

SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS

SAVE

Improving the evidence base on delivering aid in highly insecure environments

South Sudan Background Brief

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

Research overview

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.¹

Purpose of the briefing note

This briefing note summarises preliminary findings from interviews with 101 aid actors and 203 affected people. Its purpose is to serve as background for meetings in Juba 15-17 June, the intentions of which are 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 lastly, to identify gaps or issues requiring more detailed analysis.

The researchers are acutely aware of the difficulties agencies face in delivering aid in South Sudan, particularly the extreme logistical and security challenges that are posed on a day-to-day basis. The team is grateful for the time that aid agency representatives and the affected communities have contributed to the research so far. We hope that the collective expertise, experience and honest reflections of those involved in the study will contribute to a better understanding of 'what works' in aid delivery amid high levels of insecurity.

Aid actor interviews

The research team to date has conducted 101 interviews with representatives of aid organisations, donors, private sector entities and local authorities in South Sudan.² These interviews took place in Juba, Twic East, Duk, Leer and Akobo, and included both senior and mid-level aid organisation representatives.

¹ Cash and vouchers will be examined in more detail in further interviews.

² Although the majority of interviews (and almost all of the Juba interviews) were conducted primarily to inform Component 1, they are included in the summary here because the discussions naturally also covered Component 2 topics. Additional Component 2 interviews are planned in the coming months to cover topics in more depth.

Programming approaches

The conflict has exacerbated longstanding logistical challenges to humanitarian programming in South Sudan. With the active fighting and increased risk of looting since December 2013, aid agencies have moved from pre-positioned supplies and road movement to an increasing reliance on air transport for supply and staff. This has had varying impact on different sectors.

A supply-heavy programme, **food assistance** has been largely reliant on air transport, including airdrops to ground teams who are responsible for distribution. Aid agencies with responsibility for food distributions have responded to insecurity by repeatedly withdrawing and re-deploying teams, a practice which has at times resulted in disruptions in distributions.

Health interventions, which require more continuous staff presence but fewer bulky supplies, have sometimes been able to operate with greater field presence outside of town centres in comparison to food, NFI and nutrition interventions.

In the **protection** sector, which requires minimal supplies but more consistent field presence, community acceptance has been of high importance. Agencies have used approaches such as embedding long-standing protection teams within communities; setting up mobile protection teams/advisors to move between project sites and integrate protection principles into ongoing programmes; and using international staff to accompany civilians during vulnerable activities such as firewood collection or food distribution.

Overall, in addition to air drops, creative programming adaptations have included:

- Rapid response mechanisms, which helped to re-open access into highly conflict-affected counties and deliver short-term multi-sector interventions;
- Mobile clinics, which move with displaced populations and can respond to new emergencies as they arise;
- Quick 3-month interventions to revitalise a failing health unit and then pass it on to another NGO to support;
- Transfer of food along river corridors and from neighbouring countries based on negotiated agreements.

Quality 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.

Trade-offs were noted between the quality of aid and its scale, particularly regarding the use of rapid or mobile emergency response mechanisms. Interviewees highlighted that acceptance and longer-term investment were required to adequately deliver services. Concerns were also raised about an emerging culture of humanitarian 'flag-planting' in South Sudan. One interviewee described the current approach as focused on reaching as many people as possible rather than thinking about the quality of aid that people have received.

Interviewees reflected on donor decisions to invest more in the largest organisations to spread out and cover new, underserved areas, than in funding and building the capacity of smaller pre-existing partners. Investments in the larger organisations may have increased coverage, but the quality of existing smaller partners or programmes was also noted as important. Since aid organisations had been working in every county of South Sudan prior to the conflict, an opportunity may have been lost to build on existing context knowledge, relationships, and acceptance with communities.

Staff and partnerships

To protect the safety of their national staff, aid agencies have had to realign staffing configurations along ethnic lines. This has resulted in hiring staff more locally. They have also increased their use of international staff in conflict-affected areas, since they are perceived to have more freedom of movement and some level of protection. In times of heightened insecurity, agencies typically evacuate non-essential relocatable staff (both international and national) and ask locally hired non-relocatable staff and essential staff (for example an area coordinator and/or logistics officer) to stay in order to maintain life-saving services. There has thus been a focus on highly localised and international (non-regional) staff profiles,

Since early 2014, there has been a trend of decreased partnerships with national NGOs. As one INGO representative observed: “What we hear from partners is “why are people abandoning us?” National NGOs were perceived by some to be at higher risk of compromises to impartiality and neutrality, given their close ties to affected communities and tribes. There were limited but strong examples of INGOs working to build the capacity of national NGO partners. For all types of organisations, key factors for maintaining access included the level of staff confidence and maturity in dealing with highly insecure environments, including staff training and security management protocols.

Risks and risk management

With some exceptions, threats of violence and criminality are largely associated with military forces attacking or moving through the area, rather coming than from the local population. Emergency health and WASH programmes position themselves as more risk-taking, while large food movers felt they could relocate teams based on security conditions. Food programmes did, however, have to factor the safety of supply stocks into their risk calculations.

Both formal and informal risk management approaches were seen to have advantages. Organisations with sophisticated yet flexible risk assessment methodologies that blended security analysis, a sense of the criticality of the specific intervention and community acceptance and locally sourced information seemed to have greater access and were more confident in their programme quality. Fiduciary and programme quality risks will be examined in more detail in future interviews.

Outreach and negotiations for access

At the national level, OCHA has taken a lead on humanitarian access negotiations. A noted achievement was its organisation of a ‘ground-rules’ agreement signed by opposition commanders in the first months of the conflict. Soldier discipline and chain of command issues have meant that corridors remain uncertain, however.

At the local-level, many larger organisations maintained their own capacity to negotiate access and to communicate with armed actors in order to guarantee programme and staff safety. Some organisations with relatively long histories of providing aid in the country have preserved contacts and relationships with gatekeepers from years prior. Interviewees repeatedly cited their organisation’s history in the area, or ‘brand,’ as a reason they were able to maintain safe

access. This implies that the quality of services is not only of immediate benefit for aid recipients, but contributes to enabling access going forward.

Aid agencies also reported making informal agreements or conditions for service with local authorities, including commitments to respect aid organisations' staff and property, as well as warning them in advance of any potential dangers. Local authorities were seen as encouraging of humanitarians and their services so long as they followed bureaucratic procedures such as introduction and registration. Such assurances do not guarantee safety of access on the ground, however, because of chain of command limitations and other exigencies.

Humanitarian principles

The history of humanitarian aid in South Sudan has relevance for current access conditions. The current South Sudanese leadership's major experience with humanitarian aid was when its SPLM/A rebellion was being supported by Operation Lifeline Sudan's relief. The fact that humanitarians are now pursuing principles of independence, neutrality, and impartiality may be genuinely confusing to these previous perceptions of humanitarian aid.

Several (large and operationally independent) organisations report that their adherence to principles and their perception as principled organisations has helped to enable their access. These organisations stressed the importance of keeping consistent dialogue with armed actors and authorities on both sides of the conflict, always emphasising their impartiality and neutrality. For one organisation, this included stressing the fact that they operated in both Government-held and opposition-held areas.

National NGOs have had an especially difficult time presenting themselves as neutral, as they often have staff predominantly from one ethnicity or another due to their servicing of specific geographic areas. One national NGO headquartered in Juba and implementing in opposition-held territory explained that moving between the two areas created a dilemma of not being trusted by the local population in either location. This same organisation commented that while people in their service area may see the conflict as ethnically-driven, they view it as a political dispute, separate from their humanitarian imperative, and they continue to hire Juba staff of all ethnicities.

The reliance of many organisations on the integrated UN mission's assets for air transport or force protection for road convoys has posed difficulties in maintaining independence. Agencies providing services within UNMISS bases have also found it difficult to maintain an independent profile. As one INGO noted, "Inside the PoCs we have trouble separating... It's hard to explain [to beneficiaries] that something was an UNMISS decision."

Corruption and misuse

Bureaucratic impediments were perceived to be used to limit the resources going into opposition-held areas and for gatekeepers to profit financially. At the local level, unofficial taxation was reported to be on the rise, especially in opposition counties, as civil servants and security personnel are not being paid. Interviewees also raised concerns that inflated population-in-need numbers at the county level added up to an unrealistically high total.

The scale of possible diversion of humanitarian aid to military actors is not well known. Interviewees reported that food is likely to be making its way to armed forces, since they are supported by their communities, but what percentage or the means through which this happens were not detailed in interviews, and requires further analysis. Generally, agencies have not dedicated significant resources to analysing, measuring or preventing corruption and diversion in South Sudan. Local staff are often the ones having to deal with informal regulation/ taxation or requests for kick-backs.

Affected population consultations

The research team interviewed a total of 203 affected South Sudanese people living in the Juba POC site, Twic East / Duk, Leer and Akobo in March-May 2015.³ This included 24 focus groups and 18 individual interviews with displaced persons, host communities and those living in remote locations. The goal of these consultations was to better understand how people seek to access humanitarian assistance safely and what are their concerns regarding its quality. An international researcher worked with local translators to conduct the consultations, and local women generally conducted women-only focus groups.

In conducting the consultations, the researcher at first asked local NGO staff (translators) to assist by calling community members to take part in focus groups. The resulting focus groups consisted of people who were repeatedly used as the 'community representation' in such circumstances. Responses given by these participants were more prepared, and at times more agitated, as they felt they were being interviewed frequently with little change resulting in aid programmes. When the researcher moved on his own and consulted people randomly, it became clear that most 'average' residents are not routinely consulted at all.

Quality of aid

Among those consulted, food was considered by far the most important form of aid. In all locations, people focused on **quantity** over issues of quality, in particular stressing that current levels of food aid were not sufficient to support their community. After food, people found health, shelter, and education (typically in that order) to be the next most important aid services. While participants were clear to say that they appreciated any and all aid services provided, they felt the quantities being given were not enough to support the population.

People consistently reported that new IDPs and returnees were missed by aid registrations and distributions and were not able to access services as a result. As one registered woman summarised, "If you are registered, then life is okay and your children can play because there is food. If you are not, then life is very difficult and your children do not play, and you are very hungry." Food is typically shared, reducing further the size of the intended ration, but increasing reach.

The **timeliness** of assistance, including the length of distribution cycles and the reliability of the distributions, were of concern. In some areas, people reported women falling sick from sitting for hours, or days, in the sun waiting for the distributions to take place. After a cancelled distribution, five registered women consulted at an air-drop zone said, "We're going to sleep here under this tree tonight, even tomorrow if we have to, until we get food." In other locations, it was the duration between cycles that presented the biggest issues. While there was an urgency conveyed for greater quantities of food, registered people generally seemed fairly understanding regarding the timeliness of food distributions, so long as they did come.

Targeting seemed to be generally accepted as fair. When asked how the aid system in their area was working and whether it was fair, interviewees typically responded that they felt the system was working well, only that the quantities were not enough and that new IDPs and returnees were missed.

There was very little commentary on **corruption or diversion** of aid happening within communities, including local authorities. Because of the general sensitivity of the issue and in some cases the presence of armed actors themselves, it proved challenging to ask people about the diversion of aid by armed actors.

³ The locations outside Juba were visited in April-May 2015. Planned visits to Pagak and Malakal were canceled or postponed due to security issues.

Secure access to aid

Affected populations reported feeling safe accessing aid so long as it was within their own community, or their perceived protected zone. These zones were different sizes in different areas. Akobo and Leer residents reported feeling safe walking long distances (though physically burdened), while Twic East communities did not want to leave their payam, and Juba PoC interviewees feared leaving the UNMISS gates.

Many respondents reported facing dangers when collecting food aid from long distances. This threat was perceived for both men and women, though it was more of a concern for the women, as they are typically the ones moving for food-aid collection: “It is very, very, dangerous. You must be young and strong to walk the 14 kilometres for food. Mobility is an issue. You can hire a car to transport the food, but it is expensive. People can be killed on the way. You don’t walk at night, because there is banditry.” To reduce their risk, people stay overnight in the town centre and walk back to their homes the following day(s). Rural populations consistently asked that food and services be brought to the payam-level. One aid organisation interviewed in these areas reported that they had considered closer distribution-sites but deemed the environments too insecure. This highlights a significant tension between secure access for the recipient and aid actor population.

In Leer, Akobo, and Twic East, IDPs were arriving from frontline areas, seeking safety and services in counties farther from the fighting. This included IDPs from Malakal, where they had been receiving aid services within the UNMISS base, highlighting that affected people will move away from services and the perceived safety of the bases in response to insecurity. In this case, the persons fleeing Malakal cited cross-ethnic fighting within the PoC as a driving factor for leaving. This supports the idea that insulation within geo-ethnic zones contributes to people feeling safe to access aid.

Affected people generally felt that aid organisations and staff were safe to operate in their areas. This was partly because of the relative security of the areas compared to where people were fleeing from and partly because humanitarians were seen as protected by their status as internationals and as helpers. As one woman described “Humanitarians need not fear. There is no problem, because they are the ones serving.” Another explained, “It is safe here for the NGOs. Because when we came here we were running, but we settled here because it is safe. Of course NGOs can’t be operating where it is not safe.” Aid agencies operating in these areas similarly reported feeling safe to operate, although they had taken increased security measures compared with previous years. Several weeks after the researcher’s visit, aid providers in Leer and Akobo evacuated relocatable staff due to fears of military attack.

Further Contact

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

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