SECURE
ACCESS IN
VOLATILE
ENVIRONMENTS

SAVE

What It Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments

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Humanitarian Outcomes

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Acronyms

ACF	Action Against Hunger
AMISOM	African Union Mission to Somalia
CBO	Community-based organisation
CDAC	Communication with Disaster-Affected Communities
CDC	Community Development Councils
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FTS	Financial Tracking System
GHD	Good Humanitarian Donorship
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	internally displaced person
IMC	International Medical Corps
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
INSO	International NGO Safety Office
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IS	Islamic State

JOPs	**Joint Operating Principles**
MSF	**Médecins Sans Frontières**
NFI	**non-food item**
NGO	**non-governmental organisation**
NRC	**Norwegian Refugee Council**
OCHA	**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**
OLS	**Operation Lifeline Sudan**
ORCD	**Organization for Research and Community Development**
SARC	**Syrian Arab Red Crescent**
SPLA	**Sudan People's Liberation Army**
SPLM-iO	**Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition**
SRA	**security risk assessment**
PoC	**protection of civilians**
PTRO	**Peace Training and Research Organisation**
UN	**United Nations**
UNDSS	**UN Department of Safety and Security**
UNHAS	**UN Humanitarian Air Service**
UNHCR	**UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**
UNICEF	**United Nations Children's Emergency Fund**
UOSSM	**Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations**
WFP	**World Food Programme**
WHS	**World Humanitarian Summit**

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Executive Summary

This study seeks to determine 'what works' when trying to enable access and deliver quality humanitarian assistance to people caught up in war zones. It is part of the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme, conducted from 2013 to 2016. Based on fieldwork in four of the most dangerous aid settings during this time (Afghanistan, South Central Somalia, South Sudan and Syria), SAVE explored how to deliver effective humanitarian responses amid high levels of insecurity. The SAVE research focused on three areas: presence and coverage (see Stoddard et al., 2016b); access and quality (the present report); and accountability and learning (see Steets et al., 2016).

The present study aims to answer two questions:

1. What works best to enable access in the most insecure environments?
2. What works best to deliver quality aid in situations of reduced oversight and control?

Based on rigorous literature reviews (Schreter and Harmer, 2012; Carter, 2014), we identified the following as the critical factors affecting access and quality:

- Humanitarian principles and ethical decision-making;
- Staffing issues and partnerships;
- Corruption, diversion and compromises;
- Outreach and negotiations with armed actors;
- Programme quality and communication with affected people.

Our methodology consisted of: (1) 519 interviews with aid organisations, authorities, donors and the private sector, in remote and rural locations as well as capitals and headquarters; (2) in situ consultations with 789 affected people living in hard-to-reach areas in the four countries, both individually and in focus groups, to understand how people living in conflict zones seek safe access to humanitarian assistance and how they view its quality; (3) field-level workshops with stakeholders in each of the four settings; and (4) an online, multi-language survey of 242 field-based national and international aid staff working on the four countries.

According to the operational presence data collected by SAVE's presence-and-coverage research component, only a small number of organisations operate in the most dangerous areas in the four countries (Stoddard et al., 2016b). With the exception of parts of Syria, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and/or national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies are the organisations that are most present in the four countries. National and local NGOs also play important roles, especially in Syria and Somalia, where international organisations rely on them for access. A small number of INGOs feature prominently in each country as well, albeit slightly different INGOs in each country. The main UN humanitarian agencies have also sustained their access, which includes field offices, primarily by relying heavily on international and national partnerships. The exception is South Sudan, where UN agencies also often implement their programmes directly. Because observers have credited the ICRC and/or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) with achieving better access than others

(e.g., Healy and Tiller, 2014; Egeland et al., 2011), which is somewhat borne out in the data on presence in these four contexts, this study considers the key attributes of the two organisations in greater detail, while also examining a range of practices across both national and international organisations.

The evidence collected throughout this study reveals that a slightly different constellation of aid actors manage to maintain access and work effectively in each country. This suggests that specific attributes and practices in each context make a difference, rather than just an organisation's overall identity, funding or mandate. The evidence suggests that multiple factors, not just one or two, determine whether an organisation can enable access and deliver high-quality assistance under difficult circumstances. These factors are summarised below, organised by the categories that guided our analysis.

Humanitarian principles and ethical decision-making

Cultivating operational independence is an effective way to enable access. Across the four countries, the organisations achieving good access in hard-to-reach areas tend to have a strong internal 'triage' culture (at global and/or country level) that is driven by the goal of reaching people who are most in need – rather than simply executing programmes in reachable areas. This organisational ethos is particularly effective when combined with a rich understanding of the given political environment, including possible pressures from political actors on the ground or in donor capitals, and flexible funding. Independent funding and/or logistics help different types of organisations, both small and large, to undertake higher-risk programming, where they have the motivation to do so.

Adherence to the core humanitarian principles involves contradictions and compromises. But most agencies have a simplistic view of the principles, tending to "recite them as a mantra and treat them as moral absolutes" (Terry, 2015). While aid agency staff understand the need to make difficult choices, they rarely frame these dilemmas in the language of humanitarian principles (MSF and the ICRC are exceptions). Rather, they retain an idealistic and at times dogmatic understanding of the principles. Aid agencies do not think about ethical risks in the structured way they increasingly think about other types of risks (security, financial, reputational, etc.). This is connected to a general discomfort with discussing compromises and corruption, as well as a lack of attention given to negotiations, particularly with designated terrorist and other politically sensitive groups.

Staffing and partnerships

International organisations' approaches to staffing and partnership vary from direct delivery with international staff presence to multiple forms of remote management. Rather than insisting on international staff presence or tolerating what can be dysfunctional remote management situations, some of the **more effective agencies invest in supporting national staff and partners to oversee activities at a high level of quality and management responsibility, which allows staff to have regular face-to-face interaction with affected people.** Our study finds that having international staff in senior management positions – particularly in Afghanistan and Somalia, where they are only occasionally able to visit programmes – sometimes hinders access and quality, due to their limited mobility, higher risk profile, inability to speak the local language, weaker contextual knowledge and high rates of turnover or absence.

Visits by outside senior staff play an important role in addressing issues of programme quality (gatekeeping, clan favouritism, corruption, etc.), but they do not necessarily have to be conducted by international staff.

Staffing choices that are informed by a solid understanding of the context, conflict and power dynamics, and of the limitations of highly local staff profiles, can better enable access. The type of national staff working for an organisation makes a significant difference for access and quality. Organisations, however, do not always focus on the right qualities. National staff should possess relevant personal networks (beyond just the appropriate clan or ethnic identity) and the integrity to negotiate for an impartial response. Equally important is investing in their capacities and in building trusting and open relationships within teams. Many organisations that hire highly local staff as a way to gain access, especially in Syria and Afghanistan, struggle with reduced aid quality as well as slow response time to newly arising needs, especially when combined with a low-visibility approach.

International agencies that invest in the quality of partnerships have better opportunities to enable access. International organisations pursue partnerships with national actors – both NGOs and private sector companies – as a way to enable access, especially in Syria and Somalia. These national partners often take on greater security risk without receiving sufficient support for security management or broader organisational capacities (see also Howe et al., 2015; Stoddard et al., 2011). International actors invest more in capacity building to manage financial and operational/quality risks (for which they are still responsible) rather than security risks (for which they are not). The level of trust and communication between partners – specifically for local partners to be able to discuss, and not hide, challenges and problems encountered during implementation – is an important factor in successful partnerships that enable access.

Decisions to work with local partners to enable access are hindered by concerns regarding fiduciary risks. National NGOs continue to receive only a very small proportion of their funding directly from large governmental donors, and they receive little support for organisational development (GHA, 2015).This is partly due to widespread, but often unstated, assumptions that international organisations always add value and that national organisations are at greater risk of being non-neutral, biased in aid delivery and more likely to engage in corruption or diversion. But in Somalia and Syria, where partnership is most common, affected people and aid actors at the local level do not report that national NGOs are more susceptible to corruption or bias. Moreover, in situations of acute need, donors and agencies are often unable or unwilling to accept commensurate levels of fiduciary risk (based on realistic assessments of likelihood and impact) from partners that are best able to reach people.

Compromises, corruption and diversion

Paying for access and granting concessions are commonplace, yet remain taboo as a subject of discussion. Common practices include paying money at checkpoints; paying unofficial taxes; altering targeting criteria; employing local militia; or working in one area instead of another so as not to antagonise a powerful person or community. These compromises are sometimes justified because they are essential for maintaining access; too often, however, it is impossible to say whether they are justified because they are not discussed. Local-level staff are the ones interfacing with local stakeholders and encountering ethical dilemmas, but they receive insufficient support, due to a culture of silence on these issues.

Reflecting a more pervasive and worrying set of problems than compromises made strategically to enable access, local people interviewed in three of the four settings reported that **corruption, bias and/or favouritism are major impediments to receiving aid.** These problems are present everywhere, but appear to be most severe in Somalia and Afghanistan, where community power holders or 'gatekeepers' are cited for misusing aid assets for patronage purposes. Senior staff show insufficient awareness of the extent of these practices, particularly in Syria, where the gap between the views of affected people and of staff members (based in Turkey) is the largest among the four countries.

Donors' and agencies' 'zero tolerance' policies on corruption can negatively affect access. These policies inhibit discussions of actual corruption (including diversion) risks and the potential compromises that are necessary to ensure access and improve quality. Humanitarian organisations' decisions about where they could work within particular countries are often strongly influenced by concerns about diversion. The focus on preventing diversion is especially strong in areas where terrorist groups of particular concern to donors are active – notably Al Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State in Syria. Donors will always feel strong political pressure not to be viewed as tolerant of corruption. But they, and ultimately their taxpaying publics, must find ways to take better account of the inherent risks and compromises that are necessary to assist the people most in need.

Outreach and negotiation with non-state armed actors

The vast majority of humanitarian agencies still fail to engage strategically with armed non-state actors in order to negotiate access. In interviews and a survey, many field staff said they are uncertain about whether such contact is even allowed. While examples of good practice exist in each country, especially among a handful of INGOs accustomed to working in conflict environments, they tend not to reflect a consistent organisational approach. MSF and the ICRC, by contrast, benefit from organisational investments in engaging in regular dialogues with parties to the conflict. Their flexible funding facilitates this by allowing more time and scope for building relationships and contextual understanding. There are clear links between the degree to which aid agencies feel comfortable negotiating with specific non-state armed groups and the views of host and donor governments towards these groups. This, combined with the lack of policy and practical guidance on this topic, fuels a sense of secrecy and a tendency to delegate negotiations (if they even take place) to field staff, without questions asked. Inter-agency negotiations can be helpful for setting broad ground rules or engaging at senior levels, but they have been hampered by the political and operational limitations of the United Nations, and they are no substitute for strong bilateral relations with key stakeholders at the local level. Ad hoc, local-level coordination between agencies *is* however essential and would be aided by greater organisational capacity and transparency on negotiations.

Programme quality and communication with affected people

Aid that people view as appropriate and meeting their needs safely and with dignity results in more local support. In some settings, this can lead to greater acceptance from armed groups and motivate communities to protect organisations. This is true where there is relatively more cohesion between affected people and local armed actors (due to popular support or the fact that fighters are local, for example). In some cases, however, aid organisations assume linkages between civilians and armed actors that do not actually

exist, or are tenuous. The evidence suggests that there is significant room for improving programme quality by designing programmes in more participatory ways and communicating better with affected people (see also Steets et al., 2016).

Affected people are unsatisfied with the degree of their involvement in aid programmes, citing little real dialogue or consultation. While many people expressed appreciation for the aid received, many also felt that they were not helped during times of greatest need. In all four countries, response time to newly arising needs is slow, with the challenges partly attributable to insecurity (notably the use of low-profile, static approaches) and partly to insufficiently fast and flexible funding. Across all four countries, cash-based responses are underutilised, relative to their potential. Aid organisations and Western government donors continue to perceive cash assistance as entailing unacceptable levels of fiduciary risks (compared with in-kind aid) in highly insecure environments. **Affected people also reported facing physical dangers while collecting aid.** Door-to-door or local-level distributions can lower this risk, although mitigating measures are necessary to manage the cost and insecurity for aid actors.

Ways forward

Simply reaching vulnerable people caught up in war – much less providing them with relevant, dignified and timely assistance – is a formidable task. Much of what makes access so difficult is beyond aid agencies' control. Yet in each of the four contexts, some organisations – local, national and international – are managing not only to get there, but to make a meaningful difference in people's lives. This study describes in detail how these organisations are setting themselves apart, and it points to many current gaps in policy, practice and funding that, if addressed, could enable the humanitarian sector to have better access to the people most in need.

BOX 1. WHAT WORKS?

Based on the findings above, we identify several practices that can help **organisations** to better enable access and quality in highly insecure environments:

1. Promote an organisational culture where compromises, corruption and ethical risks are openly discussed;
2. Develop a more nuanced understanding of humanitarian principles and ethical risks, including incorporating these ideas into risk management frameworks and staff trainings;
3. Provide staff (especially local) much clearer policy guidance, support and training on negotiations;
4. Take the time to develop a stronger understanding of the context, conflict and power dynamics, such as by mapping out the interests of political actors (donors, host governments and armed non-state actors) and examining how they may negatively influence one's ability to be impartial and independent;
5. Select and develop national staff with relevant personal networks and integrity, and empower them to perform in senior positions at a high level of quality by providing regular, sustained support and by monitoring to prevent corruption;

6. Invest time and resources in designing participatory, flexible programmes and better communication with affected people, including pushing back against regulations or not accepting funding from donors that may impede this goal;
7. Do far more to independently monitor, investigate and tackle the most problematic types of corruption that prevent vulnerable people from receiving aid, and provide incentives for the greater integrity of aid;
8. Ensure that aid delivery is made as safe as possible for recipients, such as through localised distributions.

Promising practices for **donors (government and UN)** and those working at the i**nter-agency level:**

1. Provide more unrestricted funding to aid agencies in order to facilitate operational independence and appropriate risk-taking;
2. Bring donors into dilemmas, thus making them a shared problem and encouraging a shared approach to solutions, rather than having agencies absorb all the risk (this should include questioning or clarifying the intent of donors' counter-terrorism and zero-tolerance policies);
3. Provide greater direct funding to national partners that are able to access hard-to-reach areas, based on more realistic assessments of actual fiduciary risks;
4. Ensure that individual aid agencies, and the aid system as a whole, consider programme criticality, i.e., are able to take on risks (security, fiduciary, reputational and ethical) in proportion to the level of humanitarian need.

Many of these suggestions are not new. The question, then, is what is stopping them from being implemented. We highlight a range of reasons throughout this report. The thorniest issues include: Will agencies invest in their ability to negotiate with non-state armed groups, when such groups are sometimes fighting against the very governments that fund these agencies? Is it viable to call for much more unrestricted funding, or for funding to be channelled directly to national and local NGOs in contexts where they are the ones with access? What would it mean for donors to openly state that they are taking real risks with taxpayers' money, and to explain why this is worthwhile? Are we collectively taking enough fiduciary risk – as much, perhaps, as if our own citizens' lives were at stake?

The answer is not for every agency to become like the International Committee of the Red Cross or Médecins Sans Frontières, nor for all funding to go to them. Neither organisation has been immune to serious challenges, national and local actors are in many contexts key to access, and the UN has many comparative advantages in logistics, certain key sectors, and global legitimacy. Yet collectively, the sector has a lot to learn from the principled pragmatism of these two (and other) organisations. This means having the courage to put humanity and the humanitarian mission first, having the financial and logistical independence to do so, and building cultures within and between agencies that allow for honesty about what compromises are working and what compromises are not.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Conducted from 2013 to 2016, the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme explored how to deliver an effective humanitarian response amid high levels of insecurity. The study sought to improve upon what has been thus far a limited evidence base for an important and vexing problem: how can humanitarian organisations help people caught up in conflicts, when these conflicts make it dangerous for aid workers to operate safely? Based on fieldwork in four of the most dangerous aid settings during that time (Afghanistan, South Central Somalia, South Sudan and Syria), the research focused on three areas:

1. **Presence and coverage:** Quantifying and mapping humanitarian coverage in relation to security conditions.
2. **Access and quality:** Identifying the key determinants for enabling access and quality aid interventions.
3. **Accountability and learning:** Providing practical lessons and guidance for improved monitoring and evaluation.

This report[1] summarises the research findings related to access and quality. This research sought to answer two questions:

1. What works best to enable access in the most insecure environments?
2. What works best to deliver quality aid in situations of reduced oversight and control?

To answer these questions, we must first describe how agencies are currently operating in these environments and identify the agencies that have been most successful at accessing the most vulnerable people living in the hardest-to-reach areas of these environments. This report first presents the methodology of the research (Section 1). This is followed by an overview of the four contexts and the programming approaches favoured by aid agencies in each (Section 2), and then a discussion on the types of agencies that have the best access (Section 3), building on the findings of the SAVE study on presence and coverage, *The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage* (Stoddard et al., 2016b). Finally, this report provides an analysis of 'what works' (Section 4), organised according to five clusters of factors.

1.2 Methods and research process

The SAVE studies are based on research in four contexts that exhibit most of the key issues in humanitarian access. The contexts cut across different geographic regions; levels of global profile; conflict types (civil conflict, inter-state warfare, conflict along ethnic lines, 'stabilisation' contexts); and access environments (see Table 1). They were the most dangerous contexts for aid operations during the time period studied, according to the Aid Worker Security Database. Thus, if anything, they may overstate the access challenges as compared to other contexts. In seeking to answer the two research questions, the research team began by defining 'access' and 'quality'. With regards to access, we sought to examine both organisations' access to people and people's access to aid:

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[1] Drawing on the research findings described in this report, two multi-language resource papers have also been produced, on (1) decision-making in high-risk environments (Haver, 2016) and (2) humanitarian access negotiations (Carter and Haver, 2016).

- **Access** is the degree to which affected people are able to reach, and be reached by, humanitarian aid.
- A **quality aid intervention** is one that is both effective and ethical. It is relevant and addresses priority needs; is timely; avoids duplication with other actors; preserves the dignity of recipients; and minimises the potential of aid to do harm.[2]

The team then developed a list of factors that might influence access and/or quality (see Annex 1). This initial understanding was informed by the researchers' previous experiences as well as multi-language literature reviews (Schreter and Harmer, 2012; Carter, 2014). Following a six-month inception phase (October 2013 to March 2014), the team narrowed the list to several clusters, which formed the basis for interviews with aid actors:

- Partnerships, staff and organisational issues (including aid groups' identity, funding and approaches to risk management);
- Corruption, diversion and compromises;
- Outreach and negotiations with armed actors;
- Programme quality and communication with affected people;
- Humanitarian principles and ethical decision-making.

While most of the analysis focused on the organisational level, the research also examined inter-agency dynamics. The research maintained a light focus on three major sectors – health, food assistance and protection – to ensure a balance of perspectives on different types of assistance. It also sought a balance of focus between in-kind and cash-based assistance, and examined how agencies decide on the modality of assistance.

The team developed definitions for key terms, elaborated in Box 2 below.

BOX 2. KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

The terms **aid agency** and **aid organisation** are used interchangeably. The SAVE research focused on the part of agencies' work that is **humanitarian** in nature, i.e., designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity, during or in the aftermath of crises. Aid agencies include local, national and international NGOs[3]; UN agencies and international organisations that are members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee; and members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Host government and donor government agencies are referred to separately. Unless otherwise specified, the term **donors** refers to the largest humanitarian donors in each of the four countries, as summarised in Section 2.

Aid actor refers to a broader set of actors involved in humanitarian action, including aid agencies, representatives of governments, local authorities, private companies and donors. While many aid actors are directly affected by crisis, the SAVE research considers them as distinct from the **affected population**, which refers to people affected by crises. Many of these people are considered in need of humanitarian assistance.

A **multi-mandate** organisation is one that responds to emergency humanitarian crises as well as broader issues related to poverty, human development and social justice. The large majority of organisations working in conflict are multi-mandate. ICRC and MSF are the

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[2] Adherence to technical or sector-specific standards can be seen as a reflection of these broader principles of 'quality'. The SAVE research did not seek to measure the extent to which these standards were applied.

[3] In the cross-border response from Turkey, many NGOs recently founded by Syrians or members of the Syrian diaspora are registered in another country, such as the US or the UK. This report refers to them as 'Syrian NGOs', 'diaspora NGOs' or 'national NGOs', recognising that many of them are not able to operate on a national scale.

two organisations most frequently described as **single mandate** agencies, meaning "they work only with an emergency humanitarian mission based in international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles" (Slim and Bradley, 2013). Organisations can also be conceived of on a spectrum, based on how focused they are on the humanitarian mission (i.e. how close to 'single mandate' they are).

In a **partnership**, an aid agency works with another actor (e.g., other aid agencies, local authorities, businesses), called a **partner**, to accomplish shared objectives. It can be contractual or non-contractual, paid or unpaid.

Remote management is an approach that can allow organisations to continue some activities in situations where access is limited, by transferring management and monitoring responsibilities to national or local staff members and/or external partners.[4]

Transfer modality refers to whether the assistance provided is cash-based (including vouchers) or in-kind. It applies across a variety of sectors, objectives and delivery mechanisms.

Ethics are moral principles that govern a person's or a group's behaviour. **Humanitarian ethics** are based on the idea that "every human life is good and that it is right to protect and save people's lives whenever and wherever you can" and a "feeling of compassion and responsibility towards others who are living and suffering *in extremis*" (Slim, 2015, p.26-27).

Risk is the likelihood and potential impact of encountering a threat, while **risk management** is a formalised system for forecasting, weighing and preparing for possible risks in order to minimise their impact.

Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (TI, 2014). It includes financial corruption such as fraud, bribery, extortion and kickbacks, as well as non-financial forms of corruption, such as the manipulation or diversion of humanitarian assistance; the allocation of relief resources in exchange for sexual favours; and preferential treatment in assistance or hiring for family members or friends (nepotism and cronyism) (TI, 2014).

The methodology consisted of interviews with aid actors, consultations with affected people, field-level workshops and an online survey with staff of aid organisations.

1. **Interviews with aid actors** were conducted with staff from aid organisations, authorities, donors and the private sector, in remote field locations as well as capitals and headquarters. The teams conducted 519 interviews in total. See Annex 2 for the interview guide.

   A balance was sought to ensure representation of both genders, non-Western actors and national staff. The gender and national staff breakdown is as follows (see Annex 3 for a more extensive breakdown of interviews by country and type):

   - **Afghanistan:** 90 per cent of interviewees were national staff; 10 per cent of interviewees were women
   - **Somalia:** 62 per cent of interviewees were national staff; 24 per cent of interviewees were women
   - **South Sudan:** 17 per cent of interviewees were national staff; 41 per cent of interviewees were women

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[4] **This definition is similar to those used by most agencies, with the exception of the ICRC, which defines remote management only in terms of third parties: "an ICRC activity or objective being fulfilled by a third party due to the absence of an ICRC staff in the phases of response (assessment, implementation, monitoring and evaluation)" (Donini and Maxwell, 2013).**

- **Syria:** 62 per cent of interviewees were national staff; 25 per cent of interviewees were women

Most of the 429 country-level interviews, along with an additional 245 interviews conducted for the presence-and-coverage research (Stoddard et al., 2016b), were later analysed using qualitative data analysis software.

2. **In situ consultations with affected** people were held in each of the four countries. The research teams consulted 789 affected people through individual interviews and focus groups. The goal of the consultations was to better understand how people living in conflict seek safe access to humanitarian assistance and how they view its quality. See Annex 4 for the guide used. Interviews with women were mostly conducted by female researchers. When deciding where to conduct consultations, the SAVE team focused on hard-to-reach, conflict-affected areas, and aimed to strike a balance between different areas of control (i.e., government, non-government, etc.) and between urban and rural.[5] Within each area, we sought to ensure a mix of participants in gender, age, ethnicity and displacement status. The locations were as follows (see Annex 5 for maps of these areas and a breakdown of the composition of the consultations by area and gender):

   - **Afghanistan:** Kunar, Khost, Paktika, Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan provinces
   - **Somalia:** Mogadishu, Gedo, Baidoa, Lower and Middle Juba
   - **South Sudan:** Juba, Twic East, Duk, Leer, Akobo
   - **Syria:** Al Hasakeh, Deir Ezzour, rural Aleppo, urban Aleppo, Hama, Damascus

The research also drew on quantitative surveys with affected people. These were conducted as in-person household surveys in Syria and by mobile phone (interactive voice response) in the three other countries. See Annex 6 for the quantitative survey instrument used, and see Stoddard et al., 2016b for a summary of the survey results.

In the interviews with aid actors and the consultations with affected people, the SAVE team made every effort to address questions of gender and social differences, such as attempting to interview equal numbers of men and women. Where possible, interviews with women were conducted by female researchers. However, cultural constraints and insecurity sometimes made this challenging. In total, about 23 percent of aid staff interviewed were women, and a lower percentage were national female aid staff; this may, however, not be far from the proportion of female aid staff as a whole, particularly at programme and senior levels where the interviews were focused. Just over a third of affected people consulted were women (38 per cent). These consultations did not always yield the depth of insight expected in terms of the specific challenges faced by women when accessing assistance. It may have been possible to work with dedicated national female researchers (for South Sudan, where this was not done) and/or partner with local women's groups, but it is not clear that the quality of interviews would have been better. The same can be said for other aspects of social difference, such as clan, power status in communities and religion. While the research team consciously sought this type of balance in the sample of people consulted, the general security environment and limited scope did not allow for rigorous sampling along these lines. Further work is necessary to investigate issues of gender and social differences, including questions of age and disability.

3. **Field-level workshops** involved consultations with stakeholders in each of the four field settings. The first round of workshops (June to November 2015) allowed for discussion of the synthesised findings at the country level, and the second

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[5] For Afghanistan, a decision was made to focus on the highly insecure provinces of the south and southeast; for Somalia, on southern Somalia; for South Sudan, on the three states that were most conflict-affected at the time of the study; and for Syria, on cross-border operations from Turkey and, to a much lesser extent, operations from Damascus.

round (June to July 2016) solicited feedback on the draft resource papers (Haver, 2016 and Carter and Haver, 2016). Workshops were held in Kabul for Afghanistan; Juba for South Sudan; Nairobi and Mogadishu for Somalia; and Gaziantep, Turkey, for Syria. In some cases, workshops were held with separate groups of stakeholders (e.g., international agencies, national NGOs, donors) to allow for a more open discussion of sensitive topics.

4. **An online survey**, in English, French and Arabic, targeted field-based national and international aid staff working in insecure contexts. It gathered 537 usable responses, including 242 from the four SAVE countries. It was conducted in early 2016 to gather additional evidence on specific topics and disseminated in partnership with Conflict Dynamics International. The survey included 'peer assessment' questions to gather views on which organisations have the best ability to access people in insecure areas. See Annex 7 for the survey questions and for an analysis of the survey results.

The SAVE team selected interview subjects for the aid actor and affected population consultations through purposive and convenience sampling. For stakeholders who were especially difficult to reach, we used snowball-sampling methods: individuals recommended similar people to speak to, with the aim of increasing their trust in the research and/or the interviewer. We conducted a small number of interviews with aid actors in Somalia and Syria by phone or Skype. The long research timeframe allowed for consultation with a greater breadth of stakeholders, especially at the very local level, than had been previously possible on this topic. This included various types of 'under-consulted' actors, such as private sector entities (e.g., local businesses, small transport companies, development contractors); Islamic charities (particularly in Syria and Somalia); local authorities; local NGOs and community-based organisations; and directly affected civilians, who constituted a majority of the people consulted.

Evidence regarding which organisations have the best access and quality (see Section 3) came from (1) the data on the 'most present' organisations (Stoddard et al., 2016b); (2) the online survey (peer assessment); and (3) the insights of field researchers, based on the extensive interviews they conducted. During the country-level syntheses and the global synthesis, the analyses of aid actor interviews gave greater weight to the positive experiences reported by types of organisations that were believed to have higher levels of access and quality. The consultations with affected people (about the types of organisations and projects they valued most) and the other aid actor interviews provided a deeper understanding of the state of current practice, including what is working and what is not.

To deal with the large volume of evidence, the case study material was synthesised and discussed at the country-level workshops, led by the lead authors. This allowed a picture of key dynamics in each country to develop organically, without pressure to have the findings inform global-level conclusions. Each interview was coded using qualitative analysis software, making it possible to sort and retrieve examples by country, topic and type of organisation and staff.

Finally, a note on the approach used to answer the second research question of 'what works' to enable quality: Access and quality are closely intertwined, each influencing the other. Where access is constrained, aid organisations tend to experience declines in programme quality. For example, needs may be poorly understood, deliveries late, staff skills and training inadequate, and services interrupted. Furthermore, to convince governments, local authorities or armed actors that they should be allowed to operate safely, aid organisations often make compromises or concessions – significant or subtle – that can erode the quality of their assistance and further diminish their access. As a result, the SAVE research

sought to understand how aid actors make difficult decisions in highly politically charged environments. This issue is addressed most directly in Section 4.3 (and further explored in a separate resource paper: Haver, 2016), while other issues related to programme quality are examined throughout Section 4, especially the parts of 4.3 examining corruption and Section 4.5 on programme quality.

To conduct the research, Humanitarian Outcomes partnered with a mix of country-level entities and individual researchers:

- **Afghanistan:** A team from the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO), led by Rachel Morrow; a team from the Organization for Research and Community Development (ORCD), led by Dr. Shams Rahman; support and additional research from William Carter, based in Kabul.

- **Somalia:** Independent consultants Nisar Majid, Khalif Abdirahman, Guhad Adan, Fardowsa Abdirahman and Shamsa Hassan; workshop assistance from Peter Hailey (Centre for Humanitarian Change); support from and additional interviews by Katherine Haver.

- **South Sudan:** Researcher John Caccavale, based in Juba, working with various South Sudanese facilitators/translators to conduct the affected population consultations; support from Katherine Haver.

- **Syria:** Syria-based and Turkey-based researchers from Proximity International; teams led by Danya Chudacoff, Francesca Nurlu, Edith Albert and Abdulhadi Arrat; support from and additional interviews by Katherine Haver and William Carter in Turkey and by phone to Damascus.

In each country, researchers produced written English transcripts for every interview and focus group. The heads of the national-level research teams synthesised the findings from the aid actor interviews and the affected population consultations in two documents, using a common template (see Annexes 8 and 9). These syntheses formed the basis of shorter background briefing notes, prepared for participants of the first round of workshops.

1.3 Methodological notes and caveats

While the first SAVE report focuses on measuring presence and coverage in insecure areas (Stoddard et al., 2016b), this report focuses on how aid organisations are confronting the access challenges. In determining 'what works', we seek to find commonalities between contexts. The main contextual access-related differences between the countries are summarised in Section 2, along with the programmatic adaptations used in response. But this report does not explore in detail the varied political and historical contexts in which humanitarian action has been carried out or the role of sometimes decades-long relationships between agencies and key actors at the country level. We cannot overstate that this should *not* be construed as downplaying the importance of context-specific awareness in enabling access.

Given the challenges of conducting research in volatile contexts, the team sought to document the methods used and the biases and limitations as clearly as possible. Due to the research coordinators' distance from the subject matter (a partial result of the difficulty of visiting many insecure locations), the team focused on developing partnerships with local research organisations. The team was aware of, among other challenges, the possibility of falsified research

results, particularly in Syria and Afghanistan, where teams of local researchers are working in dangerous conditions and/or remotely communicating with team leads. To mitigate these risks, the SAVE team sought to foster open dialogue with the research entities about these risks and to ensure robust oversight systems, such as by requiring the presentation of all transcribed material.

Second, in each country, the identities of individual researchers influenced the type of stakeholders they could reach and the depth of information obtained. For example, the clan affiliation, personal networks and experience levels of the different team members in Somalia allowed them to move around with relative freedom. They were able to speak with gatekeepers at internally displaced person (IDP) camps and agencies in Al Shabaab areas (the latter was only by telephone). In Syria, the network of Syrian-based researchers was critical to candidly soliciting the views of affected people and local aid workers; by contrast, many senior stakeholders in Turkey were less open with Turkey-based researchers than with visiting international researchers, which seemed to reflect the general habits of operational secrecy in the country. In South Sudan, the international staff researcher had good physical access, but was limited by the depth of his contextual understanding, by his not being South Sudanese and by the attraction of unwanted attention from local military actors during the consultations. In Afghanistan, the team benefited from having an international team member in Kabul and in field visits as well as two national research entities with specific regional experience.

Third, although largely overcome through careful planning and the extended research period, a small number of research locations were selected based on the ability of researchers to safely access, and ask questions in, these locations. For example, the teams in Syria conducted individual interviews, but not focus groups, in Islamic State–held Deir Ezzour and government-held Damascus due to security concerns. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers did not visit Damascus, mainly due to a decision to focus on the Turkey-based response, and also due to the challenges of obtaining a visa. In South Sudan, visits to Pagak and Malakal were cancelled or replaced due to insecurity at the time. For Syria, the teams took note of the perceptions among some aid staff (including those in Turkey) that Damascus-based aid operations were under the control of, or complicit with, the government. This report contains only limited findings specifically about Damascus-based operations, and these were derived from interviews with Damascus-based aid staff and affected people living in Damascus.

A fourth limitation is that there remains a slightly – but not overly, the authors believe – skewed focus on larger and international organisations, due to their greater visibility, ease of contact and willingness to be interviewed. For Syria (and Somalia, to a lesser extent), some channels of funding and aid actors also remained under-explored, including both formal and less formal Gulf-based donors. Surveys with affected people suggested that independent donors and opposition groups constitute a small but significant part of the humanitarian response in parts of Syria (see Section 3), but neither type of actor was extensively consulted.

Lastly, the challenges of conducting research often mimic those faced by aid actors. Overall, the research teams were very satisfied with the interviewees' ability to speak candidly about sensitive topics. For Syria, the sense of secrecy in aid operations affected the research slightly: international aid staff did not seem comfortable speaking freely during a workshop in Turkey, and Syrian aid staff based in Turkey were reluctant to discuss issues of corruption or the specifics of negotiations during interviews. But the latter obstacle was largely overcome through consultations with aid staff, local councils and private transporters based in Syria. Similarly, there was limited commentary on corruption or diversion during the affected population consultations in South Sudan, partly due to not only the prevalence of unconditional distributions (i.e., everyone registered in an area was provided with the same amount of aid, resulting in fewer opportunities for bias during targeting), but also the presence of armed actors during some consultations, inhibiting discussion.

2. How are agencies operating in these countries?

Before determining 'what works' to enable access and quality, it is necessary to first understand 'what's happening'. This section explores the basic dynamics of how the majority of aid agencies – both international as well as national and local – are operating in each setting. Each country presents different types of access constraints and challenges, and humanitarian organisations have consequently established different patterns of presence and operating modalities.

Table 1 below summarises the main contextual factors in each country and the programming approaches at work; the latter are expanded upon in Table 2. While there are of course many exceptions in each country that are not captured here, these tables illustrate some of the most salient differences relevant to access. This should allow the reader to better situate the examples cited in Section 4 in relation to other insecure environments. The categorisations are indicative only and based on the authors' judgment and their knowledge of the four settings, gathered through this and other research.

Here are some of the key observations based on Table 1:

- Syria generally has the highest proportion of people in need living in urban areas, the most developed infrastructure and the most highly skilled staff. South Sudan has the lowest of all three.

- Aid workers are at high risk of violence in all four contexts, with targeted violence highest in Somalia and collateral violence highest in Syria.

- The conflicts are most dynamic in South Sudan and Syria. Agencies in these countries tend to use more rapid-response modalities, while programming in Afghanistan and Somalia is more static.

- Non-state armed groups actively interfere with or attack aid operations in all four contexts. Host government interference and violence are highest in Syria and lowest in Afghanistan.

- Major government donors have the highest level of overall political interest and involvement in Syria and the lowest in South Sudan. Their antipathy to non-state armed groups is highest in Somalia for Al Shabaab and in Syria for the Islamic State. Their support to host governments is highest in Afghanistan and Somalia.

- Senior staff are the most distant from their programmes in Somalia and Syria, where international agencies' reliance on national partners is also the highest.

Table 1: Key differences in context and humanitarian programming approaches between the four countries, mid-2014 to mid-2016

Legend: ■ High ■ Medium-high ■ Medium ■ Low-medium ■ Low

	Afghanistan	Somalia	South Sudan	Syria
Physical/socioeconomic context				
Proportion of people in need living in urban areas	Medium	Low-medium	Low	High
Quality of transportation infrastructure	Low-medium	Low-medium	Low	Medium-high
Quality of telecommunications networks	Medium	Low-medium	Low	High
Availability of highly skilled national staff	Medium	Low-medium	Low	High
Availability of highly skilled national female staff (relative to male staff)	Low	Low-medium	Low-medium	Medium
Political context				
Overall collateral violence against aid workers	Medium-high	Medium-high	Medium	High
Overall targeted violence against aid workers	Medium-high	High	Medium-high	Medium
Degree to which frontlines are shifting	Low-medium	Low-medium	Medium	Medium-high
Host governments' negative interference with and/or violence towards humanitarian action	Low-medium	Medium	Medium-high	High
Non-state armed actors' interference and/or violence towards humanitarian action	Medium-high	Medium-high	Medium	Medium-high
Number of non-state armed groups	Medium	Medium	Low-medium	High
Non-state armed groups' internal coherence	Medium	Medium	Low-medium	[varies]
Level of coherence and trust between non-state armed actors and local population[6]	Medium-high	Low-medium	Medium-high	[varies]
Donor governments' level of interest in the conflict	Medium-high	Medium-high	Low-medium	High
Donor governments' support for host government	Medium-high	Medium-high	Low	Low
Donor governments' antipathy to major non-state armed group(s)	FN. 7	FN. 8	Low-medium	[varies] FN. 9
Donor governments' concern about diversion and/or interference by armed actors	Medium	High	Low-medium	Medium-high

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[6]   As in, the armed group consists mainly of members of local or nearby populations, as opposed to foreign fighters or fighters from different regions.

[7]   The Taliban has been designated as a terrorist group by Canada and a few other countries, but not by the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and the United Nations. The Haqqani Network has been designated by Canada, the US and the UK, but not by the EU or the UN. The Taliban and the Haqqani Network are closely affiliated with each other in some areas of the country. The Islamic State (which is becoming more active in Afghanistan) has been designated as a terrorist group by nearly all states and regional/global organisations that designate such groups.

[8]   Al Shabaab has been designated as a terrorist group by the UK, the US and a few other countries, but not by the EU and the UN.

[9]   High for the Islamic State, medium-high for other designated groups (e.g., Jabhat Al Nusra, which is designated by the UK, the US and the UN, but not the EU), low for many 'moderate' groups.

	Afghanistan	Somalia	South Sudan	Syria
General programming approaches of humanitarian agencies				
Cross-border humanitarian operations				
Cross-line humanitarian operations				
Staff, management and organisational profiles				
Nationalisation of senior staff positions for security reasons				
Senior staff based far from programme sites				
Senior staff ability to visit programme sites				
Use of hyper-local staff, to enable access				
Use of low-profile approaches (non-branded offices, vehicles)				
Staff move between programme sites by road				
Partnerships				
Use of partnerships with national or local organisations to deliver assistance, for security reasons				
Partnerships with diaspora NGOs				
Partnerships with national, local NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs)				
Partnerships with private sector contractors for aid transport to partner for distribution				
Partnerships with local councils or local authorities				
Partnerships with existing local structures (clinics, schools)				
Coordination				
Agency willingness to coordinate and share information				
Types of assistance				
Rapid response mechanisms and mobile aid delivery				
Use of cash-based assistance				
Use of formal banking systems				
Use of less formal banking systems, e.g., hawalas, for payments to staff and/or aid recipients				
In-kind aid: house-to-house or village-level distributions				

Table 2: Overview of humanitarian presence and programming in the four countries, mid-2014 to mid-2016[10]

	Humanitarian presence	Programming approaches
Afghanistan	Aid agencies are largely clustered in the centre and north, which are relatively more secure, despite southern provinces having greater levels of conflict and need. Presence is also minimal in many periphery districts. Aid groups are highly 'bunkerised' and in close proximity to targets in Kabul. Field offices are headed by a mix of international and Afghan staff, but international staff are limited in the extent to which they can travel overland outside the main cities.	Initiating projects requires extensive outreach to local actors, limiting the ability to respond quickly or to respond to new areas. Many agencies take a highly localised, low-profile approach. Most INGOs implement directly, but rely more on national staff; some partner with Afghan NGOs to reach areas they cannot. International agencies that partner tend to work with national NGOs and Community Development Councils (CDCs), originally established under the National Solidarity Program. Restrictions by armed actors and limited numbers of qualified female staff make it difficult to reach women.
Somalia	Most aid organisations have no significant programming in Al Shabaab areas due to concerns about interference and security. Many aid agencies have management staff based in neighbouring Kenya, but some have senior posts in Mogadishu or urban centres where Somali national/regional/provincial government and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) are present. As with Afghanistan, they are 'bunkerised' and in proximity to targets.	A high proportion of aid is delivered by Somali NGOs, though the number of national NGOs has slightly decreased since 2011 due to corruption concerns. The UN implements almost entirely through partners (including many Somali NGOs), while INGOs pursue a mix. Partnerships tend to be with national or local NGOs or in some cases community-based organisations (CBOs). There is also a growing reliance on private transport companies.
South Sudan	In early 2014, the majority of humanitarian response was in Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites controlled by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and in Juba, reaching only about 10 per cent of the displaced population. Programming later increased with new modalities and reduced fighting. International staff have more freedom of movement and protection than national staff, but largely remain Juba-based due to remoteness and limited evacuation options. National staff are often limited to working in areas along ethnic lines.	Since mid-2014, multiple rapid response mechanisms, reliant on air transport and sometimes airdrops, have helped re-open access to highly conflict-affected counties and deliver short-term multi-sector interventions; one mechanism involves direct implementation by UN agencies. Mobile clinics can move with displaced populations and respond to new emergencies, but many aid programmes are disrupted by frequent withdrawals and re-deployments. Partnerships with national NGOs are limited, because they are less needed for access. Some national NGOs are seen as unable to be impartial or neutral.

[10] **The findings on presence in this table come from Stoddard et al., 2016b.**

Syria	Government-held areas have the most aid presence, followed by non-government-held areas, and non-government-held areas that are held by the Islamic State. From Turkey, almost no international staff entered Syria in 2015 to mid-2016, with the exception of a few INGOs that allowed brief visits by international staff of certain nationalities (e.g., from the Middle East or South Asia), who are presumed to face a lower risk of being kidnapped. From Damascus, the UN and the ICRC, with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), work in government-held areas and sometimes cross-line. Only a handful of INGOs are based in Damascus. Small numbers of international staff are in Damascus, with a few in other cities and very few international staff based in non-government-held areas.	From Turkey as well as Damascus, a large proportion of aid is implemented in one-off, mobile deliveries, through remotely managed (cross-border from Turkey) programmes, using national staff and partners. From Turkey, several INGOs operate only through partners, while others use a mix of partnership and direct implementation. Partners include a mix of diaspora, national or local NGOs; local councils; and existing clinics, schools and bakeries. From Damascus, partnerships are imposed rather than sought out, with the government requiring all international agencies to work with (and often under the direction of) the SARC, with some (including UN agencies and a few INGOs) permitted to also work more directly with various government ministries.

As will be elaborated in Section 4.1 on humanitarian principles, it is critical for aid agencies to understand the primary interests and motivations of the main political actors in their environments – both their broader political and economic motives as well as their attitudes towards humanitarian aid. This understanding allows agencies not only to operate effectively in a complex environment, but also to ensure that they have not been unduly influenced by such actors and have instead maintained a focus on the core humanitarian mandate of relieving suffering and saving lives.

In each context, three major types of political actors influence access: (1) host governments (at national and regional levels, as well as formal and informal authorities); (2) non-state armed groups; and (3) the governments of donor countries that actively fund humanitarian organisations. All three types of actors have the potential to negatively influence humanitarian action. Table 3 below presents an overview of how each type of actor has influenced, interfered with or committed violence against humanitarian operations in each country, from mid-2014 to mid-2016.

According to the Financial Tracking System (FTS) of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the largest five governmental donors to the four countries in 2015 were the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Commission (ECHO), Germany, Kuwait and Japan – with Kuwait among the top five for Syria only. In all four countries, the top two donors were the US and the UK, and together they comprised between 67 and 74 per cent of the total contributions of the top five donors. This reflects their significant influence on the aid landscape, particularly for funding that has been earmarked at the country and/or project level. In Syria, there is also significant funding from Gulf donors and their NGO partners that is not at all captured by FTS.[11]

While some donors have separate entities for aid funding, including funding that is specifically humanitarian, in practice they will always be influenced by their broader security and foreign policy goals. As others have noted, this poses fundamental questions about whether it is realistic or appropriate to expect donors to support "the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from … political, economic, military or other objectives", as set forth

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[11] While FTS has other shortcomings and gaps, it is nonetheless the best data source available, and in-country research provides further evidence suggesting that these governments are major funders in the four countries.

in the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles (GHD group, 2003; see also Harvey, 2009; Macrae et al., 2002; Leader, 2000). As will be argued in more detail below, it places at the very least an onus on humanitarian agencies to fully understand the broader political, economic and military interests of the governments from whom they accept funding, particularly earmarked funding. This includes understanding how parties to the conflict perceive donor governments and how these governments' concerns may be influencing – intentionally or not – an agency's operations.

Table 3: Major political actors and how they influence, interfere with or commit violence against humanitarian operations in the four countries, mid-2014 to mid-2016

	Host government	Non-state armed actors	Donor governments
Afghanistan	The national government generally facilitates humanitarian assistance, but provincial and local-level authorities can interfere in negative ways, e.g., misrepresenting needs, engaging in corruption, not providing permission for agency movement.	Aid organisations face violence from complex attacks usually directed at others, as well as opportunistic kidnappings by Taliban and criminal actors. UN agencies and certain types of aid groups are at times directly targeted due to their association with the national government.	Donor governments' development and stabilisation funding is designed to support the government. The proximity of humanitarian aid efforts with international military stabilisation efforts has contributed to high numbers of complex attacks. One government that also acts as a major aid donor is engaged in military operations against the Taliban, which have involved civilian causalities, including those of aid staff.
Somalia	National, regional and local governmental authorities have very limited capacity or reach, particularly beyond main towns and cities. Formal (governmental) and informal authorities attempt to influence or control humanitarian aid, sometimes through the threat of violence, with varying degrees of success.	Clan militias and Al Shabaab impose restrictions and conditions as well as threats to humanitarian aid, which can lead to attacks (e.g., over disputes on employment, contracts, tax disputes). Al Shabaab's violence has generally targeted not only the Somalian government and AMISOM, but also UN agencies.	Donor governments' development and stabilisation funding is designed to support the government, and has tended to be allocated to areas where Al Shabaab is absent. Partly due to past corruption scandals, aid groups perceive high levels of fiduciary risk in Somalia, particularly for Al Shabaab areas, where counter-terror regulations apply. One major donor is engaged in military operations against Al Shabaab, in support of the host government.

South Sudan	National government actors generally allow international humanitarian aid, but have imposed limitations and bureaucratic impediments to aid into opposition-held areas, notably around flight clearances. Members of the government's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forces have committed violence against aid workers and looted aid facilities.	Aid organisations face high levels of collateral violence due to active fighting. Targeted attacks by non-state armed groups have been rare. The main opposition groups encourage humanitarian aid to their areas, but local-level armed actors sometimes seek to extract payment and/or divert aid for their own use.	Donor governments have shifted support away from the national government as the conflict has intensified, and development funding has decreased or been suspended.
Syria	The national government severely restricts aid delivery through complex bureaucratic impediments, effectively prohibiting many operations from Damascus into non-government-held areas. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) plays a central role in coordinating aid delivery, in part because of government requirements that it do so. The government's targeting of civilian centres (notably medical facilities) and large gatherings is a major threat to aid operations. Aid organisations working cross-border from Turkey face restricted border openings and regulatory challenges.	Aid organisations face high levels of collateral violence due to active fighting. Dozens of armed groups are present, with each area featuring different configurations of control. Non-state armed groups sometimes encourage or tolerate aid, but at other times interfere with programmes, steal goods and abduct or detain staff. The Islamic State has targeted aid workers with violent killings and kidnappings, but at other times has tolerated Western-funded aid operations, while imposing restrictions.	Donor governments have multiple, competing priorities and a high level of political engagement. Limited progress in attempts to resolve the conflict has been accompanied by high levels of resources for and interest in humanitarian aid. Aid groups perceive high levels of fiduciary and reputational risk in areas where the Islamic State (and other designated groups, to a lesser extent) are present, due to donor governments' concerns about diversion.

3. Which types of aid agencies have the best access?

SAVE researchers gathered primary data from humanitarian organisations in each of the four countries on their field presence and activities for the current and prior years of operation (see Stoddard et al., 2016b for more detail about the methodology). The results of these datasets represent the most detailed measures collected to date on humanitarian deployment. They yielded the following findings:[12]

- The ICRC tends to be present in violent situations, along with national Red Cross/ Red Crescent societies;[13]
- National and local NGOs are always among the organisations most present in dangerous areas;
- Fewer than a dozen international NGOs consistently rank among the most present in insecure environments;
- Three UN entities are also among the top 20 most present organisations (noting, however, that they often implement through NGO or private sector partners).

To delve deeper into the question of how certain agencies maintain presence in challenging environments, we conducted an additional survey of individual field-based staff in early 2016. The sample consisted of 242 respondents (79 from Afghanistan, 57 from South Sudan, 53 from Syria and 53 from Somalia). Of the total sample, 45 per cent were staff from INGOs; 27 per cent from UN agencies; 19 per cent from national NGOs; 7 per cent from 'donor or other'; and 2 per cent from Red Cross/Red Crescent agencies. National staff comprised 39 per cent of the sample. We asked them to name the organisations that they believe have the best ability to access affected people in high-risk areas. The answers are found in Table 4 below (see page 31). The lists largely bear out the other data findings in Stoddard et al, 2016b, and also square with the qualitative findings from the surveys and consultations with affected people as well as the aid actor interviews.[14]

However, it is very important not to mistake the ability to achieve relatively good access to some vulnerable people living in highly dangerous areas for wide presence. There remain many places where even the most capable aid agencies are not operating (Stoddard et al., 2016b).

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[12] Due to conditions of anonymity, the organisations are presented by organisational type.

[13] As noted in Section 3, however, the role of the ICRC has been limited in non-government-held parts of Syria.

[14] It is important to note that the lists in Table 4 only represent aid organisation staff members' perceptions of access, not actual access or presence. Aid staff may not always know exactly which organisations have access where. There may also be a bias to respond by saying that one's own agency has the best access (although this was somewhat mitigated by obtaining a diverse sample of organisations and asking respondents to name three to five organisations). The sample size of the survey was small, and the answers are more reliable at the top of the lists. To show the full variety in terms of the types of organisations named, all organisations that received at least 2 per cent of all mentions are shown here.

The survey also posed a separate question about the humanitarian organisations that respondents believed to have the best ability to deliver quality assistance. Respondents named a very similar set of organisations (see Annex 7), revealing close linkages between strong access and high quality, as noted in Section 1.2.

Survey respondents perceived the ICRC and national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies as having good access in all four countries. National or local NGOs similarly feature strongly, particularly in Syria and Somalia, where they are at or near the top of the lists. National or local NGOs in Afghanistan and South Sudan are not perceived as having access that is as strong; in those two countries, direct implementation by international agencies is more common (as noted in Section 2). Lastly, UN agencies and INGOs also feature prominently, with a different constellation of agencies positively perceived in different countries. Notably, the 'big five' INGOs identified in previous research (ALNAP, 2015) as constituting nearly a third of all humanitarian NGO expenditures – MSF, Save the Children, Oxfam, World Vision and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) – do not always appear high on each list. Instead, a slightly different set of INGOs is perceived as having good access in each country. This suggests that specific practices in specific contexts – rather than just the organisation's resources, overall identity or mandate – make a difference.

One may have expected national NGOs to feature more prominently than they do on the lists in Table 4. This may be explained not only by the fact that such NGOs are smaller and more numerous (which means that an NGO is less likely to be mentioned multiple times), but also by various limitations in the survey data.[15] It should be noted as well that the UN often relies heavily on NGO and private sector partners – interestingly, however, field-level aid staff still credit the UN for having achieved good access. This may be explained by the UN's large scale and/or its high-profile, branded aid (food, tarps, school supplies, etc.). Overall, even in Somalia and Syria, where national and local NGOs play the greatest role, significant numbers of international organisations continue to directly implement programmes that can be large. The operational presence data, affected population responses and aid actor interviews all confirm that international humanitarian actors are working alongside national actors. It is thus important not to overstate the current presence and capacities of national actors in hard-to-reach conflict settings.

Similarly, the evidence from this study suggests that 'new or rising actors' that are sometimes viewed as playing an increasing role in natural disaster response – such as national militaries, the private sector, individual donors and regional organisations (Bennett, 2016) – play only a marginal role in high-conflict, hard-to-reach areas at present. With a few exceptions, the affected people consulted and surveyed did not report receiving significant amounts of aid from these types of actors. The exceptions concern (1) funding from private individuals, which does constitute an important part of a few agencies' funding base, notably for MSF globally and for some diaspora NGOs in Syria; and (2) funding from independent donors (e.g., business people, politicians, owners of financial capital) and armed opposition groups, which appears to constitute a moderate part of the humanitarian response in some parts of Syria, according to the household survey. But this varied significantly by region/city, and it was unclear whether the armed opposition groups had procured the aid themselves (or which branch had done so) or were merely associated with the efforts of others.

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[15] As noted above, the sample is more heavily weighted towards international staff and organisations. If one assumes that respondents are more likely to cite organisation types similar to their own (which is not a given), overall views of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and national NGO actors may be even more positive than captured here. With regards to the Red Cross/Red Crescent, however, a partially counter-balancing caveat concerns the greater visibility of large or otherwise prominent agencies (ICRC, national RC societies, MSF and major UN agencies), which could mean that they are overrepresented. Along these lines, seven people named MSF as having the 'best ability to access' populations in Somalia, despite its withdrawal in 2013; this could suggest misinformation or indicate that respondents believe MSF has good potential to re-enter.

Table 4: Survey responses to "Which 3–5 humanitarian organisations do you believe have the best ability to access affected people in high-risk areas in your country of operation?"

Afghanistan

Rank	Organisation	#	%
1	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	33	11 %
2	Afghan Red Crescent Society	24	8 %
3	World Food Programme (WFP)	20	7 %
4	Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)	19	6 %
5	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	14	5 %
6	Save the Children	14	5 %
7	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	11	4 %
8	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)	9	3 %
9	International Organization for Migration (IOM)	9	3 %
10	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)	9	3 %
11	Danish Refugee Council (DRC)	8	3 %
12	Local/national NGOs (general)	7	2 %
13	United Nations (general)	6	2 %
14	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan	5	2 %
15	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	5	2 %
16	Afghan Aid	5	2 %
17	Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees	5	2 %
Total number of organisations named		297	

Somalia

Rank	Organisation	#	%
1	Local/national NGOs (general)	24	12 %
2	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	14	7 %
3	Red Cross/Red Crescent	14	7 %
4	Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)	12	6 %
5	Save the Children	10	5 %
6	United Nations (general)	10	5 %
7	Danish Refugee Council (DRC)	10	5 %
8	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	7	4 %
9	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)	7	4 %
10	Action Against Hunger (ACF)	7	4 %
11	Concern Worldwide	7	4 %
12	World Food Programme (WFP)	6	3 %
13	INGOs (general)	6	3 %
14	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)	4	2 %
15	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	3	2 %
16	Adeso	3	2 %
17	Coopi	3	2 %
18	World Vision	3	2 %
19	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	3	2 %
Total number of organisations named		**194**	

South Sudan

Rank	Organisation	#	%
1	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	34	17 %
2	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	28	14 %
3	World Food Programme (WFP)	16	8 %
4	Medair	14	7 %
5	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)	12	6 %
6	United Nations (general)	9	4 %
7	South Sudan Red Cross	9	4 %
8	Local/national NGOs (general)	7	3 %
9	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	5	2 %
10	International Organization for Migration (IOM)	4	2 %
11	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	4	2 %
12	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA)	4	2 %
13	INGOs (general)	4	2 %
Total number of organisations named		**205**	

Syria

Rank	Organisation	#	%
1	Syrian Arab Red Crescent	18	11 %
2	Local/national NGOs (general)	14	8 %
3	Syrian American Medical Society Foundation	11	6 %
4	United Nations (general)	11	6 %
5	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	10	6 %
6	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	9	5 %
7	Mercy Corps	6	4 %
8	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	5	3 %
9	International Medical Corps (IMC)	5	3 %
10	GOAL	5	3 %
11	Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM)	4	2 %
12	World Food Programme (WFP)	4	2 %
13	Big Heart	4	2 %
14	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)	4	2 %
15	Relief International	3	2 %
16	Shafak	3	2 %
Total number of organisations named		171	

By mapping out which types of organisations have been relatively successful at reaching people in dangerous areas, we are now able to closely examine what works best to enable access (and quality). The following section describes the attributes and practices of some of the relatively successful organisations, and contrasts them with the practices of aid agencies overall in order to pinpoint promising approaches.

4. What works?

The first part of the SAVE research on presence and coverage found that only a small pool of international aid agencies consistently works in the most dangerous countries, and that this is not enough to meet demands (Stoddard et al., 2016b). But the data also revealed that a varied – and slightly different, in each country – constellation of aid actors makes up the access picture. This suggests that specific practices in specific contexts can make a difference for access (and quality). The evidence summarised below points to the challenges and shortcomings of current approaches in many areas. But it also points to promising practices that overcome these challenges, and areas of opportunity for change.

As described in Section 1.2, the team considered numerous factors that may influence access and quality, based on previous research. The following clusters of factors were determined to be worthiest of further inquiry; the sections that follow are organised accordingly. Issues related to funding and risk management/risk appetite are incorporated into multiple sections.[16]

Figure 1: Factors that influence an organisation's ability to enable humanitarian access and quality

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[16] Some of these topics, particularly security risk management, are also well-covered by other studies (Egeland, 2011; Collinson and Duffield, 2013; Stoddard et al, 2014; Stoddard et al, 2016a)

4.1 Humanitarian principles and ethical decision-making

This section examines the first cluster of factors – how organisations think about and use humanitarian principles, and how they make difficult choices that have ethical consequences – and relates them to an organisation's level of access and quality. For more discussion of these issues, see the SAVE resource paper on decision-making (Haver, 2016).

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The fundamental humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – play a peculiar role in the work of most aid organisations operating in conflict environments. On the one hand, most aid organisations universally embrace and continually refer to the principles. They help establish the humanitarian sector's identity and boundaries. Nearly all international organisations and many national organisations providing relief in conflict zones have made institutional commitments to the principles: they are formally enshrined in two General Assembly resolutions (1991 and 2004) to guide UN humanitarian work; hundreds of NGOs signed a 1994 Code of Conduct guiding operations in disasters;[17] and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement endorsed the principles in 1965.

On the other hand, it is widely acknowledged that various challenges make it difficult – impossible, many would say – for most organisations, in practice, to live up to the principles, particularly neutrality and independence (Svoboda, 2015; Donini, 2012; Magone et al., 2011; Leader, 2000). The challenges include (1) insecurity and the attempts of armed actors to instrumentalise and manipulate aid; (2) the reliance of many humanitarian agencies on financial support from major donor states, creating pressure to align political and humanitarian objectives; (3) the politicised role of the UN, particularly in contexts with integrated missions; and (4) multi-mandate aid agencies' engagement in other (non-humanitarian) activities, such as recovery, development and peacebuilding, which may require them to work in tandem with governments or advocate for specific political solutions.

In addition, there is conceptual confusion. Many donor governments work under multiple sets of aid principles – including the Paris, fragile states and humanitarian principles – that are difficult to reconcile (Schreter and Harmer, 2013). It remains unclear how to apply these principles when states are humanitarian actors in their own countries (Harvey, 2009; Mačák, 2016) and/or when states are simultaneously involved in civil wars or counter-insurgency campaigns.

Many observers have noted that the ICRC and MSF – the two largest single-mandate (Dunantist) humanitarian organisations, which also operate with the greatest financial independence – are best positioned to adhere to the fundamental humanitarian principles (Brauman, 2011; Slim, 2013; de Waal, 1994). Their ability to be principled is commonly seen as a major reason these organisations' have (sometimes) achieved better access in difficult environments. In other words, parties to the conflict perceive these organisations as *actually* impartial, neutral and independent, and are thus more likely to leave them unharmed – so the thinking goes. Previous research has found, for example, that agencies negotiating according to the core principles are more successful at enabling access (Egeland et al., 2011; Fast et al., 2011; Steets et al., 2012) than agencies relying on heavy protection or 'bunkerisation' (Egeland et al., 2011; Steets et al., 2012; Collinson and Duffield, 2013).

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[17] **The Code of Conduct was also signed by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Article 3 of the code specifies that "aid not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint". It thus avoids the principle of full neutrality and allows NGOs to support particular political or religious positions.**

Drawing on empirical evidence about the agencies that are actually most present (see Section 3 and Stoddard et al., 2016b) and qualitative interviews with aid actors and local people, this study seeks to unpack some of the aforementioned questions. First, what type of decisions and dilemmas do aid organisations face in conflict environments, and what does this tell us about the meaning of principled humanitarian action? Second, how does an organisation's adherence to principles affect its level of access? Lastly, given the Western and especially European origins of the international humanitarian sector and its fundamental principles (Davey et al., 2013), how relevant are they for non-Western aid organisations in the four settings examined?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PRINCIPLED? DIFFICULT CHOICES WITH ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES

Each of the core humanitarian principles plays a different role. Humanity and impartiality reflect the goals of humanitarian action: helping and protecting others in wars and disasters. Meanwhile, neutrality and independence are best viewed as instrumental principles, used to achieve the freedom of operational access and the autonomy necessary for realising the objectives of the first two principles. Humanity is the most important principle because it expresses the fundamental goal of all humanitarian action. As Hugo Slim describes, elaborating on Jean Pictet's formulation of the goal of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement:

> Humanitarian action is a teleology of person, not politics. There is no greater goal beyond the person in humanitarian action: not peace, not democracy, not religious conversion, not socialism, not political Islam, and not military victory. Humanitarian action is an urgent and limited ethics of protection and assistance *in extremis*.
> (Slim, 2015, p. 47)

Because humanity is the heart of the humanitarian endeavour, upholding it sometimes requires compromising impartiality, neutrality or independence. An agency may decide that it is better to help the people it has access to, even if they are not the ones most in need – here, the agency has compromised its impartiality. Or it may compromise its neutrality by accepting a military escort in order to be able to reach a besieged population. Or it may risk its independence by accepting funding from an entity with overtly political goals in order to continue a vital aid programme. Acting in a principled manner does not always mean avoiding such compromises and concessions. Rather, it means being aware of the options available and determining whether, when and what type of compromise is worthwhile. Of course, if compromise "crosses a certain threshold it becomes a surrender of principle. There is no perfectly reliable means of determining where that threshold lies" (Brauman, 2012), but the struggle to reach an acceptable compromise can be a form of principled action itself (Magone et al., 2011).

Aid agency staff interviewed for this study fully understand the need for compromise. They routinely described having to choose between several bad options to get the job done. However, they tend not to frame these difficult choices in the language of principles. Rather, most staff (and agencies as a whole) retain a simplistic view of humanitarian principles. They tend to "recite them as a mantra and treat them as moral absolutes" (Terry, 2016). Across all four countries, both international and national staff spoke of the importance of humanitarian principles in their work, but with reflexive and generic enthusiasm. While some interviewees, particularly at senior levels, described general threats to principled humanitarian action in their particular context, few appeared to grapple with the specific tensions and dilemmas that adherence to the principles created for their organisation, in operational terms (see also Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016; Macdonald and Valenza, 2012; Egeland et al., 2011; Harvey, 2009). MSF and the ICRC are notable exceptions: their decision-making tends to be

grounded in a more nuanced understanding of principles, including a hierarchy of principles that puts humanity at the top (see also Labbé and Daudin, 2016; Slim, 2015), and the need to find acceptable compromises. Other organisations demonstrate this capacity in specific circumstances, but it more reflects individual leadership than institutional support.

In other words, most organisations lack structured ways of thinking about ethical risks. This appears to negatively affect both access and quality. Ethical risks tend not to be part of INGOs' growing enterprise risk management systems, which focus on security, fiduciary, reputational and legal risks (Stoddard et al., 2016a). Most organisations find it difficult to weigh the urgency or life-saving nature of an intervention (programme criticality) and determine their risk acceptance accordingly – a dynamic further complicated by donors that show a similar lack of flexibility (and of transparency) when it comes to their level of risk tolerance.[18]

The lack of attention given to ethical risks is closely connected to the discomfort of discussing compromises and corruption (described in Section 4.3) and the lack of prioritisation of and support for negotiations (Section 4.4). Interviewees from the ICRC and MSF tended to consider access not as a given, but more as a process that builds over time, though a fluid, dynamic understanding of the principles – which are not abstract or absolute, but always translated operationally into negotiations, logistics, finance, etc. More generally, the idea that adherence to humanitarian principles is definitional (i.e., this is what sets aid actors apart from commercial, political or military actors) makes it harder to acknowledge cases of failure to uphold them. This is particularly true for organisations that are involved in other activities (i.e. multi-mandate agencies), but nonetheless eager to still be identified as humanitarian.

BOX 3. WORKING IN AREAS HELD BY THE ISLAMIC STATE AND AL SHABAAB: FINDING ACCEPTABLE COMPROMISES

Organisations working in areas controlled by the Islamic State (IS) and Al Shabaab make compromises of different kinds. In Syria, some organisations working in Islamic State areas had to curtail their programmes – eliminating food and non-food item (NFI) distributions, for example. (This was partly because IS "didn't like [such distributions]" and/or "didn't think they were needed", but also because of donor and agency concerns about reported thefts of these goods.) One organisation agreed with IS on an internal communication protocol, specifying the names of three field staff who would be allowed to communicate with staff in Turkey by phone.

In Somalia, to develop working relations with Al Shabaab leaders, organisations have accepted not being able to work in the areas of greatest need or with the people in greatest need within these areas. They have allowed Al Shabaab leaders to suggest specific interventions. For example, one organisation said that Al Shabaab asked it to desilt large water catchments built in Siad Barre times, and since the organisation determined that the benefits of this work would be community-wide, it was happy to comply. Many organisations reported that minimal monitoring requirements are still in place, including before-and-after pictures of projects, the use of GPS coordinates and the use of satellite pictures to help verify the work.

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[18] **The UN has developed a programme criticality framework, which is promising but remains underutilised in real-time decisions about acceptable risk (Haver et al., 2014).**

OPERATIONAL INDEPENDENCE AND A FOCUS ON HUMANITY

Across the four countries, a common thread among the (minority of) organisations that have achieved good access in hard-to-reach areas is a strong internal culture of 'triage'. This means that they seek to assign degrees of urgency to different groups of people in need and endeavour to respond accordingly. At global and/or country level, these organisations are driven by the humanitarian mission – the principle of humanity – to relieve suffering and reach the people most in need. While many organisations claim to focus on this core mission, in practice many appear to be distracted away from it by forces of bureaucratic self-preservation or a focus on non-humanitarian activities. A few INGOs cited the fact that they had a very small development portfolio (i.e., they are mainly focused on emergency response) as enabling them to go "all in" during an emergency, knowing that this would not compromise other aspects of their program (Stoddard et al., 2016a). A strong focus on humanitarian activities – i.e., being relatively more 'single-mandate' than 'multi-mandate' – may account for the relatively stronger perception of the access abilities of organisations such as the International Medical Corps (IMC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and MedAir in at least one of the four countries (see Table 4), in contrast to several of the larger, more multi-mandate INGOs.

The practices of successful organisations suggest that a focus on humanity is especially effective when combined with an understanding of the given political environment. To deliver on the (non-political) humanitarian mission, an agency needs to understand the political forces at play, including but not limited to how it might be influenced by them, so as to be able to deftly navigate them (Slim, 2015; Svoboda and Gillard, 2015). A contextual understanding helps foster operational independence. It allows organisations first to *recognise* and second to *overcome* various pressures from political actors on the ground or in national or donor capitals to the greatest extent possible. 'Independence' does not mean doing whatever one wants and failing to listen to local stakeholders. It means the opposite: listening carefully and being able to identify and manage the demands of those seeking only power or trying to capture resources for private use.

In practice, independence is greatly facilitated by unrestricted or less restricted funding, which gives agencies more flexibility when it comes to programming choices and risk management. It means that agencies' humanitarian responses are less likely to be bound or influenced by donor special interests on particular areas or groups in the country. Independent capacity in logistics and transport can also be critical, for it allows an organisation flexibility of movement, based on its own risk tolerance. Besides the ICRC and MSF, many other kinds of organisations benefit from independent funding or logistics, where they have it. In all four countries, organisations cited examples where private or less restricted funding allows them to undertake higher-risk programming. This includes UN agencies' less restricted funds; INGOs' core funding (where they have it); and Somali and Syrian NGOs' funding from Gulf donors or Islamic charity networks (see Box 4). Such funding allows them to take on more fiduciary risk, due to less stringent monitoring or reporting requirements. This is particularly important for Muslim organisations, which face higher levels of scrutiny from donors, charity commissions and banks than do other types of international organisations (see also Metcalfe et al., 2015), and hence have lower fiduciary risk thresholds.

Across the four countries, private or less restricted funding also allowed different types of organisations to take on greater security risk. For example, they could invest in extra vehicles or equipment, organise trainings, work on safety protocols, conduct in-depth context analyses and take longer to implement projects, including hiring the right types of staff (or firing the wrong ones). For example, one INGO with good access in South Sudan partly

attributes its flexibility to its investment in security protocols that involve regular check-ins in remote locations using Thurayas, which are more expensive than many donors were initially comfortable with. The largest UN agencies in South Sudan (in addition to the ICRC and MSF) own or have easier access to air assets, which allows them to directly implement projects in some of the hardest-to-reach areas. Many NGOs, by contrast, rely on air assets operated by the UN, which subjects these organisations to UN security clearance procedures and leaves them with less flexibility of movement (see also Cunningham, 2016).

BOX 4. THE ROLE OF PRIVATE FUNDING FOR ONE SYRIAN ORGANISATION

"We have two types of projects: those we plan with our INGO partners, implemented by our staff, and those we implement using individual/private donations, mainly from the Gulf, where we focus on besieged areas, working with local partners. The INGO projects are about 80 per cent of our work; the rest is through private donors. We focus on the besieged areas with the private funding rather than INGO funding because it became very costly to work in the besieged areas. For example, sugar there costs $15 instead of $1. Also, monitoring and documentation requirements are not that easy or feasible in these areas. And international agencies are not that flexible. The private donors are willing to pay what it takes, and they care about these areas, because they are most in need." (For more insights on how Syrian organisations view their partnerships with Western versus non-Western donors, see Howe, 2016.)

As a whole, the evidence suggests that it is important to recognise that MSF's and the ICRC's relative success in enabling access (where they have been able to do so) comes from their institutional commitment to fulfilling the spirit of the humanitarian principles and the greater flexibility afforded by their funding structures. The two factors complement and reinforce each other.[19] But the evidence also suggests that the level of access that MSF and the ICRC can achieve is at times complicated and diluted by their Western identity and the importance placed on international staff presence. A factor that specifically affects the ICRC is its close working relationships with the national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, which act as an auxiliary to national governments that at times obstruct humanitarian access (e.g., in Syria). Other organisations with different identities and assets can nonetheless take the best of what works from this approach and learn from it. In terms of the humanitarian principles, this means embracing the need for compromises; allowing greater organisational openness to and space for critical reflection; and paying more attention to the potential for systemic forces (donor funding, the demands of local armed actors, bureaucratic self-preservation, etc.) to move one's moral compass off course.

THE RELEVANCE OF HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES FOR NON-WESTERN AID ORGANISATIONS
The SAVE research finds that national staff and national NGOs in all four countries attach great importance to humanitarian principles at the rhetorical level (similar to international staff and international NGOs). This was noted during interviews and in the survey, where national and international staff were equally likely to cite "strict adherence to the humanitarian principles (neutrality, independence, impartiality)" as the reason that some organisations achieve better access. Reflecting the relative newness of humanitarian action in Syria, many interviewees from Syrian NGOs admitted that they are only minimally aware of the humanitarian principles, but nonetheless embrace the idea of providing services based on need and avoiding interference by outside groups.

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[19] Certainly, the ICRC's international mandate also plays an important role in increasing a host government's acceptance of the organisation's position in a country. Both the ICRC and MSF also provide services that can benefit armed non-state actors, such as field hospitals that treat combatants and, for the ICRC specifically, the exchange of bodies and prisoner negotiations.

At the same time, aid actors saw other ethical principles and frameworks as relevant in some countries, such as the Hippocratic Oath (Syria), the Islamic principles of charity (Afghanistan) and integrity (Somalia). These different types of principles all aim for a separation of the goals of humanity (i.e., helping people) from broader political or ideological struggles. In Afghanistan, some aid organisations view Islamic ethics and principles as a more or equally effective method of gaining access compared to the classic humanitarian principles, and just as useful for resolving conflicts and protecting against interference. This is not so different from how some Western organisations base their activities on Christian or other faiths without being seen as compromising the fundamental humanitarian principles.

While non-Western and local aid groups have demonstrated a lack of neutrality or impartiality in some cases (e.g., groups in Syria that prefer to work in certain areas or with certain groups, such as orphans of martyrs (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015)), the same is true for a variety of international and Western organisations (e.g., aid groups that allow themselves to be commandeered into a counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan (Terry, 2011; Williamson, 2011)). All types of aid actors struggle to live up to the ideals of the humanitarian principles. Moving from a simplistic, absolutist and/or ideological view of the principles to a more nuanced and practical one – based on acceptable compromises – would allow a shift from "theory and identity to concrete and shared challenges and concerns" (Mohamed and Ofteringer, 2016). In this way, a more realistic understanding of how tensions between the principles are reconciled in practice could help advance a dialogue between humanitarian organisations of different backgrounds and origins. It would also help keep the focus on the core objectives of the humanitarian principles, which are practical and operational rather than ideological.

4.2 Staff, partnerships and organisational issues

This section examines the staffing arrangements, partnerships and cultures of different organisations in order to identify the factors that tend to be related to the ability to access the most vulnerable people and deliver high-quality programming in insecure environments.

THE ADDED VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL STAFF?

International staff typically make up a very small portion – on average around 10 per cent – of field staff of humanitarian organisations (Aid Worker Security Database). They often focus on office-based work such as coordination and donor liaison, while national staff carry out the majority of programme work that involves interaction with local people. A number of arguments are made for why international staff should fill senior posts. First, they can have more knowledge of technical standards and a greater variety of experiences to draw from, which are thought to improve programme quality (ECHO, 2013). Second, they are seen as more able to be politically neutral and less subject to local pressures that may lead them, for example, to channel aid or funds to their families or local elites (ECHO, 2013). Third, international staff may be easier to evacuate, leading some organisations to prefer that international staff handle certain politically sensitive activities. Fourth, and least readily acknowledged, staff educated in Northern/Western countries are often valued for their ability to liaise with donors and report to the standards set by these donors. Lastly, international staff in a very limited number of contexts, including South Sudan, may be able to offer protection by presence (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2016).

With some exceptions, international staff in the four countries have less proximity to affected people than in most humanitarian contexts. In response to increased security risks for international staff, many organisations are transferring more programme responsibility to local staff, while international staff still try to oversee activities from a different location.

Organisations also pursue partnerships with national actors (NGOs and the private sector) to enable access. This is the case in Afghanistan and South Sudan, and especially in Syria and Somalia. In all four countries, international agencies that are implementing directly (i.e., not through partners) often hire very local staff – i.e. those who live in or very close to the community or area where programming is taking place – to increase their acceptance in and knowledge of the area, thereby enabling access.

Many practitioners and observers are concerned about the trend towards remote management. Some criticise the tendency of international staff to remain 'bunkerised' behind high compound walls or outside the country altogether (Duffield, 2012; Donini and Maxwell, 2013; Fast, 2014). Such commentary sometimes mistakenly assumes a time when international staff were more present than they ever were in reality. Nonetheless, the decrease in international staff presence is a real phenomenon, one that concerns many international organisations – especially INGOs, which value the role of international staff or delegates in direct action, participation and solidarity, and/or bearing witness. In response to its concern about the shift towards remote management, the European Commission, which acts as a donor, created a policy mandating that actions involving remote management are to be funded only as a last resort and encouraging its partners to recruit staff with international experience (ECHO, 2013). Among operational organisations, MSF has been perhaps the most outwardly troubled, having debated whether remote management is a form of compromised action that conflicts with the organisation's identity and principles (see Hofman and Perache, 2014). MSF has also had some success with remote management, including in Somalia up until it withdrew in 2013 (Sondorp et al., 2012; Belliveau, 2015). While the ICRC has somewhat sidestepped the issue by defining remote management as only involving third parties, i.e. not national delegates[20] (Donini et al., 2013), it is equally concerned about conflict situations in which only national delegates and/or national societies are present.

Both the ICRC and MSF work hard to maintain international presence in difficult areas. This is due partly to the nature of their activities (war surgery, secondary healthcare, mandated protection activities) and partly to their Dunantist ethos, which emphasises international staff as a way to ensure political independence. In some settings, they are notably more successful than other international actors at maintaining international staff presence. The two organisations have greater such presence than other organisations in South Sudan. This is not only for reasons similar to those of other organisations (limited local staff capacity and ethnic dimensions of the conflict), but also because of their greater logistical capacities (requiring advanced skills) and the consequently greater fluidity of their operations (requiring more staff who can move from one place to another). Despite programme suspensions over the years, the ICRC and MSF also continue to operate with international staff in insecure parts of Afghanistan.

Somalia and Syria offer a more mixed picture, however. In Somalia, the ICRC and the Somali Red Crescent have worked together to regain their presence in recent years (including international staff on a rotational basis), and have been notably more successful than others. MSF, however, suspended all programming in Somalia in 2013, following several serious security incidents and the sense that the risks and compromises endured by its staff were 'untenable' (MSF, 2013). Should MSF ever re-enter, it will most likely start operations in only Somaliland or Puntland. In Syria, the ICRC plays an active role from Damascus with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, but during the 2013–2016 period examined, it did not openly programme in non-government-held areas accessed from across borders. Following the abduction of several staff members in 2014, MSF's programming from Turkey into Syria was reduced to the donation of medical supplies to third parties in non-government-held areas only (Hofman and Perache, 2014).

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[20] **Programmes that are implemented through national societies are considered remote management, except when the ICRC is funding an objective of the national society itself, rather than an ICRC objective.**

Setting aside the specific experiences of these two organisations, what does the evidence suggest about the correlation between international staff's proximity to affected people and an organisation's access or programme quality? In examining only international agencies (since most national and local NGOs are run by national staff), the question is most relevant for Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan. (In Syria programmes across the Turkish border, nearly all positions have been nationalised.[21]) In Afghanistan and Somalia, some senior positions are held by international staff, while others have been nationalised, mainly for security reasons. In South Sudan, international staff are generally not targeted outside of Juba and are often protected by their statuses as internationals and as helpers. This has sometimes allowed them to play a role in the protection of civilians by presence (see also Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2016).

In Afghanistan and Somalia, international senior staff are able to visit offices and programme sites only infrequently. In these countries, international senior staff are both helpful for, and a hindrance to, access and quality – and the latter is insufficiently understood. In both countries, national and international staff described the sense of a barrier between them. They feel removed from one another, with decreased trust and transparency, which national staff find de-motivating. Both national staff and international staff – but especially the former – feel that the inability of international staff to speak the local language or to safely visit field locations slow workflows. They also introduce counterproductive divisions between senior management and technical experts on the one hand, and beneficiaries and field staff on the other. International staff are seen as often having weaker contextual knowledge and struggling to cultivate information networks beyond their own colleagues (in Somalia, this is also true for some types of Somali diaspora staff). Their high rates of turnover and absences (due to R&R rotations) as well as limited mobility are also problematic. In Afghanistan, international staff are seen as generating a larger security burden, thus increasing security costs, raising an organisation's risk profile and requiring more time and energy for security management.

BOX 5. ONE VIEW OF PROBLEMS CREATED BY INTERNATIONAL STAFF IN SOMALIA

The Somali head of an international aid organisation working in Somalia shared his views: "In Somalia, foreign employees create security and expectation issues. If anyone wants to create security problems, they will be fast to cause problems to a foreigner. Also, having a foreigner with you creates false impressions and wrong expectations. The same people who were not bothering you at all will come around asking so many things when there is a foreigner with you, as they think that they brought with them sacks of money. Foreigners also tend to be polite and will not say anything to dampen these heightened expectations. They would say 'yes we will see' and 'yes we will try'. When they leave, the people will ask you, 'Where is what was promised by the foreigner?' They think that this was sent, but we didn't deliver. So not having foreign employees may have denied us the expertise we need, but in terms of access, it is a bonus."

Senior staff visits are viewed as important during negotiations. Local staff from the area are most likely to be the ones negotiating with armed actors for access. In interviews, Somali project staff reported facing severe pressure and physical threats from local authorities, armed actors and others wielding power, due to a widespread perception that aid organisations – and, by extension, those who work for them – have significant resources at their disposal. The SAVE research found examples of international staff usefully playing the role of 'bad cop' to enforce rules and good practices, allowing national or local staff to

[21] International staff are largely not present in non-government-held areas of Syria, and the research on Damascus-based operations did not cover this topic.

maintain good relations and act as the 'good cop'. In some cases, the 'bad cop' role can be filled by an outside ('relocatable') national staff, not based in the area. In Somalia, affected people and aid organisations tend to have the most positive views of organisations whose senior staff (Somali or international) are able to visit project sites and speak directly with local populations, authorities and local staff – in contrast with those whose senior staff rarely visit. These organisations are seen as more likely to address issues of quality (gatekeeping, clan favouritism, corruption, etc.).

The totality of evidence suggests that the benefits of international staff presence, when it comes to enabling access and quality, may not always outweigh the drawbacks. This is particularly true for more established remote management situations, where national staff assume a high level of responsibility for security reasons, but international staff remain nominally in control. The assumption that international staff automatically improve programme quality is unwarranted. Instead, it makes more sense to select staff so that the people responsible for managing and ensuring programme quality are also able, as much as possible, to regularly and safely access programme areas. In cases where only national staff can safely access an area, it is more effective to invest in the training and organisational support necessary to allow them to oversee the activities at a high level of rigor and to maintain the ability to have face-to-face interaction with people receiving assistance. When hiring international staff, agencies should be clearer about where and how they can add value, such as their writing skills, donor liaising, technical knowledge and outside support to negotiations.

NATIONAL STAFF AND CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Evidence from all four countries suggests that the type of national staff working for an organisation makes a significant difference for access and quality. Specifically, when local/national staff have relevant personal networks (rather than just the right clan or ethnic identity) *and* the personal integrity to negotiate for an impartial response, they are more able to help their organisations deliver quality programming. Organisations whose national staff have appropriate technical skills or are given the ability to develop also tend to be more successful. Organisations with good access and quality repeatedly stressed the need to choose the 'right' national staff – i.e., those who are able to enable access – based on a nuanced understanding of the context, conflict and power dynamics. These organisations also invest in their staff's capacities and in creating trusting and open relationships with them, furthering their staff's integrity and connection to the organisation and its values.

Some aid organisations seek out specific types of staff to enable access, but do not focus on the right qualities. In Somalia, for example, some international organisations focus on hiring staff who simply speak the language or are of the right ethnicity. Reflecting the aid sector's weak understanding of clan dynamics overall, these organisations do not look closely enough at clan affiliations (see also Majid 2012; Maxwell et al., 2014; Maxwell et al., 2016). This includes an unawareness of the clan or sub-clan identities among their own staff and their Somali NGO partners' staff. Most Somali NGOs identify with a particular clan or sub-clan and tend to work in areas where this clan or sub-clan is dominant. The ability of field staff or partners to move safely, particularly into new areas, and to push back against bribery or kickbacks can depend on their clan identity.

Some organisations working in Somalia have conducted internal reviews of the identities of their staff and/or partners and how they are perceived in the local context. Others stressed the importance of conducting background checks and verifying information on CVs during recruitment. One international organisation that had been working in Mogadishu for many years decided to commission outside researchers to conduct a deep contextual analysis that took political and conflict dynamics into consideration. The analysis helped the organisation to identify communities and vulnerabilities it had been unaware of, in part due

to limited staff mobility. Building this kind of deeper contextual understanding may also have implications for the way one selects, trains and supports international staff. Unfortunately, little evidence was found to suggest that organisations are taking seriously the need to build international staff members' contextual understanding (e.g., organising extensive trainings on the context, selecting people with prior contextual experience, etc.).

In Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria (from Turkey), international agencies tend to hire hyper-local staff – i.e., staff who live in or very close to the community or area where programming is taking place – as a way to increase acceptance and facilitate connections with local power-brokers. But while highly localised staff can help promote access, they have drawbacks for aid quality, including sometimes lacking the relevant technical skills, and they may also be more susceptible to local pressure for corruption, including favouritism and bias in aid delivery. In addition, when combined with a low-visibility approach, an overreliance on highly local staff can impede an organisation's ability to respond to new emergencies, such as displacement in another area.

Relying too much on highly local staff can also contribute to 'access inertia', wherein once agencies contract their presence, they have "stronger incentives to remain in their comfort zone than to try to expand their geographic and programmatic reach" (Stoddard et al., 2016b). Examples of this were noted in Afghanistan and Syria. In Syria, most INGOs operating cross-border from Turkey hire local staff who live in or very near to the areas of implementation, in order to facilitate access, build contextual knowledge and reduce the need for staff movement. By contrast, some of the larger Syrian NGOs have established good reputations across a wider region in northern Syria and can rely on these reputations when entering new areas and bringing staff who are not local. Similarly, in Afghanistan, a highly local approach was found to inhibit expansion and make programming more static.

One international organisation working in Somalia recognised that gaining access to an area controlled by Al Shabaab is best achieved by going from the local level upwards. The organisation focuses on creating a better understanding of the context by tapping the personal networks of its own staff, which involves determining who is prepared to make calls and pursue contacts. In developing this approach, the organisation's leadership has come to understand that some staff will, perhaps understandably, seek to exaggerate the strength of their networks and relationships. National staff frequently visit the city where senior international staff are based to discuss and develop this approach, build trust and reinforce the values of the organisation. The organisation credits this approach with helping it to regain access to an under-served area.

BOX 6: FEMALE STAFF IN AFGHANISTAN

The low number of female staff outside of Kabul was found to have significant repercussions for the quality of aid. This is particularly the case for health: women's access to healthcare is limited by a lack of female nurses and doctors as well as societal pressure for female patients to have a male escort. Aid agencies found it difficult to send female international employees into the field, especially to the southern and eastern Pashtun-dominant areas, where social norms are sometimes unconducive for women to transact business with (predominantly male) stakeholders and may compromise community acceptance, increasing security risks.

Women living in rural areas are often not allowed to speak directly with men, thus inhibiting aid organisations' ability to engage with women, such as by interviewing them as part of needs assessments. Some INGOs had success in gaining communities' endorsement for the training of women and their working in key services, as midwives (e.g., in Uruzgan) and refugee camp teachers (e.g., in Khost), for example. Overall, however, there was little evidence of longer-term initiatives to bring women into humanitarian aid organisations through entry-to-work or professional development schemes, despite this being an issue throughout the protracted crisis.

The evidence summarised above points to promising examples of agencies that have achieved better access and quality by taking seriously the idea that where national staff have better access, they will have to lead. This approach prioritises having senior management who are able to visit regularly to provide oversight and make meaningful connections with communities and understand their specific situation. This means taking extra steps to ensure the right national staff are selected and offering continuous support to promote their autonomy and ability to ensure impartial programming.

THE VALUE AND RISKS OF PARTNERSHIPS

As described in Section 2, in Somalia and Syria (and Afghanistan, to a lesser extent), international aid organisations pursue partnerships with national and local actors partly as a way to increase their access. While national or diaspora NGOs are the most common type of partner for this purpose (along with national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, for the ICRC; and both INGOs and NNGOs, for UN agencies), the variety of partners has recently expanded somewhat.

The use of private companies to transport goods is common in all four countries. This is especially the case for UN agencies, and agencies in Somalia reported an increase in their use. There, transporters are seen as more discreet and able to blend in with local populations, with aid un-branded. (Taking this approach a step further, some agencies in Somalia are increasing the use of vouchers, so that private companies both procure and transport items.) In Afghanistan and Syria, both UN agencies and NGOs frequently use commercial transporters as a way to minimise security risks, even though they are very expensive; many see them as an effective way to 'transfer risk', for a price. Very limited evidence is available on how much commercial transporters pay at checkpoints manned by non-state armed groups; how much of a role such payments play in furthering violence; or the extent to which transporters may be organised into price-fixing cartels.

Some international agencies in Somalia are also increasingly partnering more with smaller community-based organisations, such as local farming cooperatives or youth groups, in order to bypass perceived corruption problems with NGOs. In Syria, both INGOs and Syrian NGOs working from Turkey rely heavily on local councils (and relief committees), which act as middlemen between aid organisations and beneficiaries, as well as sometimes between aid organisations and armed groups. Some NGOs also partner with vendors and bakeries for food security programming. Others support existing, non-government-run medical facilities by paying their staff, providing medicines and equipment, and requiring regular reports against performance indicators.[22]

[22] **The experiences of Damascus-based organisations with regards to partnerships are not examined here.**

The increasing reliance on partners raises several questions. First, do national actors really face less security risk? If not, what does it mean for an international organisation's access strategy to rely on such partnerships? Second, if national actors have better access, why not fund them directly? Is there evidence backing the idea that national or local partners face greater risk of diversion, corruption or favouritism?

With regards to security risk, the evidence is mixed. Some national actors do experience lower risk, while others appear to face the same or higher levels of risk, but simply have a greater risk tolerance than international actors (due to, e.g., economic pressures or a desire to stay and help) (Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard et al., 2009). In this study, many (but not all) staff from local aid organisations in Somalia reported feeling physically at risk in some cases, due to the perceived value of the aid they were providing. Many such staff felt that their international agency partners insufficiently understood these risks and/or provided insufficient support for their ability to face them.

Expressing a different view, many Syrian NGO staff felt that taking physical risks was inherent to their work as humanitarians, and some saw their tolerance of risk as linked to the fact that they are not neutral actors – that is, they took a side during the revolution and see their humanitarian work as part of that. Many described their level of access as determined mainly by their level of funding, rather than by physical or security constraints, with the exception of areas held by the Islamic State. In other words, they saw themselves as able to go 'anywhere' – and were willing to face the physical risk of doing so – they simply wished to receive more funding to do so. In Afghanistan, by contrast, local aid organisations in the south and east of the country claimed not to face any security risks at all. Complicating the picture is the fact that national organisations across all four countries reported having only rudimentary security risk management procedures. In Syria, for example, they view the main risks as coming from aerial shelling and military clashes, and simply attempt to move staff away from possible strike locations.

In all four countries, there is limited to no shared analysis or discussion between international and national partners on security risks. Very few INGOs provide support to strengthen the security management systems of their local partners. Rather, security is viewed as the responsibility of the national or local partner. Especially in Syria, the capacity of international agencies to support partners, such as through shared approaches to risk management, remain underdeveloped relative to the requirements of the situation. Many INGO representatives interviewed in Turkey expressed concerns about the extent to which security risks are being transferred – inappropriately, some feel – to their Syrian NGO partners. Risk is also further transferred to the local councils that receive and distribute aid. When asked if aid organisations face any risk while delivering aid, a local council member in the Aleppo countryside said no, explaining that "[aid] organisations do not even come to [our] village, we receive relief [assistance] through organisations' delegates, who stay in the village for two to three hours every month."

In Somalia, the staff of private transport companies who were interviewed reported facing severe risks, including checkpoints, taxation, corrupt agency staff and security threats. In spite of the risks they face, they are sometimes harshly treated by their contractors and blamed when things go wrong, even if it was not their fault, such as an attack on a convoy. In South Sudan, national NGOs are more likely to have staff caught up in violence, on the run with the affected community or unable to evacuate, yet very little consideration is given to how national NGOs' security management capacities can be improved (see also Tanner and Moro, 2016). This is despite the fact that national NGOs often provide information, particularly on security, to other humanitarian actors (Tanner and Moro, 2016).

As a whole, national NGOs receive only a very small proportion of their funding directly from large governmental donors, with estimates as low as 0.2 per cent (GHA, 2015).[23] There are several reasons for this, including established rules against it (in the case of the European Commission); a sense of national NGOs having limited capacity, particularly in underdeveloped, chronic crisis countries; and the administrative difficulty of channelling and monitoring small amounts of funding, which means that writing large checks to large agencies is seen as achieving greater coverage more quickly. Other concerns include the beliefs that national NGOs are at greater risk of being non-neutral, biased in aid delivery and more likely to engage in corruption or diversion. The evidence for such assertions is mixed. Across the four countries, international agencies also experience lapses in impartiality, neutrality and independence, as noted above. Both international and national organisations rely heavily on local staff, and both types of organisations are seen as susceptible to corruption. While larger and/or international organisations may be more likely to have systems that provide checks and balances, such systems could likely be developed with more sustained organisational development.

In Somalia and Syria, where partnership is most common, affected people and aid actors did not report that national NGOs are more susceptible to corruption or bias across the board, when compared to their international agency counterparts. In Somalia, affected people described some agencies as able to stand up to corrupt authorities or gatekeepers, and others much less able to do so. This type of good practice was seen among both national and international agencies as well as those implementing directly and those working through partners or sub-contractors, with no clear patterns either way. In Syria, as described above, some national or diaspora organisations are able to operate with a higher profile and more non-local national staff, which appears to help reduce bias and favouritism in aid delivery, compared with many INGOs, which rely on very local staff. On the other hand, the Syrian aid staff interviewed in Turkey were, as a whole, the least willing to speak openly about possible corruption or diversion. And national as well as international actors working from Turkey rely heavily on local councils, which play a role in the widespread favouritism reported by affected Syrians. In South Sudan, while many international stakeholders expressed the view that national/local NGOs are at greater risk of compromising impartiality and neutrality, given their close ties to affected communities and tribes as well as their limited capacity, they also saw national NGOs as having stronger community ties that could make aid more relevant. For their part, South Sudanese NGOs reported feeling abandoned by the international community since the conflict began in 2014 (see also Tanner and Moro, 2016).

The evidence gathered here suggests that assumptions that national organisations are more at risk of corrupt practices or that international organisations automatically add value are unwarranted. More nuanced and realistic assessments about actual fiduciary risks could be helpful, such as the *likelihood* of the threat and its *impact* – not just on the agency or donor, but, more importantly, on local people. In situations of high need (critical programmes), it may be worth tolerating greater fiduciary risk from those partners, national or international, that have the ability to reach people. It does not solve any problems to simply pass security and fiduciary risks down the chain, be it to a local council, a transport company or even a beneficiary who is forced to hand over a cut of his or her ration (found to be a relatively common practice).

With regards to capacity building and the quality of relationships between national NGOs and their international partners, practice was mixed. Generally, international agencies still feel

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'on the hook' for fiduciary risks when partnering; thus, they tend to make greater investments in their national NGO partners' capacities to manage fiduciary risks, as compared with security risks. For operations into Syria from Turkey, driven in part by more extensive donor requirements for monitoring and reporting, some INGOs are taking positive steps to boost Syrian NGO partners' capacity (see also Howe et al., 2015). This includes mentoring, frequent discussion and the embedding of INGO staff into the partner organisation. Some expressed positive views about the possible long-term benefits of such capacity building. By contrast, many Somali NGOs are more negative. Many observed that some agencies (notably, but not exclusively, UN agencies) partner with them in instrumental, haphazard ways, making little-to-no investment in their operational capacity. But they also cited positive examples of longer-term relationships and trust building, particularly with INGOs. International agencies in Somalia with a large number of partners find it more difficult to visit and build relationships with them, and tend towards an oversight rather than a supportive role.

Overall, the research revealed insufficient investment in genuine partnerships, even where (as in Somalia and Syria) they have proven essential for access. This absence is especially troubling in chronic crises that have lasted decades, such as Afghanistan and Somalia. Capacity building efforts too often constitute one-off initiatives like trainings and workshops, or aim at building only operational capacity, neglecting organisational capacity (see also Howe et al., 2015). Some long-term INGO-national NGO partnerships involve genuine attempts to allow national NGOs to build their autonomy, but many others are contractual and opportunistic, and leave national NGOs facing significant security and other risks on their own. These gaps are a source of significant frustration for national partners and hinder the overall level of access achieved in each country. Taken together, the evidence reinforces a finding from a previous study on partnerships in Iraq and Syria (Howe et al., 2015): international aid agencies should think more carefully about when, how and why they partner, and whether they possess the sufficient capacity to do so. The evidence also suggests that the level of trust and communication between partners – specifically, the ability of local partners to discuss, and not hide, challenges and problems encountered during implementation – is an important factor in successful partnerships (Howe et al., 2015; see also Section 4.3).

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that donors need to review the rationale for not providing direct funding to national or local NGOs in situations where they are better able to access hard-to-reach areas. This would imply that it is important to make sure that commitments under the 'Grand Bargain', which seeks to achieve a target of 25 per cent of humanitarian funding "as directly as possible" to local and national responders (multiple authors / organisations, 2016), are not limited to contexts where access is relatively easy. The evidence summarised here shows that national and local NGOs are an essential and under-tapped resource for reaching vulnerable people in need. Administrative obstacles and poorly evidenced assumptions about higher rates of corruption are insufficient reasons for not providing more sustained, flexible funding and greater support to organisational development. While the capacity constraints are real (in many cases compounded by years of insufficient investment in such capacity), examples from the research suggest that they can be overcome by supportive, sustained engagement. An important part of such engagement needs to be dialogue and discussion about the complex nature of principled humanitarian action (Sections 4.1 and 4.5).

4.3 Corruption, diversion and compromises to enable access

This section explores how agencies and donors have approached issues of corruption, diversion and compromises, and how this affects access and quality.

A CULTURE OF SILENCE ABOUT COMMON PRACTICES

Corruption, or "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (TI, 2014), affects access and aid quality in several ways. First, it can deprive vulnerable people of their access to life-saving resources (TI, 2014; Ewins, 2006). Echoing practices identified in previous research, local people interviewed in three of the four settings reported that corruption, bias and/or favouritism are major impediments to their receiving aid.[24] Second, as described in Section 4.1, maintaining a principled humanitarian response will sometimes require making compromises (in order to access people), which can involve payments or other concessions that benefit private individuals – essentially, forms of corruption. Third, this study finds that donors' and agencies' concerns about fiduciary risks – especially large-scale or high-profile corruption scandals and the diversion of resources to armed groups (particularly to designated terrorist groups and other groups of political concern to donor governments) – inhibit aid agencies' willingness to work in some areas (see also Stoddard et al., 2016a and 2016b; Howe 2016).

These three sets of dynamics are separate but interconnected. Agencies tend to focus on the third set of concerns – the reduction of fiduciary risk – by developing monitoring systems and other practices to reduce their exposure to the kinds of corruption that are most concerning to donors. They focus on being able to properly account for money spent (upwards accountability), sometimes at the expense of ensuring a high level of programme quality (downward accountability). The "natural tendency for donors to impose their own agendas on agencies, and for agencies to compromise in order to win funding" (TI, 2014) has too often silenced discussion on corruption generally, but on the first two dynamics especially: corruption that prevents people from receiving aid and the types of compromises necessary for ensuring access (which, while often related, are not the same thing). As a result, agencies are too often unable to distinguish acceptable, ethically justified practices from unacceptable ones.

The research finds that paying for access and granting concessions are commonplace in all four countries. They are at times essential to reach people in desperate need. Yet they are generally taboo subjects of discussion, both between and often within agencies.[25] Common practices include:

- Paying money at checkpoints;
- Paying unofficial taxes;
- Altering targeting criteria;
- Employing local militia;
- Working with local actors (e.g., local councils, development committees, local authorities, gatekeepers) who are known to be corrupt or biased in aid delivery;
- Knowing that partners, transporters or aid recipients are paying a cut of the aid to armed actors;
- Avoiding some areas so as not to antagonise a local authority, armed actor or dominant community.

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[24] In South Sudan, there was less commentary on corruption or diversion, in part because of the recent prevalence of unconditional general distributions (which means fewer opportunities for bias or favouritism during targeting) as well as the presence of armed actors during some consultations (which inhibited discussion on this sensitive topic).

[25] The book Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed, edited by MSF CRASH (Magone et al., 2011), is a notable exception.

While organisational policies are largely against 'paid access', practice on the ground differs, as aid staff confront the reality of working in highly charged political environments. Staff members – particularly national or local staff, who are most often interfacing with local stakeholders – encounter difficult choices and ethical dilemmas, as they try to balance the need to get aid to vulnerable people with the need to appease those who hold power.

The tendency of aid agencies not to talk about these compromises and dilemmas stems in part from simplistic views on 'principled' humanitarian assistance (as described in Section 4.1) and in part from an unrealistic set of expectations regarding corruption and diversion during aid delivery in war zones. 'Zero tolerance' policies on these practices are seen as inhibiting discussion of actual risks and the potential compromises necessary for ensuring access (see also TI, 2014).[26] Donors – and ultimately their taxpaying public – at times contribute to this by showing an insufficient understanding of (and ability to accept) the inherent risks of assisting those most in need. Donors' concern about diversion are especially acute in areas where terrorist groups are active – notably Al Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State in Syria. Corruption scandals in these places can easily erupt into media scandals. As one INGO headquarters representative summarised, "If it goes to newspaper and becomes a headline story, it turns into politics, and then politics drives the risk appetite, which becomes absolutely zero." As a whole, corruption risks are not shared, but rather devolved to agencies and then to national staff and/or national partners. INGOs report that individual donor representatives can acknowledge the elevated risk in some contexts during conversations, but not in writing. Furthermore, several INGOs shared stories of auditors coming in a few years later and applying a higher standard than was understood to be in place at the time (Stoddard et al., 2016a).

In contrast to other aid groups, the ICRC and MSF have greater freedom to deal with corruption and with compromises required to enable access. Both organisations also have much higher percentages of private or unrestricted funds than most international NGOs.[27] They have also developed more nuanced and extensive views on what it means to adhere to humanitarian principles: while the ICRC grapples with difficult situations internally and tends to speak publicly with one voice, MSF has a strong culture of internal and external debate (Brauman, 2012). These factors have allowed them to confront such dilemmas and predicaments more head-on and more honestly, which has in turn helped them to minimise unnecessary compromises and to take risks when appropriate to enable access. While neither organisation accepts corruption, when it happens, there is greater flexibility to acknowledge and explain it publicly to their support base and fewer punitive responses from donors in dealing with it. As an MSF representative explained, "our philosophy is that we make mistakes, we're not perfect ... People understand that. They don't understand the rosy picture that NGOs only do good things and don't make mistakes."

The following sections explain attitudes and practices towards corruption in each of the four countries, including how they affect local people's access to aid and aid groups' access to affected people.

OVERVIEW OF ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES WITH REGARDS TO COMPROMISES, CORRUPTION AND DIVERSION

Practices regarding compromises, corruption and diversion varied across the four countries, with **Somalia** being the most extreme case. All local populations interviewed – including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, IDP camp managers, project committees, government officials and private companies – described aid actors and aid projects in very much the same

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[26] See also the findings from the Independent Commission on Aid Impact report on DFID's approach to managing fiduciary risk in conflict-affected environments (2016). The report found that while key steps are being taken to protect UK funds in conflict environments, DFID had not clearly articulated its approach to risk appetite, leaving many staff confused and unsure about what statements like 'zero tolerance' and 'high risk appetite' mean in practice.

[27] In 2014, MSF received 89 per cent of its funding from private sources (MSF, 2015), while the ICRC received 83 per cent of its funding from governments, but with the majority either un-earmarked or lightly earmarked by geographic region (ICRC, 2015).

language: corruption and collusion are endemic. Staff at different levels of both international agencies and national/local NGOs are reportedly working with local business people or other power-holders to manipulate aid resources for their personal benefit and to the detriment of vulnerable people (see also Majid and Harmer, forthcoming). In interviews, affected Somalis often perceived an unclear or unjust rationale for who receives aid, citing many examples of the undeserving, wealthy or powerful being part of the quota. Aid agencies and their staff are seen as representing particular clans or personal interests. In this context, as described in Box 7, gatekeepers simultaneously exploit local populations while also helping to bring assistance to them and lobbying aid providers on their behalf (see also Maxwell and Majid, 2016; Jackson and Aynte, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013; Bryld et al., 2013).

Furthermore, interviews with aid staff and affected Somalis suggest that access is almost always bought or paid for at some level (in the form of money, jobs or contracts). In some cases, threatening to withdraw a project, or knowing whom to speak with and putting pressure on the difficult actor in the chain, reportedly bypasses the need for payment. These practices were more common with well-connected staff with high integrity (see Section 4.2 above). But these instances seem to be few and far between. Somali organisations working in Al Shabaab areas reported that the normal taxation rate is 30 per cent, though this can be negotiated downwards (see Box 9). In non–Al Shabaab areas, when an organisation or individual takes a firm stance, these payments or favours may amount to little more than a few hundred dollars or the inclusion of several family members or local militia on a beneficiary list. The extent of concessions made may or may not be known by Nairobi-based senior management or the 'senior partner'. Approaches vary considerably, and many agencies are known locally for whether they are strong or weak, i.e., principled or corrupt. An agency's reputation can be boosted by refusing to pay or agreeing to pay only small amounts. There are many shades of being corrupt, and agencies can engage in both positive and negative practices at different levels.

BOX 7. THE COMPLICATED ROLE OF GATEKEEPERS IN SOMALIA

In interviews, Somalis often perceived an unclear or unjust rationale for who receives aid and who does not, with aid agencies seen as representing particular clans or personal interests. 'Gatekeepers' often control aid vulnerable people's access to aid, and aid organisations' access to vulnerable people. Gatekeepers can include district commissioners, landowners, clan leaders, business people and sometimes aid organisation staff (Bryld et al., 2013). The gatekeepers that researchers talked to and heard about in Mogadishu are seen as playing a complicated role, simultaneously exploiting local populations while also helping to bring assistance to them and lobbying aid providers on their behalf. Some vulnerable people expressed a mixed view of gatekeepers, including a sense of appreciation for them. In interviews, self-described gatekeepers covering many IDP camps in Mogadishu provided the researchers with insightful observations about the overall lack of coordination and accountability, as well as corruption and competition, attributable to government officials (notably the district commissioners or other landowners) and other powerful individuals, including aid organisations themselves.

In **Afghanistan**, aid actors acknowledged that corruption is a challenge, but saw an overall trend towards less corruption in the past three to five years, with mechanisms increasingly in place to overcome it, due to a growing awareness of an endemic set of problems. The tone was thus more optimistic than in Somalia, despite a similar perception that small-scale aid

diversion and other abuses of power are endemic and rampant (echoing previous studies such as Savage et al., 2007; Isaqzadeh, 2014). In interviews, vulnerable Afghans spoke of false or inappropriate beneficiary selection, either through the staff-complicit generation of 'ghost villages' and 'fake elders', or non-staff-complicit interference by community elders to prioritise their friends and family over the intended, vulnerable beneficiaries (see Box 8). Similar to partnerships with local councils in Syria, aid agencies saw the use of Community Development Councils (CDCs) as bearing risks of small-scale corruption (particularly in beneficiary selection) and as sometimes lacking conflict sensitivity, but also as having benefits in terms of more participatory analysis and planning.

Aid actors in Afghanistan and Somalia (and lately, those working in Syria from Turkey) have spent significant time developing monitoring systems and other practices to reduce their exposure to corruption. In Somalia, several international agencies have undertaken organisational reviews and restructuring in recent years. These have involved significant staff changes and the introduction of different types of semi-autonomous internal units, which variously aim at improving monitoring, risk management, learning and accountability. Examples were noted where these efforts have started to contribute to 'cleaning house' and to a transformation of the organisation. At the same time, these 'draining the swamp' exercises are not short-term processes. One agency representative estimated it would take over five years to take effect, with real transformation not happening until 2020 (Majid and Harmer, forthcoming). In any case, organisations in both countries generally remain reluctant to acknowledge or discuss payments made for safe access, or bias and corruption in programming more generally.

BOX 8. AFGHANS' VIEWS ON CORRUPTION IN HUMANITARIAN AID

A large number of affected people consulted, particularly in Helmand, Kandahar and Kunar, described instances of corruption and diversion. Local government, community development councils and 'fake' community elders have often been embroiled in a range of situations in which aid was diverted to the villages of specific tribes or extended families (not to the most desperately in need), or fictitious beneficiaries were registered. In both cases, aid is often sold profitably. Sometimes aid actor staff were implicated in such schemes. Respondents also mentioned subtler forms of bias and favouritism. In Kunar, as many as half of the respondents indicated that friendly connections with aid workers would move them up the distribution list and significantly cut their waiting time. Many respondents felt silenced or disempowered to report these incidents.

For **Syria**, at the time of the research, staff of organisations working cross-border from Turkey generally did not see corruption, bias or favouritism as major problems in the areas they work in.[28] In interviews, international NGO staff said they believe these issues are manageable compared to other contexts they had worked in, while Syrian NGOs were reluctant to discuss the subject altogether. These views are consistent with the survey of aid staff: only 35 per cent of all respondents working on Syria believed that 'corruption, bias and/or favouritism' were major problems, compared with 54 per cent in South Sudan, 59 per cent in Afghanistan and 63 per cent in Somalia.

Affected people and aid staff based inside Syria have very different views. Across all areas surveyed (in mid-2015), affected people reported during in-person consultations that corruption and favouritism are widespread, with friends and family members often

28 US government investigations into possibly corrupt sub-contracting and procurement fraud among several large INGOs had not yet been made public (Slemrod and Parker, 2016).

inappropriately included on distribution lists. People in Hama cited this as a particular problem, perceiving a mismatch between the quantity of aid provided and the quantity received by people in need, with "most people deprived because of false excuses". A lack of monitoring and control over the aid distribution process is perceived as allowing this to occur. Local councils and relief committees play a key role in the selection of beneficiaries and can also influence the amount of assistance delivered to their area, with some evidence that urban local councils wield more power than rural ones. Interestingly, many aid organisation representatives and local council members corroborated the views of affected people, acknowledging that "certain groups are favoured over others because of the corruption".

The gap between the views of those in Turkey and those in Syria regarding the prevalence of corruption likely stems from an overreliance on actors such as local councils; pressure to spend money and get aid out the door; and the deprioritisation of 'downwards' accountability to affected populations. Among both international and Syrian NGOs, 'corruption' may also have been understood as large-scale fraud or embezzlement (i.e., stealing an organisation's money), rather than small-scale (but still impactful) reallocation of resources intended for others. Overall, the lack of awareness within Turkey suggests that aid organisations do not focus enough on local-level corruption, which significantly harms people's access to aid and its perceived quality.

While aid actors working from Turkey are not overly concerned about financial corruption or bias in aid distributions, they are concerned about potential diversion to armed actors. Many groups reported that the risk of aid being diverted to the Islamic State plays a strong role in preventing them from working in areas under IS control. The level of concern is considerably higher than for areas controlled by other designated terrorist groups. Such concerns, combined with IS's interference with aid delivery and its expulsion of aid organisations, led to a tapering off of international assistance in IS-held areas such as Deir Ezzour and Ar Raqqa, and to its near-elimination towards the end of 2015. Several organisations said that they could have continued programming in these areas, but opted not to, mainly because the risk of reputational damage from a diversion or corruption incident in IS-held areas was seen as too high. In this regard, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the concerns of the agency and those of the donor, with differing reports (even between interviewees from the same agency) on whether the agency was asked by the donor to withdraw.

In **South Sudan**, humanitarian agencies more readily acknowledged that diversion and corruption are problems (unlike in Syria), but have not dedicated significant resources to analysing or preventing it (unlike in Afghanistan and Somalia). The lack of a designated terrorist organisation in the country – as well as the fact aid that diversion has been at times tacitly accepted, such as during Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) from 1989 to 2005 – has meant that the diversion of aid to military actors is not perceived to be as serious of a matter (Maxwell et al., 2015). Aid actors reported that government authorities and Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-iO) members routinely seek to influence the location of a distribution or to manipulate the numbers of people in need in order to receive a larger share of aid. More overt incidents of diversion, such as commanders looting or rerouting food trucks to barracks, were also noted. Unofficial taxation is on the rise, especially in opposition counties, as civil servants and security personnel are not being paid. Interviewees reported that food is likely making its way to armed forces, since they are supported by their communities. The distinction between civilian and solider is often blurry, both at the beneficiary and authority level, and aid actors widely consider it impossible to keep food from reaching combatants. As one interviewee commented, "Today's fisherman is tomorrow's fighter." Some aid agencies used the term 'misuse' to describe this phenomenon, in contrast with 'diversion', which is seen as occurring only up until the point of distribution.

# 4.4 Outreach and negotiation with non-state armed actors

This section focuses on negotiations with non-state armed actors, not host governments. It also focuses on the country level, rather than the regional or global level. For more discussion of these issues, see the SAVE resource paper on negotiations (Carter and Haver, 2016).

INSUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO AND SUPPORT FOR AN INDISPENSABLE ASPECT OF ACCESS
Evidence from this and other studies suggests that negotiating with parties to an armed conflict is a critical part of enabling access. Aid organisations are able to operate more safely and effectively – especially in the long-run – when relevant armed actors know that they are there, know what they are doing and have at the very least acknowledged, if not signalled some kind of approval or acceptance of, their work (McHugh and Bessler, 2006; Egeland et al, 2011). While by no means fool proof – organisations can still face indiscriminate attacks, and negotiations can fail or create further risks – attempting to communicate and negotiate with all relevant actors is almost universally recognised as an important first step. Despite this, the research finds that no meaningful progress has been made in this area since previous studies had found that the large majority of humanitarian agencies fail to engage strategically with armed non-state actors (Egeland et al., 2011; Jackson, 2013).

Many staff working in these contexts remain uncertain about not only how to engage with non-state armed actors for access, but also whether they are allowed to do so, under their own organisation's rules or international normative frameworks. Only about half of staff surveyed (51 per cent) reported that their organisation communicates with non-state armed groups. Similarly, only half (52 per cent) believed it to be generally acceptable for a staff member of a humanitarian organisation to speak directly with a member of an armed non-state actor, for the purpose of facilitating humanitarian access. The rest said 'no' (21 per cent), said 'it depends which non-state armed actor' (14 per cent) or were 'not sure' (13 per cent) (see Figure 2 below). Respondents working in Afghanistan were the least likely to believe that negotiations are acceptable (36 per cent said 'yes'), while those in South Sudan were most likely to believe they are (64 per cent said 'yes').[29]

Figure 2: Attitudes and practices towards negotiations with non-state armed actors in the four countries, early 2016

Do staff from your organisation communicate with members of a non-state armed actor, for the purpose of facilitating humanitarian access?

Yes 51%
Not sure 20%
No 29%

Do you believe that it's generally acceptable for a staff member of a humanitarian organisation to speak directly with a member of an armed non-state actor?

Yes 52%
Not sure 13%
It depends on which armed non-state actor 14%
No 21%

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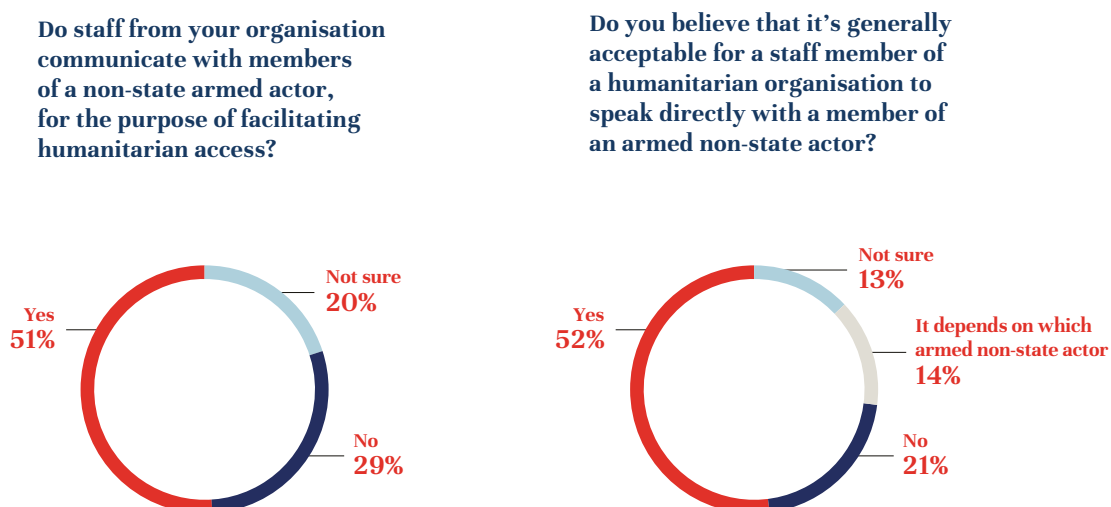
[29] The difference between countries is not as extreme when examining international staff responses only: the percentages of international staff replying 'yes' to this question range from 57 per cent (for Somalia) to 66 per cent (for South Sudan). The lowest percentage of those answering 'yes' was observed for Afghan staff (16 per cent).

These sentiments were echoed in the interviews, where staff from UN agencies, INGOs and NNGOs expressed uncertainty (or internally contradictory views) about whether direct contact with non-state armed groups – particularly those designated as 'terrorist' organisations – is permitted. Staff from the ICRC, national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies and MSF, by contrast, consistently spoke knowledgeably about their organisations' approach to negotiations. The ICRC and MSF both consider ideal practice to be conscientious, usually direct engagement with armed actors. While examples of similar practices can be found in each country, especially among a handful of INGOs accustomed to working in conflict environments, they do not always reflect a consistent organisational approach.

The ICRC and MSF examples suggest that it may be less about the basis on which one negotiates – i.e., presenting one's work as grounded in neutrality and independence – than about the overall level of care and attention given to the process. Both organisations have made significant organisational investments to engage in regular dialogue with parties to the conflict as part of what they do. Interviewees from these organisations suggested that their unrestricted funding partly facilitates this, which is reinforced by the researchers' observations of donors' influence on the willingness of aid organisations to reach out to politically sensitive armed groups. Unrestricted or less restricted funding allows more time and flexibility to better understand the context and build relationships with key actors. Those with high portions of earmarked funding felt themselves to be under more pressure from donors – both overt (pressure to deliver and report on a set of activities described in a proposal) as well as subtle (pressure to avoid at all costs incidents of diversion to certain non-state armed actors). All the same, several UN agencies and large INGOs clearly have the resources to invest in more policy, guidance and training on negotiations, but they have not done so. The reasons appear to be the general sensitivity of the subject, the need to be flexible in practice (which can make it difficult to set guidance) and the political positioning of donors vis-à-vis many non-state armed actors.[30]

The research finds clear links between the degree to which aid agencies feel comfortable negotiating with specific non-state armed groups and the views of host and donor governments towards those groups. Across the four countries, senior aid agency staff are much more likely to describe discussions to enable access with non-state groups such as the SPLM-iO in South Sudan, or groups associated with the Free Syrian Army or Kurdish-affiliated groups in Syria. By contrast, they are much less comfortable speaking with, or working in areas controlled by, designated 'terrorist' groups or other entities under political or military attack by Western governments, such as Al Shabaab in Somalia; Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Syria; and the Taliban in Afghanistan. This hesitance is partly fuelled by lingering confusion about what types of activity may constitute 'financial or material support' under counter-terror legislation, and whether individual aid staff are at real risk of prosecution under counter-terror legislation (see also Stoddard et al., 2016a; NRC, 2015; Burniske et al., 2014).
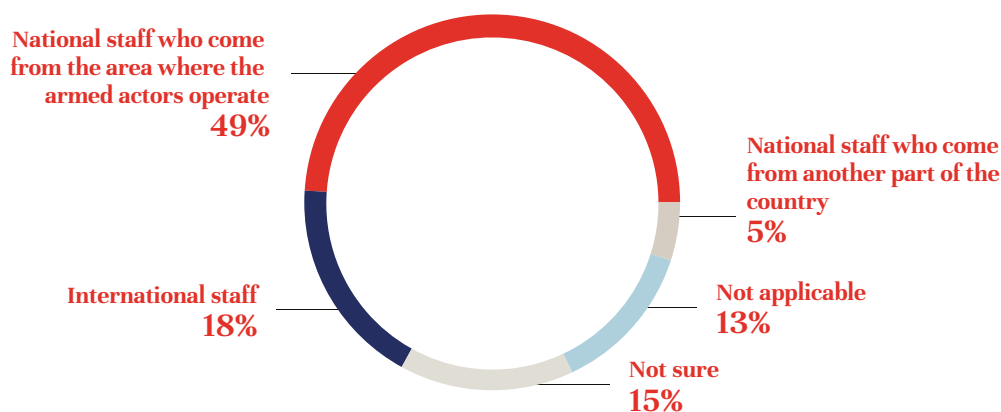
More than that, the mere existence of the 'terrorist' designation contributes to a sense of these groups being 'on the other side' politically, or at least dangerous to engage with (see also Jackson, 2014). The political positioning is at least as important as the official 'terrorist' designation. In Syria, aid agencies expressed much greater concern about potential diversion to IS than to Jabhat Al Nusra, despite their both being designated terrorist groups. Many INGOs cited diversion to IS as a 'nightmare scenario' that would trigger a cascade of financial and reputational risks (Stoddard et al., 2016a; Howe, 2016). While several of the groups certainly also posed heightened security risks to humanitarian operations (notably Al Shabaab and IS), senior interviewees were clear that fiduciary and reputational risks – due to those groups' political positions vis-à-vis Western donor governments – also play a central role in their decision-making.

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[30] **In this regard, ICRC's recent initiative to establish a Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation – working with UNHCR, WFP, MSF and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue – is a promising development.**

These attitudes – combined with a lack of strategic investment in policy and practical guidance in this area – fuel a sense of secrecy and a tendency to delegate negotiations to field staff, without questions asked. Among survey respondents who said that their organisation engages in negotiations, 68 per cent said this is done by "national staff who come from the area where the armed actor operates", 25 per cent said it was done by international staff and 7 per cent said it was done by national staff who come from another part of the country (see Figure 3[31]). Such staff are generally not well supported in this task, according to interviews. Survey respondents reported that some training on negotiations has been provided, although this has been limited: 26 per cent of survey respondents said that any staff from their organisation had received training in the last two years on how to communicate with non-state armed actors for the purpose of facilitating humanitarian access. Staff from the UN as well as those working on South Sudan and Syria were more likely to report that someone from their organisation had received such training.

Figure 3: Types of staff involved in negotiations with non-state armed actors in the four countries, early 2016

If your organisation communicates with non-state armed actor(s), what type of staff do so?

National staff who come from the area where the armed actors operate
49%

National staff who come from another part of the country
5%

Not applicable
13%

Not sure
15%

International staff
18%

THE ROLE OF INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION ON NEGOTIATIONS

In some circumstances, it may be impractical or counterproductive for multiple organisations to maintain bilateral relations with a particular armed non-state actor. Aid agencies can be played off one another or undercut if they have not agreed on red lines or informal 'ground rules' (Jackson, 2014). In three of the four countries (all but Somalia), examples were cited in which inter-agency coordination on negotiations, or joint negotiations, is helpful. This is particularly the case for setting broad ground rules (in South Sudan and Syria) and for engaging with non-state armed groups at senior levels (as in Afghanistan). But such efforts are also hampered by the limitations, both political and operational, of the UN, especially in Somalia.

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[31] Note that Figure 3 shows all responses to this question, i.e. even those said 'not applicable' and 'not sure'.

To work around the limitations of the UN, some agencies engage in ad-hoc, local-level coordination or work through NGO mechanisms, both of which were seen as useful. Problems arise where NGOs cannot work effectively with the UN, but have not developed strong bilateral relations with key stakeholders at the local level, because of insufficient organisational capacity and a lack of internal transparency on their approach to negotiations.

In the past, the UN has usefully played a lead in inter-agency negotiations or agreeing on 'ground rules', particularly in the 1990s (Jackson, 2012). In Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria, the UN continued to play such a role. In Afghanistan from 2014 to 2015, following the withdrawal of foreign military forces, the UN increasingly began to open up high-level channels to senior Taliban leaders, with the goal of facilitating humanitarian access (Dyke, 2014). In South Sudan and Syria (for operations from Turkey), OCHA has sought to facilitate dialogue between parties to the conflict and the humanitarian community, including by producing 'ground rules' to be followed by armed groups and aid actors. In non-government-held parts of Syria, this resulted in a Declaration of Commitment and a set of Joint Operating Principles (JOPs) signed by several dozens of armed groups in Syria. In South Sudan, what resulted was a 'ground rules' agreement signed by opposition commanders in the first months of the conflict. In interviews, aid staff said that for Syria, while not 'game-changing', these initiatives have helped clarify expectations with armed groups. They have proved more helpful with relatively moderate groups, by providing staff members with a credible reference document to enable them to ask for passage at checkpoints; they have limited to no effect on more radical groups, such as IS. For operations based in Damascus, the UN has worked hard in consultation with the ICRC and the few Damascus-based NGOs to devise joint approaches to encourage the government to facilitate access, with limited success.

There can also be challenges with relying on the UN. In South Sudan, agencies' ability to access new areas and conduct negotiations is very much tied to their ability to access flexible air transport. The reliance of many NGOs on the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which is managed by the WFP and can only operate in areas that have been cleared by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) or other security staff, at times hinders NGOs' (and OCHA's) ability to initiate negotiations. OCHA in South Sudan has worked to find creative ways around these limitations – for example, working with UN operational agencies to conduct security risk assessments (SRAs) that are normally done by UNDSS staff, but can also be done by certified security staff from other agencies. In Afghanistan and Somalia, Western military and political stabilisation efforts have exacerbated divides between 'multi-mandate' aid agencies (those working on development and humanitarian programming) and 'single-mandate' aid agencies (those opting to focus solely on humanitarian programming in that context). The UN agencies in both countries tend to align more closely with the host governments, such as by providing development support and/or working within an (integrated) UN peace operation. Al Shabaab also directly targets the UN in Somalia. These factors contribute to the challenges OCHA and the UN agencies face in effectively negotiating with non-state armed actors for humanitarian access, according to both UN and NGO interviewees, which has had knock-on effects on NGOs working within UN humanitarian coordination systems. The ICRC and MSF, for their part, always seek to manage their staff, security and assets separately from the UN, so that armed groups and local populations are more likely to see them as distinct, thus building trust.

In Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria, agencies do engage in ad-hoc, local-level coordination to devise joint approaches to negotiations outside the UN system; such efforts are mostly seen as useful. (In Somalia, there are fewer examples of this, owing to general mistrust between aid agencies and secrecy about operational presence (Stoddard et al., 2016b).) In Syria, for example, several INGOs coordinated their approach to responding to the demands of the Islamic State (see Box 10). In Afghanistan, NGOs come together to discuss security

issues via the International NGO Safety Office (INSO), which also produces joint analysis that is seen as helpful (see also Jackson, 2014). But agencies' tendency to negotiate indirectly with the Taliban and other groups (e.g., via local elders), and the high degree of local variation have limited the usefulness of joint local approaches in Afghanistan. While such joint initiatives are important, the agencies that are successfully working in the most difficult environments do not see them as an effective substitute for direct bilateral negotiations. Many aid agencies working in Syria from Turkey even went one step further, stressing that too much information-sharing is counterproductive or dangerous. Generally, the organisations that are active in difficult areas tend to negotiate directly with armed actors at the local level to maintain their access.

OVERVIEW OF ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES TOWARDS NEGOTIATIONS WITH NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS

National aid staff expressed feeling isolated when making decisions to take risks, with limited engagement from their international counterparts. In **Somalia**, the general climate of intolerance of corruption and diversion (especially the diversion of aid to Al Shabaab), combined with the pro-government, stabilisation agendas of donors and the UN, plays a large role in severely curtailing operations in areas controlled by the group. Reflecting this, the percentage of survey respondents reporting that their organisation engages in negotiations with non-state armed groups (23 per cent) was the lowest of the four countries. This sense of fear has silenced discussion within and between agencies about actual practices on the ground. One INGO with a long-term partnership with a Somali NGO, for example, acknowledged that they entirely pass on responsibility for negotiating access and are not involved in any way; there is no risk management framework through which to base decisions, and no discussion of red lines. These findings echo previous research (Egeland et al., 2011; Jackson, 2014), suggesting that there has been little to no progress in this area.

BOX 9. NEGOTIATING WITH AL SHABAAB IN SOMALIA

Organisations working in Al Shabaab areas reported that they are generally tougher to negotiate with than government actors at the outset, but more predictable once they agree. While Al Shabaab's decision-making structure is fractured and unclear even to those who are part of it, government agencies are no more coherent, and in government areas "you have to pay money every time to different people and they don't control each other". The normal Al Shabaab taxation rate is reportedly 30 per cent of the project costs, paid upfront, although this can be adjusted downward depending on the person and his view of the project's benefit. One staff member observed, "Some NGOs may say that these deductions come from their running costs, but in truth they always come from what the beneficiaries should have received."

It is typically local staff from the area (rather than ethnic Somalis from the diaspora or other nationalities) who speak to Al Shabaab. Staff members' personal networks, as well as the history and quality of the organisation's work in the area, are seen as important for developing relationships with local Al Shabaab leaders. Leaders who are local, older and more educated are seen as more likely to understand the benefits of projects for people in need and willing to bend the rules. But the frequent rotation of forces as well as the persistent suspicion of Western-funded aid make it difficult to build trust. Relationships are constantly in flux, and nothing is guaranteed.

Al Shabaab reportedly values projects with tangible results that can be easily measured, such as buildings, wells, canals, desilting water catchments, sandbag distributions, assistance to schools, or medical services. This includes projects using cash-for-work. They tend to distrust food or medicine from Western sources as well as 'soft projects' involving trainings or meetings (e.g. for protection programming), suspecting them of hidden agendas. Al Shabaab leaders sometimes accompany staff members to project sites to present themselves in a positive light before the population. They often closely monitor projects to make sure they are completed as planned.

Aid actors working on **Syria** were the most reluctant of the three countries to broach the subject of humanitarian access negotiations. Many Syrian NGO (and a few INGO) Turkey-based representatives made statements equating the act of negotiating itself with being 'unprincipled', i.e., making (unacceptable) compromises. In their reluctance to discuss the topic, it seems that Syrian organisations see themselves as under intense scrutiny and seek to avoid any possible association with military or armed actors. When partnering with Syrian NGOs, INGOs generally let them manage engagement with armed actors, and some reported that a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy is in place with regards to discussing specifics. No positive examples were cited of INGOs encouraging Syrian NGOs or other partners to share details of how they achieved access.

Most of the aid actors, local councils, affected people and private suppliers and transporters consulted inside Syria reported that non-state armed actors (with the exception of the Islamic State) generally do not interfere with aid delivery. They said that checkpoints only cause delays, and they emphasised regime airstrikes as the major security risk. INGO representatives in Turkey, however, were much more candid when describing incidents in which non-state armed actors had stolen goods, abducted or detained staff, suspended programmes or otherwise interfered with aid delivery.

In the very fluid conflict in Syria, there is a high degree of coherence and overlap between armed and unarmed stakeholders, including those involved in providing aid. For many INGOs and Syrian NGOs, local councils and relief committees act as middlemen not only with beneficiaries, but also with armed groups. Some local council members help transport aid from the Turkish border, with armed group representatives also joining the convoys as a form of protection. Sharia courts are also reportedly used to address interference. The courts sometimes give permission for movements of humanitarian supplies and act as a point of contact with armed actors to enable passage for humanitarian convoys and avoid issues at checkpoints. They have also ruled in favour of aid groups after the seizure of goods, successfully getting armed groups to return the items. Taken together, this type of solidarity between armed actors and unarmed civilians can facilitate aid delivery, but it can also contribute to bias, resulting in some vulnerable people being excluded, as described above in Section 4.3.

BOX 10. NGO OPERATIONS IN ISLAMIC STATE–HELD AREAS

Despite the difficulties, a range of INGOs and Syrian NGOs have been able to work (both directly and through local partners) in areas under control of the Islamic State during 2015–2016, including with Western government funding. This requires extensive and careful negotiations, as authority structures are fractured. In some areas, IS has been

more tolerant of health and WASH than of food or NFI distributions, because it views the former as a provision of technical expertise that it cannot provide. For example, IS was willing to let a Western INGO restart programming (after IS had suspended it several months ago) when it realised that it could not pay healthcare workers' salaries and provide supplies for the clinics.

Like Al Shabaab, IS sometimes seeks to associate itself positively with aid projects. In one case, an INGO closed a healthcare facility when IS came to the facility to record a propaganda film, despite this violating the MOU that the group had signed with the INGO. IS reportedly saw this as a fair response, and the situation was resolved over a period of four months.

INGOs reported mixed experiences in coordinating among themselves to negotiate with the Islamic State. In one case, when IS representatives sent the small number of NGOs operating in one area a 'request for information' with 11 questions, the NGOs conferred together and decided which ones they would respond to and which ones they would not (e.g., they refused to provide staff names). Then, each submitted its questionnaire separately, so as not to attract undue attention to their coordination. In another case, however, a few large INGOs reportedly advised another INGO not to hand over lists of staff, hire car companies and leases, etc. to IS representatives – when in fact, those INGOs had already done so several days earlier. The INGO representative believed these were deliberate lies, perhaps in an attempt to undercut a competitor's access, and consequently lost trust in other organisations.

In **Afghanistan**, as elsewhere, many organisations have delegated outreach and negotiations to field staff. Senior management continues to have (intentionally) minimal oversight and control of the process beyond sometimes setting parameters and red lines (as noted in Jackson and Giustozzi, 2012). Negotiations are thus routed through localised channels, with community elders acting as mediators or interlocutors with the Taliban. The survey confirmed that indirect approaches are the most common, compared to the other three countries (45 per cent said their organisation uses this approach). Some organisations use an indirect approach because they have carefully determined that this is the best option (among a set of bad options), while others choose this route because they lack guidance on how to engage directly. The indirect approach was found to have significant limitations in communities with non-local opposition commanders.

In **South Sudan**, international staff are the ones most likely to conduct negotiations. Direct approaches are also the most common, compared to the other three countries. Aid actors are generally more open about negotiations, mainly because of the lack of designated terrorist groups and because Western governments do not support any one side of the conflict. Many larger agencies (UN, INGOs and the ICRC) maintain relatively strong capacities to negotiate, while OCHA also seeks to facilitate a coordinated dialogue. In some cases, aid agencies build on long histories of providing aid, preserving relationships with gatekeepers from years prior. Many INGOs rely on the integrated UN mission for air transport, security management and force protection for road convoys. This prevents them from fully capitalising on their relationships with armed actors to enable access. Whereas the ICRC, MSF and just a few other INGOs have access to their own air assets (and, for the ICRC and MSF, always seek to manage their security independently from the UN), many INGOs and NNGOs have trouble moving quickly to respond to new crises or adjusting their positions as security conditions change.

BOX 11. DO NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS CARE WHERE YOUR FUNDING COMES FROM?

In Afghanistan and Somalia, some organisations have opted not to take money from the US or other parties to the conflict (Afghanistan), or to take the UN or donor stabilisation funds (Somalia), in order to preserve their independence and to be seen by parties to the conflict as neutral and independent. Some Somali organisations reported that Al Shabaab leaders accept their programming only if they could demonstrate that it came from non-Western sources, particularly during the famine. On the whole, however, the evidence suggests that it is important not to assume that armed groups care about where an organisation's funding comes from or that they make the same political distinctions as one's organisation (between, say, Dutch stabilisation funding and Dutch humanitarian funding). Multiple examples from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria suggest that non-state armed groups have specific concerns, often at the very local level, that are not easy to predict; they are sometimes willing to look the other way if aid serves their purposes and they can do so while saving face (see Boxes 9 and 10 as well as Jackson, 2012 and 2016). For example, the Islamic State accepted American NGOs with American funding to work in territory under its control in 2015. Nor is it possible to hide one's funding sources by working through a partner or under a different name. Most armed actors have ways of easily obtaining information they deem relevant. One INGO in Syria, for example, reported being grilled by an armed actor about its partnerships in a completely different part of the country that the armed group knew all about, just to see if the INGO was being honest.

4.5 Programme quality and communication with affected people

This section examines whether improved programme quality leads to better access, and under what conditions. It then presents findings on how affected people perceived aid quality, grouped according to some of the key elements of 'quality' explained on page 16 of this report.

THE LINK BETWEEN QUALITY AND ACCESS

In some situations, delivering quality assistance – aid that is appropriate and meets people's needs quickly, safely and with dignity – is seen as enhancing an organisation's ability to sustain safe access. This applies mostly where there is relative cohesion between affected people and local armed actors, i.e., armed groups seeking the local population's support. In parts of South Sudan, for example, interviewees repeatedly cited their organisation's history in the area, or 'brand', as a reason that they are able to maintain safe access. This means that the communities trust the agencies for delivering quality assistance and staying with them over time. In such cases, there may be arrangements wherein local authorities warn them in advance of known military movements. Of course, such arrangements are not fool-proof, and aid groups are sometimes caught off guard when they think they have better acceptance and/or brand appreciation than they actually do.

The delivery of essential services can sometimes serve as a bargaining tool – albeit an uncomfortable one, given the principle of humanity.[32] This has been at play in both South Sudan and Syria with mixed effect. In Syria, a few NGOs (Syrian and international experiencing interference by an armed group unilaterally threatened to withdraw, relying on local communities to put pressure on the armed group to re-establish access. This approach worked especially well for NGOs with large-scale programming, that are well known (i.e. not operating with low visibility) *and* well-supported in their areas of operation. In South Sudan,

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[32] **Aid agencies have used this approach in the past, such as in Liberia (Jackson and Davey, 2014).**

some organisations collectively decided to suspend operations in an area in response to interference by local authorities and repeated looting. While the response had some positive impact, there were ethical challenges in that the approach was seen as a form of collective punishment. It also prompted a need to develop inter-agency triggers and benchmarks for re-entry. (see Haver, 2016 for further discussion of these ethical challenges). It also prompted a need to develop inter-agency triggers and benchmarks for re-entry. In the long-term, it may have had some negative results, such as a tendency to turn to withdrawal as the default option. (see Haver, 2016 for further discussion of these ethical challenges).

In a few cases, however, organisations assume linkages between local communities and parties to the conflict that do not exist in reality. In Afghanistan, for example, agencies tend to negotiate indirectly, through community elders or other interlocutors, instead of speaking with the Taliban or other groups. This indirect approach was not always effective. The challenge is not one of simply moving from 'passive' to 'active' acceptance, but ensuring that an agency is accepted by the right people. This entails negotiations with armed groups or gatekeepers who may create problems if not consulted, i.e., 'talking to everyone with a gun' (Egeland et al., 2010).

To the extent that security management approaches based on 'active acceptance' rely on false assumptions about linkages between armed groups and others in the community, they are unhelpful. Acceptance by local people does not necessarily mean acceptance by armed actors. This research notes many examples of tensions between the two: armed groups or local elites may attempt to divert large portions of aid from the people most in need, and vulnerable communities may lack ways to meaningfully exert influence on armed actors. Moreover, asking a vulnerable person to pressure armed actors to allow in aid may present the individual with an impossible choice: advocate for aid and risk his/her life, or get nothing at all for the community. Previous research on the promise of acceptance as an NGO security management approach has focused on a set of case studies that, at the time, were largely not active conflict settings (e.g., Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda in Fast et al., 2011), thus missing these issues.

While community outreach of all kinds is seen as essential for quality programming, it is not an effective substitute for outreach to armed actors. Satisfying the demands of vulnerable people and those of powerful actors can be especially difficult. Certainly, the quick and easy option is usually to acquiesce to the demands of the people with guns; besides entailing possibly unacceptable ethical compromises, however, this can erode one's access over time. In Somalia, for example, 'standing up' to corrupt and powerful actors is seen as a starting point for many good practices, from negotiating access on favourable terms to pushing for quality programming. But doing so requires considerable risk and effort on the part of staff and the organisation as a whole.

COMMUNICATING WITH AFFECTED PEOPLE
The SAVE research on accountability (Steets et al., 2016) found that the system remains biased towards upwards accountability in these four contexts. Others – such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance and the Communication with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) network – have also called attention to this dynamic. Despite recent investments in community feedback mechanisms, local communities in these four countries are unhappy with their degree of involvement. 85 per cent of people surveyed said they have never been consulted about the aid they received. The Somalis interviewed for this study reported that while there is a fair amount of consultation in the form of assessments and feedback mechanisms, there is little sense of a real dialogue (with one or two notable exceptions) and not much connection between these consultations and the nature of the programmes implemented. It appears to

be consultation for the sake of consultation, rather than as a means to build consensus or better target responses.

Aid agencies in all four countries are seen as relying too much on community leaders or 'gatekeepers', and tend not to involve the broader community throughout their projects. These problems – relating to communities, developing genuine participation that gets beyond self-appointed gatekeepers, navigating local politics and avoiding elite capture of aid benefits – are well known to affect both development aid and humanitarian action (see, e.g., Anderson, 2012). Our research does not show much evidence of innovative or in-depth approaches to tackle them, which suggests a need for further applied research and learning in this area. Because social ties and governance mechanisms are weakened, the challenges of ensuring the genuine involvement of vulnerable people become even greater during conflicts. But given how difficult this can be in insecure settings, there appears to be significant room for improvement in aid agencies' relations and communications with affected people.

Certainly, it is challenging for agencies to determine when local representatives are genuinely trying to act in people's best interests. In some cases, notably South Sudan and Somalia, the SAVE researchers had to work hard to hear views different from those promoted by gatekeepers, elders and other groups of people repeatedly used as the 'community representation'. In Afghanistan, many aid agencies work with Community Development Councils (CDCs), a unique category of community-based organisation originally established under the National Solidarity Program. These agencies see CDCs as an attractive option for participatory approaches and a means to engage easily with affected communities. However, they also carry risks of low-level corruption, lack of transparency and rigour (particularly in beneficiary selection), potential conflict insensitivity and aid diversion. A few agencies reported the need to very closely monitor the CDCs; when they did perform, they significantly enhanced the quality of aid, and when they did not, they significantly undermined programmatic quality. Not all villages are alike, and some CDCs are more willing to work in the public interest than others (Pain, 2015). Therefore, a strong understanding of the local context and power dynamics is indispensable.

BOX 12. AFFECTED PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF AID WORKER SECURITY

In all four countries, majorities of the aid recipients surveyed by phone or consulted in person said that they do not think it is dangerous for aid organisations to operate in their areas. In Afghanistan and parts of Somalia (including Mogadishu), a majority of respondents consulted in person felt that aid organisations in their areas – even foreign staff – are able to operate safely and that security is not a problem. This stands in stark contrast with the perceptions of aid actors – both international and national/local staff – of their own operational security in these districts. (Both Afghan and Somali staff often feel unsafe due to their association with aid organisations. For Somali staff in particular, pressure arises from their being known as having access to aid resources.) It is difficult to explain these two contradictory viewpoints: Do affected people fear that aid workers will not want to stay if they say it is dangerous? Have they become so acclimated to danger that they do not perceive it as a problem? Or do they simply have a high risk tolerance and think aid agencies should have the same? Regardless of the explanation, it highlights a disconnect between the views of aid organisations and those of affected people, and suggests the need for better communication.

SCALE AND RELEVANCE

Agencies reported finding it difficult to simultaneously use participatory approaches and reach large numbers of people at scale. In both Syria and South Sudan (where the conflicts are most dynamic), organisations frequently reported trade-offs between achieving scale and maintaining commitments to accountability and participation: reaching large numbers of people in insecure contexts across wide areas makes it difficult to listen to people, conduct good response analysis and design programmes in response to their needs. In all four countries, the aid delivered is found to be more rudimentary. This includes one-off, opportunistic distributions as well as very basic kinds of aid delivery, such as of food, shelter and hygiene items (Stoddard et al., 2016b).

Rudimentary programming means less relevant programming. People in all four countries reported in surveys that the aid they receive is often not what they need most. In Syria, people consulted in focus groups and interviews reported that in-kind aid is sold at high rates, in order to buy items that are more needed. Estimates vary, but the large majority of respondents observed that many people (between 30 and 70 percent) sell part of their aid and that some people (between 10 and 30 per cent) sell all of their aid.[33] Some items are received in quantities that are too large, while other items are distributed more frequently than required. In the Aleppo countryside, some of the food provided is frequently sold because it can be sourced or grown locally (e.g., grains, pasta, and lentils).

While insecurity and the need to cover a large area can make it difficult to tailor programmes to local needs, the reasons for avoiding cash and/or other more appropriate responses are not very good, since they can be done at scale. Across all four countries, cash-based responses are underutilised, relative to the presence of functioning markets in many areas and affected people's preference for this more flexible and lower-profile modality. In Syria, cash is also seen as one of the most efficient ways to reach besieged areas.

The widespread underutilisation of cash in insecure areas can be explained by multiple factors, including regulatory challenges (notably, for Syria, from the Turkish and Syrian governments and banks) and the greater perceived technical difficulty of cash-based programming. Perhaps most importantly, aid organisations perceive cash assistance to carry greater fiduciary risks – i.e., more prone to corruption and diversion – than in-kind assistance. In interviews, senior managers said they believe that the negative impact on the organisation – including reputational damage and the risk of no longer being able to receive funding from key donors – would be worse for the diversion of cash than food or NFIs. This is true even though food and NFIs are already being sold at high rates (as in Syria), and can be rebranded and redistributed by armed actors. Many Western donors (particularly the UK and the European Commission) are seen as encouraging the broader use of cash, while simultaneously insisting that there be zero (or near-zero) risk of diversion at the point of delivery, according to interviewees. Thus, there is a higher standard in place for cash and vouchers than in-kind assistance, especially at the outset of projects (see also Howe, 2016; Stoddard et al., 2016a, Barder et al, 2015).

BOX 13. IS ACCESS FOR SOME SECTORS EASIER THAN FOR OTHERS?

The SAVE research maintained a broad focus on health, food assistance and protection. It finds that protection work is rare and of scarcely greater scale than what takes place in more-secure settings, despite it seeming essential (Stoddard et al., 2016b; see also Niland et al., 2016). This is partly explained not only by insecurity limiting the ability

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[33] The question was unfortunately not asked in this same form in the other three countries, making it difficult to compare answers. The research in Syria was conducted last, and the formulation of this question was suggested by Proximity International, the research entity working in Syria.

of humanitarians to engage in more technical and presence-reliant activities, and also by the more general challenge of this not being a responsibility easily undertaken by humanitarians, in comparison to the relevant duty-bearers or peacekeeping actors. Protection programming to mitigate gender-based violence is especially challenging to conduct openly and safely. In Afghanistan, this also reflects widespread discrimination against women, while in other countries (Somalia and Syria), Islamist and other armed groups either prohibit such programming in areas under their control or insist on more-tangible forms of programming.

With some exceptions, health services are seen as more naturally impartial (needs-based) than distributions of food, non-food items and cash-based assistance. The latter are seen as having more universal appeal and hence greater potential for political instrumentalisation. Aid agencies see health care as the least controversial, i.e., the most straightforward activity for aid actors to negotiate with non-state armed groups for permission to conduct safely (Syria is the notable exception, in that health assistance of all kinds has been the target of Russian and government attacks and suspicion.) Several examples were given of armed groups accepting medical facilities to treat people wounded in war, since they could directly benefit from such work (e.g., in Afghanistan and South Sudan).

By contrast, many types of powerful people on the ground tend to see food and cash as more important to them, particularly in parts of Somalia and especially South Sudan, where need is high, even among armed actors and other gatekeepers. This makes negotiations lengthier and more complex, since more people feel they have a stake in the outcome, but this also gives aid organisations more leverage. Food assistance actors frequently withdraw and re-deploy, whereas health interventions require more continuous staff presence. Health care staff consequently tend to invest more in establishing good relations and sometimes see themselves as taking on greater risks than food assistance actors. However, food programmes do have to factor the security of supply stocks into their risk calculations, particularly in environments with dynamic or fluid front lines. Across all countries, aid staff perceived food and cash programmes, especially large ones, as more prone to theft and diversion than service-based aid programming, such as in health and education.

TIMELINESS

In all four countries, affected people and aid organisations reported slow response time to newly arising needs. This mirrors findings from other studies, including WHS, 2016 and ALNAP, 2015. The challenges of timeliness are due not only to insecurity, but also to insufficiently fast and flexible funding (see also Healy and Tiller, 2014; CBHA, 2013). Aid organisations with less restricted, earmarked funding are able to respond more quickly and flexibly to new needs. This included MSF and the ICRC as well as, in South Sudan, some of the larger UN agencies (WFP and UNICEF), which implement directly and own or have easier access to UN-owned air assets. Some national and diaspora NGOs in Syria are also able to respond more quickly and flexibly with funds from private donors, including individuals and Gulf-based charity networks. Various types of emergency response mechanisms – where UN agencies and/or international NGOs are pre-positioned with supplies and funds – are also seen as improving the timeliness of response in Afghanistan and South Sudan.

In interviews, affected communities said that the absence of agencies during times of greatest need creates a major barrier to building trust. In Somalia, many respondents said that if they had received aid in time, they would not have been displaced during the famine (see also Maxwell and Majid., 2016). More generally, in all countries, most people did not

perceive there to be a clear basis for determining when aid arrives; there is a sense of 'it just comes when it comes' or 'it comes if you are in the right place at the right time'. People expressed resignation and confusion about how the aid system works. In Somalia, aid is seen as most meaningful during an extreme crisis, such as the recent famine, when the need was absolutely clear, or during Ramadan, when aid had a religious and social meaning. Islamic charities are strongly associated with providing food annually during Ramadan, which seems to be appreciated for its predictability.

In Syria, aid is seen as slow to arrive in some rural areas that are far from the border and have weak communication capacities. One respondent reported that after his village in the Aleppo countryside was targeted by the regime's air forces, half of the population was displaced to agricultural lands: "We needed help and tents, but no one responded to our needs. [Recently more and more] relief NGOs [have come to the area], but before, [there was] none." Similarly, people in opposition-controlled Al Hassakeh reported that most NGOs are unable or unwilling to provide assistance during the most unstable times when help is most needed, such as during clashes with the Islamic State. In both South Sudan and Syria, the reliability of aid distributions is of particular concern. In some areas in South Sudan, people reported women falling sick from sitting for hours or days in the sun to wait for distributions to take place. After a cancelled distribution, five registered women consulted at an airdrop zone said, "We're going to sleep here under this tree tonight, even tomorrow if we have to, until we get food."

PHYSICAL SAFETY

In both South Sudan and Syria, affected people reported facing physical dangers while collecting aid. In South Sudan, the danger comes from traveling long distances. Both men and women felt threatened, though it was more of a concern for the women, as they are typically the ones collecting food: "It is very, very, dangerous. You must be young and strong to walk the 14 kilometres for food … You can hire a car to transport the food, but it is expensive. People can be killed on the way. You don't walk at night because there is banditry." Rural populations consistently ask that food and services be brought to the payam (sub-county) level. In an interview, a staff of one aid organisation in these areas reported that it had considered closer distribution sites, but deemed the environments too insecure. This highlights a significant tension between secure access for the recipient and for aid staff. Cash and vouchers, which are obviously less bulky and more discrete, can address these problems, when they are appropriate (i.e., when there are functioning markets and people feel safe receiving cash).

In Syria, aid actors frequently distribute aid locally or at the household level. In Aleppo and Hama, for example, people reported that regime shelling and airstrikes during aid distributions (large gatherings) pose a significant threat. This threat of course equally affects aid organisations (where their staff is actually present) and affected people. In Aleppo City, focus group participants said that "when family members go to distribution sites, we wait in fear until they return". As a precautionary measure, people dig trenches where they can hide if they are too far away from another type of shelter when airstrikes occur. To mitigate this risk, distributions are sometimes conducted door-to-door, staggered at different times, reduced in size or conducted in 'safe places'. Generally, people want to see more of this style of distribution. The downside is that such distributions are seen as limiting the visibility of the project and organisation, which also limits the awareness of non-beneficiaries who may deserve aid, but are not receiving it, due to bias or favouritism. Therefore, there exists a tension between delivering assistance safely and having a system that people trust. This can be addressed, however, by good communications and public awareness about how to apply for aid or how to complain if one is not on a list, while avoiding publicity about when aid will actually be provided and making distributions discreet and local.

5. Conclusion

Humanitarian action is an urgent and limited ethics of protection and assistance *in extremis* (Slim, 2015). Its core principle of humanity places the person above political concerns. Wars – particularly like those in Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria, where parties to the conflict regularly attack or obstruct relief efforts – create a swamp of political concerns that aid organisations must wade through in order to reach the people in need.

This study is based on extensive interviews with affected people and aid staff on the frontlines of conflict, as well as surveys, document reviews, workshops and cross-checking of information with multiple sources. The research finds there are clear reasons why some organisations achieve better access than others, even if such access does not always turn into widespread presence. A key feature is focusing on the goal of reaching those most in need, rather than simply executing programmes in reachable areas. This mindset can be found in a small range of national and international organisations – non-governmental ones as well as those from the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and the United Nations. As an ethos, it is particularly effective when combined with a deep understanding of the political 'swamp' surrounding the organisation. This means identifying the key power-holders – from local gatekeepers to UN Security Council members – and understanding how they may influence the organisation as it carries out its mission. Unrestricted funding and independent logistics can enable such operational independence by allowing organisations with the right mindset to take on higher-risk programming.

When lives are at stake, money and assets will go missing. They will be stolen, extorted or given up through compromises made in order to get access. This is inevitable. The humanitarian mission – living up to the principle of humanity – is all about the art of finding acceptable compromises. Practices such as paying for access and granting concessions are widespread and simply part of the reality of delivering aid in war zones. Confronting these dilemmas more head-on would empower local staff to speak more freely about these practices. Most organisations lack structured ways of thinking about ethical risks as well as balancing out risks (security, fiduciary, reputational etc.) with criticality, or level of acute need. This negatively affects both people's access to assistance and the quality of aid provided.

In critical situations, one needs to tolerate a higher level of fiduciary risk from those who have the ability to reach people safely. Blanket assumptions that national or local organisations are more corrupt or biased are not justified by the evidence collected here. Such organisations are often essential for access, and partnerships with them require a longer-term and more serious approach. The humanitarian sector also needs to be clearer about the value-added of international or diaspora staff who cannot safely interact with people in need, and to focus more energy on investing in the skills and capacities of those staff who can.

For people caught in the midst of war, aid organisations often seem distant and perplexing. They do not communicate well and are not flexible enough to meet the most urgent needs. They often work with or through the wrong people (power-holders with little interest in helping the most vulnerable) and fail to monitor properly. As a result, bias, favouritism or corruption often prevents the neediest people from receiving help. These problems are

generally not the result of strategic compromises taken to enable access; rather, they arise from agencies prioritising accountability to donors over investing in systems and practices to improve accountability to the people they serve. Project-specific, earmarked funding can impede the latter.

Fortunately, the evidence suggests that investing in quality aid and combatting corruption can pay off. Aid that is relevant to people's needs and meets these needs quickly, safely and with dignity can result in better access in the long-term. This is mainly true where there is a high degree of coherence between armed actors and local vulnerable people, which is only sometimes the case. Too often, however, aid agencies do not sufficiently understand or engage with the armed actors around them, leaving local staff to make difficult choices in a cloud of secrecy. This fear and hesitance are particularly marked for groups under political or military attack by Western donor governments.

The evidence collected here suggests that the humanitarian community needs to be more honest – within organisations, between donors and organisations, and even with the general public in donor countries – about the realities of helping vulnerable people in war. Sometimes agencies make justifiable compromises, and sometimes they are inappropriately influenced by political actors. Knowing the difference between the two is an important starting point of making sure that people suffering in crises can access the help they need.

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