
What It Takes: Enabling access and quality aid in insecure environments

This briefing note summarises the main findings of the SAVE research programme on humanitarian access and quality programming.

In several of the world's largest conflicts, aid agencies struggle to reach people in need. Insecurity and interference make it dangerous for aid workers to operate, and for local people to access assistance safely. To work around these problems, agencies often deliver assistance remotely or through partners, but this creates additional challenges in ensuring that assistance is appropriate and effective.

To deepen the evidence base on this topic, Humanitarian Outcomes and partners conducted the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) study in 2013-2016. The study involved in-depth field research in the four most dangerous settings for aid operations: Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria. This briefing paper summarises the key findings of a [longer report on 'what works' for enabling access and quality](#) humanitarian assistance in insecure contexts. The research involved hundreds of consultations with affected people, aid organisations, authorities, donors and the private sector as well as an online survey and country-level workshops. A full methodology can be found [here](#).

Only a small number of organisations operated in the most dangerous areas in the four countries, and they were not enough to meet demand (see the [SAVE presence and coverage report](#) for more detail). In each country a slightly different constellation of aid organisations achieved relatively good access – notably the Red Cross movement, and national and local NGOs, as well as a select number of INGOs, and three UN humanitarian agencies. The wide variety among organisation types suggests that specific practices in specific contexts make a difference, rather than just an organisation's identity, funding or mandate.

Based on rigorous literature reviews, we identified the following as 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.

The research concludes that multiple factors, not just one or two, determine whether an organisation can enable access and deliver high-quality assistance under difficult circumstances. The most important are summarised below.

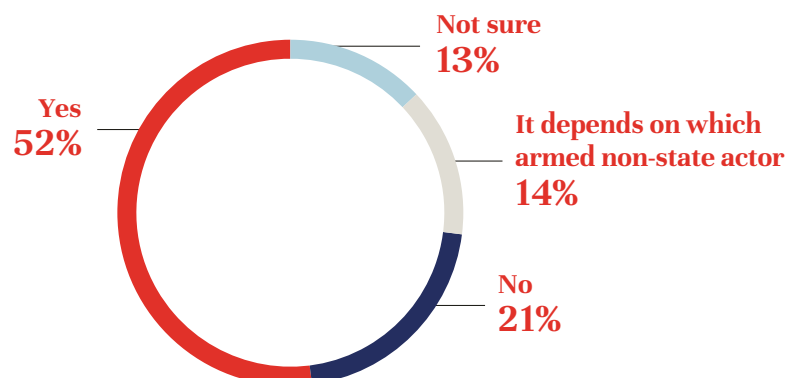
1. Cultivating operational independence. Across the four countries, organisations that achieved good access tended to have strong internal ‘triage’ cultures (at global and country level) driven by the humanitarian goal of reaching people most in need – rather than simply executing programmes in reachable areas. This ethos was particularly effective when combined with a strong understanding of the political environment, including pressures from actors on the ground, within the region and in donor capitals. Unrestricted or less restricted funding and independent logistics also gave different types of organisations, small and large, more flexibility in programming choices and approaches, enabling them to work in higher-risk areas.

Many organisations’ decisions about where they could work within particular countries were strongly influenced by concerns about diversion. There was a particular focus on preventing diversion in areas where terrorist groups of concern to government donors were active – notably Al Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State in Syria. This suggests a need for agencies to review their funding options for their operations in high-risk contexts in order to preserve independence (recognising that independence is not an end in itself but an operational stance aimed at ensuring that humanitarian action is not diverted from its purpose of alleviating suffering).

2. Understanding that part of being principled is making compromises. In all four countries, paying for access and granting concessions were commonplace, yet remained taboo as a subject of discussion. Common practices included 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 were sometimes essential for maintaining access, but often it was not possible to say whether they were justified because they were not discussed. While aid agency staff understood the need to make difficult choices, they rarely framed these dilemmas in the language of humanitarian principles (MSF and the ICRC were exceptions). Rather, they retained an idealistic and at times dogmatic understanding of the humanitarian principles. Local-level staff interfacing with local stakeholders and encountering ethical dilemmas often received insufficient support, due to a culture of silence around compromises (see the [SAVE resource paper on ethical decision-making](#) for more on these issues).

3. Engaging strategically with armed non-state actors in order to negotiate access. A related finding is the need to approach negotiations carefully and strategically. The study found, however, that there is a limited skillset for, and understanding of, the core elements of successful negotiations in these settings. Many field staff said they were uncertain about whether contact with non-state armed groups was even allowed.

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?



While examples of good practice were found each country, especially among a handful of INGOs accustomed to working in conflicts, they did not reflect a consistent organisational approach. MSF and the ICRC, by contrast, had invested in engaging in regular dialogues with parties to the conflict. Their flexible funding facilitated this by allowing more time for building relationships and contextual understanding.

There were also clear links between the degree to which aid agencies felt comfortable negotiating with specific armed non-state groups and the views of host and donor governments towards these groups. Combined with the lack of policy and practical guidance on this topic, this fueled a sense of secrecy and a tendency to delegate negotiations (if they took place) to field staff, without questions asked. Inter-agency negotiations were often helpful for setting broad ground rules or engaging at senior levels, but were not a substitute for strong bilateral relations with key stakeholders at the local level (see the [SAVE negotiations resource paper](#) for more on this topic).

- 4. Hiring the right type of national staff,** and investing in staff and partnerships. The type of national staff working for an organisation makes a significant difference for access and quality. The research found that organisations often did not focus on the right qualities. They were most successful when they selected national staff who possessed relevant personal networks (beyond just the appropriate clan or ethnic identity) and the integrity to negotiate for an impartial response. Equally important was building trusting and open relationships within teams. While many organisations hired highly local staff as a way to gain access, especially in Syria and Afghanistan, this often reduced aid quality and slowed responses to newly arising needs, especially when combined with a low-visibility approach. International agencies that invested in the quality of their partnerships with national actors also had better opportunities to enable access. 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 – was found to be an important factor in successful partnerships.
- 5. Managing corruption risks and involving people in the design of aid programmes.** The evidence suggested that there is significant room for improving the quality of assistance by designing programmes in more participatory ways and communicating better with affected people, even in high-risk environments (see the [SAVE accountability and learning report](#) for more detail). Aid that people viewed as appropriate and meeting their needs safely and with dignity resulted in more local support. Where there was relative cohesion between affected people and local armed actors, such local support translated to more acceptance from armed groups, and communities were motivated to do what they could to protect aid organisations.

Local people interviewed in three of the four settings reported that certain types of corruption, notably bias and favouritism, were major impediments to receiving aid. These problems were most severe in Somalia and Afghanistan, where community power holders or gatekeepers reportedly misused aid assets for patronage purposes. Senior staff showed insufficient awareness of these practices, particularly in Syria, where the gap between the views of affected people and of (Turkey-based) staff members was the largest among the four countries. In all four countries, there were widespread assumptions that national organisations were more biased, non-neutral and prone to corruption than international ones. But in Somalia and Syria, where partnership was most common, affected people and aid actors at the local level did not report that national NGOs were more susceptible to corruption or bias; international organisations were equally affected by such problems.

Affected people also reported facing physical dangers while collecting aid, especially in South Sudan and Syria. Door-to-door or local-level distributions were found to lower this risk, although mitigating measures were necessary to manage the cost and insecurity for aid actors.

WHAT WORKS?

Several practices can help organisations 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 nuanced understanding of humanitarian principles and ethical risks, including incorporating these ideas into risk management frameworks and staff trainings;
3. Provide staff (especially local) with clear policy guidance, support and training on negotiations;
4. Take the time to develop a strong 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 support the integrity of the programme and manage corruption risks;
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 interagency level:

1. Provide more unrestricted funding to aid agencies in order to facilitate operational independence and appropriate risk-taking;
2. Bring donors into dilemmas, making them shared problems and encouraging a shared approach to solutions, rather than having agencies absorb all the risk (this should include questioning or clarifying how to manage counter-terrorism policies if they result in a partial response, and the implications of 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.

FULL REPORT

For more information and to cite this work, please refer to the full report: Haver, K. and W.Carter (2016) "[What It Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments](#)", report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments research programme: [SAVEResearch.net](#), Humanitarian Outcomes, October.