

# Inter-agency Access Mechanisms

NRC's engagement in coordination to enhance humanitarian access

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## Executive summary

Securing and maintaining humanitarian access is critical to the work of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Increasingly, humanitarian agencies responding in complex, conflict-affected contexts recognise the benefits of coordination to promote access. NRC commissioned this review to make informed decisions on whether and how to engage in different joint access mechanisms, what mechanisms to advocate for, and who would be best placed within a country team to represent NRC in different fora. To understand how humanitarian access coordination mechanisms are functioning in practice, initiatives in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan were studied in depth.

### **Main findings**

Coordination is essential for the humanitarian community to establish, maintain and extend access in a global context characterised by escalating risk, protracted conflict and increasing needs. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to access coordination that will reliably yield effective outcomes in the range of humanitarian contexts in which NRC operates. Developing and advocating for tailor-made approaches, which include both formal and informal initiatives, as well as mechanisms exclusively for NGO coordination, is most likely to promote open information sharing and effective collaboration.

### **Key recommendations**

NRC needs to strengthen its investment in joint access initiatives and encourage other humanitarian agencies to engage. NRC is well placed to initiate and lead NGO-specific coordination mechanisms and should take responsibility for influencing reform in UN-led initiatives to achieve better access outcomes.

#### **Ensure appropriate and adequate resources are available for access coordination:**

- Dedicate financial resources towards access;
- Decide which team members will lead, and contribute;
- Empower staff by clarifying organisational policy, positions and 'red lines';
- Ensure that team members understand and apply the core humanitarian principles to their work;
- Foster organisational culture that promotes frank access dialogue.

#### **Advocate for, and invest in, coordination structures tailored to local operating contexts:**

- Engage proactively to establish, strengthen and influence access coordination mechanisms;
- Accept the need for parallel initiatives in conflict-affected contexts, including NGO-only groups;
- Advocate against the adoption of an overly prescriptive coordination structure;
- Develop and share practical guidelines and tools for access coordination.

#### **Set concrete objectives and demonstrate the added value of coordination:**

- Agree on what initiatives can practically achieve;
- Encourage collaboration and challenge competitive cultural dynamics;
- Highlight concrete outcomes to demonstrate the benefits of inter-agency coordination;
- Promote learning as widely as possible.

#### **Identify the limitations of formal access coordination mechanisms in each context and invest in complementary strategies to enhance access:**

- Pursue opportunities to collaborate on access issues informally and build ad hoc networks;
- Establish trusted links between informal and formal access mechanisms;
- Include national NGOs in access coordination.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and objectives of the study

#### **Access and humanitarian assistance**

Globally, humanitarian needs have reached an unprecedented scale, driven by dramatic escalation in armed conflict, the increasingly protracted nature of crises, rising state fragility and the highest levels of displacement recorded since the second world war. The UN predicts that 87 million people across 37 countries will require humanitarian assistance in 2016 and has appealed for more than USD 20 billion to meet their needs (OCHA 2016d).

While the international humanitarian system has grown and evolves to try to respond more effectively to critical needs, humanitarian space is shrinking as a result of the proliferation of obstacles facing actors trying to deliver assistance and communities seeking aid. Humanitarian access is constrained by a range of factors, including limited resources, poor infrastructure and geographical isolation, but the most common and intractable challenges now facing humanitarians come from conflict, violence, and the politicisation of aid. As most major humanitarian crises now involve armed conflict (ALNAP 2015, OCHA 2016g), access impediments are increasingly preventing assistance from reaching people in need and making delivering aid more perilous (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard 2011, Humanitarian Outcomes 2015a). The core humanitarian principles that provide the fundamental foundations for humanitarian action are increasingly compromised as agencies try to balance escalating risks to their personnel and assets with the imperative to save lives and alleviate suffering.

#### **Access coordination**

Humanitarian agencies seek to address access challenges by establishing and maintaining robust acceptance for their programming in the communities in which they work. Principled, transparent, accountable and high quality humanitarian action is considered a crucial foundation on which actors can negotiate access with communities, authorities, and parties to conflict. Coordination enhances effectiveness of humanitarian response and improves efficiency by reducing duplication. It is embedded in key quality and accountability frameworks guiding humanitarian action, including the Core Humanitarian Standard for Quality and Accountability (CHS) (2014) and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct (CoC) (IFRC 1994). Increasingly, humanitarian agencies recognise the benefits of working together specifically to promote access (CDI 2014).

The United Nations Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) "has a vital role in facilitating and coordinating humanitarian agencies' efforts to establish and maintain access, and to overcome factors that inhibit access" (OCHA 2010, p.2). While OCHA's role is mandated in international humanitarian architecture (IASC 2015), the politicisation of aid and integration of political and humanitarian agendas in UN missions complicate humanitarian access issues in conflict-affected contexts. Consequently, other coordination mechanisms are needed, particularly among NGOs, to promote safe access to humanitarian assistance, and protect the lives of people in need and aid workers.

#### **NRC's engagement in access coordination**

As a leading humanitarian NGO, access is critical to the NRC's work. Without safe and unimpeded access, NRC's ability to deliver assistance to, and ensure the protection of, those in need is compromised. This issue is most acute in the hardest to reach locations and in contexts affected by conflict, where NRC prioritises emergency response. Acknowledging the significance of humanitarian access to its work, as

well as rising challenges to securing access, since 2010 NRC has deliberately invested in efforts to improve access - operationally, programmatically and through policy advocacy. One strategy that NRC has employed to enhance humanitarian access involves strategically engaging with inter-agency coordination initiatives. These include formal and informal groups, some comprising NGOs exclusively, while others include, or are led by, United Nations (UN) agencies, most notably OCHA. NRC commissioned this review to make informed decisions on whether and how to engage in different mechanisms, what mechanisms to advocate for, and who would be the best placed within a country team to represent NRC in different fora.

## 1.2 Methodology

### Approach

This research was undertaken to review NRC's engagement with joint initiatives to further humanitarian access, particularly focusing on complex, conflict-affected operating contexts. It seeks to assess the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of inter-agency humanitarian access initiatives in order to enable NRC to make informed decisions about how best to invest resources in future to enhance access and positively influence policy. The study was conducted as part of NRC's global work to improving humanitarian access, supported primarily by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) and the UK Department of International Development (DFID).

Employing a realist methodological approach (Pawson & Tilley 1997, Westhorp 2014) the review sought to explore the complex interaction between contextual factors, organisational approaches and individual reasoning to understand how, where and why interagency access coordination mechanisms function across different humanitarian contexts. Qualitative data derived primarily from semi-structured interviews were collected and analysed. This was complemented by relevant literature on humanitarian principles, constraints and access, as well observational data from the author's professional experience. Appreciative enquiry (Elliott 1999) techniques were used to focus the literature review and interviewees on identifying positive factors contributing to success and highlight examples of best practice. Gap analysis processes were used to draw out approaches informants believed would improve outcomes.

### Key informant interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate open discussions encouraging critical reflection, frank disclosure, and constructive recommendations for improvement and reform. 42 stakeholders were interviewed, providing insight into eight critical humanitarian contexts - Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq, Somalia and South Sudan and Syria - four of which were studied in depth. The principal participants were senior NRC staff in management, policy, security, and protection roles. Other key stakeholders interviewed included humanitarian professionals from UN agencies, particularly OCHA, donor agencies, including ECHO, relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Action Contre La Faim (ACF), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), representatives from national NGO coordination bodies, and researchers investigating humanitarian access.

## 2. Access coordination case studies

To understand how humanitarian access coordination mechanisms are functioning in practice, four countries were selected for detailed analysis - Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan. All four countries are affected by large-scale, complex emergencies and characterised

by protracted conflict, extremely low development indicators, and fragile governance. International presence in these contexts is long-standing, the humanitarian situations in each are classified as severe and are expected to deteriorate further in 2016 (ACAPS 2015), and all are priority operations for NRC.

## 2.1 Afghanistan

### Humanitarian context

The war in Afghanistan is now in its fourth decade. After the 2014 drawdown of international forces and the end of NATO's formal combat mission, conflict intensified in 2015 (Ali 2015, Amiri 2016, Osman 2015). The impact on the Afghan population continues to increase every year, with a record high 11,002 civilian casualties documented in 2015 (UNAMA 2016). Afghanistan is also highly vulnerable to natural disasters. 30 per cent of the population are in need of urgent assistance in 2016 and 70 per cent living in chronic poverty. 1.57 million people are classified as severely food insecure and require emergency relief, with a further 7.3 million moderately food insecure (FSAC 2015). A range of indicators highlight an increasingly frustrated and fearful population. More than 2.4 million registered and 2.4 million undocumented Afghan refugees live in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan (IOM 2015a) and 1.1 million Afghans are internally displaced (UNHCR 2016c). Despite rising needs, large parts of the country are increasingly inaccessible to the humanitarian community. Afghanistan is consistently ranked among the most dangerous contexts for aid operations, recording the highest number of attacks on aid workers globally since 2011 (Humanitarian Outcomes 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

### Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination

Access coordination has a relatively long history in Afghanistan's humanitarian and development context. A number of formal joint access coordination mechanisms have been established, with two currently operating. Notwithstanding the high staff turnover experienced in the Afghan aid sector, many of the same organisations and individuals tend to comprise the core participants in these access groups, although they have different facilitators and donors.

The first formal inter-agency group to work explicitly on access issues was the Conflict Sensitivity in Afghanistan (CSA) working group. Revived in 2013, the CSA aimed to raise awareness of and promote conflict sensitivity approaches to aid delivery in Afghanistan, at a time when humanitarian and development space was contracting. The group sought to better incorporate conflict sensitivity into humanitarian and development action in Afghanistan to improve practice and enhance outcomes. CSA's work was grounded in the Do No Harm framework (Anderson 1999, OECD 2009) and widely agreed conflict sensitivity principles (Zicherman 2011). Defining themselves as a "community of practice" (CSA 2013, p. 4), the group developed a concise Terms of Reference (ToR), agreed on basic principles and identified priority issues, including access and actor mapping. The most recent steering committee included representatives from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and The Liaison Office (TLO). Despite a membership of up to 30 agencies including NRC, less than ten members participated regularly. Although national NGO engagement was encouraged, with the exception of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), Afghan voices were apparently not pronounced. National NGOs advised the facilitator that they did not see the relevance of international NGO discussions about access to their own work, so withdrew.

CSA developed background documents analysing the access issues facing aid agencies in the Afghan context, practitioner access guides and reviews of lessons learned from other contexts, but not all of these resources were completed, or widely distributed. The group developed a set of access principles for assistance in Afghanistan, to be used as a foundation for aid programming, as well as in advocacy towards parties to the conflict to improve safe access, agreed by 18 member organisations, including

NRC. Participation in the CSA helped TLO's director to highlight the shrinking of humanitarian space in Afghanistan and call on UN leadership to negotiate collective access in an address to the UN Security Council in 2014 (Karokhail 2014). Regrettably, it is hard to assess to what extent CSA's resources were operationalised by members, or how they were used to adapt practice, support negotiation, or to inform policy advocacy. Through late 2014 and 2015, CSA meetings became infrequent and progress diminished, effectively leaving the group in recess. The failure to replace the group's first facilitator, high turnover of international staff, and inconsistent member engagement were cited as the main reasons for the initiative's decline. The contributions of a small number of key individuals clearly underpinned the group's progress, their agencies reportedly did not demonstrate the same level of sustained commitment needed for continuity. Despite attempts to build links, competition with parallel mechanisms, including the PSG described below, also undermined the CSA's sustainability. Still, its work is seen to have contributed to the development of other joint access initiatives in Afghanistan.

At the same time as the CSA was operating, NRC initiated the NGO Project Support Group (PSG) as part of its humanitarian access communications project, funded through ECHO's Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM). PSG membership was initially open to like-minded NGOs and included more than 25 agencies, but active participation tended to coalesce around fewer than ten ECHO ERM partners and larger international NGOs, with MSF, ICRC and INSO observing. The group's approach initially comprised: cultural induction activities for expatriate aid workers, humanitarian training for *madrassa* graduates, and public awareness campaigning to promote greater understanding of humanitarian principles and NGOs among Afghan communities, particularly targeting those in less accessible areas. A radio drama series called *New Home, New Life*, was produced and broadcast widely in Pashtu through the South and East of the country. A 2014 external evaluation suggested that the radio program was positively contributing to NGO acceptance, but also highlighted widespread distrust of aid agencies and lack of awareness of humanitarian principles among local people (NRC 2014). Since then, awareness-raising through radio drama has expanded, supported directly by PSG member agencies, but no longer managed by the PSG or NRC. Some respondents expressed confidence that this initiative does support NGO acceptance and access, but the evidence remains largely anecdotal and is limited geographically.

Members' assessments of the relative value of each approach in promoting access were mixed. More than half of those who participated in an internal review in May 2015 agreed that the *madrassa* graduate training was the most useful, with some agencies expressing an interest in recruiting training participants for humanitarian and emergency program roles. Half of members who responded wanted to see the initiatives continue to be implemented and indicated a willingness to try to find co-funding. Externally focused initiatives aside, group members also ranked the usefulness of other PSG activities, with access-related information sharing seen as the most useful, followed by networking. It was clear that participants were frustrated with the lack of concrete action to improve access undertaken by the PSG. Recommendations for future work included leading joint negotiation to facilitate access to difficult to reach locations, access mapping, developing specific strategies to improve access in high priority locations, and establishing an access library of relevant materials. Despite this participatory assessment, little action was taken at the time to expand, or redirect, the group's activities. Concerned that the existing group structure and processes in place were not appropriate to meet its objectives, members also discussed alternatives for restructuring and strengthening the capacity of the PSG, including realigning the group under ACBAR's umbrella, and establishing closer links to INSO to capitalise on their credibility, training capacity and wider membership base. Finally, members also considered the importance of ensuring PSG representation on the new OCHA-led access group in order to ensure NGO access needs and concerns would not be overshadowed by UN perspectives.

Participating agencies' pronounced dissatisfaction with the group's lack of demonstrable achievements and their increasing disengagement were the catalysts for reforms undertaken in September 2015. In the new structure, a small core group, comprising invited INGO Country Directors, is tasked with driving action and takes responsibility for decision-making. An expanded group, which is open to registered

NGOs, who are signatories to the IFRC Code of Conduct (IFRC 1994), feeds into, and benefits from, PSG activities. To revitalise interest and commitment, NRC reinforced the case for continuing NGO-led collaboration on access by drawing on evidence from ERM partner response maps, INSO and UN security incident trend data, and OCHA materials, showing gaps between existing humanitarian operational presence, capacity and needs. Marshalling these resources from a wide range of sources helped to renew confidence among participants that the initiative could be more effective. Core membership was confirmed in late 2015 and a co-chair from the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) elected to support NRC's Humanitarian Access Coordinator, who facilitates the group's work. Respondents agreed that resourcing a dedicated facilitator was essential for the access group to make progress and also concurred that member agencies needed to dedicate human and financial resources towards access coordination. Guiding documents have since been developed, but after 5 months, the PSG has not yet demonstrated tangible progress towards its revised objectives.

Most recently, OCHA launched an Access Advisory Group (AAG) in early 2015, at the request of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). It was established to enhance access broadly for the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, improve shared approaches to addressing challenges, and potentially facilitate a common access strategy. It is also clearly linked to global UN policy, specifically the roll out of the OCHA's Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework (ARMF) as a tool to systematically collect, monitor and analyse data on humanitarian access constraints (OCHA 2012b). The AAG seeks to encourage better collaboration between NGO and UN coordination systems, connect individuals and agencies to efficiently solve specific access problems and also provide an avenue to raise critical access issues to the HCT for high level advocacy and support. The AAG is co-chaired by OCHA and NRC and comprised of invited senior representatives from UN agencies, clusters and NGOs, with the ICRC and MSF observing. It is structured along similar lines to the PSG, with a core group leading implementation and meeting regularly, while opportunities are envisaged for other agencies to participate and benefit through an extended forum. Membership is capped at 12 and shared as equitably as possible between UN and NGO representatives. Agencies nominate one senior individual to participate in all meetings to ensure continuity and build trust - typically a director, head of unit, or access specialist. Confidentiality is rigorously protected to promote open discussion and frank disclosure.

The AAG meets monthly and reports regularly to the HC and HCT, identifying critical issues requiring urgent attention, recapping chronic or unresolved problems and providing recommendations for specific actors to take action. Progress has been made on the formation of sub-groups, tasked with responsibility for leading more focused work on: access mapping using the ARMF; analysing existing access toolkits and guidelines; consolidating access data on transportation and logistics; and conflict actor mapping, respectively. AAG members regard actor mapping as a fundamental prerequisite on which to base the development of sound access strategies and support joint and bilateral negotiation, which is solidly supported by literature (Jackson 2014a). Filling this gap in knowledge about both civilian and armed groups, leadership and scope of influence is particularly crucial in 2016 in light of the country's fracturing conflict and fragile sub-national governance. In the absence of a functioning logistics cluster in Afghanistan, the World Food Programme (WFP) coordinates common logistical support services, most notably UNHAS air assets, but the NGO community report being marginalised when attempting to access these, or are excluded altogether from some information sharing mechanisms. As a result, NGOs and some UN agencies, collect data on road access independently and share this through informal networks.

INSO are seen to play an essential role in consolidating information from disparate sources on security-related access constraints associated with road closures, illegal checkpoints, attacks and conflict dynamics. Their robust reciprocal relationships, protection of individual identities and tight restrictions on the dissemination of data instils confidence among NGOs that they can balance the benefits of sharing access-related information, while minimising the potentials risks to their own operations. UN agencies similarly rely on the security management system managed by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). Recent responses to rapid-onset humanitarian crises in Kunduz and

Badakhshan were cited by respondents as examples of how poor cooperation between these parallel systems undermines access and compromises the delivery of timely, effective assistance. The AAG's willingness to act as a broker to improve linkages between UN and NGO security and logistical networks, to further integrate data in order to disseminate more accurate and timely information to operational agencies, was cautiously welcomed. Success, however, will depend heavily on perceived trust in the protocols adopted to protect the confidentiality of data sources and likely be strongly personality-driven.

Notwithstanding ACBAR's broadly representative role and facilitation of access-related workshops, there was little evidence of national NGO participation in joint access mechanisms and Afghan voices in existing fora are relatively limited. TLO's participation in the AAG and recent inclusion of DACAAR in the PSG are notable exceptions, but do not signal any comprehensive acknowledgement of, or attempt to address, this imbalance. This omission can at least partly be attributed to the lack of national staff in senior management roles across the humanitarian community (by no means unique to Afghanistan) and the ongoing use of English in coordination fora. However, some respondents suggested that actual or perceived differences in operating practices, particularly in regarding adherence to core humanitarian principles, discourages formal cooperation on access between national and international NGOs.

The wide range of interpretations of the humanitarian principles and their flexible application on the ground has long confounded access in Afghanistan. The unprecedented size of the international response, the blurring of military, political and humanitarian agendas, and rapid proliferation of NGOs in the first decade following the removal of the Taliban in 2002 have produced a highly diverse, and divided, community. The distinction between sustainable development activities and emergency assistance is unclear, with many NGOs implementing development and humanitarian programming. Conflict dynamics further confound simple classification, as more of the country is affected by insecurity, and life-saving needs take priority over longer-term programming. Many aid agencies have accepted funding from donors to support overtly political and military objectives, including under counterinsurgency (COIN), counter-terrorism (CT) and stabilisation frameworks, and some have also worked closely with armed forces, including Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). It is widely accepted that this approach has undermined local perceptions about the independence and neutrality of humanitarian aid (Blankenship 2014, Fishstein & Wilder 2012), thereby endangering the lives of aid workers and contributing to further decline in access in areas affected by conflict and controlled by armed opposition groups (AOGs), particularly the Taliban, or Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). ACBAR's former director describes how divergent approaches among humanitarian and development agencies in Afghanistan undermines effective access coordination:

...the notable lack of consistency in this domain has concrete and serious effects on the delivery of aid and the possibilities for coordination. As a result, certain actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) tend to feel that it is necessary to distance themselves from other humanitarian actors by, for example, not being associated with any collective communication initiatives or only having observer roles in coordination forums (Saillard 2013).

Inability among agencies to reach consensus on fundamental operating principles and so-called red lines, or to hold each other to account when these are compromised, continues to hinder open information-sharing, effective cooperation, and joint action to address access issues in Afghanistan. As a result, most agencies seem to prefer to invest in improving their internal capacity, through carefully considered recruitment strategies, operational policies and, to a lesser degree, specialised training. All respondents also stress the importance of developing informal networks to exchange access related information. These are typically grounded in trusted, personal relationships and are pragmatically-oriented, with logisticians, security and safety advisors, policy personnel, and country directors interacting closely with their respective counterparts in other agencies. Confidentiality is cited as crucial for exchanging sensitive information about operational access, which is why many agencies are more willing to share data with



INSO, who are then in a position to consolidate, analyse, and disseminate this more widely through their own communication networks, while protecting anonymity. Further, INSO sometimes facilitates *ad hoc* meetings to provide NGOs with opportunities to discuss critical access-related issues, but the majority of this work is done bilaterally, in response to specific requests from member NGOs.

The overwhelming criticism of interagency access mechanisms in Afghanistan shared by respondents related to the lack of tangible outcomes. Notably, some responses highlighted a lack of clarity about how successful access coordination could be defined and what concrete outcomes could realistically be achieved through coordination mechanisms. Even those supporting coordination in principle had concerns that access initiatives have been limited to merely talking about access, without taking action. Many references were made to 'meeting fatigue', describing the burden of multiple meetings, frustration with the repetition of access related discussions taking place in different coordination fora, and the recirculation of basic data. Deeper analysis, more frank discourse on access strategies, and joint action were inhibited by lack of coherence and trust among group members. Even when meetings were well attended, membership discontinuity and the wide diversity of participants' roles undermined progress because of the reluctance to make decisions or share sensitive information. Most interviewees agreed that merely turning up to meetings is insufficient, highlighting the need for organisations to commit resources to joint work and delegate decision-making authority to representatives.

There is a heavy reliance on individuals with the capacity and vision to drive agendas forward, who also need to allocate substantial resources to assume responsibility for time-consuming coordination functions. While voluntary and self-regulated, the strength of joint access mechanisms is clearly linked to dedicated funding and committed leadership. In cases where funding for access coordination has been expended, or reallocated, or when effective coordinators have moved on to other roles, respondents note that initiatives tend to stagnate. Funding is also needed to implement joint activities.

Training was frequently cited as an example of a practical benefit that access initiatives could facilitate as understanding of the core humanitarian principles, approaches to promoting acceptance, and negotiation skills are seen to be widely lacking. Building members' organisational capacity and fostering mutual understanding would empower agencies to develop their own principled access strategies, as well as building stronger foundations for advancing joint operational and policy access work.

Although acknowledged to be time-consuming, foundational work being undertaken by the reformed PSG and AAG to develop and reach consensus on terms of reference, structure, participation and objectives, seeks to directly address these issues and learn from previous experience. Separating the function and membership of core and extended sub-groups to overcome shortcomings identified with previous initiatives can potentially produce better outcomes in future, if progress can be made quickly.

## **2.2 Central African Republic (CAR)**

### **Humanitarian context**

Protracted low-level conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) escalated in December 2013, displacing more than 1 million people. Armed groups on both sides have committed widespread human rights abuses with impunity, including sexual violence (Cinq-Mars 2015) and forced recruitment of child soldiers. The conflict has created a major humanitarian crisis in what was already one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than half of CAR's 4.6 million people struggling to meet their basic needs and 435,000 internally displaced (OCHA 2015a). 2.1 million people face food insecurity in the coming year (WFP 2015), with malnutrition and preventable disease now the biggest killers of children (OCHA 2016f). African Union (AU) forces, French troops and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) support the national

government, protect civilians and promote stabilisation. Insecurity hampers humanitarian access and leaves many people in CAR unable to access critical assistance. Criminality is high and aid workers face threats from intimidation, direct violence, abduction and execution, with CAR recording the fourth highest number of incidents globally in 2014 (Humanitarian Outcomes 2015).

### **Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination**

There was widespread agreement among respondents that effective joint access coordination in CAR is heavily personality-driven. While this is certainly not unique to the humanitarian context in CAR, the effect is so marked as to make effective coordination far more contingent on particular individuals than structures. Informal networks, grounded on trusted interpersonal relationships, were strongly preferred. This type of NGO collaboration was seen as particularly effective at field level and reportedly works best when agencies' mandates are similar and sectoral activities complementary. Participation in formal coordination mechanisms is seen as expedient, particularly the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and CMCoord, but was regarded as generally unhelpful for improving or securing access on the ground.

There was a strong sense of frustration expressed that existing formal access coordination mechanisms are generally too cumbersome, slow and politicised to improve access for operational agencies responding to emergencies. OCHA's leadership and approach to working with NGOs in CAR has recently been reformed and experienced personnel recruited. Both UN and NGO respondents were hopeful that by focusing on its facilitation role, instead of trying to manage the humanitarian community, OCHA would be able to build effective relationships and foster improved coordination. While this could certainly redress some of the significant criticism directed towards the agency reflected in this study and highlighted by previous research (Renouf 2015), it is too soon to gauge the success of this new approach.

Reaching consensus on common positions and joint action will continue to be challenging because of the wide range of identities, mandates, and approaches of agencies represented. Moreover, marked power disparity means that agencies leveraging resources have disproportionately greater influence over collective decision-making, leaving NGOs disenfranchised and poorly supported. Mistrust and competition for resources contribute to reluctance among many participants to openly share sensitive information about security, local networks, and operating procedures in formal coordination meetings. This further limits their usefulness as mechanisms to consolidate information on access challenges, or share examples of good practice.

However, it was acknowledged that relatively small or inexperienced NGOs can potentially benefit more from joint access initiatives than larger, well-established agencies, which have the resources and skills to secure access independently. These include physical resources, such as field offices, warehouses and ground or air transportation assets, as well as personnel with the requisite experience and 'soft' communications, mediation and negotiation skills.

Given the nature of current conflict dynamics in CAR, operational agencies stressed the need to rapidly secure humanitarian access to allow timely delivery of assistance to people displaced by violence. In most cases, assistance cannot be delayed until cease-fires or peace settlements are negotiated at a political macro level. As a result, agencies reported a preference for investing in their own internal institutional strategies and resources to secure timely access through the use of carefully developed and implemented acceptance strategies. There was little confidence in the past performance of coordination mechanisms in leveraging political influence to secure or improve access. Joint public advocacy is likewise felt to have had little impact on improving perceptions, or expanding humanitarian space.

Competition for resources was commonly suggested as one of the factors that hinder the development of more effective inter-agency coordination on access. It was acknowledged, somewhat reluctantly, that

expanding access into new locations, or being the first agency to reach affected populations in need, can give an NGO a competitive advantage over others for finite resources. This was particularly noted in contexts, or over periods of time, in which access is highly constrained, as external pressure from headquarters intensifies on both donors and implementing agencies to respond. In these circumstances, there is a reported tendency for agencies that have been able to secure access to withhold information from counterparts and operate as independently as possible.

Reluctance to share sensitive information with other agencies and engage in joint access coordination also arises from sound internal risk management strategies. Respondents were quick to identify potential risks associated with joint humanitarian action in CAR's context, where differences between aid agencies are not widely understood by communities, or parties to the conflict (Renouf 2015). Being associated with unprincipled actions undertaken, or poor quality assistance provided, by other agencies presents a significant reputational risk. Resentment from beneficiaries, leaders, and armed groups and can lead to violent retaliation, jeopardising staff safety and operational integrity. There was also a strong sense that agencies prefer not to divulge when and how they have been forced to compromise their principles, or decide to make trade-offs, in order to reach vulnerable affected people, or protect the safety of personnel. It was not clear to what degree this self-censorship derives from internal organisational dynamics (for example, HR policies, accountability systems, and management directives), or concerns about repercussions from external authorities and donors.

The logistics cluster has been active in CAR since mid-2013. It supports humanitarian access by providing shared logistics services, including ground and air transportation and common warehouses in Bangui and Bossangoa, collecting information on road network status and producing updated maps (Logistics Cluster 2016c). As the cluster lead, WFP manages UNHAS, which is used by 60 humanitarian agencies to transport personnel and supplies to parts of the country that are only accessible by air because of conflict, or are otherwise inaccessible during the wet season when roads are impassable. In early 2016, in partnership with NGOs, the cluster began rehabilitating airstrips in locations prioritised for humanitarian assistance or of strategic importance for contingency planning. The first runway in Sibut was opened in January, enabling safer and faster access to the surrounding area for humanitarian agencies and supplies (OCHA 2016f). Respondents acknowledged the importance of UNHAS and highlighted the need for infrastructure development to improve access to remote and insecure locations.

MINUSCA is mandated to protect UN personnel, assets and relief items. It is also tasked with creating a secure environment for the "full, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance" through effective civil-military coordination and in collaboration with the wider humanitarian community (UNSC 2014). Examples of collaboration include the provision of static security for premises and assets, escorts for goods and personnel in transit and direct protection of civilians at IDP sites. CMCoord is the primary link between the humanitarian community and security forces. Regular CMCoord meetings in Bangui and at regional centres are attended by all formal security actors, including UNDSS, and provide the platform for information sharing and coordination on security-related access issues. However, NGO respondents noted that direct requests for assistance, as well as any criticism of MINUSCA's failure to provide adequate security for humanitarian operations, or to protect civilians, were not welcomed in CMCoord meetings, so needed to be communicated through informal channels. A range of perspectives were expressed regarding MINUSCA's impact on humanitarian access in CAR, both negative to positive. Some NGOs with field offices in remote and insecure locations explicitly linked their safety to the close proximity of MINUSCA peacekeeping bases, particularly the French Sangaris troops. In addition to exchanging information on security incidents and protection concerns, MINUSCA presence was factored into NGO contingency planning, in the event of the need to rapidly hibernate or evacuate personnel. Another example cited was the activation of CMCoord's crisis cell during the recent attacks against humanitarian agencies in Bangui, which led to MINUSCA forces acting quickly to facilitate the evacuation of aid workers, although they were unable to protect NGO compounds and assets from looting.

In contrast, examples were also presented, which highlighted the risks incurred by humanitarian agencies when they have been perceived as too closely linked with international military forces. This is backed-up by findings from a comprehensive study on humanitarian access constraints in CAR conducted in 2015, which found that armed groups perceive generally humanitarian actors as part of the wider military intervention to restore stability to the country, suspect aid workers of providing intelligence for international forces and believe that they favour particular groups when providing assistance (Renouf 2015). Respondents in both studies linked this perception of bias and deceit to the threats, intimidation and violence directed at humanitarian agencies and personnel.

Indisputably, the UN's failure to respond to credible evidence of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by international peacekeepers in CAR (Deschamps 2015, HRW 2016a) has significantly undermined MINUSCA's integrity and throws into sharp relief challenges inherent to integrated UN missions. In particular, it has clearly driven a wedge between political and humanitarian actors among international community in CAR, and especially alienates agencies with solid protection mandates, which interferes with effective cooperation on access.

INSO reportedly plays an increasingly important and welcomed role in CAR in as a bridge between NGO and UN security architecture and approaches. Through the establishment of a parallel NGO-focused forum to collect, analyse and disseminate safety information, INSO is seen to empower NGOs to strengthen their own security management systems and gain greater independence from UN security actors and rules. INSO is also able to facilitate indirect engagement with stakeholders, when needed, which NGO respondents cited as particularly helpful for newer agencies with less robust networks.

The NGO forum in CAR is reportedly developing promising approaches to improving access coordination. Established in 2014, the Comité de Coordination des ONGI en RCA (CCO) has 50 members, with a tightknit executive committee (EXCOM) comprising ten active members. By meeting formally at least every two weeks and communicating informally on a daily basis, the EXCOM has been able to consolidate relationships and reach agreement on priorities relatively quickly. The CCO's advocacy working group has been vocal in calling for MINUSCA and the UN to be held accountable for sexual abuses described above. OCHA and the CCO also recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to resource dedicated NGO focal points at sub-prefecture level who will lead liaison with local authorities to promote humanitarian access and overcome impediments in the field. Nationally, the CCO is encouraging members to more openly discuss bureaucratic and logistical access constraints, so that the forum can then negotiate outcomes on behalf of all NGOs, or enlist OCHA and the HC's support to help the wider humanitarian community. As the CCO is seen to be more successful in pushing back against unreasonable and illegal demands, NGO members recognised the advantages of sharing information and taking a coordinated approach to improving access. Respondents noted, however, that many agencies underestimate the resources and time needed to actively engage in coordination fora. To strengthen coordination mechanisms and make the most of joint work, respondents clearly understood that members need to allocate human and financial resources towards coordination functions and ensure that personnel with the appropriate skills, experience and delegated authority participate.

There was general agreement that access can be improved in CAR by promoting better understanding of the core humanitarian principles, among both aid workers and key community stakeholders. With funding from ECHO and support from the CCO, OCHA are leading an initiative to build capacity among aid workers for better access through comprehensive training on conflict sensitivity, do no harm, humanitarian principles, protection mainstreaming, mediation processes and negotiation. Described as a 'community of practice', rather than a formal access working group, training graduates are expected to enhance their own agencies' ability to secure access, and, it is hoped, will also improve coordination by sharing information and learning from each other's experience.

## 2.3 Somalia

### Humanitarian context

Struggling to emerge from more than two decades of civil war, Somalia continues to be affected by high levels of political instability, escalating conflict and persistent development and humanitarian needs. Almost 5 million, out of the total population of 12.3 million, are targeted for life-saving and livelihoods assistance in 2016 (OCHA 2016g). Acute malnutrition affecting more than 300,000 children and chronic food insecurity are exacerbated by severe drought, one quarter of the population are in need of emergency health services and only half of all Somalis have access to safe water (OCHA 2015c). There are persistent survival and protection concerns affecting the country's 1.1 million IDPs (UNHCR 2016a) and almost 1 million Somalis continue to live as refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2016b). The UN-mandated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the United Nations Assistance Mission to Somalia (UNSOM) support the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to create the political environment needed to foster stabilisation and peacebuilding, including combat operations. Humanitarian access in Somalia has been problematic since the early 1990s, with the international community forced to withdraw from the country repeatedly (Rotelli 2014). As very few aid agencies now operate in areas under Al Shabaab influence, or other armed opposition group control, up to three million civilians living in these areas effectively have little or no access to humanitarian assistance.

### Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination

Thanks to the long UN presence in Somalia, there is robust and well-functioning humanitarian coordination architecture in place. Under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) operates as the strategic and operational decision-making and oversight body, based on input from the OCHA and the Cluster Coordinators via the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICGC) (OCHA 2015b). In line with IASC policy, the HCT in Somalia comprises the heads of UN agencies, donor representatives, NGO directors and the NGO Consortium, with the ICRC given observer status. The Humanitarian Coordination Forum (HCF), facilitated by OCHA, is open broadly to UN, NGO and other international stakeholders and acts as the main information sharing mechanism for the wider community. A number of specialised groups also advise the HCT on access related issues, including the Civil-Military Coordination Working Group and the newer Humanitarian Access Task Force.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) was established in May 2013 under UNSCR 2101 with a mandate to support state building, peacebuilding and rule of law, explicitly linking humanitarian action in the country to the UN's military and political objectives for the first time. The HCT, UN emergency relief coordinator and the NGO consortium strongly opposed the UN's structural integration on the grounds that blurring humanitarian and political agendas would reduce humanitarian space, hinder the provision of aid to people in need, compromise the core humanitarian principles on which assistance is based and jeopardise the safety of aid workers (Ferreiro 2012). A study of the consequences of integration undertaken by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) 18 months after the establishment of UNSOM found that "integration failed to create an environment conducive to principled action and humanitarian access" (ACF 2015, p. 2). It observed that the humanitarian community had largely given up on actively promoting principled humanitarian action based on impartiality and neutrality, eschewed attempts to gain access through acceptance or negotiation and based access strategies on military protection provided by AMISOM. Many respondents to this review concurred with the ACF assessment, highlighting the overwhelming lack of access to aid among communities in Al-Shabaab controlled areas in the central and southern areas of the country. This lack of internal consensus about the very definition of humanitarian action and the identity of actors is seen as central to the access problems facing the humanitarian community in Somalia.

UN integration has also further entrenched the militarisation of aid in Somalia, with clear evidence that humanitarian aid is being used as a tactical tool by political and military actors on both sides of the conflict. UNISOM is explicitly directed to align closely with the Federal Government of Somalia and AMISOM, which is mandated to conduct offensive military operations to reduce the threat posed by Al Shabaab and other armed groups. Humanitarian agencies' risk mitigation strategies in Somalia are based on deterrence, rather than acceptance, with UN compounds based on, or near, military bases, AMISON providing protection for UN personnel and private security companies engaged by other international agencies and donors, armed escorts used to transport supplies, and the widespread use of military assets for humanitarian logistics. NGOs are also encouraged to implement AMISOM quick-impact projects in locations retaken from Al Shabaab in the absence of objective needs assessments, similar to COIN strategies used in Afghanistan. These actions have exacerbated Somali community perceptions about the partiality of international humanitarian responses, which go back to the 1990s, and led to Al Shabaab openly declaring UN agencies as legitimate military targets from 2014. The humanitarian community's lack of independence from the UNSOM has, in turn, increased the risks faced by NGOs from both direct and collateral targeting. It reinforces the vicious circle perpetuating the current situation in which the political rhetoric of successfully stabilising Somalia contrasts starkly against the failure of extending humanitarian aid to more than 3 million people in parts of the country under opposition control.

Against this political and military background, joint access initiatives in Somalia are highly constrained. Respondents typically found it easier to identify what could, and should, be done to improve access coordination than to describe what is currently working effectively.

The joint access work led by the Somalia NGO Consortium (SNC) was generally regarded as the most useful mechanism for improving access and overcoming obstacles. It was established in 1999 as a loose network focused on information exchange, the Consortium has evolved and professionalised to better serve NGO needs in Somalia's changing humanitarian context. The active participation of its 85 national and international NGO members, particularly those serving on the steering committee, directs the Consortium's work. It is mandated to facilitate coordination, systematically collect, analyse and share information, represent NGOs in formal coordination mechanisms, and support members' advocacy (SNC 2014). One recent example of the Consortium's involvement in coordinated effort to improve access was shared by numerous interviewees: As political reform processes consolidate federalism in Somalia, authorities in Puntland and Somaliland are imposing new, parallel, and sometimes contradictory regulatory requirements on humanitarian actors. While legal reform is expected and needed in Somalia, the proliferation of different rules is confusing and they can be imposed arbitrarily or punitively and be used as a pretext for corruption. In late 2015, NGOs working in Puntland came under increasing pressure to accept local authorities' intervention in operational, procurement, and recruitment processes, which jeopardised humanitarian independence and would have compromised agencies' administrative and compliance procedures. Attempts to negotiate bilaterally were unsuccessful, with agencies forced to capitulate, or prevented from operating. When NGOs shared their experiences the Somalia NGO Consortium stepped in to advocate on behalf of the wider community, directly towards relevant government authorities, as well as enlisting the support of UN leadership and the donor community. Moreover, many respondents who recounted this example recognised that this coordinated action led by the Consortium shielded individual NGOs from further repercussions from speaking out independently. The recent success of the NGO Consortium's advocacy to help overcome structural constraints has demonstrated the benefit of both coordination and linkages between NGO representative bodies and UN leadership for leveraging greater influence over Somali authorities.

Some respondents also identified the urgent need for high-level advocacy to promote principled humanitarian action, improve access, particularly into areas outside of government control, and better protect civilians and aid workers, and acknowledged that this must come from NGOs. The NGO Forum's advocacy working group was suggested as the best placed to campaign effectively, if sufficient NGO members would agree to prioritise this issue.

INSO has recently taken over the provision of security and safety services to NGOs in Somalia, which was formerly managed by the NGO forum's NGO Safety Program (NSP). Collaboration between INSO, the NGO Forum and members is well developed, with INSO able to provide a range of useful data and analytical products, advice, training, and assessments to strengthen NGOs' risk management systems and ability to operate safely. INSO (formerly NSP) also regularly produces access maps, based on analysis of three meta-indicators evaluating the difficulties associated with reaching an area, staying to operate, and the actual presence of international NGO or UN staff. The most recently published map, from 21 February 2016, clearly illustrates the extremely low levels of access through the south, central and north-eastern regions of the country (INSO 2016b). INSO supports improved access coordination by facilitating open discussions on access constraints through regular meetings and encourages NGOs to report security incidents so that, anonymised and consolidated, the data can be shared with the wider community. Based on their global experience, INSO promote the need for NGOs to use acceptance strategies to improve access, reinforcing the importance of the core humanitarian principles for safe and effective humanitarian action. While many operational NGOs agree in principle, few seem to be willing or able to change their approaches in Somalia to reflect this. Instead, respondents shared examples illustrating how agencies are moving further along the continuum towards deterrence and protection through the increasing use of armoured vehicles and armed escorts.

A dedicated Humanitarian Access Task Force has recently been established by OCHA, with its draft terms of reference (ToR) based on OCHA's global access monitoring and reporting framework (AMRF). As there is general agreement that the humanitarian community must do more to improve access in Somalia, the task force was cautiously welcomed. However, NGO respondents reported that the proposed scope, which includes improving awareness, information collection, consolidation and dissemination, access coordination, promoting operational access on the ground, and leading policy advocacy, is far too ambitious. Some interviewees also indicated that some of the proposed data collection activities would duplicate existing mechanisms, particularly those currently used by NGOs to share access and security information. There are also concerns about the use of information shared and confidentiality of sources given the highly politicised and militarised Somali operating context. It is also not clear at this stage how the group will be structured, who will participate and how its work will be resourced. Cynicism was clearly rising in the absence of clear progress since the inaugural meeting in November 2015. While acknowledging that the Task Force is still in its inception phase, it will need to be sensitively and collaboratively developed if it is to become more than a reporting tool. Based on lessons learned from other contexts, respondents also highlighted the essential role that experienced and committed personnel will play in ensuring the initiative's future success, along with sufficient resources and political will from UN leadership, particularly the triple-hatted DSRSG/RC/HC.

According to respondents, the small minority of humanitarian agencies attempting to negotiate access with armed opposition groups in Somalia feel compelled to do so independently and covertly. Uncertainty and fear of possible legal repercussions from donors, local authorities and, even, in some cases, an agency's own headquarters, reportedly constrain the majority from attempting to respond to needs outside of Somali government and AMISOM-controlled parts of the country. Pragmatic donor agencies, who are aware of the risks and compromises agencies must take in order to deliver assistance in opposition-controlled areas, are understood to tacitly approve by relaxing transparency requirements, but fall short of sharing the risks with implementing agencies. This pervasive culture of 'don't ask, don't tell' regarding access to conflict-affected communities in large parts of the country hinders meaningful cooperation, including joint negotiations, public advocacy, and learning from others' experiences.

## 2.4 South Sudan

### Humanitarian context

Since gaining independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan has been marred by sustained armed conflict, with political, inter-ethnic and inter-communal dimensions. Armed groups have committed indiscriminate violence against civilians, widespread destruction of civilian property, looting and attacks against aid workers (HRW 2016, UNMISS 2015). Between 50,000 and 100,000 people have been killed since 2013 with 1.6 million displaced internally and a further 650,000 into neighbouring countries (OCHA 2016c). The conflict has crippled agriculture and rural livelihoods, contributing to a food security crisis that threatens a third of the population, 30,000 of whom face famine (IPC 2016). The government of South Sudan is heavily dependent on international aid and remains largely unable to provide essential services, uphold rule of law, enforce justice, or hold armed forces to account for human rights abuses. Established in 2011, the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) is mandated to protect civilians, monitor human rights and facilitate humanitarian assistance (UNMISS n.d.). Access in South Sudan has constricted from 2012, with violence against aid workers and humanitarian assets, active hostilities and bureaucratic impediments increasing each year (Bennett 2013, OCHA 2016a).

### Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination

In South Sudan, there are numerous fora in which access is implicitly or explicitly considered, including separate access, analysis, operational and CMCoord units and working groups facilitated by OCHA, as well as the logistics cluster, security-focused groups, and NGO-led initiatives. There is a marked division between policy/advocacy and operational/security approaches to understanding and operationalising access within NRC, which influences the nature of engagement in access coordination. This seems to be replicated among other agencies represented in this study and does appear to contribute somewhat to undermining effective information sharing and collaboration across the humanitarian community in South Sudan. Personnel with operational and security management responsibilities tended to prefer bilateral and informal access coordination, while those with policy, advocacy and protection focused roles were more inclined to see value in formal joint mechanisms. Respondents generally agreed that the proliferation of coordination meetings was time-consuming, repetitive and detracted from operational and programmatic responsibilities, with attendance declining as participants tended to lose interest in the absence of demonstrable outcomes for improved collaboration or access. This frustration with redundancy is consistent with a more comprehensive 2015 study of NGO perceptions in the country, which similarly found "the architecture designed to support the response for the people of South Sudan has become overly burdensome and focused on itself" (InterAction 2015, p. 3).

The Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) endorsed specific guidelines for coordination between humanitarian actors and UNMISS in South Sudan in December 2013 to avoid conflict, clarify distinctions between roles, and "preserve humanitarian space, access and principles" (UNMISS 2013). However, there was a strong perception by respondents that these principles are not well implemented - likely as a result of UNMISS' evolving in response to conflict dynamics in the last two years. The tensions implicit in the integrated UN mission, compounded by UNMISS' limited ability to fulfil its protection and humanitarian support mandate outside of UN bases, reinforces public perceptions that humanitarian assistance is not provided impartially in South Sudan. Respondents reported that this, in turn, undermines other humanitarian actors' use of acceptance strategies based on the core humanitarian principles to secure access. Integrated missions' unintentionally negative impact on humanitarian action and access is well established in South Sudan (Bellamy & Hunt 2015) and other conflict-affected contexts (Glad 2012, Hofman 2014, Metcalfe, Giffen & Elhawary 2011).



The OCHA Access Unit leads inter-agency access coordination, plays a key role in negotiating access in the field and produces regular reports on constraints, based on data provided by humanitarian partners. OCHA's role as negotiating access is generally well received, particularly among NGOs lacking the resources, skills, or leverage to enable direct engagement with powerbrokers. OCHA is widely regarded as the key negotiator with all parties to the conflict and the access unit is often called on to lead access discussions on behalf of the humanitarian community with both government and military stakeholders, including UNMISS, the SPLA, and armed opposition groups. Respondents expressed less satisfaction with the function of the OCHA Access Working Group, which seeks to enhance access coordination between NGO and UN agencies. The group's activity and efficacy seems to have been highly variable - influenced by external conflict dynamics, rapid turnover of agency personnel and working group participants and, most recently, declining participant engagement in the last year in the absence of tangible outcomes.

The logistics cluster, led by WFP, facilitates humanitarian access by coordinating operational information and services, providing common storage facilities and managing common road, river, and air transport services, including the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), on which NGOs rely heavily, particularly during the wet season (Logistics Cluster 2016a). It monitors physical access across the country and disseminates regularly updated maps showing physical road accessibility and constraints, based on UN and NGO partner reporting (Logistics Cluster 2016b).

The significance of physical and infrastructural impediments in South Sudan make the role of the logistics cluster and WFP crucial to facilitating access for the humanitarian community. While the cluster is apparently well resourced, provides quality services and timely information, it reportedly exerts an unusual level of influence over NGO operational decision-making, prioritisation and, ultimately, ability to respond to emergencies. Some respondents contended that the logistics cluster's provision of common services is not equitably shared between UN agencies and NGOs, which seems to intensifies inter-agency tension and undermines cooperation. NRC's partnership with WFP is seen to support cooperation in relation to transportation services for NFI and shelter distribution activities. Further, NRC and WFP have developed a relatively effective, albeit somewhat cumbersome, system for negotiating field access to insecure areas to deliver material aid, by which WFP initially securing agreements with relevant stakeholders, followed by NRC independently confirming acceptance. Regrettably, WFP does not appear to participate in other inter-agency access initiatives, missing opportunities to enhance information sharing and cooperation for improved humanitarian access for all actors.

The South Sudan NGO Forum is an independent coordinating body, representing more than 380 national and international NGO members. Its purpose is to improve NGO operations in the country by facilitating engagement between NGOs and other humanitarian actors, fostering national NGO coordination, developing policy, supporting evidence-based advocacy, and collecting, analysing, and disseminating NGO-related security information (SSNGOF 2016b). The NGO Forum encourages NGOs to report access constraints and develop common responses to promoting access. It also plays an important role in representing NGOs and advocating on their concerns to key government, UN, and security-sector stakeholders (Helton & Morgan 2013). NGO respondents valued the services provided by the Forum, particularly its security information and analysis function, as well as advocacy undertaken towards government authorities, donors, and UN leadership to highlight issues of concerns for NGOs. This is consistent with findings from InterAction's (2015) earlier study of NGO perspectives in South Sudan.

With bureaucratic restrictions increasingly hampering NGO operations in South Sudan, several respondents asserted that joint access mechanisms must be able to demonstrate their ability to raise awareness of humanitarian principles and advocate for acceptance from authorities in order to maintain humanitarian space for all actors. The South Sudan NGO Forum has built constructive relations with authorities from relevant ministries, the SPLA, and police, using these to lobby against the imposition of arbitrary, unauthorised, and punitive bureaucratic impediments. Most recently, the Forum's advocacy

towards the transitional government is believed to have influenced revision of proposed new laws that threatened to impede humanitarian agencies' independence and operations.

Both the NGO Forum and the access working group reportedly struggle to collect comprehensive information on access constraints faced by operational agencies to create robust data bases and shared analysis of constraints, on which joint advocacy positions could be based. Agencies' low levels of reporting, and lack of transparency in discussing, access constraints seems to be linked to concern about how information could potentially be misused, as well as scepticism about the value of sharing this information for enhancing access at operational or policy levels. While some respondents expressed frustration about the lack of progress on addressing this gap, since it was highlighted three years earlier (Bennett 2013), the access survey undertaken by the NGO Forum is widely seen as a positive development. Using data reported by NGO members from the first half of 2015, the report was the first to quantify the significant financial impact of violence against personnel and assets on NGOs and highlight the number of working days lost as a result of activity suspension or delay. This enabled the South Sudan NGO Forum to more credibly advocate towards all signatories to the peace agreement, including the transitional government, the international community, and opposition groups, to "ensure the safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to people in need" (SSNGOF 2015, p. 2).

While it does undeniably represent an example of successful coordination on access, the NGO Forum's survey also underscores this persistent reluctance among the humanitarian community to openly share information: while response rate among international NGO members was 59 per cent, in contrast, only 20 of the 190 national NGO members contributed to the survey.

Respondents agreed broadly on the variety of factors undermining collaboration: at an individual level, a lack of confidence from limited experience, contextual knowledge and capacity can diminish the likelihood and utility of contributions. Moreover, individual differences are highly influential, with personality differences cited persistently as crucial for cooperation. Probing this response more deeply revealed the importance of establishing reliable, reciprocal interpersonal relationships as a prerequisite for inter-agency engagement on access issues. High staff turnover, particularly associated with the rapid shift from a transitional context to a humanitarian conflict setting in December 2013, leads access groups to both repeat processes and lose momentum until new relationships and trust can be established. Understandably, mistrust also exists between organisations, as the South Sudan humanitarian community comprises agencies with disparate mandates, guiding principles, and approaches to providing emergency aid and development assistance. Competition for resources, as well as fear of sanctions for compromising humanitarian principles and operational norms, were seen as inhibiting open dialogue and reporting of access constraints. These tensions incline individuals and agencies towards establishing informal networks and exchanging sensitive, security, and access related information bilaterally. This is typically regarded as both safer and more effective in improving operational access. Aversion to sharing information openly certainly hinders the development of common understanding of humanitarian access in South Sudan, which, in turn, compromises the community's ability to work together to effectively mitigate against impediments and resolve access issues as they arise.

Several respondents observed that the South Sudan humanitarian context is relatively underexplored analytically, with large parts of the country inaccessible and poorly documented. This analytical deficit is seen to contribute to time-consuming speculation about conflict drivers and future scenarios, rather than humanitarian response planning being based on sound evidence. In addition to collecting data on access, coordination initiatives could usefully devote resources to improving analysis, which could then be used for better humanitarian decision-making. National NGOs, which typically have greater access to more remote and insecure locations than international agencies, would be well positioned to usefully contribute to this work, if they were better integrated into coordination mechanisms.

### 3. Conclusion

Effective coordination is essential for the humanitarian community to establish, maintain, and extend access in a global context characterised by escalating risk, protracted conflict, and increasing needs. Despite the dissatisfaction and frustration commonly expressed by field-based practitioners when discussing the weaknesses of existing coordination mechanisms, and the complexities imposed by unique contextual constraints in each country, this review demonstrates that both formal and informal mechanisms for coordinating humanitarian access are clearly needed.

#### **Defining and operationalising humanitarian access**

All respondents interviewed for this research defined access in terms of humanitarians' ability to provide assistance to people in need, but less than half acknowledged the ability of people in need to receive assistance. Further, many respondents, particularly those working in policy, advocacy, and inter-agency coordination roles, asserted the importance of grounding humanitarian access in the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These differences are reflected in relevant literature. Operationalisation of humanitarian access was clearly influenced by professional responsibilities, with personnel responsible for safety giving primacy to security constraints, operational staff tending to focus on bureaucratic and logistical impediments, field managers highlighting access in practice, including negotiation, and policy staff tending to view access through a protection lens.

#### **Access coordination**

The clear conclusion from this research is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to access coordination that will reliably yield effective outcomes in the range of humanitarian contexts in which NRC operates. The complexity of many contemporary humanitarian contexts, compounded by the protracted nature of current conflicts, demand that the humanitarian community apply flexibility when setting up access coordination architecture. Developing tailor-made approaches, which include both formal and informal initiatives, as well as mechanisms exclusively for NGO coordination, is most likely to promote open information sharing and effective collaboration in order to improve operational access and constructively influence access policy.

Negotiation with various power-brokers, including government and opposition civilian leadership and armed forces, is regarded as essential to humanitarian access (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard 2011, Grace 2015, Jackson 2014). In this study, respondents' attitudes to joint access negotiations were highly polarised, described along a continuum from necessary, viable and useful, to unhelpful, unacceptable, and even dangerous. Naturally, organisational policies and approaches influenced these views, along with individuals' professional principles and experience. Situational elements combine with these factors to further complicate the range of responses to joint access negotiations, particularly in the environments studied, where access is acutely impacted by insecurity and conflict.

#### **Contextual influences**

Contextual factors understandably have a significant impact on the effectiveness of access coordination initiatives. Most notably, the presence of an integrated UN mission is typically associated with greater need for coordination on access yet, paradoxically, is also associated with higher levels of reported dissatisfaction regarding its efficacy. Respondents linked this directly to the perceived conflict of interest between UN political and humanitarian mandates. Although widely discussed in relevant literature (Glad 2012, Metcalfe, Giffen & Elhawary 2011) and addressed at a policy level through global and context-specific guidance documents, in practice, this issue continues to undermine effective access coordination

initiatives in the field and, many research respondents argued, erodes the core humanitarian principles on which assistance is based. Many NGO respondents expressed concern about the risk of being closely associated with UN agencies and coordination mechanisms where UN peacekeeping forces are deployed, or where the UN's political objectives are seen to compromise its neutrality. Some respondents gave specific examples of the negative consequences resulting from politicisation, or instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid, which are extensively corroborated by research (Brooks 2015, Donini 2009).

## Organisational influences

Organisational features, including policies and procedures, structure, human resourcing and independence, appreciably influence the nature and quality of engagement on access coordination across contexts. Agency identity, mandate, policies, and approaches typically provide a framework for understanding and operationalising access, influencing the nature of engagement with other humanitarian actors and overarching disposition towards coordinating on access. While the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are distinguished by their autonomy and UN OCHA governed by its mandate to bring humanitarian actors together for coherent responses to emergencies, agencies like NRC must decide how to engage in coordination to best fulfil objectives and manage risk. Some respondents in this research identified the particular challenges facing multi-mandated NGOs, including NRC, which implement both life-saving humanitarian responses and longer-term durable solutions programming, when positioning themselves vis-à-vis coordination generally and joint access initiatives specifically. At a more operational level, organisational structural and procedural factors, including recruitment requirements for senior roles, clear delegation of authority to country and field offices, dissemination of position and policy papers to guide decision-making, and provision of advice and support from headquarters, also influence agencies' willingness to actively engage in access coordination.

## Individual influences

Individual characteristics clearly shape the development and functioning of access coordination initiatives. Approachable, sincere, and collaborative inter-personal engagement styles are seen as instrumental for establishing trusting relationships on which access coordination is based. Equally important is an individual's ability to establish credibility by demonstrating thorough contextual understanding, communicating respectfully and discretely, and promoting principled humanitarian action. These personal attributes and behavioural styles are equally important for engaging successfully in formal coordination mechanisms and establishing effective informal ways of cooperating on access.

## 4. Recommendations for future action

NRC needs to strengthen its investment in joint access initiatives and encourage other humanitarian agencies to engage. NRC is well placed to initiate and lead NGO-specific coordination mechanisms and should also take responsibility for influencing reform in UN-led initiatives in order to achieve better access outcomes for organisations and, most importantly, for populations in need.

### 4.1 Ensure appropriate and adequate resources are available for access coordination

**Dedicate financial resources towards access** by quantifying investments and systematically budgeting for multilateral, bilateral and independent access activities. Advocate towards receptive humanitarian donors for the inclusion of access costs in humanitarian project budgets, reinforcing the primacy of securing, maintaining and enhancing access to the timely delivery of life-saving and sustaining assistance.

**Decide which team members will lead on, and contribute to, inter-agency access coordination,** based on the specific needs and constraints characterising each operating context. Make responsibility for access explicit and achievable in staff terms of reference and work plans. Where feasible, create a dedicated access coordination or advisory role, with operational, coordination and internal capacity building functions. Consider access explicitly during recruitment for key posts, giving weight to relevant experience, skills and personality traits that contribute to constructive inter-agency coordination.

**Empower staff by clarifying organisational policy, positions and 'red lines'** in relation to access negotiations, internal and external information sharing and decision-making. Develop and disseminate practical access toolkits to guide practice and include sessions on humanitarian principles and their relationship to access as part of staff induction processes.

**Ensure that team members can understand, communicate and apply the core humanitarian principles** to their work. Similarly, ensure that all field staff can clearly explain their organisation's identity and objectives in audience-appropriate language. Further, develop internal capacity on ostensible 'soft-skills', including actor mapping, conflict analysis, mediation and access negotiation.

**Foster an organisational culture that promotes frank discussions about access challenges, approaches and weaknesses, at all levels.** Facilitate regular reflection processes to capture learning on access initiatives and build a context-specific repository of good practice in order to ensure institutional knowledge can be systematically transferred to new staff, thereby mitigating against the detrimental impact of high turnover on sustaining humanitarian access coordination. Draw on this resource to share examples of best practice externally through formal and informal access coordination mechanisms.

#### **4.2 Advocate for, and invest in, coordination structures tailored to local operating contexts**

**Engage proactively to establish, strengthen and influence access coordination mechanisms in all critical humanitarian contexts.** Advocate for relevant UN agencies to facilitate and appropriately resource, access coordination, principally in relation to humanitarian logistics and security.

**Accept the likely need for parallel structures where separation is warranted for political or operational reasons,** particularly in contexts in which humanitarian architecture is governed by an integrated UN mission. Develop and support NGO-led access initiatives, either through existing representative coordination fora, the creation of dedicated groups, or under the auspices of an agency providing support services to NGOs relevant to access, such as INSO. Establish clear communication channels between distinct access mechanisms to share information, seek support and leverage greater influence.

**Advocate against the adoption of an overly prescriptive coordination structure.** Instead, promote the participatory development of a customised solution to address key access challenges, grounded on thorough stakeholder and conflict analysis. Consider approaches, adapt templates, and draw on tools from access coordination structures in comparable operating contexts to initiate discussions, decide constituents, develop terms of reference, and inform each access group's scope of work. Reach consensus among members regarding the potentially divisive issues of participation and information management/confidentiality. Build in regular reviews to promote flexibility and adapt coordination mechanisms to respond to changing conflict dynamics, humanitarian needs, and political circumstances.

**Develop and share practical guidelines and tools for access coordination.** Ensure that facilitators have the training and support needed to initiate and manage access coordination mechanisms. Develop simple, practical, evidence-based toolkits and templates with recommendations on group structure,

scope and size; selection of members; standard operating procedures, particularly around confidentiality; objective setting; and monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks.

#### 4.3 Set concrete objectives and demonstrate the added value of coordination

**Determine what the group can practically achieve** and what it will be unlikely to be able to influence. Given the typical constraints on members' time, prioritising the most serious impediments to access and focusing action towards attainable goals will contribute to positive and sustained engagement.

**Encourage collaboration and try to challenge competitive cultural dynamics** that undermine coordination initiatives. Agree on communication protocols from the outset to build trust and preserve confidentiality of sensitive information. Limit participation, or create a smaller, core group to direct action and make decisions, which informs, and responds to issues raised by, a wider membership.

**Highlight concrete outcomes to establish the benefits of inter-agency coordination**, particularly successes related to overcoming bureaucratic obstacles that hinder humanitarian actors' presence, operations and independence. Examples showing how joint initiatives have improved access on the ground, or contributed to policy change, instil confidence in the credibility of coordination mechanisms, challenge scepticism and thus galvanise the humanitarian community towards better participation.

**Promote learning for access coordination as widely as possible**, internally and externally. Document and share best practices, while also systematically reflecting on ineffective structures and processes in order to avoid duplication and make better use of limited resources. Develop concise, practical tools for practitioners to use as guides, rather than strict formula, to build humanitarian professionals' access coordination skills.

#### 4.4 Identify the limitations of formal access coordination mechanisms in each context and invest in complementary strategies to enhance access

**Pursue opportunities to collaborate on access issues informally** through professional and personal networks. Proactively identify organisations and individuals with common interests and broadly shared values, promote reciprocity, and protect confidentiality when sharing information. Build *ad hoc* coalitions with agencies seeking access to the same geographic locations to share knowledge, resources, and strategies. Unite with agencies facing related access impediments to leverage more influence through a joint response. Encourage open acknowledgement of the difficult trade-offs agencies consider when balancing the need to reach affected communities and protecting staff and assets, reinforcing the primacy of humanitarian principles in ensuring broader, more sustainable access for all actors.

**Establish trusted links between informal and formal access mechanisms** to enable intractable, or critical, issues to be elevated to UN, political, diplomatic, or security providers, in order to request direct assistance or target advocacy. Ensure agreements regarding confidentiality are staunchly respected.

**Address the exclusion of national NGOs from access coordination mechanisms.** Expand interaction with local partners and foster improved mutual understanding through explicit, honest, bilateral dialogue on access strategies. Enhance capacity by including local partner personnel in training focusing on humanitarian principles, risk management, mediation processes and negotiation skills.

## ACRONYMS

AAG	Access Advisory Group	INSO	International NGO Safety Organisation
AAN	Afghan Analysts Network	IO	International Organisation
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project	IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief	JMEC	Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission
ACF	Action Contra la Faim	MINUSCA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic
AI	Amnesty International	MSF	Médicins Sans Frontières
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action	NFIs	Non-Food Items
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia	NFMA	Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ATHA	Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action	NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
AU	African Union	NSP	NGO Safety Programme
AUPSC	African Union Peace and Security Council	NUG	National Unity Government
CAR	Central African Republic	OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
CCO	Comité de Coordination des ONGI en RCA	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
CDI	Conflict Dynamics International	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard for Quality and Accountability	POC	Protection of Civilians
CMCoord	Civil-Military Coordination	PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
CoC	Code of Conduct	PSG	Project Support Group
COIN	Counter Insurgency	RC	Resident Coordinator
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement	SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
CSA	Conflict Sensitivity in Afghanistan	SNA	Somali National Army
CSO	Central Statistics Organisation	SNC	Somalia NGO Consortium
CT	Counter Terrorism	SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
DAC	District Administrative Centres	SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition
DFID	Department of International Development	SRS	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
DPKO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations	SSNGOF	South Sudan NGO Forum
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo	TAF	The Asia Foundation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council	TFG	Transitional Federal Government
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General	ToR	Terms of Reference
EC	European Commission	TRG	Transitional National Government
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection	TLO	The Liaison Office
ERM	Emergency Response Mechanism	UK	United Kingdom
EXCOM	Executive Committee	UN	United Nations
FDFA	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC	UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
FSAC	Food Security and Agriculture Cluster	UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety and Security
FTS	Financial Tracking Service	UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit	UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator	UNMISS	United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team	UNSC	United Nations Security Council
HO	Humanitarian Outcomes	UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group	US	United States
HPN	Humanitarian Practice Network	WFP	World Food Programme
HRW	Human Rights Watch		
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee		
ICCG	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group		
ICG	International Crisis Group		
ICNL	International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law		
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross		
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan		
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies		
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation		

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**Numerous internal confidential documents were also consulted for this study, which were shared by key stakeholders, including NGO coordination bodies, the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).**

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted remotely, with a limited number of key informants, across a relatively small number of humanitarian operating contexts. The wide variation in NGO mandates, approaches and policies in this field is not well represented here. This is particularly the case for agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which are widely acknowledged as having unique access strategies and engage in access coordination initiatives distinctly differently from NGOs like NRC. The researcher sought to mitigate against the risk of selection bias by ensuring that a range of stakeholders were included from each country studied. The findings thus shed light on how existing inter-agency access mechanisms function in these locations, but may not necessarily be extrapolated to different contexts. Further, it must be noted that it was not possible, within the scope of this study, to engage directly with affected populations in order to understand how their access to humanitarian assistance may have been improved through coordination.

## HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT OVERVIEWS

Contextual factors significantly impact significantly on the nature of humanitarian access and the range of access constraints faced by humanitarian actors, and opportunities and challenges associated with access coordination. Developing a thorough understanding the operating environment, including a rigorous conflict analysis, is critical to promoting safe access and effective inter-agency coordination. The following section provides a brief overview of the humanitarian context in each of the four countries included in this study.

### Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan is now in its fourth decade. After the 2014 drawdown of international forces and the end of NATO's formal combat mission, the conflict intensified in 2015 (Ali 2015, Amiri 2016, Osman 2015) and is expected to escalate further in 2016. Armed opposition groups (AOGs) have demonstrated an increased willingness to engage the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in conventional warfare by undertaking large-scale attacks in the South, East and North (INSO 2015). Leadership contests, factional disputes, increasing reports of foreign fighters (Ali 2016) and sustained clashes between groups affiliated to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and Islamic State (ISIL) in the east, further attest to the conclusion that the war has in fact fragmented into "multiple overlapping conflicts" (INSO 2016a). Attempts to restart peace talks are repeatedly frustrated (Ruttig 2016) and the impact of conflict on the Afghan population continues to increase every year: The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented a record high 11,002 civilian casualties in 2015 (UNAMA 2016).

Afghanistan is a highly disaster-prone country, subject to earthquakes, flooding, drought, landslides and avalanches. In 2015, Afghanistan had the third highest risk rating on the INFORM index, indicating Afghan communities' extremely high vulnerability to humanitarian crises and disasters and the government's limited capacity to respond (INFORM 2015). OCHA's 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) confirms this, declaring 30 per cent of the population to be in need of urgent assistance and 70 per cent living in chronic poverty. 1.57 million people are classified as severely food insecure and require emergency relief, with a further 7.3 million moderately food insecure (FSAC 2015).

At a political level, the national unity government (NUG) formed to resolve the impasse following contested presidential elections in 2014 struggles to assert its legitimacy, build capacity, and overcome widespread corruption. Economic growth slowed sharply from 2013, from an average of 9% in 2003-2012, to only 2% in 2014, with further decline predicted (World Bank 2015). The country also faces a significant demographic challenge, with 400,000 new labour force entrants each year competing for fewer jobs: The Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) recently reported that the unemployment rate has risen from 25% in 2014 to 40% in 2015 (Zhanmal 2015).

A range of indicators highlight an increasingly frustrated and fearful population. The Asia Foundation's (TAF) most recent national survey found record levels of pessimism and lack of confidence in the government, along with significant increases in fears for personal safety and economic security (TAF 2015). With voluntary refugee return numbers dwindling since 2009, Afghans still rank second-highest among asylum seekers and refugees globally: more than 2.4 million registered refugees live in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, with an estimated 2.4 million more undocumented (IOM 2015a). Afghans make up the second largest national group seeking asylum in Europe in 2015-2016 (Grossman 2015). More than 1 million Afghans are now internally displaced (UNHCR 2016c).

Despite rising needs, large parts of the country are increasingly inaccessible to the humanitarian community. Afghanistan is consistency ranked among the most dangerous contexts for aid operations, recording the highest number of attacks on aid workers globally since 2011 (Humanitarian Outcomes

2015b, 2014, 2013, 2012). While the risks to humanitarian actors from abduction, intimidation, and collateral exposure to conflict continue to remain high, there has been a pronounced increase in deliberate attacks against health facilities and personnel in the last six months (Clark 2016, ICRC 2016). The targeting of organisations such as MSF, which are renowned for neutrality and independence, signals significant erosion in respect for humanitarian principles and further reduces humanitarian access.

### **Central African Republic (CAR)**

The conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) escalated in December 2013, leading to the displacement of more than 1 million people. Ongoing sectarian violence between predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka coalition groups and predominantly Christian or animist Anti-Balaka (AB) forces have since continued to affect large parts of the country. Intra-Seleka rivalry, involvement of foreign fighters from neighbouring Chad and Sudan and high levels of criminality contribute to further destabilisation (ICG 2015). Armed groups on both sides have committed widespread human rights abuses with impunity, including sexual violence against women and children (Cinq-Mars 2015) and forced recruitment of child soldiers. Muslim communities have been specifically targeted, causing more than 470,000 to take refuge in neighbouring countries (OCHA 2016f) and trapping many others in enclaves protected by peacekeepers (Amnesty International 2015).

The conflict has created a major humanitarian crisis in what was formerly one of the poorest countries in the world. According to OCHA latest assessment, more than half of CAR's 4.6 million people are struggling to meet their basic needs and 435,000 remain internally displaced (OCHA 2015a). In the absence of a functioning agricultural sector, 2.1 million people face food insecurity in the coming year (WFP 2015), with malnutrition and preventable disease now the biggest killers of children (OCHA 2016f). Extremely poor health, social, and economic indicators continue to fall as the interim government lacks capacity to substantially improve social service provision, rebuild infrastructure, or replace resources lost to conflict and looting. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities are scarce, many of the country's schools remain closed, and access to medical care is limited by poor infrastructure and lack of skilled personnel. The mandate of the country's transitional government was extended until elections could eventually be held in February 2016.

The crisis in CAR was declared a Level 3 emergency in December 2013, leading to a significant increase in international assistance. The African Union (AU) and French government deployed troops in late 2013, with the European Union following in early 2014. Soon after, the UNSC authorised the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), a 10,000-strong peacekeeping operation, with a mandate to protect civilians. AU and French forces were incorporated into MINUSCA and its mandate was extended in February 2016.

Insecurity has significantly hampered humanitarian response and leaves many people in CAR unable to access critical assistance. Criminality is high, with agencies regularly affected by theft, including extortion and illegal taxation. Aid workers face risks from intimidation, direct violence, abduction, and execution, with CAR recording the fourth highest number of incidents globally in 2014 (Humanitarian Outcomes 2015). According to INSO's analysis, armed groups were responsible for the majority of incidents against NGOs in the last year. This includes the outbreak of sectarian violence in Bangui in September-October 2015 in which national, international NGO and IO premises were targeted, leading to the temporary evacuation of hundreds of humanitarian personnel (HRW 2015c). The targeting of humanitarian actors indicates limited acceptance of humanitarian action and poor understanding of the humanitarian principles in the country, particularly among parties to the conflict.



## Somalia

Struggling to emerge from more than two decades of civil war, Somalia continues to be affected by high levels of political instability, escalating conflict and persistent development and humanitarian needs.

The UN-mandated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was deployed in 2007 as a peacekeeping force to support the national reconciliation process (AMISOM 2016a). It has since supported the Somali National Army (SNA) in subsequent conflict with Al Shabaab and other opposition forces. In August 2012, the Federal Government of Somalia was formed, Somalia's first parliament established, and a Provisional Constitution passed. Significant political progress has since been made towards setting a clear agenda to share power and resources through a strengthened federal system of government, incorporating the semi-autonomous Puntland and self-declared independent Somaliland regions in the north of the country. Territorial gains achieved by AMISOM and the Somali National Army (SNA) since 2012 remain extremely fragile and have actually undermined Somalia's longer-term stability by promoting further marginalisation and exclusion of some clans and communities. Throughout the last three years, the security situation in Somalia has become more volatile, with Al Shabaab adopting new military tactics, as well as has stepping up attacks on civilians, humanitarian workers and government authorities.

The UNSC has extended AMISOM's mandate annually for the last five years, widening and strengthening its scope. It is now defined as a multidimensional peace support operation, tasked with undertaking offensive operations against Al Shabaab, enabling and securing political processes throughout the country, and promoting stabilisation to facilitate peacebuilding and reconciliation processes (UNSC 2015). The United Nations Assistance Mission to Somalia (UNSOM) was established in 2013 to support the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to create the political environment needed to foster stabilisation and peacebuilding in the country. It works closely with AMISOM and, as an integrated mission, is also responsible for the coordination of humanitarian assistance in Somalia.

Acute humanitarian needs persist in Somalia, with almost 5 million, out of the total population of 12.3 million, targeted for life-saving and livelihoods assistance in 2016 (OCHA 2016g). Ongoing high levels of acute malnutrition affecting more than 300,000 children and chronic food insecurity are exacerbated by severe drought conditions in parts of Puntland and Somaliland. The predicted impacts of the El Niño phenomenon threaten up to 10 per cent of the population from significant flooding in low-lying areas in the country's south (UNDP 2015). Limited access to basic services undermines development. The health system is weak, poorly resourced, lacking capacity and inequitably distributed, leaving one quarter of the population in need of emergency health services. Only half of all Somalis have access to safe water, with sanitation access levels at less than 40 per cent (OCHA 2015c). This contributes to excessive mortality and morbidity from waterborne diseases and exposes women and girls in particular to physical and sexual assault. With one of the lowest primary school enrolment rates globally, lack of teachers, facilities and learning materials leaves an estimated 1.7 million children out of school. In south and central parts of the country the education system has ceased to function at all. There are persistent survival and protection concerns affecting the country's 1.1 million IDPs (UNHCR 2016a), as well as lack of progress towards durable solutions for long-term displaced communities. Almost 1 million Somalis continue to live as refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2016b). The persistent conflict and generalised high levels of violence, in the absence of effective rule of law, leads to greater internal displacement and makes both return and resettlement options untenable for many.

Humanitarian access in Somalia has been problematic since the early 1990s, with the international community forced to pull out of the country on several occasions (Rotelli 2014) and many agencies continuing to operate remotely. The country's South and Central areas have typically been most severely affected by conflict. Access maps produced by NSP/INSO, with OCHA's cooperation, illustrate how the volatility is linked to contraction and expansion of humanitarian agencies' ability to reach affected

communities over time. Notably, access declined between 2009 and 2011, then briefly stabilised in 2012-2013, before contracting again in the last two years (NSP 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, INSO 2016b). As very few aid agencies now operate in areas under Al Shabaab influence, or other armed opposition group control, up to three million civilians living in these areas effectively have little or no access to humanitarian assistance. In the 2016 humanitarian response plan (HRP), enhancing access is specified as one of five key elements needed to implement an ambitious strategy that focuses on reaching the most vulnerable people, with limited resources. The plan asserts that "innovative approaches to field-level access negotiations will continue to be explored to expand access" (OCHA 2016g, p. 4).

## **South Sudan**

Since gaining independence from Sudan in 2011 through a protracted 6-year peace process, South Sudan has been marred by numerous armed conflicts, with political, inter-ethnic and inter-communal dimensions. After the outbreak of fresh hostilities in December 2013, the conflict has intensified into open civil war, with Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglai states most severely affected. Armed groups, including the government Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the main rival, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), have committed indiscriminate violence against civilians, widespread destruction of civilian property, looting, and attacks against aid workers (HRW 2016, UNMISS 2015).

The government of South Sudan is heavily dependent on international aid. Depreciating currently, global oil price declines and over-reliance on foreign imports have contributed to steep increases in the cost of living, forcing more of the population into poverty. The government's ability to provide basic health, education and social welfare services continue to deteriorate. It is largely unable to uphold rule of law, enforce justice, or hold armed forces to account for war crimes and human rights abuses (HRW 2015a). New legislation passed by parliament in mid-2015 and ratified by the President in February 2016, which will restrict NGOs' operations, compromise their independence, and enable the government to punish those engaging in advocacy (ICNL 2016), has been widely criticised by the international community for undermining essential humanitarian action (EC 2016, OCHA 2016e, SSNGOF 2015).

Established in 2011, the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) was reinforced on 27 May 2014, with a revised mandate to protect civilians, monitor human rights, and facilitate humanitarian assistance (UNMISS n.d.). The mission faces three key challenges, which impact directly on access:

- restrictions on its own access to large parts of the country compromise its ability to fulfil all elements of its mission, including the providing critical aid to conflict-affected areas;
- it struggles to find durable solutions for more than 200,000 IDPs in six Protection of Civilian (POC) sites and is increasingly incapable of providing short-term protection and security, as evidenced by the attack on civilians and aid workers at the Malakal POC on 17-18 February 2016 (OCHA 2016b);
- its inability to project force beyond the immediate vicinity of UN bases limits its ability to deter or monitor violence against civilians, or facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Between 50,000 and 100,000 people have been killed since 2013 with 1.6 million displaced internally and a further 650,000 into neighbouring countries (OCHA 2016c). The conflict has crippled agriculture and rural livelihoods, contributing to a food security crisis that threatens a third of the population, 30,000 of whom face famine (IPC 2016). Sexual and gender-based violence is pervasive and perpetrated with impunity (UNMISS 2015). Children are traumatised by the protracted conflict, with armed forces on both sides recruiting child soldiers (HRW 2015b) and school closures preventing almost 1 million from pursuing education (OCHA 2016c). Other essential health, water, sanitation, and economic infrastructure have

been damaged or closed down, contributing to rising mortality and morbidity from preventable disease (OCHA 2016c).

OCHA's access database shows that humanitarian access in South Sudan had begun to shrink from 2012, with violence against aid workers and humanitarian assets, active hostilities, and bureaucratic impediments increasing each year (Bennett 2013, OCHA 2016a). This trend is corroborated by the South Sudan NGO Forum's data, as well as agencies' own internal security monitoring mechanisms. South Sudan's changing regulatory environment is also a major concern for access, with a strong sense from humanitarian agencies that laws being drafted are designed to deliberately undermine their operational independence and divert humanitarian assistance (Bennett 2013). Impediments include:

- arbitrary changes to customs regulations, which disrupt the importation of humanitarian goods;
- delaying the issuance of visas and work permits for international staff;
- extortion, arbitrary taxation, interference in procurement and recruitment processes;
- misuse, confiscation and destruction of NGO assets.