

# OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Access

## What is Humanitarian Access?

Humanitarian access relates to humanitarian actors' ability to reach people affected by crisis, as well as an affected population's ability to access humanitarian assistance and services.

Access is therefore a fundamental pre-requisite to effective humanitarian action. Rapid and unimpeded access is essential to establish operations, move goods and personnel where they are needed, implement distributions, provide health services and carry out other

activities, and enable affected people to benefit from assistance and access basic services.

National authorities have primary responsibility for the well-being of affected people. Specifically in situations of armed conflict, the parties to conflict have the responsibility for the well-being of civilians under their control. **When essential needs are not met, States must not arbitrarily withhold consent to impartial humanitarian relief.** All parties must allow and

facilitate the impartial provision of assistance.

Our ability to establish and maintain humanitarian access is based on our acceptance. Our adherence to humanitarian principles (see *OOM Humanitarian Principles*) is key in gaining such acceptance. For example, if one or more parties to a conflict believe, rightly or wrongly, that humanitarian actors are acting in favour of a political or military outcome, they will be less willing to allow the implementation of humanitarian activities.<sup>1</sup>

### Constraints on Humanitarian Access

Many types of constraints affect humanitarians' ability to reach people who need assistance, particularly in situations of armed conflict, but they can also be problematic in natural disaster contexts. These constraints also affect the ability of affected people to have full access to humanitarian aid. They include:

- Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or of entitlements to assistance.
- Restrictions of movement of personnel and humanitarian supplies.

- Physical environment.
- Interference in humanitarian activities (for example, the diversion of aid).
- Active fighting and military operations.
- Attacks on humanitarian personnel, goods and facilities

It is important to note that not all access constraints are deliberately obstructive and may constitute violations of international law. In many cases, a combination of access constraints limit access

rather than a single factor. Achieving and maintaining access requires coordinated efforts—such as liaison with the relevant State and non-State actors at all levels—to establish acceptance for humanitarian actors and their work. In recent years, bureaucratic constraints, politically and economically motivated attacks on humanitarian personnel and active fighting have persistently contributed to limited access to conflict-affected people.

## What is OCHA's role?

OCHA has a vital role in coordinating and supporting humanitarian actors' efforts to establish and maintain humanitarian access, and to overcome factors that inhibit access. Facilitating and coordinating efforts to establish access to affected people is central to the

mandates of the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs).

At the country level, OCHA supports HCs in their role, leading or facilitating efforts to gain and maintain access, including the coordination of

options and strategies to increase access, relevant advocacy or negotiations and promotion of humanitarian principles. Another important OCHA service in this regard is civil-military coordination, which is often essential to help establish a safer and more

<sup>1</sup> Mandate of Emergency Relief Coordinator [A/RES/46/182]: "Actively facilitating, including through negotiation if needed, the access by the operational organizations to emergency areas for the rapid provision of emergency assistance by obtaining the consent of all parties concerned, through modalities such as the establishment of temporary relief corridors where needed, days and zones of tranquility and other forms."

*“It is critical that all humanitarian organizations are granted free, safe and unhindered access to all people in need, wherever they are. [...] Their presence and programming are fundamental to the continued life-saving response.”*

- Stephen O'Brien  
Emergency Relief  
Coordinator and  
Under-Secretary-  
General for  
Humanitarian Affairs,  
16 December 2016

conducive operating environment.

OCHA also facilitates efforts to monitor access in order to

identify constraints and their implications for affected people. This analysis can then be used to build common approaches to

resolving issues and to inform decision-making and operational solutions.

## What does OCHA say?

1.

Multiple types of access constraints in a given context mean there is no single blanket solution. Strategies must be tailored to the specific contexts, actors and patterns involved.

2.

Coordinated approaches are essential. Comprehensive analysis and action cannot be developed and implemented by a single actor or in isolation. The approach taken by one humanitarian actor can affect the operational environment and other humanitarian organizations.

3.

To establish acceptance for humanitarian action, and therefore access to affected people, humanitarian actors must operate in a principled manner and establish and maintain engagement with all relevant State and non-State parties.

## Case Study

In Yemen, humanitarian needs increased throughout 2011 due to a widespread armed conflict. Several armed groups—the de facto authorities—controlled the country's conflict-affected regions. Their presence made it difficult for aid organizations to access areas where assessment missions and response activities were needed, especially in the north.

OCHA led efforts to contact the armed groups in the northern Sa'ada governorate. The aim was to develop positive relationships between non-State actors and humanitarian actors, and to improve the chances of accessing people in need. The humanitarian principles were explained to non-State actors and a joint inter-agency response plan was developed. Monthly coordination meetings and fortnightly cluster meetings allowed for discussions on access constraints and ways to implement the response plan. De facto authorities and other non-State actors participated in these meetings, and transparency and collaboration improved. In addition, the number of humanitarian programmes increased, and about 160,000 people benefited from aid in Sa'ada. This was a dramatic increase compared with late 2010.

The access-negotiation process continued throughout 2012 with a coordinated approach to assessing humanitarian needs and delivering assistance to people who needed it most.

## To find out more

Contact:

**Karen Perrin**

Policy and  
Planning Advice  
Section,

OCHA New York,

[perrink@un.org](mailto:perrink@un.org)

Apr 2017

- Reports of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, with a section on humanitarian access (latest report: S/2016/447).
- Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups, a guide for all humanitarians involved in securing access in conflict situations. (OCHA, 2006)  
<https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/HumanitarianNegotiationswArmedGroupsManual.pdf>
- Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict - Conclusions (2016), which was commissioned by OCHA.  
<https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Oxford%20Guidance%20pdf.pdf>