Leadership is a vital element in humanitarian operations. Good leadership can lead to more effective humanitarian response while poor leadership can create delays, confusion, and missed opportunities.

Both agencies and their staff in the field are well aware of this. When polled for ALNAP’s 2012 State of the Humanitarian System report they singled out poor leadership as the greatest constraint to the performance of humanitarian operations. Yet despite the interest, there has not been much consideration of what ‘leadership’ means.

In this research, we define operational leadership as a combination of three functions: defining a vision for humanitarian response, developing a strategy to achieve this vision and implementing the strategy.

Humanitarians often assume that these three functions are performed by a single individual – the leader.

ALNAP’s new research challenges this and suggests that effective leadership in humanitarian action needs:

leaders, teams and procedures.
What makes leadership effective?

- Decisions made by team
- Office structure with clear roles and delegation
- Simple operating procedures
- Effective information management
- Skills of the leader and leadership team members

AVERAGE RESULTS | "HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOUR ORGANISATION'S HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS IN THE COUNTRY?"

- 'Not at all effective'
- Average
- 'Fully effective'

AVERAGE RESULTS | "HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR ORGANISATION IN CREATING A COMMON VISION... STRATEGY AND PRIORITISING ACTIONS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS VISION?"

- 'Not at all effective'
- Average
- 'Fully effective'

How effective is leadership?

- 40% are women from the global south
- The study did not find any evidence that cultural background influences views of leadership.
In any emergency response agencies should consider and explicitly clarify the respective role and level of accountability of:

- the organisation
- the country director/representative
- the country leadership team

In many cases this will mean increasing the role and accountability of the organisation and the team.

**Role**

- In **country offices** leadership teams should regularly identify the role that the organisation can best play in emergency responses, based on the global orientation of the organisation and local capacities and needs.

**Information**

**Country offices and clusters** should:

- identify minimum information sets required for key decisions using global guidance as a starting point, determine where and how this information can be accessed, and who will be responsible for its collection and analysis (paying particular attention to the keeper of the ‘big picture’)
- establish monitoring systems to collect information on the emergency as it unfolds to update this ‘big picture’
- consider how best to use information technology to store, disseminate and present information

**Decisions**

- **Agencies** should clarify their attitude and expectations on decision-making steps at the country level.

**Country offices** should:

- clarify which types of decisions are ‘office wide’, and need to be taken ‘at the top’
- clarify the decision-making process and the respective roles of the formal leader and the senior staff in this process

**Training and staff development**

- ensure that any training or development programmes for individual leaders include guidance on organisational structures and delegation, decision-making approaches, information collection and management, and ‘simple rules’ procedures
- focus attention on training both **leadership teams and individual leaders**. Simulations and exercises may be particularly effective in developing group leadership capacity
- ensure that **leadership teams and individual leaders** support the development of nationally recruited staff to ensure that these individuals can achieve senior positions and participate in leadership teams at the country level

**Structure**

- **Country offices** should ensure that the structure of the office allocates human resources according to operational requirements and provides each unit with clear responsibilities and regularly review this structure.

**Delegation**

- **Agency-level** generic templates should clearly identify the levels of delegated decision-making authority and resources. In most cases authority should be delegated as close to the site of implementation as possible.

The study ‘Between chaos and control’ and related material are available online at [www.alnap.org/leadership](http://www.alnap.org/leadership)