## SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS — SAVE

*Improving the evidence base on delivering aid in highly insecure environments*

## Syria Background Brief

## Enabling access and quality aid in insecure environments (Component 2)

### Research questions and methods

Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) is a three-year programme of primary and applied research that seeks to contribute to practical solutions for maintaining effective humanitarian response amid high levels of insecurity. Field work is being undertaken in four contexts: Afghanistan, South Central Somalia, South Sudan and Syria.

Component 2 of the SAVE programme seeks to answer two research questions:

- What works best in obtaining *access* in the most insecure environments?
- What works best in delivering *quality* aid in situations of reduced oversight and control?

It focuses on three sectors: health, food assistance and protection, as well as cash and vouchers.

### Purpose of the briefing note

This briefing note summarises the preliminary findings from interviews with aid actors and consultations with affected populations, and serves as background for meetings in Gaziantep 4th – 6th November. The intention of the meetings is to review these initial findings with stakeholders, seek feedback on the extent to which the findings are accurate and reflect the right balance of issues, and lastly, to identify gaps or issues requiring more detailed analysis.

For Syria, the SAVE Component 2 research focuses on two organisational hubs: South Turkey (Gaziantep, Antakya, Reyhanli) and Damascus. The research focuses only on inside-Syria operations. Interviews with aid actors in Damascus will be conducted in the coming months; the 'aid actor interview' summary below primarily reflects the experiences of aid organisations working cross-border from Turkey.

### Aid actor interviews

The research team conducted 119 interviews with representatives of aid organisations (mainly INGOs, Syrian NGOs, UN agencies and Islamic charities), Government authorities and local governance structures (mostly 'informal'), donor governments, and private sector entities involved in aid delivery (such as transporters and vendors). Approximately 62 per cent were with Syrians and 40 per cent of all interviews were with individuals located inside Syria (Aleppo, Ar Raqqa,

Damascus, Hama, Al Hassakeh and Idlib). Research staff from Proximity International conducted the majority of the interviews, with teams led by Danya Chudacoff, Francesca Nurlu, Edith Albert and Abdulhadi Arrat. The SAVE Component 2 team, Katherine Haver and Will Carter, provided support and also conducted interviews in Turkey.

## Quality of aid

> The SAVE research programme defines a **quality** humanitarian aid intervention as one that is:
> - relevant and addresses priority needs, with dignity;
> - timely;
> - avoids duplication with other actors;
> - minimises the potential of aid to do harm
>
> The research seeks to understand how agencies gauge programme quality, understanding the trade-offs and compromises that exist in highly insecure settings.

As in other large, complex and fast-moving crises, aid organisations in Syria reported trade-offs between quality and scale: reaching large numbers of people across wide areas makes it difficult to maintain quality. Both one-off deliveries as well as frequent programme interruptions were seen as hindrances to quality. Several INGOs reported that over the last year they were seeking to move from 'quantity-focused' to 'quality-focused' programming, including by more accurately assessing needs and reaching fewer people in a more predictable manner. At the same time, however, there is a recognition that targeted distributions may have actually made more sense at the beginning of the crisis whereas blanket distributions may be more appropriate now, as many people have exhausted their savings and assets.

The fluid frontlines of the conflict have created a dynamic of 'shrinking and expanding space' for humanitarian programming. International aid organisations highlighted the need for greater flexibility from donors so as to be able to shift programme objectives when the security situation changes.

## Staffing and organisational issues

Over the last two years, international staff presence in Syria has decreased sharply. With the exception of parts of Kurdish-held Syria, into which some international staff cross from northern Iraq, and Damascus (where small numbers of international staff remain based, primarily UN agencies), most aid agencies had no international staff in Syria in the first half of 2015. A few INGOs allow brief visits by international staff of certain nationalities (e.g., from the Middle East or South Asia) who are seen as able to blend in or are presumed to face a lower risk of kidnapping.

Most INGOs operating cross-border from Turkey prefer to hire local staff who live in or very near to the areas of implementation. This is seen to help facilitate access and build on contextual knowledge while significantly reducing the need for staff movement. Hiring locally is seen as especially important for INGOs that operate with low visibility, since they cannot rely on their reputation to facilitate access. By contrast, some of the larger Syrian NGOs have built up good reputations on which they rely when entering in to new areas, with staff that were not necessarily local to the area. This suggests that a low visibility approach entails potential trade-offs for access, as well as quality, down the line. Localisation could potentially compromise quality, due to smaller pools of potential staff to draw from or due to favouritism and bias in aid delivery. It may also be

that, as in Afghanistan, a low visibility, highly local approach can inhibit expansion, slows response to new emergencies and make programming more static.

A majority of INGOs and Syrian NGOs conduct vetting or background checks on their Syrian staff, to ensure that they are not affiliated with any military groups. Some donors' counter-terrorist regulations require this practice. Vetting is seen as arduous, the information gathered is of limited reliability, and it carries data security risks. It may contribute to an understanding of conflict dynamics (or, by contrast, have a negative impact, through the hiring of 'un-networked' people), but it is not clear overall the extent to which it assists in enabling access and maintaining quality.

**Partnerships and remote management**
Generally, in the last 2-3 years, INGOs and diaspora Syrian NGOs operating from Turkey have increased their reliance on a wide variety of partnerships to maintain or expand reach. (By contrast, many Syrian NGOs described their level of access as determined mainly by their level of funding rather than by physical or security constraints, with the exception of areas held by the Islamic State (ISIS.)) Presently several INGOs operate in Syria only through partners, while most use a mix of partnership and direct implementation. In addition to 'local councils', some NGOs partner with vendors and bakeries for food security programming, while several NGOs support existing, non-government-run medical facilities, paying their staff and providing medicines and equipment and requiring regular reports against performance indicators.

Driven in part by more extensive donor requirements for monitoring and reporting (due to operations in Syria becoming more remotely managed), some INGOs are working more closely with their Syrian NGO partners to boost their capacity. This includes mentoring, frequent discussion, and even the embedding of the INGO's staff into the partner organisation. A few interviewees expressed positive views about the possible long-term benefits of such capacity building. Overall, however, INGOs shared concerns about the extent to which security (and to a lesser extent fiduciary) risks are being transferred to their Syrian NGO partners. INGOs' capacity to support partners, including through shared approaches to risk management, remain under-developed relative the requirements of the situation in Syria.

Some interviewees noted that INGOs and Syrian NGOs rely heavily on local councils (and relief committees), which act as middlemen between aid organisations and beneficiaries, as well as sometimes between aid organisations and armed groups. NGOs' relationships with local councils appear to be a central component of both their access and the selection of beneficiaries (for distributions of food or non-food items). A local council can influence the amount of assistance received, with some evidence that urban local councils wield more power than rural ones. These 'partnerships' with informal local governance structures are not systematically coordinated across the aid community, despite the fact that multiple NGOs may speak separately with a single local council.

**Risk management and decision-making**
Organisations vary in their reported levels of risk management and risk tolerance. Many Syrian NGOs expressed the view that taking security risks is inherent to their work as humanitarians, and some see their tolerance of risk as linked to the fact that they are not neutral actors, that is, they took a side during the revolution and see their humanitarian work as part of that. The majority of Syrian NGOs have little to no risk assessment procedures in place; they see the main risks as coming from aerial shelling and military clashes, and attempt to move staff away from possible strike locations.

For international NGOs, the level of risk tolerance appears to be a product of both the particular circumstances in which the programme was initially established (i.e., decisions made at the outset) as well as the personal risk calculus of the NGO leadership. Programme criticality also plays a part. One INGO felt that their willingness to tolerate 'barrel bombs' was higher given that they knew the health facilities were 'pretty much life-saving'.

Concerns about legal and fiduciary risks play a role in determining where INGOs are willing to operate in Syria. There is particularly true for areas with designated terrorist groups. The level of concern about potential aid diversion to ISIS appears to be considerably higher than for other designated groups, such as Jabhat Al Nusra, however, suggesting that larger geopolitical factors play more of a role than counter-terrorist regulations themselves. Such concerns appeared to have contributed to the recent tapering off of international assistance in ISIS-held areas such as Deir Ezzour and Ar Raqqa, and to its more recent near-elimination. (ISIS's interference with aid delivery, including its expulsions of aid organisations, however, has contributed more to this trend.)

Several respondents felt that the general increase in donors' monitoring and reporting requirements could be causing INGOs to stick to the areas they already operate in rather than expand. Organisations that have access to private funding tend to undertake their higher risk programming with such funds. One large Syrian organisation, for example, said that it was able to work in a hard-to-reach, besieged area, using very small partners, despite foodstuffs costing 15 times what they do in other areas, because of private funding.

Aid actors generally perceive cash assistance as carrying more fiduciary risks (i.e., more prone to diversion) than in-kind assistance. It is unclear if they see cash as more likely than in-kind aid to be diverted, or if they believed the impact on the organisation would be more negative, or both. The diversion of health supplies and medicines is perceived as less of a problem than that of food and NFIs, which can be sold for cash or rebranded and redistributed by armed actors.

**Outreach and negotiations for access**
Aid actors working on Syria were more reluctant to broach the subject of humanitarian access negotiations than they were in Afghanistan, Somalia or South Sudan. This was particularly the case for Syrian NGO (and a few INGO) representatives, who made statements equating negotiating with being 'unprincipled' and making (unacceptable) compromises. In their reluctance to discuss the topic it seemed that Syrian organisations see themselves to be under intense scrutiny and seek to avoid any possible association with military or armed actors.

The majority of the 34 Syrian NGO representatives interviewed (about half based in Turkey and half based in Syria) indicated that they had no need to negotiate with external entities because they have encountered little to no problems with military groups. This could be due to these entities' established presence in the local community or their informal connection to armed groups in the area of operations (as staff are often local residents) – or due to the withholding of information due to its known sensitivity.

When partnering with Syrian NGOs, INGOs generally let them manage engagement with armed actors, and some reported that a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy is in place with regards to discussing specifics. No positive examples were cited where INGOs were encouraging Syrian NGOs to share the details of how their access was enabled.

As mentioned above, local councils are generally perceived as a tried and trusted mechanism for gaining access. Some local councils reported being involved in helping to transport aid from the

Turkish border. This requires the cooperation of armed groups, which either join the convoys as a form of protection or are coordinated with in order to facilitate passage. Such negotiations appear to be based mainly on personal or community connections, as well as facilitated by edicts of local sharia courts. The courts sometimes give permission for movements of humanitarian supplies and act as a point of contact with armed actors to enable passage for humanitarian convoys and avoid issues at checkpoints. Several international and Syrian NGOs reported using the sharia courts to confront military groups that attempted to disrupt their work. In some cases, the court has ruled in their favour and they have been able to retrieve seized goods.

A few examples of joint approaches to negotiation were cited. First, more formally, OCHA in Turkey has developed a 'Declaration of Commitment' with armed groups that are present inside Syria but also based in Turkey (Gaziantep, Reyhanli) to facilitate humanitarian access inside Syria. In Idlib and Aleppo thus far, at least 36 armed groups have reportedly signed this Declaration of Commitment. In the framework of the Declaration of Commitment, OCHA produced Joint Operating Principles (JOPs) for Idlib, where armed Islamist opposition groups Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar al Sham are present. INGOs had mixed views on the effectiveness of each of these. Some say they have not enabled access, while others say they have helped clarify expectations with armed groups, especially among the more moderate groups, by providing staff members a credible reference to enable them to ask for passage at checkpoints, as well as demanding accountability from armed actors looking to block passage.

One INGO experiencing interference from an armed group reported having successfully used the tactic of refusing to negotiate and threatening to pull out, relying on local communities to put pressure the armed group to reestablish access for the aid organisation. This may work especially well for NGOs with large-scale programming and/or who are well known and supported in their areas of operation. Success was also reported with reaching out to umbrella groups to negotiate with smaller groups, especially in fragmented landscapes such as Aleppo Governorate (e.g. identifying that three or four groups in an area are affiliated with the Free Syria Army (FSA) or Ahrar al-Sham, and then going to speak directly with the FSA or Ahrar al-Sham in order to get assurances from those smaller groups).

Overall, with the exception of ISIS, the evidence collected suggests that non-state armed groups allow, permit and in some cases even facilitate the access of aid in opposition-held parts of Syria. The picture is mixed between the international and Syrian stakeholders consulted, however. Similar to aid actors and local councils, the private sector sub-contractors (suppliers and transporters) inside Syria report that checkpoints are not a problem (they only cause delays), but rather that regime airstrikes are the major security risk. This was also echoed in the affected population consultations (see below). While respondents may not have been entirely forthcoming, it is possible that armed groups are generally permitting access to humanitarian aid, and even encouraging it to areas under their control. Several interviewees indicated that an aid organisation's level of access stems in part from how much the armed groups there need NGOs in order to provide support for local populations.

**Humanitarian principles and ethical action**
Some Syrian NGOs, while expressing support for humanitarian principles, took a wider view, citing the equal importance of medical ethics (Hippocratic Oath) and principles of Islamic charity, for example. Several Syrian NGOs reported having provided training to their staff on how to apply humanitarian principles. Many NGOs noted challenges in identifying partners who were unaffiliated with political or armed groups, in order to remain independent and neutral. Such partners by definition tend to be less connected with key stakeholders and thus cannot negotiate humanitarian

access as easily as those affiliated with locally powerful entities. By contrast, several Syrian NGOs indicated that their perception as neutral actors has enabled them to gain community acceptance and trust, including from armed actors

**Corruption, diversion and conflict sensitivity**
Interviewees from Syrian NGOs were reluctant to discuss corruption and diversion. International NGOs generally believed corruption and diversion was not a major problem compared to other contexts they had worked. Among both international and Syrian NGOs, 'corruption' may have been understood as high level fraud or embezzlement (stealing an organisation's money) rather than small-scale reallocations of resources intended for others. Generally, there appears to be a gap between what is reported by aid actors in Turkey and what is reported by affected populations and aid actors inside several locations in Syria with regards to favouritism and corruption at several levels (see below).

## Affected population consultations

The goal of the affected population consultations was to better understand how people living in Syria seek to safely access humanitarian assistance and how they view its quality. Both aid recipients and non-recipients were consulted, as well as representatives of local councils and aid organisations.

The research teams individually interviewed 97 Syrians and conducted 40 focus groups, for a total of 262 people consulted (26 per cent women). A household survey of affected people was also conducted, reaching a total of 1,992 responses (and will be reported on by Component 1). With the exception of Damascus and Deir Ezzour, where a slightly more targeted approach was used for security reasons, the field teams approached every third household to select participants. Household survey respondents were then asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group or individual interview. Additional aid actor interviewees were identified through individuals known to the field-based enumerators.

The consultations were conducted between May and August 2015 in the following locations:
- Aleppo city
- Aleppo countryside (southern)
- Hama province (northwest)
- Damascus[1]
- Deir Ezzour[2]
- Al Hassakeh

In each of the above areas, between two and six locations were selected, seeking to achieve a balance between 'high insecurity' and 'low insecurity' locations, which were defined based on pre-set criteria. The findings below mainly reflect the qualitative material (interviews and focus groups) rather than the household survey.

**Secure access to aid**
In Aleppo and Hama, regime shelling / airstrikes were noted most frequently as the major threat to receiving aid, i.e. during distributions (large gatherings). This was seen to affect aid organisations and affected people equally. In Aleppo City, focus group participants said that 'when family members go to distribution sites, we wait in fear until they return'. As a precautionary measure,

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[1] Individual interviews only; no focus groups
[2] Individual interviews only; no focus groups

people dig trenches where they can hide if they are too far away from another type of shelter when airstrikes occur. To mitigate this risk, distributions are sometimes conducted door-to-door, staggered at different times, reduced in size, or conducted in 'safe places'. Generally people would like to see more of this style of distribution.

Aid organisations' (Syrian and international) reliance on local councils to receive and distribute aid is seen as reducing their risk (i.e. risk is transferred). When asked if aid organisations face any risk in delivering aid, a local council member in Aleppo Countryside said no, explaining that '[aid] organisations do not even come to [our] village, we receive relief [assistance] through organisations' delegates, who stay in the village for two to three hours every month.'

People in these areas also cited examples of fighting or chaos during distributions, but this was less of a risk than the shelling. Women face some threat of harassment during distributions and can find it more difficult to transport items home. In Aleppo City, rubble accumulation on the roads was also mentioned as a posed safety risk when transporting aid back home.

In Al Hassakeh, Aleppo and Hama, both affected people and local councils generally described armed groups, including specifically Jabhat Al Nusra and the Free Syrian Army, as not posing any security threat and letting aid organisations operate in the areas they control. A few people mentioned that there had been 'issues with military groups' during distributions (without elaborating), but that community actors, such as local councils, were quick to resolve them. A few (limited) examples were also cited of armed groups protecting aid organisations.

In Damascus (regime-held areas), both aid organisations and affected people are under threat of harassment, abuse as well as unpredictable shelling / bombings, especially near frontlines. People receiving aid face further risks, including reputational damage, detention, kidnapping and/or killing. In one particularly contested area near a frontline, a representative of a Syrian aid organisation that works in opposition-held (including besieged) areas, mentioned that they could be detained and killed by government forces if they were caught whilst distributing aid.

In Deir Ezzour, regime shelling / airstrikes, as well as the threat of detention, kidnapping or harassment by ISIS, makes receiving aid dangerous (to the limited extent that external humanitarian aid is still provided). Women are not allowed to go unaccompanied, posing additional challenges for female-headed households. One participant said, 'the physical and psychological danger is permanent [and] continual'.

In Al Hassakeh, the most stable area surveyed, door-to-door distributions are sometimes but not generally used, in order to avoid over-crowding and chaos. Local councils and aid committees agree that door-to-door distributions are more effective, but they are seen as more time- and resource-intensive. Protection at distribution points is often provided through Kurdish security forces.

**Quality of aid**
In most of the areas surveyed, the most prevalent type of aid reportedly received is food baskets and hygiene items. Generally, people expressed appreciation for the aid received, and were reluctant to appear ungrateful, but also view its **quantity** as insufficient, across all areas. For Aleppo City and Aleppo countryside, people perceive aid as increasing since what one respondent called a 'drought' (drop in aid levels) in 2014. By contrast, in Hama, people saw aid levels as decreasing this year, which they perceived as linked to corruption (see below). In Deir Ezzour, people interviewed report that there has been near total reduction of aid since ISIS took over. In Al Hassakeh, as of May 2015, aid was generally seen as increasing in recent months, but a lack of

coordination between NGOs is seen to contribute to uneven aid distribution, with some areas over-served and some under-served. In Damascus, views on aid quantity varied, and areas with greater numbers of displaced people appear to have been prioritised.

With regards to **relevance**, across the board, people reported that in-kind aid is sold at high rates, in order to buy more needed items. Estimates vary, but the large majority of respondents observed that many people (between roughly 30 and 70 percent) sell part of their aid and that some people (between roughly 10 and 30 per cent) sell all of their aid. Some items are received in quantities that are too large while other items are distributed more frequently than required. In Aleppo countryside, some of the food provided is frequently sold because it is able to be sourced or grown locally, e.g. grains, pasta, and lentils.

In terms of **timeliness**, people generally understood the question to refer to the regularity or predictability of aid delivery, or to its overall quantity. A few examples were provided of where aid was not timely. Aid was seen as slow to arrive in some rural areas that are far from the border and have weak communications capacities, for example. One village in Aleppo countryside was 'severely targeted by the regime's air forces several times, which resulted the displacement of half the village's population to the agricultural lands less than a year ago. We needed help and tents, but no one responded to our needs. [Recently more and more] relief NGOs [have come to the area], but before, [there was] none.' People in opposition-controlled Al Hassakeh reported that most NGOs were unable or unwilling to provide assistance during the most unstable times when help was most needed, such as during clashes with the ISIS.

As noted above, local councils and relief committees are typically in charge of **targeting**, sometimes with the selection criteria provided by the aid organisation. The role of local councils (versus that of aid organisations) appears to be even more pronounced in rural areas. Beneficiary lists are sometimes but not always verified by the aid organisation. The people interviewed viewed targeting based on need as a kind of 'positive discrimination', in contrast to 'negative discrimination', when someone's friend or relative receives aid due to favoritism. While both IDPs and host communities tended to be among those targeted in Aleppo, Al Hassakeh, and Hama, IDPs alone tended to be the focus of aid distributions in areas in Damascus.

Across all areas surveyed, affected people reported that **corruption and favouritism** were widespread, with friends and family members often inappropriately included on distribution lists. People in Hama cited this as a particular problem, believing that this was why aid levels had decreased recently. They perceived a mismatch between the quantity of aid provided and the quantity received by people in need, with 'most people deprived because of false excuses'. A lack of monitoring and control over the aid distribution process was seen as allowing this to occur.

Interestingly, many aid organisation representatives and local council members corroborated these views, acknowledging that 'certain groups are favoured over others because of the corruption'. In Damascus, while favoritism was also seen as prevalent, a few interviewees mentioned the Red Crescent as an organisation that did not resort to any kind of favouritism when selecting beneficiaries; one person noted, however, that the Red Crescent sometimes distributes through local partners so they cannot verify in that case whether beneficiaries were selected fairly. Across multiple areas, door-to-door distributions were seen as limiting the visibility of the project and organisation, which may also limit the awareness of non-beneficiaries who may be deserving. There therefore appears to be a tension between the need for assistance to be delivered safely while also having a system which people trust.

## Further Contact

For further contact regarding SAVE Component 2 (Enabling Access and Aid Quality) in Syria, please consult the project website (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/save) and contact:

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