Humanitarian Outcomes Research Programme on Humanitarian Coverage, Operational Resources, and Effectiveness (CORE)
Programme Summary

In late 2018, with support from the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA), Humanitarian Outcomes launched a new data-driven research programme addressing the challenge of humanitarian access and coverage in conflicts. The research takes forward and builds upon the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) study supported by UK DFID—a multiyear, field-based empirical analysis that revealed weak and imbalanced humanitarian coverage in insecure contexts (www.saveresearch.net). Under this new programme on Coverage, Operational Resources, and Effectiveness (CORE), Humanitarian Outcomes will follow up the SAVE findings with actionable research that will identify and bolster the humanitarian actors best placed to make significant access gains in difficult environments. The goal is to provide concrete information on the operational reach of humanitarian actors, and to assist those actors with best practices for expanding their secure access.

The CORE programme has three research components that together will feed empirical analysis on the state of secure access and humanitarian coverage in challenging security environments, while also providing three ongoing open-access data streams with potentially broad and sustainable benefit to humanitarian action on their own. First, the new research and analysis will be informed by up-to-date statistics on humanitarian operational security made possible by the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD). In addition to maintaining the AWSD, the team will build out its global database of humanitarian organizations (GDHO). This will be an online, open source of basic operational and resource information worldwide, along with country-specific data on presence and coverage in selected hard-to-access areas. The other new data initiative will contain the results of an ongoing, rotating survey of affected populations in under-covered areas. These results will triangulate the operational data and capture people's perceptions of the performance of the humanitarian organizations operating in their area. This 'Survey of Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness (SCORE)' will focus on a different set of conflict settings each year, and using mobile telecoms surveys, identify which humanitarian actors are most effective in gaining and maintaining access while providing quality assistance. Agencies with high 'Presence Scores' will be examined for potential transferable lessons, access innovations, and examples of good practice.

During the two-year period, the project will publish analytical reports including: the yearly Aid Worker Security Reports, which provide updated statistics and analysis of security conditions and thematic issues affecting humanitarian operations, an access briefing paper on the state of humanitarian resources and presence in a select number of countries, and a major report at the end of the project containing analysis on the extent to which there is evidence of improvements in humanitarian access and coverage of needs, as well as further recommendations for donors and agencies to strengthen developments in this area. Reports will include statistical analysis of the data from the databases and survey results, augmented by field practitioner interviews, and would have the intent of featuring and encouraging good practice in achieving access and maintaining quality programming in difficult environments.

Why this research is needed

Solid information on the extent of humanitarian reach and capacities in any given crisis is currently not available to decision makers in the humanitarian sector. No comprehensive data sources exist that show how many humanitarian aid organizations, projects, or personnel are at work globally or in specific crises. While the system has improved at tracking aid funding flows, and there are some new important new initiatives on access mapping at the global level, such as ACAPS, there is no single, centralized source enumerating the humanitarian provider agencies and where their resources are deployed, sectorally and geographically. Country-specific humanitarian operational information varies from context to context, with some very detailed 3Ws information ("Who does What Where") available in certain places, while in others there is little or nothing. Host governments' own registries of aid agencies tend to be patchy and out of date. Moreover, none of the limited operational information that does exist includes what is arguably the most important information source — reports from the affected populations themselves on whether they have been reached by the aid response, and if so, how well what was provided met their needs.

Especially in hard-to-access locations, this lack of specific information on deployment and programming capacities contributes to both skewed humanitarian coverage and critical gaps in coverage of high-risk/high-need areas. The information gap allows for agencies to misrepresent or exaggerate their operational presence while obscuring areas of low or no coverage. In so doing it exacerbates the fragmentation of international aid response and inhibits coordinated strategic planning.

Geographical and programming gaps, and skewed coverage. Before the three-year, four-country study on Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) was conducted, the gaps in coverage deficits and humanitarians' general weakness in negotiated access were largely obscured. Findings from this study, conducted by Humanitarian Outcomes for UK DFID, showed that in response to insecurity and other perceived risks, humanitarian agencies will cluster in areas perceive to be safer while leaving higher-risk, and higher-need areas underserved. (Stoddard & Jillani, 2016) Reliance on remote control programming, a standard adaptation in hard-to-access environments, limits agencies' ability to target the most vulnerable segments of the population as well as to do more technically complex programming. The response becomes more rudimentary, such as basic commodity distribution, which often does not meet the most critical needs of the beneficiaries.

Access inertia and lack of negotiating skills. The lack of necessary skillsets in negotiating secure access further contributes to an operational inertia where humanitarian responders remain in their comfort zone with little incentive to expand into new areas (Haver & Carter, 2016). An empirically measured 'most-present index' of agencies found just a handful of INGOs, and fewer UN agencies, can be counted on to join local counterparts in the highest-risk areas of a select group of conflict affected countries (Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria). The less-present agencies often lack internal training and organizational culture to push for greater access in a responsible but calculated risk-taking way.

Other problems that can result from the lack of detailed operational information include:

Preparedness deficits. In addition to a comprehensive and collaborative needs assessment, the humanitarian actors in any context need information on the current and potential capacities for response to plan appropriately for timely and effective response to emergencies. A 2013 field study on humanitarian preparedness found despite coordination mechanisms and pre-disaster contingency planning initiatives, rapid effective response to emergent crises was still hindered by the lack of a comprehensive inventory of the actors and capacities in each setting (Harmer & Stoddard, 2013).

Sub-optimal decision-making by donors. Lacking a clear picture of potential implementing partners, donors tend to rely on past experiences with certain agencies (usually favouring those of the same nationality) rather than selecting the best placed and best equipped provider for the job. This creates a path dependency in funding and partnerships which can stifle healthy competition and innovation on the agency side, while hindering strategic optimization on the donor side.

Supply-based rather than needs-based response. Paradoxically, the lack of shared information on actors and capacities leads to a supply-based response on the part of individual agencies. When it is unknown ahead of time which actors have the capacities and expertise in certain areas, the actual needs of the affected population become secondary to whatever the individual agencies put forward that they are prepared to do. Donors, UN humanitarian leaders and coordination mechanisms can push organisations to do more, including identifying additional partners, but this tends to be post-hoc and suboptimal. Solutions need to be found in advance of times of critical scale-up.

Research strategy

The first step for addressing the access challenges for humanitarian assistance providers is to make known the extent to which agencies are reaching (or not) the hard-to-reach areas of high need. This empirical evidence and contextual analysis were developed under SAVE's four-country study, but it was timebound and requires ongoing investment in the humanitarian sector. The patterns of imbalanced humanitarian coverage and access weaknesses revealed by this and other research speak to the need for better information and analysis on how to apply it to extend secure access for humanitarian response. This project proposes to stand up a centralized information system for operational data on humanitarian organizations and where their resources are deployed, and then a narrower examination of the presence and coverage picture in a set of highly insecure settings, or those facing other access constraints. The first case studies are planned for Northern Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Central African Republic. Combined with survey data from the affected populations in countries on if and how well aid has reached them, this will enable a stock-take of humanitarian capacities and coverage and to identify the strong and weak links among humanitarian responders.

Humanitarian Outcomes will combine its existing data resources, experience, practitioner networks and recent empirical findings on access in insecure environments to conduct a program of data-gathering and analysis that can be utilized by operational agencies in insecure environments. The program will build on knowledge as to how to gain and maintain secure access, through traditional or alternative means of delivery, and feature new success stories of agencies able to access hard-to-reach-areas, as well as transferable lessons of good practice in secure access. In doing this, the program aims to support increased humanitarian reach and coverage of needs.

The project will make possible three key data streams created and maintained by Humanitarian Outcomes. They will work in tandem to inform a clearer picture of humanitarian access and coverage and provide the evidence base for analytical products for operational agencies and their donors interested in extending the effective reach of humanitarian assistance. These are: the existing Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), the Global Database on Humanitarian Organisations (GDHO), and survey data from affected populations and aid recipients in hard-to-access contexts (the Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness, or SCORE). The research team will synthesize the information generated by these components in published products, including some specific examination into the practices of the humanitarian entities with the highest Presence Score revealed through the research.

The three main components of the research programme are as follows:

1) Continued data gathering and analysis on security incidents affecting civilian aid operations

With support from the US, Canadian, and Irish governments, the Aid Worker Database (AWSD) went online in August 2010, making available for the first time a comprehensive global dataset of major incidents of violence against aid workers, with data going back to 1997. The AWSD provide a crucial evidence base for security trend analysis and decision-making in humanitarian operations that had not existed previously. Since its launch, the website has logged 108,542 visits, with a average of 1,233 visits per month. Although other data sets have emerged that collect different slices of this information, the AWSD remains the single centralized source of major attacks affecting civilian aid operations worldwide, and the only one with publicly accessible data. The database is governed by the principles of open data, anonymity for agencies and victims (to encourage information-sharing), and systematic verification of incident reports. As such it provides an overarching global level picture of the issue and tool for comparative analysis, trend-tracking and prioritization of resources.

The statistics and analysis produced by the AWSD continue to inform policy and organisation practice. The AWSD is regularly cited in numerous news media reports, as well as academic research and organizational policy and guidance documents throughout the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian provider and donor agencies have made use of the statistics in annual reporting and planning exercises. This work was also commended as a critical contribution to the humanitarian security sector in the Report of the Secretary-General on the Safety and Security of Humanitarian Personnel (2016) and the Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians (2010).

2) Global-level operational database and analysis on humanitarian deployment

Humanitarian Outcomes' existing Global Database on Humanitarian Organizations (GDHO) will be used as a basis for an enhanced tool for collecting centralized basic organizational and operational data on humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations. This predecessor database was developed by Humanitarian Outcomes to support prior research projects that it conducted, including Providing Aid in Insecure Environments (HPG/CIC) and State of the Humanitarian System (ALNAP).

Using a methodology combining human data gathering, automated scraping and systematic imputation, the database will provide information on the size and scope of humanitarian operations globally and by country. Categories will include budgets, staff deployments, programming sectors and other basic information.

International humanitarian organizations include UN agencies that are full members of the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC)[1], as well as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UN Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA); the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC); International NGOs that have participated in humanitarian response, as indicated by inclusion as a recipient or provider agency on FTS, registration with a major consortium or registry of international aid organisations,[2] a past implementing partnership with one of the UN humanitarian agencies, or receipt of humanitarian funds from a large government donor or the European Commission.

National organizations include: National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; National NGOs that have received funds from UN humanitarian agencies or IOM and a limited set of international NGOs (drawn from agency partnership lists and FTS) or are registered with a regional or international consortium or registry of aid organizations. National NGO registries were used with caution, as in many countries a large portion of the registrants were no longer active

Because of the large numbers of organizations and the inherent difficulty in obtaining data for all of them, Humanitarian Outcomes has developed an algorithm for imputing the missing data (using conditional mean imputation), which improves in accuracy with the more hard data that are entered. Working with a data scientist and web developer, and consulting with technical experts in the field, Humanitarian Outcomes is testing the current methodology and determine what redesigns or improvements are necessary. Based on these tests and consultations, the imputation algorithm will be modified or confirmed, and the database redesigned with an eye to creating a sustainable (low-cost) source of timely and open data that will of use to practitioners, policy-makers and for general information.

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[1] FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO
[2] These were: AlertNet, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), VOICE, and InterAction.

3) **Survey of Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (SCORE)** – Data and analysis on the most present providers in high-risk settings based on affected population surveys

Opinion polls and client satisfaction surveys are ubiquitous and indispensable in politics and the private sector, yet humanitarian actors have yet to develop any systematic, statistically robust means for obtaining the perspectives of those on the receiving end of aid. While individual organisations solicit feedback from their beneficiaries, this is largely done on a project-by-project basis and is still much more the exception than the rule. What little input is obtained from aid recipients is not used effectively to inform field-level strategic decision-making or higher-level humanitarian policy. This gap means that there is a lack of much-needed qualitative information on the sufficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of humanitarian aid from its primary users.

Humanitarian Outcomes has several years' experience in fielding public opinion surveys among affected populations to inform and triangulate research on operations and policy. Using remote telecoms technology - text-based (SMS), live-calls (CATI), or interactive voice response (IVR) as appropriate, statistically representative samples of respondents are drawn from countries where mobile phone usership has sufficiently penetrated, providing a wider capture of public perceptions of the humanitarian response for less cost, and less risk, than traditional household surveys. To complement the access and coverage research, surveys will be fielded in 2-3 hard-to-access contexts per year to elicit public views on the quality and coverage of the overall humanitarian response as well as feedback on the most present and effective actors. The analysis of the resulting survey data will provide a humanitarian Presence SCORE (Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness) for each country surveyed and for individual agencies. Assigning scores for agencies will not be intended for "name and shame" purposes, but rather to single out and highlight the local and international entitles that have achieved success in gaining and maintaining secure access in order that the sector might learn from the examples.

Key informant interviewing of practitioners and policy makers in the humanitarian sector will augment the survey and operational data. The research team will interview senior organizational and operational staff of humanitarian organizations and coordinating bodies using a semi structured format. These interviews will enable us to cross-check the quantitative findings and to delve deeper into the environmental conditions and challenges behind coverage gaps, as well as to identify strengths and lessons-learned that will then feed in to the applied research and training component of the project.

Planned research products

- **Aid Worker Security Reports** – The team will continue to research and publish the widely read/referenced Aid Worker Security Reports that provide analysis of the latest security statistics along with an in-depth examination of an issue of importance in operational security.

- **Access Briefing Paper** – A briefing paper will be published in 2019 providing statistics and analysis on humanitarian access and coverage, using data on humanitarian deployment as well as the first of the SCORE surveys. It will look at 2-3 critical new contexts identified for access challenges, building on SAVE findings and identifying adaptations and further good practice. It will also identify the key questions and issues to be addressed in the final project report in 2020.

- **CORE Programme report** – the two-year study will culminate in a major report on the issue of secure access. It will contain a rigorous statistical analysis of the data gathered throughout the two-year period from the three data streams and will feature the country case studies and organizations with high Access Scores.

References

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Haver, K., & Carter, W. (2016). *What It Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments.* Humanitarian Outcomes.

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