**Briefing
Note**
NOVEMBER 2016
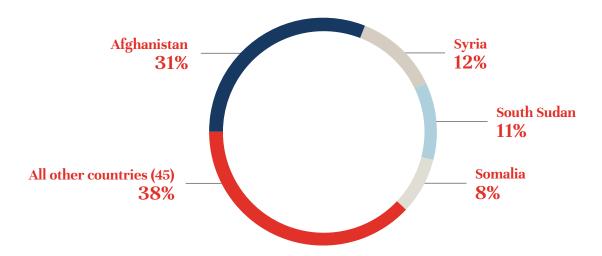
SECURE
ACCESS IN
VOLATILE
ENVIRONMENTS

SAVE

The effects of insecurity on humanitarian coverage

This briefing note summarises the main findings of the SAVE research programme on humanitarian presence and coverage.

In a small but critical number of humanitarian emergencies, violence against aid workers is rising. Four countries currently account for 60 per cent of all these attacks: Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan and Somalia. More than 1,000 aid workers have been victims of direct or collateral violence there since 2011 – wounded, kidnapped, or murdered, often as proxy targets and tools for terror or propaganda. Over 300 lost their lives.

Afghanistan 31%
Syria 12%
South Sudan 11%
Somalia 8%
All other countries (45) 38%

These trends are well evidenced the Aid Worker Security Database (aidworkersecurity.org), and in its Aid Worker Security Reports. What is less well understood is how these attacks on aid workers are affecting the size and scope of their operations and the number of people in need that they are able to reach.

Are aid agencies managing to stay and deliver aid in the most dangerous places, or are the most pressing humanitarian needs going unmet? If they do maintain a presence, what impact is insecurity having on the quality of their assistance? And are donors doing the right things to help?

The SAVE project is the first major effort to answer these questions. In order to determine how insecurity affects 'humanitarian coverage' – the proportion of people in need of help who are reached by aid – the research team needed to tackle the more basic measure of presence, i.e. the extent to which aid agencies are operating in the most dangerous places. Field researchers gathered primary data, conducted 275 interviews and surveyed 3,000 humanitarian practitioners and local people over the course of three years. This is an overview of the findings. A more detailed account of the results and methodology can be found in the main report, here.

Humanitarian
Outcomes

GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY
INSTITUTE

On humanitarian presence and coverage of need, several major findings emerge:
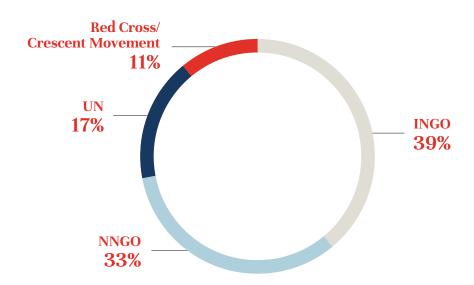
1. **There is a relatively small pool of international aid agencies which consistently work in the most dangerous countries, and not enough to meet demand.**
   Only a small fraction of the total international humanitarian organisations regularly respond to the most violent, conflict-driven emergencies. The countries with the highest number of aid worker attacks host the lowest number of aid organisations per dollar in funding. Countries with no attacks attract over four times the number of organisations, relative to funding, on average.

   BOX 1. WHICH AID AGENCIES ARE ABLE TO OPERATE IN THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES?

   Due to conditions of anonymity in conducting this report, we cannot name the organisations that are working in the most insecure locations. What we can say is:

   - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is mandated to operate within war zones and tends to be present in more violent situations, along with National Red Cross/Crescent Societies
   - National NGOs are always amongst those most present in dangerous areas
   - Under a dozen international NGOs consistently rank among the most present in insecure environments
   - Three UN entities are also among the top 20 most present organisations – though often in coordination rather than directly operational roles

2. **In high-risk countries, security is the single most important factor determining where aid agencies operate.**
   The greater the level of violence in an area, the fewer the aid projects that run there: even though the suffering may be many times greater. The SAVE project was able to demonstrate this relationship between aid presence and security through rigorous quantitative analysis. Confirming this finding, in agency after agency interviewed senior staff affirmed that security was their primary concern when making decisions about where to go, more so than the needs of people or the funding available for the mission.
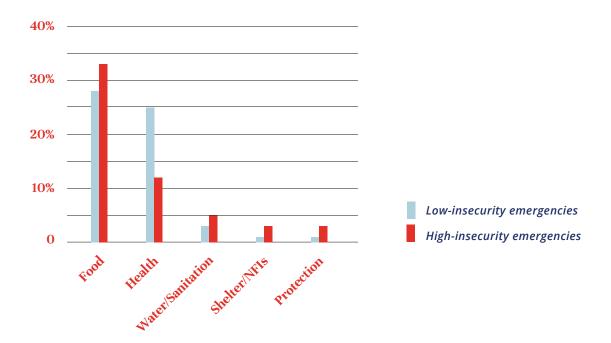
3. **Within the most violent countries, aid agencies tend to narrow their field presence, and cluster in safer areas – often in inverse proportion to where the needs are highest.**
   In the face of elevated insecurity, aid agencies pull back from district level and concentrate their presence in provincial or national capitals, or in regions perceived to be safer. At the same time, it is uncommon for aid groups to withdraw from a country completely in the face of worsening security conditions. They maintain a presence to the best of their ability, but it can be a deceptively shallow one. The main exception to aid agencies' withdrawal from violent areas is in capital cities, where they plant their country office flags. Staying in capitals is crucial for visibility to donors and other

important stakeholders. But the concentrated presence of aid organisations creates a target, and – as in Somalia – can place them adjacent to the primary focus of fighting, leading to collateral harm. We call this the 'capital city paradox'.

4. **Aid delivered in insecure environments is more rudimentary, as agencies are unable to offer technically complex programming or to target the most vulnerable.**
   Organisations in highly insecure settings are forced to adapt their programming to mitigate risk, switching to remote management, greater reliance on local partners, and one-off opportunistic distributions. This leads to more basic aid delivery, such as food assistance, shelter and hygiene items. People who received aid in these places said in surveys that the aid they received was often not what they most needed – such as protection, or education for children whose schooling has been disrupted by war – a quality concern addressed in more detail in other SAVE research.

Low-insecurity emergencies
High-insecurity emergencies

5. **Donor policies and agency incentives can work against humanitarian access and coverage, while making the aid presence seem more robust than it actually is.**
   Donor governments play a complex and at times problematic role in the shaping of humanitarian presence and coverage. Agencies' neutrality, impartiality and independence – core humanitarian principles – have been threatened by counter-terror policies and funding strategies that have the effect of discouraging aid programming in opposition-held territories. In each case of civil conflict, coverage was proportionally greater in areas of government control. While some humanitarian organisations remain operational in active conflict, they often overstate their impact. Incentives to demonstrate presence to donors and the general public can obscure the reality that their footprint on the ground is limited. The perverse result is that aid organisations often inadvertently make the humanitarian situation appear less dire than it is, undermining their advocacy on behalf of the people they seek to serve.

FULL REPORT
For more information and to cite this work, please refer to the full report: Stoddard, A., & Jillani, S. with Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D., & Klimentov, V. (2016). The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage (Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: **SAVEresearch.net**). Humanitarian Outcomes.