

ALNAP Study



ALNAP

Leadership in Action:
Leading effectively in
humanitarian operations

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

1.	Introduction	9
1.1.	Why this study?	9
1.2.	Scope of the study	10
2.	Methodology	12
3.	Conceptual models of leadership ... and management	15
4.	Operational humanitarian leadership – earned or vested in authority?	18
5.	An overview of the qualities valued in operational humanitarian leadership	22
5.1.	Identifying leadership qualities and traits	22
5.2.	Qualities and traits of operational humanitarian leadership: evidence from the case studies	24
5.2.1.	Introduction	24
5.2.2.	Leadership skills related to ‘the bigger picture’	25
5.2.3.	Relational and communication skills	28
5.2.4.	Decision-making and risk-taking	30
5.2.5.	Management skills related to leadership	32
5.2.6.	Personal qualities	33
5.3.	Experience is invaluable	34
5.4.	In summary...	35
5.5.	The cracks in leadership – when strengths become weaknesses	37
6.	The fundamental importance of political skills in operational humanitarian leadership	38
7.	How does operational leadership vary across different types of humanitarian crisis?	40
8.	Fostering leadership within the international humanitarian system – what can we learn?	43
8.1.	Introduction	43
8.2.	What fostered leadership in the case studies	43
8.3.	What obstructed leadership in the case studies	46
8.4.	How did the leaders featured in our case studies deal with these obstacles, and create their own ‘enabling environment’?	50
8.5.	In conclusion	51
9.	Gender, culture, identity and leadership	52
10.	The personal cost of humanitarian leadership	53
11.	Collective leadership – the way forward?	54
12.	Learning Leadership	57
13.	Conclusions and recommendations	58

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership has long been an important topic in the commercial, political and military arenas. However, despite the challenges inherent in leading humanitarian operations, leadership has, until recently, received limited attention in the humanitarian sector. The last decade has seen a marked increase in the time and resources devoted to identifying and developing humanitarian leaders; however, evidence from ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report (Harvey et al. 2009), and from elsewhere, suggests that ineffective leadership is still a major constraint to effective humanitarian action.

This study seeks to contribute to improved humanitarian leadership by considering the factors that make humanitarian leadership successful, and identifying actions that actors within the humanitarian system can take to improve the quality of leadership in humanitarian responses. It focuses specifically on the operational level of leadership. For the purposes of the study, operational humanitarian leadership is defined as:

■ **Leadership in-country, that provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response to a specific crisis (whether at the programme, organisational or system-wide level), focused on the affected population, and building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together around that vision and objectives. It also means finding ways of collectively realising the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.**

The aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of what effective leadership looks like, to identify the determinants of good leadership and ways in which it can be fostered. It is based on modelling excellence, through 11 case studies of effective leadership, in different crises, different countries and at different levels. The findings are related to the wider literature and current thinking on leadership, and compared with research on leadership in other sectors.

A consistent finding across all the case studies was the significance of personal authority as the determining factor of effective leadership, as opposed to the authority vested in position or status. The qualities and experience of the individual leader matter as much as, or more than, their job title. Five main areas of leadership qualities emerged from the case studies:

- (i) Strategic leadership skills that relate to the bigger picture, comprising:
 - a. the ability to understand the context and dedicating time to contextual analysis

- b. a clear and strategic vision of what the humanitarian operation is attempting to achieve, beyond short-term funding horizons, and building ownership around that vision
 - c. a focus on the affected population and their needs, both for the long-term vision and in day-to-day decision-making
- (ii)** Relational and communication qualities, comprising:
- a. the ability to listen and to learn from others
 - b. the ability and willingness to share information and be transparent
 - c. the preparedness and ability to speak out, to have courageous conversations
 - d. the ability to build relationships with key political stakeholders
 - e. connecting with staff
 - f. presentational skills
- (iii)** Decision-making and risk-taking skills, comprising:
- a. the ability to make decisions rapidly when needed, according to the situation on the ground, and knowing when to end consultation
 - b. being able to make decisions on the basis of incomplete, unreliable and sometimes contradictory information
 - c. the flexibility to change decisions as the situation changes
 - d. the willingness to be held accountable for decisions taken
 - e. a mature and balanced approach to risk-taking, prepared to innovate, yet quickly learning from and correcting mistakes
- (iv)** Management and organisational skills, including:
- a. putting together a strong team in the spirit of distributed leadership, leading by example and mentoring staff
 - b. being a good manager, with an eye for detail, as well as being a good leader with visionary and strategic skills
- (v)** Personal qualities, such as:
- a. being principled and acting with integrity
 - b. being self-aware as well as having an inner self-confidence
 - c. humility – willing to credit and to learn from others
 - d. tenacity and determination
 - e. energy and enthusiasm

Taken together, these qualities point to the importance of 'relational leadership' based on networking, communication and team-building that brings out the leadership potential of others. The relational nature of operational humanitarian leadership is underscored by the finding that the ability to build consensus across agencies is critical to effective leadership; however, it is equally important for those in leadership positions to know when to bring consultation to an end in order to make a clear decision. This requires judgement, courage, and being comfortable with dissent.

This ability to judge when particular skills and approaches are relevant and desirable in a given context emerged as an important theme in the study, and serves as a warning against reducing leadership to any single list of competencies. Leadership happens when individuals engage completely with a situation. The ‘magic’ that can transform a list of skills from ‘competence’ to ‘excellence’ is often to do with the essence of the individual and how that person engages with the context in which they find themselves, the people with whom they are working, and with themselves. In fact, the study found that when a particular

“Leadership, then, is an art, based as much on judgement and intuition as on pre-defined skills”

leadership strength is overplayed it can become a weakness: a leader’s tenacity and energy can, for example, result in pushing colleagues too hard, with negative effects for the team and the programme. This can lead to burn-out. Leaders and organisations should be aware of this ‘shadow side’ of leadership, and take measures to address it.

Leadership, then, is an art, based as much on judgement and intuition as on pre-defined skills. The study found that experience of humanitarian operations is key to developing and applying this judgement. Demonstrated experience is also important in establishing the personal credibility and authority on which successful humanitarian leadership rests. Political skills, including political acumen, emerged as fundamental to operational humanitarian leadership, even in humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters. This means having a strong understanding of the political economy of the crisis, carrying out a political stakeholder analysis, both rapidly and on an ongoing basis, having strong relational and networking skills across actors and across boundaries (for example with parties to the conflict, or with the military), and having strong diplomatic, negotiating and facilitation skills. This combination can be critical to successfully negotiate and open up humanitarian access, which is key to an effective operational response.

The importance of operational experience suggests that leadership, far from being innate, is a learnt skill. Although some individuals may have natural propensities towards displaying the qualities outlined above, the study suggests that leadership can be learned, fostered and developed. The case-study leaders had acquired their skills in a number of different ways: from role models from both childhood and adulthood, from experience in the humanitarian aid sector, from being coached by a supportive line manager, and occasionally through formal training programmes.

While individuals can develop their own leadership skills, it is the organisation and the system as a whole that create a context within which these skills can most effectively be put to use. The case studies show that in order to foster leadership, humanitarian organisations should consciously give operational leaders and teams space to work, and should reward risk-taking. Unfortunately, this seldom happened in the case studies. Instead, many of the examples of effective leadership emerged in spite of a deeply constraining context, and the case-study leaders were

“In order to foster leadership ... give operational leaders and teams space to work”

prepared to take risks knowing that they would not necessarily receive the support of their organisations. There is alarming evidence of a growing tendency towards risk-aversion in the sector, associated in part with the drive for accountability, which is resulting in a stifling culture of compliance, and in part with the constraints of bureaucracy. This results in incentive systems that reward compliance with procedures and financial targets rather than innovation and leadership. Within the UN especially, risk-taking by individuals was more likely when they disregarded their own career paths and prioritised humanitarian objectives. In addition, many humanitarian organisations appear to value technical expertise at the expense of people and relationship skills in the process of selecting operational leaders, and pay inadequate attention to context and to the particular leadership skills required for specific situations.

“what is unique is the context: working with people in distress, taking decisions that will affect lives and livelihoods on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information, while under pressure to act rapidly”

The international humanitarian system also appears to be neglecting the opportunity to capitalise on the wide range of potential leaders. The study found that drawing on diverse cultural identities can be a real asset to leadership. Examples emerged in the case studies of leaders consciously and unconsciously drawing on their different identities (and life experiences) in order to cross boundaries and make connections with different actors to facilitate the humanitarian response. However, commitments to diversity notwithstanding, operational leadership opportunities currently favour internationally recruited staff. Nationally recruited staff – who offer wider sets of cultural identity – face structural and attitudinal barriers in developing their

leadership potential and moving into international leadership positions. In a similar vein, it was striking how hard it was to find examples of women showing effective operational humanitarian leadership when drawing up the list of potential case studies. This begs a question about the gender balance among field-based managers and the importance of exploring possible barriers to women assuming leadership roles and developing their leadership potential.

Although most of our case studies focused on individual leaders, many of these were successful because they were able to build high-performing teams. This implies an element of collective leadership, yet highlights the individual's role in creating a leadership environment around them that was valued by their colleagues and peers. This approach strengthened what could be achieved, especially where the team's skills complemented the leader's abilities. Where a collective leadership structure is formally set up, it is vitally important to establish ground rules and operating procedures at the outset, although our case studies indicate that there may be a finite period for cross-organisational leadership to work, and that this depends on the stage in the crisis and the particular set of individuals coming together. This kind of collective leadership structure needs to be sustained to be effective, and may need to be recreated as circumstances and individuals change.

Is humanitarian leadership really different from leadership in other sectors? The study suggests that, although many of the qualities possessed by effective leaders are not unique to the humanitarian sector, what is unique is the context in which they are being applied: working with people in distress, taking decisions that will affect lives and livelihoods in a fluid situation and on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information, often in a dangerous environment with a wide range of different actors some of whom may be hostile to the humanitarian endeavour, while under pressure to act rapidly. As a result, the study suggests that successful humanitarian leaders generally exhibit an unusually broad range of leadership qualities, and that compared to leaders in other sectors they show a strong values base. A relational approach and demonstrated sectoral experience may be particularly important.

The study also asked whether effective humanitarian leadership was different from one type of crisis to another. Here there seemed to be few distinctions that could be generalised between types of emergency. Rather, each emergency is different: the qualities that determine if a leader in one crisis can play as effective a role in another depend critically upon that individual's sensitivity to context, avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach, and therefore their ability to identify locally-specific opportunities and limitations.

The findings of the study are inspiring in terms of examples of exceptional leadership provided by individuals and some teams. They also present cause for concern, because leadership often seems to have happened in spite of, rather than because of, the organisational culture in which they were operating. The emerging message is that much more needs to be done in the international humanitarian aid sector to foster operational humanitarian leadership, with implications for the culture of the sector as a whole, and for individual organisations and their chief executives and senior management teams in particular.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why this study?

Leadership is one of the most studied and researched areas in the business world. It is now the subject of intense interest in the humanitarian sector. There is widespread concern that international humanitarian action is underperforming due to a lack of effective leadership, sometimes described as a leadership void. Raised anecdotally for a number of years in conversations among humanitarian aid workers around the world, the findings of ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report (Harvey et al. 2009) confirmed the seriousness of the issue: lack of effective leadership was identified by aid workers as one of the main challenges to humanitarian action.

A few years behind the private sector, many humanitarian and development aid agencies have now started to invest in leadership, through leadership development programmes, developing competency frameworks, and commissioning reports (e.g. Featherstone 2010; Hochschild 2010; PIA and CCL 2010). To date, however, there has been no systematic approach to studying what operational leadership means in the humanitarian sector, or to unpacking what it might look like in practice. For leaders working to provide emergency humanitarian assistance, success must be achieved while working in chaotic, often physically challenging and insecure or hostile environments. Humanitarian leaders need to resolve multiple, often paradoxical pressures – to act quickly, to be as effective as possible, to be impartial and accountable and to respond according to need and in line with donors' expectations, often on the basis of incomplete or anecdotal information and in the face of immense logistical and often political challenges.

So what does humanitarian leadership mean in these contexts, and what skills does it require? ALNAP embarked on this study to explore *operational leadership*¹ in humanitarian contexts in order to develop a better understanding of what effective leadership means in different types of crisis, to identify the determinants of good leadership and suggest how it can be fostered. The specific objectives of this study are threefold:

- (1) To identify examples of effective operational leadership, what is valued in such examples, and what appears to determine effective operational leadership.
- (2) To explore whether the qualities of effective operational leadership are the same or how they differ in different types of humanitarian crisis, and in different phases of a crisis.
- (3) To begin to identify how organisations, and the sector as a whole, can promote and foster effective operational leadership.

1. It thus complements work on leadership being done by other organisations. For example, the work on strategic leadership by the Humanitarian Futures Programme, the human resource aspects of leadership by People In Aid (PIA), and investment in leadership training by the Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy of Tulane University, among others.

For the purposes of this study, operational leadership is defined as:

■ **Leadership in-country, that provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response to a specific crisis (whether at the programme, organisational or system-wide level), focused on the affected population, and building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together around that vision and objectives. It also means finding ways of collectively realising the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.**

1.2 Scope of the study

This study is based on a series of case studies of effective operational humanitarian leadership (as defined above), based on the assumption that we can learn most about what works from models of excellence² (see Section 2 on methodology). It is not easy to set the boundaries of operational humanitarian leadership. Humanitarian action is an expanding domain which goes beyond ‘saving lives’ to saving livelihoods, protecting civilians, disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction (DRR), and post-crisis recovery and rehabilitation. The case studies, however, mainly focus on humanitarian leadership during the response phase of a crisis, when preparedness and recovery are less prominent, although issues of protection and conflict transformation do feature. Leadership is relevant to all aspects of humanitarian action, but it is during the operational response phase that the ‘leadership void’ has been particularly acute (Harvey et al. 2009), and this may therefore be the period when successful humanitarian leadership is thrown into sharpest focus. Within the response phase, the case studies covered ‘rapid-onset’ and ‘slow-onset’ humanitarian crises, triggered both by natural disasters and by conflict.

The majority of case studies of effective operational leadership were associated with an individual who was perceived to have played a key leadership role. Thus, the main focus of this study is to explore the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours of individuals who demonstrated successful leadership, specifically what was valued and appreciated about what they did and how they did it (Sections 5 and 6). What also emerges is the extent to which many of these individuals created a leadership environment around them, a topic of growing interest in the wider literature (Section 3). Three of the case studies are examples of collective leadership where structures were deliberately set up to distribute leadership among a number of individuals. These case studies broaden the scope of enquiry from the behaviour of individual leaders to the nature of ‘leadership’ in a group. Our initial findings on collective leadership and on creating a leadership environment are discussed in Section 1.1. In selecting the case studies we deliberately avoided equating leadership with positions of authority, and the case studies include individuals who were felt to be ‘effective leaders’

2. This draws on Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and its emphasis on modelling excellence. See, for example, McDermott and Shircore (1998: 8), who argue that ‘[y]ou can clone success, without having to clone people’.

although they did not hold formal leadership roles. This relationship between effective leadership and formal leadership positions is examined in Section 4.

We had aimed to ensure a balanced mix of men and women who showed exceptional operational humanitarian leadership, but despite our efforts to do so, we were unable to identify as many women as planned, itself an interesting insight that is discussed in Section 9.

The study considers operational leadership within the international humanitarian system – a system with unclear boundaries and limited homogeneity. The ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report usefully reflects on this:

|| To term the huge diversity of actors and networks a ‘system’ risks implying a degree of cohesion and uniformity of objectives that simply is not the case. Nevertheless, by virtue of their shared broad goals and underlying values, and their interdependence in field operations, there is a very real sense in which international humanitarian actors and their national counterparts involved in disaster management do comprise a system – albeit a loosely configured one. (Harvey et al. 2009:13)

Some unique aspects of this system throw up particular leadership challenges. For example, a feature that can baffle outsiders, not least military personnel working alongside international humanitarian agencies, is its lack of hierarchy. The humanitarian system is not based on ‘command and control’, but on consensus-building, as will be explored in Section 4.

Our case studies of leadership are drawn from United Nations (UN) agencies, from international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. We did not consider operational humanitarian leadership within national governments, nor within donor organisations. We consider the factors that systemically foster or obstruct operational leadership within this ‘system’ in Section 8.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in two phases. The first scoping phase explored the concept and practice of operational humanitarian leadership through a literature review and interviews with a number of humanitarian aid workers. Each of these had played an important leadership role in humanitarian work, in a range of contexts, at different levels, and for various agencies. The findings led to the definition of operational humanitarian leadership referred to earlier, and to the formulation of 11 hypotheses or preliminary findings about operational humanitarian leadership (Box 1). This was critical in making the study manageable. Leadership is a broad and nebulous topic. Identifying and then testing these preliminary findings through the case studies provided focus to an otherwise imprecise task. The scoping exercise fed into the planning of the second phase, a period of in-depth research into operational humanitarian leadership based on a series of case studies in order to model excellence. Feedback from many sources provided many examples of effective leadership, from which a shorter list of 11 case studies was selected according to the following criteria:

- (i) to cover different types of humanitarian crisis (e.g. rapid-onset natural disaster, conflict, slow-onset natural disaster) in order to capture contextual variation in the requirements for operational humanitarian leadership
- (ii) to cover three levels of in-country operational humanitarian leadership:
 - leadership regarding the international humanitarian response in-country (Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator – RC/HC – level)
 - collective leadership, usually across a group of like-minded or similar humanitarian agencies, but sometimes among a set of different actors
 - leadership shown by an individual agency in-country in terms of its operational humanitarian response
- (iii) to include individual leaders from different cultural backgrounds
- (iv) to capture potential gender-based determinants of leadership
- (v) to be recent in order to be relevant to the current context of humanitarian crises and to inform future leadership
- (vi) to include both single-mandate and multi-mandate agencies

Table 1 presents the sample of case studies (expanded in Annex 1). In each one effective leadership was associated with high levels of performance, innovation, and/or a particular breakthrough.

Research for the case studies was carried out through interviews with the leaders themselves, with members of their staff and line manager where appropriate, and with their peers and other observers of their leadership style or the leadership environment they created. Nearly 60 interviews were conducted, most of them by telephone although

Box I: Preliminary findings and hypotheses tested during the case studies

The external context and operational humanitarian leadership

1. Political, diplomatic and negotiating skills are increasingly important for effective operational humanitarian leadership.

The international humanitarian system and implications for operational humanitarian leadership

2. Operational leadership is inhibited by features of the international humanitarian system that go beyond any single organisation, including the contract-driven, standardised nature of much aid that encourages managerialism rather than leadership, and accountability mechanisms that inhibit risk-taking and creativity.
3. Organisational culture and incentives tend to obstruct, rather than foster and support, effective operational humanitarian leadership (e.g. tendency to risk-aversion, a focus on funding targets).
4. Building consensus is key to effective operational humanitarian leadership.
5. Effective operational humanitarian leadership has to be earned. It is not vested in positions of authority.

Different types of operational humanitarian leadership

6. The qualities required of operational humanitarian leadership vary little between different types of humanitarian crisis, but substantially between different 'levels' of an operation.

Qualities required for operational humanitarian leadership

7. Developing a shared strategic vision and objectives, focused on providing appropriate support to the affected population, is the essential starting point for effective operational humanitarian leadership.
8. Experience is vital to being able to exercise the judgement needed for effective operational humanitarian leadership, and to have credibility.
9. Despite a tendency to focus on the results achieved by operational humanitarian leaders, it is their relational and communication abilities that distinguish truly effective leaders from 'strong leaders'.

Supporting and developing operational humanitarian leadership

10. Operational humanitarian leadership needs to be supported by effective strategic leadership higher up the organisation.
11. The demands on individual leaders have increased substantially. Collective leadership, in which leadership skills and responsibilities are distributed within a team or among a set of people or agencies, is likely to become a more appropriate model for operational humanitarian leadership.

some were face-to-face, particularly in Kenya and Sudan. (See Annex 2 for a full list of interviewees.) Because of the subjective and personal nature of leadership, quotes from these interviews are used throughout this study to illustrate a particular point and to convey the perspective of the interviewees in their own words. The study was less successful in identifying gender-based determinants of leadership. Although the interviews explored this issue, few clear insights emerged. More focused research on this topic is needed to do it justice and to be conclusive.

The study benefited from an Advisory Group of leadership experts drawn both from within and outside the humanitarian sector, who provided comments and insights at key points of the process.

TABLE I : Sample of case studies of effective operational humanitarian leadership

	Conflict	Rapid-onset natural disaster	Slow-onset crisis
Leadership to the international response (RC/HC level)	Ross Mountain, UN, Democratic Republic of Congo, (2005-2010) Sara Pantuliano, UN, Sudan (2000-2002)	Alexander McLeod, UN, Pakistan (2005)	
Leadership across a group of similar agencies, OR across different actors	NGO Joint Initiative, Zimbabwe (2005-2008)	Tri-partite Core Group, Dan Baker (UN), Robert Chua (Singapore Ambassador, ASEAN), U Kyaw Thu (Deputy Foreign Minister), Myanmar (2008) IFRC, Haiti (2010)	
Leadership within an agency for its overall and/or programme-specific response in-country	Abbas Gullet, Kenya Red Cross Society (2005 to present) NB covers humanitarian response to post-election violence and natural disasters in Kenya – droughts and floods		
	El Khidir Daloum, Save the Children UK, Somalia (2001–2007) Ramiro Lopes da Silva, WFP, Sudan (2004-2006)	Jemilah Mahmood, MERCY Malaysia, Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004-2008)	Abby Maxman, CARE International, Ethiopia (2006 to present)

Note: the three case studies highlighted in bold were the most in-depth

3. CONCEPTUAL MODELS OF LEADERSHIP ... AND MANAGEMENT

The books and articles on leadership could fill large libraries.³ Many are recent publications, confirming this as a major preoccupation at the turn of the twentieth century. As the world becomes more globalised, complex and fast-moving, the requirement for and demands of leadership across all types of institution are seen to be critical to its ability to cope with change, to adapt, and to remain relevant. The cutting edge of astute and effective leadership is required; sound management and administration are not sufficient.

Definitions and models of leadership abound, although some writers warn that there will never be consensus about how to define it (Grint 2005). There have been many attempts to categorise leadership and to provide leadership typologies, but there is growing recognition of the risk of being overly reductionist and procedural and of missing the very essence or 'magic' of effective leadership (e.g. Grint 2005; Hailey 2006). In recognition of the 'multifaceted' understanding of leadership, this study draws on several different approaches to exploring what it might mean in the humanitarian context. We were informed, in particular, by the approach set out by Grint (2005), which looks at four aspects of leadership, although these are not exhaustive:

- the person – who leaders are
- the result – what leaders achieve
- the position – where leaders operate
- the process – how leaders get things done

Each of these dimensions was examined in the case studies. We also drew on the work of Adair, and in particular on the importance of a leader being aware of, and balancing, the needs of the task, the group and the individual: as an effective leader, 'you need to be constantly aware of what is happening in your group in terms of the three circles' – see Figure 1 (Adair 1993:38). The issue of how much priority should be accorded to task versus people recurs in the literature (e.g. Blake and Mouton 2005; Golman et al. 2002). In the 1960s Fiedler (1967) used this theme to develop his contingency model of leadership, focusing on the style of leadership rather than the traits and personal characteristics of individual leaders, and developing the concept of situational leadership. In other words there is no single leadership style that is appropriate to all contexts, it must be adapted to the situation. In some circumstances being task-oriented is more appropriate and in others being people-oriented should take precedence. Hersey and Blanchard (Hersey 1985) further developed this theory of situational leadership. For example, sometimes a more directive style of leadership is best suited, sometimes a more coaching style. We refer to these themes of task versus people, to situational leadership, and to Adair's model in our analysis of the case studies. Our analysis also benefited from the concept of servant-leadership, originally associated with Robert Greenleaf (1977), which is particularly

3. According to Hochschild (2010) there are more than 2000 publications on leadership available on the Amazon.com website.

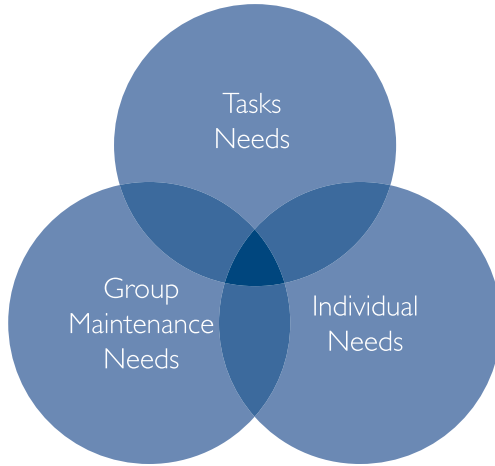


Figure 1 Adair's three-circles model of leadership

relevant to operational humanitarian leadership with its emphasis on caring and service. In addition, the study draws on the findings of research into leadership in other sectors, for example Binney et al. (2005) on the private sector and the PIU (2001) on the public sector. There is remarkably little published literature that is closer to home, although that may be beginning to change with increasing attention being given to leadership in the aid sector more generally, some of it with a humanitarian focus (e.g. Dickman et al. 2010; Hochschild 2010; PIA/CCL 2010). Hailey (2006) quotes the statistic that in 2002 only 10% of books carried by Amazon.com on non-profit management covered non-profit leadership, and most were based on US experience and focused on board and governance issues. Since then there has been some 'grey literature' on leadership produced in UN and NGO circles, although humanitarian leadership is usually a small sub-set of research into leadership in these sectors. This study compares the findings from our case studies of operational humanitarian leadership with the findings from these other studies.

In addressing leadership, how much attention should also be given to management? The relationship between leadership and management is a much-debated topic, with many writers keen to make distinctions between the two, yet also emphasising their complementarity (e.g. Hailey 2006). Hochschild (2010:15) captures the distinction well in the following statement:

||
The manager's focus is mainly within the organization. The leadership task relates more to the big picture, the external environment, the future and organizational change. The leader is less the promoter of rules than of values, less of an administrator than an innovator. The role of the manager is to conserve and maintain the status quo, the leader's is to challenge it.

These differences are summed up in Table 2. They chime with the work done by Heifetz et al. (2009) on adaptive leadership, which distinguishes between managerial authority and expertise, which can solve technical and routine problems that are within the manager's or team's know-how, and the type of leadership which is needed for adaptive challenges that demand a response outside the normal toolkit or repertoire, and that may require people to learn new ways of doing things.⁴ While it is useful to distinguish between the characteristics of management and leadership, this does not mean that the two roles are mutually exclusive. As emerged in the case studies, being an effective leader can also mean being a good manager.

Management	Leadership
Administers	Innovates
Focuses on systems	Focuses on people
Relies on control	Inspires trust
Short-range view	Long-range perspective
Asks how and when	Asks what and why
Eye on bottom line	Eye on horizon
Imitates	Originates
Accepts status quo	Challenges status quo

4. See also http://www.creelmanresearch.com/files/Creelman2009vol2_5.pdf

4. OPERATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP – EARNED OR VESTED IN AUTHORITY?

The case studies set out to test two hypotheses:

- » Effective operational humanitarian leadership has to be earned. It is not vested in positions of authority or in specific institutions, such as the UN.
- » Building consensus is key to effective operational humanitarian leadership, and is becoming increasingly important as the humanitarian-response system becomes more complex yet remains non-hierarchical.

With one exception, the individual leaders in the case studies occupied formal positions of authority, for example as the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) or as the head of their agency in the country concerned. However, a consistent finding was the significance of personal authority as the determining factor of effective leadership rather than the authority vested in position or status; the leadership demonstrated went above and beyond each leader's hierarchical authority. This was neatly summed up by one interviewee, referring to the authority that comes with being an NGO Country Director (CD): 'being a CD gets you a seat at the table, but unless you fill that seat pretty soon people will walk away'. The word that was often used to explain why the leaders in our examples had been effective was their personal 'credibility'. This was true even for the most senior leader in the case studies, Ross Mountain, who was the UN RC/HC in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Despite holding four different senior UN positions in DRC,⁵ it was Ross's high level of personal credibility that was regarded as a critical factor in his leading the turn-around of the international humanitarian response in the country to be more focused, effective and accountable. Indeed, despite his seniority, in Ross's own words: 'the authority you really have is the authority to exercise your ability to convince ... You have to demonstrate you can bring added value'. This is what makes the difference in building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together, from our definition of operational humanitarian leadership above. As discussed in Section 5.3 below, credibility is closely related to experience.

One of our case-study leaders, Sara Pantuliano, did not occupy a position of authority, especially in the early phase of setting up the Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) in Sudan in 2000.⁶ Yet in the words of Sara's line manager, the UN RC/HC in Khartoum, Roger Guarda: 'grade-wise she was the most junior, yet she became the most important person in the office'. In this sense leadership

5. Ross Mountain was simultaneously Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the DRC, UN Humanitarian Coordinator, UN Resident Coordinator, and UNDP Resident Representative.

6. NMPACT was a multi-agency, cross-line programme endorsed by 25 organisations, aimed at promoting a Nuba-led response to the crisis in the Nuba Mountains. See Annex 1 for a fuller description.

is embodied in the individual or individuals concerned; it is not an abstract concept or a status that can be conferred on someone by virtue of their appointment. This was reiterated in the case study of Andrew MacLeod, the UN Cluster Coordinator in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake. According to Jan Vandemoortele, RC/HC at the time: 'I don't suppose the Pakistan military had any notion of whether Andrew was a P4 or a D2, they saw someone who embodied leadership'. According to Grint's classification, this has to do with who the person is rather than the formal reins of power that may be given to them. Yet Grint (2005) also reminds us that the identity of the leader is essentially relational not individual; leadership is to do with how leaders relate to their wider community, a theme explored below, and the determinants of this go far beyond positional power.

This point is underlined by another theme arising from the case studies, that is the extent to which many of the leaders demonstrated their leadership abilities at a number of different levels and in diverse contexts. For example El Khidir Daloum, the Country Director for Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) in Somalia, provided effective leadership to his staff in the country programme office, but also played an important and influential leadership role in the wider international community through the Somali Aid Coordination Body (SACB) and its sectoral committees, and showed effective leadership with his peers within SC-UK's other CDs in the region. Jemilah Mahmood at MERCY Malaysia and Abbas Gullet at the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) played visionary and transformational leadership roles as heads of their respective organisations, as well as providing inspiring operational leadership. In Jemilah's case, this was in the way she responded to the impact of the tsunami in Aceh; for Abbas it was the way in which he responded to the impact of post-election violence and recurrent natural disasters in Kenya. In addition, Abbas Gullet has also played an effective leadership role in relation to other Red Cross National Societies in Africa by initiating the capacity-building Network for African Red Cross National Societies (NEPAC).

In the examples of collective leadership, the leadership group comprised individuals in senior management positions, but only in two of the three cases was this critical for the collective leadership to work: for example a group of NGO Country Directors coming together in the Zimbabwe case study, and the triumvirate of a senior Burmese minister, the HC of the UN, and the Chair of ASEAN in the TCG in Myanmar. Once again, however, bringing together a group of senior managers was not sufficient to guarantee effective leadership. It was how they worked together and related to the wider context that made these examples stand out.

The lack of organisational hierarchy within the international humanitarian system means that consensus-building, especially across agencies, is of critical importance. This is particularly the case for the UN, expected to provide strategic leadership and to coordinate the international response to a humanitarian crisis, yet without the structures of authority

to do so, and indeed sometimes working in contexts where its role is questioned. As the UN's role has become more complex, often fulfilling a number of different mandates within any one crisis – from humanitarian response to long-term development, political support to peace-keeping – consensus-building has become more critical yet also more challenging. The UN does not automatically command respect, and instead the institution and its staff must earn its authority and leadership role. Hochschild's (2010) study of leadership in the UN describes this as external and internal coalition-building, calling it lateral rather than hierarchical leadership. Diversity is a defining characteristic of the UN, and a high premium is placed on the ability to bring unity where there are divergent viewpoints.

A leader's skill in building consensus was remarked upon in a number of the case studies. This in turn relates to leaders' ability to communicate, build relationships, listen, and be decisive – qualities that are discussed in Section 5 below. The way to do this seems to vary among different types of humanitarian crisis. Randolph Kent, an experienced HC who was interviewed for the scoping phase of this study, describes how, as a leader in a rapid-onset crisis (whether triggered by conflict or natural disaster), it may be necessary to take a decision first and build consensus for that decision later. Abby Maxman, CARE's CD in Ethiopia, recognised that there is more time to do this in a chronic emergency, describing it as 'a marathon not a sprint. If you run too fast you'll lose both your energy and your capital'. Yet knowing when to bring consultation and consensus-building to a close in favour of making a clear decision emerged as an important leadership quality that not all of the case-study leaders had mastered. This is not only a matter of judgement, it also takes courage, and it means being comfortable with dissent. Ross Mountain warns against being preoccupied with disagreement or personalising it, and instead staying focused on the overall goal and on more pressing needs. Humanitarian leadership is not 'a command performance'. How leaders are perceived, and the extent to which they have credibility and have built trust (discussed in Section 5 below) affects the extent to which their team and peers want to be associated with their decisions, especially the controversial ones.

Box 2: The role of structures and procedures within the NGO Joint Initiative in Zimbabwe

Ground rules

At the outset, clear rules were established for the composition and process of the Joint Initiative's meetings, including who would attend (CDs had to attend in person and not delegate to more junior staff), how the meetings would be chaired, and how they would be recorded.

Decision-making

Clear procedures were established which allowed for a system of 'pitching' by each agency, followed by voting among the group to decide on the allocation of funding. All decisions were based on majority rule, although partners rarely disagreed.

Donor agency involvement

Every quarter the Joint Initiative would hold a meeting with donors to discuss progress. Donor input was valued and used to help steer the focus of the project.

Consensus-building is all the more critical when leadership is collective. This was the case in the NGO Joint Initiative in Zimbabwe, which was entirely non-hierarchical and in which participation was voluntary. Its success was in large part attributed to comprehensive and clear ground rules and structures that were agreed upon at the outset, which ensured that all decisions were collective (see box 2).

Although we can conclude that the personal authority earned through credibility and other (especially relational) qualities is critically important to effective leadership, and that positional authority alone is not enough to create an effective leader, in at least two case studies of individual leadership, both at HC level, there were structures in place that helped to bolster the HC's leadership role in the international system. In the case of DRC, in which the concept of pooled funds was being piloted, these structures served to strengthen the strategic leadership role of the HC. Clear processes linked the allocation of pooled funds to the Humanitarian Action Plan with its strategic objectives, and the HC's leadership role within these processes was clearly established (UN HC 2009). But once again, there is evidence that tools and structures are not sufficient to guarantee leadership. The UN's experience of pooled funds in Sudan at the same time does not illustrate the same level of strategic leadership. Dan Baker, the HC in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, felt that the fact he had unique access to the Government of Myanmar through the Tri-Partite Core Group (TCG) in a context where no others were able to negotiate directly with government, strengthened his leadership position within the international humanitarian community. But feedback from those working in the international system in Myanmar was clear that it was also Dan's skills that gave him the credibility and trust that earned his leadership. Structures alone cannot substitute for this.

5. AN OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITIES VALUED IN OPERATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

5.1 Identifying leadership qualities and traits

Capturing leadership traits and finding ways of replicating them is the 'holy grail' of leadership studies and of leadership-development programmes. Yet what are valued as leadership traits have by no means been constant over time, nor do these traits apply in every context. Hailey (2006) traces the perceptions of leadership traits in recent decades. Leadership used to be thought of as innate; it was all about personality and charisma; the concept of the 'heroic leader' was popular in the 1970s. But how did these leadership styles adapt to different contexts and to external influences? By the 1980s the focus switched to organisational change and the role of 'transformational leadership', acting as a catalyst to positive change through the ability to communicate and inspire. In the late 1990s, as some organisations became flatter and more decentralised, the emphasis was on a new set of skills in networking, negotiation, delegation and team-building, sometimes called relational leadership. Research began to endorse the value of: 'quieter, humbler, less charismatic leaders who are keen to be seen to be part of a broader management team and actively encourage others' (Hailey 2006, citing Bennis and Nanus 2004: 5). This idea is gaining popularity as a more appropriate form of leadership for the interconnected and complex world of the twenty-first century. Wheatley and Frieze (2010:2) capture this shift:

" Heroic leadership rests on the illusion that someone can be in control. Yet we live in a world of complex systems whose very existence means they are inherently uncontrollable... If we want to be able to get these complex systems to work better, we need to abandon our reliance on the leader-as-hero and invite in the leader-as-host. We need to support those leaders who know that problems are complex, who know that in order to understand the full complexity of any issue, all parts of the system need to be invited in to participate and contribute.

Attempts to identify and develop leadership traits have fuelled interest in the 'competency approach', an attempt to measure and monitor core competencies, and to encourage those competencies in the next generation of leaders. Competency frameworks are now being used in the international aid system. For example, the UN uses them for recruitment and internal promotion both as a means to integrate management and leadership values, and specifically for recruiting HCs. The HC competencies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Humanitarian Coordination Competencies	
Domain	Competencies
1. Leadership	1.1 Formulating strategies, applying humanitarian principles and norms 1.2 Deciding and initiating action
2. Managing relationships	2.1 Relating and networking 2.2 Fostering humanitarian teamwork
3. Influencing and representation	3.1 Negotiation and advocacy 3.2 Presenting and communicating information
4. Managing complexity	4.1 Analysing complexity 4.2 Planning and organising
5. Adapting and coping	5.1 Coping with pressure and setbacks 5.2 Adapting and responding to change

Note: Endorsed by the 73rd IASC Working Group meeting in March 2009, building on the Profile for Humanitarian Coordinators endorsed by the 65th IASC Working Group meeting held in July 2006.

A competency framework approach has also been proposed by ELRHA (enhancing learning & research for humanitarian assistance)⁷ in order to help professionalise the humanitarian sector (Walker and Russ 2010). This framework includes ‘leadership’, which is broken down into 15 different behaviours. The Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) has further developed this framework in its humanitarian management and leadership development programme. Leadership is captured in three categories (i) self-awareness; (ii) motivating and influencing others; and (iii) critical judgement. The value of these frameworks is in deconstructing leadership into particular behaviours that can be recognised and replicated. But they do not capture the whole picture. Some authors warn of the limitations of competency frameworks and their tendency to reduce an understanding of the complexity of a particular role to its measurable aspects. Hailey (2006: 5) cautions that: ‘this emphasis on measurement and ranking may be at the cost of valuing less tangible leadership behaviours such as intuition or good judgement’, and is concerned that it downplays the potential negative aspects of strong leadership which is directive and disempowering. Binney et al. (2005: 10–11) make the point that:

“ ... there is no competency model that can be applied to build the ideal leader. Leaders are effective when they are able to bring how they really are to the task they have chosen: when they engage fully with others, when they retain the capacity to think clearly under huge pressure, when they recognise self-doubt as a powerful aid, when they accept that ‘good enough’ is often a whole better than perfection, when they work with others ‘as they are’ rather than expecting blind loyalty. Leaders command respect because they are real: passionate, hard-working and committed, but not perfect.

7. This is a collaborative network dedicated to supporting partnerships between Higher Education Institutions in the UK and humanitarian organisations and partners around the world.

A senior trainer at the UN System Staff College, quoted by Hochschild (2010:58), echoes some of these concerns, warning that: 'Competencies don't measure passion, dedication, commitment to the organization'.

Zenger et al. (2007) make a useful contribution in talking about the 'broad footprint' of leadership, using the metaphor of a tent. The centre pole represents leadership traits related to character, for example honesty and integrity; the four corner poles represent 'personal capabilities' (mainly skills acquired during one's career), a 'focus on results', 'effective interpersonal skills', and 'leading change', which makes the link to the outside world. Their research also shows that there are 'companion behaviours', for example an optimistic attitude, that can make all the difference in turning generic leadership competencies into something truly effective. Findings such as these, which capture the complexity of leadership, cast doubt on the appropriateness of mechanistic competency frameworks.

Competency frameworks imply measures of capability and proficiency, but are they about excellence? According to the findings of Zenger et al. (2007:2), 'we need to set our sights higher'. Training and supporting managers to the point of adequacy does not produce 'extraordinary leaders who, in turn, produce extraordinary results' (ibid: 2). Instead, organisations need to focus on how their 'good' managers can become 'great'.

Thus, although competency frameworks may provide an entry point and are relatively simple to administer, it is important that this rather mechanistic approach does not devalue, oversimplify or ignore some of the human dimensions of effective leadership that defy measurement, nor the 'magic' that can turn good into great.

5.2 Qualities and traits of operational humanitarian leadership: evidence from the case studies

5.2.1 Introduction

Bearing in mind these warnings about competency frameworks, this section draws out the leadership qualities that emerged across the case studies, and that were also valued by the leader's colleagues and peers as well as by the leaders themselves. These are organised in five groups, coincidentally mirroring the five tent poles referred to by Zenger et al.:

- (i) strategic leadership skills that relate to the bigger picture
- (ii) relational and communication qualities
- (iii) decision-making and risk-taking skills
- (iv) management and organisational skills
- (v) personal qualities

Some of these qualities relate strongly to who the person is, for example their values, which

are hard to measure in a competency framework. Other qualities are described more as skills and abilities which may either come naturally to the individual concerned or may be learned (see Section 12 below). In presenting these qualities and traits we also describe how the leaders used some of them in their work.

In the light of the discussion above, we suggest that these qualities should not be seen as an exhaustive ‘one size fits all’ template for operational leadership. Very few, if any, leaders will be highly skilled in all of these areas, and even if they are, the context will determine which qualities to display at any given time. But it was striking how many of our case-study leaders had a wide range of these skills, some of which appeared non-negotiable, for example the value-based skills of placing the emphasis on the affected population.

5.2.2 Leadership skills related to ‘the bigger picture’

The preliminary finding from the scoping phase indicated that:

»» Developing a shared strategic vision and objectives, focused on providing appropriate support to the affected population (rather than institutional processes), is the essential starting point for effective operational humanitarian leadership.

As described in the following three sub-sections, the case studies strongly endorsed this finding.

Contextual analysis

A defining feature of operational humanitarian leadership is the leader’s ability to understand the context. This is partly a function of political and analytical skills (see below), but is also a consequence of the leader valuing the importance of a strong contextual analysis and dedicating time to understanding it, despite the many competing demands on their time. A Sudanese politician who had worked with NMPACT in Sudan when he was part of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) lamented that you often see good technical people paying inadequate attention to the context and simply trying to replicate a technical ‘fix’ that had worked elsewhere. Both Sara Pantuliano in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan and El Khidir Daloum working in Somalia were particularly credited for their in-depth knowledge of the context in which each was working and the time they dedicated to achieving that knowledge and understanding. This clearly enhanced their leadership role because others sought them out for their analysis and advice. For senior UN leaders, the demands on their time may prevent them from spending significant periods outside the office; in this case placing a value on strong contextual analysis depends on others to provide it.

Having and holding a vision

The ability of the leader to have a clear and strategic vision of what the humanitarian operation is attempting to achieve, and to translate that vision into objectives, emerges as a consistent theme across the case studies. At a first glance, the 'vision' may be obvious – saving lives – but as explained in Section 1.2 above, humanitarian action is far more complex than this. There will always be competing priorities. Working out which are more important and how they should be achieved depends on having a strong grasp of the context of the crisis. Having a vision relates to the 'long-range perspective', 'eye on the horizon' characteristic described in Table 1. Within the UN, Hochschild (2010:109) talks of: 'bringing clarity and a value-based vision where there is short-term thinking, divisions and uncertainty'. But it is not only within the UN that short-term thinking may be the default mode. The short timescales that govern much humanitarian funding and the contract-based postings of many international humanitarian staff encourage a short-term planning and programming perspective that often inhibits the development of a longer-term vision and the ability to sustain such a vision with any consistency.⁸ Indeed, in several of the case studies this strong sense of vision led the leader to challenge conventional ways of doing things. NMPACT, for example, had as its vision: 'enhancing the Nuba people's capacity for self reliance within a sustained process of conflict transformation guided by the aspirations, priorities and analyses of the Nuba people themselves' (Pantuliano 2008: 42). This was very different from the conventional, often externally driven, responses to food insecurity. One of Ross Mountain's early contributions on arriving in DRC as HC was to clarify and establish protection as the overall objective of the international humanitarian response.

The ability to communicate the vision with conviction and to build ownership around it is just as important as creating the vision – these are also described below as relational skills. Creating the vision collaboratively so that it is a shared goal is a critical first step in effective collective leadership, evident in the case studies on the IFRC Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT) in Haiti and the Zimbabwe NGO Joint Initiative. This can be a slow process. NMPACT took a year, but eventually achieved consensus among nine UN agencies, 16 international NGOs and 24 national NGOs on the unconventional vision described above. In rapid-onset crises speed is of the essence. After the Pakistan earthquake a shared vision of civil–military cooperation, based on the new UN Cluster System, had to be built quickly, involving the large number of international humanitarian actors and the Pakistan military. This was a messy and at times tumultuous process. But this is also where Andrew MacLeod's leadership on the international side, as UN Cluster Coordinator, was critical. In partnership with the Pakistan military he developed the concept of 'non-interfering coordination', which proved successful in balancing the independence of NGOs with the need to coordinate with the military so that gaps could be filled.⁹ This resulted in what Jan Vandemoortele, the HC in Pakistan, called '[The] most successful civil and

8. See Buchanan-Smith and Bromwich, forthcoming, for an analysis of this in relation to the Darfur crisis.

9. The theory behind non-interfering coordination was: (1) sharing an open and honest assessment of needs with the NGO and humanitarian world, including the United Nations; (2) allowing humanitarian actors to choose what operations they will undertake, rather than dictating activities; (3) asking NGOs to inform central commanders of the choices made; (4) central commanders can then identify unmet gaps in humanitarian delivery, which can be back-filled by the Army and other government agencies (MacLeod and Nadeem Ahmed, nd).

military cooperation ever', ultimately contributing to the effectiveness of the response (MacLeod and Nadeem Ahmed, nd).

The leader's ability to maintain the vision and to hold course was highlighted as an important quality in some of the case studies. In the unpredictable and often chaotic environment of a humanitarian crisis this is no mean feat. An experienced leader interviewed for the scoping phase described it as sustaining momentum beyond the first wave of response and ensuring that the objectives remain clear and are paramount, whatever the distractions and obstacles encountered.

Keeping the focus on the affected population

Ensuring that the overall goal or vision is focused on the affected population, and that this informs day-to-day decision-making and action, is a strong theme across the case studies. It highlights the centrality of values in humanitarian leadership. It was variously expressed by the leaders and by their staff and peers, in the following words:

- 'I'm not working for SC-UK, I'm working for children.'
- 'He cares.'
- 'She is most obviously (and infectiously) driven by real compassion and concern for those we seek to serve.'
- 'She spoke with knowledge, passion and commitment, and that commitment drew others who were committed.'

Jemilah Mahmood took it a step further in explaining what difference this makes to how she does things, in other words translating her values into behaviour:

" I put myself in the shoes of the affected population. Whenever I go into [a situation like this] I try to see it from the lens of the survivor – what kind of assistance do they want – and thinking ahead, so it's not just bags of rice but is it really working from their perspective of what's needed? We need to have a dialogue with them and listen.'

This focus on the affected population clearly informed the case-study leader's respective vision and drove their commitment. In terms of leadership, the priority given to the affected population was evident to their staff and colleagues, it earned them respect, and it positively affected their ability to draw others around them. As Ross Mountain said: 'if you see it just as a job, then taking people with you is very difficult'. In relation to Adair's three circles model of leadership (Figure 1, above), it means clearly defining 'task needs' in terms of the affected population.

5.2.3 Relational and communication skills

The study tested the finding from the scoping phase that:

»» [D]espite a tendency to focus on the results achieved by operational humanitarian leaders, it is often their relational and communication abilities that distinguish truly effective leaders from those identified as 'strong' leaders.

Each of the 11 case studies consistently supported this finding. So what do we mean by relational and communication abilities, and how are they demonstrated? The case studies reveal a number of different aspects, including:

- (1) **The ability to listen and to be prepared to learn from others**, with openness and without arrogance, is a quality that was much valued by the leaders' colleagues. Even the most experienced leaders like Ross Mountain strongly believed in hearing and incorporating the suggestions of others, recognising that they don't have all the answers themselves. This was commented upon and appreciated in a number of case studies. (In contrast the research by Zenger et al. (2007) shows that one of the typical 'fatal flaws' of the least effective leaders is their lack of openness to new ideas.)
- (2) The leader's **ability and willingness to share information and to be transparent** was particularly welcomed, for example in Dan Baker's leadership, the Acting HC in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, who had unique access to the Government of Myanmar and who reported back openly and frequently to his colleagues in the international community. In a closed society where information was at a premium, this was highly valued.
- (3) Some of the case-study leaders stood out for their **preparedness and ability to speak out, to have courageous conversations**. In the wider international community this meant raising issues that were being ignored, asking difficult questions and naming what was not being named. With their staff it meant being honest if something was not working and needed to change, or if the leader disagreed with a team member. This again was a quality valued by their colleagues and staff. In the words of El Khidir Daloum of SC-UK, 'I was a controversial figure because I speak out ... Complacency is not leadership. You are following'. Although speaking out inevitably challenged some actors, his colleagues and peers appreciated this quality, one of them commenting that SACB meetings were more worthwhile if he was present. The ability to have courageous conversations is central to the concept of conversational leadership promoted by David Whyte and others:

|| Conversational leadership does not mean indulging in endless talking but rather identifying and engaging with the crucial and often courageous exchanges that facilitate meaningful change. (www.conversational-leadership.org)

- (4) How leaders ***relate to their staff*** was identified as a leadership quality in a number of case studies, particularly of leaders in senior management positions. ‘If staff feel you care for them, they are willing to work for you’, was the clear message from a number of interviewees. The human qualities of being able to connect with staff at all levels of the organisational hierarchy, from the senior management team to drivers and guards, so that everyone feels they have a personal relationship with the ‘leader’, and that the leader cares about their well-being, were noted and cherished. This is the circle that relates to ‘individual needs’ in Adair’s model (Figure 1, above). This quality is associated with Ramiro Lopes da Silva, WFP’s ex-Regional Director in Sudan. It was seen to bring out the best in his staff, and encouraged them ‘to go the extra mile without feeling it’.
- (5) ***Relational skills are a critical part of the leader’s political skills***, and are further explored in Section 6 below. A range of skills is relevant here, including building relationships with key ‘political stakeholders’; building alliances and networks; and the ability to negotiate and engage in dialogue with very different actors.
- (6) A number of the leaders talked about themselves as ***being able to get on with people, as being personable and sociable***. An ability to connect and communicate across different sectors – from local people, to the military, politicians and government officers at all levels – emerges as an extremely valuable quality in many humanitarian crises. For example, Jemilah Mahmood has an openness, a directness and an ease that enables her to quickly establish trust and form the essential relationships to get things to happen. She herself talks about seeking to establish a dialogue and find commonalities with others, drawing on her own culture and background.
- (7) A more formal aspect of communication skills is the ***skill to represent***, which mostly refers to presentational skills in more formal fora, whether related to one’s agency or to a particular viewpoint or issue.
- (8) Not surprisingly, ***communication and relational skills are essential to effective collective leadership***. This clearly emerges from the NGO Joint Initiative in Zimbabwe. One of the factors that helped this to work was building open, frank and honest relationships within the core group of seven international NGOs. The TCG in Myanmar was a very different form of collective leadership among actors that were less united in their overall goals. Nevertheless, it was

important that the relationships were strong among the three key players, the HC of the UN, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Myanmar and the Singapore Ambassador as the ASEAN representative. In the words of one interviewee: 'the chemistry worked'.

The relative strengths of these different skills vary from one leader to another, but the clear message is that these communication and relational skills are critical in order to motivate and inspire staff and peers and to bring people with you. They relate to two of the circles in Adair's model of leadership concerning group maintenance and individual needs; and to Grint's process of leadership – how things are done. Being open to the ideas and contributions of others avoids the 'heroic leader' syndrome in favour of 'leader-as-host' (Wheatley and Frieze 2010). For example, NMPACT was designed with a cohort of advisers, which encouraged the circulation of ideas and contributions to the development of the programme. The ability to form relationships across boundaries can make all the difference in a humanitarian crisis in terms of building alliances and making things happen. Ross Mountain shared his underlying belief that 'people want to work together for something positive', and that by sketching out the positive you can draw people in. In contrast, a recent study on leadership in development and humanitarian organisations found that lack of communication was the principal failure of leadership (CCL/PIA 2010).

5.2.4 Decision-making and risk-taking

Decision-making abilities

A fine balance emerged in the case studies between consultation and consensus-building (described in Section 4) and decisiveness. Sensing when to end a consultative process in order to make a clear decision, especially if there is dissent, is a matter of judgement, which is in turn informed by experience. Three other decision-making qualities that are pertinent to humanitarian crises are:

- (i) The ability to make decisions rapidly according to the situation on the ground, without resorting to an operational blueprint.
- (ii) The ability to make decisions on the basis of inadequate, contradictory or unreliable information – a feature of many humanitarian crises – which implies being comfortable with 'not knowing', being prepared to take risks, and avoiding perfectionist tendencies in favour of 'good enough'.
- (iii) The agility and flexibility to change decisions as the situation or information available changes, but at the same time being prepared to say no and not being 'blown from one side of the room to the other', for example on the basis of the last conversation with a particularly persuasive colleague. Ramiro Lopes da Silva captured this well: 'set your goals and deploy your capacities ... but always be willing to adjust and fine-tune your approach as you go forward'. The goal may be fixed, but the means used to achieve it should not be.

While the need for these decision-making qualities may not be unique to operational humanitarian leadership, they are certainly intensified in a humanitarian crisis, which is often chaotic, unpredictable and fast-moving, and may occur in a hostile environment. All of the decision-making abilities required for humanitarian operations are strengthened through experience.

The case studies underlined that taking decisions alone is not enough. It is vital for leaders to be accountable, especially when things go wrong, so that the leader's team /staff know that they'll be supported in such circumstances.

Risk-taking and innovation

Being prepared to take risks emerges as a strong theme in the case studies, but in a mature and balanced way, not recklessly. The ALNAP study on innovation introduced the concept of 'honourable risk' in humanitarian work, recognising the risk and cost of failure when lives and livelihoods are at stake, yet also grasping the opportunity to do things previously thought impossible (Ramalingam et al. 2009). Some of the case-study leaders who were in senior management positions were credited with encouraging their staff to take risks, yet being prepared to shoulder responsibility if things went wrong. One of the most striking examples is the case of Abbas Gullet, Secretary-General of the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS), who has instilled a risk-taking culture within the KRCS, bucking the trend of risk-aversion that pervades the organisational culture of most humanitarian aid institutions (see Section 9.3 below, and Box 3).

Taking risks requires courage, frequently acknowledged by interviewees when commenting on a leader's abilities. As Jemilah Mahmood's colleague stated, in relation to her presidency of MERCY Malaysia: 'she was never afraid to take the next hurdle, to stumble where others might be more cautious'. Inherent in risk-taking is being prepared to make mistakes. Another of Jemilah's leadership qualities is her adaptability and her ability to learn fast so that mistakes were

Box 3 Bucking the trend – a risk-taking culture within the KRCS

The value Abbas Gullet attaches to risk-taking is evident from his own words:

'...if you don't, it is all routine. You are a typical civil servant. Try things and make mistakes'. He models risk-taking in the way he has developed the KRCS, for example now supported financially by a hotel complex run by the Society, and in the way he leads their operational response. Strongly results-oriented, he finds a way to break through obstacles to make things happen, even if it means breaking the rules.

He has consciously nurtured a risk-taking culture among his staff. A common refrain in interviews with KRCS senior managers was: 'the sky is the limit', the phrase used by their boss. Staff are encouraged to come up with new ideas, which are met with enthusiasm and support, albeit not uncritically.

Interestingly Abbas has also worked to simplify internal procedures, which is part of developing a risk-taking culture that values innovation. According to a colleague from the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the KRCS is 'a shining example of a risk-taking culture', which has challenged the rest of the movement in its attitude to risk.

rectified quickly. This quality is key to successful risk-taking. It may explain why our case-study leaders, most of whom were risk-takers, were also successful in achieving results. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the relationship between risk-taking and failure in any depth. Other leadership studies, however, affirm the critical link between risk-taking and learning, for example White's work in the private sector (2009): 'in our research we found that managers who can tolerate risk also value the learning opportunity afforded by making mistakes'. In contrast, Zenger et al.'s research (2007) shows that a typical flaw in the least effective leaders is their inability to learn from mistakes.

Although risk-taking is widely associated with leadership, in the humanitarian sector it seems particularly pertinent because of the pressures to respond rapidly, especially in the early stages of a crisis when human suffering is most evident and may be particularly acute, in situations that are likely to be chaotic and confused, and information is partial and incomplete.

Risk-taking is also closely related to innovation, and innovation to leadership (see Ramalingam et al. 2009). A number of the case-study leaders were credited with being innovative and 'thinking outside the box'. These are examples of 'adaptive leadership', promoted by Heifetz et al. (2009) when the complexity and novelty of a situation demands a response outside the standard repertoire. In two of the collective leadership examples – the TCG in Myanmar and the NGO Joint Initiative in Zimbabwe – the collective structure itself was an innovation. Indeed, Mercy Corps (which provides incentives and recognition for innovation) presented its annual agency-wide award for innovation to the Mercy Corps Zimbabwe programme for its role in initiating the Joint Initiative.

5.2.5 Management skills related to leadership

Putting together a strong team, leading by example and mentoring

Almost all of the case-study leaders inherited rather than chose the team with whom they worked and who supported them at the outset. Over time, however, many of them were able to choose and build the kind of team that they wanted. In the words of one leader: 'if you haven't got something you have to build a team. A good leader recognises where his or her gaps are and calls on others to fill those gaps. No one person can be a humanitarian leader'. The ability to identify effective individuals who worked well as part of a team was a quality associated with the majority of individual case-study leaders.

For the leaders in positions of senior management, often with responsibility for large teams, leading by example was valued by their staff. This means not asking others to do what you wouldn't be prepared to do yourself. Sometimes it might also mean stepping out of the director's office and working on the frontline. A striking example of this, which inspired his staff, was Abbas Gullet's initiative in being one of the first humanitarians to drive into the 'red zone' during the post-election violence in Kenya, responding to the crisis and helping to remove the bodies of those who had been killed. This image stayed with his staff and somehow defined his leadership style.

For those leaders in senior management positions, the quality of taking time to mentor their staff and giving them space to be leaders in their own field was appreciated in a number of the case studies. These are enabling leaders, who place a high value on developing the leadership qualities of their team.

A good leader, and also a good manager

A common refrain is that effective leaders are rarely good managers, and that individuals who have visionary and strategic skills can often lack the skills to carry out more detailed and routine management tasks; they enjoy the big picture but often get bored with the detail. More than half of our case-study leaders contradicted this view. They combined an eye for detail with the ability to engage with the bigger picture. For an NGO Country Director this is a particularly valuable combination of skills. A senior manager/leader within a UN system is likely to have a wider array of management support services at their disposal; in this case, key skills include the ability to delegate and to supervise, and were mentioned in relation to some UN leaders in the sample.

5.2.6 Personal qualities

The personal qualities that shone through in the case studies, and that relate to who people are, include:

Principles and integrity

In terms of the leader's values, being principled and acting with integrity was widely appreciated by staff and peers. These qualities were often linked to honesty and transparency. There was a sense that people knew where they stood, that they respected the leader's values and were therefore attracted to the leader. This also meant that they were more likely to support difficult decisions that were based on incomplete information.

Self-awareness and self-confidence

Evidence of self-awareness was expressed in various ways, for example leaders having the courage to admit what they cannot do, and knowing their own limitations. Overall there was a strong correlation between the qualities and traits the leaders saw in themselves and those mentioned by their staff and peers – although the latter were often more expansive. This correlation itself indicates a relatively high level of self-awareness on the part of the leaders.

Self-confidence also means being self-assured. This quality helps leaders to accept that they won't always be liked for their actions and decisions, which are guided by a higher goal than seeking popularity. It may also help in being comfortable with dissent, discussed above. And it definitely helps in being open to the ideas and initiatives of colleagues and peers, being prepared to allow their leadership to shine and not feeling threatened by it.

Humility

Despite the high levels at which some of the case-study leaders were operating, and their achievements, their humility was in itself humbling to witness. It was expressed in different

ways – by playing down their role, being quick to give credit to others, and being open to learn from the ideas and experience of others. Humility also relates to ego. One leader showed self-awareness in ‘owning’ their ego, rather than being driven by it. Another spoke of how ‘you need to lose your ego a bit – it’s not about you, you have to put yourself in other people’s shoes, with respect, and build trust’.

Tenacity and determination

The leader’s ability to stay focused on the main goal and not to give up was commented upon in a number of cases, often where the team was working in challenging contexts where there were numerous obstacles – logistical and political. Adopting a problem-solving mentality and breaking through impediments, even if it meant breaking the rules, were some of the ways in which tenacity and determination were shown.

Energy and enthusiasm, yet also self-care

The energy and enthusiasm of the case-study leaders were very evident and closely related to their commitment to serve, and therefore their drive. As described below, most of them worked exceptionally long hours. This raises the issue of self-care, which surfaced as an important quality in the scoping phase of the study, meaning a leader’s ability to look after herself or himself and to manage their own stress rather than ‘spilling over’ and affecting others. Personal support structures were important in some of the case studies, giving the leader the space to do what they did. (See also Section 10 below.)

5.3 Experience is invaluable

The case studies set out to test the finding from the scoping phase that:

»» Experience is vital to being able to exercise the judgement needed for effective operational humanitarian leadership, and to have credibility.

Evidence from the case studies strongly endorsed this finding, both in terms of depth and breadth of experience, for four main reasons:

- (1) As described above, a leader has to make many decisions in a humanitarian crisis on the basis of incomplete and inadequate information. Knowing when and how to make these decisions, and when to cut off consultation, is a matter of judgement, in turn informed by experience of humanitarian operations. In the case of Ramiro Lopes da Silva’s leadership of WFP in 2004, setting up the world’s largest food-aid operation in Darfur and opening new offices in Southern Sudan with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, his extensive experience in a wide range of humanitarian crises was seen to be critical to his successful leadership of WFP in responding to the scale of the needs in Sudan at that time. In his own words: ‘I benefited in WFP from involvement throughout my life in complex emergencies’.

His experience of working in insecure environments and therefore taking security issues into consideration was also recognised and respected by his staff in Sudan. For many experienced leaders judgement is closely related to intuition, and both are informed by experience.¹⁰ Only with experience do the necessary maturity, judgement and intuition develop. Greenleaf describes intuition as: 'a feel for patterns, the ability to generalize based on what has happened previously' (Greenleaf 1977: 23).

- (2) The political skills that are now essential to operational humanitarian leadership are mostly developed through experience, as discussed in Sections 6 and 12 below.
- (3) The importance of experience in giving the leader credibility from the perspective of their staff and peers was often mentioned in interviews. It gave them confidence in the leader's decisions and respect for their knowledge and chosen approach.
- (4) Having in-depth experience and knowledge of one's own organisation, whether a UN agency, an NGO or the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, emerged as a valuable asset in many of the case studies, for example the case study of Ross Mountain and his extensive experience of the UN in the DRC, of Ramiro Lopes da Silva and his in-depth knowledge of WFP built up over many years, of El Khidir and his experience and knowledge of SC-UK, and of Abbas Gullet's transformational leadership of the KRCS. Not only is this invaluable for getting things done, knowing one's way around the organisation and having relationships with key individuals, it also informed the leader's appetite for risk and how far they were able and willing to push the organisation. Ross Mountain captured this succinctly by explaining that having experience meant that 'it had become a lot easier taking risks. I know a few people and they know me, so I am unlikely to be terrorised by the system.'

In emphasising the importance of experience it is also important to distinguish between straightforward years worked and learning and reflection based on experience.

5.4 In summary...

Many of these qualities of operational humanitarian leadership are recognised across many sectors, for example, having and holding a vision, decision-making abilities, being innovative, and being self-confident and self-aware. What is different in operational humanitarian leadership is the context in which these qualities are being applied which is, by definition, more extreme than most settings in which private-sector leadership is demonstrated. This gives the qualities required of operational humanitarian leadership a particular edge, for example taking decisions that will affect other people's lives and livelihoods in a fluid situation and on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information, leading by example – which means being prepared to operate in dangerous environments – working with people in

10. See Malcolm Gladwell (2005) for an interesting analysis of how experience unconsciously influences our intuition.

distress, and negotiating with a wide range of different actors, some of whom may be hostile to the humanitarian endeavour, while under pressure to act rapidly. Operational humanitarian leadership is also value-based with a focus on (often impoverished, marginalised and disempowered) populations affected by the crisis and on the role of the humanitarian community in serving those populations. Individual commitment to such values and to putting them into practice is a defining feature of operational humanitarian leadership and is key to attracting staff and colleagues. This explains Hochschild's distinction between leadership that achieves desired outcomes irrespective of the means and moral content, and value-based leadership, concluding that: 'value based leadership is ... essential to maintaining the organization's [UN's] authority and leverage' Hochschild 2010:14.

The importance and range of relational and communication qualities are striking across all the case studies, from demonstrating basic human respect and care for colleagues at all levels, to being prepared to have courageous discussions and to raise difficult issues, to simply being able to listen and to make effective presentations. Combined with self-awareness, this is part of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al. 2002). These skills are key to building relationships in order to successfully negotiate access to affected populations, and to bringing out the best in the leader's team and colleagues. This emphasis on the 'relational leader' rather than the heroic or task-oriented leader follows a trend of how leadership is being re-conceptualised. Mintzberg (2010: 2) sums this up:

" I think of true leaders as *engaging*: they engage others with their thoughtfulness and humility because they engage themselves in what they are doing – and not for personal gain. Such leaders bring out the energy that exists naturally within people. If there is a heroic dimension to their behavior, it is not by acting heroically so much as by enabling other people to act heroically.

This also resonates with the concept of servant-leadership that 'seeks to involve others in decision-making, is strongly based in ethical and caring behaviour, and ... enhances the personal growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizational life.'¹¹

The research conducted by Zenger et al. (2007) on leadership in the private sector found that the best leaders usually excelled in just two or three areas, and it was how they used those few 'world class' strengths that propelled them into the category of exceptional leader. In contrast, the findings of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) research into leadership within non-profit organisations in the UK, quoted in Hailey (2006), suggested that individual leaders exhibited an unusually broad range of qualities and traits compared to leaders in the public and private sectors. The ACEVO research concluded that leaders needed a balance of inward-looking (management) and outward-looking (influencing) skills, with highly developed communication and networking skills, as well as

11. As defined by Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. See <http://www.theleadershiphub.com/userlog/servant-leadership-explained-10-essentials>

resilience and emotional attachment. This resonates strongly with the findings of this study. Our case-study leaders were highly effective across a wide range of skills rather than just a few. This finding suggests that this may be even more important in operational humanitarian leadership than in leadership of UK-based non-profits because of the pressures of responding fast and responsibly and engaging with a wide range of actors in a chaotic and often hostile operating environment.

5.5 The cracks in leadership – when strengths become weaknesses

One of the questions we asked interviewees was: ‘what didn’t work?’ Sometimes the answer related to influences in the wider organisational or political context, explored below. But in relation to the leaders themselves, it was striking how often an individual’s leadership strengths could become a weakness when overplayed. For example, supporting, developing and mentoring staff could become over-protective when the employee concerned lacked either the necessary competence or the ability to make the required changes in their performance. The mostly commonly cited weakness was the leader’s tendency to push colleagues too hard, expecting others to match their own boundless energy and appetite for work, and to keep up with their own frenetic pace. This could become an unreasonable demand. Both of these examples reveal the shadow side of a leader’s strengths.

Yet as White (2009) reminds us: ‘finding flaws is human.’ The more pertinent question is how the leader relates to those flaws or cracks in their leadership style.¹² Where this is a blind spot for the leader, it may take an organisation, a line manager, colleagues or some kind of external support (for example, coaching) to draw the leader’s attention to their flaws or unbalanced strengths. But the real issue is the leader’s ability and willingness to acknowledge the flaws and to be prepared to engage with them. This in turn requires a high level of self-awareness, humility, and an openness to learn, however senior and experienced the leader may be. In White’s treatise (2009) against the ‘strengths-based movement’, he emphasises the importance of continuous learning and embracing of weakness, stating that:

|| Growth and development – especially in areas in which one is weak, or even flawed – takes humility and hard work, not to mention rising above one’s ego. Right down to the core of the human psyche, it’s actually easier to believe in a notion of a perfect leader than it is to do the work necessary to change and become a better or more effective leader.

12. Zenger et al. (2007) call it ‘imbalanced strengths’, and the leader may need to be encouraged to develop strengths in one area, for example inter-personal skills, to complement the area in which they have exceptional strengths, for example in achieving results.

6. THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL SKILLS IN OPERATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

One of the findings from the scoping phase that the case studies set out to test is that:

» **As the context for humanitarian operations becomes increasingly politicised (e.g. to do with more assertive governments and the international humanitarian system perceived as associated with wider political agendas), political, diplomatic and negotiating skills are increasingly important for effective operational humanitarian leadership.**

During the scoping phase a number of experienced interviewees pointed out that, although guided by the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality, international humanitarian action is not apolitical. It is often carried out in highly politicised contexts, and may be challenged by assertive governments suspicious of the arrival and actions of numerous international humanitarian agencies that appear to operate with limited accountability and that may be perceived as closely associated with Western political agendas. Neutrality has to be earned and political humanitarian leadership is clearly central to operational humanitarian leadership.

All of the case studies provided strong evidence to support this hypothesis, not only in conflict-related crises but also in rapid-onset emergencies. Dan Baker, who witnessed and was part of the international humanitarian response after the earthquakes in Haiti and in Pakistan, as well as Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, concluded that political skills were paramount in order to negotiate humanitarian access so that the technical experts could get on with their job.

Many of those interviewed for the case studies confirmed a growing awareness of the importance of political skills, but underlined that this is not about being a politician but about being a humanitarian professional with political acumen. So what do we mean by political skills in humanitarian leadership? A number of traits emerged from the case studies:

- (1) the foundation for effective political skills is having a strong contextual understanding and analysis, at the heart of which must be a strong understanding of the political economy of the humanitarian crisis.¹³ Understanding the crisis through a political lens, constantly updating that analysis, and being able to engage comfortably with highly complex situations, are essential.
- (2) Being able to carry out some kind of political stakeholder analysis – not in a lengthy and procedural way, but rapidly and intuitively, constantly updating the analysis – is

13. Despite growing awareness of the importance of a strong political analysis, Collinson (2003: 1) found that 'supply-side considerations and blueprint approaches frequently hold sway' in analyses of humanitarian crises.

critical to working out who is important and which relationships to invest in, so that this is done strategically rather than haphazardly. A national staff member working with one of the case-study leaders commented on how he would always brief himself on the background of key government ministers and officials before meeting them. This is also important to identify entry points in terms of negotiation as well as action.

- (3) Strong relational and networking skills are key, with different actors and across boundaries, for example with government officials, politicians and the military. Informal networking emerges as often being more important than formal networking structures, and investing in this kind of social capital over time also pays off, as is evident from the case studies on Myanmar, Ethiopia and Sudan. (See Box 4.) Combined with (2) above, this must be informed and not uncritical. One of Andrew MacLeod's key assets in Pakistan was his ability to work across boundaries, both cultural (Western/international–Pakistani) and organisational (UN–military).

Diplomatic, negotiation and facilitation skills are all part of this set of political skills. These were demonstrated in a number of different contexts and with different results in our case studies. El Khidir Daloum regarded one of his greatest leadership achievements to be negotiating humanitarian access and principles on behalf of the international humanitarian community with the Islamic Court of the new regime in Somalia. His negotiation skills with clan elders in Somalia were widely respected. Ramiro Lopes da Silva, WFP Regional Director in Sudan, acknowledged the importance of working with all actors (and parties to the conflict in Darfur) to understand their viewpoint and to negotiate access, describing his style as follows: 'I don't like making big public statements. We as humanitarians gain more from quiet and active diplomacy.'

Sara Pantuliano's leadership of NMPACT is a powerful example of this set of political skills in action, as described in Box 4.

Box 4: Political skills in action in the Nuba Mountains: Sara Pantuliano

Sara's achievement was her role in setting up and providing leadership to the only operational programme in Sudan at the time that was subscribed to by both parties – the Government of Sudan and the SPLM – during the North–South civil war: Learning from Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and the limitations of a divided operation, NMPACT established a single, coordinated cross-line initiative centred around a set of principles of engagement that were developed collaboratively by NMPACT partners. This achievement required exceptional political skills. These included a profound understanding of the context, through a political lens, and an ability to grasp and engage with the complexity that was inherent in that context. It required skills of diplomacy, in this case working with both sides to the conflict even-handedly. Sara was credited with understanding the politics without getting involved in them. All of this depended upon building relationships with the key actors and with key individuals, taking the time to invest in and to maintain these relationships, having worked out who was important and could play a significant role. Relationship-building was attributed as 'one of her major qualities', and she describes spending hours with individuals before big meetings so that everybody would arrive at major appointments more or less in agreement and decisions about the direction of the programme could be taken more easily. All of this created the conditions for 'vigorous interaction with key political and military actors', central to NMPACT's success. (Pantuliano 2008.)

7. HOW DOES OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP VARY ACROSS DIFFERENT TYPES OF HUMANITARIAN CRISIS?

The case studies deliberately explored humanitarian leadership in different types of humanitarian crisis, in order to test the hypothesis that:

» **The qualities required of operational humanitarian leadership vary little between different types of humanitarian crisis, but vary substantially between different ‘levels’ of the operation i.e. between leadership of the international humanitarian system in-country, versus leadership within an organisation, versus leadership of a particular programme.**

This is about ‘situational leadership’ and the extent to which the leadership style must adapt according to context.

Most of the case-study contexts were conflict-related or triggered by rapid-onset natural disasters; one was slow-onset (there were supposed to be more examples in this category but some case studies had to be dropped because of difficulties in tracking down key individuals). The findings across the case studies show remarkable consistency in the qualities and traits that the leaders displayed and that were credited with making a difference, for example big-picture skills in terms of contextual analysis and developing a vision to guide the operation, communication and relational skills, and the importance of value-driven leadership. The differences that emerged are quite subtle within those broad traits. For example, the ability to make decisions rapidly was generally more important in rapid-onset crises. Fiedler’s work (1967) on situational leadership helps to throw light on this, distinguishing between situations where task-oriented leadership is appropriate and where people-oriented leadership is better suited. This resonates with Adair’s three-circles model in terms of which circle should be given precedence in different contexts and at different times. For example, Randolph Kent’s experience, described in Section 4, of making a decision first in a rapid-onset crisis where speed of response is critical, and building consensus for that decision later, indicates precedence given to task. The relational, people dimension is still important, but in terms of timing this is addressed later, after a ‘task-oriented’ decision has been made. Abby Maxman’s experience in Ethiopia, also described in Section 4, where slow-onset food-security crises dominate, of taking time to build consensus, indicates that a people-oriented leadership style dominates early on. But this cannot be at the expense of being task-oriented. It is critical to know when to stop building consensus in favour of a firm task-oriented decision. This resonates with Adair’s model in terms of which of the three circles should predominate in different contexts and at different times. Adair’s reminder that ‘you need to be constantly aware of what is happening in your group in terms of the three circles’ (Adair 1993:38) seems apt. Even when one circle is given precedence for a while, the balance needs to be redressed later on.

In many of our case studies there is an interesting balance between technical/ programme leadership and political leadership (explored in Section 6 below), both important components of operational humanitarian leadership. In one of our case studies, the IFRC Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT) – assembled and mobilised in response to the Haiti earthquake as the initial part of what proved to be the biggest single-country emergency operation ever mounted by the IFRC – technical expertise and experience were strongly emphasised in the critical first few weeks, achieving impressive results. Good relationships within the FACT team facilitated this, suggesting that the people-oriented side cannot be ignored. Interestingly, in the example of Haiti, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was deliberately separated political and technical leadership in order to free up the latter so that it could be operationally task-oriented, but not at the expense of political leadership. In the TCG after Cyclone Nargis political leadership was also separated out, but not deliberately. It took precedence early on as it became apparent that an operational response was impossible without a political break-through that granted humanitarian agencies access to the delta region, which had been devastated by the cyclone. However, some interviewees felt that technical leadership, for example giving priority to responding to need, was not in balance with political leadership and was overlooked. This does, however, illustrate the significance of political leadership, even in humanitarian crises that are triggered by natural disasters – see also Section 6 below. After the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, political skills and alliance-building were highly valued, and Andrew MacLeod as UN Cluster Coordinator was credited with successfully building relationships with the Pakistani military, the major actor leading the government's response.

Relational skills featured highly in all the leadership case studies; the difference is that in long-running conflicts and in slow-onset natural disasters there is an opportunity to build these up over time, whereas this is far more difficult in rapid-onset crises. Yet the experience of the Acting HC in Myanmar demonstrated the value of relationships built up before a rapid-onset crisis, in this case with the Government of Myanmar before Cyclone Nargis, which contributed to Dan Baker being requested by his in-country UN colleagues to take over the HC role. Wherever possible, building up relationships and networks in a country that is prone to rapid-onset crises is worthwhile and pays off during the critical early response period.

The findings from the case studies point to some differences in humanitarian leadership needs in different contexts, for example speed of decision-making, but warn against generalising across categories of humanitarian crisis. For example, a task-oriented leadership style may not be appropriate in all rapid-onset humanitarian crises because of the political leadership (and relational) skills that are critical in many of these contexts. A context-specific analysis of leadership needs is therefore essential, to indicate the appropriate balance of leadership skills required, and thus to inform recruitment processes.

Interestingly, the leadership qualities that emerged in the case studies did not vary as much as expected between levels of leadership, challenging the finding from the scoping phase set out above. Instead, there was remarkable consistency across the case studies that enabled us to identify the main qualities and traits that are presented in this report, although of course there

were differences in how they were put into action and the scale at which they were applied.

So do these findings mean that an individual or group of individuals who provide effective leadership in one context can be expected to do the same in a different one? This question generates considerable interest in the leadership literature. Binney et al. (2005: 55) provide an interesting perspective, that 'context shapes the nature of the leadership that is provided – and it largely determines the results.' This does not mean that context overwhelms the leader, although that is a possibility. Rather, 'by recognising the importance of context, successful leaders begin to see where and how to focus their efforts' (ibid: 56). Using the metaphor of an experienced yachtsman, they explain how:

" [the yachtsmen] don't see the weather as 'the problem' and themselves as 'the answer'... They study conditions intently and are knowledgeable about the fine detail of the performance of their boats and crews and their achievements under a range of circumstances... They don't try and conquer the conditions but think about where and how they can harness winds, tides and currents to take them where they want to go. (Binney et al. 2005: 56)

The implication is this: 'If you give context its due respect, you will be more effective as a leader; if you seek to fit the context into your vision, a lot of time and energy will be wasted' (ibid: 71). This finding has strong resonance for this study and for operational humanitarian leadership more generally. Focused on a number of time-defined examples of effective leadership, it was beyond the scope of the study to follow the case-study leaders over a longer period to explore their adaptability to different contexts. Nevertheless, investing in contextual analysis, listening, and the ability to learn and to be adaptable emerged as strong leadership themes in most of the case studies. These qualities imply a high degree of sensitivity to context and the potential to be the successful and experienced yachtsman that Binney et al. describe. Indeed, some interviewees did comment positively on previous leadership roles played by the case-study examples, particularly the more mature leaders such as Abbas Gullet and Ross Mountain who have led humanitarian operations in numerous different crises.

This study makes no claim to be the final word on situational humanitarian leadership, but it does emphasise the importance of understanding the context in order to apply an appropriate leadership style. This in turn highlights the qualities that enable a leader to be flexible in order to adapt to different contexts, using their 'big picture' analytical skills, and seeing the opportunities but also the limitations and working out how to focus their efforts. This may also depend upon the leaders having sufficient experience of the type of crisis context that they are confronting; if that is ignored in the recruitment process (as is sometimes the case) then a leader's other skills may become less transferable. This is an area that deserves further exploration in the humanitarian field.

8. FOSTERING LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM—WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

8.1 Introduction

The findings of the scoping phase for this leadership study were salutary. When interviewees were asked about the wider humanitarian system and leadership, they came up with twice as many reasons why the wider system and organisational cultures inhibit operational humanitarian leadership than factors that foster such leadership. There were resonances with a recent study of leadership in the public sector which concluded that: ‘Public service leaders are often unable to lead effectively because others fail to give them the freedom, the support systems or the challenges that will permit them to do so’ (PIU 2001: 4).

The findings from the scoping phase were captured in the following three statements that the case studies set out to test:

- Operational humanitarian leadership has the best chance of being effective when it is supported by effective strategic leadership higher up the organisation.
- Operational leadership is inhibited by features of the international humanitarian system that go beyond any single organisation, including the contractually driven, standardised nature of much aid that encourages managerialism rather than leadership, and accountability mechanisms that inhibit risk-taking and creativity.
- Within international humanitarian agencies (ranging from the UN to international NGOs), organisational culture and incentives tend to get in the way of, rather than foster and support effective operational humanitarian leadership. For example, organisations tend to be risk-averse and focused on sound management and funding targets rather than leadership for bold and creative programming.

8.2 What fostered leadership in the case studies

Following the pattern of the scoping phase, the list of factors that fostered leadership in the case studies was shorter than the list of obstacles.

Space and trust to lead

The phrase ‘space to lead’ was frequently voiced in the case-study interviews. A number of the leaders commented on the space they had been given, usually by their immediate line manager. The line managers who were interviewed confirmed this. Recognising the strengths and potential of the staff member they were managing, they consciously gave them space while remaining supportive. Roger Guarda, the UN RC/HC in Sudan who was Sara Pantuliano’s line manager, illustrated this well. He gave her leeway, encouraged her to

take initiatives and to take risks. In his words: 'I like people to take initiative and to operate autonomously, with supervision, but with a lot of encouragement and coaching.' Sara acknowledged the positive impact this had on her: 'knowing that Roger backed me 100%, even if I made mistakes in the process, gave me full confidence that I could experiment and follow my instincts in taking risks with the programme and come up with something as crazy as a cross-line programme with the humanitarian counterparts of the warring parties jointly involved in steering it'.

How much of this 'space' was to do with the individual style and approach of the respective line manager, and how much was it influenced by the organisation's culture? According to Roger Guarda this kind of space is unusual within much of the UN: 'younger people often find themselves working for people who are jealous of them. They are encouraged to be followers not leaders.' This is confirmed in Section 8.3 below. In contrast, the NGOs represented in our case studies appeared more likely to foster an organisational culture that gives space to its leaders, for example SC-UK and CARE, although this space may be shrinking according to the trends noted in Section 8.3. The KRCIS was also able to give space to Abbas Gullet as Secretary-General. In this case the board is giving him space and clearly has confidence in him, but this does not mean a lack of critical engagement. This last point is important as it underlines the role that the line manager or board can play in developing the leader's potential, encouraging them to grow through constructive challenge rather than awed or uncritical acceptance.

Our statement above, that operational humanitarian leadership is most likely to be effective when it is supported by effective strategic leadership higher up the organisation, has its roots in the example of James Grant's leadership in setting up Operation Lifeline Sudan, while supported at a higher strategic level by Richard Jolly in UNICEF. In only one of our case studies did this kind of pattern emerge clearly, with Roger Guarda providing higher-level strategic leadership to Sara Pantuliano's operational leadership in the Nuba Mountains, also in Sudan. This implies that it may be an unusual combination, although it almost certainly contributes to effective operational leadership on the ground. This synergy of leadership at different levels merits further investigation. What other examples could we learn from? How was the synergy created – by accident or deliberately? How did it work and what difference did it make?

Rewarding risk-taking

Clarke and Ramalingam (2008: 55), exploring organisational change, concluded that:

|| Leaders who successfully navigate periods of change encourage and facilitate difficult negotiations. They are prepared to disrupt existing patterns of organisational behaviour, to create and highlight conflicts, and to challenge institutional taboos. They also recognise their own role in creating and maintaining the status quo, and so are prepared to accept a loss of control, and a measure of ambiguity about the future, as the price for increasing innovation and engagement.

This implies risk-taking and, as explained in Section 8.3 below, the case-study leaders were mostly prepared to take risks in spite of their organisations rather than because of them. However, supportive management did encourage risk-taking, especially when the individual concerned had won the trust and confidence of their immediate line manager, as in the case of NMPACT and Sara Pantuliano's leadership. The risk-taking culture that Abbas Gullet has established in KRCS, described in Box 3 above, is an unusual and interesting example of how risk-taking can be encouraged organisationally and rewarded, and also how procedures can be simplified to facilitate this. Mercy Corps' innovation prize, awarded to the Mercy Corps Zimbabwe Country Team for its role in putting together the Joint Initiative, is another positive example of an organisational incentive to innovation, closely linked to risk-taking.

Structures to support leadership

Although structures alone cannot make a leader, they can strengthen a leader's role. Two examples are given in Section 4, of how pooled funds linked to a humanitarian action plan strengthened the strategic leadership role of the HC, and how the TCG structure strengthened the role of the HC, albeit inadvertently, by giving him exclusive access to the Government of Myanmar. There is a third example related to the IFRC and collective leadership after the earthquake in Haiti. Pre-existing structures and procedures within the IFRC – the Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT), the Federation's first-response mechanism which is rapidly convened and deployed before gradually withdrawing as IFRC operational structure is put in place, plus the Emergency Response Units (ERUs) staffed and mobilised by National Societies – successfully came together to assemble the Federation's biggest single-country emergency operation. But again, the structures and procedures alone could not have made this an example of effective collective leadership (indeed although they were cited as well functioning they were not without problems). It was the skills and qualities of the individuals working together within these well-defined structures that were central to the success of the response.

8.3 What obstructed leadership in the case studies

A growing tendency towards risk-aversion

During the scoping phase for this study, a number of experienced leaders and managers within the international humanitarian system spoke strongly about their concerns that humanitarian organisations have become increasingly risk-averse and about how this has discouraged and hampered leadership. When we tested this in our case studies, it became clear that many of these examples of effective leadership emerged in spite of an unfavourable organisational context. Indeed, this is one of the ways in which the individual leaders showed courage, being prepared to take risks for a higher purpose or goal, usually related to the affected population, despite the fact that they were unlikely to be backed by their organisation.

So what is creating this risk-averse culture? First, there is the **drive for accountability and compliance**. Although intended to raise standards and improve overall performance, there is a sense that the pendulum has swung too far and that instead agencies are saddled with restrictive compliance mechanisms that discourage any risk-taking action. For example, well-intentioned risk management has been reduced to box-ticking risk registers rather than finding creative ways of taking acceptable risks, based on experience and judgement. In an earlier ALNAP publication, Slim (2006) expressed concern that the drive towards consolidation in the humanitarian system and bringing organisations and approaches ‘into line’ tends to discourage innovation. According to one interviewee, we have lost the ‘sharp edges’ – and leadership is a sharp edge.

Another way in which the compliance culture suppresses leadership is that it places a heavy burden on the leader of reporting, form-filling and documentation. As many of today’s managers within humanitarian agencies will verify, these day-to-day demands easily crowd out leadership skills and activities, including relationship-building and engaging with the bigger picture. In this respect, vastly improved information technology may have become ‘a double-edged sword’. On the one hand it has revolutionised communication and the speed with which information can be exchanged across the world. On the other hand it has meant that field-based managers are instantly and continuously accessible to their headquarters and this has shifted the centre of gravity in operational leadership. One interviewee estimated that in the 1990s he spent 90% of his time with the community and 10% on reporting; with improved information technology this has shifted to at least 50% of his time spent in communication with headquarters.

This sense that demands for accountability have gone too far and may now be stifling leadership initiative, creativity and spontaneity resonates with findings from the public sector. The PIU study on public-sector leadership calls for a better balance between the freedom to lead and holding public-sector leaders to account for their performance, concluding that:

“ Policy-makers should more systematically take account of the effect of policies, guidance and legislation in either encouraging or constraining leadership... Inspection bodies should collectively look at leadership performance. (PIU 2001: 6)

This is useful advice for the international humanitarian system.

A second cause of risk-aversion within the humanitarian system is the growth of a **bureaucracy that constrains leadership and positively discourages risk-taking**. Hochschild's (2010) study of leadership in the UN sketches out how the hierarchical and role-oriented culture of large bureaucracies crushes the space for leadership and innovation and by its very nature has little appetite for change, causing the organisation to be risk-averse: 'It is no coincidence that in the UN effective leaders can often be at odds with the bureaucracy' (Hochschild 2010: 16). Weiss (2008: 107) has called it 'overwhelming bureaucracy and underwhelming leadership'. Grint's (2005) insights into leadership, position and power help us to understand the stultifying impact of this kind of culture:

" If organizational leaders assume that leadership is primarily positional so that, for example, only those people in formal positions of power are recognized as leaders, then those without formal positions may well be discouraged from taking actions that are vital for organizational success but deemed by the formal leaders to be irrelevant. Hence it may be that risk-taking, showing initiative, taking responsibility and so on are not actions that non-formal leaders will take. The result may well be extremely bureaucratic and torpid organization. (Grint 2005: 31)

In the case of Sara Pantuliano's leadership of NMPACT, scepticism within the UN about what she was trying to achieve by introducing a different paradigm of humanitarian response and by 'thinking outside the box' (Pantuliano 2008), was identified by interviewees as one of the obstacles she faced. Having a supportive and senior line manager undoubtedly helped her to break through this scepticism. Another of the case-study leaders, Andrew MacLeod, who consistently fought through the UN's bureaucracy during the response to the earthquake in Pakistan, reflected that 'the UN system does not respond well to strong leadership, so one has to disregard rules and persist in holding individuals to account'. In the words of another experienced leader within the UN: 'UN administration gets in the way every time. You have to fight the bureaucracy'.

However, some of our leadership case studies also showed how this particular barrier to leadership may be temporarily lowered immediately following a disaster. For example, in the emergency phase following the Pakistan earthquake, decision-making was localised to a greater extent than is usually the case in the UN, allowing Andrew MacLeod to provide leadership beyond the prescribed boundaries of his position – although this did not last as the UN's centralising tendencies soon re-asserted themselves.

The **bureaucratic culture of many UN agencies is associated with this risk-averse tendency** and is a major concern at the RC/HC level: 'whenever you stick your neck out the UN is very ambivalent about whether to support you or not ... If people want you out, it is very unlikely that the UN will back you ... This is the most talked about issue

in RC/HC retreats'. Hochschild (2010) confirms this conservative and risk-averse culture that pervades the UN, and also talks about the: 'strong orthodoxy of political correctness... [which triggers] "self censorship and constant trimming" in which individuals seldom say quite what they really think for fear it may offend or might not conform' (Hochschild 2010: 50). This, he indicates, is a consequence of the political tightrope that the UN is continuously walking.

The consequences for incentive systems: rewarding managerialism rather than leadership

The combination of risk-aversion and the pressures of a large bureaucracy inevitably affect the incentive systems within many humanitarian organisations. Rather than encouraging innovation and leadership, there is a sense that managerialism is rewarded instead: compliance with procedures, meeting financial targets and bringing the money in. Some expressed concern that the professionalisation of the 'humanitarian industry' has introduced incentive systems related to careers and perks and that this trend has acted as a disincentive to engagement driven by the desire to tackle injustices. A theme that emerged from a number of the case studies, particularly within the UN, was that individuals were at their most effective as leaders when they no longer worried about their career. One leader put this starkly: 'this was first and foremost [about] a total disregard for my own career path'. This gave the individual a freedom to act according to their best judgement of the situation on the ground and what was needed, rather than according to what mattered to their agency headquarters and the extent to which a risky action could jeopardise their career prospects.

Dalton et al. (2003: 42) remarked that: 'One cannot help but draw the conclusion that leadership often plays second fiddle to management'. That humanitarian agencies are more likely to reward management rather than leadership is therefore not a new insight or conclusion, but it still seems to hold true. Yet as this study has shown, it should not be a choice of either management or leadership; both are needed. The question is whether the current attention to leadership development across many humanitarian agencies is also addressing the issue of organisational culture, incentives and what behaviours are rewarded to create an enabling environment for humanitarian leadership?

The consequences for individual leaders

It became clear from the case studies that many of these examples of effective leadership emerged in spite of the deeply constraining context described above. The fact that most of the case-study leaders were prepared to take risks, despite the disincentives, makes this quality all the more remarkable, especially where they were prepared to defend their staff within the organisation and shoulder responsibility for risk-taking by their teams as well. In the case of Ross Mountain in DRC, if necessary he was also prepared to defend colleagues working for other UN agencies against the pressures that they faced from their own headquarters.

A situation has been created where risk-taking has become almost entirely dependent on the individual, with little organisational backing. In the words of one of the leaders we interviewed:

“ The incentive for people to make bold decisions and to step out of the mould is lacking. If you irritate a government or a major agency, and if you don’t have a lot of experience, then you are putting your whole career on the line.”

Selection, recruitment and succession

Having explored the qualities and skills of humanitarian leadership in our interviews, a number of respondents felt that recruitment processes do not adequately value these qualities and skills. The most commonly cited problem in both NGOs and UN agencies was the value attached to technical expertise over people and relationship skills. Concern about recruitment as an obstacle to leadership was most strongly expressed in relation to the UN, in terms of its Country Team and the RC/HC. For example, inadequate attention is paid in recruitment and in selection to context and the particular skills and expertise it requires (see Section 7 above). Both political skills and humanitarian experience are needed, but skills that were appropriate to one context cannot be automatically transferred to another. There is also concern that attempts to standardise the system, and leadership and coordination in particular, have resulted in formulaic responses that ignore the individual. At its bluntest, this was expressed as: ‘rather than getting the right people and giving them the freedom to operate, we do the opposite, get ineffective individuals and try and formalise the system.’ Hochschild (2010) explores UN selection criteria for the most senior positions, confirming that political and geographic criteria dominate, to the detriment of management and leadership skills.

Exploring succession in any detail was beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it was sobering to note that a number of the case-study leaders were ‘one-off’ examples of effective leadership that were not sustained after the individual or team left. The challenge of succession is not unique to the world of humanitarian aid. However, it does suggest that effective humanitarian leadership is still vested in individuals, and tends to happen by accident rather than by design, that it is not yet being fostered and promoted systemically, and that the space for leadership can rapidly contract with changes in personnel.

Obstacles to national staff becoming leaders

Staff structures and contracts in the international aid system are clearly divided into ‘national’ and ‘international’. Three of the case-study leaders started their careers in the ‘national staff’ category progressing into international leadership positions. Discussions with these leaders and with others who worked with them implied that this had happened against the odds and that ‘nationally-recruited staff’ still face substantial barriers to reaching international leadership positions. This includes discriminatory assumptions and even prejudice about the priorities, experience and abilities of national staff, and little tolerance for those who cannot manage instantaneous and constant communication, written and spoken, in English. One interviewee used the analogy of a river to make the point. National staff are on one side and international staff on the other. Either

we can build a bridge from one bank to the other, or we can choose to get rid of the river. Although the barriers to national staff breaking into international positions may be more tangible than the barriers associated with gender discrimination, the challenges are similar in that national staff have to work harder than their internationally-recruited counterparts (often Northern) to establish credibility as they move into international positions. While humanitarian aid organisations talk about diversity many, in particular Northern or international NGOs, are still far from being inclusive and do not deliberately invest in nationally-recruited staff with the potential to become international leaders.

These barriers and prejudices became a ‘push factor’ for at least one of the case-study leaders. Frustrated with the perceived dominance of Northern agendas and a failure to strengthen national leadership within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Abbas Gullet chose to leave a senior management position within the IFRC to become Secretary-General of the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS), ‘to prove to myself and to the rest of the world ... that we can do it as a national society’. Not only has Abbas successfully transformed the KRCS, but he also sees his mission as motivating his staff to work to their full potential, and critically important – to believe that they are as good as any others, national or international.

8.4 How did the leaders featured in our case studies deal with these obstacles, and create their own ‘enabling environment’?

The fact that the leaders featured in our case studies were effective despite these obstacles deserves some attention. In most cases the leader was well aware of the obstacles and worked around or through them. For example, one of the leaders knew well what his organisation required of him in terms of compliance and procedures. Where possible he followed these, but was also prepared to find a way around them when they became an obstacle. The creativity and courage to act in this way differentiates the leader from the manager, although it can set up a tension between the field-based office and headquarters if the outcome is not appreciated (or even known about) at the headquarters. This was not the case in our example, but the leader’s ability to circumvent procedures was undoubtedly helped by familiarity with the system and therefore knowing how best to deviate from the norms, and the confidence and wisdom to know when to do so.

Most of the case studies resonate with the findings of Binney et al. (2005) in their research into private-sector leadership, which showed that leaders were unable to transform their business environment, organisational culture or group dynamics in the way that they had hoped:

»» The leaders in our study became more effective when they accepted the contexts they were in and focused on how to turn them to their advantage... Instead of denouncing their organisational cultures, they looked for the ‘magic’ in them on which they might build. (Binney et al. 2005: 8)

There were two exceptions. First the example of collective NGO leadership through the Joint Initiative in Zimbabwe was actually a response to UN structures and systems that had failed to engage robustly with the government, to prioritise a response to or fundraise in order to respond to the displacement caused by Operation Murambatsvina, the Government of Zimbabwe's slum-clearance programme. In this case the limitations of the prevailing structures gave rise to a new form of leadership – a collective of NGOs stepping into the breach. Second, Abbas Gullet is an example of an individual who chose to step out of an environment he found constraining and into another where he could develop his full leadership potential. In many ways he created the space to lead by taking the helm of a national society rather than remaining within the confines of a much larger international organisation. In doing so he has effectively challenged the dynamics of power and of relationships within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in ways that are reverberating well beyond the KRCS.

8.5 In conclusion

Humanitarian leadership flourishes when the leader is given space to operate, and is willing to step into that space with a clear goal and a preparedness to innovate and to take risks. This works best when leaders have the support of their line managers and of more senior in the hierarchy, and are also supported by the organisational culture. It is rare for these factors to come together, however, and this appears to be a major reason for the deficit of humanitarian leadership. The trends towards risk-aversion and the demanding procedural requirements of the accountability and compliance culture currently pervading the international humanitarian system make it even less likely that this combination of factors will occur. Concerns about these trends are growing and are generating much discussion within the sector, although the external factors that demand such accountability and compliance also seem to be intensifying.¹⁴ This study confirms these trends and their consequences in stifling leadership.

14. For example as bilateral donors come under pressure to quantify the results of their aid spending in ways that demand rigorous compliance that may be at odds with the humanitarian/development process itself. See Natsios (2010).

9. GENDER, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP

Binney et al. (2005) conclude from their research into leadership in the private sector that people are most effective when they bring themselves to leading, when they come across as real people, making use of all their senses and their life experiences. So what does it mean to bring all of oneself in terms of gender, culture and identity? When is it of benefit, and when a hindrance?

It is not clear, from the results of the study, whether gender-based discrimination presents particular barriers to women in obtaining and succeeding in operational leadership roles. On the one hand, it was difficult to find many examples of effective operational humanitarian leadership provided by women when drawing up our list of potential case studies, despite canvassing widely. Examples were easier to find at the headquarters level than in the field. The reasons for this are not entirely clear although some have speculated that it may be due to the time demands and the personal cost of operational humanitarian leadership, explored in Section 10 below, which may be a particular challenge for women, who universally bear the main burden of family and caring responsibilities. On the other hand our small sample of women did not seem to experience particular barriers to leadership on the grounds of gender-based discrimination, although in one case it was commented that the female leader concerned had to work harder at the outset to gain respect and establish credibility in the male-dominated political context, and in a couple of cases political relationship-building was thought to have been easier for men than for women. Most of our interviewees did not see gender as a significant determinant of the style of leadership, but this deserves more in-depth investigation than was possible in this study.

In terms of culture and identity, we all carry a range of identities, and international humanitarian aid work is, by definition, cross-cultural, although a Western culture *de facto* dominates many organisations. Some of the case-study leaders were able to draw on their different identities (and life experiences) in order to cross boundaries and make connections with different actors. Andrew MacLeod's ability to connect with the Pakistan military as a result of his own military background is a case in point. Some of the case-study leaders came from multi-faceted cultural backgrounds. Leaders consciously and selectively drew on various aspects of their own background in order to connect with important actors, whether peers within the international humanitarian system or political players. Also critical is their ability to communicate across cultures. Some leaders talked of learning these skills when growing up, others from years of experience of working for international organisations. Somewhat exceptionally, in the case of the TCG in Myanmar, a leadership structure was deliberately put in place to provide that cultural bridge from the essentially Western international humanitarian system to the deeply distrustful regime of Myanmar, through ASEAN.

What it means to bring all of oneself in terms of gender, culture and identity, is eloquently articulated in a study of intercultural effectiveness that included one of the case-study leaders, Jemilah Mahmood (see Box 5). People's various identities are often unconscious; only occasionally do we pause to reflect on them and what they mean or how they may be perceived in different contexts. The description of Jemilah, and insights from other case studies, suggest the importance of a leader being aware of, and able to connect with, different aspects of their identity and culture at different times.

Lane et al. (nd) call it cultural intelligence. This is another rich area of exploration that deserves further research in relation to humanitarian leadership, and to inform how it can be fostered.

Box 5 Culture, identity and leadership: the case of Jemilah Mahmood

All individuals belong to multiple cultures, and types of cultures, simultaneously. Jemilah for example considers herself part of the Malaysian, Malay, Chinese, medical doctor, Muslim, female, mother, humanitarian aid and global business cultures and she articulates clearly what it means to be part of each of those cultures. Which culture she draws upon to guide her perceptions and behaviours depends on her context. She does not always choose to act according to a single culture, because she carries all these cultures in her, and often uses several at the same time to guide her behaviour. For example, when trying to get emergency supplies to a conflict site, she uses both humanitarian aid and the global business culture, and leverages her identity and expertise as a doctor to establish her credibility. (Lane et al. nd: 59)

10. THE PERSONAL COST OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

All of the leaders featured in the case studies were outstanding in terms of their commitment to their work and to what they were trying to achieve. They were also exceptional in terms of the long hours that they put in, even for a sector that is renowned for its lack of work–life balance. This was commented upon by some of their peers and staff in terms of how the time spent at work took them away from their families and personal lives, but this can also be a physical separation where the international humanitarian post is unaccompanied. Some of the words used by the leaders themselves were perceptive: 'I'm married to my work', and talking of the 'sacrifice' they had made. This suggests the personal price some leaders were prepared to pay in order to be so effective. And it had consequences for their teams, who often felt driven to equal the leader's energy and long hours, discussed in Section 5.5 above. Although it often seemed to be the leader's choice to put in such long hours, some of the case-study leaders were described as 'workaholic'. The appetite for work was certainly a contributory factor in what they were able to achieve,

but the risk of burnout stalks such intense working practices, and many humanitarian aid workers will have witnessed this among colleagues or experienced it themselves. A perceptive book on the subject describes the classic burnout pattern of being over-giving and over-responsible, both potential traps for humanitarian leaders (Glouberman 2002). The author describes the process:

|| Once our experience of ourselves is disconnected from our actual self, the way we really are, and becomes dependent on what we do, give or achieve, we don't really know who we are, or where we begin and end, or where our true being lies. (Glouberman 2002: 127)

Burnout was not mentioned in relation to any of the case-study leaders. Most of them seemed to demonstrate a relatively high level of self-awareness, although it was also apparent that most had a strong sense of identity invested in their humanitarian work and in their role in international humanitarian action. Nevertheless, there is a warning here and burnout could prove to be the 'Achilles heel' of operational humanitarian leadership in terms of the cost to the individual leader and/or their team.

This issue of how to maintain a work–life balance while providing operational humanitarian leadership deserves further investigation, partly because of the role model that the leader is wittingly or unwittingly providing, and partly because of the risk of burnout. This also raises a question about the responsibility that organisations have towards their staff, even where it seems to be the individual's choice to take on such a punishing schedule. Ultimately, how can organisations foster a style of humanitarian leadership that does not demand such personal sacrifice?

11. COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP – THE WAY FORWARD?

The concept of collective leadership is gaining attention and popularity across all sectors. It is based on the idea that leadership can be distributed across a team or a number of individuals where there is a shared sense of purpose. Leadership thus becomes a collective task based on shared decision-making and delegated authority. It is a relational form of leadership. Within an organisation it depends upon a specific, team-based leadership culture being developed and social capital being the focus of investment rather than individuals (see Hailey 2006).¹⁵ It emphasises the collective capacity of the organisation. Many see this as a more appropriate way of working in today's uncertain and complex world than heroic individual leadership, because it unleashes collective potential through diffuse and collaborative ways of working, to a shared common purpose (eg. HFP 2009).

15. This description is based on Hailey (2006).

One finding from the scoping phase that was tested in the case studies is that:

»» The demands on individual leaders have increased substantially. Collective leadership, in which leadership skills and responsibilities are distributed, is a more appropriate model for operational humanitarian leadership in the future.

Although the majority of our case studies focus on the individual, many of these individuals were successful because they were able to build teams to support them. Thus, although we explored these case studies from the perspective of individual leadership, many of them also point to a strong element of collective leadership. Observers (and sometimes colleagues) identified 'a leader' as playing a pivotal role, but part of that role was creating a leadership environment around them, something their colleagues and peers valued.¹⁶ This made it possible to achieve more by attracting and bringing in high-quality staff, especially where these complemented the leader's abilities (see Section 5.2.5 above). However, these 'leadership teams' rarely seemed to survive the leader's departure, implying that the individual rather than the organisation was key to creating a collective leadership culture.

Other studies on leadership in the sector have emphasised the value of either a leadership team and/or a leadership organisational culture that promotes collectivity, participation and collegiality (Smillie and Hailey 2002), although this does not yet seem to be the norm. Within the UN, for example, Hochschild (2010) argues that leadership requires a combination of multiple attributes that are rarely found in one person. Instead, a leadership team is needed, although this may be built up around a particular individual as in at least six of our individual case studies. Featherstone (2010) urges the UN Country Team to provide greater leadership to support the HC, in turn linked to mechanisms of collective accountability. Smillie and Hailey's research (2001) into leadership among South-East Asian NGOs showed collective leadership in practice. Developing a leadership culture and team-working were key components to effective leadership, and the NGO directors in question were central in promoting such a culture; the role of an individual in facilitating collective leadership thus echoes the findings of some of our case studies of individual leadership. A more recent study reports progress in creating leadership cultures within NGOs and moving beyond the figurehead leader (CCL/PIA 2010: 18).

Three of the case studies were deliberately selected as examples of effective collective humanitarian leadership. In each of these it was harder to identify a single individual who played the key role; they were genuinely more collective. Interestingly, each was time-defined and set up for a specific purpose to address a particular crisis:

- (1) The Tri-Partite Core Group (TCG) was set up in response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, bringing together the Government of Myanmar, the UN and ASEAN.

16. When selecting the list of potential case studies, the filtering out of certain leaders by some interviewees was itself informative. Some of these included, for example, leaders who had performed impressive and 'heroic tasks' themselves, but were not collegiate or collective in their leadership style.

- (2) IFRC mobilised a Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT) in response to the earthquake in Haiti, which facilitated the mobilisation of 21 Emergency Response Units from National Societies.
- (3) In Zimbabwe seven international NGOs came together to establish the NGO Joint Initiative in order to respond to the large-scale displacement triggered by Operation Murambatsvina, the government's policy of closing down slums across the country.

What can be learned from these three case studies? Both the Zimbabwe NGO Joint Initiative and the IFRC FACT highlight the importance of establishing ground rules and operating procedures at the outset. This was slightly different in the FACT case, as structures were in place to respond in advance, everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing, and it worked. The Zimbabwe Joint Initiative was not originally planned, but one of the key reasons for its success was the forethought given to decision-making structures from the beginning, which contributed to consensus-building (see Box 2 above).

Both of these examples also indicate that there may be a finite period for effective cross-organisational leadership to work. Success was due to the energy and commitment arising from a particular stage in the crisis, in both cases the early emergency stage, and associated with a particular set of individuals coming together. When these individuals moved on, or the urgency declined, collective leadership did not last. It would probably need to be re-created and re-energised to be appropriate to the next phase.

The unique circumstances and the unique structure of the TCG make it hard to draw generic lessons about collective leadership across such disparate actors. It may, however, be possible to replicate some aspects of this model of collective leadership across actors in contexts of deep antagonism between the government and the international humanitarian community, if a regional or more neutral actor can be found to play the catalytic and mediating role that ASEAN played in this example.

In response to the finding from the scoping phase, we can conclude that many of our examples of individual leadership were able to mobilise teams around them, and that this was crucial to their success; they released collective potential. The two examples of collective leadership across agencies suggest the potential for creative and positive collaboration. This is a rich area that deserves further exploration.

12. LEARNING LEADERSHIP

There is a long-standing debate on whether leadership is innate or can be learned. In other words, are leaders born or can they be created? While some individuals do seem to have 'natural' leadership skills, the general consensus is that this is an art that can be learned, fostered and developed, which is true for many of the skills listed in Section 5.2 – hence the investment in leadership development programmes.

We explored with a few of the case-study leaders and other interviewees the question of how they had learned their leadership skills:

- (1) Two African interviewees talked about the influence of their childhood in learning leadership skills, in being exposed to effective traditional leadership in the rural areas in which they had grown up and thus being provided with role models from an early stage.
- (2) Learning from experience, working in the humanitarian aid sector, was the most commonly cited route to learning leadership – 'the school of hard knocks' in the words of one interviewee. This seemed particularly important for learning the political skills that are fundamental for operational humanitarian leadership. As mentioned in Section 5.3, however, it is not just years of experience that count, but the willingness and ability to reflect and learn. Some interviewees, particularly from within the ICRC, highlighted the importance of an organisation's commitment to deploying promising leaders in a wide range of roles and settings, thereby preparing them for progressively responsible leadership positions.
- (3) Being coached by a supportive line manager who was committed to developing leadership within his team was influential in at least one case, explained by the line manager in the following words:

'Give them an open field to take initiatives and encourage them to do so. Don't sit on people's heads. As they take initiatives, encourage them more and more, and expose them to as many problems as possible ... Coach them from 2 steps behind. Here are your targets – how are you going to go about it?'

In another example, one leader was valued by his team for the way he coached them, opening up a learning space and allowing them to develop their own leadership potential

- (4) A few leaders talked about the value of learning from an effective and inspiring role model, usually someone more senior in the organisation with whom they had worked closely. One described how she would reflect on what her role model would have done when she is faced with a particularly challenging issue. By the same token, a number of our case-study leaders are clearly influential role models to some of the staff they currently manage, or have managed in the past.

- (5) Only one leader emphasised the value of learning leadership through a more formal training programme. Abbas Gullet completed his International Masters Program in Practising Management (IMPM), co-founded by Professor Henry Mintzberg, and has consciously learned as much as he can about management and leadership from the private sector, applying this learning within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Abbas Gullet is now sending some of his staff from the KRCS to study for the IMPM.

‘Learning leadership’ can thus come from a number of different routes. What matters is how individuals incorporate this learning and makes it their own. Binney et al. (2005) capture this well:

“ Living leaders have the courage to use their life experiences as a guide. They do not look to the ideal of competency frameworks but are comfortable with their experience and instincts. As leading and change mirror the life cycle of human development, it is your own experience which is your inner compass for working in the moment, for finding the right mix of continuity and change and tolerating uncertainty in a thoughtful and not panicky or hyperactive way. (Binney et al. 2005: 243)

13. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

There is no blueprint for understanding leadership. This would be a contradiction in terms; leadership is an art, and it is also something of an art to capture what this elusive yet critical concept means in practice. This study has attempted to learn from other, usually more extensive, research into leadership in other sectors in order to throw some light on what we have called operational humanitarian leadership. Modelling excellence was the chosen research method, exploring in some depth 11 case studies of leadership at different levels, in different organisations, and in different contexts.

The findings are both inspiring and worrying. At the individual level they are inspiring. A number of individuals in very different contexts provided exceptional leadership and, as a consequence, achieved impressive results, often in difficult and hostile operational contexts. At the organisational or sectoral level the findings are more worrying because leadership often seems to have emerged in spite of rather than because of the organisational culture. A growing aversion to risk, in turn a consequence of the compliance culture and bureaucratic approach that has taken a grip of the humanitarian sector, are squeezing the space for leadership to flourish, instead favouring managerialism, and stifling initiative,

innovation and risk-taking. Where space has opened up for individuals to develop and demonstrate their leadership potential these appear to be isolated islands, created by an unusual coincidence of factors, for example a line manager who sees the potential of their staff member, and an organisational culture that gives space to its field-based managers. In some of our examples of leadership it is the individual who has created that space, working around organisational obstacles and procedures that could confound the less experienced or less tenacious.

For this study, as stated earlier, our working definition of operational humanitarian leadership is:

»» Leadership in-country that provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response to a crisis (whether at the programme, organisational or system-wide level), focused on the affected population, and building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together around that vision and objectives. It also means finding ways of collectively realising that vision, for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.

Our definition combines strategic vision, values in terms of a focus on the affected population, and behaviours and skills in terms of consensus-building and delivery. The case studies confirmed the importance of these qualities. Political skills also emerged as critical in all humanitarian crises. What was remarkable about most of the case-study leaders was the wide range of leadership skills and qualities they each demonstrated. Their qualities were mostly well balanced. They were able to engage at the strategic contextual level, as well as having strong relational and communication skills, yet balancing these people-oriented skills with task-oriented decision-making skills, and bringing inspiring personal qualities to their work that drew people towards them, for example being principled and working with integrity. The 'magic' that transforms these skills and qualities from 'competence' to 'excellence' often depends on the essence of the individual and how they engage with the context in which they find themselves, the people with whom they are working, within and outside the humanitarian sector, and with themselves.

Although we searched for evidence that certain types of leadership style and approach are commonly required in particular types of humanitarian crisis, the lack of a clear pattern in our findings warns against making unwise generalisations. Instead, we conclude that context is extremely important, and that a context-specific analysis of leadership needs is essential to indicate the appropriate balance of skills required, and thus to inform recruitment and selection criteria and processes. Individual leaders who are sensitive to the context rather than assuming 'one size fits all', who listen and are open to learning, are likely to be the most versatile in terms of adapting their leadership style appropriately to different humanitarian crises.

Likewise, although we set out with a set of expectations and assumptions about the difference between individual and collective leadership, some of the distinctions started to blur as the case-study research got underway. Collective leadership emerged as a feature in many of the case studies of individual leaders. Although an individual leader may have played a key role in terms of their strategic leadership, and their relational skills in drawing people around them and putting together high-performing teams, that they also fostered a leadership environment in which others could contribute and were motivated to do so and encouraged to develop their potential. Thus, the 'results' of the case-study leaders often relied upon inputs from a range of people. This fits well the kind of leadership that Wheatley and Frieze (2010) identify as appropriate to the contemporary world, 'leader as host' rather than heroic leadership. In effect the individuals concerned created a 'micro-culture' that fostered leadership among their colleagues and staff that their wider organisations had sometimes failed to create.

A lurking question throughout was: what is different about humanitarian leadership, or is it the same as leadership in other sectors and with other objectives? While many generic qualities are the same, for example balancing strategic visioning and planning skills with communication and relational skills, there are also differences. The humanitarian sector is by definition at an extreme end of the spectrum where leadership decisions affect people's lives, their survival and their livelihoods in challenging and dangerous environments. The humanitarian system is relatively non-hierarchical, so consensus-building is critical, especially across agencies, and often under pressure of time where speed of response is vital. The combined effect of these distinctions is to give a particular edge to operational humanitarian leadership. And values lie at its heart.

Recommendations

The message emerging from this study is that much more needs to be done in the international humanitarian aid sector – the focus of this study – to foster operational humanitarian leadership. This has implications both for the culture of the international humanitarian aid sector, and for individual organisations. Developing effective leadership requires engagement and commitment at the highest level. We therefore make a number of recommendations to chief executives and their senior management teams. Our recommendations are presented according to the different target groups, including individuals in the sector who aspire to develop their leadership skills and potential.

For the international humanitarian aid sector

- (1)** The findings of this study fundamentally challenge the **risk-averse culture** that has developed within the international humanitarian aid sector. Attempts to strengthen accountability and increasing corporatism have resulted in a culture of compliance that is stifling initiative, risk-taking and ultimately leadership. If leadership is to flourish beyond a few courageous individuals, this culture has to change. This has particular implications for how donor governments and other funders assert their accountability requirements. This study recommends that current accountability initiatives and compliance mechanisms be reviewed in

terms of the extent to which they discourage healthy risk-taking and leadership, and to find ways of modifying accountability procedures where necessary. We would also suggest exploring what can be learned from organisations that have successfully instilled a risk-taking culture, and how such a culture could be replicated.

- (2) The model of effective operational leadership that emerges from this study is **a model of leader as host** rather than the heroic leader. The case-study examples indicate the value and benefits of collective leadership, and the potential and important role of the individual leader in creating an environment conducive to leadership and initiative within a wider team. The complexity of most humanitarian crises means that this distributed or shared form of leadership may be more appropriate. The study therefore recommends that this model of operational leadership that should be promoted within the sector. As mentioned below, further work and exploration is needed on collective leadership.
- (3) There is an urgent need to invest more in **national leadership**. While the UN has generally done most to embrace diversity it appears that many international NGOs and other organisations have not yet gone far enough, and that it is still unusual for nationally recruited staff to move into international leadership roles and for their leadership skills to be recognised. Initiatives like the CBHA's leadership development programme for nationally recruited staff could make an important contribution, but there is a sense that more needs to be done, for example through mentoring and challenging assumptions – albeit not openly expressed – about the experience and skills of nationally recruited staff.

For humanitarian aid organisations committed to fostering and developing leadership

- (4) Chief executives and senior managers should reflect on whether they give their field-based managers sufficient space to exercise their leadership potential while still engaging and challenging those managers constructively in order to develop and refine their skills. Staff surveys and/or 360° appraisals could feed into such a review.
- (5) Chief executives and their senior management teams should also review their **organisation's appetite for risk** and how this encourages or holds back their field-based managers. Finding the right balance in encouraging responsible risk-taking, identifying and learning rapidly from mistakes, and providing backing to field-based staff who take actions, and risks, in the name of the organisation they work for, is an art rather than a science. This deserves conscious and regular review at a senior level. Once again, staff surveys and 360° appraisals could feed into this. Responsible risk-taking also means clarifying respective responsibilities at different levels, especially in terms of the

responsibility of field-based managers, and honouring and supporting staff in carrying out their responsibilities.

- (6) Humanitarian aid organisations and their senior management teams must reassess their **incentive systems** in terms of what is being valued. In terms of meeting the needs of the affected population, what is the appropriate balance between incentivising compliance (for example, with the agency's procedures and financial targets), and incentivising leadership (such as perceptive political analysis, building high-quality relationships with key actors, developing innovative operational responses)? The former may be easier to measure in numeric terms, but the latter must be given the recognition it deserves if the organisation wishes to foster leadership.
- (7) In terms of **recruitment** of field-based managers, much greater emphasis must be given to relational and communication skills (including political skills), as well as to technical competence. This may require a rethinking of recruitment processes to obtain wider feedback from former colleagues, team members and line managers on such leadership qualities than is normally the case.
- (8) In terms of **identifying leaders for particular humanitarian crises**, a context-specific analysis of leadership needs is essential in order to identify the appropriate balance of skills required. The needs cannot be generalised by dividing crisis according to type – 'rapid-onset', 'conflict', 'slow-onset' etc. Key qualities that indicate versatile leadership include sensitivity to context and being open to learning.

For leadership development programmes

- (9) Leadership development should be **part of career development** and start early rather than be a 'bolt-on' for more senior staff. This means fostering and developing leadership qualities through training, mentoring and coaching. It also means encouraging a habit of reflection to develop self-awareness. Organisations can foster this by providing structured opportunities for reflection during and post-deployment. Although this is a challenge in a sector that is action-oriented, making the space for reflection will help to develop a leadership culture within organisations.
- (10) While many **leadership development programmes** rely heavily on competency frameworks, organisations are encouraged to recognise the wide range of leadership skills and qualities that are key to effective operational humanitarian leadership and to avoid a reductionist or mechanistic approach. Sometimes it may be more appropriate to put this range of skills together in a team rather than to expect an individual to have them all.

- (11) As this study has demonstrated, **modelling effective leadership** can be a powerful and inspiring contribution to such leadership development programmes. The value of role models and mentoring should be recognised and incorporated.
- (12) As part of their efforts to develop leadership, humanitarian aid organisations should train their senior managers in **coaching skills** in order to foster the leadership potential of their teams and of more junior staff.

The implications for individual leaders

- (13) This study provides an insight into the range and types of skills that are needed in operational humanitarian leadership, against which individuals can assess their own performance. But leadership ultimately depends upon how individuals bring themselves to this role and makes these skills their own.
- (14) Leadership strengths can also be weaknesses when pushed to an extreme and it is important for individual leaders to be alert to this. Developing leadership skills is a continuous process of reflection, learning and self-development.

Areas for further research

While this study has sought to capture the essence of operational humanitarian leadership, focusing on what was valued as 'leadership' in a range of recent humanitarian crises, a number of issues emerged that deserve further investigation. Five are highlighted here:

- (15) The findings of this study point to some tentative conclusions about collective humanitarian leadership. The examples of individual leadership indicate that the individual's ability to create an environment that is conducive to collective leadership, particularly through their relational skills, was much valued. And the examples of leadership that was collective from the outset, in which the influence of one individual was harder to identify, throw up some interesting lessons about how such collective leadership can work in practice, although each of our examples was clearly time-bound. There is a need to explore the extent to which this is a model of leadership for humanitarian operations in the future. And if so, how it can be fostered. The more formal examples of collective operational humanitarian leadership in practice, for example in UN Country Teams, would also merit further analysis.
- (16) As described above, risk-taking emerged as fundamental to operational humanitarian leadership yet is at odds with the prevailing culture in many humanitarian organisations. This suggests that it may be a key point of leverage in transforming organisational cultures to become more conducive to leadership.

The area also deserves further investigation and research. For example, risk-taking

by definition means the possibility of making mistakes. At an individual level what more can we learn about how 'successful leaders/ risk-takers' learn from their mistakes and correct them? At an organisational level, what does a risk-taking culture mean in terms of how failure is viewed and related to learning? What is an 'acceptable threshold' of making mistakes, or 'failing'? And most important of all, what needs to change so that humanitarian organisations reclaim and encourage a risk-taking culture that is appropriate to the contexts in which they are operating?

- (17) The difficulty that this study faced in identifying examples of effective operational humanitarian leadership where women played a key role is disturbing. An analysis of the gender balance in field-based management positions is needed, supported by further investigation into possible barriers that women (nationally and internationally recruited) face in playing a leadership role in the field. This could explore in greater depth the gender determinants of leadership.
- (18) The role of strategic leadership higher up an organisation's hierarchy, in supporting operational humanitarian leadership deserves further investigation. The study found some evidence of the power of this synergy, but not on a sufficient scale to make it possible to draw any general conclusions. Other examples should be sought so that lessons can be learned and success replicated.
- (19) Although this study warns against some typology of leadership skills and styles for different types of humanitarian crisis, for example rapid-onset natural disasters versus protracted conflicts, there is more work to be done on situational humanitarian leadership and an individual's ability to adapt their leadership style to different contexts.

ACRONYMS

ACEVO	Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
CBHA	Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies
CCL	Center for Creative Leadership
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ELRHA	Enhancing Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance
FACT	Field Assessment Coordination Team (IFRC, Haiti)
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator (UN)
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
KRCS	Kenyan Red Cross Society
NEPAC	Network for African Red Cross National Societies
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLP	Neuro-Linguistic Programming
NMPACT	Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation
PIA	People in Aid
RC/HC	Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (UN)
PIU	Performance and Innovation Unit
SC-UK	Save the Children-UK
TCG	Tri-partite Core Group
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

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ANNEX 1. CASE STUDIES OF EFFECTIVE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Ross Mountain, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2005-2010

Ross Mountain has spent most of his career in the United Nations. Having worked in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean, he was one of the UN's most experienced HCs by the time he occupied that position in DRC between 2005 and 2010.

In addition to being the HC, Ross was Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, the RC, UNDP Resident Representative and one of the top three officials in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in DRC (MONUC) during a period when it became the largest UN mission in the world.

Ross was previously Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Iraq after his predecessor had been killed in a bomb attack on the UN offices. Between 1998 and 2003 Ross served as Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator and Director of the Geneva Office of OCHA, and was the Secretary-General's special representative on a number of humanitarian missions, including East Timor (1999), the floods in Mozambique (2000) and the crisis in Liberia (2003).

The context - DRC

The protracted humanitarian crisis triggered by violent conflict and chronic instability has continued for well over a decade. This is mainly focused in Kivu Province in the east and Orientale in the northeast. The conflict has been associated with widespread abuses of human rights, and DRC also hosts a vast population of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Sexual and gender-based violence has been a major protection concern. Millions have been killed in what has been termed one of the world's deadliest conflicts.

This long-running crisis has, however, had poor international coverage and the humanitarian response has been poorly resourced as a result. During the period of Ross Mountain's tenure in DRC, in 2006 the UN supported the largest and most challenging presidential election operation it has ever undertaken, which brought Joseph Kabila to power.

Andrew MacLeod, Chief of Operations of the United Nations Emergency Coordination Centre, Pakistan, 2005

Andrew is a lawyer and former military officer. He holds Law and Arts degrees from the University of Tasmania and obtained a Masters of International Law from the University of Southampton. Andrew was commissioned in 1991 as an Officer with the Australian Army and served attachments with the British Army's Royal Green Jackets.

As a humanitarian aid worker, Andrew worked with ICRC in the Balkans during the break-up of Yugoslavia, and was later deployed to Rwanda. He later worked with the International Commission of Jurists overseeing election monitoring in East Timor and Sri Lanka. He entered the UN system in 2003, working for UNCHR and with IASC.

Andrew is currently CEO of the Committee for Melbourne, an independent network of Melbourne leaders working for the city's quality of life and prosperity and is also Chair of the UN Global Compact Principles for Social Investment.

The context - Pakistan Earthquake

An earthquake hit Pakistan-administered Kashmir on 8 October 2005. This sudden-onset emergency killed an estimated 75,000 people and affected thousands more, many of the victims living in poor and inaccessible mountainous areas. Much of Pakistan's infrastructure was also debilitated. The urgency was heightened by the imminent winter season, which would also jeopardise the helicopter flights that would be essential for delivering assistance.

Prior to the earthquake the UN system in Pakistan was undergoing a period of flux, as it was piloting the cluster system. Although the cluster structures had been established, they had not been approved nor had any training been provided. The Pakistani military was the key interlocutor for the international system, and was the central authority controlling the national response. The UN mission was under the overall leadership of Jan Vandemoortele, the RC/HC. He had little previous humanitarian experience, but was widely praised for his ability to adapt to new demands.

Sara Pantuliano, NMPACT, Sudan, 2000-2002

Sara Pantuliano is a political scientist with extensive experience in conflict and post-conflict contexts. She led UNDP Sudan's Peace Building Unit between 2000 and 2002. In the post-conflict phase she initiated and managed the high-profile NMPACT in the Nuba Mountains. She was also a resource person and an observer at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Sudan peace process.

Sara is currently Head of the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI in London. She has written extensively on Sudan and is a regular media commentator on Sudan and humanitarian issues.

The context - Sudan's Nuba Mountains

The Nuba Mountains region was one of conflict during the North–South civil war in Sudan. The Government of Sudan expelled all international NGOs from the Nuba Mountains in 1991 and its blockade on relief supplies lasted for over a decade. Assistance to government-controlled areas continued throughout the 1990s, but the international response in the other areas was limited to some funding for an indigenous organisation. Very little external humanitarian assistance reached the Nuba Mountains between 1999 and 2000. After some of their staff had been killed, some agencies had withdrawn also from the government-run areas. There was an incipient food crisis and serious protection issues.

In early 2000 a comprehensive consultation began under the Office of the UN RC/HC. In a highly politicised environment in which humanitarian aid was often used as a weapon in the conflict, advocacy efforts were critical in ensuring that aid eventually reached all areas in need. These efforts helped to broker the Nuba Mountains ceasefire in January 2002.

The Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) was the first and only programme to be endorsed by the Government of Sudan and the SPLM while the conflict remained active.

The NGO Joint Initiative for Urban Zimbabwe, 2005-2006¹⁷

The NGO Joint Initiative (JI) for Urban Zimbabwe was a co-ordinated humanitarian response to address the short and medium-term needs of highly vulnerable communities in urban Zimbabwe through integrated development programmes.

In late 2005, the Country Directors (CDs) of seven NGOs decided to combine their capacities and resources in order to address the acute needs of these communities. The agencies were Africare, CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Oxfam GB, Practical Action Southern Africa, Save the Children UK (SCF–UK) and Mercy Corps.

17. Although the Joint Initiative continued after 2006, this case study looked only at its initial period.

The JI members agreed to work together in a unique collaboration, using their respective organisational strengths and in-country networks to provide assistance in a variety of sectors including livelihood support, food security, social and child protection, HIV and AIDS, shelter and education.

The context - Zimbabwe Slum Clearances

In 2005, the Government of Zimbabwe launched Operation Murambatsvina ('Operation Restore Order') to close down slums throughout the country. The consequent displacement of 700,000 people constituted a serious humanitarian emergency. The UN attempted to launch a Flash Appeal, but was hindered by the government. Eventually the appeal was submitted to donors without government approval, but the response was poor.

The humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe is characterised by a highly hostile state, which makes for an extremely challenging operating environment for international NGOs.

The Tripartite Core Group, Myanmar, 2008

There was deep distrust and suspicion between the Government of Myanmar (GoM) and the international agencies, many of which were entering the country for the first time in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. In response to this early impasse, ASEAN took the lead in brokering the creation of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) at a special meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers on 19 May and the ASEAN–UN International Pledging Conference on 25 May. The TCG was created as an ad hoc coordinating body between the government and the international community. Chaired by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Myanmar (U Kyaw Thu), it brought together senior representatives from the GoM, the UN, led by the HC (Dan Baker), and ASEAN, led by the Singapore Ambassador (Robert Chua). The TCG played a key role in opening up access to international humanitarian agencies and facilitating their response.

The context - Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar on 2 May 2008. Although there had been some warning, preparedness was poor and the cyclone provoked a disaster in the Ayeyarwady Delta on an unprecedented scale. The GoM, deeply distrustful of international agencies, prohibited immediate access to the affected area. During this period the response of thousands of local groups and individuals was of vital importance. Eventually international agencies were given access to provide humanitarian assistance.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) joint response to the Haiti Earthquake, 2010

In the wake of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the IFRC mobilised the biggest single-country emergency response operation in its history, deploying 21 Emergency Response Units (ERUs) from around the world. An ERU is a standardised package of trained personnel and equipment (e.g. a field hospital, a WATSAN Unit), fully self-sufficient for one month and which can be deployed for up to four months. The ERUs belong to and are made up of staff from National Societies.

The ERUs were initially organised under the Field Assessment and Coordination Team (FACT), which in turn is a vital part of the IFRC's global emergency response portfolio. These teams comprise experienced Red Cross Red Crescent disaster managers who support National Societies and IFRC delegations in their disaster response.

FACT team members have technical expertise in relief, logistics, health, nutrition, public health and epidemiology, psychological support, water and sanitation, finance and administration. FACT is on standby and can be deployed anywhere in the world within 12–24 hours, for a period of two to four weeks.

The Context - Haiti Earthquake

An earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale struck Haiti on 12 January 2010. It hit the capital Port-au-Prince and other areas of the country, in particular the West Province, which has a population of 2.2 million. The earthquake was one of the deadliest ever recorded. It created massive humanitarian needs in what was already the poorest country in the western hemisphere, afflicted by chronic humanitarian needs and political instability. In addition to the impact on the Haitian population, the staff and infrastructure of many international and national agencies were also seriously affected.

Abbas Gullet, Secretary General, Kenyan Red Cross Society, Kenya, 2005 to present

Abbas Gullet has been Secretary-General of the Kenya Red Cross Society since May 2005. From the late 1980s he was an IFRC delegate in various parts of the world. His last position with the Federation was as Director of Operations in Geneva and Deputy Secretary-General. Originally a volunteer, Abbas Gullet then became a youth officer and eventually began working internationally. Between January 2001 and December 2002 IFRC seconded him as Secretary-General of the Kenya Red Cross Society, in order to lead the KRCS out of a period of organisational crisis.

Abbas Gullet completed his International Masters Program in Practising Management (IMPM), co-founded by Professor Henry Mintzberg, and has encouraged KRCS staff to do likewise.

The context - Kenya

Parts of Kenya experience regular natural disasters, especially drought but also flooding. The presidential and parliamentary elections in Kenya in late 2007 sparked pre-election violence. In early 2008, in a period of severe post-election violence thousands became displaced and some lost their lives. The KRCS responds to natural disasters every year and also played a leading role in responding to the election violence, under the leadership of Abbas Gullet.

El Khidir Daloum, Save the Children UK Programme Manager then Country Director, Somalia, 2001-2007

El Khidir Daloum was Programme Manager for Save the Children UK (SCF-UK) in Somalia for two years from July 2001. In 2003 he was appointed Country Director for Somalia, a position he held until June 2007.

During this period he was the NGO Consortium Focal Point for one year, Member of the Steering Group of the Somalia Aid Coordination Body and co-chair (with UNICEF) of the Education Sectoral Committee. He was also a member of the Food Security Sectoral Committee and on the Steering Group of the Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU). He continued to be an active member of the Somalia NGO Consortium. El Khidir is currently the Regional Director for Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East Region for SCF-UK.

The context - Somalia

The humanitarian crisis in the failed state of Somalia is a protracted crisis triggered by long-term conflict. Parts of the country are highly insecure and access is severely constrained. The international humanitarian response is managed and coordinated from Nairobi. During the period of this case study the Islamic Court had taken over in Somalia and challenged the neutrality of NGOs operating in the country. This was also the period of the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia.

Jemilah Mahmood, MERCY Malaysia President, Indonesia, 2004-2008¹⁸

Jemilah Mahmood is a medical doctor and Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. She has also completed the Program for Executive Development at the International Institute of Management and Development (IMD) in Lausanne.

18. Jemilah was President of MERCY Malaysia from 1999 to 2010, but the case study specifically covers her work in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

In 1999, she founded MERCY Malaysia, and has extensive field experience in a range of emergencies. Jemilah was Vice-Chair of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (2006–2009) and served on the board of Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International in Geneva (2007–2009). In 2008, she was appointed Co-Chair of the Global Humanitarian Platform.

Currently Chief of the Humanitarian Response Branch at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Jemilah is also an active member of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC) and is trained in Civil–Military Coordination.

The context - Indian Ocean Tsunami

The December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami was one of the largest natural disasters ever recorded. It caused widespread devastation resulting in the loss of more than 167,000 lives; in Indonesia alone, 570,000 people were made homeless.

MERCY Malaysia was the first international organisation to offer medical relief in Banda Aceh in December 2004. MERCY Malaysia provided emergency medical relief, primary health care, psychosocial assistance, as well as helping with the reconstruction and rehabilitation of medical facilities, homes and orphanages. As part of its work in capacity building in disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation, MERCY also engaged in community education programmes.

Abby Maxman, CARE Country Director, Ethiopia, 2006 to present

Abby Maxman has over 20 years' experience in development and humanitarian work, including in a variety of field-level settings. With CARE International for over 15 years, she has worked in Africa, the Middle East, the Former Soviet Union and Haiti, in roles including country office leadership and management, regional programme management, strategy development and implementation, as well as all aspects of country programme administration and policy formulation.

Abby holds a BA in History and Political Science from Colorado College and in 1995 she obtained a Master of International Administration from the School for International Training.

The context - Ethiopia

Ethiopia experiences chronic humanitarian needs and periodic acute emergencies. Successive seasons of failed rains, rapid population growth, endemic poverty and limited government capacity have led to chronic food insecurity and water shortages in some regions of Ethiopia, complicated by conflict in some areas. With over 8 million people receiving assistance, there is a large international aid presence. The political context is characterised by an assertive state, which has been consistently distrustful of foreign agencies.

CARE has been working in Ethiopia for over 25 years and runs a US\$30 million programme encompassing both development and humanitarian activities. Its work focuses on a broad range of sectors, including food and nutrition, health, education, and water and sanitation. The international response structures in Ethiopia have been high on the agenda for humanitarian reform, and CARE has been involved in inter-agency structures at the country level.

Ramiro Lopes da Silva, WFP Regional Director, Sudan, 2004-2006

Ramiro Lopes da Silva joined the UN in the mid-1980s. He is described by WFP as ‘a veteran of key WFP emergency operations around the world.’¹⁹ Ramiro had been HC in Iraq from mid-2002 to the end of 2003 and in 2004 he was appointed Regional Director of WFP’s operations in Sudan. The fact that this was its largest country programme in the world explains why WFP appointed a Regional Director to head its operation. After leaving Sudan he became WFP’s Deputy Chief Operating Officer and Director for Emergencies in Rome and was concurrently WFP’s Special Envoy to the Greater Horn of Africa. In 2010, he was appointed WFP’s Deputy Executive Director of External Relations.

The context - Sudan

Sudan has a long history of humanitarian crises triggered by violent conflict, as well as natural disasters. During the period of Ramiro Lopes da Silva’s tenure as WFP Regional Director, the Darfur crisis was at its peak. In 2003, the government responded to armed attacks by Darfur’s rebel movements with a ferocious counterinsurgency campaign. Thousands of people were killed and millions displaced. The humanitarian crisis has continued following the failure of national and international peace-negotiation efforts.

In response to the Darfur crisis WFP launched its largest-ever food-aid operation. In January 2005 the Government of Sudan and the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement (SPLM) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that brought to an end two decades of civil war in Southern Sudan. Although it had for many years been providing humanitarian food aid in the south, this provided an opportunity for WFP to review and reorient its operations.

19. www.wfp.org/stories/wfps-emergency-veteran-tapped-deputy-executive-director-slot

ANNEX 2. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Affiliation
Nadeem Ahmed	Former Head Pakistan National Disaster Management Authority
Dan Baker	Acting UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Myanmar
Mark Bowden	UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Somalia
Nan Buzard	Director, International Response & Programs, American Red Cross
Xavier Castellanos	Head, Americas Zone Office, IFRC
Jane Cocking	Humanitarian Director, Oxfam GB
Nathan Cooper	Disaster Management Delegate, Caribbean Regional Representation, IFRC
Justin Corbett	Independent (former Paung Ku Project Coordinator, Myanmar)
Nici Dahrendorf	Independent
El Khidir Daloum	Regional Director, Latin America and the Middle East, Save the Children UK (former Programme Manager and Country Director for Somalia)
Mohammed Elmi	Minister of State for Development of Northern Kenya, Government of Kenya
Wendy Fenton	Coordinator, Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI
Pete Garratt	Relief Operations Manager, British Red Cross
Roger Guarda	Former UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Sudan
Abbas Gullet	Secretary General, Kenya Red Cross Society
Caroline Gullick	Independent (former consultant for USAID, Nuba Mountains, Sudan)
Ferdinand Von Hapsburg	Advisor, Social Cohesion and Governance, UN Resident Coordinator's Office, Maldives (formerly with OCHA Sudan)
Kerren Hedlund	Independent (former NGO liaison for ICVA, Myanmar)
Garth Van't Hul	Director of Programmes, CARE, Ethiopia
Pamela Indiaka	Regional Capacity Development, Kenya Red Cross Society
Babar Kabir	Humanitarian Director, BRAC, Bangladesh
Lex Kassenberg	Country Director at CARE Nepal (former Country Director Care Somalia, Deputy NGO Consortium Focal Point)
Chris Kaye	Country Director, WFP, Myanmar
Randolph Kent	Director, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, University of London
Andrew Kirkwood	Country Director, Save the Children UK, Myanmar
James Kisia	Deputy Secretary General, Kenya Red Cross Society
Ky Luu	Executive Director, Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, Tulane University
Andrew Macleod	CEO, Committee for Melbourne (former UN Cluster Coordinator, Pakistan)

Jemilah Mahmood	Humanitarian Director; UNFPA (former President, MERCY Malaysia)
Salih Abdul Majid	Executive Director; SOS Sahel, Sudan
Ayaz Manji	Head of Water & Sanitation, Kenya Red Cross Society
Robert Maroni	Country Director; Mercy Corps, Jordan (former Country Director, Zimbabwe)
Alexander Mattheou	Head of IFRC Delegation, East Africa Regional Office
Jason Matus	Independent
Abby Maxman	Country Director; CARE, Ethiopia
Steve McAndrew	Head of Emergency Operations, Haiti Earthquake, IFRC
Ross Mountain	Director General, Development Assistance Research Associates
Elijah Muli	Disaster Response Manager; Kenya Red Cross Society
Joel Nielsen	Head of Management and Leadership, Global Learning Center; UNHCR
Leila Pakkala	Director of Private Fundraising and Partnerships, UNICEF (former Deputy Representative, UNICEF Somalia, and Co-Chair of the Education Sector Committee)
Sara Pantuliano	Head of Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI (former Coordinator of NMPACT)
David Peppiatt	International Director; British Red Cross
Faizal Perdaus	President, MERCY Malaysia
Rachel Pounds	Country Director; Save the Children UK, Tanzania (former Country Director, Zimbabwe)
Greg Puley	Country Director; Oxfam GB, Ethiopia
Moira Reddick	Independent
Maurice Robson	Independent (former Chief, Education, UNICEF, and Education Cluster Coordinator Pakistan)
Ahmed Saeed	Former Head, Nuba Mountains, South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
Buzz Sharp	Former Chief Technical Advisor; Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit Somalia (FSNAU)
Frances Stevenson	Humanitarian Director; Help Age International
Jean-Pierre Taschereau	Senior Manager; Emergency Response, International Operations, Canadian Red Cross
Ingrid Tjøflåt	Programme Coordinator; Norwegian Red Cross, Kenya
Jan Vandemoortele	Independent (former UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Pakistan)
Peter Walker	Director; Feinstein International Center; Tufts University
Yolanda Weldring	Regional Director; Africa, Save the Children UK
Abebaw Zeleke	Former Programme Manager; Somaliland, Save the Children UK

ALNAP is a unique sector-wide network in the international humanitarian system, made up of key humanitarian organisations and leading experts in the field. The broad range of experience and expertise from across the membership is at the heart of ALNAP's efforts to improve humanitarian performance through learning and accountability.

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ALNAP Study



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