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SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS SAVE

The effects of insecurity on humanitarian coverage

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Acronyms

ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AWSD	Aid Worker Security Database
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
IO	international organisation
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IVR	interactive voice response
NFI	non-food item
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NNGO	national non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
POC	protection of civilians
RCM	Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement
UN	United Nations
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene

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Executive Summary

In a small number of crisis-affected countries, humanitarian organisations work amid active conflict and under direct threat of violence. This insecurity, attested to by rising aid worker casualty rates, significantly constrains humanitarian operations and hinders the ability of people in emergencies to access vital aid. How and to what extent this happens is unknown, in part because humanitarian operational presence itself has never been measured.

To assess concretely the impact of insecurity on humanitarian response, the 'Secure Access in Volatile Environments' (SAVE) study conducted field research in four of the world's most insecure operational settings – Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria. The objective was to measure humanitarian field presence relative to the level of need in the particular contexts (i.e. humanitarian coverage), and to determine how this coverage was affected by security conditions.

The SAVE researchers gathered primary data from humanitarian organisations in each context on their field presence and activities for the current and prior years of operation. The resulting datasets represent the most detailed measures collected to date on humanitarian deployment. In addition to this quantitative data, the team conducted 275 interviews with humanitarian practitioners and oversaw the collection of over 3,000 survey responses from affected populations in the four countries, which provided important contextual information and perspectives. The field research was supplemented by global data on demographics of the affected populations, humanitarian funding and organisational response.

The results of the study show that humanitarian operations are highly determined by security conditions and that coverage of humanitarian needs in war zones is even lower than it might outwardly appear, as aid organisations will typically remain in the country, even after suffering attacks, but will reduce their field presence and adopt new, often suboptimal, operational models to continue programming.

Specifically, the research found that:

Humanitarian organisations respond in smaller numbers to insecure contexts, compared to more stable contexts. Considerably fewer humanitarian organisations were seen to respond to highly violent, conflict-driven emergencies, irrespective of funding available and the needs of the population. Globally, the countries with the highest number of aid worker attacks had the lowest number of aid organisations responding per $100 million in funding and vice versa. On average, countries with no aid worker attacks had more than four times the number of organisations engaged in the response. In addition, certain specific international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tend to be among the major operators across all of the high-insecurity settings. They represent a subset of the largest (and some midsize) international humanitarian organisations, and their efforts are joined by a different constellation of national organisations in each context that often can achieve better access to certain areas than can their international counterparts.

Insecurity dictates where aid agencies operate within high-risk countries, resulting in unequal coverage of needs. Humanitarian operations were seen to cluster in more secure areas within these countries, irrespective of the relative level of need of the local populations. (The exception was capital cities, where aid organisations had their headquarters, despite high numbers of attacks on aid workers in those areas.) Moreover, a path dependency was observed where security-related decisions in programming led to 'access inertia', where agencies, once they had contracted their presence, had stronger incentives to remain in their comfort zone than to try to expand their geographic and programmatic reach.

Insecurity limits technical complexity and targeting of aid. Security conditions not only drive where, but what and how aid agencies deliver. The organisations willing to operate in highly insecure settings are often able to absorb casualties without halting work or fully withdrawing from the countries in question. However, they reduce their activity levels and adapt the types of activities and their programming modalities to mitigate the risk. Remote management, programming through partners, and/or one-off, opportunistic distributions become predominant modes of humanitarian action in these insecure settings. This amounts to more basic aid delivery (e.g. food supplies and non-food items such as hygiene kits) and fewer projects requiring technically intensive inputs and eyes-on monitoring. Absent a sustainable presence or security guarantees, agencies reduce programming targeted to particular vulnerable groups; prioritising the neediest in a location can be difficult. These limitations could be seen as well in the small amount of programming occurring in the protection sector in these contexts – scarcely more than what takes place in more secure settings – despite the high need for this type of programming in these settings.

Affected populations surveys confirm under-covered geographical areas and needs. People surveyed among the affected populations perceived the aid presence to be declining in their immediate areas. Only in Somalia and in one province in Syria did majorities perceive an increase in the number of aid organisations operating. According to respondents, the most commonly provided form of assistance, food aid, met the most urgent needs in only a portion of the contexts. In South Sudan, people said their most urgent need was for protection, and in Syria, a large portion of recipients reported that the aid they received did not address the most pressing needs, and they were hoping for more diversified/flexible forms of aid (e.g. cash or vouchers). Survey responses also revealed a widely divergent perception and understanding of the risks to humanitarians, with majorities in all four countries expressing the opinion that it was not dangerous for aid organisations to operate in their area.

Policies of donor governments can be counter-productive to getting aid to insecure areas, resulting in de facto partiality in humanitarian coverage. Donor governments play a complex and at times problematic role in shaping humanitarian presence and coverage. Agencies' neutrality, impartiality and independence – core humanitarian principles – have been threatened by funding strategies and regulatory frameworks that have the effect of discouraging programming in opposition-held territories. In each case of civil conflict, coverage was proportionally greater in areas under government (or Western-allied) control.

These results suggest that humanitarian response in these contexts is both more durable and more limited in scope and reach than it might appear to policy makers and the general public. Certain humanitarian organisations (far fewer than needs warrant) have been able to remain operational in countries undergoing active conflict, despite the high risk of targeted violence. But they have done so at the cost of the core humanitarian principle of impartiality, i.e. prioritising those most in need. Without diminishing the achievements of humanitarians who work in dangerous places at great personal risk, it is important to recognise that **aid organisations have incentives to appear more present than they actually are, which can obscure the reality that widespread needs are going unmet.**

In the conclusions to this report, we suggest three areas for action. The first is to increase operational transparency for a more accurate picture of coverage. Inter-organisational systems for reporting and compiling presence data could help illuminate the currently obscured coverage gaps, revealing a more accurate picture of the human costs of conflict. Second, organisations should prioritise filling these gaps and improving coverage by proactively identifying or helping to organise additional entities or mechanisms (e.g. community-based, commercial, religious, other) that could potentially deliver aid where no traditional aid actors are present. Third, donors need to consider the fact that, intentional or not, aid looks politicised in these settings. More robust humanitarian waivers and financial/legal exemptions will be critical to prevent the de facto politicisation of humanitarian coverage.

Effective provision of humanitarian relief aid is difficult under the best of circumstances. In highly insecure environments, it is not surprising that coverage of needs is patchier, and politically skewed. The task of this first component of the SAVE project was to clearly illuminate the extent of this coverage problem. Subsequent components tackled the problems of how aid organisations maintain access and achieve quality and accountability in programming in these most challenging environments.[1]

[1] See Haver & Carter, 2016; Steets et al., 2016.

1. Introduction

Research to date has confirmed widely held views that high levels of insecurity change the way aid agencies operate in a country, limiting their scope and reducing the amount and types of aid they deliver (Schreter and Harmer, 2012; Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard et al., 2011). This dynamic and its cumulative effects for aid operations on the ground have not been empirically measured, however, leaving significant knowledge gaps about the actual and potential reach of humanitarian responses in violent conflict settings. Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) directed the first phase of its research to this problem: How does insecurity affect humanitarian coverage, in concrete terms?

This report presents findings from two years of field and global-level research. It is intended to provide an empirical foundation for discussion of how to deliver an effective humanitarian response amid high levels of insecurity and to inform other aspects of the SAVE research, which seek to enable organisations to maintain meaningful access and quality programming amid high levels of insecurity, and effectively monitor these programmes.

1.1 Violence against humanitarian actors and operations

International humanitarian law[2] specifically proscribes violence against 'the Red Cross and other humanitarian organisations'[3] and accords protected status to their facilities and activities during armed conflict. Notwithstanding these rules of war, aid personnel and operations frequently come under attack in conflict settings, as belligerents use them as proxy targets, revenue sources, and convenient tools for terror or propaganda purposes.

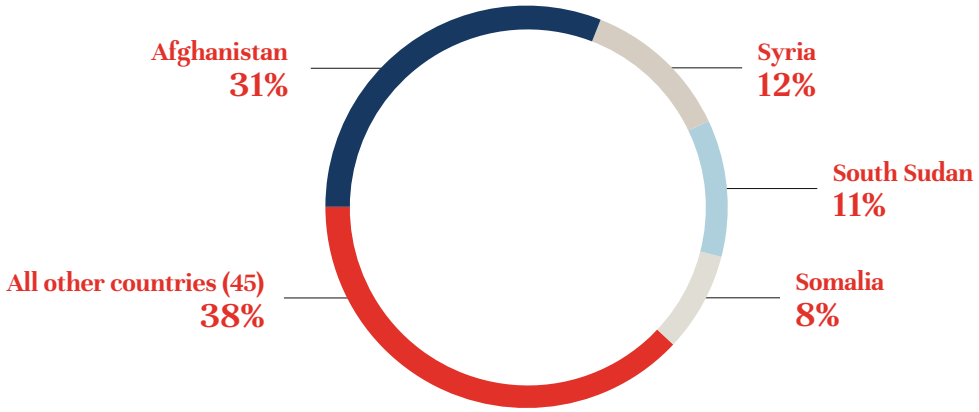
Over the past decade, major attacks on aid workers (defined as incidents in which aid workers were killed, kidnapped or seriously wounded by deliberate violence) have also risen (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015). Although the estimated population of aid workers in the field has also increased (Stoddard, Harmer, Haver, Taylor, & Harvey, 2015), the growth was not as sharp as the rise in incidents, meaning the global rate of attacks per aid worker in the field has also gone up.

This does not mean that humanitarian work has become globally a more dangerous enterprise. Rather, the increase in casualties has consistently been driven by a small number of highly violent contexts, less than 10 per cent of the humanitarian emergency caseload each year, which together account for over 60 per cent of all such attacks. For the past five years, these were Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan and Somalia (Figure 1).

[2] Includes treaty and customary law as codified in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols I and II of 1977. https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions

[3] https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201125/volume-1125-I-17512-English.pdf

FIGURE 1:
Attacks on aid workers in case-study countries relative to total, 2011-2014



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org

These four countries were selected for study because of their status as the most insecure environments for humanitarian operations. All are enduring civil conflicts involving armed non-state actors and asymmetric warfare tactics with serious impacts on local populations, over whom the warring parties rival for control. And in all of them, aid workers have been subject to both direct and collateral violence that have claimed more than 800 victims since 2011 (Table 1), of which 277 lost their lives.

TABLE 1:
Attacks on humanitarian operations by case country, 2011-2014

	Afghanistan	Syria*	South Sudan	Somalia
Total incidents	242	92	82	63
Total victims	491	139	114	108
International staff victims	37	19	16	14
National staff victims	454	120	98	94
Shooting	58	12	28	33
Kidnapping	97	26	5	10
Bombing	49	20	0	10
Other/unkown	38	34	49	10

**Note: casualty numbers in Syria may be higher than these figures reflect, due to difficulty in tracking and reporting from that country.*

Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org

Of course, each conflict context has unique characteristics and conditions that shape the nature of the threat environment confronting aid workers, and they are not insecure in equal measure or in the same ways. For example, even though Afghanistan has the highest absolute numbers of attacks, the rates of attack and aid workers killed in Syria per capita make it a more dangerous context for humanitarian action overall. Similarly, although Somalia had a lower number of security incidents affecting aid workers than South Sudan, the rate of violence and lethality of tactics was considerably higher (Table 2).

TABLE 2:
Relative insecurity levels in the four contexts, 2011-2014

	Syria	Somalia	Afghanistan	South Sudan
Attack rates*	7.9	5.6	6.8	1.4
Lethality of attacks**	71%	92%	58%	49%
Fatality rates***	3.2	2.5	1.7	0.5
Insecurity ranking	1	2	3	4

** Aid worker victims (killed, kidnapped, or wounded) per 1000 in the field*
*** Percentage of attacks involving at least one fatality (indicative of severity of means/tactics used)*
**** Aid workers killed by deliberate violence per 1000 the field*
Sources: Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security Database (aidworkersecurity.org) and SAVE project internal database

1.2 Terms and definitions

People in Need. The proportion of an emergency-affected population in need of humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian Access. The degree to which affected people are able to reach, and be reached by, humanitarian aid.[4]

Humanitarian Presence. A measure of the combined humanitarian inputs – organisations, activities and personnel – in a given operational setting at a given time.

For our calculation of presence, we included **sustained programming presence** (i.e. organisations with staff *in situ* implementing assistance activities) and **continuous support** (e.g. monthly deliveries of medical supplies to a clinic).

[4] This accords also with General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which refers to humanitarian access as a two-pronged concept: humanitarian actors' ability to reach populations in need, and affected populations' access to assistance and services.

One-off deliveries, often targeting a population on the move or in a hard to reach area where a window of opportunity temporarily opens, were not counted. This is not only because comprehensively tracking these with real accuracy would be impossible, but also for the simple reason that a population receiving only one or two deliveries of aid (while not discounting the value of this action) cannot be said to have been significantly supported by the humanitarian response over the course of a protracted conflict.

Humanitarian Coverage. The level of humanitarian presence relative to the people in need in a given area.

In an ideal scenario, humanitarian coverage would be measured not by aid presence over people in need, but by the percentage of people in need actually being served by that aid presence. This is not yet possible due to the fragmented nature of the humanitarian system, where multiple independent actors serve small, often overlapping, subsets of the affected population and where the methodology for enumerating people in need varies from one emergency context to another. Therefore, 'high coverage' by this reckoning does not necessarily amount to 'quality coverage'. In other words, it is possible for an agency to have a large staffing footprint and programme of activities where aid is not targeted to the right people or does not meet their main needs.

1.3 The problem of measuring humanitarian presence

Measuring the impact of insecurity on the humanitarian response requires determining the size and shape of the humanitarian footprint in each country. Unlike military deployments, however, the humanitarian response to an emergency is not unified and readily measurable. Rather, it comprises the loosely coordinated efforts of often hundreds of autonomous organisations taking largely independent decisions on where and how to operate. Through the cluster coordination system, the UN Office of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) has been able to produce maps of 'Who's Doing What, Where' in many countries that show which coordinating agencies are working in certain sectors in different geographical areas. While useful, these '3Ws'[5] maps typically do not give a sense of the magnitude of each agency's presence and activities or the extent to which they are covering people's needs.

Presence data is even more difficult to derive in highly insecure settings. Aid organisations[6] are often reluctant to share information on their presence and activities due to a combination of security and reputational concerns. They may face conflicting pressures to keep their specific locations and activities quiet for the security of their staff and programmes on the one hand, and on the other hand to exaggerate the extent of their presence for funding public relations purposes, demonstrating to donors and the general public that they are capable of going where needed. Humanitarian coordination mechanisms (OCHA and the sectoral or 'cluster' lead agencies) nominally have the primary responsibility to obtain and compile this information, but the results are uneven at best. With the actual size of the humanitarian footprint largely unknown, how it may shrink and/or reconfigure in situations of heightened insecurity, and what this means for the affected population, is unclear.

A good deal of humanitarian literature has been devoted to the problem of 'humanitarian access' (OCHA, 2010), including the constraints created by insecurity (Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, 2011; Steets, Reichhold & Sagmeister, 2012), humanitarian negotiations with armed actors (Jackson, 2014; Maurer, 2014), and the impacts of sanctions and counter-terror regimes (Burniske, Modirzadeh, & Lewis, 2014; Pantuliano, Mackintosh, Elhawary & Metcalfe, 2011). These are descriptive of the impediments to humanitarian presence but little in the literature describes the nature of the overall humanitarian presence itself.

[5] In some countries this set of information is now known as '4Ws' or '3/4/5 Ws' ('Who Does What, Where, When and for Whom').

[6] Throughout the report, we use aid 'organisations' or 'agencies' to denote the broad spectrum of formal entities providing humanitarian assistance. Where the distinction is germane, we qualify 'UN agency' 'international NGO', 'national NGO', etc.

2. Methods

The research consisted of (1) primary data gathering at field level in the four contexts, (2) global-level data compilation and analysis, (3) key informant interviews, and (4) surveys of the affected populations. Quantitative methods included statistical modelling and regression analysis. The results of quantitative analysis were contextualised and interpreted in light of qualitative information gleaned from interviews with humanitarian practitioners and the perspectives of the affected populations sampled in surveys.

2.1 Data gathering

FIELD-LEVEL

The study identified and recruited field-based researchers for each of the cases to serve as 'secure access monitors' (SAMs). Their assignment was to collect data on the number of humanitarian organisations, activities and personnel at the subnational level (by province/region and where possible by district) for 2014 and prior years of the conflict. This was done by first collecting existing compiled data from the UN Humanitarian Coordination Office (OCHA), followed by making direct inquiries of each of the agencies at country-level headquarters. The SAMs then cross checked these numbers by means of sub-field-level research networks. Table 3, below, summarises the field research activities.[7]

TABLE 3:
Field researchers and activities in the focus countries

Country case	Research activities
Afghanistan	• **National level.** 35 interviews in Kabul, telephone consultations and participant observation in UN and NGO fora. • **Field level.** 47 interviews and verification reporting in Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, and Uruzgan.
Somalia	• **National level.** 34 formal interviews in Nairobi and Mogadishu. Approximately 365 agency contacts at headquarters and field level. • **Field level.** Triangulation/verification reporting from southern regions: Bay, Bakool, Baidoa, Gedo, Lower Juba, Lower Shabelle.
South Sudan	• **National level.** 84 interviews in Juba, participant observation in UN-NGO fora • **Field level.**Verification in Jonglei and Unity states.
Syria	• **National level** (regional and cross-border hubs). 93 interviews in (and remotely from) Amman (Jordan), Gaziantep/Antakya (Turkey), and Beirut (Lebanon).

[7] More detail can be found in the SAVE Study Interim Report, 'Component 1: Mapping Humanitarian Access and Coverage Trends', 1 May 2015 (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files /Component_1_summary.pdf).

GLOBAL-LEVEL

Global-level data compiled for the study included humanitarian funding figures from 2006–14 drawn from the UN Financial Tracking Service (www.fts.unocha.org), which was also used to determine broad trends in sectoral and organisational response. In addition, we collected country-specific data on demographics, numbers of emergency-affected people, and insecurity indicators. These are detailed in Section 2.6.1 'Data Variables'.

2.2 Key informant interviews

In all, 273 semi-structured interviews were conducted with humanitarian practitioners in all four contexts and at the headquarters level. The interview questions were designed to elicit information on current and past activities and operational presence levels, perceptions of insecurity, and the decision-making processes around initiating and changing field programmes.

2.3 Affected population surveys

Surveys of local populations served as additional pieces of evidence to triangulate humanitarian presence information, as well as to glean residents' perspectives on security in their area and the barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance. Remote, mobile phone surveys, using 'interactive voice response' (IVR) technology were used in Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan. For Syria, the team decided that the potential for surveillance of mobile phone communications represented an unacceptable risk for respondents, and instead the study collaborated with a regionally based research partner, Proximity, to undertake in-person household surveying.

Survey findings were treated with modesty in respect to their significance. The remote survey method cannot guarantee randomness given the less than universal mobile phone ownership and coverage in these countries. Nevertheless, the target number of respondents for each country was 267, which would be the sample size required for the national populations at a 95% confidence level with a confidence interval of 6.

Somalia: The SAVE study partnered with SoukTel, which ran the survey for South Central Somalia and reached the target number of responses. To ensure that the population in and around Mogadishu (more likely to have cell phones) was not oversampled, the SAVE team requested SoukTel to run an additional 'callout' to the respondents to confirm their locations. The results showed the survey to be acceptably dispersed geographically, and the lesson was learned to include more specific location information in the South Sudan survey.

Afghanistan: The Afghanistan telephone survey, run for the study by GeoPoll, garnered 771 responses from the targeted provinces of Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Helmand, Paktika and Uruzgan. Due to consolidated mobile phone network coverage throughout the country, calling mobile phone users at random relatively easily allowed a sample to be gathered that was larger than the target.

South Sudan: Due to difficulties discussed in the next section, to reach the minimum sample number of respondents, the South Sudan IVR survey ran longer compared with those in the other countries. It was targeted both to the worst conflict-affected states of Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglei and to displaced populations currently residing in the capital, Juba, with an

additional question included to determine their place of origin. The survey achieved a total response number of 277.

Syria: Proximity's enumerators in Syria targeted six geographical areas within the country to achieve a balance of response between urban and rural residents; from those living in territory controlled by different factions (i.e. Syrian government, ISIS, Kurdish forces, and non-ISIS opposition) and from respondents with varied accessibility to aid and levels of insecurity.[8] Targeting every third house in each area for randomisation, 1,998 household surveys were completed in Aleppo (urban and rural), Deir Ezzor, Hama and Damascus.

2.4 Statistical analysis
Data variables

HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE

The dependent variables for analysis were the data collected by the SAMs on the numbers of organisations, projects, and personnel at the subnational level in each of the four countries. The problem of missing presence data (in particular, spotty personnel data at the subnational level) was addressed through the application of two different estimation techniques for the purpose (Osborne, 2013; Little & Rubin, 2014). First, we ran the primary regression analyses discarding those observations and then we applied multiple imputation procedures to address the potential shortcomings of this approach.

AFFECTED POPULATION AND PEOPLE IN NEED

Subnational population data for the countries in our sample were drawn from different sources, selected for best reliability. For Afghanistan, we used data from NATO's Civil-Military Fusion Center, which has subnational population data for the period 2010–13. Using this data, we predicted values for missing years using a simple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. For regions in Somalia, we took United Nations Development Programme estimates. For South Sudan, we used state-level data from the National Bureau of Statistics South Sudan for the year 2011, and used the population growth rate to extrapolate for subsequent years.

Estimates of the number of people in need of aid (PIN) at the national level were taken from UN Strategic Response Plan/appeal documents.[9] As mentioned in section 2.5, disaggregated PIN estimates were not available at the subnational level for most countries, so we used this national PIN figure to calculate the proportion of the population in need nationally and then calculate corresponding subnational figures for the four countries by applying the ratio to the subnational population. For Syria, the PIN numbers by governorate were available in UN documents (UN OCHA, 2014), and these were found to correspond nearly exactly with the results of our formula for estimating.

[8] Highly insecure areas had experienced damage to water and power services in the last three months, were close to military frontlines (less than 2 kilometres for urban and 10 kilometres for rural populations), or in the last three months had undergone a change in who controlled the area.

[9] The SAVE study originally piloted a new standardised methodology for estimating people in need that would be comparable across contexts and more specific than a severity scale: It took the number of people affected by acute malnutrition (using GAM rates) and adding it to the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). After soliciting input on the methodology, however, it became clear that neither GAM nor IDP data were reliably available for the years and countries in question, particularly at the subnational level. We've thus reverted to the simpler minimum estimate used often by UN humanitarian country teams, which is to take the highest number of affected people reported in any single sector in strategic planning documents.

INSECURITY

The independent variables were the number of major attacks occurring in the subnational regions in each country. Two datasets provided data on these variables: the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), which tracks killings, kidnappings and serious injuries of aid workers by violence from 1997 to the present, and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),[10] which collects broader numbers of violent incidents and targets, and as such, provides an indicator of generalised violence and instability in an area irrespective of the humanitarian response.[11] We use the AWSD data when illustrating the particular threat environment for aid operations. For the analysis of the relationship of aid presence to insecurity, however, using the GTD data as the variable was more appropriate, since it is more statistically independent of aid presence. Summary statistics for the entire dataset (all countries) are displayed in Table 4.

TABLE 4:
Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Organisations	14.381	17.412	1	110	367
Projects	49.498	61.686	1	371	235
Personnel	469.756	1323.541	1	10637	193
Population in Need (Estimates)	184508.797	237204.872	0	2575000	518
AWSD Incidents	1.342	2.107	0	15	518
GTD Incidents	23.385	35.435	0	336	371

2.5 Limitations

The study met with several – largely expected – challenges to amassing humanitarian presence data for each of the four contexts. Even with field-level researchers in each field context systematically inquiring agency by agency, the availability of presence data was limited. Reasons for this included organisations' genuinely held perceptions of security risk, weaknesses in record keeping, and concerns about public image. Despite data anonymisation and confidentiality protocols used by the SAMs, they were not able to overcome some organisations' sensitivities around sharing operational information. This was particularly the case for Syria, were only 63 per cent of the known humanitarian organisations agreed to share their information and of those only a few did so at the requested level of granularity (i.e. staff and projects by district). There was more willingness to share in the other country contexts, but high levels of turnover and a lack of systematic personnel record keeping by many agencies, particularly for past years, resulted in data gaps.

[10] AWSD can be found at aidworkersecurity.org and GTD at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

[11] Incidents included in the GTD consist of 'the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation' (http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf accessed 22 December 2015).

Finally, reputational concerns appeared to cause a reluctance to be transparent about how limited some reported operational presence actually was. The result was a lack of reliable data on humanitarian presence prior to 2011 (not needed for South Sudan and Syria but sought for the longer-running crises of Afghanistan and Somalia), and only partial availability of staffing numbers from 2012–14 for all countries. Means of addressing these limitations in the quantitative analysis are described in the next section.

The affected-population survey also faced some limitations in terms of what it was intended to achieve. Despite the use of a female voice on the interactive recording asking the questions, designed to increase the willingness of women to participate, the gender balance skewed heavily male (overall roughly 70:30 per cent, male:female). This likely not only reflects the reluctance of female respondents but also the gender imbalance of cell phone ownership in the countries.[12] The South Sudan survey, also conducted by Souktel, faced lengthy delays due to a low response rate. SoukTel and in-country contacts considered the main factors hindering response to be limited English skills among much of the population outside Juba (translating the survey into a language other than English, the country's official language, did not make sense because more than 60 indigenous languages are spoken in South Sudan); unfamiliarity with or fear of the IVR survey tool among those whose phones were randomly called; and weak coverage and cellular network disruptions caused by the government, including periodic intentional shut-downs of cell towers.

Additional methodology details and limitations were outlined in the interim report and can be found at www.SAVEresearch.net.

[12] However, when the SAVE study used in-person consultations for later components of the study an imbalance remained, possibly due to the reliance on male researchers in some contexts and due to the limited number of women willing to work in deep field, insecure locations in these countries.

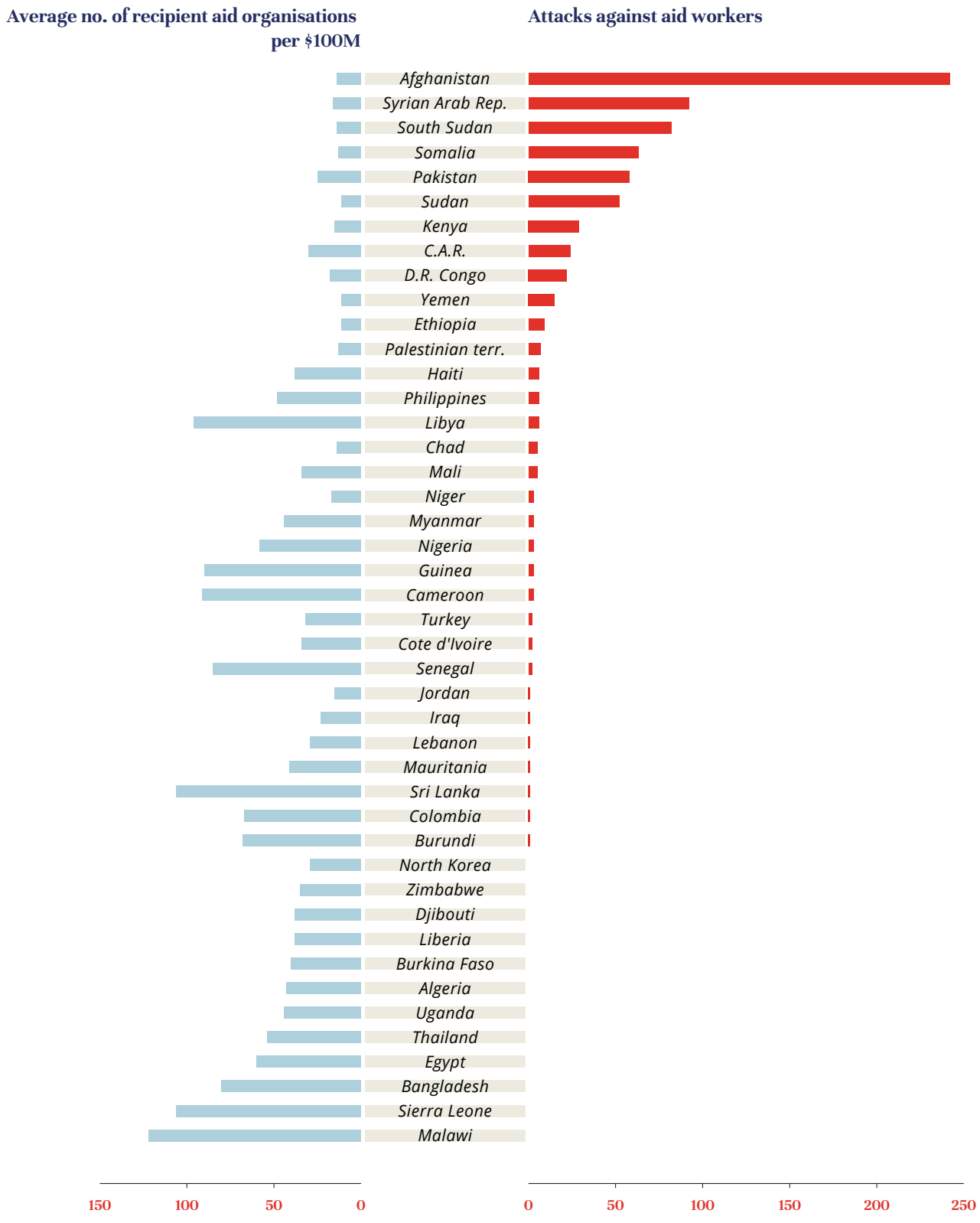
3. General findings

The study sought to identify general patterns of humanitarian response in insecurity, both across all four cases and in comparison with other humanitarian emergencies.

3.1 An overall smaller pool of humanitarian responders in insecure countries

Globally, the data show that larger numbers of aid organisations respond to emergencies in more secure settings, for instance to natural disasters in politically stable countries, than in places where conflict and violence are a present threat. Using the reported humanitarian contributions recorded by Financial Tracking Service (FTS), we see that, per $100 million in funding, the number of organisations responding in low- or no-violence emergencies was, on average, four times higher than in violent ones. Topping the list of most insecure with the smallest relative organisational presence were the four focus countries of this study (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2:
Comparison of emergency responses by insecurity and presence, 2011-2014



Sources: Aid Worker Security Database (aidworkersecurity.org) and FTS (fts.unocha.org)

What this suggests in practice is a relatively small group of humanitarian actors operate in the highest risk locations. We tested this mathematically by using the presence data gathered by the SAMs in the most dangerous provinces within Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan and generating a ranked index of 'most present' organisations in each country and across the board.[13] For each country, the higher the index, the more widespread the organisation's presence relative to the average for the regions in question. Summing them up across the countries lets us know which organisations have the most widespread presence in high-risk environments generally. [Note: In keeping with the anonymisation of collected data to which the study committed to with its subjects, the organisations will not be named in this or other SAVE study publications.]

TABLE 5:
Index of aid organisations most present in high-insecurity areas (anonymised)

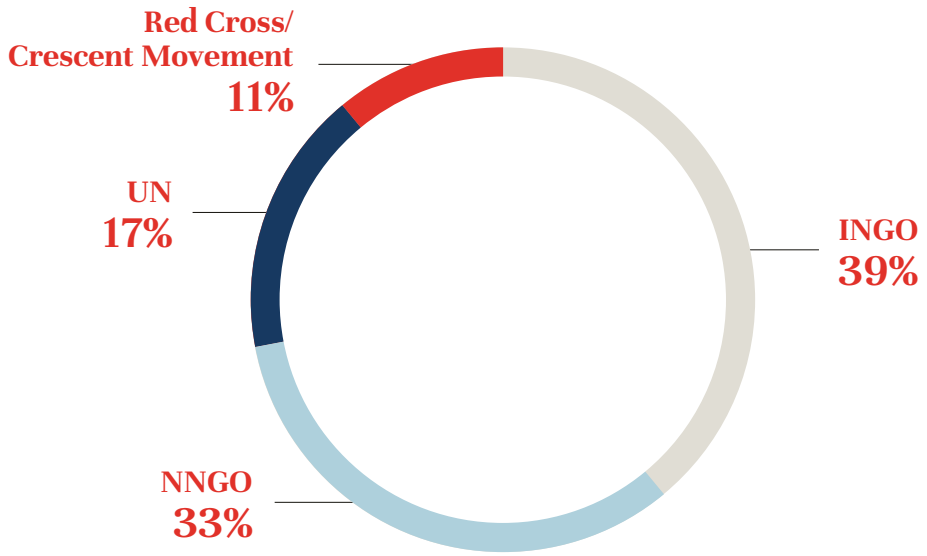
Rank	Presence index	Type
1	11.57074317	INGO
2	9.047547341	RCM
3	8.111730602	UN
4	6.664764343	NNGO
5	6.664764343	RCM
6	5.812206312	NNGO
7	5.710687716	INGO
8	5.666393849	INGO
9	5.096303292	INGO
10	4.724192025	UN
11	4.140942171	NNGO
12	4.134403139	INGO
13	3.568850692	UN
14	3.381402543	INGO
15	3.080811766	NNGO
16	2.626648868	NNGO
17	2.559321824	INGO
18	2.374266651	NNGO

[13] Data indicators used, depending on their comprehensiveness for each country, included personnel numbers and the number of districts within a province that an organisation was active in. We excluded organisations that had no presence in any of the countries (i.e. those working completely through partners). After generating ranked indices for each country, we normalised the measures so we could aggregate across countries. A different ranking technique was used for Syria, due to incompatible presence indicators, and results were later compared to the index.

What this exercise revealed:

- In each country, national NGOs are operating in the most dangerous areas, achieving high enough presence index rankings that despite being operational only in their own countries, they rank among the humanitarian actors able to achieve the most presence in highly insecure areas (see Figure 3 and Table 5).
- In addition to the Red Cross/Crescent movement, a small number of specific INGOs – under a dozen – consistently rank among the most present in the most dangerous locations among all other international aid providers.
- The most present INGOs all tend to be among the largest by budget size, but they include a diversity of national identities, both faith-based and secular.
- Three UN entities are also among the top 20 organisations 'most present' organisations in each country. However, this is more often in a coordinating capacity rather than a direct operational role, so their presence is often limited to a single office and relatively small number of personnel.

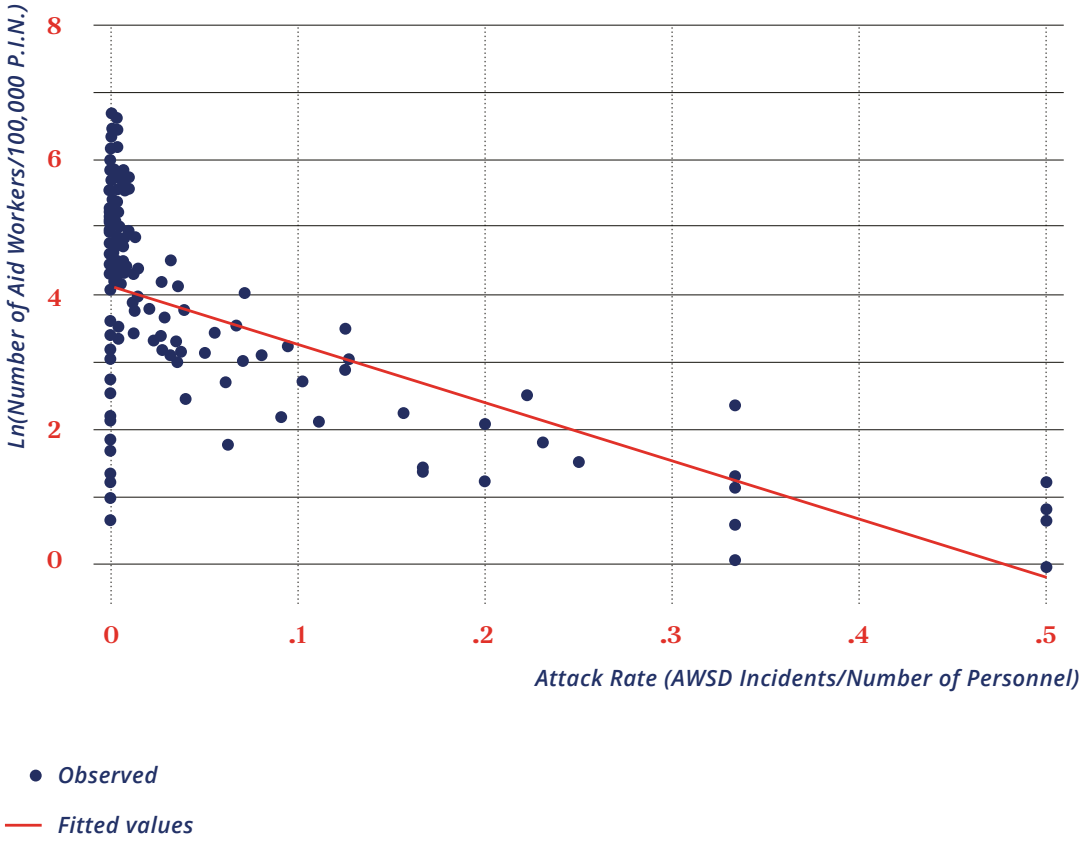
FIGURE 3:
Top 'most present' humanitarian actors



3.2 Statistical analysis

Using the data on humanitarian presence we gathered in the four countries, we investigated whether it was possible to show a statistically significant relationship between insecurity affecting aid organisations and the level of aid coverage in a given area. Our hypothesis was that these two variables would be negatively correlated (i.e. that an area where aid workers have been attacked would have a smaller humanitarian response). And indeed, in plotting aid worker attack rates (number of AWSD-recorded incidents/number of aid personnel) against coverage levels (number of aid personnel/100,000 people in need), we do see a pronounced negative relationship (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4:
Humanitarian coverage and aid worker attack rates



This would appear to show a very clear negative relationship between high insecurity and low humanitarian coverage, that is, the higher the degree of insecurity, the lower the level of humanitarian coverage of people in need. However, this simple bivariate relationship cannot be taken as proof, for reasons that are not immediately apparent. First, regions with larger aid worker populations may be likely to experience greater numbers of attacks in general simply because the aid presence offers potential targets. Second, as the number of aid workers in a region increases, the attack rate falls by construction, holding the numbers of attacks constant. This realisation called for a more principled and diligent approach to the analysis if results were to have sufficient rigor.

To get around the circularity problem of using aid worker attacks as our measure of insecurity, we instead used the data on a broader range of violent incidents and combat from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)[14] as our independent variable. And to make the coverage figures comparable across all four cases, we set different baselines for each country using fixed effects. Then, using OLS (ordinary least squares) regressions, we attempted to measure the statistical impact of violent incidents on the level of humanitarian coverage at the subnational level. Results from that analysis were inconclusive, however (i.e. they did not pass the test for statistical significance).[15]

[14] https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/. The GTD collects violent incidents committed by non-state actors for political/coercive purposes and includes a wide range of asymmetric warfare tactics.

[15] We also did time series analysis, once again using OLS regression to estimate the impact of insecurity on humanitarian coverage in a given year, controlling for coverage the previous year. Preliminary results from the analysis showed a negative, statistically significant (albeit substantively small), effect of insecurity on projects. However, the slope coefficients on some of the lagged measures were statistically indistinguishable from 1, suggesting we had run into a unit root problem, common in time series analysis.

The inconclusive results illustrate the difficulty inherent in performing statistical analysis on observational data (as opposed to a controlled experiment) due to confounding factors in the strategic and operational environment. These results certainly do not prove that insecurity does not have an impact on humanitarian coverage, but rather that it is obscured in formal models by the existence of other factors and drivers, such as the strategic behaviour of both aid groups and armed actors. First, humanitarian organisations are likely to operate in areas that have been affected by conflict, due to the resultant needs of civilians. Second, militant groups are likely to increase the 'supply' of violence in areas where humanitarian actors gravitate, given that they can be attractive targets.

Additionally, non-state armed groups are unlikely to engage in violence in areas where they have already consolidated control. Humanitarian actors may avoid these areas, however, perceiving themselves to be under threat of potential attack. However, a simple observational study would suggest these areas are safe and that humanitarian coverage is low. Comparing these regions to government-controlled areas where humanitarian actors are present (and which may be targeted by anti-government militants) would generate a misleading finding: namely a positive relationship between insecurity and coverage.

Finally, the humanitarians' perception of risk also speaks to another confounding element, which is the 'stickiness' of security-driven operational decisions. Agencies in insecure environments tend to remain in locations and programming modalities where they feel comfortable, and have strong disincentives to expand into the unfamiliar. In part this is because there is inherently greater risk involved in being new to an area where you have not yet had time to forge acceptance with local populations and conflict actors. But there is also an observed behaviour in organisations (Stoddard, Haver, & Czwarno, 2016), reconfirmed by security professionals interviewed for this study, in which they will more readily raise the assessed risk level in response to new incidents than lower it their absence. (How much time must pass since the last attack before one can confidently say the risk has decreased?) The elevated vigilance result in what looks very much like a path dependency, and at times inertia, of many agencies working in long-term insecure contexts.

Notwithstanding the lack of definitive regression results, the effects of insecurity on humanitarian coverage and operations can still be quantitatively (and qualitatively) observed, as the following sections will show.

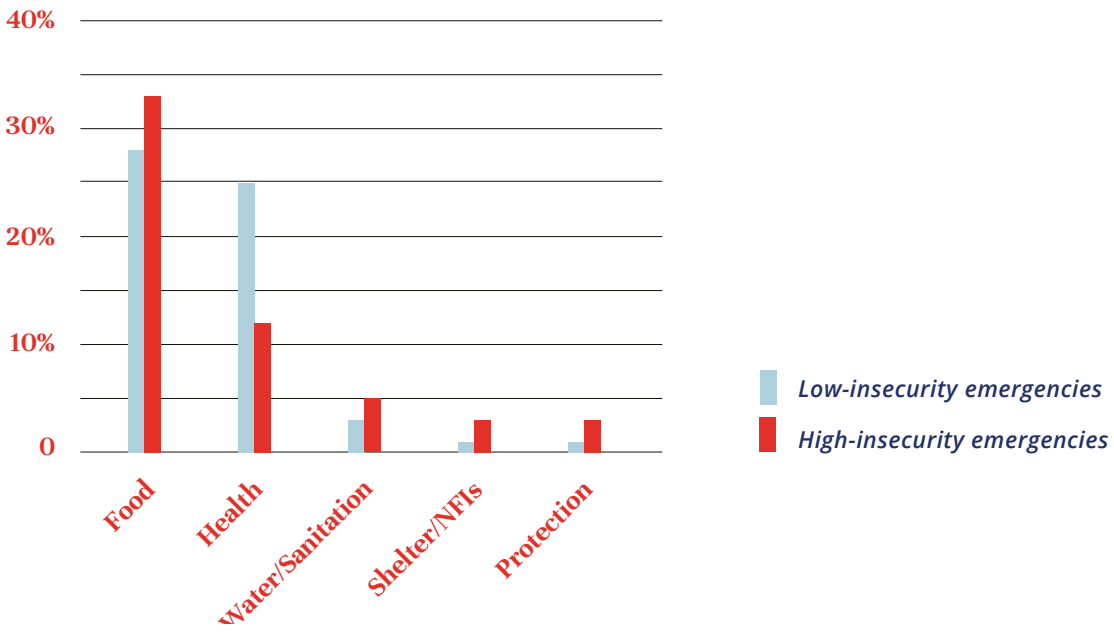
3.3 Insecurity-induced limits on the numbers and types of programmes

Humanitarian activities run the gamut from the simplest distributions to highly complex and technical programmes. Getting data at the necessary level of granularity to differentiate between the types and complexity of different humanitarian projects is extremely difficult. However, global statistics on humanitarian funding do break down activities by project within broad sectors (food, water, heath, etc.), and we can use these figures to see patterns in types of programme between low and high insecurity countries.

We compared activities and funding per sector during 2011–14 between the emergency-affected countries with the highest insecurity (our four focus countries, plus Pakistan, Sudan, CAR, DRC and Yemen – which had aid worker attacks numbering in the double digits) and the lowest insecurity (Algeria, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Liberia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Thailand, and Zimbabwe – all of which had zero attacks reported against aid workers during the period) (Figure 5). This showed that the more insecure countries had higher relative percentages of funding going to food and shelter/non-food items (NFI) distributions than the secure ones. Insecure settings also saw lower relative percentages of funding going to the health sector, which typically requires more technically complex programming requiring skilled personnel and sustained presence.

That protection activities have a higher proportion of total funding in insecure environments than secure ones is not surprising, but given the incidence of violence against civilians in civil conflict settings, one would expect the difference to be much greater than the figures show. This can also be explained by insecurity limiting the ability of humanitarians to engage in more technical and presence-reliant activities. The findings for the water and sanitation (WASH) sector are less easily explained. On the one hand, some of this programming can be highly technical, requiring experts and access, which would lead one to expect it to be proportionally lower in insecure contexts than secure ones. However, in many cases the WASH sector category includes very basic distributions of 'hygiene kits' that require no more technical capacity than the distribution of food or shelter items. This, we suspect, explains the higher proportion of WASH funding in insecure environments. In addition, in some highly urban conflicts such as in Syria, the ICRC and other agencies have prioritised support to rehabilitate the main supply lines, working with local authorities.

FIGURE 5:
Funding by sector as a percentage of total contributions, 2011-2014



Source: FTS (fts.unocha.org)

Interviews with aid workers in the four contexts strongly supported the quantitative evidence that not only do relatively fewer organisations operate in insecure areas, but also the scope of the programming they were able to carry out was curtailed. For instance, aid organisation personnel reported that they were less able to specifically target more vulnerable groups than they would normally consider optimal. A less stable presence on the ground often means relying on intermediaries for distribution planning and beneficiary lists, reducing the ability to prioritise the neediest among the local population. Cultural injunctions, against certain programming for women and girls in areas of Afghanistan, for instance, were often cited as posing too high a security risk for organisations to go against. In large areas of South Sudan and parts of Syria, a large portion of programming was limited to mobile deliveries as opposed to static programming with a sustained organisational presence.

If insecurity limits technical complexity and targeting of particular vulnerable groups, medical programming, particularly hospital services and trauma care, were seen to garner greater acceptance in the subfield regions considered the most dangerous. The reason for this is simply that they are needed and desired by all warring parties in the conflict, as well as the local population – though this has not rendered them immune from targeted attacks and collateral violence. This may explain why INGOs with proven capacity to run this type of technical medical programming, even though a small minority within the global INGO community, are among the organisations ranked highest on the presence index. The fact that they are few in number means that they can only cover a fraction of the total needs in any context, of course, and the organisation that has been able to gain access to the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan was still working in only three of the country's 34 provinces.

3.4 Affected-population survey findings

Research and evaluations of humanitarian action, particularly in insecure settings, have only very rarely focused inquiry on the recipients of aid and their communities. To the extent that the perceptions of these populations are sought, it has most often been in the context of a humanitarian organisation getting feedback from its own beneficiaries on specific projects. Remote telephone surveying in particular is still in its infancy in the humanitarian sphere, but has the potential to yield important information about various aspects of humanitarian response writ large. The results of the surveys conducted for this study (by remote telecoms in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia, and South Sudan and household canvassing in Syria) both helped to support some of the quantitative findings on humanitarian coverage and revealed that perceptions of insecurity and access challenges diverge between humanitarians and the people they serve. For many questions, the results varied both between countries and locations surveyed within countries (discussed in the country-specific findings in the next section), but a few overall themes emerged as well.

PERCEIVED CHANGES IN AID PRESENCE IN RECENT YEARS: MORE DECLINE THAN GROWTH

Afghans and South Sudanese reported seeing fewer aid organisations working in their area in the past three years than had been there previously. In South Sudan, the perceived decline was starker, reflecting the cessation of many development-oriented aid projects that had been running before the outbreak of violence and evacuation of personnel. This decline in aid presence was also the dominant perception among Syrian respondents in all areas except Aleppo, which had seen the number of aid operations increase sharply in conjunction with stepped up cross-border operations from Turkey.[16]

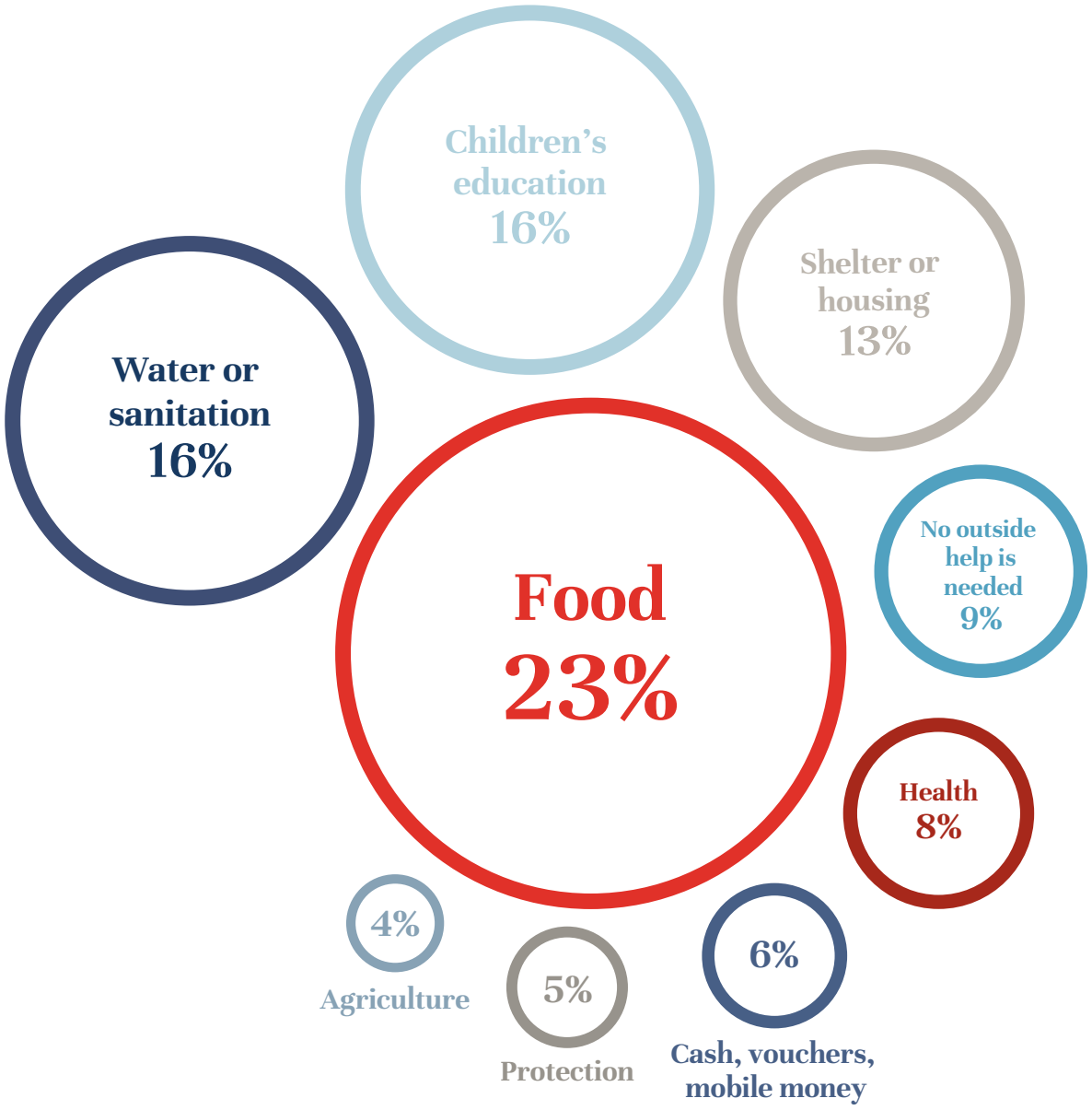
[16] The surveys were conducted from May through August 2015.

South Central Somalia respondents, conversely, reported seeing an increase in the number of aid organisations, likely reflecting the 'redeployment' of UN agencies and some INGOs in response to the famine that was declared in mid-2011, after years of very low presence.

TYPES OF AID NEEDED AND PROVIDED

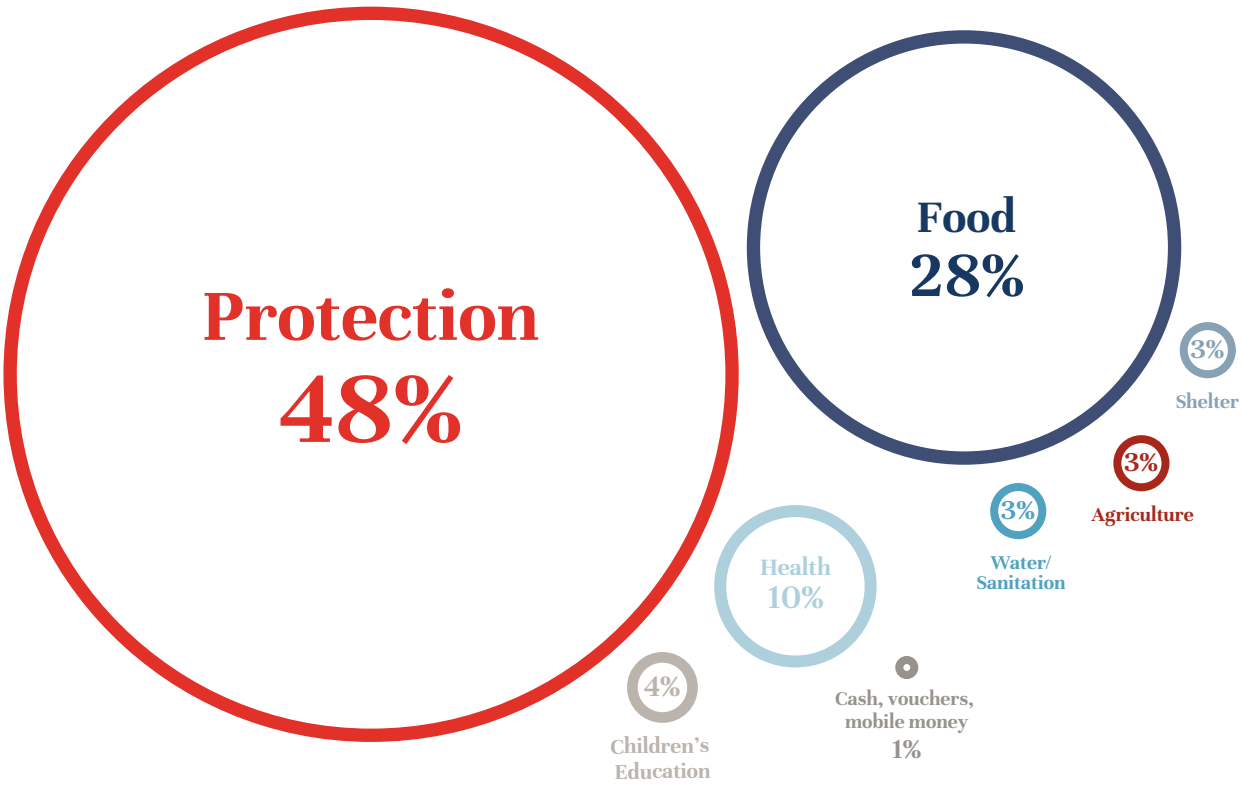
Food aid was cited most often as the most urgent need by affected people in all countries except South Sudan, where more people reported protection as their first priority, with food coming second.[17] Children's education, though often not considered a basic humanitarian provision, ranked high as a priority need, particularly in Syria and Afghanistan.

FIGURE 6:
Type of aid most needed – Afghan responses



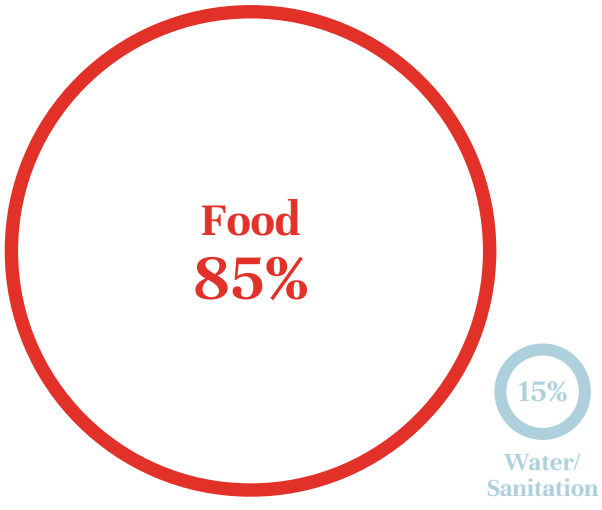
[17] It should be noted that South Sudanese respondents were most likely not referring to the protection programming typically provided by humanitarian organisations, but rather actual physical protection from violence.

FIGURE 7:
Type of aid most needed – South Sudanese responses



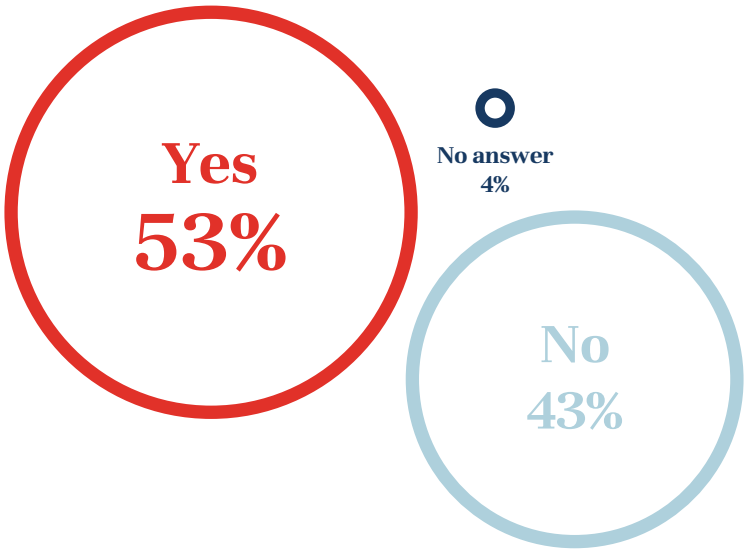
In Somalia, respondents were much more unanimous in terms of the type of aid most urgently needed. For a large majority (85 per cent) it was food, and for the remainder it was water/sanitation assistance.

FIGURE 8:
Type of aid most needed – South Central Somali responses



In Syria, where in-person surveys allowed a more nuanced breakdown of the question of needs, people were asked about the greatest needs for different groups. Respondents cited food as the greatest need for women, education for children, and cash for men. Numerous respondents cited an excess of food aid baskets and a desire for a greater diversity of aid, or preferably cash, so they wouldn't need to sell portions of their food to meet other needs. In general, far fewer recipients reported receiving cash assistance than food and hygiene items, health care, and water/sanitation assistance. When Syrian aid recipients were asked if the aid they received addressed their most urgent needs, a significant proportion of them (43 per cent) answered 'no'.

FIGURE 9:
Relevance of aid to Syrians
Syrian responses: Was the aid you received what you most needed?



DIVERGENT VIEWS OF INSECURITY FOR HUMANITARIANS

Majorities in all four countries agreed on only two points. The first was also the most surprising and counter-intuitive: Respondents were mostly of the opinion that working in their location was not dangerous for aid organisations. This of course is in direct contradiction to aid organisations' perceptions (and what aid-worker casualty figures seem to support). Only in two subnational areas – Helmand, Afghanistan, and Aleppo Syria – did majorities agree that aid groups faced specific danger; in all others and overall, most respondents answered 'no' to the questions of whether operating in their location was dangerous for aid organisations. This does not mean that most respondents failed to acknowledge violence and insecurity in their region; in fact they were seen as posing general impediments to people's ability to access aid (Figure 10). What this does suggest is that the people surveyed did not perceive a specific, direct threat against humanitarian workers and organisations.

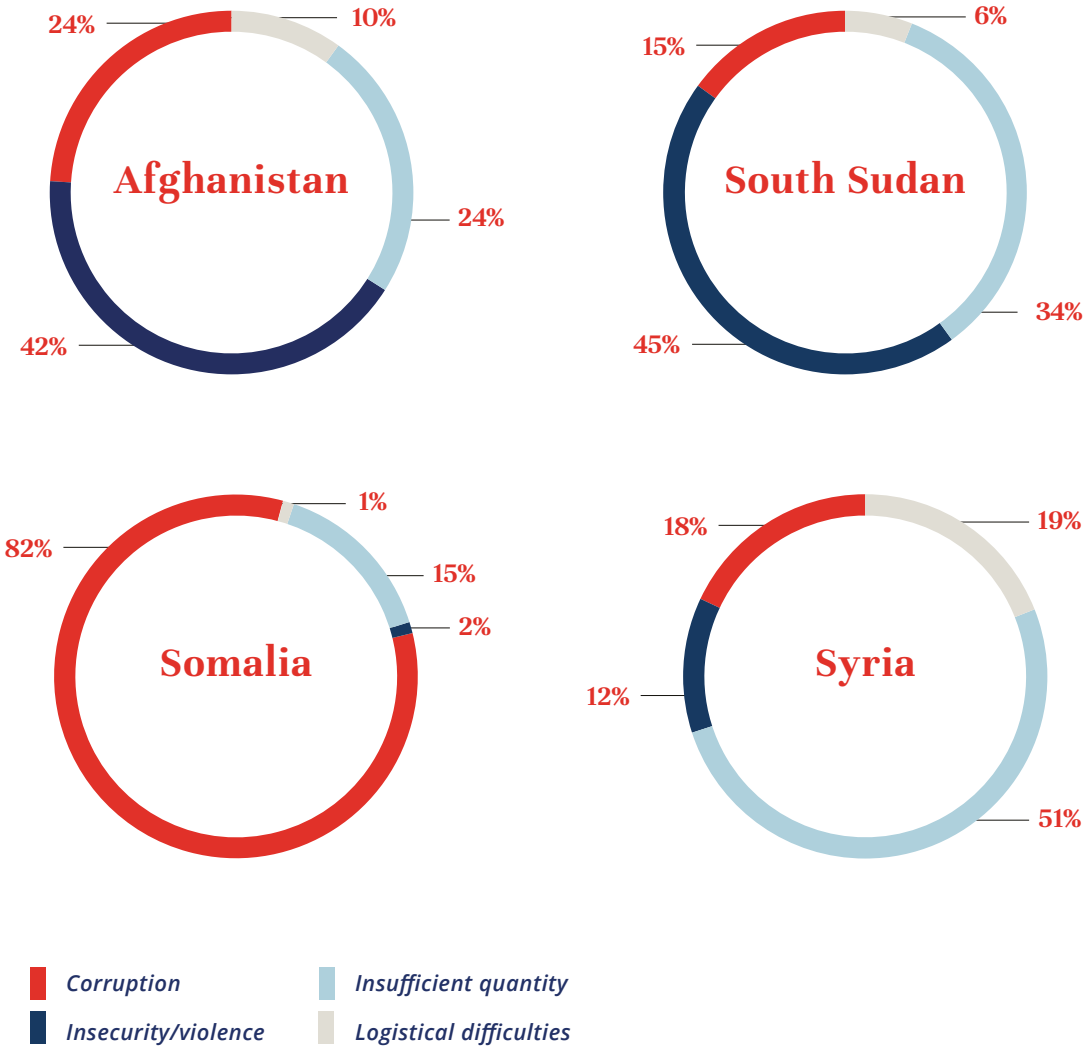
The dramatic difference in perception might also reflect the greater distance and difficulty of forging meaningful dialogue between humanitarian organisations and local communities in insecure settings. Other surveys of affected populations have established that they are rarely consulted by humanitarian organisations in decisions regarding aid programming (Stoddard, Harmer, Haver, Taylor, & Harvey, 2015).

This was affirmed in these surveys, in the second point on which findings in all four countries were uniform: Large majorities (65–94 per cent) reported that locals in their area had not been consulted by any aid organisations about their opinion of the aid being delivered (a finding further explored in the SAVE Component 3 forthcoming final report).

THE OBSTACLES TO AID, AS PERCEIVED BY AFFECTED PEOPLE

Despite not perceiving aid organisations to be at risk, affected people in some countries nevertheless cited insecurity generally as a major impediment to accessing aid. Afghans and South Sudanese cited insecurity as the number one obstacle to aid in their areas. For Somalis it was the second largest impediment, after corruption. In Syria, most people felt that their biggest problem in terms of accessing humanitarian aid was simply that not enough of it was coming in.

FIGURE 10:
Perceptions of biggest obstacles to aid in the four countries



4. Operational and policy implications in the case study countries

The interviews of humanitarian practitioners and the surveys of affected populations can add greater depth and contextual detail to the access-related findings. Perhaps the strongest overall conclusion from interviews across the four contexts is that security concerns, more than any other factor, determined where, when and what sort of programming aid organisations implement. Security of access, more than high levels of need or availability of funding, determines where aid organisations go and where they can remain, resulting in clustering in certain areas inside countries. This is manifested both directly, as in Afghanistan where the direct targeting of aid workers prevented agencies from expanding to new provinces, and indirectly, as in South Sudan where ambient security concerns (i.e. the fear of combat ensuing/recurring) prevented investment in the facilities and logistics capacity necessary to maintain a sustained aid presence in field locations.

4.1 Adaptive programming paradigms

The threat profile, political environment, and donor interests that humanitarian actors must navigate are specific to each context and have resulted in different modes of adaptive programming. While there are exceptions in every case, it is possible to discern a general pattern or operational model for the humanitarian response that has emerged in each place (summarised in Figure 11).

FIGURE 11:
Prevailing operational models in the four contexts

Afghanistan	Somalia	Syria	South Sudan
↓	↓	↓	↓
Low-profile and highly localised	Programming through partners	Cross-border/remote mobile deliveries	Rapid response/ mobile deliveries
↓	↓	↓	↓
'Access inertia' and constraints to speed/types of programming	Fiduciary risk, leading to additional presence losses	Lack of information-sharing and coordination	Costly and scattershot coverage

In each of the operational models shown in Figure 11, humanitarian organisations have found a way to continue programming but, as we will see in the discussion below, each also entails significant downsides and results in uneven coverage of humanitarian need across each country.

4.2 Afghanistan

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Three years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban re-emerged as a significant armed insurgency and began to gain ground, particularly in the south and east. The national government has been unable to extend control across many large, mostly rural parts of the country or gain the allegiance of populations isolated by rugged geography and alienated by widely perceived government corruption.

Ranked third from bottom of least developed nations (UNDP, 2015), Afghanistan has been receiving international humanitarian aid for longer than the current 15-year civil conflict has been going on. The consensus of the humanitarian actors interviewed, and reflected in their official planning documents (UN OCHA, 2013), is that needs are most severe in the south and southeast of the country, where fighting has displaced tens of thousands, exacerbated pre-existing malnutrition, and disrupted immunisation programmes. In addition, the southeast also hosts large refugee populations from Iran and Pakistan. Despite gains made in some development sectors during the post-Taliban period, humanitarian needs in many places have not abated, and in others have increased, due to intensifying conflict and newly occurring natural disasters and refugee crises.

The number of major attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan began rising steeply in 2003 and since 2010 has been the highest, in absolute numbers, of any humanitarian context, year after year (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015). The most common form of attack is kidnapping, typically settled by the intervention of community leaders with the safe release of victims after a few days. Although this now-commonplace practice makes the lethality of aid worker attacks on the whole lower than in other places, Afghanistan has also had a relatively high number of 'complex' attacks employing sophisticated weaponry and explosives, that are highly lethal. The internationalised nature of the conflict, with the presence of Western troops and foreign jihadist fighters, has meant that aid workers can serve as convenient and potent proxy targets for those seeking to strike against the national government and the Western world political order more broadly.

HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE

A large influx of humanitarian organisations into Afghanistan following the US invasion in the early 2000s levelled off in the middle of the decade. The data gathered in Afghanistan show that, countrywide, the humanitarian organisational presence has not changed significantly since 2006, fluctuating around 160 operational[18] organisations, including roughly equal numbers of international and national NGOs (70–75 each, depending on the year), 6–9 UN agencies, and two Red Cross/Crescent movement entities (and not counting a variety of governmental and commercial entities, working mostly on development and economic infrastructure projects). No major operational humanitarian organisations reported newly entering Afghanistan in the mid-2000s (though one exited and then re-entered a few years later). The overall numbers of organisations present and operational held more or less stable (data collected by Secure Access Monitor in Afghanistan) despite a three-fold funding surge in response to heightened humanitarian needs from 2006–08 (FTS).

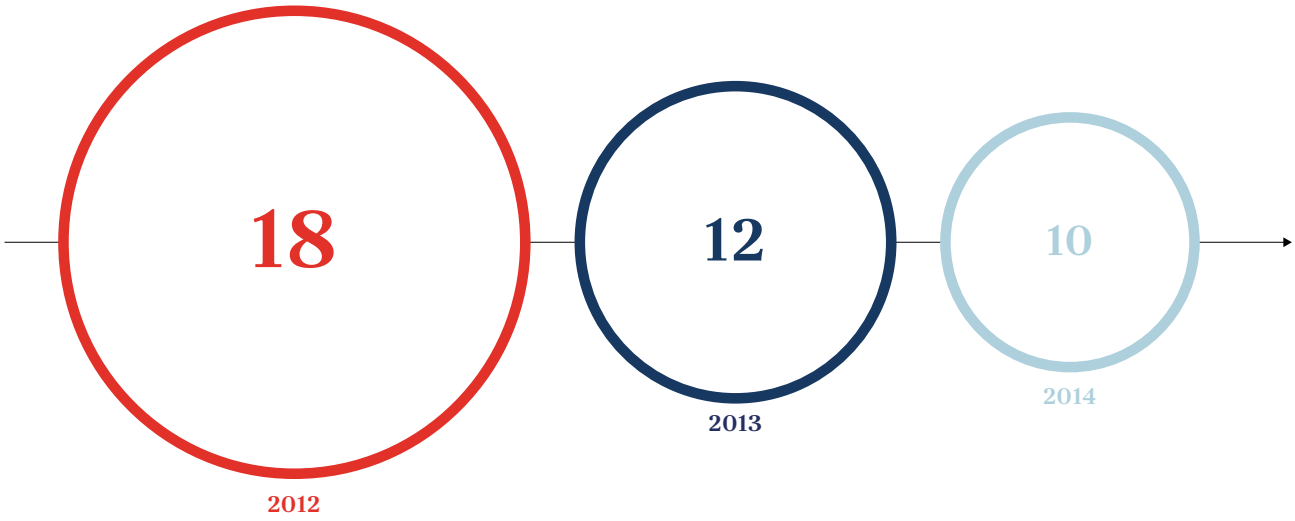
[18] Excludes organisations that have an official presence in the capital but are not running humanitarian programs directly anywhere in the country.

The Afghan national civil society capacity for humanitarian response had been overstated at times in the early years of the current crisis. Despite some 2,000 national NGOs officially registered with the government, practitioners on the ground report that less than 150 have the capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance, and only 70–80 have been operational in any given year. Although a handful of large national NGOs have broad coverage across the country, the majority work only in one province (out of 34 provinces) and in just 1–4 districts per province (where the average number of districts per province is 12). The Afghan National Red Crescent Society is operational in nearly all provinces, and a majority of respondents in the affected population survey confirmed they were more present in those areas than either international or local aid organisations. However, their scope of action is limited to their own resources and those provided by the International Red Cross/Crescent movement. They were not used as an alternative channel for international donors and other organisations to extend presence.

In terms of international NGOs, in 2014 they were present on average in two regions (mostly north and northeast), three provinces, and 10 districts each. The largest INGO operational presence encompassed 12 provinces and more than 50 districts.

The reduction in presence over the study period can be seen most clearly at the district level. Even though many organisations could continue to claim presence in the same number of provinces, the number of districts they were active in decreased by over 40 per cent between 2012 and 2014 (see Figure 12).[19] Interviewees with aid organisations in Afghanistan reported that the reduction is more dramatic since the early years of the post-2001 humanitarian response to Afghanistan, which they attributed to deteriorating security conditions.

FIGURE 12:
Declining district presence of humanitarian organisations in Afghanistan
Average number of districts per organisation



[19] These are the years for which full data on district presence was available.

DECISION DRIVERS AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

Over several years, insecurity patterns in Afghanistan have created the prevailing situation: most of the humanitarian presence remains concentrated in the northern parts of the country, which is more stable and where operating is safer. Of course, a variety of factors can play into decisions to reduce presence, including tighter access to humanitarian funding, which began to fall off after 2011. However, most aid organisation personnel interviewed in Afghanistan attested that it was insecurity, more than funding or any other factor, that influenced where they were programming. Only those organisations working exclusively in the small, relatively safest region of the central highlands (Bamyan and Daykundi provinces), stated that insecurity was not their main access challenge.

The majority of aid personnel interviewed said that they would not accept funding to expand programming into a new region in which they were not well established, as their safety depended on being known and accepted by the local community and power holders. When NGOs did enlarge their geographical scope, they reported, they usually did so in areas adjacent to current implementation areas, or where the organisation was otherwise already well known. Only a small number (less than 10 per cent) of interviewees stated that they had shifted their geographic focus in the pursuit of funding; for others, lack of funding is preventing them from having as robust a presence in some regions as they would like.

At the same time, almost all interviewed organisations stated that they had experienced security incidents, either at implementation sites or, more commonly, when traveling through unfamiliar communities between project sites or offices. One organisation had recently experienced a grenade tossed over the wall of its western-region field office. Neither casualties nor major property damage resulted, and the act was determined to be related to a since-addressed staffing dispute, so the organisation continued its work without interruption. In some other cases, acts of violence led to a work suspension of a few days or a few weeks, as the organisation investigated the incident and undertook further rounds of community consultation. Most organisations appear willing to accept a high level of ambient violence, short of full-blown combat, and said they would only pull out of an area if their organisation was specifically targeted with deadly violence, or received a credible threat that it would be targeted with such violence in the near future.

To deal with insecurity, most INGOs in Afghanistan employ localisation – a means of maximising community acceptance – as their primary coping strategy. Localising programming means hiring all staff from the immediate vicinity of the project and reducing or completely eliminating the presence of non-local personnel, vehicles and organisational branding so that the work can blend into local community life. Those aid organisations that have localised their programming admit that this approach can undermine the technical quality of projects, since the local pool of potential hires often lacks the technical skills needed for certain activities. It can also delay implementation due to the need for supplemental staff training. Nevertheless, none had abandoned this practice, which they credit as the only means for programming to proceed.

Localisation further requires extensive communications before and during project implementation. These consultations take place between implementing organisations and local leaders, including both state officials and non-state leaders such as tribal elders, commanders, or religious leaders. Sometimes they also consult with armed opposition groups (AOGs) – a broad term in Afghanistan encompassing the Taliban and other militant groups.

Some organisations reported that they undertook these consultations via community intermediaries and/or with the understanding that non-state community leaders would themselves be AOG members. Other organisations reported direct meetings with AOGs to facilitate community access. Just mapping the relevant stakeholders for negotiating access can be complex. One organisation, working in what were at the time deemed secure areas of Nangarhar province, experienced a rocket attack on its office after it consulted one non-state community leader about further programming, but not another.

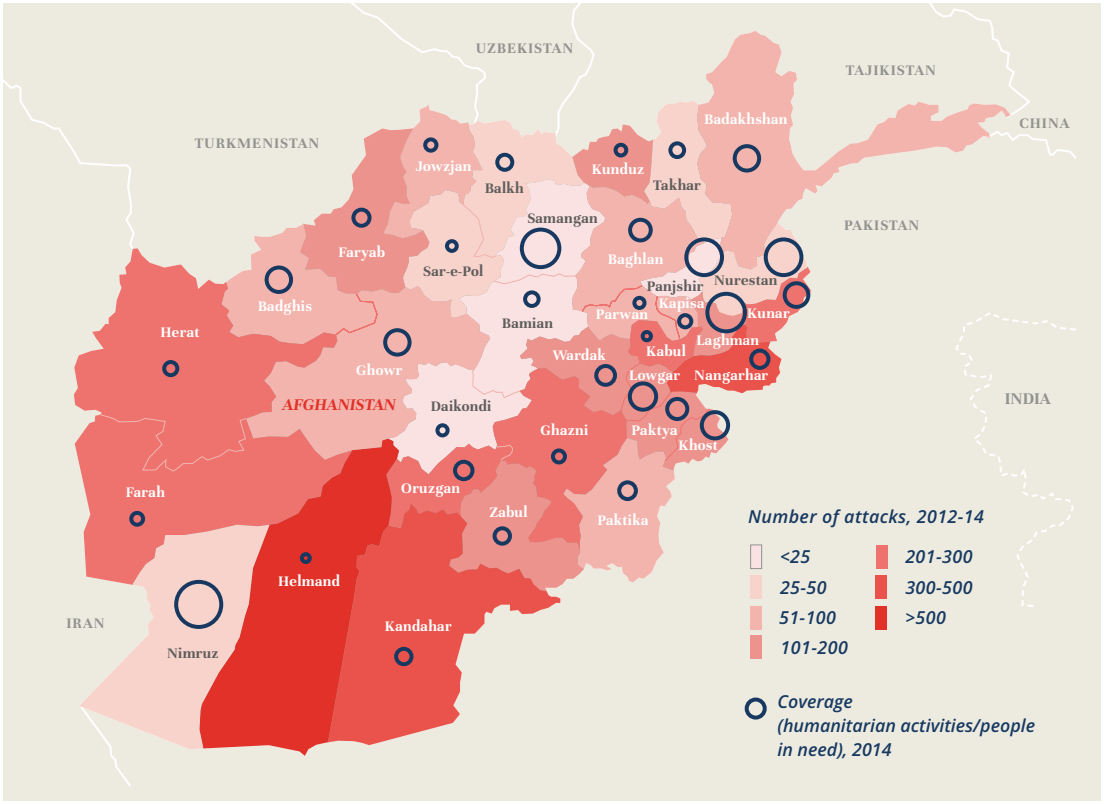
The need for such careful and prolonged negotiation naturally hinders flexible programming and rapid emergency response. One international NGO reported that it could only respond to floods in northern Afghanistan after a full month of negotiation, and one UN agency described months of negotiation, still ongoing, to gain secure access in Helmand province. It also often means in practice that local power holders have veto power over aid activities and modalities. Gender issues tend to become the sticking point in this regard. One INGO reported that it required all its projects to be inclusive of both men and women, and this constituted a non-negotiable condition of its intervention. However, the same organisation emphasised that it only reached this point after building trust with the same communities for nearly a decade and that it was not looking to expand its programming to new areas. More commonly, interviewees stated that their organisations could not work with, or target, women and girls directly. Instead, they had to rely on male intermediaries from the community to see to it that community women also benefitted from organisational programming, albeit in a way that the organisation could not directly assess or verify.

COVERAGE EFFECTS

The localisation model has enabled a stable population of humanitarian organisations to remain programming in Afghanistan, but this has in some ways obscured the fact that the humanitarian presence has thinned out at the subfield (district) level generally and is concentrated in safer provinces, not those where the humanitarian need is greatest. The violence and insecurity that has spurred the needs in Helmand and other areas in the south has also prevented a concomitant increase in humanitarian presence, as agencies choose to remain in their relative comfort zones. In keeping with the data and interview findings, the affected-population surveys also bear this out. Of the provinces surveyed, Kandahar in the south had the lowest percentage of respondents who had seen aid in their area in the past three years.

With so many aid worker casualties continuing to occur in Afghanistan, faulting the majority of organisations who rely on this programming modality is hard, but at the same time the downsides are apparent. In addition to the constraints on rapid response and quality of programming mentioned above, the prevailing ‘access inertia’ among agencies has resulted in a clear imbalance of humanitarian coverage across the country, illustrated by Maps 1 and 2.

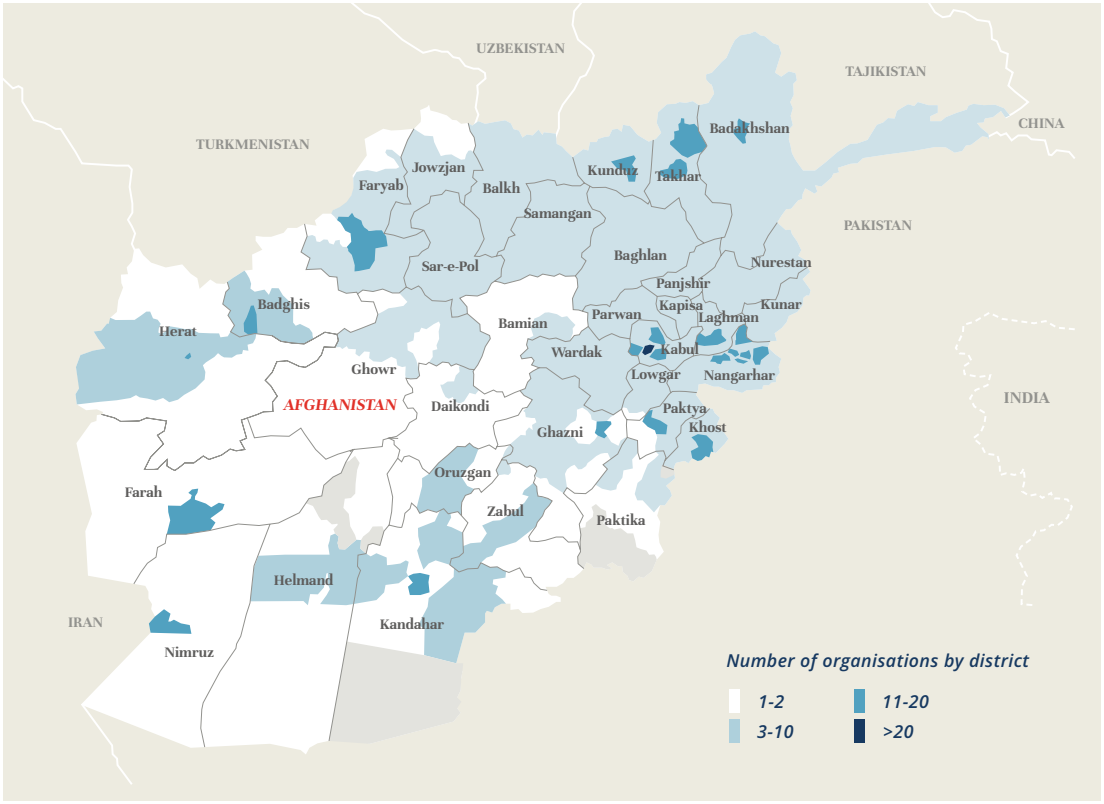
MAP 1:
Insecurity and humanitarian coverage in Afghanistan, 2014



Sources: SAVE dataset, Global Terrorism Database (start.umd.edu/gtd)

Access limitations have not been offset by identifying or helping to build up local partners at any scale, or other potential modes of remote programming. Humanitarian donor governments and the UN are conscious of the geographical imbalance between the needs and response in Afghanistan and have sought to address it with funding instruments and incentives. For example, the UN Common Humanitarian Fund, established in 2012, has allocated the most funding to the south and southeast with the admitted strategy of creating a pull effect to draw more humanitarian presence to these underserved regions and less to the central highlands. The data show that reduced funding has indeed led to decreased presence in the central highlands. However, 'pull funding' for the south has had less effect, with only a few INGOs embarking on new operations there – too small a number to change the overall picture. OCHA's 2015 3W mapping in Afghanistan (Map 2) shows the presence picture at the time of this writing, with the density of aid agency presence still concentrated in the north and in provincial capitals.

MAP 2:
OCHA Mapping of Afghanistan Operational Presence, 'Who Does What, Where (3W)', 2015



Source: OCHA, humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/3w

4.3 South Central Somalia

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

A 'failed state' since 1991, Somalia, specifically in the southern and central regions,[20] is roiled by civil violence and regularly hit by droughts, floods, population displacements and epidemics. Lack of essential services and the effects of climate change have likewise contributed to the extreme vulnerability of the population, who live continually on the edge of humanitarian catastrophe.

The current permutation of civil war began in December 2006, when Ethiopian forces invaded to topple the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts of Somalia that had established control of South Central Somalia some years earlier. This period saw the rise of the Islamist militant group Al Shabaab,[21] which has waged a guerrilla campaign against the national authority in Mogadishu and its international supporters. Small arms are pervasive across south Somalia, and business and markets run on a system of networks, trust and local protection, without written documents or state regulation.

[20] South Central Somalia, which is politically distinct from the northern regions of Puntland and Somaliland, consists of 11 regions: Lower Juba, Middle Juba, Gedo, Bay, Bakool, Lower Shabelle, Banaadir, Middle Shabelle, Hiiraan, Galguduud and Mudug. While the study refers generally to South Central Somalia as the locus of conflict and insecurity for humanitarian operations, data was collected in the nine southern regions only (i.e. all of the above except Galguduud and Mudug).

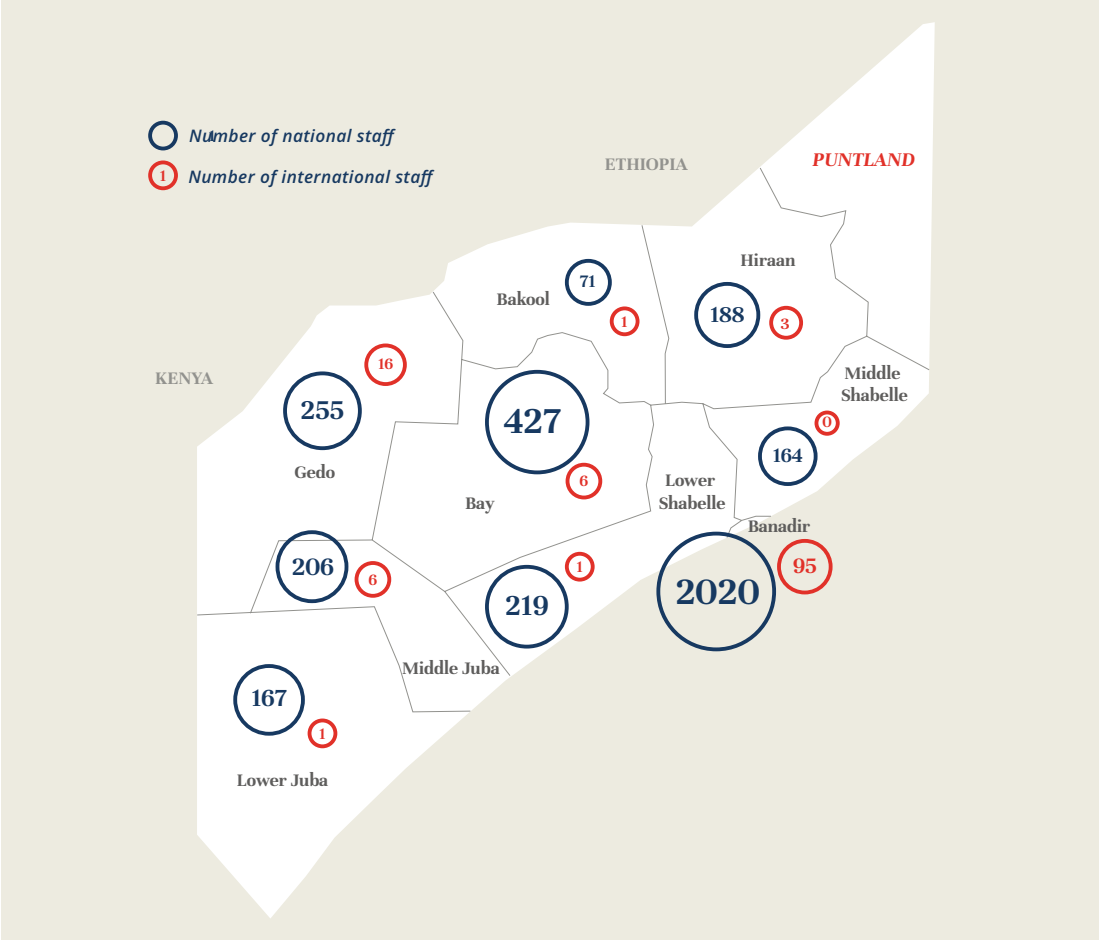
[21] Al Shabaab is translated as 'the youth', and while employing holy war rhetoric, it can also be viewed as a youth group pursuing a political agenda in the face of an entrenched socio-political order dominated by clan elders. It also provides alternative opportunities for members of minority clans who would otherwise be excluded from power, which is used as a recruiting tool.

Despite decades of international aid to Somalia, the international community and Somalis do not understand each other well, and the aid system functions uncomfortably outside the Somali system of local trust and local protection, which has helped to keep Somalia among the most violent contexts for aid providers for as long as this data has been recorded (more than two decades).

Like the armed opposition groups in Afghanistan, Al Shabaab has targeted international aid entities, but has focused its violence primarily on Somalia National Government and AMISOM forces, as well as UN agencies, due to the political role played by the UN in the country.[22] In 2011 and 2012, it also explicitly barred 19 international aid organisations, including UN agencies and some major INGOs, from South Central Somalia and has demanded payments from aid organisations in exchange for access to famine-affected areas under its control. Despite aid workers' perceptions of Al Shabaab as the primary security threat, the majority of violent incidents affecting NGOs are reported to be the result of inter-clan hostilities, often revolving around competition over the resources and employment of the aid 'industry', with different groups seeking a bigger piece of the action. Based on an analysis of security incidents, the main risks for aid organisations seem to have to do with their selection of suppliers, contractors, staff and beneficiaries. (This squares with the affected population survey in which respondents overwhelmingly saw corruption as the main barrier to their access to aid.)

MAP 3:
South Central Somalia NGO (international and national) presence per region, 2014

Staff presence per region



Source: SAVE dataset

[22] As an example, in August 2013, Al Shabaab spokesperson Sheikh Abdulaziz Abu Muscab issued an audio statement warning civilians to avoid government buildings, AMISOM bases, and UN offices as these were potential targets of future attacks. NGOs and their facilities were not mentioned.

The areas in which Al Shabaab is firmly in control have lower ambient insecurity (active fighting), whereas many areas under Somalia National Government (SNG) control are more contested and volatile. Moreover, the Somalis surveyed did not see insecurity as a major obstacle to the provision or receipt of aid (only 2 per cent reported that it was), in contrast with the international aid community. But humanitarian presence in Al Shabaab-held areas is hindered by more than direct, physical security threats. Because Al Shabaab has been designated as a terrorist organisation, aid organisations must contend with serious legal and financial risks if they run afoul of the anti-diversion regulatory framework of the US and other governments. This is important because even though both Al Shabaab's and SNG's local authorities regularly seek to extort payments and bribes from aid organisations, the counter-terror legal risks apply only in the former.

The difficulties of working in Al Shabaab-controlled areas is a major factor in the evolution of the predominant partnership model of humanitarian programming. Many organisations locate their Somalia programme management in neighbouring Kenya and some in Mogadishu, while others have offices in both Nairobi and Mogadishu. The bulk of the direct implementation, meanwhile, is performed by Somali NGOs as confirmed by field interviews. Incidences of major corruption and diversion following the aid surge in 2011 have spurred a tightening of controls (as well as reduced aid funding generally), and some blacklisting of Somali NGOs that had been collaborating with multiple international aid organisations.

DECISION DRIVERS AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

The upshot of all of the above has been that humanitarian presence in South Central Somalia has been increasingly constrained by aid organisations seeking to mitigate their physical, fiduciary and legal risks within this extremely complex and forbidding environment. As in Afghanistan, most of the aid organisations that have been attacked in Somalia have retained a programming presence in country. Only one pulled out completely on the grounds of physical insecurity. Others have modified and limited their approaches while maintaining some operations. Often this entails, first, limiting their activity to more critical (life-saving) projects and, second, reducing senior staff exposure. Over the past decade, the main way international aid organisations sought to reduce their exposure was via partnerships with local actors. More recently, however, legal and financial/fiduciary issues have caused activities to cease in specific locations, when some partners prove to be fraud or diversion risks. And although they remain the majority of organisations doing direct programme implementation in Somalia, local NGOs have seen their direct access to international funding decline steeply, likely as a result of fiduciary concerns. The number of allocations to national NGOs from the UN-managed Common Humanitarian Fund has dropped 77 per cent – from 142 in 2011 to 33 in 2014 – while the number of UN allocations (subsequently sub-contracted to NGOs) has increased 300 per cent – from 33 in 2011 to 99 in 2014.

As in the other settings, access constraints and risk considerations have influenced the types of project implemented. Interviewees in this context, as in Syria, are of the opinion that health facilities tend to be the types of project most accepted by local non-state armed actors as they benefit all community members and conflict parties equally, with little opportunity for diversion. In contrast, the practice of identifying and targeting the most vulnerable members of a community for aid has always been difficult in the Somali context, as it runs counter to cultural norms of equity and can exacerbate competition between local clans. However, when asked to identify the most urgent need, an overwhelming majority of the Somali affected-population survey respondents answered 'food'.

Risk-driven delays in responding to rapid-onset crises and newly emergent needs were also reported in Somalia. At the same time, the clustering of most aid organisations in Mogadishu and other urban areas seemingly contradicts the logic of avoiding the frontlines of the conflict, as this is where much of the violence is playing out. The small number of international staff working inside Somalia are largely confined to bunkerised living conditions and have little to no contact with the people their programming is serving. High staff turnover and low field-level institutional memory and contextual expertise are the natural results.

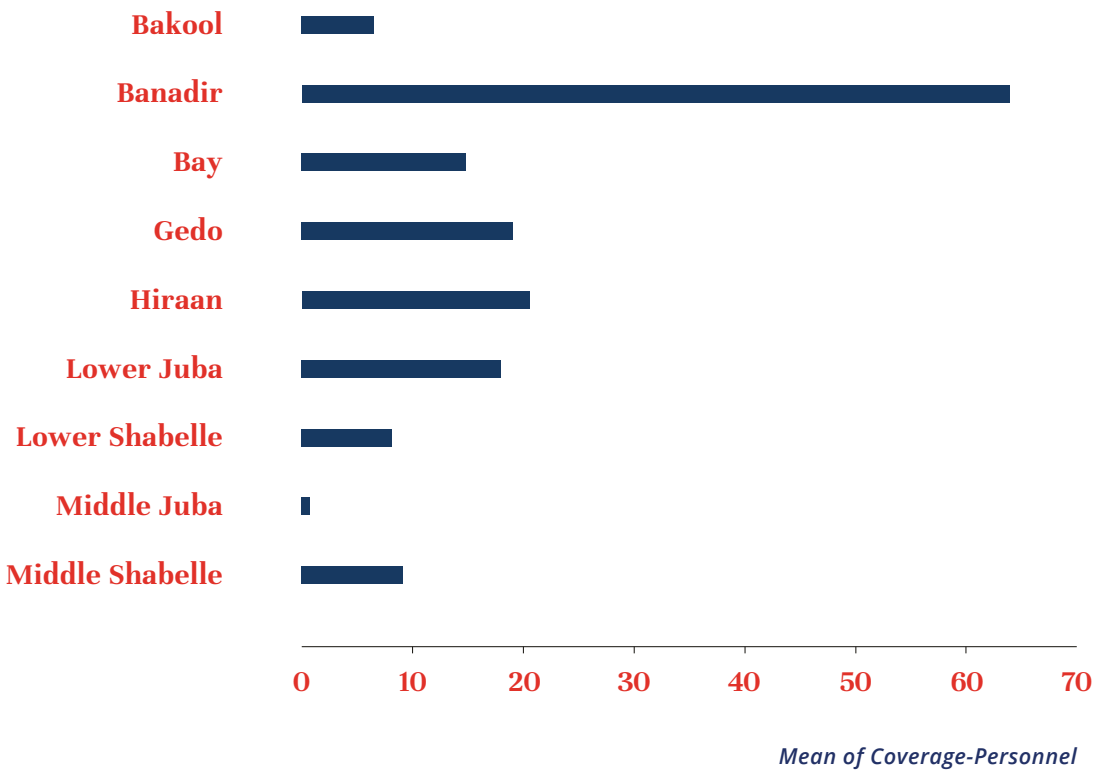
When asked about their main constraints to access, almost all aid workers interviewed cited insecurity related to Al Shabaab. However, when prodded further, the risk that emerged related largely to Al Shabaab's attempts to interfere with aid operations, for which the NGOs feared running afoul of legal and financial counter-terror regulations. Such concerns have led to widespread reluctance to engage in direct discussion with members of Al Shabaab. Of all the international aid organisations seeking to work in Somalia, only one has opened consistent channels of consultation with Al Shabaab for negotiated access.

The role of donors has reinforced the presence trends in Somalia, de facto promoting support to areas controlled by the government. The thematic approach to funding, in particular, has shifted the focus of aid intervention to urban areas and reduced funds for rural projects, where Al Shabaab's presence is strong. In 2009, USAID halted a new grant for Somalia, and the remaining funds were allocated to locations where Al Shabaab was not present. USAID funding rose again after the famine declaration, but appetite for programming in Al Shabaab-controlled areas was considerably dampened by the uncertainty over aid organisations' exposure to legal implications for programming in areas that could be construed as benefitting Al Shabaab. In 2009, the US Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) refused to issue a general waiver for humanitarian aid to areas under Al Shabaab's control – a 'key event' in the evolution of humanitarian presence and programming in South Central Somalia (DARA, 2010). Additionally, much of the development side of funding has been explicitly designed to strengthen the Somalia National Government, such as the 'stability funds' and the 2012 'New Deal' funding in support of state-building goals. Most aid organisations that have redeployed in South Central Somalia since the 2011 emergency have done so in areas controlled by the government.

COVERAGE EFFECTS

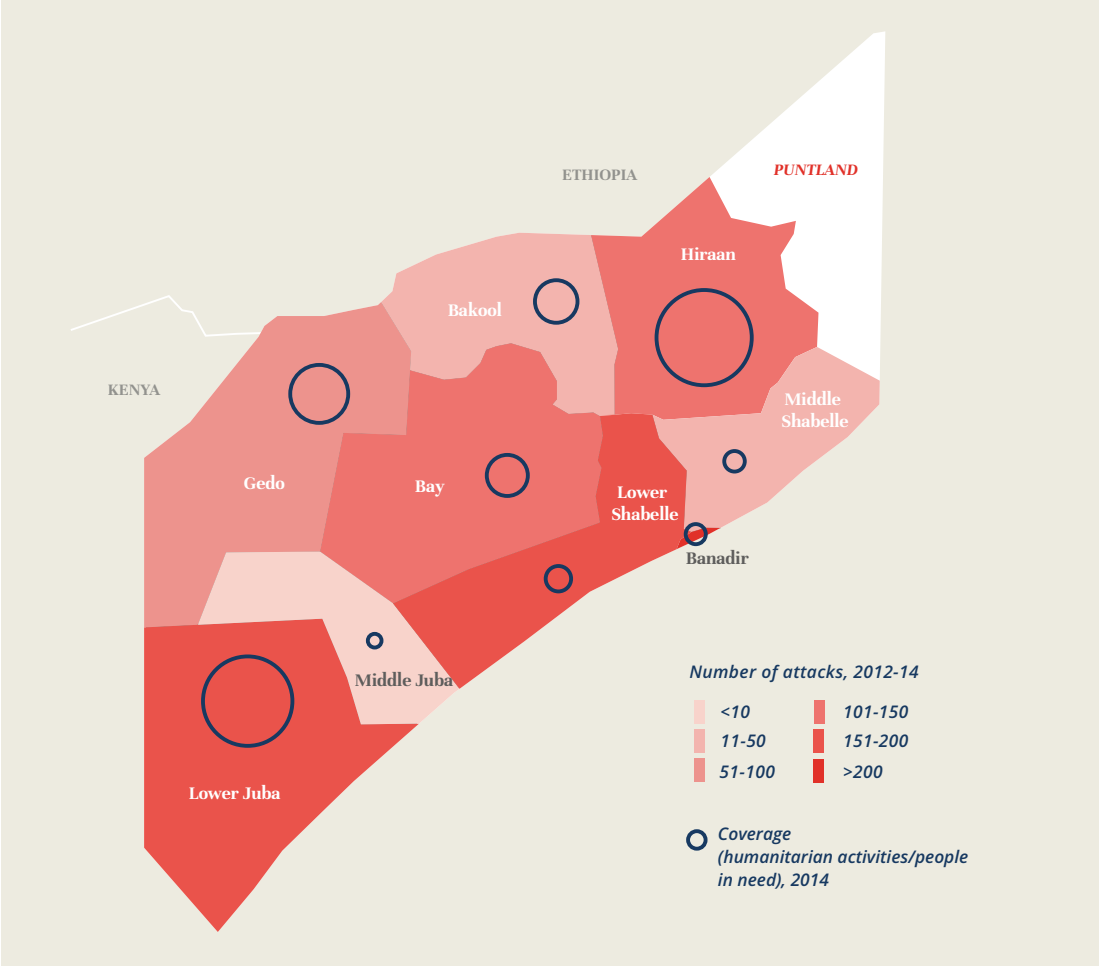
In addition to the reported loss of response speed and the ability to prioritise rural programming, the result of insecurity-driven access constraints – compounded in Somalia by international state-building goals and legal (counter-terror) and fiduciary risks – has been that coverage of people in need is highly unbalanced. In other words, the humanitarian presence in relation to the number of people in need is much higher in urban and government-controlled areas and lower in the majority of rural areas, particularly where Al Shabaab is strongly present. Figure 13 illustrates clearly the over-representation in Banadir region (where Mogadishu is located) and weak coverage in areas where Al Shabaab is strongest such as Middle Juba and Lower Shabelle.

FIGURE 13:
Coverage by region in South Somalia, 2014



Levels of humanitarian coverage in South Central Somalia overall have continued to decline, a trend that shows no sign of improving. Several factors have contributed: international organisations' progressive withdrawal from Al Shabaab-controlled areas, concentration around specific strategic urban centres and in a few areas where access is possible (e.g, Gedo), and mitigation of fiduciary risk by reducing some partnerships with local organisations, and national NGOs' reduced access to direct funding.

MAP 4:
Insecurity and humanitarian coverage in South Central Somalia, 2014



Sources: SAVE dataset, Global Terrorism Database (start.umd.edu/gtd)

4.4 South Sudan

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

In December 2013, less than three years after South Sudan gained independence, an outbreak of violence in the capital Juba quickly devolved into widespread civil conflict. Originally a political struggle within the governing Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) party, the violence played out along ethnic lines between the Dinka and Nuer tribes, causing massive displacement and a major humanitarian crisis.

The crisis has affected all ten states in South Sudan, although fighting has centred primarily in the Greater Upper Nile states of Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile. During early days of the violence, tens of thousands of South Sudanese fled to bases of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which, in an unprecedented action by UN peacekeeping forces, took them in and established Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites that continue to shelter people at the time of writing.

Although representing a small portion of the affected population, the PoCs were the focus of much of the initial humanitarian response, as it was easier and safer to provide aid to these few locations with consistent, secure access. Elsewhere in the field, battle lines were constantly moving and towns were taken and retaken by different sides. Humanitarian field facilities and assets existing before the conflict were largely looted or destroyed in the process.

With nearly two million displaced and over six million in need of humanitarian aid (UN OCHA, 2015), the South Sudan crisis was declared a major emergency ('Level 3') by the UN interagency system, prompting surges of humanitarian funding and staff resources to the country. As battle lines solidified several months into the conflict, humanitarian organisations began attempting to push the aid response out to the 'hard-to-reach' areas. And because the population in need was spread across large areas in Greater Upper Nile, with limited road access, air-drops and mobile responses became the predominant operational approach. According to the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan, the principal humanitarian needs created by the displacement have been for food security and livelihoods, followed by health services, access to clean water and sanitation, and physical protection of conflict-affected civilians (Ibid.). The South Sudanese people sampled by this study's survey reported protection as their number one need, followed by food and needs provided through the other aid sectors.

Aid organisations cited physical access, logistical constraints, and scattered and displaced populations as the main challenges to South Sudan's humanitarian response. Insecurity is the constant variable that had become the 'new normal', influencing nearly all aspects of operation. Unlike many other contexts, national staff have been at greater risk than international staff for direct conflict-related violence, due to the ethnic dimensions of the civil war. Collateral violence and criminality were also of concern to aid agencies, however, and violent crime has recently increased in densely populated places such as Juba and the Maban county refugee camps. Numerous car-jackings and violent robberies and sexual assaults suggested an atmosphere of growing impunity. While the operating and living conditions were nowhere near as restrictive as Somalia or Afghanistan, many humanitarian agencies had established curfews and limited the movement of staff in many areas.

HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE

During the initial months of conflict, aid programming that had been ongoing in the extremely poor nation of South Sudan was disrupted nearly completely. Only a handful of organisations reported to the study team that they were still running programmes in the primary conflict-affected areas, with the majority of the humanitarian community confined to PoCs and peripheral areas. Similar to the access inertia observed in Afghanistan, many organisations chose to remain operational in POCs only, even though the 75,000 inhabitants of PoC sites accounted for less than 10 per cent of the displaced and at-risk population.

Despite efforts to regroup and assist the conflict-affected population, the quantitative data collected in South Sudan show that the overall humanitarian field presence in the Greater Upper Nile region declined considerably in the two years since the start of the crisis, with a 12 per cent decrease in operational organisations, and a 36 per cent decrease in humanitarian projects. The decrease was due in part to the withdrawal of development-oriented agencies that have lower thresholds for risk, as well as the shift to basic humanitarian delivery seen in the other insecure contexts studied. In South Sudan in particular, the active combat conditions, combined with the pre-existing lack of logistical infrastructure drove a wholesale shift in operational modalities from in-situ programming in field locations to mobile deliveries (often referred to in South Sudan by the short hand 'rapid response').

The Common Humanitarian Fund for South Sudan prioritised food and other basic humanitarian sectors for its allocations and created a 'rapid response mechanism' (RRM) to fund organisations capable of responding anywhere in the country with aid interventions across the prioritised sectors within a few days' notice. Various UN and INGO actors ran several parallel rapid/mobile response structures and mobile teams, necessitating the creation of an 'operational working group' to minimise the confusion of frequent movements in and out of field locations.

DECISION DRIVERS AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

For reasons of ease and safety of access, humanitarian organisations avoided establishing a sizable presence outside of the PoCs. Even before the crisis, conditions in most areas of the states were so basic that establishing humanitarian presence meant a significant financial and logistical investment in a location to ensure fundamental needs for staff, such as accommodation, food, water, vehicles and evacuation routes. These infrastructural realities, combined with security concerns, downed communication networks, missing field-staff and lost assets, created little confidence in the ability to operate from field locations. As a result, only a few large organisations with independent funding, robust internal security mechanisms, or unique delivery models such as indirect implementation or mobile response units were prepared to respond outside of the PoCs. Donor funding was not enough to meet the logistical demands of most humanitarian organisations, which needed to build new bases and secure means of air transport.

The implications of insecurity for national staff and local partner organisations are different in each context studied, but are particularly divergent in South Sudan. In the other settings, although ethnicity and mistrust of nationals from other parts of the country can still be a risk factor for national staff, remote management and localisation of programming using national staff and partner organisations is much more feasible and widely used than in South Sudan. South Sudanese staff are considerably more at risk for direct targeting than internationals due to the ethnic dimension of the conflict, seemingly precluding any options for remote management. Regional international staff have also been limited in where they may work, due to their country's role in the conflict. Ugandans, for example, were often not sent to field locations, and specifically not opposition territory. In contrast, the perceived insecurity of international staff is dramatically lower, and internationals have safer access and more freedom of movement to field locations. Of course they are also far fewer in number than nationals, which is another factor driving the rapid response/mobile delivery approach as the primary modality of programming.

Even with a field researcher based in South Sudan to quantify humanitarian presence, it was not possible to accurately capture the frequency of one-off distributions and rapid response teams. Although some rapid response team activities are included within the data, other large mobile responses are not, as they do not have a long-term presence at a location and their frequency makes them difficult to track. For instance, WFP airdropped food aid to 72 locations in 2014. UNICEF ran 42 rapid responses, and ECHO-funded organisations have run about a dozen short-term responses each, per year, for the last three years. The rapid response model, while arguably a necessary adaptation to the conflict conditions, presents a challenge to the humanitarian community. Not only will accurate reporting on this type of programming require more robust information management systems than currently exist in coordination mechanisms in the field; it raises questions around the definition of operational presence and the varying degrees of humanitarian response.

Aid workers interviewed in South Sudan view insecurity more in terms of the logistical constraints emerging from large-scale instability related to the conflict. Interviewees were most concerned with military movement, as this presents a threat to both staff and assets.

As a result, entire counties have been sparsely served by aid, not because of direct threats to personnel, but due to fears by aid organisations that the areas are, or shortly could be, contested. Conversely, insecurity for humanitarian staff at the community-level garnered less concern. Interviewees consistently reported having positive relationships with the local community at their project sites and did not find criminality or targeted violence to be significant issues. (The exception to this was from organisations operating in PoC sites or refugee camps, where criminality was frequent.) Similarly, a majority of the South Sudanese people sampled in the survey ranked insecurity as the most significant barrier to receiving aid, but they did not perceive aid organisations to be in specific danger of violence, implying that it was generalised insecurity (active conflict conditions) that was the hindrance. Moreover, more survey respondents perceived risks to receiving aid rather than providing it, perhaps implying the need for beneficiaries to cross lines or expose themselves to opposition groups to collect the aid.

Finally, as the response almost entirely relies on air transport, operating costs have increased dramatically and movement of supplies is limited. Deciding to rebuild offices and pre-position supplies requires a high degree of confidence that the organisation will not lose its investment if fighting recurs in the area. The reliance on air transport is a critical factor characterising South Sudan's humanitarian response. This reliance is in large part influenced by security concerns. Even where road conditions are passable, ground corridors still have not been opened in any large scale, due to security-related issues such as landmines, banditry or the need to cross frontlines.

TABLE 6:
Humanitarian resources in South Sudan, 2013–14

	2013	2014
Organisations	262	232
Budget	$1.2 billion	$1.9 billion
Project sites	1,228	1,096
Project activities	1,933	1,835
International staff	1,989	2,335
National staff	17,885	20,538

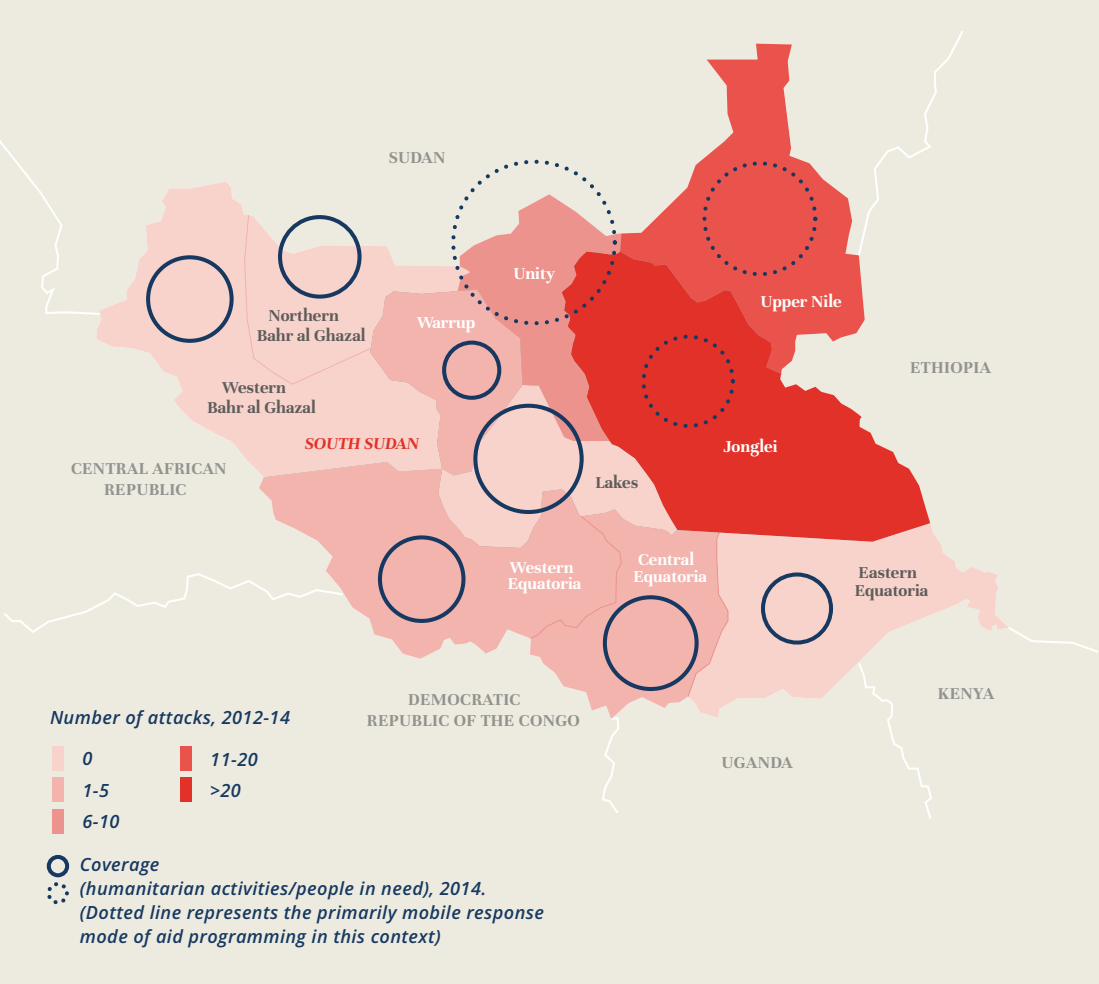
Source: SAVE dataset

COVERAGE EFFECTS

South Sudan's extreme poverty and lack of infrastructure meant that humanitarian coverage was never optimal, but the deterioration in security with the escalation of conflict had significant shrinking effects, including slight reductions in the number of operational organisations, project sites and activities (see Table 6), even as funding increased. Staffing numbers increased, but these personnel were concentrated mostly in the capital. A significant percentage of budgets has been used to cover the very high costs of air lifts.

Although the quantitative analysis shows South Sudan to have a larger humanitarian presence and better overall coverage levels than the other contexts studied, it is important to note the difficulty in sustainably meeting the needs of a far-flung population with mobile deliveries. As the conflict entered its third year in 2014, a few organisations such as ICRC and MSF endeavored to maintain static operations, but the humanitarian presence was still largely focused in the three UNMISS PoC sites and in field locations perceived to be a safe distance from frontlines.

MAP 5:
Insecurity and humanitarian coverage in South Sudan, 2014



Sources: SAVE dataset, Global Terrorism Database (start.umd.edu/gtd)

4.5 Syria

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

By any measure, the Syrian conflict, a multi-party civil war with regional and international dimensions, presents the most challenging political and security environment for humanitarian response in recent memory. In March 2015, the conflict entered into its fifth year with no sign of de-escalation. By this time, areas of control had solidified, divided between the Assad government mainly in the south and west; Kurdish forces in the north; increasingly small portions held by various rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army; and a consolidation of the Islamic State (IS) territory across much of the west and central portions of Syria, centred in Raqqa and spanning the Syria-Iraq border.

The massive humanitarian needs in Syria stem mainly from conflict-related displacement and public infrastructure damage. By 2014, an estimated 6.5 million people were displaced inside Syria, and 9.3 million were in need of humanitarian aid (UN OCHA, 2014). This does not include the roughly four million refugees that managed to flee Syria to neighbouring countries.

The initial humanitarian response in late 2011 was limited to a relatively small number of actors, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) cooperating with and supporting Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), eight UN agencies operating from Damascus, and a small number of NGOs, mostly based in Damascus, that had been working on the Iraqi refugee crisis. From the beginning, the humanitarian response to Syria has been bifurcated between the aid efforts of organisations officially sanctioned by the government of Syria (GoS) and working under strict constraints, and a larger number of INGOs and Syrian diaspora organisations operating cross-border from hubs in Turkey (primarily), Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Because prior to UN Security Council Resolution 2139 (2014) the cross-border aid operations were technically unlawful, an environment of secrecy and mistrust prevented open communication and effective coordination among aid organisations, particularly between INGOs and UN agencies, that still persists to a large degree today.

Humanitarian operations face security threats stemming directly from the conflict, (bombardment, ground fighting, and crossfire) as well as insecurity arising from the multiplication and fragmentation of armed groups, which includes interference with aid deliveries, attempted diversions, and kidnapping. For those actors operating from Damascus, the limitations imposed by the political context and the necessity of working within GoS regulations for the UN and INGOs have been equally constraining, preventing them from delivering aid to certain areas, notably across lines of control. The international organisations operating cross-border faced increased security threats from IS in 2013, particularly kidnapping, which prompted them to curtail all cross-border movements of international staff from Turkey. Although the overall number of security incidents involving aid operations has been higher in western areas controlled by various armed opposition groups, the severity of the incidents (i.e. killings and kidnappings) and the overall threat levels are higher in areas controlled by IS. In the former case, each small, armed group seeks more aid to reach areas it controls. As such, humanitarian actors interviewed see them as easier to understand and more amenable to negotiation. In contrast, IS is seen as largely foreign to Syria, often erratic in its behaviour, and promulgating a complex political-ideological narrative that sees the humanitarian response as in allegiance with its Western enemies.

HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE

The humanitarian response to Syria expanded in 2012 and 2013, driven by an increase in organisations setting up cross-border operations, then plateaued in 2014 at 54 international humanitarian organisations (UN, Red Cross/Crescent Movement and INGOs), and roughly 175 Syrian NGOs and diaspora organisations. Measured by the total number of organisations responding inside the country, Syria ranks the lowest of all emergencies, indicating the degree of difficulty and insecurity in implementing aid activities within this particular context. Syrian diaspora organisations have emerged as a critical force in filling part of this vacuum, though large gaps remain. In 2014, rather than new organisations entering the context, the major INGOs consolidated their Syrian operations and explored the possibilities of starting cross-border operations from additional hubs (Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq). In parallel, several INGOs operating cross-border are continuing to explore establishing a presence in Damascus and starting operations from inside Syria.

The bulk of aid delivery by organisations based in Damascus (and to a limited extent for cross-border deliveries) is channelled to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), as mandated by the Syrian government. The SARC has operational reach across Syria, with branches in 12 out of 14 governorates, as well as 75 sub-branches, including difficult-to-reach areas such as IS-dominated Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa governorates and some opposition-held areas in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. Supported by the ICRC and IFRC with funding and capacity building, it has been criticised by humanitarian actors for its close ties with the government and for lack of impartiality in its aid delivery. At the same time, however, it has suffered more casualties than any other humanitarian organisation working in the context.

Additionally, an estimated 150–200 very small Syrian NGOs and local charities were active in Syria during the study and were mostly unaccounted for by the humanitarian coordination mechanisms at the time, save for the 74 that are officially registered with the government and allowed to partner with UN agencies.

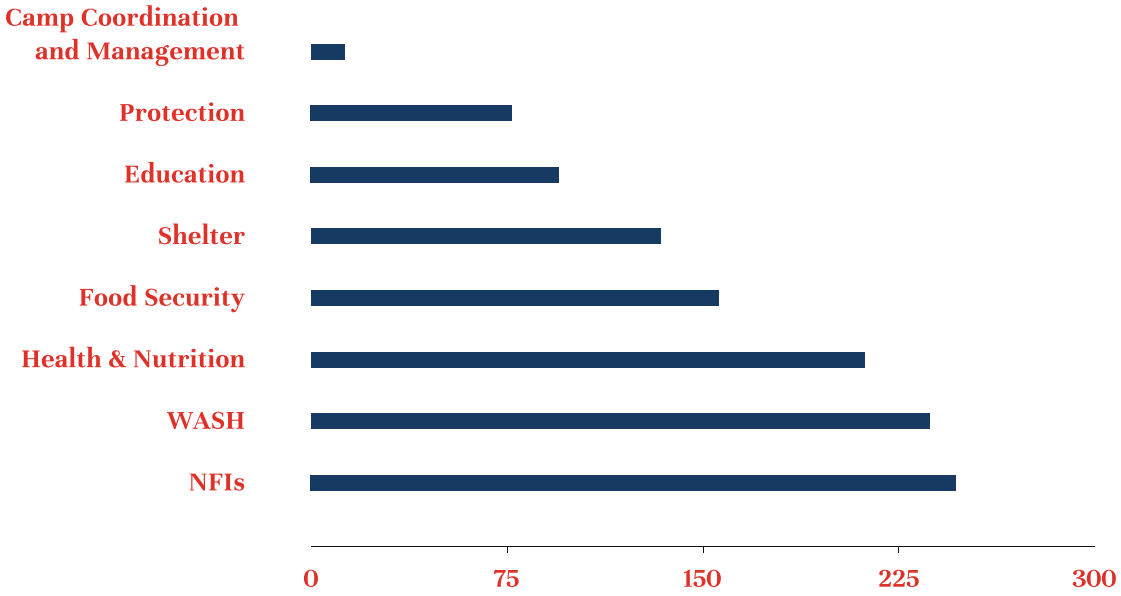
DECISION DRIVERS AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

The difficulties of the security context and increasing pressure from IS as it consolidated its control in 2013 and 2014 have severely limited options for aid operations in Syria. Organisations implementing cross-border aid from Turkey were forced to rely more and more on national staff and/or national partner organisations, as the risks to internationals traveling across the border became too great. At least two major INGOs ceased direct cross-border implementation completely and began to work only through local partners. They also increasingly emphasised the monitoring and evaluation of programmes, as diversions to IS and violations of counter-terror legislation became more prominent risks after IS increasingly interfered with aid operations. This also led to a significant decrease of the humanitarian presence in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates, with several INGOs and diaspora NGOs withdrawing most of their staff and suspending their activities, leaving only around five still operational there at the end of 2014.

For INGOs that were able to remain operational in IS areas, their chosen programming sector appeared to play a major role. INGOs and their partner diaspora NGOs involved in health care (particularly hospital and trauma care services), as well as those doing technical water and sanitation (WASH) programming, managed to maintain their presence. According to practitioners interviewed from these agencies, better access for these programmes can be explained by the greater acceptance of health, and particularly life-saving, programmes, and the fact that more complex service-type programmes are more difficult to maintain than aid commodity (or cash) distributions, giving organisations less to fear about IS potentially enriching itself with their aid.

Across the whole of Syria, however, the need to reach large numbers of people using limited distributional capacity has caused most aid programmes to focus on simple humanitarian distributions. Non-food items (NFI) distributions, was the single most common activity undertaken by aid organisations in 2014 (see Figure 14).

FIGURE 14:
Aid activities reported by sector in Syria, 2014



A relatively small portion of programming has utilised cash and vouchers as opposed to aid commodities. Fear of possible diversion and tight controls of cross-border cash transfers from Turkey seem to be largely why this modality has not been more utilised.

In terms of the Damascus-based humanitarian response, getting aid across lines of territorial control has posed the most significant security and government-imposed obstacles. The passage of UNSC Resolution 2165, which authorised cross-border humanitarian operations as a by-product, increased cross-line operations between July and December 2014.

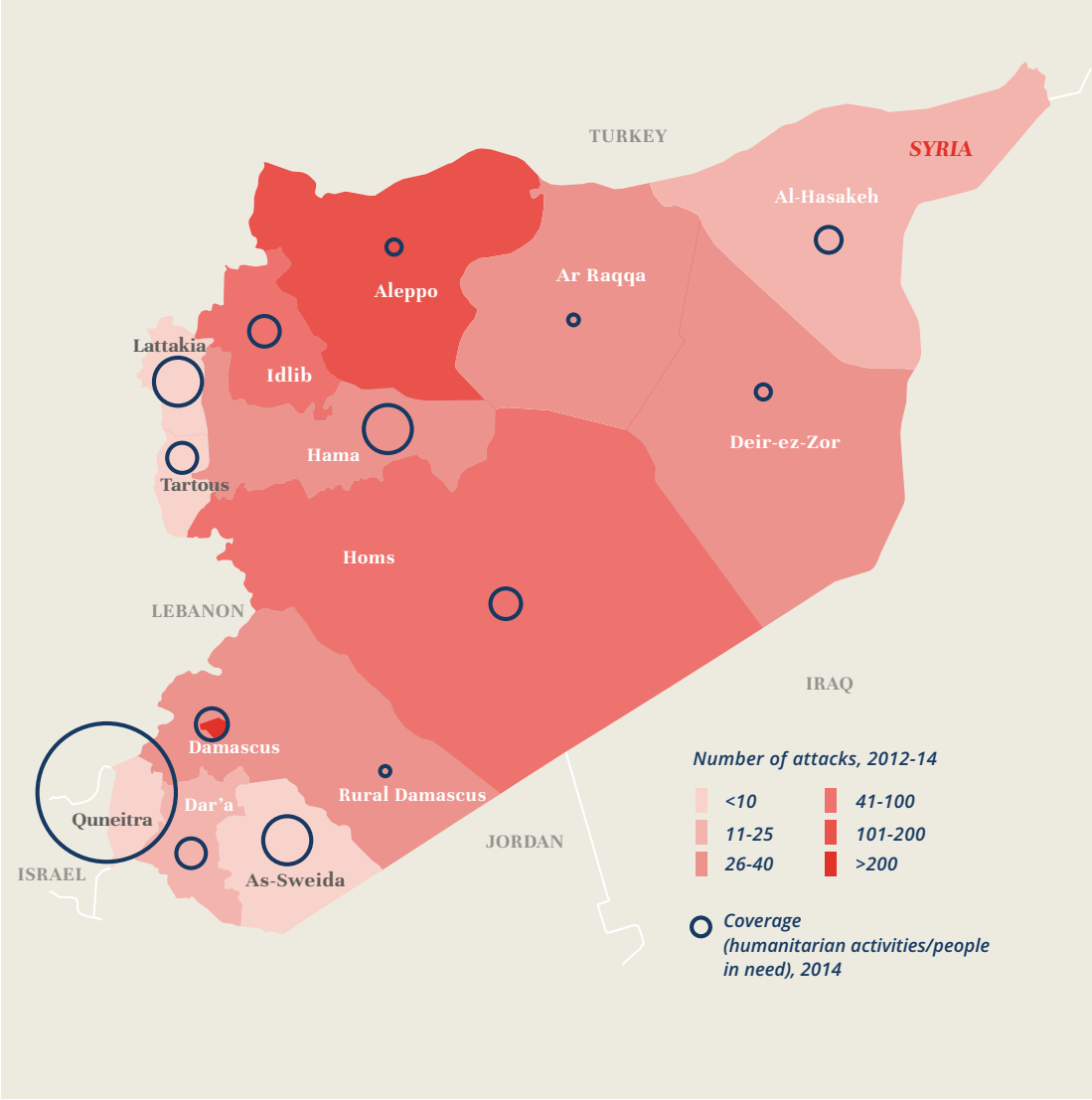
The household survey of affected people in the governorates of Aleppo, Al-Hassakeh, Damascus and Hama revealed that the population perceived that needs on the ground were increasing, but the number of aid providers was going down. The exception was Aleppo, where most respondents reported an increase in aid organisations. This squares with interview and data evidence that, as cross-border operations were being squeezed out of IS areas, organisations were concentrating increasingly in Aleppo and Idlib. Like the other contexts studied, most affected people do not perceive a significant direct threat to aid workers (despite casualty figures to the contrary). Only in Aleppo did a majority agree that (international) aid groups faced specific danger.

COVERAGE EFFECTS

The IS threats to, and explicit expulsions of, international aid organisations from areas under their control significantly reduced the cross-border humanitarian coverage from Turkey. Subsequently, agencies have reported that the bulk of the response has concentrated on Idlib and Aleppo governorates despite the ongoing high humanitarian needs in IS-held areas. A UN official observed that most of the humanitarian programming in Syria is concentrated in a 40-kilometre zone along the border from Idlib to Aleppo. Meanwhile, IS-controlled areas in Ar Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor have the fewest relief operations. Government and held territories show the highest ratio of aid activities to affected population (Map 6).

The considerable operational challenges and insecurity constraints have resulted in Syria having the lowest humanitarian coverage (presence per persons in need) of any major crisis.

MAP 6:
Insecurity and humanitarian coverage in Syria, 2014



Sources: SAVE dataset, Global Terrorism Database (start.umd.edu/gtd)

5. Conclusions

The evidence gathered by the SAVE study shows that the constraining effects of insecurity on humanitarian operational presence and coverage of needs are considerable, though in each case country influenced by different factors. While it should come as no surprise that insecurity makes accessing affected populations and meeting their needs more difficult, these findings can help illuminate the paucity of humanitarian coverage where it is often obscured, albeit by well-meaning humanitarian entities.

The effects of insecurity on presence are seen primarily on the subnational level; coverage gaps are obscured when viewed from the national or global level. In other words, aid agencies will remain operational in a country, but in fewer field locations and with fewer, simpler programmes that are less able to target the most vulnerable groups or to provide the type of aid that meets their most urgent needs. In addition, these security-driven decisions in high-risk areas are sticky: Once it has 'hunkered down', an organisation has strong incentives to remain in a smaller comfort zone and not expand into new geographical or programmatic areas. In this way, operations become path dependent and hard to change.

Another uncomfortable but inescapable conclusion of the research is that humanitarian coverage is not only uneven within and across contexts, but coverage is also proportionally lower in areas under control of militants in opposition to the government and to the Western powers that provide most of the humanitarian funding (i.e areas controlled by IS in Syria and Al Shabaab in South Central Somalia). The implications of this for the core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and humanity are stark.

The findings also suggest a few potential areas for action.

1) Increase operational transparency for a more accurate picture of coverage.
Reputational and financial concerns clearly create the tendency among some organisations to overstate their presence and territorialise service areas even when they are meeting just a fraction of the need. Apart from misrepresentation, agencies' general reluctance to fully disclose operational information (which this research study experienced first-hand) has resulted in a much weaker situational understanding of aid operations in arguably the most critical contexts. To avoid these tendencies and to present a clear picture of the scope and scale of the humanitarian response – and its gaps – the humanitarian community requires common measures of presence and coverage. Ideally, coverage would be measured not by the calculation of humanitarian presence over people in need, as used for the purposes of this quantitative analysis, but rather by the percentage of people in need being reached and served by the humanitarian response. For this to happen, more work needs to be done on developing a common methodology for calculating people in need from among the affected population.

Likewise, more robust information-management systems need to be developed for mapping operational activity (OCHA's field-verified 4Ws initiative in Afghanistan represents a good move in this direction), as well as methodologies for tracking and reporting on the specific modality of rapid response deliveries and the populations they reach.

Greater transparency as to which actors are operating in these most difficult settings could provide the opportunity to deliver aid in a more effective and coordinated manner, gaining efficiencies. This is more of a normative challenge than a methodological one. It requires the organisational relationships that enable information to flow freely yet securely, in a way that benefits all parties in the process. Designing the system would not be difficult but, to work, it will require a critical mass of stakeholders to participate fully and consistently.

A related measure that would enhance both transparency and accountability would be humanitarian actors jointly investing in systematic, independently conducted remote surveys of affected populations. This would enhance knowledge of underserved areas, priority needs, and issues of importance to local populations.

2) After identifying coverage gaps, prioritise finding means to fill them.
Collectively, humanitarian actors have met access constraints if not with complacency then with a decided lack of urgency in finding means to reach the people in need that remain unassisted by the overall humanitarian response. This is not born of neglect or incompetence, but rather of the fundamentally fragmented nature of humanitarian response. Each organisation being too small to cover more than a fraction of the people in need, each focuses on operating neutrally and impartially *within the area where it has decided to be present.* Facing at times formidable obstacles and threats, each organisation does what it can, where it can, to the best of its ability. However, on the macro scale this amounts to partial and inequitable coverage for the country as a whole, as many like-minded agencies tend to cluster in the same places.

The reality of sparse humanitarian coverage warrants a more strategic overview and stronger leadership. In addition to advocating for disaster-affected governments and non-state armed actors to protect and aid civilians in areas they control, the various parts of the humanitarian system have responsibilities to find proactive and innovative means for reaching people in areas too risky for humanitarian organisations to operate. This should start with identifying the humanitarian actors who are already present and assessing what more they can absorb and implement to serve greater numbers of people. Second, when the limits of that potential capacity is reached, aid actors could make aggressive and concerted efforts to identify or help organise additional local/national entities or mechanisms (e.g. community-based, commercial, religious, other) that could potentially deliver materials and services, even if they are not ideal humanitarian partners for political or other reasons.

3) Openly address political constraints and pressures in donor-aid organisation dialogue.
Donor governments have played a complex and at times problematic role in shaping humanitarian presence and coverage, which needs to be addressed candidly. Core humanitarian principles are threatened – and there are attendant security risks – when funding strategies discourage programming in opposition-held territories. Although the problem is not universal, we need to grapple with the fact that aid presence in many countries appears partial and politicised. Donors must both encourage agencies to do more and to devise solutions for presence gaps, and remove the obstacles and disincentives to their doing so. Blanket humanitarian waivers and financial/legal exemptions for aid providers should be the norm when there are high levels of need. For their part, individual aid organisations must be frank about their own presence, limitations and capacities, and speak out forcefully when they know that needs are not being met.

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