



Lessons Papers: A Methods Note

by Neil Dillon and Leah Campbell

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the three main reviewers of this Methods Note: Roxani Krystalli at the Feinstein International Center, Elizabeth Parker (independent) and Karen Peachey at CaLP. Your comments and feedback throughout the drafting process were invaluable.

Appreciation also goes to each of the interviewees who gave their time to discuss the issues and challenges of evidence synthesis in the humanitarian sector.

Thanks are also due to the ALNAP Secretariat. To Paul Knox-Clarke and Alice Obrecht for their comments on early drafts, and to Tim Harcourt-Powell for his help in delivering the final product.

All mistakes and shortcomings in the paper are the authors' own.

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Suggested citation:

Dillon, N. and Campbell, L. (2018) *ALNAP Lessons Papers: A Methods Note*. ALNAP Methods Note. London: ALNAP/ODI

Copyediting by Deborah Eade

Bibliographic editing by Renée Goulet

Communications management and typesetting by Tim Harcourt-Powell

ALNAP would like to acknowledge the financial support of Irish Aid in carrying out this initiative.

ISBN: 978-1-910454-63-3

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives of the Methods Note

ALNAP has been publishing Lessons Papers since 2001. These aim to improve the performance of humanitarian action by presenting the lessons of previous responses in a concise and readable format and a timely manner. The Papers are aimed mainly at agency staff who design and evaluate humanitarian responses. Previous ALNAP Lessons Papers include:

- Sanderson and Ramalingam (2015). Nepal Earthquake Response: Lessons for Operational Agencies.
- Cosgrave (2014). Responding to Flood Disasters: Lessons from Previous Relief and Recovery Operations.
- Lucchi (2014). Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence.

The Lessons Papers seek to identify a broad range of lessons from across the international humanitarian community in the context of a specific crisis or crisis-type. The authors of the Papers therefore pose quite broad research questions and consult a wide range of grey literature and non-academic source libraries. While it is difficult to do this in a rigorous manner, the papers respond to a core information demand from decision-makers in the field, as evidenced by the continuing popularity of the Lessons Papers.

This Methods Note proposes a revised methodology for future ALNAP Lessons Papers. It seeks to improve the rigour of the research methods used to generate them, while maintaining the broad research questions and inclusive approach to grey literature review.

This Methods Note is aimed primarily at the ALNAP Secretariat and authors of future Lessons Papers. It should be used to guide the definition of the Terms of Reference (ToR) and methods design of Lessons Papers, and as a normative framework against which to judge their quality and completion. This Methods Note is also intended to be of indirect use to other humanitarian organisations conducting evidence reviews, for which it should provide useful insights into the methods available for conducting a rigorous review of grey literature, with a focus on the type of literature produced by the humanitarian community.

Critically, this Methods Note aims to improve the quality of future Lessons Papers by:

- **Reducing the space for author bias**
- **Improving the evidential grounding of the findings**
- **Enhancing the transparency of the methods used**

Author bias can affect the range and type of lessons presented in Lessons Papers in various ways. Bias can narrow or skew the field of papers reviewed, affect an author's judgement of the quality of evidence provided by a given agency or organisation, or affect the importance placed on a particular lesson on the basis of the author's own experiences. It is important to remember that author bias can never be entirely removed from the process, and an author's own experience can often be a useful source of guidance. Nevertheless, we believe there is scope to significantly improve the Lessons Papers by reducing the space for author bias, particularly in the selection of evidential sources during the initial stages of the review. This should lead to higher quality papers, providing a more accurate reflection of the available evidence.

Improving the evidential grounding of the findings further reduces the scope for author bias. The methodological choices presented in Section 3 are all designed to ensure that future authors base the lessons presented in the Papers on evidence from the humanitarian community. Crucially, it includes an assessment of the quality of this evidence, which is important because of its highly variable nature. Integrating a transparent assessment of evidential quality into the author's methods should enhance the degree to which future lessons are based on reliable evidence.

Enhancing the transparency of the methods used in future Lessons Papers should enable readers to assess the source of our findings and understand the analysis that underpins them, and so to make more informed decisions about the applicability of our findings to the operational contexts in which they are working. In addition, improving transparency should increase the replicability of the methods used. This should also make it more feasible to update the Lessons Papers in the future, in order to keep up to date with contemporary research and evidence. The methodological choices presented in Section 3 have been made with this in mind.

Although this Methods Note does seek to improve the quality of future Lessons Papers, it is important to understand that it does not provide a methodology for how to make an objective assessment of the effectiveness of a particular intervention. Humanitarian crises are complex phenomena, and the international community's response to them inevitably involves dynamic interactions between multiple stakeholders and environmental factors. In such circumstances, being humble about what we can objectively know remains wise counsel (Ramalingam, 2013), and the relative value of the implicit knowledge of actors within the system gains in importance. For this reason, ALNAP considers it vital to continue gathering and sharing lessons across our membership and the humanitarian community at large.

Moreover, this Methods Note does not propose a single standardised approach to be used for all future Lessons Papers since methodological decisions will need to be tailored for each Paper. In this regard, this Methods Note guides but does not replace the Terms of Reference (ToR) for each future Lessons Paper. Nor will it substitute for clear justifications of methodological choices made by future authors.

1.2 ALNAP Lessons Papers to date

Since 2001, ALNAP has published 18 Lessons Papers. While none of these defines what does or does not constitute a lesson, each has typically sought to present a selection of practitioner insights about the delivery of previous humanitarian responses, which the author considers important for practitioners to bear in mind in future crises.

Importantly, previous Lessons Papers have included insights on both effect and process. Lessons have included information about which types of intervention have worked well and which have not. But they have also included information about common challenges faced by other decision-makers in similar types of crisis; about features of crisis response that are not specific to a given intervention, such as inter-agency coordination, funding streams, human resource strategies, relationships with national governments and local actors; or about the processes and environmental factors that need to be taken into account when planning and implementing a crisis response.

This is the type of information that ALNAP Lessons Papers have typically – and successfully – provided. ALNAP members consistently cite the Lessons Papers as useful resources, and the individual Papers consistently achieve more downloads than any other ALNAP information products.

The Lessons Papers have presented, on average, 12 key lessons drawn primarily from literature review and sometimes stakeholder interviews. The lessons have been aimed at field staff of international humanitarian agencies, and have prioritised operational issues to bear in mind when implementing an emergency response.

It is important to recognise, however, that the scope and methodology of Lessons Papers have varied considerably over the 17 years since ALNAP started publishing them. Comparison across that period reveals at least three different types of paper, spread across three different eras (see Figure 1 below):

- **Evaluation Syntheses:** the earliest Lessons Papers (produced between 2001-2003) were explicitly designed to synthesise lessons from evaluations of specific crises. As such, the scope was limited to the crisis in question and the methodology was restricted to reviewing evaluations rather than grey literature or conducting stakeholder interviews.
- **Crisis-Specific Lessons:** six Lessons Papers produced between 2005 and 2015 were focused on presenting lessons from a wider range of sources than evaluations, but still limited to those applicable to a specific crisis. Here the purpose was partly to inform practitioners arriving at the crisis in question, theoretically in the early response phase. Consequently, the methodological choices were driven by a desire to ensure timeliness, usability and pertinence to the specific crisis rather than generalisability to a wider set of contexts.
- **Crisis-Type Lessons:** nine Lessons Papers produced between 2005 and 2014 were focused on lessons for responses to specific crisis types, e.g. slow-onset drought/food insecurity, floods, earthquakes and urban disasters. As such, the primary driving factor was to identify lessons that are applicable across crisis-type rather than being specific to individual projects or instances. The methodology used for these papers provided a fairly structured review of a wider range of resources, including evaluations, grey literature and stakeholder interviews. Data sources typically included the HELP Library and other libraries where possible (e.g. the ICRC database and online academic libraries).

Notwithstanding the differences between previous papers outlined above, the Lessons Papers have a common objective: to share the evidence generated by practitioners and humanitarian agencies that relates to successful programming – including that published in the grey literature. This objective is closely tied to the core function of ALNAP as a centre for sharing knowledge among member agencies – and indeed the Lessons Papers have traditionally used the ALNAP resource library (the Humanitarian Evaluation, Learning and Performance or HELP Library) as a key database.

It is, however, a broad objective. Notably, it does not impose blanket restrictions on the types of evidence to be included in the Lessons Papers. Thus, each Paper's evidence base could feasibly include a range of study types (e.g. from control trials to after-action reviews), themes (e.g. from inter-agency coordination to individual programme effectiveness), or normative criteria (e.g. between response effectiveness, appropriateness or connectedness to long-term development).

Figure 1: Three Eras of Lessons Papers

		Lessons Paper Era															
		2001 - 2005 Evaluation Syntheses DAC Aid Effectiveness Working Group collaboration					2006	2007 - 2009 Early Lessons Papers ProVenton consortium agreement				2010	2011 - 2016 Updates and new crises				
		2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Type of Lessons Paper	Evaluation Syntheses	1		2 3													
	Crisis-type Lessons					6		7	9 11	13		14	15		16 17		
	Crisis-Specific Lessons					4 5			8 10	12							18

Lessons Papers		
1	Aid Responses to Afghanistan: Lessons from Previous Evaluations Dabelstein (2001)	10 The Global Food Price Crisis: Lessons and Ideas for Relief Planners and Managers Ramalingam, Proudlock and Mitchell (2008)
2	Key Lessons from Evaluations of Humanitarian Action in Liberia ALNAP (2003)	11 Responding to earthquakes: Learning from earthquake relief and recovery operations Cosgrave (2008)
3	Iraq and Rehabilitation: Lessons from Previous Evaluations Van Den Berg and Dabelstein (2003)	12 Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for Operational Agencies ALNAP (2009)
4	South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations Beck (2005a)	13 Responding to urban disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations O'Donnell, Smart and Ramalingam (2009)
5	South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake recovery operations Beck (2005b)	14 Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies Hedlund and Knox-Clarke (2011)
6	Tsunami Emergency: Lessons from Previous Natural Disasters Houghton (2005)	15 Responding to urban disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations Sanderson, Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2012)
7	Slow-onset disasters: drought and food and livelihoods insecurity learning from previous relief and recovery responses Hedlund (2007)	16 Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence Lucchi (2014)
8	Cyclone Nargis: Lessons for Operational Agencies Ramalingam and Pavanello (2008)	17 Responding to flood disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations Cosgrave (2014)
9	Flood disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations Alam, Herson and O'Donnell (2008)	18 Nepal Earthquake Response: Lessons for Operational Agencies Sanderson and Ramalingam (2015)

1.3 The Evolving Evidence Landscape

Much has changed since ALNAP published its first Lessons Paper in 2001. The most obvious evolution is that there is now far more evidence in the humanitarian sector. Evidence synthesis in the sector now takes a range of different forms, including among others:

- Systematic reviews: these are structured approaches that consist ‘in mapping out the available evidence, critically appraising the evidence and synthesizing the results’ (Krystalli and Ott, 2015). They generally aim to answer a question like ‘does this approach or intervention work?’. Research questions are typically very tightly defined and focus on measuring the effect of an intervention on a given population group in a given context, usually in comparison to a control. They also typically appraise the literature against pre-defined quality criteria.
- Rapid evidence assessments: Rapid evidence assessments (REAs) ‘provide a more structured and rigorous search and quality assessment of the evidence than a literature review but are not as exhaustive as a systematic review’ (DFID, 2015). REAs typically seek to answer the question ‘what does the evidence tell us about X?’. REAs commissioned by DFID typically aim to provide policy-relevant evidential syntheses with a total production timescale of three to six months.
- Literature reviews: these are defined here as all reviews of available literature on a given thematic question, which seek to synthesise the evidence they present. Literature reviews can vary according to the type of question they aim to answer, the degree to which literature is included or excluded on the basis of structured criteria, and the extent to which evidential quality assessments are applied to the literature reviewed and/or integrated into the analysis.
- Evidence maps and evidence gap maps: evidence maps such as those developed by 3ie and IRC are collections of evidence based on a thematic area that answer the question ‘what do we know and not know about “what works”?’ (3ie, 2017; see also IRC, 2016). Instead of presenting synthesised evidence findings or conclusions in the manner of a typical literature review, evidence maps seek to provide a visual library of the evidence in a given sector or sub-sector, typically structured around outcome or intervention frameworks.

The second point to note is that the humanitarian sector is increasingly concerned with rigour in the generation and review of evidence. In particular, the discussions around the use of experimental and quasi-experimental methods to measure impact have also encouraged interest in designing methods to review the evidence in a manner comparable to the systematic reviews used in the medical sciences. This has encouraged the use of more rigorous approaches to evidence synthesis as outlined above.

But it also encourages a tight focus on evidence regarding the measurable effects of specific interventions on specific population groups in particular contexts: what works for whom and where. Decision-makers in the humanitarian sector also require other types of information, not just about effect but also about process. It is this need that ALNAP Lessons Papers – alongside several other types of literature review – have typically served.

For this reason, the purpose of future Lessons Papers will remain distinct from systematic review, and be understood as literature reviews, in the sense defined above. This Methods Note seeks to improve the quality of the methods used by helping to define the tightness of the research question, the method used for selecting literature, the approach to inclusion and exclusion criteria and the integration of evidential quality assessments in the analysis.

2. Methodology

The research methodology used to prepare this Methods Note comprised a review of the secondary literature focused on three key areas:

- Evidence available on ALNAP's HELP Library
- Alternative approaches being used in the sector
- Previous ALNAP Lessons Papers

Primary research in the form of interviews, skype calls and direct contact/email was undertaken to supplement any data gaps for the two latter areas.

2.1. HELP Library Review

2.1.1. Aim:

The aim of the HELP Library review was to ensure that the methodology for future Lessons Papers is grounded in a good understanding of the nature of the grey literature available in the humanitarian sector and to replicate the search methods that could be used when identifying documents.

2.1.2. Steps taken:

The HELP Library was searched for documentation of relevance to a potential future Lessons Paper on drought response. This allowed the researchers to run a pilot search of the database using a single keyword 'drought', which returns a large enough number of documents to require a rigorous selection approach.

The extraction and selection process included three steps:

- Step 1: Relevant documents in the HELP were found in three different ways: by title search, the keywords search function on the HELP website, and the 'internal tags' applied within the HELP Library. Each search was conducted using the single search term 'drought'. 214 documents were identified in total.
- Step 2: A random sample of these documents was then drawn. A total of 101 documents were selected using random number assignment.
- Step 3: Each document was then screened on the basis of document type, which removed those not typically used in a Lessons Paper, primarily PowerPoint presentations or briefing factsheets. All other documents were included, resulting in a final selection of 57 documents. Importantly, content and quality of the documents was not taken into account during Step 3. This allowed the research team to assess the full range of evidential quality available to future authors.

2.1.3. Data extracted:

Basic information was then recorded for each document, in order to provide an overview of the nature of the evidence available in the HELP library. The information captured covered three key areas:

Meta-data:

- Title
- Publication year
- Organisation

Evaluation information (in the case of evaluation reports):

- Independence of the evaluation
- Type of evaluation (ex-post, ex-ante, mid-term, impact evaluation; evaluations of projects, programmes, or strategies)
- Inclusion of experimental, quasi-experimental, or non-experimental methods
- Whether or not the evaluation tools were described
- Whether or not an evaluation rubric was published
- Whether or not the OECD DAC criteria were explicitly covered

Methodological information (for all studies):

- Data type (quantitative, qualitative, mixed)
- Explicitness of the overall methodology used
- Explicitness of the sampling method
- Whether or not challenges and limitations were presented
- Whether or not the interviewees were listed
- Whether or not interviewee categories were provided
- Whether or not a bibliography was provided
- Whether or not in-text citations were provided.

2.2. Alternative Literature Review Approaches

2.2.1. Aim:

In order to situate the future Lessons Papers in the context of the wider evidence landscape, a purposive selection of literature review approaches within the humanitarian sector was made, and the studies reviewed. This enabled ALNAP to assess the methodological choices for future Lessons Papers against a clear background understanding of the approaches taken to similar challenges by other humanitarian organisations. It also allowed for a methodological comparison between the previous Lessons Papers and literature reviews currently being conducted in the sector.

2.2.2. Steps taken:

ALNAP searched within the HELP and via Google Search for ‘literature review’, ‘lessons paper’ and ‘systematic review’ + ‘humanitarian’. The search was not exhaustive, and did not consider every result returned. The goal was to identify an illustrative sample of papers. Only papers published between 2015 and 2017 were considered, and documents focused on humanitarian response were prioritised. ALNAP aimed to identify 10 documents which could represent a diversity of approaches. Ultimately, 11 documents were selected. Two additional papers were added from the recent Tufts/Oxfam Humanitarian Evidence Programme (HEP) series of systematic reviews.

2.2.3. Data extracted:

The selected papers were examined and data extracted, using a study matrix covering the following questions:

Basic information:

- Type of document
- Subject of review

Clarity of purpose and scope:

- What is the purpose of the review undertaken?
- What is the purpose type (operational lessons, gaps in evidence base, etc.)?
- How was this purpose identified?
- How was the scope identified?
- How does this purpose/scope influence the research questions identified and methods used to answer them?

Evidential quality:

- How are the methods used made clear?
- What methods are used?
- How is the generalisability of findings identified?
- How generalisable are the findings?

Resources and timeliness:

- How many days went into producing the literature review?
- How long did the literature review take to produce (from commissioning to finalisation to publication)?
- What aspects of the methodology used, if any, consumed the greatest volume of resources?

Research Questions:

- What type of research questions were asked?
- How were they identified?
- How did the research question affect the methodology used?

Methodology:

- How was the literature identified?
- What libraries were consulted? What other sources?
- Were key word searches used? If so, how were they constructed?
- How was quality of evidence assessed?
- Was grey literature reviewed? What learning can be drawn from the inclusion/exclusion of grey literature in this review?
- How was quality of evidence taken into account in the review?
- How much literature was reviewed?
- How much literature was identified but not reviewed? What (inclusion/exclusion) criteria were used to make selections?
- Was literature review supplemented with other activities (interviews, quantitative analysis, etc.)?

In order to fill in the gaps where information was not available, ALNAP contacted the authors of each paper either by email or by Skype to answer remaining questions, and conducted interviews with five additional individuals with a background in systematic/evidence reviews in the humanitarian sector.

2.3. ALNAP Lessons Papers Review

2.3.1. Aim:

The aim of the Lessons Papers review was to clarify their scope, and base methodological choices on a deep understanding of the evolution of their purpose, methods, sources used, final format and resources allocated.

2.3.2. Steps taken

In all, the review comprised five steps:

1. A list of all prior ALNAP Lessons Papers was taken from ALNAP's website. 18 were identified from 2001 to 2016.
2. A study matrix was created to capture basic information about the Lessons Papers.
3. The matrix was populated using review of the Lessons Papers as well as supplementary information from ALNAP's internal records, including ToRs and contracts. Brief interviews with ALNAP's Director John Mitchell and Head of Research Paul Knox Clarke were conducted to fill in the gaps where possible.
4. Having undertaken the review, several patterns were identified, particularly regarding periods of time as well as in differences among the Lessons Papers themselves. A narrative was produced to accompany the matrix, which explores these trends as well as adding context to explain the gaps in the matrix.

2.3.3. Data extracted:

The matrix was populated to include:

- metadata (title, year, author, subject, purpose)
- format (length, number of lessons, presence of an executive summary, bibliography and bibliography length)
- sources used (number of libraries consulted, use of evaluations, peer-reviewed journals, grey literature and interviews)
- method used (stated purpose and scope, questions asked, presence of a clear methodology section, nature of the methodology used, limitations and gaps presented, whether or not sources were cited per lesson)
- resources used (total contracted days, number of researchers and contract length)

3. Proposed method for future ALNAP Lessons Papers

This section presents the proposed method for future ALNAP Lessons Papers. It is intended to serve as a guideline for future authors, a standard against which to gauge the quality of commissioned work, and a means by which ALNAP can increase the quality and transparency of future Lessons Papers.

It is recognised that all methodological choices will affect the resource requirements and production timescale of future Lessons Papers. These implications will be addressed on a case-by-case basis when authors are contracted.

The method is composed of a series of methodological choices, covering the following areas:

- Defining the purpose of the Lessons Paper
- Defining the research question
- Selecting data sources
- Assessing evidential quality
- Conducting the review
- Interpreting findings and presenting lessons

Future authors should use this section as stand-alone guidance for making methodological choices for their Lessons Paper, but it should not substitute for a robust methodology section in each Lessons Paper.

3.1 Defining the purpose of the Lessons Paper

The ALNAP Lessons Papers have a different objective to most other examples of evidence synthesis in the sector. They do not seek to provide a definitive answer on ‘what works’. This is partly because of the complexity of the system, the length and non-linear nature of the causal chains linking humanitarian interventions to their effects, and the difficulties surrounding external validity that have been discussed in great detail elsewhere (see Cartwright and Hardie (2012), Stern et al. (2012), Pritchett and Sandefour (2013)). Rather, previous Lessons Papers have focused on critical issues that field staff should consider when designing and implementing a crisis response. This includes, to some degree, highlighting issues on the effectiveness of certain types of interventions in certain types of context. But a much greater focus has been placed on wider issues concerning challenges and opportunities that arise in particular crisis contexts. Issues such as the relative risk of disease outbreak in flood response, or specific challenges around coordination in urban response, or who the regional stakeholders were in the Nepal earthquake response. Future Lessons Papers will continue in this vein, but must ensure that readers are made aware of this objective and understand the implications for applying Lessons Paper findings in new contexts and crises.

Consequently, it is imperative for each Lessons Paper to include a clear purpose statement so that the reader has a clear understanding of how to interpret and apply the lessons presented, and how to relate the Lessons Paper to other products in the evidence landscape.

A purpose statement should include a clear explanation of what the Lessons Paper is seeking to achieve and what type of evidence it aims to provide. Previous Lessons Papers have provided quite a wide range of evidence, including:

- Evidence about the effectiveness of certain types of intervention in certain types of context, e.g. Sanderson et al. (2012) cite evidence that ‘cash-based programmes work well in urban areas’; while Cosgrave (2014) argues that ‘shelter reconstruction works best when it is owner controlled’ in flood responses.
- Evidence about the challenges and opportunities that are present in certain types of context, e.g. Cosgrave (2014) notes that, for flood responses, ‘the risk of disease outbreak is real but lower than commonly thought’; while Sanderson and Ramalingam (2015) urge responders to the Nepal earthquake to ‘pay special attention to marginalised, hidden and vulnerable populations, especially in urban areas’.
- Evidence about the nature of certain crises or crisis types, e.g. Sanderson and Ramalingam (2015) argue that, in the Nepal earthquake response, it was important to ‘recognise the regional nature of the response’, while Cosgrave (2014) stated the importance of understanding that ‘floods are not short-term events’.

Future Lessons Papers must clearly spell out the types of proposition for which they are seeking to provide evidential support. These may include, for example, statements like those above. They may include statements relating to any of the OECD DAC criteria for humanitarian aid, i.e. related to the appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, impact or other normative assessments of the quality of humanitarian response. But readers must be able to understand from the outset what types of evidence the Lessons Paper aims to provide.

3.2 Defining the research question

3.2.1 Keeping it general

The purpose of Lessons Papers, as stated in the previous section, is to collate and present critical issues that field staff should be aware of when designing and implementing a crisis response. This is an inherently wide-ranging ambition. To meet it, the research questions posed by future Lessons Papers will need to remain broad in focus.

Tightly defined research questions, such as the PICO questions typically used in systematic reviews, are not relevant for Lessons Papers. Box 1 presents an example of what PICO questions look like, and their implications for review methods. But the critical point to note is that such questions focus on assessing the effectiveness of a specific type of intervention on a specific population group in a tightly defined context.

While effective in their own right, there are at least two reasons why such tightly defined questions would present a problem for the ALNAP Lessons Papers. First, definitions can prove challenging in the humanitarian sector. Authors of a recent systematic review highlighted the difficulty of defining basic terms in the sector, given the variation between contexts and complexity of crises (Krystalli, forthcoming). Even the term ‘humanitarian’ proved difficult to define to a satisfactory standard: should reviewers include studies on nutritional crises in regions not otherwise affected by humanitarian crisis? How do reviewers tackle the warping effect that humanitarian emergencies can have on otherwise agreed-upon conceptual terms, such as ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’, whose interpretation and application in humanitarian crisis can differ significantly from standard mental health practice.

The point could equally be extended to disputed terms within the humanitarian system, such as ‘protection’, for which different agencies have different mandates, perspectives and practices (See Murray and Landry, 2013: 4).

Second, the objectives of the ALNAP Lessons Papers remain too wide to be well served by a research question focusing on the effectiveness of a tightly defined intervention. PICO questions are specifically designed to assess the effect of a specific intervention in a particular context on a particular population. But the problem applies equally to the more common question types used in systematic reviews in the humanitarian system, which typically approximate to, but do not fully meet, the PICO definition, e.g. ‘What is the impact of mental health and psychosocial support interventions on people affected by humanitarian emergencies?’, or, ‘What are the impacts of food assistance on pastoralist livelihoods in humanitarian crises?’¹

ALNAP Lessons Papers seek to ask an inherently more general question than this. They seek to gather lessons from relevant agencies concerning the overall response of the international humanitarian community to a particular crisis or crisis type. This increases the generality across two dimensions:

- **The range of things under investigation:** Lessons Papers provide analysis on a much wider range of entities than individual interventions or intervention types. They may include analysis of interventions to some extent, but never by segregating intervention types to consider which ones have which specific results. More importantly, Lessons Papers will always include analysis of issues beyond the intervention portfolio. Issues about inter-agency phenomena such as coordination and leadership; internal mechanisms of response agencies such as human resources and planning; government positions in countries affected by crisis; global funding mechanisms and policy responses; heterogeneous portfolios of interventions that may include a whole range of activity and modality types; and much more.
- **The types of lessons:** as outlined in Section 1.2 above, rather than focusing only on the effect of an intervention, Lessons Papers also need to look at additional factors. These may include, among others, lessons about the challenges and opportunities that are present in certain types of context, about the nature of certain crises or crisis types, or about issues surrounding processes.

ALNAP Lessons Papers to date have thus sought to pose broad questions in line with their overall purpose. For example, Cosgrave (2014) posed the question ‘what key issues should agencies consider when responding to humanitarian crises following flooding?’, which allowed the author to look at a far wider range of issues than a typical systematic review would allow.

Importantly, the question presented in Cosgrave (2014) does go some way to defining two elements:

1. Who the lessons are intended for
2. In what type(s) of crisis they should be considered

As will be discussed below, these two points can be used to start building a more transparent approach to the Lessons Papers; previous Lessons Papers generally failed to make the research question explicit, or demonstrate the implications of the research question for the methodological choices made. The following section addresses these points in more detail.

3.2.2 Making it explicit

Most of the previous Lessons Papers and the alternative literature review approaches assessed in the preparation of this Method Paper (see Section 2.2 above), had a clearly defined purpose, but no clearly stated research question.² Future ALNAP Lessons Papers should present a clearly stated research question, without unduly narrowing its scope.

Three principles should be followed in this regard:

1. **Be clear on the breadth of focus.** Future Lessons Papers should state the research questions to make it clear that the paper is based on a broad range of lessons, and not focused on assessing an intervention's effect. So, for example, a research question such as 'what lessons can be learned from responses to epidemics in urban settings?' would pass this test, by virtue of making it clear that the Lessons Paper does not focus on the effectiveness of, say, a particular treatment programme.
2. **Be clear for whom the lessons are intended.** This should also enhance transparency for the reader, as well as helping to narrow the search focus for literature review. Thus, 'what lessons for relief managers in international agencies can be learned from responses to epidemics in urban settings?' defines the primary intended user group. This should help the author to develop consistent criteria for including potential lessons, as well as making the Lessons Paper more useful.
3. **Be clear from where the lessons are drawn.** This should include two elements (i) the type of resource and (ii) the crisis context. Thus 'what lessons for relief managers in international agencies can be learned from independent evaluations of responses to epidemics in urban settings in low-income countries?' would pass this test on the basis that it specifies the type of resource being reviewed and the crisis context from which the lessons are drawn. This should significantly help in developing consistent inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review. It also further contributes to transparency regarding the applicability of the lessons identified.

Taken together, these principles should allow future Lessons Papers to benefit from some of the positive aspects of systematic reviews, while maintaining the breadth of focus that remains essential to the objectives outlined above. The main aim is to enhance the quality of the Lessons Papers by posing questions that can be answered in a rigorous manner, and to make the process more transparent by being honest about what the Lessons Papers are, what they are not, and situating the Lessons Paper in the context of wider evidence.

In addition, by breaking down the elements of the literature into component parts, a research question framed in this way should help the review process. In the above example, reviewers will know that they should select only independent evaluations and only those that address epidemics in urban contexts, which in turn should assist the process of selecting data sources.

3.3 Selecting data sources

Humanitarian knowledge is spread across a wide variety of sources. Academic peer-reviewed articles are only one source. Grey literature (including programme and organisation reports, independent evaluations, and agency-commissioned research) and unpublished work make up a large part of the overall picture. It would therefore be highly problematic if future Lessons Papers were to ignore the grey literature.

But the sheer quantity of agency-specific libraries and the absence of a common database for grey literature obliges authors to make selections between libraries, which in turn introduces the potential for bias.³

Future Lessons Papers should seek to approach this problem in the following way:

- Authors should make explicit which databases have been searched for literature to review. This is important simply to make the process more transparent for the reader.
- Authors should present the rationale for which databases have been selected. The selection rationale should explain the choices made on the basis of the individual Lessons Paper purpose and research question. Search functions will also vary greatly between academic journals (which some researchers find difficult to access since they are behind paywalls, but are nevertheless able to provide Boolean searches for keywords, and stable web links over time to assist historical searches) and sector-specific libraries and agency-specific websites (which theoretically have greater operational relevance, but offer limited search functions, unstable archiving, and variable evidential quality).
- Third, authors should include ALNAP's HELP Library, which specifically aims to collect and store grey literature produced by the ALNAP membership. This includes a range of literature types of potential value for Lessons Papers, including evaluations, thematic studies, after-action reviews, needs assessments, policy documents and guidelines. As such, it represents a starting point for any review of lessons drawn from the ALNAP community.⁴

3.4 Assessing evidential quality

As outlined above, ALNAP Lessons Papers seek to draw from evidence from peer-reviewed and other sources. This entails engaging with grey literature, whilst accepting that the quality of evidential sources may differ. The question of how to approach evidential quality assessments must therefore be addressed.

Approaches to evidential quality taken by other literature in the sector:

Evidential quality is assessed in a range of different ways by other authors in the humanitarian sector. Of the papers selected for review by the research team, the approaches to evidential quality assessment varied along a spectrum ranging from:

- Providing no assessment of evidential quality at all
- Assessing evidential quality through implicit author judgement alone
- Assessing evidential quality through explicit customised criteria designed by the author in the context of the literature review in question⁵
- Assessing evidential quality through explicit external criteria⁶

Approximately half of the papers assessed evidence using explicit criteria, whether by customised criteria or relying on external criteria defined by an authoritative source. The others either provide no assessment or used implicit criteria and author judgement alone.

Authors also expressed different opinions on the usefulness of evidential quality assessments in the interviews. Some argued that assessing evidential quality was either unnecessary or impractical: unnecessary on the basis that transparency about sources enables the readers to assess evidential quality themselves, so there was no need for the author to do so; impractical because of the difficulty of designing a common assessment tool that can cover such a wide variety of resource types (from peer-reviewed articles to unpublished internal agency reports).

Others argued against the use of explicit external criteria on the basis that, in reality, applying each of the criteria requires author interpretation.

This point is extended somewhat by the findings of Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2013: 13), reporting on their experience of applying systematic review techniques to the evidence in the field of international development:

Even following seemingly clear and objective guidelines, such as those outlined in [DFID (2014)], is neither a straightforward nor a bias-free exercise. For example, any answers to the question of whether a particular research method is appropriate to answering the research question will involve a fairly large degree of subjectivity. Finally, authors took different approaches to the use of the evidential quality assessments. Most of those who did assess the evidential quality continued to include documents of poor quality. In some cases, this was because there were not many documents for review. In other cases, such documents were included because it was part of the review's objective to map the evidence base, regardless of quality.

Though the quality assessment was not often used to exclude documents, authors often used it to determine how much emphasis to place on such evidence. Several felt that, where the author could highlight some assessment of evidential quality, it could be left to the reader to judge whether to take the point into consideration.

One approach used by a systematic review commissioned by the Humanitarian Evidence Program (HEP) was to rank the evidential quality by each finding rather than just by each document reviewed (Maynard et al., 2017). This enables the reader to assess the reliability on a finding-by-finding basis. It also encourages the presentation of information about evidential quality alongside the paper's findings, which increases the likelihood of readers picking it up in Lessons Papers aimed at operational audiences such as ALNAP's.

3.4.2 What this means for future Lessons Papers:

Future ALNAP Lessons Papers should include an assessment of evidential quality. We consider this essential given the degree of variation in evidential quality among the grey literature reviewed for previous Lessons Papers and as discussed in Knox-Clarke and Darcy (2014), among others. Without providing such an assessment, future Lessons Papers would risk either retreating from the grey literature altogether or presenting lessons without allowing readers to gauge our confidence in them. Neither option would meet the objectives of the Lessons Papers outlined above.

In providing an assessment of evidential quality, we expect future authors to use explicit customised criteria designed for the literature review in question. The rationale for this is twofold.

First, the rationale for choosing explicit over implicit criteria or none at all should be clear by now. Future Lessons Papers need to provide transparent methodologies (see section 3.5 below for more on how). Indeed, as Knox-Clarke and Darcy (2014) propose, clarity of method is a criterion for evidential quality. Future Lessons Papers should therefore lead by example in this regard by explaining how quality assessments have been made. Doing this also has the potential to be a useful guide for those who generate evidence, who will be able to understand the basis of quality judgements made upon their work and those of other organisations.

Second, the rationale for choosing customised rather than external criteria is more nuanced. External criteria remove the potential for author bias being introduced by establishing ad hoc criteria. The downsides include the application of criteria that were designed for sectors with a strong tradition of academic peer review. STROBE, CASP and NIH are all designed for use in the medical sciences.

DFID (2014) is tailored to the development sector. But, as Krystalli and Ott (2015) note:

Although much can be learned from the international development field for reviews in humanitarian situations, important differences remain, particularly in terms of the types of data and evidence that are possible to collect, assess, and synthesize in these fields. Evidence syntheses for the humanitarian field thus often have to be adapted from medical standards.

Given that ALNAP Lessons Papers aim to synthesise the evidence available in the humanitarian system, we consider that translating criteria directly from the medical sciences would carry too great a risk in terms of ruling out essential knowledge present in the grey literature.

There are, nevertheless, some criteria that are more relevant to the humanitarian sector:⁷

- Knox-Clarke and Darcy (2014: 15-17) provide six-fold criteria that specifically aim to provide a ‘tool for humanitarian actors when considering the strength of the evidence that they use’.
- Shaxson (2005) and Spencer et al. (2003) provide evidential quality-assessment tools geared towards policy-makers across a range of fields.
- Bond (2013) proposes five key principles for assessing the quality of evidence produced by NGOs in both the development and humanitarian spheres.

Each of these criteria have their own merits and are aimed at fields in which grey literature predominates. Using any one of them would be a significant advance on making assessments through implicit author judgement alone. However, as Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2013:15) note in considering evidential-grading frameworks, ‘Such scales are not neutral or apolitical; they are built on particular assumptions about the ordering of evidence, and, as such, it is important to question their foundations.’ While the point may apply less strongly in the case of non-grading criteria such as those highlighted above, it does remain. And wading too far into the politics of the hierarchy of evidence is antithetical to the approach of ALNAP Lessons Papers, as detailed above.

For this reason, we advise future authors to consult the assessment frameworks described above, but to bear in mind the advice of Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2013:15) by approaching any assessment framework ‘with a critical and informed eye, keeping in mind that there is no objective, bias-free way of assessing evidence’. In some cases, this may mean using one of the external criteria more or less untouched, in others it may require complete revision. But in either case, we expect the authors of Lessons Paper to explicitly outline and justify the criteria that they have used. In time, we would also expect future authors to build on the approaches taken by previous authors of Lessons Papers in this regard, which may provide useful information on the applicability of external criteria, or even allow for the consolidation of standardised core assessment criteria specifically tailored to the Lessons Papers.

3.5 Conducting the review

This section outlines the steps to take in conducting the literature review once the purpose, research question, reference libraries, and evidential quality assessment criteria have all been selected. Following the direction of Krystalli and Ott (2015), Hagen-Zanker et al. (2012) and Mallett et al. (2012), the proposed approach is designed to capture the benefits of systematic review while adapting it to fit the specificities of both the humanitarian sector and the unique of the Lessons Papers.

It covers the following aspects:

- Literature search methods
- Approaches to inclusion and exclusion of literature
- Snowballing
- Assignment of quality ratings
- Construction of study matrix

Authors should make explicit the details of the methodology, in order to increase transparency for the reader. The methodology section should include, among others:

- list of databases searched
- search terms used
- quality assessment approach
- inclusion and exclusion criteria used during screening
- number of documents reviewed
- description of the method for selecting individual lessons

The study matrix, used to extract information from documents during the review process, should also be made publicly available.

3.5.1 Literature search methods

The ways documents tend to be stored in the field of international development, or the places they tend to be located, are not conducive to orthodox search and retrieval methods centred on academic journals and databases.

This point, made in Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2013:9), applies just as much to the humanitarian evidence base. This presents significant challenges to authors of Lessons seeking to follow a more transparent process such as the one outlined in this Methods Note. Searching abstracts by keywords, for example, will clearly not get the author very far in a review of the grey literature of agency-specific databases.

Consequently, the search method will need to be adapted somewhat from the standard systematic review approach. Nevertheless, we believe that it is possible to make significant quality and transparency improvements by following the approach laid out below.

First, it is expected that authors include a keyword search on the databases defined following the approach outlined in Section 2.1.2. This is important because it reduces the bias effect of working from the author's own familiar reference points.

Once identified, databases should be searched using pre-defined search terms. The search terms define precisely the inputs that the author will enter into the chosen databases in order to identify the first set of potential studies for review. They are intended to capture as wide a range of potentially useful documents as possible, which will later be reduced using a clear and consistent set of inclusion/exclusion criteria (see below). It is vital that each search term is recorded and reported in a defined methodology section in the Lessons Paper, in order to make the process transparent.

The process of defining good search terms is not an easy one. Authors need to include spelling variations, synonyms and acronyms in their set of search terms. Krystalli and Ott (2015) illustrate this point well with the example of “NGO” versus “non-governmental organizations” versus “non-governmental organisations,” versus “nongovernmental organizations”. One might even add ‘nongovernmental organisations’ to that list.

Defining accurate search terms is made harder by the nature of the Lessons Papers. Unlike the adapted systematic review approach discussed in Krystalli and Ott (2015), Lessons Papers will be working from a very wide research question, as detailed in Section 3.2. This hinders the author’s ability to provide tightly defined research terms, but at the same time it threatens to return unmanageable numbers of documents for review.

However, as outlined in Section 2.1.2 above, ALNAP did conduct a successful search of the HELP Library using the single search term ‘drought’. Using a combination of search approaches specific to the HELP Library (namely, mixing title searches with internal tags), ALNAP was able to identify a preliminary selection of 214 documents. Because of the open nature of the typical Lessons Paper research question, we would encourage future authors to consider similar approaches, so as to cast the net as wide as possible in the initial literature search.

We nevertheless recognise that, particularly when looking beyond the HELP Library, the number of documents returned from an initial keyword search may be so large that it becomes unfeasible to conduct a relevance screening using the inclusion/exclusion criteria approach described in Section 3.5.2 below. We therefore expect future authors to estimate the maximum number of papers they can feasibly screen with the resources available. In cases where this number is smaller than the number of papers returned by initial keyword searches, we expect authors to present a rigorous and transparent method for selecting papers from the initial set which will then be screened, using their chosen inclusion/exclusion criteria.

3.5.2 Approaches to inclusion and exclusion of literature

Once an initial list of potentially useful resources has been compiled, it will need to be screened for relevance to the research question. It is essential to do this on a transparent basis, applying a consistent set of eligibility criteria across the literature set and providing an explicit explanation of the criteria. Decisions such as whether to screen at title level, abstract, or full-text search will need to be made explicit and justified.

The critical factor determining inclusion and exclusion criteria should focus on the relevance to the research question and, to the extent possible, the evidential quality. Thus, screening by temporal scope and publication date, disaster type addressed, geographical or development context, response agency type, would all count as useful ways to restrict the literature pool according to the relationship between the literature under review and the Lessons Paper research question. Wall and Hedlund (2016), for example, used publication date as a proxy for temporal scope, by excluding all documents published before 2009. Punton et al. (2016) used a mix of metadata, methodological approach and geographical scope to determine inclusion and exclusion criteria.⁸ Maynard et al., Parker and Twigg (2017) used a multi-step process to reduce an initial set of 4,000 documents returned by keyword search to a final set of 11 documents for review. Their inclusion criteria included publication date, inclusion of primary research, methodological design, report type, geographical scope, survey reach, the types of interventions analysed (including scope, length and budget), a clearly defined methodology, and report language.

3.5.3. Snowballing

Once the dataset has been screened, authors should consider the usefulness of snowballing, or using the documents identified in the dataset to identify other papers. This diverges from the conventional approach to systematic review, but could be useful for searching grey literature. In particular, it helps to overcome a critical challenge in the humanitarian evidence landscape, which is that many articles are not available on centralised databases such as the HELP.

By snowballing the bibliographies of documents already included in the review, authors can seek to avoid excluding useful agency-specific knowledge that has yet to be transferred to a common database.

3.5.4. Construction of study matrix

Authors should construct a clear and transparent study matrix at the start of the review process, which specifies a core set of basic information to be collected from each document reviewed. This encourages comprehensive and standardised review across the whole literature set, and reduces the scope for author bias.

The matrix should include (but not be limited to) three basic categories of information:

- Basic metadata such as the publication date, author(s), commissioning agency, document type, and scope definition.
- The lessons for which the paper provides evidence.
- Information that forms the basis of the evidential quality ratings, as identified by the author's explicit customised criteria for assessing evidential quality (see Section 3.4), e.g. presence of an explicit methodology section, triangulation of sources, recognition of limitations and challenges etc.

3.5.5. Assignment of quality ratings

It is important for authors to assign a unique quality rating to each document reviewed. This should be based on an assessment of the extent of confidence in the document's findings, as opposed to an assessment of the value or usefulness of the document as a whole. Providing such a rating is often a difficult process, and decisions regarding publication of the quality ratings should be made with ALNAP's approval. Nevertheless, individual, document-specific ratings of evidential quality are an essential part of the proposed Lessons Papers methodology. In particular, they form part of the basis for making confidence ratings in individual lessons identified, as described in Section 3.6.3 below. We therefore encourage authors to identify a clear and consistent set of criteria for assessing evidential quality (see Section 3.5.5) before conducting the review. Authors should then provide a single numerical score for each paper on the basis of the criteria when completing the study matrix.

3.6 Interpreting findings and presenting lessons

The final part of this section discusses the approach to interpretation of findings and the presentation of lessons. The purpose is to ensure that future Lessons Papers provide readers with a transparent analysis of the direction in which the evidence is pointing.

This involves four elements:

- Selecting the lessons
- Framing the lessons the right way
- Stating the scale of the supporting evidence
- Providing a clear confidence rating in each lesson

3.6.1 Selecting the lessons

The process of selecting which lessons identified in the review should be included in the Lessons Paper, and which should not, will always involve a degree of author interpretation. Lessons Papers do not typically present statistical meta-analyses, and the qualitative nature of much evidence generated by the humanitarian system would make using such techniques alone unnecessarily restrictive. Nevertheless, the narrative synthesis must be approached in a clear and robust manner, and the author should describe and justify the criteria used to select individual lessons from the evidence set. While the author's own judgement will be critical here, particularly regarding the relative of importance of individual lessons presented in the literature, ALNAP proposes that authors outline the criteria used to select lessons, beginning with:

- **Scope specificity:** Lessons Papers typically seek to gather information of relevance to particular types of crisis or crisis setting. Lessons that are specific to such crisis and context types should therefore be prioritised. Sanderson, Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2012) 'Responding to Urban Disasters', for example, included lessons that only apply in urban contexts (e.g. 'use assessment and targeting approaches that suit urban complexity' or "urbanize" sectoral interventions').
- **Scope relevance:** sometimes Lessons Papers have included lessons which apply both within and beyond the contexts defined by their scope. Lucchi (2014) 'Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence', for example, included 'take a localised approach' as a strategic lesson. This point can certainly also apply to situations other than urban violence, so it would not count as a lesson on the basis of scope specificity, narrowly defined. But the fact that this lesson was particularly prevalent in the literature on urban violence is itself telling. It would therefore count as highly relevant within the scope defined by the Lessons Paper, without being specific to it alone.
- **Evidential breadth:** some lessons may be supported by evidence from a wide range of contexts within the scope of the research question, while others may not be. For example, the recommendation to take localised approaches in situations of urban violence in Lucchi (2014), may draw from an evidence base that includes a wide range of different geographical locations and context types; or conversely from a narrower set. Future ALNAP Lessons Papers should seek to prioritise lessons drawn from wider evidential sets where appropriate to the lessons in question.
- **Evidential quality:** in order to ensure that future Lessons Papers are well grounded in the available evidence, we consider it important to exclude lessons lacking a strong evidential base. Authors should use clear criteria for assessing their confidence in individual lessons, as detailed below in Section 3.6.3. But ALNAP also expects that this process will affect the inclusion criteria for lessons in the final Paper, and that lessons lacking a reasonable level of confidence will be excluded.

Framing the lessons

The second element in this process is framing and presenting the selected lessons in a similar manner to past Lessons Papers. The lessons identified to date have not typically been of the form 'doing X leads to Y'. Rather, they have been more open lessons and ideas for consideration, such as 'Drought has multiple and varied effects on people's lives. Agencies should be prepared to initiate multi-sectoral, multi-country responses to meet the real needs of drought-affected populations' (Hedlund and Knox-Clarke, 2011). Authors should be open about the fact that this is not based on a proven cause-and-effect analysis, but rather a consideration they think is relevant for the primary user group in particular crisis-types.

Approaching the Lessons Papers in this way should allow authors to provide a range of potentially conflicting ‘things to think about’ rather than simply presenting the only way forward. This should allow for an honest discussion where the evidence points in different directions.

Critically, this approach relies on the authors being clear about what is known and not known, the contexts in which their findings are drawn, and the limitations and gaps in the analysis, so that the readers can make their own assessment.

3.6.2 Stating the scale of the supporting evidence base

Previous Lessons Papers have generally provided clear citations for each lesson presented, but have not summarised the size of the evidence base supporting that lesson. We encourage future authors to ensure that each lesson is given a rating on the basis of the number of pieces of supporting evidence, indexed against the total size of the literature review set.

This is important in part because of the nature of the lessons typically identified in the Lessons Papers. As outlined below, previous Lessons Papers often include lessons that are hard to dispute, such as ‘ensure you have the capacity to carry out the intervention’ (Lucchi, 2014). But the value of this lesson is precisely that it emerged so loudly in reviews of previous responses to situations of urban violence. In this sense, the number of studies focused on urban violence that cited this lesson tells us something specific and important about the nature of urban violence and the humanitarian community’s responses to them. As such, we consider it important that future Lessons Papers identify the size of the supporting evidence base.

That is not to say that numbers count for everything. Far from it. Authors may also want to cite the breadth and diversity of the evidence base, e.g. by noting how many different locations are covered by the studies supporting a given lesson. Moreover, and as outlined below, we consider that the heterogeneity of the evidence base, and the prevalence of agency and sector-specific grey literature, makes it particularly important to include lessons that may emerge from a potentially low number of sources. This issue should be dealt with in the confidence rating assessment described below. Nevertheless, it remains important to provide a separate assessment of the size of the supporting evidence base in order to make clear to the reader which lessons were most frequently highlighted in the literature.

3.6.3 Providing confidence ratings

The last element in this process is the provision of a transparent assessment of the author’s confidence in each lesson. The confidence rating should be derived from at least three separate factors:

- Evidential quality
- Consistency across sources
- Generalisability

We encourage authors to use a numerical scale for this assessment, so as to allow the combination of each of these three factors.

Evidential quality:

This assessment will need to take into account the quality of the papers in which the lesson was identified. We encourage authors to use a numerical system to rate evidential quality, such that the evidential quality of the lesson is calculated on the basis of an average quality score for the papers in which it was identified.

The use of an average will allow a lesson from a low number of high-quality papers to receive a higher score than one from a large number of low-quality sources. This is important because of the heterogeneity of the grey literature: the high number of agency-specific papers means that it is reasonable to expect a lesson to be identified only in those papers commissioned or written by agencies with a specific mandate or function in the crisis response. Some lessons on protection, for example, may well only be drawn from the limited number of agencies with specific protection mandates. A similar point applies for any sector-specific aspect of the response, whereby the literature produced by agencies involved in the relevant cluster may reasonably be expected to focus more on that sector, and therefore are more likely to identify lessons specific to it. As a result, it is important to ensure that the number of agencies writing about an issue does not correlate directly with an assumption of high evidential quality.

Consistency across sources:

Consistency across sources will need to be assessed in order to gauge the extent to which a lesson is disputed among stakeholders. This is particularly important in the humanitarian setting, where much grey literature is produced by individual agencies involved in the emergency response. As a result, the literature often reflects the different perspectives of those agencies on the explanatory factors underlying the effectiveness of the response.

Lessons Paper authors should reflect divergence in opinion in a clear and easy-to-assess manner. As with evidential quality, we would encourage authors to use a numerical system for rating consistency. The author should determine the specificities of how to rank consistency in the design phase of the Lessons Paper. But an obvious challenge will be to define precisely what counts as disputing a lesson. Many of the lessons identified in previous Lessons Papers are difficult to directly dispute, e.g. ‘needs assessments should incorporate existing knowledge and be flexible’ (Cosgrave, 2014), ‘ensure you have the capacity to carry out the intervention’ (Lucchi, 2014), or ‘use the extensive preparedness planning that has already taken place’ (Sanderson and Ramalingam, 2015). As a result, a simple binary may be the most practical solution, such that a lesson receives 1 point if no or limited instances of contestation are seen in the review, but 0 points if this is not the case.⁹

Generalisability:

The challenge of applying research findings across contexts and populations has been widely discussed in the literature surrounding the application of RCTs outside the medical sciences (For example, Cartwright and Hardie (2012); Stern et al. (2012), Marcellesi (2015)). But, as Krystalli and Ott (2015) note, it is particularly challenging in the humanitarian sector:

The settings of data collection in the humanitarian sector – which often involve active armed conflict, natural disasters, or the immediate aftermath of conflict or disasters – render the collection of data difficult or impossible and limit the types of studies that can take place. When data collection is possible, the reliability, representativeness, and generalizability of the data may be limited by questions of access and numerous biases, including selection, recall, and reporting bias.

This point was echoed by some of the authors interviewed for this Methods Note, who argued that the poor quality of the evidence base limits the potential for generalisability. Some also noted that the value of generalisability should also be considered with caution in the humanitarian field. Indeed, one interviewee noted that sound, context-specific evidence can sometimes be extremely useful provided that readers are able to understand the conditions of that context-specificity and therefore to determine the applicability to their own contexts.

Moreover, Pritchett and Sandefur (2013) compared the errors generated from inferring causation from less rigorous studies to that generated from transferring findings from more rigorous single studies to other contexts. They concluded that the errors were much larger in the latter instance. This would suggest that, on top of the concerns mentioned above, even the most rigorous research can face significant generalisability challenges.

As a first step in response to these concerns, we propose that Lessons Papers should not directly claim that their lessons can be generalised across all crises within their scope, but should present lessons and ideas for operational staff to consider. The interpretation of findings should be made in this light, with a particular focus on presenting a range of ideas, choices and issues to consider in planning and implementing a humanitarian response. Authors should refrain from saying that approach X will result in success or failure in future crises, but should rather show that lesson Y from past crises A, B and C are worthy of consideration in future crises of the type specified in the research question.

This is nevertheless a generalisability claim of sorts, so we encourage authors to make a simple quantitative assessment. Here again each author will have to design the test. But the critical question will be the extent to which the lesson in question is applicable to the primary user group and crisis type identified in the research question. This will ultimately boil down to the author's judgement, but the process of doing so in an open and transparent manner for each lesson will enhance the credibility of the Lessons Paper overall.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

The proposed methodology is intended to improve the quality of future Lessons Papers by reducing the space for author bias, improving the evidential grounding of the findings, and improving the transparency of the methods used.

It aims to do so without changing the fundamental purpose of identifying a broad range of lessons and ideas from across the international humanitarian community to be considered in specific crises or types of crisis. It is hoped that adopting this methodology will allow future Lessons Papers to maintain their unique character in the context of ever-growing evidence, and continue to offer vital lessons for the humanitarian community to consider.

The next step in this process will be to trial the proposed methodology outlined above in a forthcoming Lessons Paper, which ALNAP will begin commissioning shortly. Feedback is welcome from ALNAP members and the wider community throughout this process. ALNAP will continue learning from the development of future Lessons Papers, and so remain open to revisiting the methodology proposed in this Methods Note.

5. Endnotes

1. For example, the research questions posed by the Oxfam-Feinstein Humanitarian Evidence Programme (2017).
2. It should be noted that this was not the case for the two systematic reviews that ALNAP reviewed, both of which were produced as part of the Oxfam-Feinstein Humanitarian Evidence Program (HEP).
3. See Krystalli, R. (forthcoming), on this point.
4. Indeed, Maynard et al. (2017) stated that the HELP Library was a key repository of grey literature, including five of the six items of grey literature included in their review.
5. Examples included: assessing transparency of study design, triangulation of sources, discussion of limitations, transparency of sampling approach, risk of bias, and appropriateness of study design to the research objective.
6. Several papers used a range of existing approaches including STROBE criteria, CASP checklist, NIH Quality Assessment Tool for Case Series. The most frequently cited criteria were those in DFID (2014), which result in rankings of low/moderate/high quality or yes/no/partially in terms of what degree the criteria were met. Knox-Clarke and Darcy (2014) also propose a clear set of criteria for assessing evidential quality specific to the generation of humanitarian evidence.
7. Krystalli and Emerson (2015) also provide a useful list of relevant evidential quality assessment tools and discuss some of their strengths and weaknesses.
8. Criteria included publication date, language, document type (published reports and studies versus unpublished project documents), inclusion of primary data collection versus opinion pieces, coverage of low- and middle-income country settings, availability of electronic copies not restricted by paywalls.
9. With the author providing his/her own criteria for what counts as “limited instances” on the basis of the size of the selected literature sample.

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Annex I: List of interviewees

Interviewee	Affiliation
Kirsten Gelsdorf	University of Virginia
Jessica Hagen-Zanker	Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
Paul Knox-Clarke	ALNAP
Roxani Krystalli	Tufts University
Maren Larsen	Independent
John Mitchell	ALNAP
Robert Morris	Oxford Policy Management
Eleanor Ott	Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford
Karen Peachey	The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP)
Gabrielle Smith	Independent
Imogen Wall	Independent
Lisa Walmsley	Oxfam
Karin Wendt	HERE-Geneva

Annex II: Lessons Paper Outline

This annex presents an outline (see following pages) of the key headings to be included in future Lessons Papers. The purpose of providing this outline is:

- To ensure that all Lessons Papers meet the basic methodological standards outlined in this Methods Note.
- To provide readers with a clear presentation of the lessons identified, the confidence the author has in each lesson, and the methodology used to derive them.
- To balance the demands of methodological rigour demanded in this Methods Note with the need for readability demanded by the Lessons Papers' practitioner audience.
- To encourage future Lessons Papers to take a consistent approach to presenting findings so that readers can quickly and easily compare findings.

It is expected that future authors use this outline as a basis for drafting their individual Paper, although changes to the basic structure may be agreed with ALNAP on a case-by-case basis.

The outline is derived from the requirements outlined in this Methods Note (Section 3), as well as comparison to previous Lessons Papers and the other approaches as described in Section 2.

Lessons Paper Outline

Meta-data:

Lessons Papers should represent good-practice examples for rigorous grey literature in the humanitarian sector. It should therefore be standard practice for future Lessons Papers to provide:

- Author
- Publication date
- Citation information

Lessons Paper Purpose

As stated in Section 3.1. of the Methods Note, purpose statements should include a clear explanation of what the Lessons Paper in question seeks to achieve and what type of evidence it aims to provide. They should clearly spell out the types of proposition for which the Lessons Paper is seeking to provide evidential support. These may include but not be limited to the types of proposition presented in Section 3.1. But readers must from the outset be able to quickly understand what types of evidence the Lessons Paper aims to provide.

Research Question

As presented in Section 3.2.2. of the Methods Note, future ALNAP Lessons Papers should present a clearly stated research question – without unduly narrowing the scope. The stated research question should meet the three principles outlined in Section 3.2.2., namely:

- Being clear on the breadth of focus.
- Being clear for whom the lessons are intended.
- Being clear from where the lessons are drawn.

Methodology

As per section 3.5, all future Lessons Papers should provide details of the methodology used in an explicit methodology section, in order to increase transparency for the readers. The methodology section should include (but not be limited to):

- list of databases searched
- search terms used
- quality assessment approach
- inclusion and exclusion criteria used during screening
- number of documents reviewed
- description of the method for selecting individual lessons

Lessons identified

The presentation of the lessons identified in the review should be presented in line with the considerations outlined in Section 3.5 of the Methods Note. Doing so should require authors to clearly provide the following information for each lesson:

- Lesson title
- Lesson detail and supporting text
- Scale of the evidence base
- Confidence rating

Appendix:

In order to ensure transparency, it is essential that the Lessons Papers make the following information publicly available:

- List of documents reviewed: following standard citation approaches.
- Study matrix: following Section 3.5.4. of the Methods Note, Lessons Papers should publish the study matrices used to extract information during the review, which should include (but not be limited to) three basic categories of information:
 - Basic metadata such as the publication date, author(s), commissioning agency, document type, and scope definition.
 - The lessons for which the paper provides evidence.
 - Information that forms the basis of the evidential quality ratings.

Related ALNAP resources

[Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies](#)

[Responding to urban disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations](#)

[Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence](#)

[Responding to flood disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations](#)

[Nepal Earthquake Response: Lessons for Operational Agencies](#)

[Insufficient evidence? The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action.](#)

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With financial support from:



Irish Aid

Department of Foreign Affairs
An Roinn Gnóthai Eachtracha