

SECURE  
ACCESS IN  
VOLATILE  
ENVIRONMENTS

SAVE

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

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## Somalia 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 Nairobi and Mogadishu 18<sup>th</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> June. The intention of the meetings is to review these initial findings with stakeholders, seek feedback on the extent to which they are accurate and reflect the right balance of issues, and to identify gaps or issues requiring more analysis.

#### Aid actor interviews

The research team to date has conducted over 100 interviews with representatives of aid organisations, donors, private sector entities and local authorities. The interviews, conducted by a mixed gender team that included Somali researchers, took place in Mogadishu, Baidoa, Dollow and Nairobi and included both senior and mid-level aid organisation representatives. The Somalia research team was led by Nisar Majid and comprised Khalif Abdirahman, Guhad Adan, Shamsa Hassan and Fardowsa Abdirahman. The Component 2 Research Coordinator, Katherine Haver, provided support and conducted additional interviews.

#### Background

Throughout south-central Somalia, armed actors such as clan militias as well as local authorities impose restrictions, threats and conditions on the delivery of humanitarian aid. In the areas it controls, Al Shabaab continues to make it difficult – but not impossible – for aid organisations to

work. This is done by banning or obstructing their work or otherwise imposing conditions, such as requests for payments or demands to hire particular staff. In all areas, aid organisations have to consider how to resist such pressures, withdraw, and/or decide what type of programmes to deliver and what level of compromise might be acceptable.

In the years following the 2011 famine, donors and aid organisations have invested considerable effort in mitigating measures to reduce corruption and diversion – the risks of which were seen to peak during the famine response, as caution was reduced in the rush to get aid in. Both public and internal investigations have revealed a number of instances of significant corruption (or exposed high risks of corruption) within aid organisations. Counter-terrorism legislation continues to accentuate these pressures with regards to the possibility of humanitarian assistance being used to provide material support to Al Shabaab.

As acute humanitarian needs and funding levels have fallen off since the famine, the organisations interviewed reported an increasingly competitive funding environment. They also described a continuing sense of secrecy and a reluctance to share specific details about operations. As before the famine, UN agencies and INGOs partner with a wide range of entities partly in order to access hard-to-reach areas. Some INGOs and many Somali NGOs report that they are ‘following donor money’ in deciding what geographic areas and sectors to work in. Taken together, these dynamics mean that agencies have an incentive to be seen as able to access the ‘newly liberated’ and hardest-to-reach areas *and* being corruption and diversion-free.

### Quality of aid

The SAVE research programme defines a **quality** humanitarian aid intervention as one that is:

- relevant and addresses priority needs;
- timely;
- avoids unnecessary duplication with other actors;
- minimises the potential of aid to endanger recipients, fuel conflict or become instrumentalised by political interests

The research seeks to understand what indicators agencies use to gauge programme quality and how they make trade-offs and compromises in highly insecure settings.

Interviews in Nairobi suggested that agencies were preoccupied with ensuring that assistance, particularly in-kind aid, actually reaches the people registered and that projects are actually taking place (mitigating potential diversion and corruption). There was less focus on broader aspects of quality, such as technical/sector quality and ensuring that the most vulnerable populations have been targeted.

Views were mixed on whether particular sectors or activities were more or less prone to corruption or diversion. Both beneficiaries *and* predatory actors appeared to prefer cash and food over other forms of aid, and many respondents suggest that this type of tangible commodity was at highest risk of diversion. Others suggested that such risks exist in all sectors and what is important is managing these appropriately. A number of respondents suggested that larger scale programmes are more susceptible to corruption and diversion.

Interviews with aid actors and affected people inside Somalia similarly focused on issues of organisational integrity. They described some agencies as able to stand up to corrupt authorities or gatekeepers and others much less able to do so. Good practice was evident among both national and international agencies as well as among those implementing directly and those working through partners or sub-contractors.

For some Somali NGOs, working across many sectors was seen as negatively impacting programme quality, as they were spreading themselves too thin. Similarly, for international agencies, those with a large number of partners found it more difficult to visit and build relationships with them, and tended towards an oversight role rather than a supportive one.

Some positive examples of approaches to enabling programme quality included:

- Conducting nutrition causal analysis to better understand sector linkages and using nutrition indicators to inform the programme design, target areas and monitoring of food assistance, livelihood or health interventions (“Nutrition gives you insight into other programmes, e.g. revealing that a livelihood programme never happened”);
- For health programmes:
  - Mapping health data against seasonality and livelihood zones to better understand health fluctuations and adjusting programming so that mobile populations can better access services;
  - Enabling better and more culturally appropriate care by finding ways to employ Somali doctors and ensuring that treatment and prescriptions are more closely matched to the diagnosis;
  - Generally focusing on the quality of health delivery as a way to gain community acceptance, including to engage in sensitive areas such as gender-based violence.
- Communicating clearly to people about their entitlements (amounts, timelines) and what feedback mechanisms can be used to complain;
- Conducting analysis of the local context, including political and conflict dynamics, and finding ways to regularly incorporate this into programme approaches;
- Where possible, restructuring so that senior Somali and/or international staff are based closer to the programme sites; avoiding middlemen and finding ways for senior staff and/or donors or partner organisations to visit programme sites; and
- Prioritising the employment of Somali staff (whether from Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia or the diaspora) in Nairobi and in middle management positions in Somalia.

### **Staff and organisational issues**

Staff profiles and organisational culture were found to be extremely important for enabling access and programme quality. At field level, Somali project staff are under incredible pressure from local authorities, armed actors and others wielding power. There is a widespread perception that aid organisations, and by extension those who work for them, have a lot of resources at their disposal. As a result, aid organisation staff often face significant threats to their safety, simply by virtue of their job. This is all the more so if they try to stand up to and be ‘strong’ with those seeking concessions. And yet ‘standing up’ to powerful actors is a starting point to many good practices, from negotiating access (on favourable terms) to pushing for quality programming. It requires staff who have personal courage, the right skills (particularly negotiation skills), the right networks, *and* an organisational culture that supports them.

Remote management practices mean Somali field staff rarely have the chance to meet, talk to and work with senior managers. This creates a relational gap in terms of trust and transparency, which

can be de-motivating. The role of middle management becomes more important. Some organisations were found to have developed an over-reliance on certain individuals, who become internal gatekeepers, controlling which information passes up to senior management. Organisations whose senior staff were able to visit project sites and talk directly to local populations, authorities and staff were viewed positively by those interviewed in the field.

Most Somali NGOs are identified with a particular clan or sub-clan and tend to work in the areas where this clan or sub-clan is dominant. Tensions can exist within the dominant clan in a particular area or between dominant and marginalised/minority clans. Donors and international agencies can have limited awareness of the subtleties of these dynamics, including which clan or sub-clan controls the aid resources and the implications this has for local conflict dynamics, amongst other issues.

Understanding clan and other local dynamics, including the role of an agency's own staff in the political economy of aid, is important for all agencies. On a basic operational level, these dynamics can have implications for staff security and movement. More broadly, this understanding is necessary in order to be aware of the potential for one's aid to do harm and to take steps to minimise this. Respondents considered this to be weak across the humanitarian sector in south-central Somalia. To address these weaknesses, some organisations have conducted internal reviews of the identities of their staff and/or partners and how they are perceived in the local context. Another stressed the importance of conducting background checks and verifying information on CVs during recruitment.

Several respondents stressed the importance of a supportive / enabling environment where trust and capacity can be developed, but where controls are also firm, and where trust cannot easily be abused. This was described as 'trust and double-checking' relationships with one's own staff and colleagues.

In operating from Nairobi, a trend amongst many international agencies has been to employ Kenyans for their Somali programmes, who qualify as national staff. While there are many extremely skilled and able Kenyan staff, this can create additional cultural and communication barriers within an agency. A number of agencies are now attempting to reverse course and prioritise the recruitment of Somalis. Several respondents, however, including many Somalis, pointed out that some Somalis working for aid agencies do not have good contextual knowledge and rather are recruited more generally for their ethnic identity or language skills.

Interviews also raised issues around the willingness and ability of international (non-Somali) staff to develop an understanding of the operating context, especially in light of high staff turnover and limited mobility. This included an ability to develop information networks beyond one's own staff and colleagues.

### **Partnerships and risk management**

Most interviewees working in Somalia expressed a sense of taking risks on their own, in order to enable access, without much discussion or sense of shared responsibility with their international counterparts and/or Nairobi-based colleagues. In part because partnerships are frequently driven by the need to gain access, questions around how this access is obtained are commonly left unasked. One INGO with a long-term partnership with a Somali NGO, for example, entirely passes responsibility for negotiating access to its partner and is not involved in any way; there is no risk management framework on which to base decisions and no discussion of red lines. Both UN and

INGO respondents expressed a sense in which one can feel 'abandoned' by one's own organisation if things go wrong.

International agencies increasingly use private companies to transport goods. The companies are seen as more discreet and able to blend in with local populations (aid is not branded) and are expected to manage their risks entirely independently. (Taking this approach one step further, some agencies are increasing the use of vouchers, so that private companies both procure as well as transport items.) A few international agencies are also partnering more with smaller community-based organisations, such as local farming cooperatives or youth groups, in order to bypass perceived problems with NGOs.

Private contractors interviewed described the often severe risks they face in transporting goods. These included checkpoints, taxation, dealing with corrupt agency staff, and security threats from being associated with humanitarian aid and/or the UN. They often de-brand their cargo and carry it in small amounts so it looks like their own goods rather than aid. In spite of the risks they face, they sometimes feel harshly treated by their contractors, blamed for when things go wrong even if it was due to the agency's own mistake or an external factor such as an attack by Al Shabaab.

Whereas the threat of being blacklisted is high for Somali NGOs (and some INGOs), the larger international agencies are seen to have stronger powers to lobby in their own interests and to not face the same sanctions when things go wrong. One UN agency pointed to its ability to have a continuous and transparent dialogue with its donors, including raising issues of corruption/diversion, as an important way that it manages risk.

Several international agencies have undertaken organisational reviews and restructuring in recent years. These have involved significant staff changes and the introduction of different types of semi-autonomous internal units, which variously are aimed at improving monitoring, risk management, learning and accountability. The catalyst for these units has in part been the exposure or acknowledgement of high levels of corruption and diversion. Examples were noted where these efforts appear to have contributed to 'cleaning house' and to beginning to transform the organisation.

### **Outreach and negotiations for access**

Interviews with aid actors inside Somalia indicate that access is nearly always paid for at some level. Payment may be in the form of money, jobs or contracts. It may be relatively small or more significant. At local level, for an organisation or individual that is able to take a firm stance, these payments or favours may amount to little more than a few hundred dollars or putting a few family members or local militia on a beneficiary list.

These terms of engagement and the approach that agencies take can set the tone for how they are perceived by local populations and powerful actors on the ground. Approaches vary considerably and many agencies are known at the local level for whether they are strong or weak, i.e. principled or corrupt.

The extent of concessions made and the reputations of individual organisations may or may not be known by Nairobi-based senior management or the 'senior partner'. Some international agencies interviewed denied that any payments were taking place, or said that they do not know of any. They provided examples where the threat of withdrawal of a project, knowing who to speak to, and putting pressure on the difficult actor in the chain, had reportedly been used to successfully bypass the need for payments.

## Humanitarian principles

With the exception of ICRC and the Somalia Red Crescent, most organisations interviewed did not have a clear structured means of utilising humanitarian principles for enabling access and programme quality. While acting with integrity is clearly important to the quality of work, the research has not yet been able to determine the extent to which such integrity is driven by organisational strategies centred on humanitarian principles versus generally strong staff and management practices.

Financial independence is seen by some organisations as important for demonstrating operational independence, and some organisations do not take money from the US, the UN or stabilisation funds in order to preserve their independence. Other organisations report struggling to maintain an independent profile where they have to choose security protection according to the requirements of local actors, or when beginning new programmes in areas recently 'liberated' by AMISOM. Several respondents noted that it is difficult to be perceived as impartial and needs-based where an agency is not aware of the biases within its own staffing and programming.

## Affected population consultations

The research team interviewed over 100 local people (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries), including displaced persons, host communities and self-described 'gatekeepers', in Mogadishu, Dollow and Baidoa in February-March 2015. The goal of these consultations was to better understand how people seek to safely access humanitarian assistance and what are their concerns regarding its quality. A mixed gender team of Somali researchers speaking the relevant local dialects conducted the consultations, with women conducting women-only focus groups, and approximately 40 per cent of interviews being conducted by phone. The locations selected mainly reflect the experiences of urban/displaced populations living in areas outside of Al Shabaab's control. Some emerging findings are summarised below.

## Quality of aid

In all locations, people expressed negative views about the **quantity** of assistance, in that they felt that not enough was provided. At the same time, the research team observed a sense of resignation, particularly with IDPs, who expressed a view that 'aid is free and therefore we have to accept what we are given'.

In Mogadishu and Dollow, people reported there to be fewer agencies and less assistance compared with the famine period, whereas in Baidoa views were mixed on this question (people there suggested that there were more Somali NGOs and fewer international NGOs than previously). In all areas, a shift was noted in the type of programmes, with less food and cash now (compared to during the famine response) and more WASH, recovery and livelihood activities. A few people described a general increase in cash programming, however.

Respondents mentioned specific projects or organisations as better than others, but lacked detail as to why. In Mogadishu, for example, people commented that agency X, Y or Z made a lot of follow-ups, in-person, and were 'tough'. Interestingly, the organisations mentioned included a mixture of Somali, Western and Muslim organisations. Formal feedback mechanisms were not mentioned as part of this process of following-up.

With regards to **timeliness**, many respondents said that if they had received aid in time they wouldn't have been displaced during the famine (and still be displaced). At the same time, they also

felt it was important that they did receive something when they got to the IDP camps/towns. More generally, most people did not perceive there to be a clear basis to determine when aid arrives; there was a sense of 'it just comes when it comes' or 'it comes if you are in the right place at the right time'. Aid was seen as most meaningful during extreme crisis, when the need is absolutely clear, or during Ramadan, when it has a religious and social meaning. Islamic charities are strongly associated with providing food annually during Ramadan.

Respondents gave a wide range of responses in relation to which type of aid was the most **relevant** to them, with no clear pattern as to whether certain types of aid were more important. Virtually all sectors had some positive responses by some respondents. Many people referred to the relative abundance of high value food aid provided by Islamic/Arab/Turkish agencies in 2011. Some respondents also mentioned water, shelter, trainings and cash as important and useful.

The relevance of aid for urban IDPs can be understood in relation to broader livelihood strategies. In Baidoa, it was reported to the research team that approximately half of the IDP population were actually long-time residents of Baidoa. In Dollow, IDPs often seek to keep access to both their urban and rural forms of livelihood. In Mogadishu, rent in the IDP camps is generally understood to range between \$5-15 per month, paid to the camp manager, who works for the 'owner' of the land. The research team felt that in all areas, but particularly in Mogadishu where regular rents have been increasing significantly in recent years, many people in the IDP camps choose to stay there because rent is comparatively lower. People reported that many IDPs move between camps in order to receive assistance and in order to pay less rent as rent costs change.

All local populations interviewed – including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, IDP camp managers, project committees, government officials and private companies – describe aid actors and aid projects in very much the same language: that **corruption** and collusion are endemic. Those individuals who seemed most able to speak freely were overwhelming pre-occupied with corruption and bias in their responses. While these comments likely reflect more general survival strategies in the local context, they also suggest that humanitarian actors are seen as part and parcel of such dynamics.

People interviewed often perceived an unclear or unjust rationale for who receives aid and who doesn't. They cited many examples of the undeserving, wealthy or powerful being part of the 'beneficiary' quota. Aid agencies and their staff were seen as representing particular clans or personal interests. In this context, **gatekeepers** simultaneously exploit local populations while also helping to bring assistance to them and lobbying for them with aid providers. Some people interviewed expressed a mixed view of gatekeepers that included a sense of appreciation for their role. In interviews, self-described gatekeepers covering many IDP camps in Mogadishu provided insightful observations about an overall lack of coordination and accountability, as well as corruption and competition, coming from government officials (notably the District Commissioners or other landowners) and other powerful individuals, including aid organisations themselves.

There is reportedly a fair amount of **consultation** happening between aid agencies and affected people, in the form of assessments and feedback mechanisms. But the Somalis interviewed suggested that there was little sense of real dialogue (with one or two notable exceptions) and not much connection between these consultations and the programmes implemented.

### **Secure access to aid**

In the areas of Mogadishu reached by the research team there was unanimous feedback that there were no dangers to aid organisations or to people receiving aid, in terms of security threats. While

there was little further explanation, the research team thought that this could reflect overall improvements in security for normal Mogadishu residents in the last 2-3 years.

In Baidoa, by contrast, there was more reference to security threats, with people noting the proximity of Al Shabaab as well as Government-related forces. While Al Shabaab was mainly seen as a threat to international agencies and their staff, one or two respondents referred to the underlying threat of Al Shabaab in the sense that anyone, Somali or non-Somali, can be targeted.

People appeared to be most open and free in their responses in Baidoa, in comparison to both Mogadishu and Dollow where there was a much greater sense of threat or control by local gatekeepers. This dynamic was partly attributed to the fact that the IDPs' clan identities were different than that of the residents and gatekeepers/authorities.

No female respondents mentioned any specific risks of receiving aid as a result of being a woman, even when specifically asked by the female researchers. Women's organisations in Mogadishu did speak about how female staff can move around discreetly and identify female IDPs in order to raise their awareness of particular programmes e.g. training.

### **Further Contact**

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

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