

INTRODUCTION

As humanitarian actors face seemingly impossible decisions in a context of dramatically shrinking resources, there is much talk of tough priority setting. However, there has been little clarity or common ground around the terms of these prioritisation choices or the values on which they are based. Across the humanitarian system, responses to reductions in aid have been driven by immediate cost-cutting measures, and they have unfolded in an unclear and largely uncoordinated manner.¹ This is not conducive to strategic decision-making towards a wider good.

These prioritisation challenges are an acute manifestation of a chronic dilemma at the heart of humanitarian action: how best to use limited resources to meet vast, persistent and changing needs. This is not a dilemma that can be solved definitively, but it can be navigated better. How humanitarian donors and organisations choose to prioritise their resources reflects what they value, and it sets out the course for future action.

This paper builds on a [body of work](#) on humanitarian prioritisation by ALNAP.² Here, we set out a **clear model to understand decision-making spaces and influences, and we propose constructive approaches to the inevitable dilemmas and trade-offs involved**. These approaches are applicable to all those across the sector – from global to grass-roots, from donor to do-er – who are seeking to negotiate wise choices in difficult times.

The paper is in three parts. The [first](#) sets out the types of prioritisation decisions that humanitarians face; the [second](#) examines the pragmatic and ideological challenges to making these decisions; the [third](#) exposes the trade-offs at play as humanitarians set out their high-level priorities in response to aid cuts, with guiding principles to navigate these constructively.

1 For example, reports from Mozambique highlight the in-country confusion caused by the reversal of plans to transition out of a humanitarian footing, and the implications of the hyper-prioritisation of the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) against the backdrop of escalating needs (Worley, 2025a). Similarly, in Cameroon, reports suggest that the ‘accelerated transition’ to a development footing, sped up by aid cuts, has been marked by a lack of clarity and structured attention to gap-filling and risk management (Worley, 2025b).

2 Since late 2023, ALNAP has been talking with people across the humanitarian sector about the prioritisation challenges they face, including in our podcast series ‘A matter of priorities’. Building on this, in June 2025, we published a commentary piece that sets out a framework for considering prioritisation choices (Obrecht and Swithern, 2025b). This paper expands on that piece.