

Deciding in a crisis: the invisible bottleneck of humanitarian operations

Why do humanitarian teams, which have never had access to so much data, still struggle to decide quickly and to document their choices? This note offers a diagnosis, field lessons gathered from more than one hundred professionals across twelve countries, and five recommendations that require no particular tool.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The humanitarian sector faces a paradox: data collection has never been so abundant, yet operational decision-making remains slow, poorly documented and unevenly shared.
- The reporting burden, documented since the Grand Bargain commitments (2016), consumes a considerable share of field teams' time, at the expense of analysis and action.
- Exchanges with more than 100 humanitarian professionals across 12 countries converge on one point: the data exists, but turning it into a traceable decision remains a manual, craft-like process.
- Three principles stand out: data sobriety (few indicators, well chosen), systematic traceability of decisions, and grounding in international standards (Sphere, CHS, IASC, OECD-DAC).
- This note sets out five practical recommendations that any team can apply immediately, with no dependence on any tool.

1. The humanitarian data paradox

In 2026, the global humanitarian response targets 135 million people, out of an estimated 239 million in need of assistance (OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2026). Never has the gap between needs and resources demanded such fine trade-offs; yet never have the conditions for making those trade-offs seemed so cluttered.

Kobo, ODK, DHIS2, monitoring matrices, shared spreadsheets: the capacity to *collect* has been massively democratised over fifteen years. The capacity to *decide*, however, has not kept pace. Turning those flows into fast, justified and shareable operational choices remains laborious work. Between the data entered

and the decision taken lies a grey zone of manual compilation, chained validations and oral institutional memory.

This document looks at that grey zone. It is not about a tool: it is about a function, decision-making, that the sector equips less well than collection, and which, in our view, forms the invisible bottleneck of many operations.

2. A documented bottleneck

2.1 The reporting burden

The signing of the Grand Bargain at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul (2016) formalised a diagnosis shared by donors and operators alike: reporting requirements, heterogeneous and redundant, weigh disproportionately on implementing teams. The workstream devoted to simplifying reporting found its most concrete expression in the harmonised template known as “8+3”, developed by the Global Public Policy Institute and piloted in Iraq, Myanmar and Somalia between 2017 and 2019. The results were largely positive, to the point that several donors and agencies, including UNHCR, OCHA, France and Germany, chose to adopt it durably.

Yet, nearly a decade after Istanbul, progress remains uneven. In the field, a single programme may still answer to several distinct reporting formats, each with its own calendar, granularity and terminology. Every hour spent reformatting information is an hour taken away from interpreting it.

2.2 Decision latency

The second symptom is temporal. In many organisations, the cycle running from a field signal (a deteriorating indicator, an access incident, a supply disruption) to a documented decision is measured in days, sometimes weeks: compilation, formatting, transmission, meeting, arbitration, minutes. This delay is not a failure of competence, for the professionals involved are often outstanding. It is a failure of *chain*. Each link waits for the format of the next.

Decision latency carries a direct operational cost: missed intervention windows, project extensions requested too late, corrective measures launched after the difficulty has set in. In access-constrained settings such as the Sahel or the Lake Chad Basin, where logistical and security windows are narrow, that cost is paid in coverage and accountability.

2.3 The traceability deficit

A third, quieter symptom: humanitarian decisions leave few structured traces. Who decided what, when, on the basis of which data and which threshold? The answer exists, in emails, minutes and individual memories. But rarely in a form that can be consulted and passed on. Every staff rotation carries away part of the mission's operational reasoning.

This deficit undermines both accountability to affected populations, at the heart of the Core Humanitarian Standard, and the organisational learning promoted by the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria: one can neither account for nor learn from decisions whose thread has been lost.

3. What the field teaches

Between 2025 and 2026, as part of the development of a decision-support platform, SAVIA Humanitarian conducted a testing phase with more than 100 humanitarian professionals (coordination, programmes, monitoring and evaluation) across 12 countries on 3 continents. Four lessons emerge from their feedback, independently of any tool.

First lesson: the data sleeps. Most of the professionals surveyed describe volumes of data collected but never analysed, for lack of time and method. In most cases, reports are produced to be transmitted rather than to be used.

Second lesson: the dominant tool is still the spreadsheet, and it shows its limits. Powerful for compilation, the spreadsheet carries neither shared alert thresholds, nor decision history, nor comparability across programmes. Each team reinvents its own sheet, and with it its own interpretation.

Third lesson: connectivity shapes everything. In the operating areas of the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, a decision-making process that assumes permanent connectivity effectively excludes those closest to the field. “Offline-first” solutions are not a convenience: they are a condition for including frontline teams and national organisations.

Fourth lesson: the voice of the field is lost on the way up. A community worker observes one thing. The area report keeps part of it. The national report keeps even less. And the capital decides on an average. At each step, important details disappear. For example, the fact that a national NGO and an international agency do not assess the severity of the same situation in the same way at all. Several experienced testers summed it up in the same words: current systems listen poorly to “the voice of the deep field”. Yet it is often in those disagreements that the most useful information for good decisions is found.

FIELD PERSPECTIVE · DIFFA, NIGER

“During an immunisation campaign in the Diffa region, we had set up a simple community feedback mechanism. One day, a signal came from the field: in some villages, the reluctance had nothing to do with the vaccine itself. It stemmed from a specific misunderstanding that no one in the coordination room had imagined. Because the signal arrived quickly and in a usable form, the response could be adjusted within days: messages reworked with community leaders, administrative authorities mobilised. That experience left a lasting mark on me: when the loop between observation and decision is short, the field becomes intelligent. When it is long, it becomes a statistic.”

Ramatou Issa Abdoulaye, Founder of SAVIA Humanitarian, drawing on her experience as a communication-for-development consultant in Diffa

4. Three principles for sound field decisions

Data sobriety. Three indicators tracked consistently (performance, risk, progress of corrective actions) inform a decision better than thirty indicators measured intermittently. The discipline of less is counter-intuitive in a sector that often equates exhaustiveness with rigour; yet it is the condition for monitoring that overstretched teams can actually sustain.

Systematic traceability. Every significant operational decision deserves three lines: the data that triggered it, the option chosen, the date and the person responsible. This tiny gesture builds, week after week, a consultable mission memory, useful for accountability, for audits and for those who take over.

Grounding in standards. Sphere, the Core Humanitarian Standard, IASC guidance and the OECD-DAC criteria offer a common language that makes decisions comparable and defensible beyond the organisation making them. A decision framed in that language travels better, from the cluster to the donor to the evaluator.

5. Five recommendations that require no tool

The following practices require neither software nor budget; they require team discipline.

- **Establish a fifteen-minute weekly decision ritual:** at a fixed time, the team reviews its three indicators, records decisions and logs them. Regularity matters more than sophistication.
- **Keep a decision log:** a single, chronological document where each decision fits in three lines (trigger, choice, responsible person and date). It becomes the most valuable asset at handover.
- **Predefine alert thresholds:** deciding in the cold (“if coverage falls below X%, we trigger Y”) avoids negotiating thresholds in the heat of the moment, under pressure.
- **Cross-check perspectives before arbitrating:** gather separately the assessments of UN actors, international NGOs and national organisations on the same situation, then examine the divergences, often more telling than the agreements.
- **Lighten the format before lightening the substance:** wherever accepted, replace the long narrative report with a short, consistent structure (situation, decisions taken, support required). The time saved returns to analysis.

6. Conclusion

The sector has won the battle of collection; the battle of decision remains open. It will not be won first by technology, but by practices: sobriety, traceability, shared standards, and by renewed attention to the voice of those who observe crises most closely. Tools, whatever they are, will only amplify disciplines already in place or disorders already entrenched.

SAVIA Humanitarian will continue to document these questions and to publish the lessons of its work for the benefit of the community. Feedback, disagreements and field experiences are welcome: contact@savia-humanitarian.org.

ABOUT SAVIA HUMANITARIAN

SAVIA Humanitarian is an initiative founded in Niamey, Niger, by Ramatou Issa Abdoulaye, a specialist in social and behaviour change communication with nine years of experience in the United Nations system (UNICEF, UNHCR), notably in the Diffa region. SAVIA is developing a decision-intelligence platform for humanitarian teams operating in low-connectivity settings, tested by more than 100 professionals across 12 countries. Website: savia-humanitarian.org

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