mean more individuals to brief and keep in touch with).

The incentive provided to participants worked well – and researchers now know that, above and beyond this, the act of participating in the research itself was of great value for participants. This is something researchers had not fully appreciated before undertaking this study and should be kept in mind for similar research processes in the future.

While overall the method used was effective in that it allowed the researchers to answer the research questions, and has generated a number of interesting findings, there are also several things that could have been done differently. The insights from research participants themselves were so valuable, there may have been ways to engage them even further in the analysis phase. The research team also wish that they could have done more

to do more to retain national NGO participants, who had a high drop-out rate. Asking for alternative contact information (several email addresses stopped working when participants moved organisations) or establishing a stronger connection with these individuals may have helped. Unfortunately, due to the app used and the language capacity of the research team, all decisions had to be submitted in English. It is quite likely that it would have been easier to recruit national NGO participants if they could submit in other languages.

There are a variety of other insights that can be drawn from this process, and those interested in learning more about the detailed methodology used for this study are encouraged to review the methodological annex that accompanies the study (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2019b).

The authors remain open to answering further queries, which can be sent to **alnap@alnap.org**.

Endnotes

[1] The satisfaction of a decision outcome was a factor given particular importance by a number of scholars (Milkman et al., 2009; Wood and Highhouse, 2014; Geisler and Allwood, 2015)

[2] This is described by some as where the decision-maker has an 'appropriate decision frame' (Parsons, 2016) that clearly outlines 'what problem is being addressed?' (Spetzler et al., 2016).

[3] The decision quality questions were sent to participants in batches of 10, approximately two months after those decisions had been submitted. Most participants had to be reminded several times, and so ultimately the average response to these questions was received three and a half months after the decision was submitted.

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