

Start Fund: Learning from Decision-Making

2018





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Introduction

The Start Fund is a multi-donor pooled rapid-response fund that initiates disbursement of humanitarian finance within 72 hours. It is collectively owned and managed by the Start Network members, a group of 42 national and international aid agencies from five continents. The fund was officially launched on 1st April 2014 and has an annual disbursement of approximately £11 million (GBP). It is designed to fill gaps in the humanitarian funding architecture in three main areas: underfunded small to medium scale crises; forecasts of impending crises; and spikes in chronic humanitarian crises.

This product is produced for the Start Fund, part of the Start Network. Evidence and learning for the Start Fund is provided by World Vision UK.

Previous learning products on cash, accountability, slow-onset crises and disease outbreaks have all referenced Start decisions, as has the Start Fund evaluation. Humanitarian response requires practitioners to make complex decisions about how, when, and who to support before, during and after a disaster. This learning review aims to further explore the approach, rationale and criterias taken in decisions to activate the Start Fund and to select projects for implementation.

The review explores the decision-making process during Alerts raised in 2017 (Alert 135 to Alert 195, including anticipation alerts and alerts B001-B004 in Bangladesh) by systematically reviewing the minutes of 64 Allocation and 42 Project Selection meetings. It also draws upon seven interviews with the Start Fund team and Members that have participated in decision-making forums. This review is concerned with the factors that decision-makers state as informing their decisions. Analysis of the behavioural factors and biases inherent in any decision-making process is being conducted separately in partnership with CRUISSE Network and Warwick University.

HOW ARE DECISIONS MADE?

There are two important decision-making forums at the Start Fund: the allocation decision when committee members decide whether or not to activate an Alert and how much funding to allocate; and project selection, when in-country representatives decide which projects should be awarded funding. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of information for decisions in the Start Fund.

ACTIVATION GUIDANCE AND DECISIONS

The term 'Activation' refers to the decision for the Start Fund to respond to a crisis by activating the fund. Activation is made on the basis of a vote following a discussion of the Alert note, member survey responses and third-party briefing notes. Allocation meetings are remote, facilitated by Start Fund Officers, and last 30-60 minutes. Decision-makers are given an information pack 1-3 hours before the call, which includes an independent briefing on the crisis and context (prepared by ACAPS), a survey of the membership, and (in the past) briefing notes from Development Initiatives on the funding landscape.

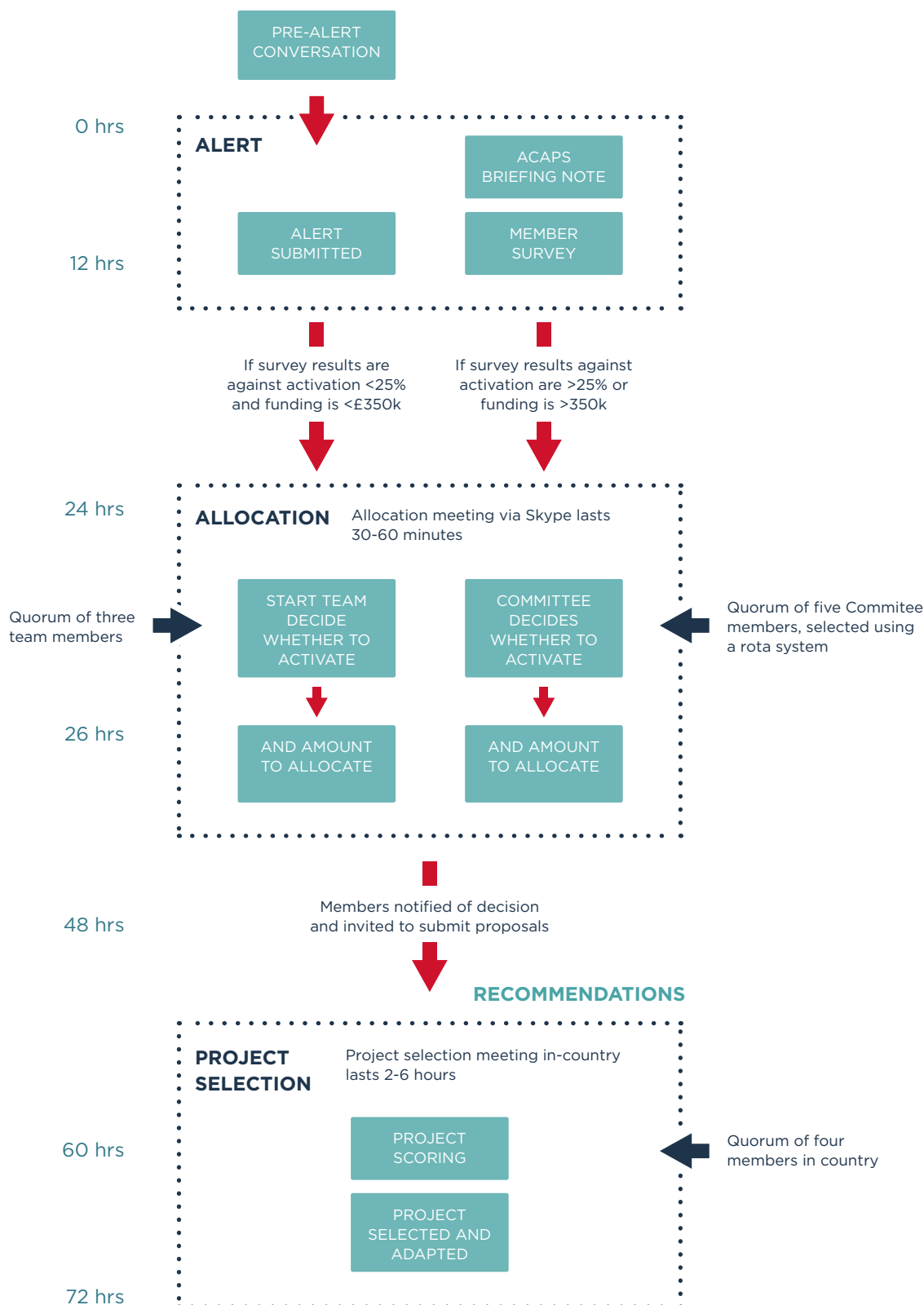
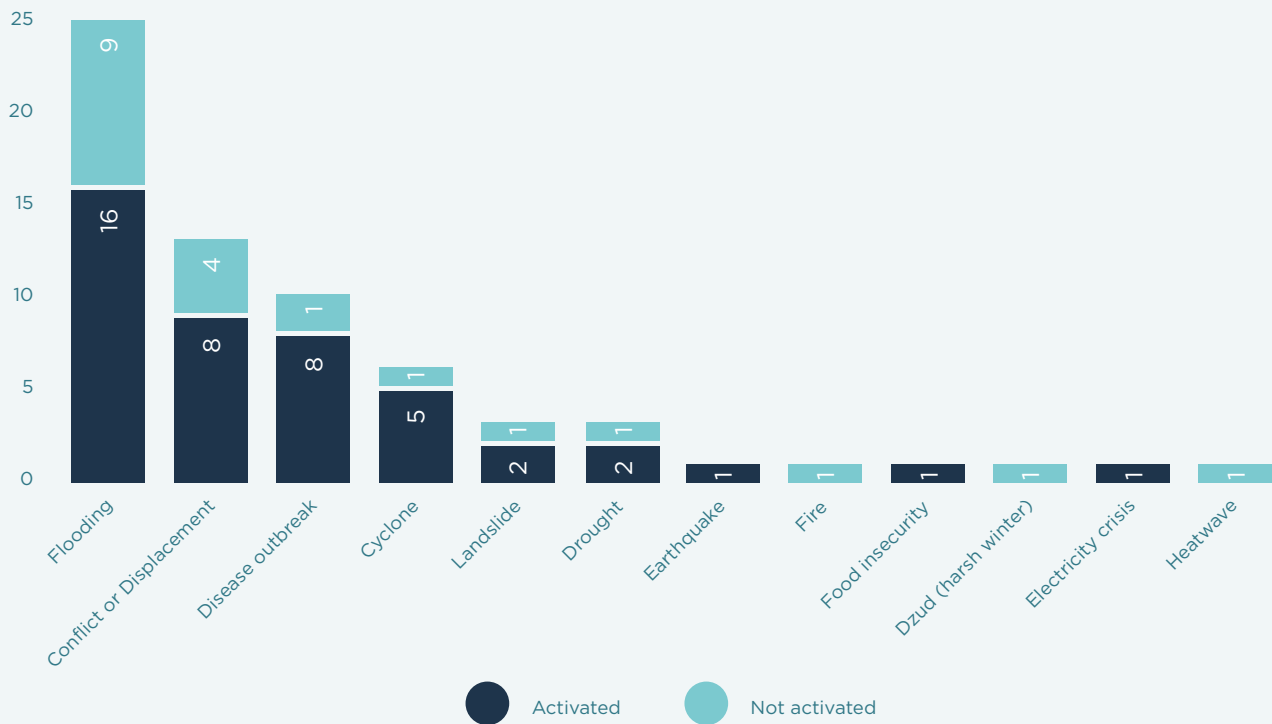


Figure 1: decision making pathway.

64% of the raised alerts were activated. However, this rate varied across different crisis types and across different decision-makers. For example, disease outbreaks were almost always funded (80%), unlike flooding (65%) or drought (50%). The Start team were more likely to activate, given that they address less complex alert decisions (where there is high support for the alert in the membership survey) than the Start Fund committee (93% compared to 51%).



Number of activations per crisis type.

The alerting agency(ies) refer to a series of questions to make decisions on Activating the Fund. The frequency of each consideration being raised in meeting minutes is indicated in Table 1. In addition to these factors, coordination amongst agencies is also a factor in activation decisions. For example, all 18 meetings where good coordination is noted are activated. In one meeting, for a disease outbreak in Niger (Alert 159) the minutes note “strong coordination among actors gives confidence that this is necessary and nothing significant has been missed.”

ACAPS Briefing Note: Yemen Cholera Outbreak

Briefing Note – 18 May 2017

YEMEN

Cholera outbreak

Anticipated scope and scale

The number of cases is expected to continue rising, due to the poor state of the healthcare system and lack of access to safe clean water sources for much of the population. The case fatality rate is 1.2%, and approximately 3,000 new cases are being reported each day. Without urgent action, the situation is likely to worsen considerably; 7.6 million people live in areas at high risk of transmission.

	Not required	Low	Moderate	Significant	Major
Need for international assistance				X	
Expected impact				X	

Crisis overview

A cholera outbreak was reported in Yemen on 27 April. Since then, the number of acute watery diarrhoea (AWD)/suspected cholera cases has increased to reach over 17,200, including 209 deaths, and the infection rate is rising quickly. The outbreak has affected 18 districts: Sana'a City (Amanat al Asemah) is the most heavily affected area, with over 4,000 suspected cases. A state of emergency has been declared in the governorate.

Suspected Cholera Cases Distribution by District

Map Source: Health Cluster, WASH Cluster 14/05/2017

Key priorities

- **WASH:** 14.5 million people are in need of WASH assistance, and lack consistent access to safe water, of which 8.2 million people are in acute need. The worst affected areas are in the west of the country, where cholera cases have now been declared.
- **Health:** 14.8 million people lack access to adequate healthcare services. Only 45% of healthcare facilities across the country are functioning at present. In areas where healthcare is available, cost of services is a barrier to access. Lack of availability and cost of services are preventing cholera-affected people from accessing immediate medical assistance.

Humanitarian constraints

- A de facto blockade on all imports, including humanitarian aid, is causing significant difficulties in importing adequate medical supplies, food and fuel to meet the country's needs.
- 31% of Yemen's 333 districts face moderate to severe access constraints, making it very difficult for humanitarian agencies to reach people in these areas with assistance.
- Active conflict is ongoing in several areas of the country, particularly Taiz and al Hudaydah. Both governorates have declared cholera cases.

Limitations

The dire state of the healthcare system throughout the country means it is very difficult to gain accurate figures on suspected and confirmed cases. It is likely that the number of deaths and suspected cases is higher than has been reported. Rural areas are particularly difficult to access. Confirmation of cholera is difficult to obtain as most medical laboratories have ceased to function.

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ACAPS briefing note for allocation meeting for 'Alert 162 Yemen Cholera Outbreak'

GUIDANCE	IMPORTANT FACTORS
Alert meets a Start Fund crisis profile (underfunded small to medium scale crises; Forecasts of impending crises; Spikes in chronic humanitarian crises)	Decision-makers referred to the Start crisis profiles in 94% of all alerts. They emphasised the Fund's remit in 'underfunded small to medium scale crises' in 52% of activated alerts. However, there were seven cases (17% of activations) where alerts to large scale crises were activated because there was clear targeting of a smaller beneficiary group in a large crisis (eg Alert 180 India Flooding) or because the alert was focussed on life-saving for the most vulnerable."
Appropriateness of a 45-day response	The appropriateness of a 45 day response is important, and listed as a positive factor in 76% of activated alerts. However, in 25% of cases, the 45 day response is not discussed (16 alerts). In some crises, the committee consider this something that can be adjusted - in alerts where a response is not considered appropriate for 45 days, 44% are still activated. For example, in alert 189 (Gambia floods), the committee consider it possible to change activities from a 6 month project to something within the timeframe.
An injection of cash would make an impact to coverage	An Alert is not normally activated if the coverage level would be low (e.g, under 20% of the affected population). For example, in alert 137 (Thailand flooding) the proposed activities could only address 10% of beneficiaries in five affected districts (out of 12), therefore the committee considered that the target group was too low for the Start fund to have an impact. 91% of alerts that proposed over 85% coverage were activated (20 of 22 alerts), and only 25% of alerts with coverage levels of 20-40% were activated (three of 12 alerts). In all three instances committees reported that "previous learning" had guided the allocation).
External sources of information	On average, 23 members respond to each survey (this represents around 50% of the membership, with a range of 40% to 71%). Of the 42 activated alerts, only 6 were activated when more than five members responded with 'strong reservations'. There is an activation rate of 95% for the cases when more than 90% of survey respondents agreed with the alert. Where lower than 70% agree, there is a 25% activation rate.
Timing of the alert	Timeliness of the alert is mentioned in 68% of alerts. Of 30 alerts where the alert was considered late, 50% are still activated. In these cases, the committee consider it justified, due to accessibility issues for example (in at least 7 cases) or because life-saving activities are still important, there is a prospect for learning or anticipation of future crisis in the area.
Government capacity	There were seven cases where the decision-makers noted that the Government had requested international assistance and all but one was activated. In another veight cases, the committee stated Government capacity was sufficient in the crisis. Nevertheless, two of these were activated because other criteria were met.
There are clear gaps for a Start Fund response	'Gaps' are regularly discussed by committees. Some identify a 'gap' in a sector or response for a group of people, others identify a 'gap' for rapid release funding (eg Alert 162 Yemen Cholera), and one identified a 'gap' in operational presence that a Start member filled (eg Alert 189 Gambia flooding). There were at least six Alerts where insufficient information on sectoral gaps were overlooked.
Media profile of the crisis	Committee members refer to alerts that are 'under the radar' or 'under reported' in 26% of alerts and to 'International attention' in 49% of all alerts. However, although it is discussed, it is not a decisive factor. For example, 50% of the ten cases with a large media profile were activated - often because of a lack of immediate funding.
Status of disbursement pot	The quantity available in the disbursement pot is mentioned in all minutes, however, the impact of it on allocation is discussed only in 38% of activated alerts, usually in the context of a low pot (26% of activated alerts). This question was used to inform one decision (Alert 141 notes funds wiping out the pot).
Current funding levels and future funding	The amount of information available to decision makers varies substantively. Known levels of available funding are often listed in the meeting minutes, but are often incomplete. Most crises are seen as underfunded. There were a small number of alerts where serious underfunding was noted as a reason to activate the fund.

¹ It is not possible to provide a more rigorous definition of the relative importance of guidance questions because of the inconsistent detail provided in allocation meeting minutes

Allocation guidance and decisions

The second decision is how much to allocate. This decision requires the committee to determine whether to increase, award, or decrease the requested amount in the alert note. Of activated alerts, 62.2% remained the same as recommended in the alert, 33.3% were lowered, and 4.4% were raised. There is no specific guidance on Allocation amount and the decision is generally not justified in minutes. However, three factors appear to feed into the decision:

- INITIAL BID:** Meeting participants often express a high level of confidence in the suggested allocation amount from the Alerting agency. In almost half of the Activations (19 of 42) the committee cites trust in the Alerting agency as a factor in their funding decision.
- SURVEY RESPONSES:** The requested funding amount was granted in the majority (75%) of cases where the bid amount was supported by more than 70% of members.
- LEARNING FROM PREVIOUS ALERTS:** Confidence to activate based on previous learning was raised as a factor in 15 cases (36% of activations). The two factors above were also overridden in eleven cases, when the suggested amount contradicted with learning from previous alerts. Learning from a similar location or crisis type was used to affirm cost assessments, inform decisions where the Alerts had insufficient detail, and increase cost estimates.

MEAL team briefing on Start Fund Cholera interventions

Previous alerts/activations

Alert	Country	Activated?	Funding requested	Cases	Deaths	# Affected	Amount allocated	Amount awarded	Individuals reached	Cost per beneficiary
9 Cameroon (Cholera)	Cameroon	Yes	N/A	1,323	58	123,000 at risk	£140,000	£139,915	456,297	£3.26
18 Nigeria (Cholera)	Nigeria	Yes	N/A	2,414	53	120,000 at risk	£125,000	£65,000	36,205	£0.56
87 Somalia (Cholera)	Somalia	Yes	£300,000	7,343	300	3,000 at risk	£300,000	£262,144	42,700	£0.16
108 CAR (Cholera)	CAR	Yes	£200,000	169	19	79,793 at risk	£150,000	£150,000	19,436	£0.13
Average				2,812	108	81,448	£178,750	£154,265	138,660	£1.03

Activities

Activity	Alert 9 Cameroon	Alert 18 Nigeria	Alert 87 Somalia	Alert 108 CAR
Cholera community sensitization/hygiene promotion (house to house visits, posters and radio announcements)	X	X	X	X
Communal solid waste containers		X		
Construction of latrines and hand washing stations	X			X
Disinfection campaign	X			
Distribution of water containers		X		
Hygiene kits	X	X	X	X
Installation of water bladder				X
Medicine and supplies for health facilities	X		X	
Rehabilitation of water points				X
Support to MoH for case management	X			
Water purification (Aquatabs, chlorination and training focal points)	X			X

Previous rationale for activating for Lassa Fever

Rationale	Alert 9 Cameroon	Alert 18 Nigeria	Alert 87 Somalia	Alert 108 CAR
Clear spike	X			
Alert is timely, allowing for a prevention and containment	X		X	X
Clear need for rapid funding		X		
Opportunity to reach hard-to-reach affected population			X	

Example of a Start Fund MEAL team briefing for an Allocation meeting

Project selection guidance and decisions

For the project Selection stage, staff from Start agencies based in the country of crisis will gather to assess project proposals. Each proposal is given a score between 0-5 on 3 criteria (relevance, efficiency and effectiveness). Scores are discussed in the meeting, and used to assist selection.

In the Alerts considered, at least one project was approved by every Project Selection Committee. There are four cases of 'light' decision-making, where the combined budget of all proposals came to less than the allocation amount and there were only 1 or 2 proposals. In these cases, proposals were not subjected to the same scrutiny and all were awarded. In addition, there were six cases where only one proposal was submitted and in these instances the project selection group always awarded funding (often accompanied by recommendations).

The criteria used to drive decisions are listed in table 2². The criteria labels refer to those terms discussed most frequently in the PSC meeting minutes (all relate to at least one of the three main scoring criteria: Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency or additional criteria, such as specific geographic focus). As in Allocation decisions, this guidance is treated very flexibly and the prioritisation of each factor also changes in different project selection group, disasters and countries.

² Meeting minutes contain a highly variable amount of detail which prevents a comprehensive assessment of criteria across cases

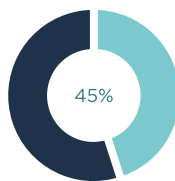


Liyè Ayo, Disaster Risk Manager at Plan International, taking part in a project selection meeting in Togo on 5 April 2017 for 'Alert 151 Togo Lassa Fever'.

PIE CHARTS INDICATE THE PROPORTION OF PROJECT SELECTION COMMITTEES THAT REFERENCE EACH TOPIC.

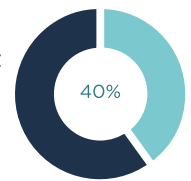
RELEVANCE

Relevance is justified by inclusion “life-saving” activities in nine cases (21%) and “well-integrated” activities in five cases (12%). On occasions where a small number of proposals were submitted, projects were selected despite activities that scored low on relevance. For example, in Alert 189 (Gambia Flooding), the committee queried the appropriateness of cash transfers and were disappointed the proposal did not include the preparedness activities that had been strongly recommended for this alert.



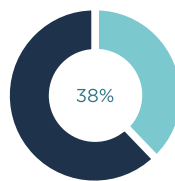
SPEED (EFFICIENCY)

The ability of an agency to implement rapidly was an incentive to awarding funding in 17 cases (38%). In several instances project selection members noted that working through established local partners could enhance the speed of response (for example, Alert 170 El Salvador Flooding and Alert 181 Nepal Flooding).



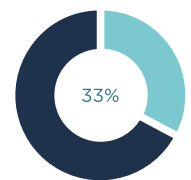
COORDINATION (EFFECTIVENESS)

In 16 cases (36%) decision-makers emphasised the importance of established coordination with agencies on the ground. As in the Allocation phase, proposals submitted in partnership are considered very positively.



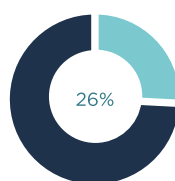
VALUE FOR MONEY (EFFICIENCY)

Value for money features less in project selection than in Allocation. However, good “value for money” or low cost per beneficiary is a deciding factor in fourteen cases. The project selection committee deemed it negotiable in at least 8 cases (19%) when other aspects of the proposal were good or coordination with other agencies was high.



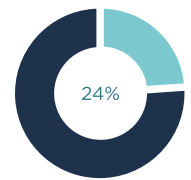
LOCAL EXPERTISE (EFFECTIVENESS)

11 awards (26%) were made because proposals demonstrated local expertise, such as having delivered previous responses in the local area. Local expertise is seen to facilitate efficiency and efficacy. In alert 181 (Nepal flooding), the committee awarded agencies on this basis, for example, Save The Children was selected for having established relationships with schools and local structures.



GEOGRAPHY (ADDITIONAL CRITERIA)

Geographic focus was foremost factor for ten PSCs. However, in other cases (B001 Bangladesh Cyclone, and 175 Kenya displacement), funds were awarded despite failure to adhere to the major geographical focus. In the latter case, the proposal was selected because the agency which was operating in the right geographical area was judged to have a poor needs assessment.



Reflections and insights on the decision-making pathway

Six challenge areas were identified while reviewing the factors that inform decision making:

1. THE QUALITY OF ALERTS IS HIGHLY INCONSISTENT; AT LEAST FIVE LACKED SUFFICIENT DETAIL FOR DECISION-MAKERS TO ACTIVATE

The majority of Alerts provide evidence that supports decision-making. However, in at least five cases (8%) the Alert was not activated because insufficiently reliable data was provided to decision-makers. Committees said they needed additional information on the context of the crisis and the gaps for a Start Fund response.

RECOMMENDATION: SPECIFY MINIMUM LEVEL OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE CRISIS THAT MUST BE PROVIDED IN AN ALERT FOR IT TO BE EFFECTIVELY ASSESSED

2. COMMITTEES ARE UNCLEAR ON WHAT DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS - SUCH AS A 'SMALL TO MEDIUM' CRISIS - AND THERE IS AN INCONSISTENT APPROACH TO DESCRIBING RANGES OF BENEFICIARY NUMBERS

There are no agreed meanings for key terms that are regularly used in meetings, such as 'underfunded' or 'under the radar'.³ Moreover, both alert authors and allocation committees take different approaches to assessing the number of affected people and the likely coverage of the fund: In some cases this is the total size of the crisis, in others, those who are unreached by the current response, in others the most vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATION: DEVELOP INTERNAL DEFINITIONS ON THE RANGE FOR AFFECTED POPULATIONS WITHIN DISTINCT DISASTER TYPES, INCLUDING:

- Can a crisis ever be 'too small' for the Start fund?
- Does the Start Fund consider crises as a whole, or does it instead consider smaller pockets of a crisis? For example, even in a large scale crises like Syria or Somalia, would the Fund identify sub-crises (within a particular theme or geographic area) for response?

There was also uncertainty about the niche of the fund in slow-onset and chronic crises,⁴ which resulted in fewer alerts (two in the period considered) and a low activation rate (50%).

3. DIFFERENT CONSIDERATIONS ARE PRIORITISED MORE OR LESS HIGHLY IN EACH DECISION-MAKING MEETING

There is no consensus on which of the thirteen guiding questions for allocation are most important: different

RECOMMENDATION: DEVELOP A FLOWCHART TO ILLUSTRATE HOW CONSIDERATIONS RELATE TO EACH OTHER AND TO INDICATE THEIR RELATIVE IMPORTANCE. THE FLOWCHART COULD ALSO BE USED TO GUIDE THE ALLOCATION MEETING AGENDA. DIFFERENT CHARTS MAY BE NEEDED FOR FRAGILE VS NATURAL DISASTER CONTEXTS.

rotas use different criteria to justify their choices. Moreover exceptions are made for every guidance question. For example, whilst "timeliness" is seen as critical in some cases, in other cases it will not be discussed.

4. DECISION-MAKING ROTAS ADOPT A CONSENSUAL APPROACH AND ARE OFTEN STEERED BY THE MOST SENIOR COMMITTEE MEMBER

The decision-making style and biases are being reviewed in more depth in a partnership with CRUISSE Network and Warwick University. However, this review suggests a need for greater specificity in justifying decisions as well as mechanisms for reviewing decisions at the end of project delivery.

³ A learning product on 'Under the Radar' crises has been written to support development of a definition. The product will be available from 1st May 2018

⁴ This can be observed in allocation meeting minutes and in the Slow Onset learning product published in January 2018

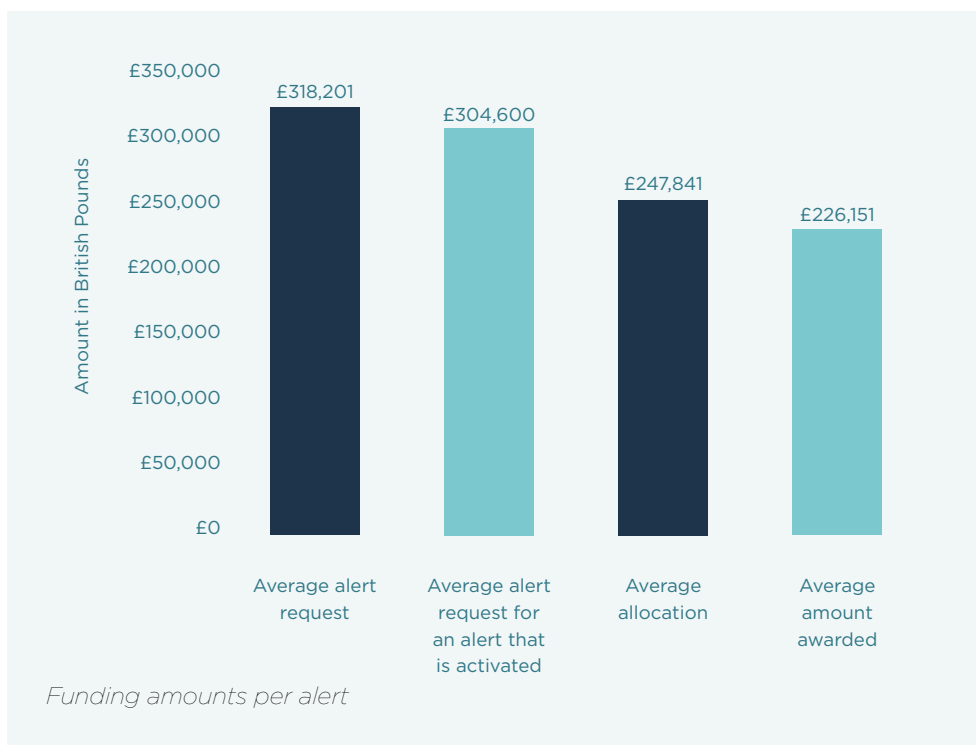
5. MEAL INPUT IS REFERRED TO DURING ALLOCATION DECISIONS, BUT IS NOT BEEN CONSISTENTLY INCLUDED IN MEAL INPUT TO PROJECT SELECTION

6. ALLOCATION STAGE INFORMATION SHOULD BE CARRIED THROUGH TO INFLUENCE PROJECT SELECTION

RECOMMENDATION: DEVELOP TEMPLATE FOR MEAL INPUT THAT INCLUDES LEARNING RELEVANT TO THE CONTEXT AND CRISIS TYPES:

1. Relevant information from the learning products
2. Learning on coordination with particular actors
3. Costs in particular locations
4. Cautions

The average amount of spend is smaller than that granted or requested. There is no formal process for the project selection committee to report back to the allocation committee on the impact of reduced funding or for them to review their funding decisions against project spending. For example, learning points from the cash, slow onset, and disease outbreak learning products contain relevant project level information



RECOMMENDATION: WHERE POSSIBLE CONTINUE TO HAVE THE SAME START FUND OFFICER FACILITATING ALL DECISIONS FOR A SINGLE CRISIS. THIS IS PARTICULARLY NEEDED IN COMPLEX CASES, WHERE THE ALLOCATION COMMITTEE WILL TABLE ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED AT PROJECT SELECTION.

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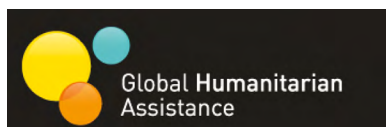
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