

## Webinar Transcript

### Who's out there? Getting an accurate picture of humanitarian presence

(89 minutes)

**Alice Obrecht:** Hello everyone and welcome to our fourth episode of Bridging the Evidence Gap. My name is Alice Obrecht, and I'm a Research Fellow here at ALNAP. For those of you who listened to our previous webinar episode, you will notice a common theme between these two episodes. Over two episodes of this webinar, we're looking at the challenges faced by humanitarian organisation in insecure settings. These are contexts which feature active violence or conflict, and where this violence, along with other factors, can lead to barriers for humanitarian organisations seeking access to people affected by crisis. Now the previous webinar, which was chaired by my colleague, Alexandra Warner, was looking at this issue of monitoring in insecure settings. So how can humanitarian organisations monitor needs, and monitor their projects in settings where having a physical humanitarian presence is quite difficult. If you missed that episode, please go and check it out on our website. The transcript and the audio with the presentation files are online.

But today, we're going to be looking at a different question. One that is slightly more basic, but it's also one that hasn't really been answered very well to date, which is who is actually operating in these settings? Which actors are in the hardest to reach humanitarian settings, and what are they doing to meet need? This is the question of humanitarian presence, and it's a really important one, for helping us to understand the coverage of humanitarian assistance, that is how successful is humanitarian assistance at meeting the needs of the worse off? Well, today we have two fantastic speakers to help us puzzle through these issues. The first is Abby Stoddard, who is a Policy Analyst and Partner at the consultancy team, Humanitarian Outcomes. She'll be talking about the unique mixed methods approach that Humanitarian Outcomes recently used to get a more accurate understanding of the realities of humanitarian presence on the ground, and an understanding of what factors are shaping presence. We're then going to hear from the practitioner perspective, and for that we have Sandeep Bashyal, the Information Management Officer for OCHA Afghanistan, who is joining us from Kabul. Sandeep will be talking about the multiple tools that OCHA is using beyond the 3W sheets, to answer the who's out there question on the ground in Afghanistan.

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So that's who we are today. We'd now like to learn a little bit about who you are, so you'll be seeing a poll appear on your screen, and please fill that in while I cover some brief housekeeping points. We've limited ourselves to two speakers today, as we'd really like to leave a lot of room for questions and discussion, because the two speakers that we have, have such rich experience and expertise on this issue. So many thanks to all of you participants who have submitted questions beforehand, we've already woven those into the discussion questions towards the end of the webinar today, but please do keep submitting your questions throughout the conversation. To submit those questions there is a question box in your webinar menu on the right hand side of your screen, and we will be doing our best to incorporate as many questions as possible. Many people continue to ask us about whether or not this webinar will be recorded, and the answer to that is yes. You will have access to an audio as well as video of the presentations and their slides in about two to three weeks' time, as well as a transcript. You'll also see today, as we go throughout the presentations and the Q&A, links to relevant websites and pieces of research that both Abby and Sandeep will be talking about, and those will be appearing in your chat box, so keep an eye out for that.

I think we will close the poll now. Good, so we have a lot of people with general interest in this in a professional capacity, and some who are using data on humanitarian presence, and very few who are collecting data, and that might be because of the difficulties in collecting this data, so it's a good thing we'll be talking about how to improve our approaches and our methods in doing this. So to get us started on this we're going to turn over to Abby Stoddard. I've already given a brief introduction to Abby. Abby is a very well known, I think, humanitarian researcher, with extensive expertise in humanitarian research, including as the lead author of ALNAP's most recent edition of The State of the Humanitarian System Report, from 2015. But today Abby's going to be talking with us about research that she's carried out as part of the SAVE research programme. This is the three year research programme on Secure Access in Volatile Environments, funded by UK DFID, and it's the first major effort to answer some of the aid world's most critical questions about how much aid is getting to war zones, and how much that aid is helping.

There are three components to this programme. Elias Sagmeister from GPPi was on our previous webinar talking about the monitoring component, and today Abby is here to discuss the unique methods that they've been using to get a better empirical understanding of humanitarian presence, and the factors that shape this, in insecure settings. So we're looking forward to hearing from Abby, who's going to be giving us a presentation that covers both the findings that they've obtained from this research, as well as some of the method. So over to you, Abby.

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**Abby Stoddard:** Thanks to ALNAP for letting me be a part of this today, and to share our research this way. So I think you introduced the SAVE programme pretty well, so I don't think I need to go through the background and structure of it, except maybe just to add that as a multi-year and multi-country study with a major field-based component, it was definitely the largest and most ambitious, and I think the most data intensive study that we've done to date at Humanitarian Outcomes. We were really pleased to partner with GPPi in taking it on.

The goal of the study was to contribute to solutions for improving aid work in highly insecure settings, and as the initial phase, the research area that I was leading, what we were trying to do was, in a sense, to lay the empirical evidence base to measure and to show concretely how insecurity and violence in the operational environment effects humanitarian presence, and coverage of needs. So I'll be talking about the first component, presence and coverage today.

These were the four countries that we were looking at, Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan and Southern Somalia, which for the time period of the study, but also still largely today, have the highest levels of insecurity in the form of major attacks going on, and aid worker casualties, and access constraints, which is why they were selected for the study.

Now some of you may be familiar with Humanitarian Outcome's work in quantifying insecurity for aid workers, and the Aid Worker Security Database that we run, and have run for the past several years. So measuring the insecurity in these places was, in fact, the easy part for us. The more difficult questions we were seeking to answer were, in these highly insecure environments, what is the level of humanitarian field presence in relation to people in need, which is a way of saying what is the humanitarian coverage? Then how is this humanitarian coverage level affected by changing security conditions, and can we measure that? Finally, are the types and sectors of programming affected by insecurity in these environments? The biggest challenge, which is one I think that many humanitarian researchers are familiar with, is that the data that you need to answer these questions are just not readily available in any compiled form. We know MSF famously asked the question, 'where is everyone?' and when that report came out, I remember being struck by the fact that the answers, we really have no way of knowing at present, because detailed information on the humanitarian footprint, country by country, simply doesn't exist. So essentially it's necessary to go out and gather these numbers and compile brand new data sets, in order to answer these questions, and that's essentially what we did in the SAVE study.

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So we were looking to fill major evidence gaps, by gathering numbers first on humanitarian presence, which we defined as the number of organisations, personnel and project activities per location in these countries, and by setting that against the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in each area, we're able to calculate a proxy for humanitarian coverage. Now I say 'proxy' because ideally humanitarian coverage would be measured by the percentage of people in need who are reached by, and have their needs met by humanitarian assistance. Now to do that would be a whole other level of difficulty for the research, because one, the inconsistent ways that people in need are estimated across emergencies, and how the aid recipients in each place are divided up and crosscut by sectors and overlapping agencies, and then the inevitable double counting that occurs. So for our purposes, this was a useful proxy just to try to measure how insecurity affects the level and the configuration of aid operations.

So in terms of how we went about this, field work was really predominant in the data gathering. We had field-based researchers working with local research partners, doing the actual data gathering and verification in the field. So they would begin by compiling the existing datasets that existed, and here is where OCHA came in very, very helpful to us, and were providing us with the 3Ws that existed in these places, as well as other data sets and registries. So that was a really useful jumping off point. From then they did systematic consultations of all the humanitarian actors in the context, both international and national, and essentially counted up the presence data. They were assisted in this by confidentiality protocols that we developed, in order to assure agencies that all this information would not be published against their specific agency's name, but would be anonymised and aggregated in any sort of public sharing of it. We also, of course, did some qualitative information gathering, and that was the practitioner interviews. So we interviewed all of these actors more in depth, and really focussed on the decision making that they did regarding operational presence. So what were the determinants of their setting up operations, what were the conditions for expanding or contracting their presence, and things like that. Really looking at where and how they operate.

Then we did affected population surveys that were targeted to people living in these very hard to access locations. So mostly these were done via remote telecoms, using interactive voice response technology. That's how we did it in Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan, but in the case of Syria it was deemed safer for the respondents, and would encourage them to respond more if we actually did in person surveys, rather than do something over the phone. So we partnered with a local research institute called Proximity, who was able to go into four governorates and actually do household surveys for us. What these surveys were asking people, was the aid presence that they were seeing,

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the organisations that they saw in their areas, whether the presence was declining or increasing, and also the type and the quality of aid that they were receiving, and whether it met their most urgent needs. So that was a way of triangulating the other quantitative and qualitative data that we were gathering for the study.

So as you can imagine, we faced some pretty significant challenges, many of which were expected, including the fact that aid organisations didn't always have complete and comprehensive records of their operational data, and often not at the level of granularity that we were asking for. With some organisations, even if they were able to get us fantastic, totally comprehensive numbers for the current year, as we went back in time the data would get spottier and softer. So we were asking for the current year, and as many years back as they were able to provide. For some organisations in some places, and this was especially true in Syria, we found a real, deep reluctance to share the operational information, even with the confidentiality and anonymity assurances. Now this was due to what we think are genuine security concerns, and what in Syria at the time, was an atmosphere of intense distrust. But we think as well there are some reputational concerns at play, when the presence of agencies was not quite as extensive as they would have liked, and they weren't keen on that being shared necessarily.

Finally we faced the basic limitations of doing a part of our quantitative analysis, which was statistical regression analysis, observational data. So listeners probably know that it's notoriously difficult for social science research taking place in complex, real world situations, to meet the threshold for statistical significance, and to make very strong claims in terms of attribution and causality. So maybe it was naïve of us to try, but I mean, I can tell you what we set out to show, and what we were hoping we would find. We wanted to see, for any particular area, whether there was a strong correlation, a statistically significant one, between rising insecurity and declining aid presence. While the data that we collected did show overall patterns that suggested this pretty strongly, it did not meet the threshold for significance. In the report we go into the variety of confounding factors that explain why we think this is. However, even though those regressions were inconclusive, that, as I said, was only one aspect of our quantitative research, and the other parts of it did leave valid, and we think interesting and useful findings. Those are the findings that I'm going to go through with you now just briefly, hitting the highlights.

The first is the broad finding that only a surprisingly small number of organisation consistently work within the most dangerous locations, in the most dangerous countries. It's clearly not enough to meet



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the total needs in any given area. Now here you can see that out of all the emergency contexts that took place during the study period, those at the top of the list, with the highest number of major attacks, shown in red on the right, have a relatively smaller number of organisations responding to the emergency, per \$100 million in funding, represented by the blue bars. If you look on the bottom, the natural disaster type emergencies in more stable and secure countries, on the bottom, that have fewer, zero attacks, have generally larger numbers of organisations responding. So maybe not too surprising that the more secure countries, attract the larger numbers of agencies responding.

We were able to use the presence data that we gathered from agencies to dive deeper into who was present and who wasn't, and we were able to calculate a ranked index of the most present organisations. So the ones that in these countries, in the highly insecure countries, were operating in the most dangerous areas, as measured by acts of violence that took place there. Now we were working with an applied mathematician to do this, my co-author, Shoaib Jillani, so a shout out to him, and also a few statisticians, so what you're seeing now is in its anonymised form, but you can see that it's only about seven INGOs, a Red Cross Movement, three UN agencies and several national NGOs, which in every context we found would be at the forefront of operations in the most insecure places, and who of course are critical to the overall response.

A second and more qualitative finding, but one which was supported by the data and the affected population surveys, was that security or the lack of it, represents for agencies, the most important determinant of where they are present. So more than the level of need, more than the availability of funding, their decisions are mainly determined, driven by the state of security for their staff. So what happens is that this results in unequal, or skewed coverage, where you see larger numbers of agencies clustering in more safe areas, leaving coverage gaps in other areas where the needs may be far higher. And that donor policies, including counter terror legislation and financial regulations, will contribute to this and exacerbate this skewing effect by making agencies even more reluctant to work in these high risk areas.

Just to quickly use Afghanistan as one example, you can see here that the insecurity is represented by the darker shades of red, and the level of humanitarian coverage that we calculated, is shown by the blue circles. So I think you can see on its face, that coverage is generally higher in the less insecure northern provinces, and lowest of all in the Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar, which have seen more violence and displacement and where very few agencies are working, still. The reason why subnational data that we collected is so important here, is because this skewed and declining coverage

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is something that you really can't see at an overall country level. So it's rare nowadays that an organisation will pull out of the country completely, even if it's been attacked. So you get roughly the same number of organisation in the country year after year, but what you don't see is that they may have contracted their presence, pull back off into provincial capitals, to the national capital, and shrinking their presence and activities in the field, the number of staff in the field. So what you see here is the declining average number of districts that agencies cover in Afghanistan, over the period of the study. So this has been a trend that has really been obscured by lack of detailed data.

The data that we collected, and the survey findings also show pretty clearly that in the insecure, hard to access locations, programming in general becomes more basic and rudimentary, and really less able to be targeted to specific, vulnerable groups. This stands to reason, organisations that cannot move their staff freely within a country will have trouble getting the skillsets they need out in the field, and that limits the technical complexity of what they can do. Especially when their staff and programming is highly localised, meaning everything is done using staff hired from the immediate vicinity, while when they're working remotely through local partners it becomes still more difficult to identify and target the most vulnerable, and may not be culturally accepted to do that. So instead the focus will shift to reaching more people with simpler deliveries. Then we also found, as kind of a side note, that as food deliveries and deliveries of NFIs tend to go up in insecure emergencies, and the more complex health type of programming goes down, at the same time we also don't see protection activities rise as you might expect it would, given the increased protection needs. It goes up a little, but not to the level you would think, given that these are protection crises, many of these situations that we're studying. So this is also a function of lack of access making more complex programming difficult for agencies.

Now finally, and this is kind of, the take home message of this study, is the fact that it's been so hard to get a clear picture of humanitarian presence and coverage in these places, that what happens is, coverage can appear to be larger and more robust than it actually is. Both agencies and donors have incentives to exaggerate the reach of their humanitarian efforts, and we make the point that humanitarian actors really undermine their own advocacy in this regard. Now by wanting to appear to their donors and to the general public that they are present and they are working where the needs are greatest, and they're able to respond, inadvertently here they're making the humanitarian situation maybe seem less dire, and by extension, taking the pressure off political actors to find solutions to the conflicts. I'm going to stop there, as my time is up, but I look forward to taking questions and also to hearing Sandeep's presentation.

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**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thank you so much Abby. Really, really interesting, I'm sure we could talk about this for ages. Fascinating to see how you've taken a topic that lots of people talk about, but don't really have a concrete or tangible feel for, and put some numbers on that. It ends up revealing some very troubling trends, which I'm sure Sandeep is going to build on. Just before we get to Sandeep, a quick follow up question for you on method. You just mentioned in your presentation that with the SAVE research you tried to use statistical analysis, or you did use statistical analysis, to try and measure the impact of violent incidents on the level of humanitarian coverage at the subnational level, and ended up with no statistically significant findings on this. So you turned to other components of the research to build in that picture of the causal relationship between insecurity and the decline of presence. I was wondering, stepping back from this and looking at statistical analysis as a method, do you think, as a researcher, that these kinds of harder, quantitative approaches to humanitarian questions are still valuable, even though they can't get us to clear and direct answers on a lot of these questions? Also, how do you think we can become a bit more rigorous at understanding casual relationships without quantitative approaches, for example, using some of the qualitative approaches that you were using in this research?

**Abby Stoddard:** Yes, so absolutely, I think that most of us in the humanitarian sector would agree that in general the field is quite data starved and the research has traditionally been, I would say, very qualitative and soft. So there are two types of statistical analysis, right? There are descriptive statistics, which can tell a compelling story, and then there's the inferential statistics, like regressions where you're trying to prove causality at a level of significance. So you can have one without the other in many of these cases. As I mentioned, the first challenge is to go out and gather the data ourselves to build these data sets to analyse. Even doing this alone, you know, bringing the data in, is I think a worthwhile contribution. Having the concrete numbers is useful and important, even if they're not conducive to regression analysis, they can still tell us some interesting things. But having said that, I do think it's important and worthwhile to continue to experiment and to test the data for significance using various questions and variables, even if most of the time you're not getting the p-values that you hope for. As an extension of that, as good practice, and to move the field forward and to avoid falling into the trap of publication bias, it's also important to publish the findings, even when they're inconclusive, and to discuss the confounding factors, which we tried to do.

You also asked about qualitative approaches, and how to make them a bit more rigorous. I think you can do that. Interviewing is our stock and trade in this field. That can be made, I think, more rigorous and systematic through more thoughtful and representative targeting of interviewees, and more



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structured analysis of it, so you're not inadvertently putting more weight on the most recent interviewee for example, and really being aware of cognitive biases when you go through the information that you gathered. Finally, for a few years now we've been calling for increased surveying of the affected populations, which is possible now through this technology. It really allows you to reach people in remote and hard to access locations. I think that's important, because it gets us away from the more tokenistic small focus groups and situation you see sometimes where an agency will only survey their own beneficiaries.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much Abby. Really interesting perspectives there on how to combine these two approaches, and their distinct values, and on the surveying point as well, how much easier it's become to get some of this richer data. So we're now going to hear from the practitioner perspective on this issue, which is a really important one, and to help us understand what tools and approaches practitioners are using on the ground to answer these questions, we're going to turn to Sandeep Bashyal. Sandeep has been working with OCHA as an Information Management Officer since 2005, and has been in Afghanistan for three years. Sandeep also has experience working in disasters and complex emergencies in Nepal, Myanmar, Darfur and Pakistan. Many of our listeners will be familiar with the 3W Forums that OCHA uses at country level to map presence, and Abby has just referred to these as well, but the question is, what is OCHA doing to compliment these forms to get a fuller picture of presence and coverage? I should just also remark to everybody in the room, that if you have questions of clarification, I neglected to mention this after Abby was done speaking, but if you have any questions of clarification or follow up discussion questions that you'd like us to cover after Sandeep's presentation, on either Abby's or Sandeep's presentation, please start entering those into the chat box under the questions tab. So Sandeep, over to you to talk.

**Sandeep Bashyal:** Thank you for this opportunity to talk on this webinar. I am just going to do a quick run through of the traditional 3W tool that we use in Afghanistan, like in any other country. Just a brief methodology of how we use it, and what we're using it for, its scope and the limitations. Then I'll be also going briefly about some supplementary tool, that let's us do more in depth analysis on humanitarian presence.

The OCHA 3W in Afghanistan is basically just a list of organisations by their sector and district, so we don't collate any more data than that. This is mainly because these NGOs and other partners have a lot of reporting to do, and we don't want to put additional burden on them. So we just ask them two questions, we just asked them whether they have active humanitarian programming or have carried

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out a humanitarian assessment in the last three months. By humanitarian programming, we mean projects that are in line with the Humanitarian Response Plan monitoring framework, or projects under the Common Humanitarian Fund. So these lists of organisations go into the operational presence, and then we have a separate list for agencies that are not strictly humanitarian. They are not currently conducting humanitarian activities, but they have access to the districts, and the capacity if there's a need, and funding is available to actually conduct humanitarian programming.

So the data is collected by OCHA sub offices. There's no direct reporting from the agencies to OCHA, so it's just actively collected. This gives us a baseline overview of what agencies are present in the district. So this is just a simple methodology of how we collect the data. So our sub offices collect these names of just acronyms of agencies, directly through phone calls or through coordination meetings, and it's not collected in a very structured way, so it's a comma-separated list, and back here in Kabul we take all that data apart, compare it to a standard list of organisations, we assign them the actual names of the organisations and then type of the organisations so that we have structured data. Some of these agencies do not want to be named publically, so we filter out that information before we create our products. So our products are just the regular products, thematic maps, data that you can find on the Humanitarian Data Exchange website, and interactive dashboards that you see at the bottom, below.

So, along with the names of agencies we also maintain a contact list of at least one contact per organisation, so these are also collected by the sub offices, and we consolidate them here. Some of the key contacts, we manually add them to the Humanitarian ID, which is a global contact list of humanitarian workers, but for Afghanistan it's not quite public. You have to be a verified responder to be able to access that list. Our interactive dashboards do offer some level of analysis. You can just look at the coverage by sector, by type of agencies, or even click on a district or province, or a region to see who's reportedly working there. You can also see trends over time, if you look at the green dashboard, it has data since 2013, so you can just scroll over the data and see how the presence has changed over time.

So the 3W is more of a baseline list of humanitarian presence, partner presence. We call it presence and not coverage because it has some limitations. This is the most comprehensive list of organisations that are working in the districts, and includes local agencies or other partners of partners who may not be directly reporting to the cluster system. So the main use would be to actually click on a district to see who's working there, and find somebody to contact to get more information on a district, and

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of course we can see changes over time in the number of operational partners. It just provides baseline data, and it has some limitations. So it does not really show the extent of coverage in a district, like in the district, there are 15 organisations working there, but there could be just one person from the agency visiting once a month to the district headquarters. So it's not an indicator of either the scale of the response, capacity of the agencies to provide support, or even gaps in response, even if you compare with the needs. Also this three-month cycle does not give an accurate picture of presence in a constantly changing emergency situation.

So there are these supplementary tools that we have to get a more accurate picture. There is a cluster reporting system against the Humanitarian Response Plan, so all the clusters have their own activity-based 3Ws, although the level of detail and the frequency of reporting, it varies from cluster to cluster. But all of them have the number of beneficiaries supported by the type of activities. So, we usually, we have a periodic monitoring report for the HRP, and we use this information to measure the progress against the needs, targets, and identify potential gaps in response. The other tool is, OCHA collects, we have these two different tools, the natural disaster tracking system, and the displacement tracking system. So our field offices collect top line information based on assessments in the field and reports from partners on internal displacement and areas of natural disaster events. So this includes number of affected population, number of people displaced, and also the organisation provided in assessment and response. So it's activity based, and the data is live, so it's updated every day, and we can use this to actually identify changes in the humanitarian context, also with areas that are difficult to reach, and who is working in these areas.

I'll just talk about how the 3W does not have any information on capacity of organisations, so the Common Humanitarian Fund, to be eligible to apply to the fund, NGOs have to go through a two-step process. There's the first step, where they submit an initial checklist of their activities and capacities, so that qualifies them to be a potential partner. Those who qualify in the first step, it's called a due diligence review, there is a more detailed assessment of the partners, and it's done by an external consultant, and those that qualify also receive a risk rating. So this helps identify potential partners that would be working in hard to access areas, or that have the capacity to respond to emergencies. In Afghanistan, due to these hard to access areas and high conflict incidences, the cash-based programming has been getting more popular. There was also a partner assessment conducted recently of these cash-based transfer programs, so there is a mapping, a list of partners who have implemented these in the past, and those who are implementing these currently. It's also a capacity mapping of these partners, it gives them a ranking, each partner has received a score of their ability

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to deliver this cash-based assessment. So these are some of the tools. In 2017, one of our priorities for the Humanitarian Response Plan is improving humanitarian conditions for people in hard to access areas. There is an access advisory group under the Humanitarian Country Team, who is looking at a more systematic approach to measure access indicators, as well as humanitarian coverage in this district. So that's about it from my side.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thank you so much Sandeep, for a really great, whirlwind overview of all that OCHA Afghanistan is doing to get a grasp on the presence question. We've had a couple of questions come in over the chat room Sandeep, so I thought I would put two of those to you, if you don't mind. I know you've just been talking quite a bit, but the first question is a pretty straightforward one about the DTS and NDTS, if that's publically accessible. So is the DTS and NDTS publically accessible, and that question was from Katarina Hamed (ph 43.43). The second question is from Michele Tarsilla, who is an Evaluation Consultant working for UNICEF in West Africa, and Michele has asked, in response to your first slide I have a question on capacity measurement. What tools do you use to measure the operational capacity of humanitarian actors, such as international NGOs that might be interested in contributing to the humanitarian response, but do not yet have any presence or staff in the country, or in the affected areas? So that's a question, you mentioned Sandeep, a few times about operational capacity, that the 3Ws don't assess this, that you have the CHF partner capacity assessments, and then the specific cash capacity assessments. Beyond those that you've already discussed, are there other capacity measurement tools that you can use to measure the operational capacity of new humanitarian actors, new international NGOs that are not currently part of the response, that want to become part of that response? Then the first question on DTS and NDTS and it being publically accessible, so if you could answer those two questions Sandeep, we'd be most grateful.

**Sandeep Bashyal:** Yes, the DTS and NDTS are both publically accessible. The data is in the Humanitarian Data Exchange platform, and there are interactive dashboards, both in the Humanitarian Data Exchange platform and the humanitarian response website for Afghanistan. For your second question, when I talked about operational capacity, it's not really a capacity assessment, so it does not really, although the name suggests capacity, but it's not really a capacity, it's just potential capacity of organisations that may be able to work, provide humanitarian assistance, but who are not currently doing so. Other than the CHF and the recent cash-based programming, we currently do not have any other capacity assessment programmes, but for new NGOs, even though they are not working in Afghanistan, they could certainly always be a partner of other agencies that are working. There's no restriction that the agency has to be previously working in Afghanistan to

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apply for these capacity assessments for the CHF. Does that answer your question? They can have a track record in other countries.

**Alice Obrecht:** I think that gets to the question Sandeep, and I think if Michele has any follow up, they can feel free to contact us and we can follow up after the webinar, but I think that that's a really good overview response to that question. We also had a question of clarification for Abby coming in from Clare Barncorn (ph 47.21), who's wondering about how you did the counting Abby, in this research. So how were different MSF entities, such as MSF Holland, MSF Germany and MSF OCB counted towards the NGO count? Were they included in that NGO count, or were they counted somehow separately? So Abby, just a quick clarification on that.

**Abby Stoddard:** Yes, just quickly, it depends on their own model, and how they identified in the field, whether as separate organisations with different management structures and staff, if so we counted them accordingly. For the cross-country global index, where we looked at the most and least present, we would combine the Federated organisations into one, and that would default to the most present.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much. Speaking of MSF, I'd like to pose a question to both of our speakers that was sent into us by MSF Spain. So Abby mentioned that MSF produced their 'Where is Everyone?' report in 2014, around this issue of presence, and MSF over the past year has now been producing a new series of reports on presence and coverage called the [Emergency Gap Project](#), and there will be a link to that coming through your chat box. The Emergency Gap Project identifies the enablers and disablers for effective emergency response in armed conflicts, really based on the perspectives of MSF's operations and field practice. Their most recent report reflect on the role of insecurity as a factor in reducing operational presence, so very relevant to this discussion today, and based on this work, MSF would like to pose the following question to Abby and Sandeep. The question is, how do you think humanitarian donors and actors need to be changing their perceptions and attitudes around risk in order to improve presence? So Sandeep, you mentioned issues around risk and data sharing, and Abby, I think that was a theme in your presentation as well. How do these perceptions of risk affect agencies' decisions about where they go and where they operate? Do data and evidence play a role in changing these mental models, in bringing about a mind shift, or do you think it's more based around the practical commitment of the humanitarian principles?

So for example, Abby you had the red map, and Sandeep you also had the map on your fantastic dashboard showing the gaps in presence and coverage. When humanitarian actors are faced with



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those maps, does that compel them to act differently, or do you think this is going to be driven more around practical commitments to humanitarian principles? So I'll look to you Abby, first to respond, and then followed by Sandeep.

**Abby Stoddard:** Okay, it's a really good question. I personally think that the more data you can gather the better, the more information you have, you should use. Because we know that risk is often misinterpreted or exaggerated in some cases in people's minds, that's it's good to know exactly what the past experience has been in certain areas. You see an access inertia in places like Afghanistan, where agencies are staying in areas perceived to be safer, and reluctant to test the waters in new areas. So I think the more information you can have, the better. But we've also argued that humanitarian actors and donors need to move from a mind set of risk transfer to risk sharing, and I'm not sure if that's completely appropriate to the question here, but what we see is donors tend to push the risk, real or perceived, onto NGOs, and the NGOs push it out to their local staff and local partners, and what needs to happen is a more clear and explicit acknowledgement about the risks that are involved, including both security risk and fiduciary risk, and a shared ownership of these risk by both donors and agencies, with the understanding that after all the mitigating and preventative measures have been taken, there will still be a residual risk that could be realised, that both sides need to understand and accept. So I also think that in terms of data, studies like SAVE and information like OCHA is doing, can press the issue, and I can talk more about that later, because I think I'm kind of, heading off track.

**Alice Obrecht:** No, that's perfectly on track, thanks Abby. Sandeep, what are your thoughts on this question from MSF Spain?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** I'll just give you an example of Afghanistan. Most of these agencies are present on the northern side of Afghanistan, and there's limited presence in the southern side, where there is a higher level of conflict. Some of the reasons are that the north historically used to have a higher presence, more development activities. It's also more prone to natural disasters, so there were DRR activities. The conflict, although it was previously more concentrated towards the south, now it's moving towards the north, and organisations have adopted this coping strategy, limiting their presence to urban centres, getting back their presence. Although there is enough evidence that there is more humanitarian need in these harder to access areas, or more conflict affected areas. So the partners are basically lacking this incentive to move to these areas, so maybe donors could provide them this incentive, although there are risks in terms of programming, you might not get as much

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return on investment in hard to access areas, than in easily accessible areas. So it's more of a question of practical commitment than the data that's available, that's what I think.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks Sandeep. Really interesting talking about the incentives that need to be put in place there, and this idea of return on investment raises some really interesting questions that are being faced right now, as we look at these significant and growing gaps in coverage. So a lot to think about. I want to pick on a question that we got from a number of participants and registrants before the webinar about tools and methods that they can use to map who is doing what. So the START Network has asked, because they are interested in developing a methodology to map the presence of its 42 members, and others have been asking about online platforms, or other tools that they could be using to map presence, so I'm wondering Abby and Sandeep, what are your practical recommendations for... it sounds like mainly INGOs or INGO networks, that they can use to map presence in different countries, particularly countries that are highly insecure? So again Abby, over to you first.

**Abby Stoddard:** Okay, so we were really arguing that it needs to become an operational norm for organisation to have and to readily share this information, within their coordination structures. So whether that's a smaller network like START, or the country level clusters. We do tend to think that it's better to do this as broadly and as universally as possible, not really to fragment it within different structures and platforms, so the broader the better. But you can see that with just a few key data points, you'd be able to put together a pretty decent picture of humanitarian presence, so that is every organisation should be able to report at the national level, at provincial level and district level, for instance the number and location of their offices, number and location of their staff, or if not the actual staff numbers, then the number of paid positions, because staff come and go and that's very changeable. Also the number and location of their activities, meaning the projects or components of programmes that they're implementing, either directly or through their partners, and the number of total beneficiaries that they're serving, again down to the district level.

Now if all of this information was available from the individual agency levels, which I don't think would be so onerous, then compiling it and reconciling it for the whole country to deal with this double counting issue, and things like that, really wouldn't be a huge methodological problem. The difficulty

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really comes in when someone has to go around, as our researchers did, and manually extract the information from one organisation at a time.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much Abby, and I have a follow up question for you on that, but before we turn to that, Sandeep, any thoughts on tools and methods they can use? I mean, I know you've presented a number of tools that OCHA's using. Obviously there are tools being used by the clusters and HCTs, so are you thinking that INGOs should really try to work with those tools and make them work for them, or are there additional tools and approaches that you would recommend?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** I think for a start, there could be basic data collection, something, like if it's a consult team of NGOs, they could have a registration process with just some basic information, and all of these agencies to report to their donors, they report to their clusters. Maybe it might be a good idea to get that data from those agencies rather than asking them to report all those activities again, like duplication of reporting. NGOs, they also have to report to the government, so there is an overload of reporting requirements. I think it might be a better idea if we just collect basic information, like what Abby mentioned, number of staff, district coverage, and get the detailed information on activities from other sources that they're already reporting to.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, fantastic, thank you both. Abby, just picking up on this piece around having people actually on the ground to help collect this data, you mentioned in your presentation that you used field-based monitors to collect information on presence and staff in very hard to reach areas. I was wondering, is this an approach you would use again as a researcher, or for Humanitarian Outcomes, and would you recommend this for people who are seeking to improve on the ground accuracy by partnering with local researchers?

**Abby Stoddard:** Well, the answer is yes. When you're actually going out to create and build the new data sets, there's really no substitute for field level research, if that's where the information is. And that really means having the time and the budget to make that possible. So we were lucky in our case that DFID saw the importance of this, and we got a generous six-month inception period, followed by two and a half years of a research phase. So that really enabled us to have teams working on the ground for several months at a stretch, which is what made it possible to do the heavy lifting of counting and verifying humanitarian presence data. Now different countries will have different levels of capacity for local research, and it requires that you invest in scoping that out, as part of the inception period of any study. There are of course good ones and bad ones, and you need to look at track records

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and references, and beware of some local research outfits, which have been accused of falsifying findings in the past, but in general it's the best investment you can make.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much Abby. Sandeep, we also had a question around updating this data over time. So it was a question that came in around systematically collecting and updating evidence on presence in a constantly changing humanitarian context over time. So this increasingly what we recognise as our humanitarian reality. How does OCHA try to stay updated on your understanding of presence as it shifts and changes over time?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** So these two, the natural disaster tracking and internal displacement tracking system, they are basically live, like we get the data every day, we still have a very simple data collection process, but there is minimal time in processing, the data is almost live. It tells us about where the new displacements are taking place, what are their needs, what response is being provided. That's a first step, and I mentioned earlier that the Humanitarian Access Working Group is working on a more systematic approach to collecting information related to access and coverage. We're not quite there yet, but this year it will be our focus.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, and Sandeep, if I could ask you just to elaborate a little bit on that, in terms of how often do you think this data needs to be updated? I mean, how quickly do you feel it changes? You've been in Afghanistan for three years, how much does the presence of humanitarian actors and their activities in particular areas of Afghanistan stay the same, or change over time? Does it need to be updated every month, every other month, or is it more of an annual process that you think would be suitable?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** No, it changes all the time. So one day an area can be accessible, next day, there is a major security incident, or an attack, and there's no access to the area. So it's a very volatile situation here, so this data should be updated as often as possible, so we should have a mechanism to actually monitor the situation as it happens.

**Alice Obrecht:** We'll be looking to OCHA to have that on a dashboard pretty soon. It sounds really handy. Good, so moving on to a few questions about best practices that we've been receiving, so we had a question around the best practices of identifying and working with hidden actors in emergencies. This picks up on a theme that both of you have talked about, which is on anonymity, and

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this is a key feature of the operating environments of many of these insecure settings, and one of the issues that really prevents a clear and accurate picture of who's doing what and where. So we've had a few questions around anonymity, one question is how can we get over anonymity to identify good local partners? Another person has asked about the connection between anonymity and corruption risk, so the fact that organisations are operating anonymously presents certain risks around corruption, how do we know organisations are behaving appropriately if these operations are being kept secret? Finally a question around coordination, so how can we strengthen coordination within hostile environments, particularly subnational coordination, which ALNAP's research on coordination has highlighted as being a major area where we need to have improvements and we need different approaches. How do we strengthen coordination at the subnational level when humanitarian actors are operating anonymously? So those are three different issues, but all connected to the overarching challenge of anonymity, and to answer to this, Sandeep, we're going to go back to you first, followed by Abby.

**Sandeep Bashyal:** For Afghanistan, some of these actors do not want to be publically mentioned in public reports or papers. They are involved in the coordination structure, so they are not quite hidden actors. Even in the field level, they regularly attend the coordination meetings, and there is a coordination system at the national level, so I don't think we have these really hidden actors in Afghanistan.

**Alice Obrecht:** Okay great, thank you. Over to you Abby, what are your thoughts on the challenge of anonymity and addressing these three issues?

**Abby Stoddard:** Yes, I was going to make the exact same point, that when you get down to the local level, the aid actors know who each other are. So anonymity really only extends so far, and there is coordination that's happening. If the question is more about how to identify the good local actors to work with, or to find new ones, we did talk about looking beyond the traditional humanitarian actors when it was necessary, to see what other sorts of actors and mechanisms might be able to get access, for instance, local commercial actors if that's necessary. But where they are present, the local organisations, it's, I think, less about finding the good ones among them than it is about creating good partnerships. So my colleague, Katherine Haver's research component on this, on maintaining access equality, found that better access can be achieved when the international actors take the time to assess the partnership, so the institutional and operational capacities of the partnership, rather than just the partner, and strengthen the areas that are important to the success of the partnership. So this



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will involve each partner complementing the capacities and compensating for the weaknesses of the other partner, and it really does go both ways.

This is maybe slightly off topic, but I just really wanted to get a word in about the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which usually have very good access relative to other humanitarian actors, but don't tend to be utilised as operational partners very much by the international agencies, apart from their cooperation with the ICRC and IFRC. Now I know that sometimes they're seen as partial or potentially too close to the government, but in areas where needs are high and access for humanitarians is severely constrained, I think the international aid community needs to ask themselves if the outcome of no aid, is better than aid that could go in that might be problematic in some way. So I just wanted to make that point.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks Abby. I think that's a really important point, you know, in terms of the mechanism versus the end, and how humanitarian actors choose to work, and how they choose to deliver, and whether or not... it's in a sense, flipping the principled question on its head, right, because it's the sense in which being principled can actually shut us off to opportunities to enhance humanitarian presence, as opposed to pushing us to expand those areas of presence. So I think it's a really interesting and important point. We have a question actually Abby that's come in over the chat, and I'd like to encourage everyone else who's with us to continue asking questions, any points of clarification that they might have, on either presentation. Abby, the question for you is, can you elaborate more on complex and simple programming? Is there a rule of thumb used in determining which one to apply, given a particular situation or context?

**Abby Stoddard:** No, I don't think there's any rule of thumb, and I don't think there's really any blueprint for organisations doing this. I think it happens kind of, organically, where in a less insecure place organisations will be doing programming at a different level. The longer that you're there for instance, the more technically complex you can get, and the more freedom you have to move staff around from other parts of the country, or international staff that would have the technical skillsets one needs for doing that kind of programming. So it's just something that happens, it tends not to be optimal, and we did see results in the affected population surveys that said that a large portion of the aid they received did not meet the most urgent needs. In Syria in particular, people saying that really they'd had enough of the hygiene packets and food packets, and wouldn't it be great if there was more cash so that we could actually buy precisely what we needed, instead of just receiving these packets over and over.

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**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much Abby, and picking up on this issue, it's a point of clarification, we've been throwing these terms around quite a bit, presence and coverage. Sandeep, there's been a clarification question for you based on your presentation. You mentioned that in OCHA you used the term 'presence' rather than 'coverage', because the latter is limiting. There's a new question, what did you mean by that? So where do you see the gaps coming in between presence and coverage, and how does your mapping of activities and monitoring of activities help you understand coverage instead of presence? So if you could elaborate on your earlier comment in your presentation on what you mean about the difference between presence and coverage, and that you find coverage to be a bit limiting.

**Sandeep Bashyal:** So presence is whether a partner has some kind of programming in the district. It does not say anything about the scale of the programme. They may just be visiting the district once a month and just doing an assessment, so that's still presence, but coverage would mean the extent of, it could be geographical coverage over the district rather than the organisation being present just in the district administrative centre. Coverage could also mean the number of beneficiaries that they are assessing, so that's how I wanted to differentiate presence and coverage.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much. We have another question that came in before the webinar from CARE, one question from an M&E advisor at CARE and a participant from NATO, each asking a similar question about a different actor. So CARE has asked what role can governments play in crisis affected countries in the accurate mapping of humanitarian actors, and in monitoring quality? And a participant from NATO asked, how can the military contribute to defining who is doing what in a crisis or conflict area? So we've been talking about OCHA led processes, INGO led processes and perhaps humanitarian research led processes to map presence, but what kind of roles can governments and militaries play in helping us understand the presence of humanitarian assistance and humanitarian actors? So Abby, if you could comment on that first, what you saw in your research across these four different countries, and then we'll move to Sandeep.

**Abby Stoddard:** To be honest, in the four conflict affected countries that we were dealing with, we actually thought less about the role of host governments, some of which didn't really have the capacity to keep up-to-date registries of NGOs, and some of which you wouldn't necessarily want to know the operational details of what agencies are doing. We focussed more on the role of donor governments

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in terms of us being surprised that they hadn't been more insistent on getting what seems like pretty basic data from the HCTs and the grantees in the field on presence and coverage. We know that donors can encourage and promote coordination and underpin it with their funding decisions. It all depends on how high priority they place on it. But in terms of host governments, it was not a big part of what we were looking at.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much. And Sandeep, your thoughts on this from the Afghanistan perspective?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** We are always looking for more accurate geographical data, or satellite imagery that militaries and governments would have access to, so that, in Afghanistan, we don't have any sub-district boundaries, so accurately mapping humanitarian presence, we can say this organisation is in a district, we can go down to whether it's in just the district headquarters or in the surrounding areas, but we can't really point out where they are working in the district. So accurate geographic data, that would really help us. In Afghanistan the government is not that involved in mapping who's doing what, or more on humanitarian presence, but sometimes, like in Pakistan, you need a permit from the government to carry out humanitarian activities. So that can actually be a hindrance than actually helping map humanitarian presence.

**Alice Obrecht:** Could I just ask you to clarify that last point Sandeep, in terms of people being asked to register to carry out humanitarian activities by the government. Would that not, in some sense, help at least the mapping of humanitarian presence? Maybe it inhibits the presence itself I suppose, but does it not help centralise the information on who is doing what and where?

**Sandeep Bashyal:** But the governments sometimes do not want to share this information, so that's another hindrance, and this registering process often takes a lot of time. So, like even to visit some areas you need a permit from the government, so that can be more of a hindrance than a benefit, sometimes.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thank you. Abby, we have another question that's come in here that we think will give you an opportunity to geek out, which is totally what we want to do on this webinar, since we're talking about evidence and the use of evidence in research. So there's a question of, if you could briefly explain, because we've talked about the method that you used and the unique features of the different components that you pulled together, could you briefly explain how you decided on this

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mixed method approach? I think in many cases, in humanitarian research one has a question where one could do really interesting, creative things with the method, but there's always this matter of deciding what pieces to bring together, and what to do and what to leave out. So if you could maybe talk about the background or the process of how you put together this mixed method approach and decided on the different components, and what kinds of criteria perhaps, did you prioritise in your methodological decisions.

**Abby Stoddard:** Sure. I think because we've been dealing with the humanitarian operational security data for so long, and dealing with the problem of getting rates, right? So you need the aid worker population in order to get rates so you can really see whether violence is getting worse or better in different areas, etc. It was always a major stumbling block that we didn't have good population data, so when this project came together, we wanted to start from there and look at what presence and coverage actually look like in the field, just because it wasn't there, you know? It's something that is there to be known, and we should know it, so I think the data was central and primary to what we were doing, and you know, data is just going and counting things, so that's what we decided to do. Now the other things that we were trying, the regressions, etc., came later. Once you have the datasets you can decide what it is that's interesting to look at, what stories the data can possibly tell. But we would never do that without contextualising it with the actual qualitative information that's coming from the people who are on the ground and experienced, and that's where widespread interviewing comes in.

The affected population surveying is still fairly new, and something that we've been experimenting with in a couple of different projects, including State of the System, and not to plug it again, it's just, it's something that really we think should be brought more into research on humanitarian assistance, because the voice of the actual end user, the consumer has not been well heard. You can find some really interesting things, and just to maybe make a point of one thing that surprised me when we looked at the affected population survey data, is that when people were asked what their most urgent needs were in these protracted conflict settings, they tended to be protection in the case of South Sudan, or food in the case of most of the others as the number one need, but the number two, or at least in the top three needs of every single one of them after that was education for children. I had been one of these people that had usually dismissed the education in emergencies cluster and things as, well, that's not lifesaving, etc., but the salience with which people hold education for kids, even in very dire crises and conflicts, was I think, striking. It's something that, it's worthwhile bringing these things out. I don't know if that really answers the question, but I think our tools are limited in research,

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but like we were talking about before, we all need to get more empirical and more evidence driven in what we do.

**Alice Obrecht:** Just a quick follow up on that, because you mentioned one of the pieces that you did this for earlier on was one of the previous iterations of the State of the System report, and now more people are using these techniques. Do you worry about survey fatigue with affected populations as a result of that?

**Abby Stoddard:** Well, you know, the sample sizes for an overall population are not huge. I wouldn't worry about it, given the polling and surveys that we get, in my country, the United States, and around the world. It's still very limited, what's going on in the field. It's interesting that respondents are often given an incentive for participating, so you probably have less of a worry of survey fatigue if someone's getting 50¢ for answering a survey. It's a good means.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, thanks so much for that. So I think we've reached our last question here, and it's a question about impact, and actually I'll ask Sandeep this question first, and then we'll end with you Abby. So someone has asked us, how does an accurate overview of presence effect impact? I take this to be this big 'so what' question. We've been talking a lot about presence and understanding who is doing what, where. How is getting better data and better analysis of presence going to help us achieve better impact with humanitarian assistance? How do you connect the dots in that theory of change for yourselves? So Sandeep, if you could take that question first, and then we'll give the final remarks to you Abby.

**Sandeep Bashyal:** Well, a more accurate overview of presence and the needs would highlight gaps in presence, or gaps in coverage, but for the impact, it's still up to the agencies that are working, they have to have the incentive to go to areas of greater needs. It's more of an operational issue than a data issue I think, because although there's information of presence and gaps, it might not be centralised and accessible to everyone. At the field level everybody knows where the needs are, so it's really more of an operational issue than a data issue. That's what I think.

**Alice Obrecht:** Interesting. Controversial, but interesting Sandeep, I always like that. Good, so very thought provoking, and Abby, your thoughts on the presence and impact question.

**Abby Stoddard:** It's such a good question, because you're right, so what? So this is really more than just an issue of knowing what the aid worker population is, area by area. I agree with Sandeep that



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what it does is give a clearer picture, or *a* picture that people really hadn't been seeing of the gaps, and just how small the humanitarian presence really is, relative to the needs in many of these emergencies. This can help, I think, the humanitarian efforts become less supply driven, when you're really seeing the drop in the ocean that some of the response is, relative to the need. Also, it's essential to good preparedness to have a known inventory of capacities and troop strength, if you will, so before the next escalation of the conflict, or new natural disaster that occurs in these places, to have this information at the ready will improve the response, and have better outcomes and impact.

**Alice Obrecht:** Great, ending with preparedness, always a good topic, another topic that we don't look at enough in this sector. So it just leaves it to me to thank our two fantastic speakers today. We are putting up some additional links for people to follow up on, and we will be sending links to the audio and the slides in a couple of weeks' time. So thank you very much to everyone who sent in questions ahead of time, and who participated today, and thank you again to Abby and to Sandeep for a really good discussion on presence and how we can understand it better. Thank you, and have a wonderful afternoon.