

APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING

How then, can donors and agencies navigate these tensions and dilemmas inherent in prioritisation, as they attempt to 'do better with less' in an era of aid cuts and poly-crises? It is evident that no single solution can fully reconcile them, but we propose high-level guiding points for decision-makers as they navigate choices and challenges over the coming year.

Be clear on purpose. Move beyond the headlines of strategic objectives to an honest articulation of what these entail in practice, the evidence on which both delivery and success will be judged, and which purpose(s) take priority.

Use an appropriate evidence base. Those who wish to prioritise life saving as their most fundamental objective in humanitarian action will still face questions as to which organisations, intervention designs/sectors or crises offer the highest life-saving impact. Consulting evidence across different options is key, as is acknowledging that what is considered an appropriate evidence base will differ depending on what purpose is prioritised. An approach that seeks to balance multilateral-centric life saving with locally centred dignity and agency will value evidence on needs and effectiveness from local organisations and populations affected by crisis in equal complement to international research and data.

Make clearer, bigger, purpose-driven 'bets'. Donors and large international agencies alike have broadened their internal and external investments over the past decade to include wide-ranging functions, issues and services. This spreads funding and attention more thinly, potentially reducing impact and making it harder to monitor effectiveness. In this new era of constrained funding, individual actors may see benefit in choosing a lane and going big. For example, leaning fully into localised response through locally managed funding mechanisms and local networks as a majority share of their spending or work; or opting to focus specifically on anticipatory action and prevention designs; or investing in organisations that explicitly support the dignity and voice of people affected by crisis in response.

This then demands and enables **complementary decision-making** to be negotiated – backed up by **transparent cooperation**. The reality that different actors will set their priorities in different places could be a net gain, instead of a net loss at the system and population levels. For this to be realised takes collaboration rather than the insularity and resource competition that has characterised much recent reaction to financial scarcity. It involves finally facing the necessity of inter-donor dialogue, and of meaningfully including local organisations in multilateral decision-making fora.

The practical and political realities of the humanitarian system, in which formal decision-making is fragmented and frequently opaque, are unlikely to change for the better in the coming years. But donors and agencies should challenge one another to do better and help one another make more effective decisions – they should share information more readily and accept that no actor can go it alone in the face of present and unfolding humanitarian demands.