

COORDINATION WORKSHOP BRIEFING PAPER

How can we improve decision-making in
humanitarian coordination?



ABOUT ALNAP'S WORK ON HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

This briefing paper is part of an ongoing research initiative on humanitarian coordination. It outlines key issues and questions related to decision-making, one of the four themes that will be discussed at ALNAP's meeting 'Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination' in London on 30 June to 1 July 2016. In particular, it will concentrate on decision-making within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism (Clusters, inter-Cluster and humanitarian country teams, or HCTs). Alongside this paper, ALNAP has also produced additional materials for background context including a video on the same topic, which can be accessed at www.alnap.org/coord-meeting.

This briefing paper draws on a literature review and interviews conducted for the broader research initiative. It has also been informed by **ALNAP's previous work on humanitarian leadership and coordination** over the past several years.

The meeting will address four aspects of coordination:

1. How can humanitarianists better coordinate across a response?
2. How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?
3. How to make the most of information management in coordination?
4. How can we improve decision-making in humanitarian coordination?

Contents

About this paper and the ALNAP humanitarian coordination initiative	2
Abbreviations and acronyms	3
Why examine the role of decision-making in humanitarian coordination?	4
Decision-making by groups	5
Decision-making processes	8
Decision-making structures	9
Suggested questions for the meeting	12
References	14

Abbreviations and acronyms

HC	Humanitarian coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian country team
HPC	Humanitarian programme cycle
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
SAG	Strategic advisory group

Why examine the role of decision-making in humanitarian coordination?

The ability to make and implement high-quality decisions is central to the success of any organisation or system. This is as true in humanitarian situations as in any other sector: humanitarian operations typically require very large numbers of important decisions to be made over the course of a response (Gralla et al., 2013).

At the same time, the nature of humanitarian contexts and the inter-organisational nature of the humanitarian coordination architecture both make decision-making exceptionally challenging. Humanitarians are often expected to make ‘life or death’ decisions on the basis of limited or inadequate information, in highly politicised and changing contexts, and under time pressure. Where these decisions are taken in the coordination architecture (HCTs, inter-Cluster or Clusters) they will need to accommodate the organisational perspectives and interests of a number of organisations.

Evaluations, research and interviews suggest that – at least in some cases – there is concern around the quality and speed of the decisions made in the humanitarian coordination system (Featherstone, 2010; Lawday et al., 2016; Sida, 2012; Slim, 2012). In the process of ALNAP’s humanitarian leadership and coordination initiative, several Clusters have suggested that this is a priority topic that should receive further consideration (Campbell, 2015).

While there has been significant research and debate around the topic of decision-making in emergency situations, this debate has tended to focus on decision-making in the emergency services, the military, and contexts such as oil rigs and commercial aviation. Despite the importance of the topic to humanitarian action, there has been only limited consideration of how to ensure effective decision-making in international humanitarian organisations (see, for example, Lake, 2011; Robinson and Joyce, 2012; Gralla et al., 2013) and in inter-organisational forums such as Clusters and HCTs.

This background paper considers three related and partially overlapping areas related to decision-making in the coordination architecture: decision-making by groups; the process by which decisions should be made and implementation assured; and the organisational structures, including clearly assigned roles and responsibilities that should be in place to ensure that the decision-making process is used successfully.

Decision-making by groups

Current guidance suggests that within the humanitarian coordination architecture, decisions should be made by a group rather than by individuals (IASC, 2009; 2015).

The desirability of group decision-making in humanitarian contexts is broadly supported by research. The arguments for making decisions in a group are as follows:

- The humanitarian architecture comprises organisations with separate accountabilities to their own governance mechanisms and to various donors. No single entity or individual has the ability to exercise command and control over implementing organisations. As a result, if joint decisions are to be implemented, they need to be made jointly by the implementing agencies (Cosgrave, 2007; Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Kruke and Olsen, 2012; Khaled et al., 2010).
- The number of decisions required can easily overwhelm any individual (Grunewald et al., 2010; Khaled et al., 2010; Thammannagoda and Thileepan, 2009).
- In situations characterised by a high degree of uncertainty, a group will generally have more relevant information on which to base a decision than any single individual. As a result, decisions made by a group will often be of higher quality than those made by an individual.

A central criticism of group decision-making is that it is slow – and that the larger the group, the more difficult it can be to come to decisions.

Some observers have pointed out that group decision-making, particularly where it relies on consensus, can be slow and cumbersome in an emergency situation (Forestier et al., 2015; Steets et al., 2010). However, previous ALNAP research suggests that this is not necessarily the case, and that Clusters and leadership teams can make decisions rapidly, particularly where these decisions are made by representative sub-groups (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015).

Current guidance clarifies the size and composition of the main decision-making forums in the humanitarian coordination architecture. The HCT does not have a separate decision-making forum – all members are involved in decisions. For this reason, the size of the HCT should be ‘limited’. Membership is open to ‘organisations that undertake humanitarian action in-country and that commit to participate in coordination arrangements’, but, in order to keep to a limited number of participants, the guidance suggests that teams establish ‘clear, generally accepted and well-known’ criteria for entry, and that ‘the main criterion is operational relevance’. Where there are too many potential participants, the humanitarian coordinator (HC) should convene ‘a separate, inclusive forum to ensure periodic interaction among [humanitarian] organisations’ (IASC, 2009: 2).

The reference module for Cluster coordination at the country level also acknowledges the need to ‘balance the need for consultation and leadership in an emergency. Key decisions need to have legitimacy and to be taken by a manageable number of partners’ (IASC, 2015: 18). The guidance module recognises that, given the diversity of country contexts, a variety of management arrangements will be required, but suggests a general model based on “Steering Committees” ... or “Strategic Advisory Groups” (SAGs) of key operational partners, complemented by separate forums or mechanisms to ensure broader information exchange for all Cluster/sector partners’ (IASC, 2015: 19). These groups should be limited in size, be representative of the Cluster membership as a whole, and communicate regularly with the broader Cluster membership.

Currently there is significant diversity across Clusters in terms of the degree to which decisions are made by a group and the way in which the larger Cluster links with the decision-making process (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015).

While limiting the size of the HCT or creating smaller forums such as SAGs streamlines decision-making, it also creates challenges, in particular:

- Ensuring the commitment of organisations outside the HCT/SAG to decisions that they did not make; and
- Ensuring that organisations that are not members of decision-making forums, but which have important or specialist information, are able to inform decisions.

Where the group has a formal leader, but all members are expected to participate in decision-making, there can be confusion over who ultimately ‘owns’ the decision.

Although groups should make – and be accountable for – decisions, individuals in leadership positions (humanitarian and Cluster coordinators) can play a key role in improving the speed and quality of decisions. In particular, they can play a facilitative role, clarifying decision-making processes (see below). In some cases they may also need to provide a ‘casting vote’ or make decisions on behalf of the group where consensus is not possible. The challenge here is how to balance the authority of the individual and the group, and in particular how to ensure that the group simultaneously accepts the legitimacy of this style of ‘leadership’ (particularly in the HCT, where the HC is ultimately accountable for decisions), while still taking ownership of and accepting responsibility for decisions.

Group decision-making does not necessarily lead to decisions being implemented.

While decisions made by groups should in principle lead to greater ‘buy-in’ and, consequently, to more successful implementation, experience in a number of humanitarian responses suggests that in many cases agencies that were involved in making decisions do not subsequently act on the basis of these decisions. This may be for several reasons:

- Agency representatives and staff do not feel that they are accountable for these decisions – to crisis-affected people, the host state, or their own donors.
- Agency representatives on decision-making bodies are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of their organisations (Bennett et al., 2006; Kingori, 2015). The guidance for HCTs suggests that HCT member organisations should be represented ‘at the highest level (country representative or equivalent)’ on the HCT, but there is no similar requirement for Clusters.
- Levels of trust and group solidarity in decision-making groups are often fairly low, and as a result members of these groups do not feel accountable to one another. Reviews of inter-organisational emergency management systems – both humanitarian (Knudsen, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2013; Nesen and Guzha, 2009) and non-humanitarian (Boin and T’Hart, n.d.; Buck et al., 2006; Moynihan, 2009) – consistently point to the importance of trust and personal relationships in building a sense of accountability to the group

Groups are not immune to bias or to the selective interpretation of information.

As noted above, one of the main arguments for making decisions in groups is that such decisions will be based on a broader information base and so will tend to be of better quality. However, groups – and particularly cohesive groups, or groups formed of individuals with fairly similar mind sets – are prone to phenomena such as ‘groupthink’ and ‘risky shift’, in which members ignore or avoid information that might challenge the group consensus on an issue. The tendency to focus on ‘core’ information and ignore ‘peripheral’ information appears to become more pronounced when individuals are stressed. Research and evaluations related to humanitarian action suggest that this phenomenon can occur in humanitarian organisations, Clusters and HCTs (Darcy et al., 2013; Houghton, 2008; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014; O’Donnell, 2014; Slim, 2012)



Decision-making processes

Decision-making processes can be thought of as the series of activities or steps by which information is collected, a decision is made and action is taken on the basis of the decision. They typically include steps such as collecting information, generating decision options, testing these options, making a decision, implementing the decision and assessing its results.

The processes by which decisions are made in the various elements of the humanitarian coordination system (HCTs, inter-Cluster, Clusters) are often unclear.

Previous **research by ALNAP on Clusters** showed a clear relationship between the clarity of the decision-making process and the perceived quality of decisions (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015). Given these findings, it is unfortunate that in some Clusters and HCTs, decision-making processes do not seem to be clear (Bennett et al., 2006; Darcy et al., 2013; Global Clusters, 2015; Kruke and Olsen, 2012; Lawday et al., 2016).

There is much debate around the best decision-making processes for emergency situations.

A significant amount of research has been conducted outside the international humanitarian sector into the best process to use for decision-making in emergency contexts (Flin, 1998; Howitt and Leonard, 2009; Klein, 2011). A key element of this debate is whether preconceptions based on experience should be understood as ‘biases’ that hinder effective decision-making or expertise that supports effective decision-making.

One school of thought suggests that structured, analytical processes should be used to ensure that all available and relevant information is considered and to prevent decision-makers from being unduly biased by preconceptions and organisational interests. These processes are generally structured, and require decision-makers to identify a number of options and then choose among them.

A second approach – broadly termed ‘naturalistic decision-making’ – suggests that these analytical processes are too unwieldy and time-consuming for emergency situations, and that decisions can be usefully based on the previous experience of skilled professionals (often supported by standard operating procedures). These processes are not based on choosing among options, but generally rely on the rapid implementation of a course of action determined by the judgement of a skilled individual. The results of this action are assessed, and if the action has not been successful, another course of action is implemented. This approach is more difficult to implement in groups, however, and critics note that it may lead to the use of plans that worked in the past and in other places, but which are not relevant to the specific conditions of the particular emergency.

A third approach, which can overlap with the first two, is for multiple options to be implemented in parallel. While this may increase the possibility of making at least one ‘good’ decision, it splits resources among a variety of different activities and can cause confusion.

None of these options is failsafe, however, and there are examples of both good and poor decisions being made using all three approaches (Kapucu and Garayev, 2011; Kowalski-Trakofler et al., n.d.).

Interviews and evaluations suggest that all three approaches are used in international humanitarian responses. The choice of the best option may well depend on the nature of the emergency – and in particular whether it is a ‘regular’ emergency (of a known type, similar to previous emergencies) or a new, unknown or emergent type of emergency (Howitt and Leonard, 2009). In addition, teams may develop effective naturalistic strategies on the basis of more structured and analytical approaches (Kowalski-Trakofler et al., n.d.) and so move over time from one approach to another.

Currently, decision-making processes are often not effective at creating a shared picture of the situation on which groups can base decisions.

Whichever approach to decision-making is used, it is important that the process should include actions to ensure that decision-makers have an accurate understanding of the situation (Bearman et al., 2010; Chen, 2008; Thompson, 2006). This generally means considering the nature of the situation; the status of the response; actions that have been planned, but not yet put into effect; and forecasts of how the situation might develop over time. This understanding is sometimes termed ‘situational awareness’. Where decisions are made by groups there is the added complexity of creating a shared understanding, which may require the compilation and assessment of information from a wide range of actors working at different levels across the response (Kapucu and Garayev, 2011; Kruke and Olsen, 2012). Humanitarian evaluations and research suggest that this shared understanding is often lacking. It is also important that the ‘common picture’ created is regularly updated as the response evolves (Hobbs et al., 2012; Ochoaa et al., 2007). Humanitarian organisations and the broader coordination system have in many cases not been able to monitor situations so as to allow for this sort of the evolving awareness (Darcy et al., 2013; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014).

Decision-making structures

Decision-making structures are related to, but not the same as, decision-making processes. While the process describes the steps that are taken from information collection to action, the structure describes where in the organisation (or system) each step of the process occurs; who is responsible for each step; and which other elements of the organisation should be involved at each step.

In many cases there appears to be a lack of clarity as to decision-making roles within the country-level coordination architecture (Bennett et al., 2006; Hobbs et al., 2012; Lawday et al., 2016).

This may reflect:

- A lack of clarity around the process that the structure should support;
- A lack of clarity in the organisations that participate in the coordination architecture as to their own decision-making structures; and
- The fact that, because different organisations have different decision-making structures, it can be difficult to connect these organisations to a single, common structure.

Despite these challenges, a number of recent reports point to the importance of clarifying the roles of the different parts of the coordination architecture – and in particular, clarifying the role of the inter-Cluster coordination element in the decision-making structure.

Cluster Lead Agencies can (or can be perceived to) unduly influence the decisions of the Clusters.

The current coordination system makes Clusters a ‘formal deliverable’ of the Cluster Lead Agency: Cluster members and the Cluster Coordinator have ‘joint responsibility’ for the ‘efficient functioning of the Cluster’ (IASC 2015: 18). This design can create tension, as the CLA is accountable for the Cluster, and pays for the Cluster, and so may expect to have some influence over decisions. Cluster members may appreciate the support and advocacy of the country representative of the CLA on occasion, but they tend to be suspicious of the CLA becoming too involved in decision making. (Knox Clarke and Campbell 2015).

Humanitarians may be able to learn from the structures used in unified command systems – although these systems are not a ‘magic bullet’.

National emergency response systems are similar to the humanitarian coordination architecture in that they generally require a number of state and non-state emergency response organisations to work together to address varied needs and priorities, often for periods of weeks or months. These systems tend to be fairly highly structured, with clear responsibilities for decision-making in different situations and at different levels. Such systems are not perfect – they also experience conflict between organisations and challenges around information flow (Knox Clarke, 2013); however, they do provide examples from which the international system might learn.

Humanitarians are not regularly designing coordination and decision-making structures to fit a specific context or operation.

There is some evidence to suggest that decision-making structures and the coordination architecture itself are more effective where they are consciously designed for each context or where a basic model is adapted to each context rather than being imposed wholesale. Current guidance recommends this approach, and coordination reviews aim to achieve more effective, context-specific structures. However, interviewees suggest that these reviews may in many cases not be achieving their full

potential, because they tend to focus on which Clusters should be present rather than on the coordination architecture as a whole.

Decisions related to humanitarian response are made both in and outside the humanitarian coordination architecture. Current guidance arguably pays too little attention to the importance of decisions that are made outside the architecture.

Decisions are made at various levels of government, in individual agency and donor organisation offices, in Clusters and in the HCT (Digital Humanitarian Network, n.d.; Hobbs et al., 2012).

When asked, humanitarian professionals are generally able to identify which decisions should be made in the coordination architecture and which should be made by individual agencies (Gralla et al., 2013).

While current guidance around HC/HCT/Cluster roles and around the humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) provides broad responsibilities for each element of the coordination architecture, it does not make explicit which decisions fall within each area, and does not always clarify the relationship between decisions made in the architecture and those made in agencies. In general, the guidance appears to assume a high level of centralised planning of the response (through the HPC) and – as a result, if we further assume that the majority of the most important strategic and operational decisions will be made inside the coordination architecture – in the HCT and Clusters. In contrast, the reality in many countries appears to be one where decision-making is more dispersed among humanitarian actors.

The existing coordination architecture often leads to overly centralised decision-making structures.

There is general agreement that in humanitarian operations more decisions should be made closer to the site of operations (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003; Houghton, 2008; IASC, 2015). However, decision-making is often fairly centralised (Kruke and Olsen, 2012; Lawday et al., 2016; Polastro et al., 2011; Steets et al., 2010). Decentralising decision-making would probably entail the clarification of which decisions are best made in individual agencies, which in operational-level (sub-national) coordination mechanisms, and which in central coordination mechanisms (such as Clusters and HCTs). It would also entail further work to ensure that a common ‘picture’ of the situation is available to decision-makers at all levels (see above).

Suggested questions for the meeting

Group decision-making:

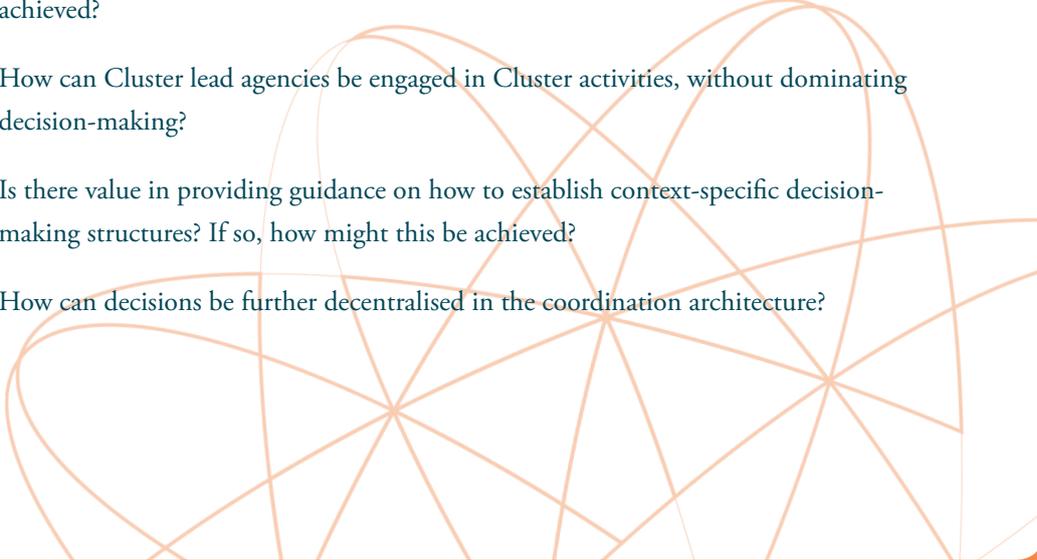
- Do we have experience of groups (HCTs, Clusters) making rapid, effective decisions? What has enabled this – and can these experiences be applied more broadly?
- Is the quality of HCT/Cluster decisions adversely affected by the desire to achieve consensus or by the failure to consider ‘inconvenient’ information? If this is a problem, what can be done about it?
- How can we increase the commitment of individual organisations to act on the basis of decisions made by groups:
 - where the organisation is represented in the decision-making group?
 - where the organisation is part of the coordination system, but not represented in the decision-making group?
- Is the role of individuals in leadership/coordination positions (HCs and Cluster coordinators) in group decision-making forums generally understood and agreed? How can these individuals best enable effective group decision-making without taking ‘ownership’ of decisions?

Decision-making processes:

- Are the decision-making processes used in the country-level coordination architecture clear and agreed? Would there be value in further guidance/clarification:
 - at a central (IASC) level?
 - at a country level?

- How structured should humanitarian inter-agency decision-making processes be? Should they tend more to 'analytic'/structured or to naturalistic styles of decision-making?
- What are the best approaches to creating shared situational awareness in the humanitarian coordination system? Could more be done to improve shared situational awareness?

Decision-making structures:

- Is there value in further clarifying the relative decision-making roles and responsibilities of the various elements of the coordination architecture (HC/HCT/inter-Cluster/Cluster/sub-national coordination bodies/individual agencies)? If so, how might this be achieved?
 - How can Cluster lead agencies be engaged in Cluster activities, without dominating decision-making?
 - Is there value in providing guidance on how to establish context-specific decision-making structures? If so, how might this be achieved?
 - How can decisions be further decentralised in the coordination architecture?
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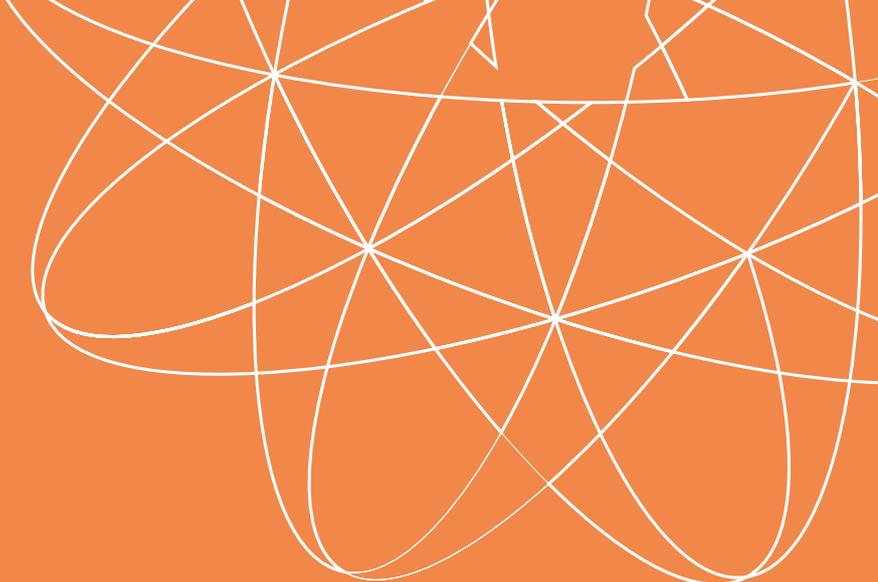
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