

Humanitarian Access under Threat: The Structural and Security Preconditions That Enable Humanitarian Organizations to Operate Safely in Armed Conflict and Volatile Political Environments

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Abstract:

Humanitarian organisations operate regularly in diverse volatile environments marked by complex and protracted armed conflicts, political, economic and social volatility, terrorism, high crime rates and deliberate obstruction of humanitarian access. Contemporary examples include, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Sahel region (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), northern Nigeria, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Gaza, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan, and northern Mozambique among many others. In many of these settings, shrinking humanitarian access is driven by structural, security and organizational factors such as, restrictive laws and policies, bureaucratic impediments, targeted and collateral attacks, movement restrictions, humanitarian assistance manipulation and interference, and the rise of fragmented armed groups with diverse agendas. The pressures are further intensified by rising hybrid warfare, digital surveillance, and misinformation that erode community trust and heighten operational risk. As a result, humanitarian access is increasingly constrained, with humanitarian organisations facing complex and fluid political dynamics and unpredictable security threats that can halt operations abruptly. These conditions have become defining features of the 21st-century humanitarian landscape, and they undermine the environment required to uphold humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. This study examines the structural and security preconditions that enable humanitarian organisations to operate safely in armed conflict and volatile political contexts. The purpose is to identify the baseline structural and security conditions necessary for viable and sustainable humanitarian presence. The findings aim to strengthen operational resilience, reinforce duty of care, and inform strategic decision-making in volatile environments.

Key words: Humanitarian access, Humanitarian security risk management (HSRM), Business continuity and Operational resilience.

1. Introduction

Humanitarian organisations are increasingly operating in volatile environments where armed conflict, political instability, and deliberate obstruction have become defining features of the 21st-century humanitarian landscape. Armed conflicts in diverse regions of the world have become protracted and complex. Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan, Sudan, Eastern DRC, Sahel region, northern Nigeria, Myanmar, Syria, Gaza and Ukraine

represent some of the many protracted, complex and volatile contexts. Millions of people have been displaced by conflict in many of these countries. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of the end of 2025 there were 117.8 million forcibly displaced worldwide (refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless person). Of these 41.6 million were refugees and 68.7 million IDPs displaced by conflict or violence[1].

Despite the record numbers of forcibly displaced persons worldwide, humanitarian space is shrinking in some of these conflict affected environments. State and non-state actors impose security and administrative restrictions such as movement restrictions, bureaucratic impediments, manipulate humanitarian assistance for political gain, and conduct targeted and indirect attacks on humanitarian personnel[2]. These pressures are compounded by fragmented armed groups, hybrid warfare, digital surveillance, and misinformation campaigns that undermine community trust and compromise humanitarian staff safety[3]. As a result, humanitarian organisations face complex political dynamics and unpredictable security threats that can halt operations abruptly and undermine the principled environment required for neutral and impartial humanitarian action. Against this background, safe humanitarian access is no longer guaranteed by humanitarian principles alone. Humanitarian organizations must navigate a dense ecosystem of complex political dynamics, security, and digital threats, negotiating with multiple armed actors and implement robust security risk management strategies to ensure continuity of operations and protection of humanitarian staff[4].

Safe humanitarian access is critical in conflict and volatile political contexts because it enables humanitarian organisations to reach populations whose survival depends on timely, impartial humanitarian assistance while protecting staff from unacceptable risk levels. In conflict and volatile environments, civilians, particularly women and children often face acute humanitarian needs driven by violence, displacement, and the collapse of essential services, yet access to their assistance is routinely obstructed by insecurity, diverse armed actors, political interference, and misinformation[2]. Without safe access, humanitarian principles cannot be operationalised, life-saving assistance cannot be delivered, and humanitarian organisations may be forced to suspend operations, leaving vulnerable communities without protection or support. Ensuring safe access is an imperative for principled humanitarian action, operational continuity, duty of care, and preservation of humanitarian space in contexts where threats are multidimensional and constantly evolving with diverse actors[3,4].

This study focuses on understanding how humanitarian organisations can continue to reach affected populations safely and consistently in armed conflict and volatile political environments. The purpose is to identify the baseline structural and security preconditions that enable humanitarian organisations to operate safely amid escalating threats and risks in insecure humanitarian settings. By analysing structural conditions, including legal frameworks, political and administrative processes, governance arrangements, and security conditions such as armed-group dynamics, splinter factions, and evolving threat patterns, the research identifies the critical factors that shape humanitarian access. It highlights the baseline preconditions that must be in place before meaningful, safe, and sustainable humanitarian presence becomes feasible. This is significant because it strengthens operational resilience, enhances duty of care obligations to staff, and supports strategic decision-making on when and how to operate in armed conflict and volatile political environments. The study enhances understanding of how humanitarian organisations can maintain principled humanitarian access, and life-saving operations despite the escalating threats, deliberate obstructions, and complex risks that define 21st-century humanitarian environments.

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study positions humanitarian access as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between structural, security, and organisational factors that determine whether humanitarian operations can be conducted safely and sustainably in armed conflict and volatile political environments. At the structural level, access is influenced by political permissions, legal frameworks, bureaucratic processes, and the degree of community acceptance shaping the foundational environment within which humanitarian actors negotiate their presence[5]. When legal authorities impose restrictive regulations and policies, criminalises engagement with armed groups, when non-state armed groups influence delivery of humanitarian assistance in their de facto areas or when communities perceive humanitarian actors as partisan, the structural basis for humanitarian access significantly erodes[5]. These structural conditions, therefore, constitute the primary enabling or constraining context that determines whether humanitarian action is viable and sustainable.

The second pillar is the security preconditions that define whether humanitarian organisations can operate safely without exposing staff to unacceptable levels of risk. These include the nature of the threat landscape (e.g., context, threat actors, attack methods), the behaviour and fragmentation of armed actors, criminality, and emerging hybrid or digital threats. Operating in this environment requires effective security risk management strategies including robust security risk management measures, community acceptance approaches and digital-security systems, all essential to mitigating security risks[4,5]. Security preconditions go beyond being just reactive safeguards, they constitute core determinants of humanitarian access itself. They shape whether humanitarian organisations can operate safely and predictably in conflict-affected environments[4,5]. Without a predictable security environment and adequate mitigation strategies, access becomes unsafe, inconsistent, or impossible.

A third pillar are the organisational preconditions that determine whether humanitarian operations can be sustained once structural and security conditions allow access. These internal factors include the effectiveness of an organization's security risk management (SRM) systems, including contingency planning, the quality of business continuity planning, staff competencies, decision-making processes, and the organisation's risk acceptance thresholds[4,5]. Organisational culture, commitment to duty of care, and the ability to adapt programming to rapidly changing contexts further shape whether humanitarian presence can be maintained sustainably, ethically and safely[4,5]. When humanitarian organisations lack internal analytical capacity, crisis-response mechanisms, or coherent risk governance, access may be technically possible but operationally unsustainable. Organisational preconditions therefore act as the internal enablers that translate external conditions into safe, feasible, and resilient humanitarian operations.

Together, these three pillars demonstrate that humanitarian access is not a single condition but the combined outcome of diverse external constraints and internal organisational readiness. Humanitarian access becomes viable when all three pillars align, reinforcing one another to produce safe, principled, and durable humanitarian operational presence in conflict-affected and politically volatile environments. This conceptual framework therefore illustrates that humanitarian access is fundamentally relational, contingent, and dynamic, shaped by the interplay between context, threat, and organisational capability rather than by any single determinant.

3. Core Concepts Underpinning Humanitarian Operations in Conflict and Volatile Environments

The core concepts underpinning humanitarian operations are Humanitarian space, Humanitarian access, Humanitarian security risk management (HSRM), Business continuity planning and Operational resilience.

Humanitarian operations rest on the foundational idea of humanitarian space. **Humanitarian space** refers to the environmental, political, and social conditions that allow humanitarian actors to operate according to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence[5,6,7]. At the core is freedom from interference. For example, freedom of movement, freedom to assess needs, freedom to deliver assistance impartially, protection from political, bureaucratic or military manipulation, community acceptance and legitimacy[5,6,7]. Humanitarian space is primarily shaped by the behaviour of state authorities, non-state armed groups, communities and influential leaders. This determines whether humanitarian organisations are perceived as legitimate and impartial actors. Conflict and volatile environments often erode humanitarian space by introducing political interference, fragmented authority structures, and deliberate obstruction that undermine the neutrality and independence required for safe humanitarian operations[5,6,7]. When humanitarian space becomes constrained through politicisation of humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism restrictions in some countries or by some donors, or community mistrust, the ability of humanitarian organisations to negotiate presence and deliver assistance becomes severely restrained. Therefore, humanitarian space represents the conceptual and operational environment in which humanitarian organisations can operate safely, ethically, and independently. It is broad, normative, and principle driven[5,6,7].

Humanitarian access is the operational expression of humanitarian space, translating the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence into the practical ability of humanitarian organisations to reach people in need, deliver assistance, and sustain continuity of services[5,8,9]. It encompasses the administrative, security, logistical, and digital conditions that determine whether movements, programming, and engagement are feasible in conflict-affected or politically volatile environments[5,8,9]. As a context-specific and operationally grounded concept, humanitarian access depends on predictable and functional administrative systems, a stable and navigable threat environment, viable negotiation channels with state and non-state actors, and logistics systems capable of overcoming infrastructural degradation and movement constraints[5,8,9]. It also requires both physical safety measures, such as secure movement planning and staff and operations protection protocols, and digital security measures such as secure and redundant communication systems, cyber-resilient systems, and reliable information flows[5,8,9]. Together, these elements form the practical architecture that enables humanitarian organizations to reach affected populations and maintain presence despite volatility. Conflict and volatile environments often shrink and destabilise humanitarian access by disrupting the political, security, and logistical conditions required for safe humanitarian operations. Fragmented authorities, shifting frontlines, hybrid threats, misinformation, polarisation, and community mistrust turn access into a fragile, constantly shifting operational challenge rather than a stable and legitimate right. This is a 21st century challenge humanitarian organizations have to face and address.

To operate within this space and maintain access, humanitarian organisations rely on humanitarian security risk management (HSRM) as the system that identifies, analyses, and mitigates threats to staff, assets, and programmes[10,11]. HSRM provides the analytical and procedural backbone that allows humanitarian organisations to determine acceptable risk thresholds, make informed decisions about presence, staff safety and movements, and implement effective security risk management measures[10,11]. It is more than a defensive or protective function, it is an enabler of principled humanitarian access, ensuring that humanitarian operations can continue even in volatile environments. Complementing HSRM is business continuity planning (BCP), which ensures that critical functions such as coordination, supply chains, communications, and decision-making remain operational during disruptions[4,12]. BCP addresses organisational resilience from an internal systems perspective, ensuring that shocks do not halt life-saving assistance[4,12].

Together, humanitarian space, humanitarian access, HSRM, and BCP form the building blocks of operational resilience. This is the capacity of humanitarian organisations to absorb shocks, adapt to rapidly changing conditions, and continue delivering assistance without compromising staff safety or programme integrity [4,13,14]. Operational resilience is the synthesis of external conditions (space and access) and internal capabilities (HSRM and BCP)[13,14]. Operational resilience reflects an organisation's ability to maintain presence, uphold humanitarian principles, and sustain critical services despite conflict volatility, political obstruction, or environmental hazards[4,13,14]. In this regard, operational resilience is not therefore a standalone concept but an integrated outcome of the structural, security, and organisational factors that underpin humanitarian operations.

The integration of **humanitarian space, humanitarian access, HSRM, and BCP** is crucial because each element enables a different part of safe and sustainable humanitarian operations in conflict and volatile environments. Each concept addresses a different dimension of humanitarian operational continuity and sustainability. Humanitarian action becomes fragile or unsustainable when any one of them is missing. Humanitarian space provides the political and social legitimacy for principled humanitarian action[6,7]. Humanitarian access translates that legitimacy into the practical ability to reach people in need[8,9]. HSRM ensures that this access can be exercised without exposing staff and communities to unacceptable levels of risk[10,11]. BCP guarantees that critical functions can continue during shocks, disruptions, or deteriorating conditions[4,12]. When integrated, these elements create operational resilience- the capacity to maintain presence, adapt to volatility, and deliver assistance safely and consistently in insecure environments[13,14]. Without their integration, humanitarian operations become exposed to political obstruction, security threats, and organisational failure, making sustained, principled access difficult or impossible.

Taken together, structural, security, and organisational drivers demonstrate that humanitarian access is not determined by any single factor but emerges as a relational outcome shaped by the interaction between external environments and internal organisational capabilities. Access becomes viable only when political and community structures permit presence, when security risks can be mitigated to acceptable levels, and when humanitarian organisations possess the systems, competencies, and leadership required to operate responsibly. This integrated perspective provides the analytical foundation for understanding how structural and security preconditions shape the feasibility, safety, and sustainability of humanitarian operations in contemporary conflict and politically volatile environments.

4. Humanitarian Access in Crisis: The 21st-Century Conditions Influencing Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access is increasingly under threat in the 21st century due to armed conflict, political volatility and fragmentation, and deliberate obstruction by state and non-state actors, in several regions of the world. Humanitarian access is often threatened by three interdependent conditions- the structural environment, the security landscape, and the organisational capabilities of humanitarian organizations. First, the structural environment has become more fragile as modern conflicts no longer feature clear frontlines or unified and coherent command structures. Instead, fragmented armed groups, shifting territorial control, restrictive legal regimes, and fluctuating community acceptance create a politically unstable foundation that can either enable or obstruct humanitarian presence. For example, in Syria, overlapping authorities, competing security forces, fragmented and fluid armed actors created an environment where access permissions varied "block by block", and humanitarian organisations faced constant renegotiation of their presence[15,16]. In Myanmar, the 2021 post-coup landscape produced multiple layers of military, administrative, and ethnic-armed-groups control, making access highly unpredictable in a politically sensitive environment[17,18]. These structural dynamics eroded the foundational conditions needed for safe and principled humanitarian action.

In Yemen both the Houthis and anti-Houthi forces (Internationally recognised government (IRG), Southern Transitional Council (STC), Saudi and UAE led coalition elements etc) have interfered with aid delivery, redirecting food and fuel to their own constituencies or frontline units[19,20]. In Houthi-controlled areas, humanitarian organizations have faced pressure to share beneficiary data, adjust targeting to favour loyal communities, or accept movement restrictions that effectively channel aid toward politically aligned groups[19,20]. These structural dynamics eroded conditions for safe and principled humanitarian action.

Political manipulation, interference and deliberate obstruction have become central features of modern armed conflicts, further constraining humanitarian access. Parties to conflict increasingly use humanitarian aid as a bargaining tool, restricting, delaying, or redirecting assistance to serve political or military objectives. In South Sudan, localized armed conflict, militarised checkpoints, interference in beneficiary selection, and sudden movement restrictions halted humanitarian operations overnight[20,21]. In Ethiopia's Tigray region, prolonged communication blackouts, bureaucratic blockages, and targeted restrictions on fuel and other supplies severely limited humanitarian access during critical phases of the conflict[22,23]. In Syria government authorities and various armed actors repeatedly restricted or delayed humanitarian convoys to opposition-held areas, conditioning access on political concessions or demanding changes to humanitarian assistance distribution lists[15,16].

The security landscape determines whether organisations can operate safely. Security threats have significantly evolved in 21st century, making humanitarian access highly unpredictable and in some high risk environments dangerous to humanitarian operations. Contemporary conflict environments feature indiscriminate violence, targeted attacks, criminality, and hybrid threats, including digital surveillance and misinformation campaigns that target humanitarian actors. In Yemen, airstrikes, front-line volatility, and armed-group interference expose humanitarian staff to severe physical harm risks, while bureaucratic impediments delay or block movement[19,24]. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab's taxation demands, targeted attacks, and control of rural areas create a threat landscape where humanitarian presence depends on rigorous security risk management and complex community acceptance[25,26]. Criminality further undermines access in contexts like Haiti, where gang control of key transport corridors and kidnapping risks make movement hazardous and often impossible[27,28]. These evolving threats mean that even when structural conditions (e.g. political permissions) exist, the security environment may render access unsafe.

Misinformation campaigns, such as those seen in Ukraine by the warring parties, proxies and others, where disinformation about humanitarian actors circulated online and undermined community trust, exposing humanitarian staff to hostility[29]. These political dynamics transform access from a technical negotiation into a contested political arena. In Syria across government and opposition controlled areas, coordinated misinformation campaigns framed humanitarian workers as foreign agents or supporters of rival armed groups. This eroded community acceptance, increased checkpoint harassment, and turned access negotiations into politically charged[30,31]. In Gaza during periods of intense conflict, misleading social-media narratives alleging that humanitarian agencies were supplying one side of the conflict circulated widely. These claims fuelled public anger, triggered hostility at distribution points, and led to community mistrust that directly constrained safe access[32,33].

Finally, humanitarian access is threatened by organisational constraints that limit the ability of humanitarian organizations to operate safely and sustainably in volatile environments. Weak security risk management systems, contingency planning, business continuity planning, insufficient crisis-response capacity, and inconsistent duty of care practices can make access technically possible but operationally untenable. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the sheer number of armed groups, combined with limited infrastructure and rapid shifts in conflict dynamics, requires humanitarian organisations to maintain high levels of analytical

capacity and operational agility, capabilities not all humanitarian organizations possess[21,34]. In Afghanistan, changes in political authority forced humanitarian organisations to rapidly adapt programming modalities, negotiate new access frameworks, and reassess risk thresholds[35,36]. Organisational capabilities decide whether access can be sustained once structural and security conditions permit it. When organisations lack the systems, competencies, or leadership needed to navigate such complex and fluid environments, humanitarian access becomes fragile, inconsistent, and easily disrupted.

5. The Structural and Security Preconditions That Enable Humanitarian Organizations to Operate Safely in Armed Conflict and Volatile Political Environments

1. Political Conditions- Structural Preconditions Shaping Access

Political conditions form part of the structural preconditions that determine whether humanitarian organisations can negotiate and maintain presence in volatile political environments. Contemporary conflicts increasingly feature bureaucratic obstruction, politicised humanitarian and development aid governance, and geopolitical competition that shape access negotiations[5,7,9,37]. Structural preconditions shaping access include:

- **Permissions to operate-** Authorisations, registration, and movement/travel permits from the authorities/political establishment and diverse other armed actors for access. This is often shaped by fluid and shifting dynamics and alliances, contested governance, and external geopolitical pressures.
- **Non-interference by authorities-** Prevents obstruction, politicisation, and manipulation of humanitarian assistance, including forced beneficiary selection, pressure to share sensitive data, or attempts to steer assistance toward certain political, religious and social constituencies.
- **Predictable administrative processes-** Stable and functional visa systems, immigration and customs procedures, and dependable movement/travel permits regimes enable continuity of operations and reduce exposure to bureaucratic “warfare” used to restrict or delay access.
- **Absence of deliberate manipulation-** This ensures access remains principled rather than instrumentalised for political or military gain, a growing challenge in environments where humanitarian assistance is used as leverage or bargaining currency.
- **Fragmented and competing authorities-** In contexts with multiple power centres (e.g., federal, regional, de-facto, or armed-group administrations), humanitarian actors must navigate overlapping and sometimes contradictory political requirements.
- **Governance stability and institutional functionality-** Weak or collapsing state institutions can produce inconsistent decision-making, arbitrary enforcement, and unpredictable regulatory environments that undermine access.
- **Political acceptance of humanitarian principles-** Authorities must tolerate neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Rejection and ignoring of these principles often results in coercive oversight, surveillance, or restrictions on programme design and or implementation .
- **Space for principled negotiation-** Safe access requires political conditions where negotiation with armed actors is not criminalised, prohibited, or politically penalised. This enables humanitarian organisations to engage all relevant stakeholders.
- **Protection from securitisation of humanitarian assistance-** Increasingly, some states frame humanitarian action within national-security agendas, leading to restrictive policies, surveillance, and limitations on engagement with communities in contested areas.

These conditions define the political structures that either enable or constrain humanitarian access in conflict and volatile political settings.

2. Security Preconditions for Safe Access

Security conditions constitute the minimum operational safety environment required for humanitarian organisations to function in armed conflict and politically volatile settings. Security drivers determine whether humanitarian organisations can operate without exposing staff to unacceptable levels of risk. Contemporary conflict environments are characterised by fragmented armed actors, fluid frontlines, prevalence of criminality and the emergence of digital and hybrid threats, all of which complicate traditional security analysis[5,7,8,21,26]. The security preconditions for safe access include:

- **Threat environment stability-** Humanitarian operations require predictable conflict patterns, manageable volatility, and reliable assessments of armed-actor behaviour, including splinter factions, proxy forces, and rapidly shifting alliances.
- **Hybrid-threat monitoring** — Effective access requires continuous tracking of intersecting risks such as armed conflict, criminality, political interference, and environmental hazards, enabling humanitarian organisations to anticipate disruptions and adjust operations proactively.
- **Fragmentation and fluidity of armed actors-** Modern conflicts often involve decentralised command structures, informal militias, and proxy dynamics, making continuous armed-actor mapping essential for safe access. Identifying armed groups dynamics , authorities, and influencers to understand power dynamics and negotiate access safely is critical in armed conflict and volatile environments.
- **Armed-actor tolerance and negotiation feasibility-** Safe access depends on tacit or explicit acceptance by state authorities and forces, non-state armed groups, tribal authorities, religious leaders and local power brokers. Access becomes significantly riskier when negotiation channels are obscure, unpredictable, or decentralised.
- **Strong HSRM systems-** Provide analytical, procedural, and organisational foundations for safe access, integrating threat analysis, movement planning, incident management, and risk-acceptance thresholds.
- **Criminality and hybrid threats-** Kidnapping, extortion, criminal violence, cyber intrusions, global positioning system (GPS) spoofing, surveillance, disinformation campaigns and other threats shape risk thresholds and determine whether HSRM can mitigate the threats effectively.
- **Information and intelligence reliability-** Humanitarian organisations require credible, timely, and triangulated security information. Misinformation, propaganda, and digital manipulation undermine situational awareness and elevate operational risk.
- **Community-level security dynamics-** Localised tensions, inter-communal violence, and informal power structures can pose security risks independent of armed groups, requiring granular, community-based context analysis. Using community-based protection monitors and local networks to obtain granular early-warning information is essential
- **Environmental and hazard-based risks-** Natural hazards, Unexploded Ordinances (UXO), landmines, infrastructural collapse, and climate-related shocks interact with conflict dynamics, shaping access particularly movement feasibility, route planning, and relocation and evacuation readiness.
- **Predictable access corridors and checkpoint behaviour-** Safe movements in armed conflict and volatile political environments requires stable, negotiated routes and consistent checkpoint practices. Unpredictable or frequently shifting access corridors increase exposure to armed actors and criminality.
- **Digital security and cyber resilience-** Cyber threats increasingly affect staff tracking, communications, and access negotiations, making digital security a core component of physical safety.
- **Protective measures and relocations/evacuation options-** These operationalise security preconditions by ensuring staff can withdraw safely during escalations, including digital disruptions that affect communications, tracking, or negotiation processes.
- **Staff competencies** -Even the best systems fail without personnel who are trained, prepared, and capable of making sound decisions under pressure.

These conditions form the core security preconditions and without them, humanitarian access becomes unsafe, inconsistent, or impossible.

3. Legal and Regulatory Conditions- Structural Preconditions Enabling Operational Legitimacy

Legal conditions determine whether humanitarian organisations can operate lawfully and legitimately, forming a significant pillar of structural preconditions. Contemporary legal environments are shaped by increasingly complex regulatory regimes because some states, donors, and international bodies now impose over-lapping and reciprocal counter-terrorism legislation and rules, sanction measures and data-protection requirements. [3,5,6,19,38]. Structural preconditions enabling operational legitimacy include:

- **Normative frameworks under IHL-** International Humanitarian Law provides the legal basis for impartial assistance and obliges parties to conflict to facilitate humanitarian aid. In armed conflict and politically volatile settings implementation is often constrained by diverse reasons but primarily host-state regulations, policies and processes. Restrictive organisational policies and counterterrorism measures by some states also constrain implementation.
- **Normative and legal foundations under humanitarian principles and IHL-** Humanitarian access is anchored in the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and legally protected under the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. These frameworks establish the ethical and legal legitimacy of humanitarian action, protect humanitarian personnel and objects, and prohibit interference with aid operations, forming a core structural precondition for operational legitimacy.
- **Clear humanitarian organisation registration frameworks-** Predictable and transparent registration systems provide legal identity and operational legitimacy, preventing arbitrary deregistration, suspension, or politically motivated delays.
- **Visa, customs, and import systems-** Functional administrative systems enable timely staff deployment, supply chains, and technical operations, including the importation of communications equipment, medical supplies, and protective gear often restricted in conflict zones.
- **Counterterrorism laws that allow humanitarian negotiation-** Legal frameworks must permit principled engagement with designated armed groups. Overly restrictive laws that criminalise humanitarian dialogue with non-state armed groups impede life-saving assistance and expose organisations to liability.
- **Freedom from criminalisation of humanitarian identity -** Domestic laws must protect humanitarian organisations from being labelled as partisan, foreign agents, or supporters of armed groups, ensuring their legal and reputational safety.
- **Sanctions and extraterritorial legal constraints-** Some countries have imposed international sanctions regimes, banking restrictions, and extraterritorial legislation blocking financial transfers, delaying procurement, and complicating operations even when host-state permissions exist.
- **Regulatory fragmentation across authorities-** In contexts with multiple governing entities (central government, de facto authorities, armed groups/militias), humanitarian organizations must navigate overlapping, contradictory, or politically contested legal requirements.
- **Data protection and digital governance requirements-** Increasingly strict data protection laws shape how humanitarian organisations collect, store, and share beneficiary information. Compliance failures can result in legal penalties or forced suspension of activities.
- **Legal clarity on humanitarian exemptions-** Effective access requires explicit legal exemptions for humanitarian goods, communications equipment, and financial transfers. Ambiguous or absent exemptions create operational paralysis.

These legal baselines shape the structural environment that enables or constrains humanitarian presence.

4. Social and Community Conditions - Structural Preconditions for Acceptance

Social conditions determine whether humanitarian organisations are accepted, trusted, and perceived as legitimate by communities. Contemporary environments are shaped by misinformation ecosystems, polarised narratives, informal power structures, and digital manipulation that can rapidly erode acceptance[17,21,39]. Structural preconditions for community acceptance include:

- **Perception of neutrality and impartiality-** This is core to humanitarian space and essential for safe engagement with communities. It is important to be aware that perceptions can shift quickly in polarised or conflict-affected environments.
- **Absence of misinformation and hostility-** Prevents humanitarians access from becoming contested or dangerous. Disinformation campaigns can portray humanitarian actors as non- partial, foreign agents, or threats to local interests.
- **Local engagement and trust-** Essential for safe field movements, programme legitimacy, and conflict-sensitive operations, especially where communities rely on social media or local influencers for information.
- **Influence of informal and traditional authorities-** Community acceptance often depends on relationships with elders, religious leaders, clan structures, or customary authorities who shape community perceptions and can either facilitate or block access.
- **Community-level conflict dynamics-** Inter-communal tensions, resource competition, and localised violence can undermine acceptance even when national-level permissions exist. Humanitarian actors must understand micro-conflict drivers.
- **Digital information ecosystems-** Social media, WhatsApp groups, and local radio stations can rapidly amplify rumours or distort humanitarian messaging. Proactive digital engagement is increasingly necessary to maintain trust.
- **Cultural and social legitimacy-** Programmes must align with local norms, values, and expectations. Culturally insensitive interventions can trigger resistance or hostility.
- **Accountability and feedback accessibility-** Communities are more likely to accept humanitarian presence when they can provide feedback, raise concerns, and see transparent responses. Being inaccessible or tokenistic mechanisms weaken legitimacy.
- **Perceived fairness of aid distribution-** Communities judge humanitarian legitimacy based on whether assistance is seen as equitable. Perceived bias can escalate tensions and jeopardise staff safety.
- **Protection from association with political or military actors-** Communities may reject humanitarian actors if they are perceived as aligned with government forces, armed groups, or foreign political agendas.

These conditions shape the social foundations of humanitarian access and determine whether humanitarian space exists.

5. Operational and Logistical Conditions - Enablers of Safe Access

Operational and logistical conditions are organisational enablers that allow structural and security preconditions to translate into actual, sustained humanitarian access. In contemporary conflict environments, operational feasibility is increasingly shaped by infrastructure degradation, digital connectivity disruptions, and geopolitical constraints on supply chains[7,8,9,40]. Enablers of safe access include:

- **Supply chain continuity-** Requires functioning procurement channels, cross-border logistics, and contingency stockpiles resilient to sanctions, border closures, and market volatility.
- **Transport and communications infrastructure-** Includes road access, air corridors, digital connectivity, and staff tracking systems, all increasingly disrupted by cyberattacks, infrastructure damage, and state-imposed shutdowns.

- **Fuel and procurement reliability-** Encompasses access to fuel, generators, medical supplies, and communications equipment, often restricted by conflict actors or regulatory controls.
- **Operational redundancy and contingency planning** — Ensures continuity through alternative routes, suppliers, and remote-management modalities when primary systems fail.
- **Digital systems resilience-** Reliable digital platforms for communication, staff tracking, and data management are essential as cyberattacks, GPS spoofing, and digital shutdowns increasingly disrupt operational continuity.
- **Cross-border operational flexibility-** Humanitarian organisations must maintain the ability to shift supply chains, warehousing, and procurement across borders when domestic routes become inaccessible due to conflict, sanctions, or political obstruction.
- **Remote-management capability-** In high-risk environments, remote programming, digital monitoring, and decentralised decision-making allow operations to continue when physical access is unsafe or impossible.
- **Infrastructure adaptability** - Organisations must adapt to degraded or destroyed infrastructure by using alternative transport modes, temporary storage sites, mobile offices, and flexible distribution points.
- **Interoperable logistics systems** - Shared platforms, common procurement pipelines, and coordinated warehousing across agencies reduce duplication, strengthen resilience, and ensure continuity during disruptions.
- **Access-supportive technology-** Tools such as satellite communications, digital mapping, biometric verification, and secure data platforms enhance movement planning, beneficiary verification, and operational reliability in contested environments.

Even when structural and security preconditions exist, humanitarian access cannot be sustained without logistical feasibility. Operational conditions are therefore indispensable organisational enablers of safe access.

7. Ethical and Principled Conditions - Structural Preconditions for Humanitarian Space

Ethical and principled conditions reinforce humanitarian space, a core structural precondition for safe and legitimate access. In contemporary conflicts, humanitarian principles are increasingly challenged by politicised narratives that undermine neutrality impartiality, independence and operational legitimacy, counter-terrorism restrictions and data-sharing demands[2,7,9,41]. Ethical and principled conditions include:

- **Neutrality, impartiality, independence-** It is critical to determine whether humanitarian organizations and their staff are accepted by communities and authorities, especially where humanitarian assistance is politicised or securitised.
- **Freedom from coercion-** Prevents political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid, including forced beneficiary selection, data-sharing demands, or pressure to align with certain political agendas.
- **Principled negotiation practices-** Ensure engagement with armed actors remains consistent with humanitarian norms and avoids legitimising coercive behaviour.
- **Safeguarding humanitarian identity-** Protects humanitarian organisations from being perceived as partisan, foreign agents, or extensions of political or military actors.
- **Protection from counter-terrorism overreach-** Ensures humanitarian organisations can engage all relevant actors without criminalisation, donor penalties, or legal exposure, a growing challenge in contexts where counter-terrorism laws restrict principled dialogue.
- **Ethical data governance-** Prevents misuse of beneficiary information, protects communities from surveillance, and ensures data-sharing demands do not compromise neutrality or expose populations to harm.
- **Integrity of humanitarian messaging-** Counters misinformation, politicised narratives, and digital manipulation that erode community trust and distort perceptions of humanitarian intent.

- **Accountability to affected populations-** Strengthens legitimacy and reinforces humanitarian space by ensuring communities can raise concerns, challenge bias, and see transparent responses.

These conditions ensure humanitarian space remains intact, enabling principled access and protecting organisations from being drawn into conflict dynamics.

8. Financial Conditions - Organisational Preconditions for Continuity

Financial conditions underpin organisational resilience and continuity, enabling humanitarian organizations to remain operational despite volatility, shocks, or deteriorating security conditions. Contemporary funding landscapes are shaped by short funding cycles, politically conditioned financing, donor risk aversion, and increasing scrutiny linked to counter-terrorism and compliance regimes[7,9,42,43,44]. Financial conditions include:

- **Flexible, predictable funding-** Enables adaptive programming, rapid re-prioritisation, and investment in protective measures in volatile environments.
- **Contingency financing-** Supports emergencies e.g., emergency procurement, relocations and evacuations, and remote-management transitions during sudden deteriorations.
- **Donor tolerance for negotiated access-** Allows organisations to engage armed actors without fear of funding withdrawal, reputational penalties, or political repercussions.
- **Multi-year financing models-** Strengthen continuity in protracted crises where short funding cycles undermine sustained access.
- **Risk-tolerant funding modalities-** Enable operations in high-risk environments by allowing flexible risk acceptance, adaptive delivery mechanisms, and context-driven budget reallocations.
- **Compliance-sensitive financial systems-** Ensure organisations can meet donor requirements without compromising principled access, especially in contexts affected by sanctions, counter-terrorism legislation, or banking restrictions.
- **Financial liquidity and rapid-release mechanisms-** Provide immediate access to funds during escalations, enabling swift procurement, staff movement, and emergency response.
- **Diversified funding portfolios-** Reduce dependence on single donors whose political conditions may restrict access, ensuring operational continuity across shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Without financial continuity, structural and security preconditions cannot be operationalised. Funding is therefore a core organisational precondition for sustained access.

9. Organisational Capacity Conditions - Internal Preconditions for Safe Operations

Organisational capacity is the internal counterpart to structural and security preconditions. Contemporary conflict environments require organisations to manage complex risk profiles, remote operations, and rapidly shifting political dynamics. Internal capacity determines whether humanitarian organizations can operate safely, adapt effectively, and sustain presence under pressure[4,7,21,40,43]. Organisational capacity conditions include:

- **Strong HSRM systems-** Provide analytical, procedural, and operational foundations for safe access, integrating threat analysis, movement planning, incident management, and risk acceptance thresholds.
- **Effective leadership and decision-making-** Enables risk-informed decisions, crisis navigation, and principled operational choices under pressure.
- **Crisis response capability-** Includes relocation/evacuation readiness, incident-management systems, and surge capacity for rapid adaptation during escalations.
- **Adaptive programming-** Ensures programmes remain feasible and relevant despite shifting conflict lines, displacement patterns, or political constraints.
- **Competent national and local staffing models-** Strengthen continuity and contextual understanding, especially when international staff face restrictions or are relocated/evacuated.

- **Remote-management readiness-** Ensures operational continuity when physical access becomes unsafe, relying on decentralised decision-making and digital monitoring systems.
- **Organisational learning and after-action review systems-** Enable continuous improvement, institutional memory, and adaptation to evolving risks.
- **Integrated duty-of-care frameworks-** Protect staff through clear policies, training, and support systems that reduce exposure to harm and strengthen operational resilience.

These capacity conditions enable organisations to operate safely within the structural and security environment, making access viable and sustainable.

10. Community Engagement and Accountability Conditions- Structural Preconditions for Acceptance

Community engagement and accountability conditions reinforce social acceptance, a structural precondition for humanitarian access. Contemporary environments are shaped by misinformation ecosystems, polarised narratives, and localised power dynamics that influence how communities perceive humanitarian actors. Effective engagement strengthens legitimacy, reduces hostility, and builds the trust required for safe operations[21,25,45,46]. Community engagement and accountability conditions include:

- **Feedback mechanisms-** Build trust, legitimacy, and responsiveness, reducing hostility and misinformation.
- **Conflict-sensitive programming-** Prevents humanitarian aid from exacerbating tensions or reinforcing inequities, protecting humanitarian space.
- **Transparent communication-** Counters misinformation, clarifies humanitarian intent, and strengthens community confidence.
- **Local partnership and localisation strategies-** Enhance acceptance, contextual relevance, and resilience of access pathways.
- **Community-based protection and dialogue-** Strengthen relationships with local leaders, influencers, and social networks that shape access dynamics.
- **Digital engagement capacity-** Ensures organisations can respond to misinformation, rumours, and polarised narratives circulating through social media and messaging platforms.
- **Cultural legitimacy and social alignment-** Ensures programmes respect local norms, values, and expectations, reducing resistance and enhancing acceptance.

These conditions strengthen the structural social environment that makes access viable and safe.

Together, the ten preconditions create the full enabling environment required for humanitarian organisations to operate safely and sustainably in armed conflict and volatile political settings. They establish the political, legal, social, and community foundations that grant legitimacy and acceptance. They also define the security parameters that make humanitarian operations physically feasible. Finally, they provide the organisational, logistical, ethical, and financial systems that allow humanitarian organizations to withstand shocks, adapt to volatility, and maintain continuity. When aligned, these preconditions transform armed conflict and politically volatile environments into navigable operational spaces where principled humanitarian action can be delivered predictably and safely.

6. Implementation Challenges Across Structural and Security Preconditions

6.1 Security Conditions: Humanitarian organisations frequently struggle to maintain safe access in environments where armed actors fragment, hybrid threats proliferate, and conflict dynamics shift rapidly. These environments are characterised by decentralised command structures, unpredictable shifts in territorial control, and the emergence of new armed actors who do not recognise previously negotiated

arrangements. In Yemen, the splintering of Ansar Allah, tribal militias, and southern separatist factions repeatedly invalidated previously negotiated access agreements. The sudden emergence of new commanders rejecting prior humanitarian access arrangements made the operating environment complex and distorted, forcing agencies to renegotiate access on a near-continuous basis[47,48]. In Mali, jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) imposed unpredictable checkpoints and extortion demands, undermining movement planning and exposing staff to heightened kidnapping and ambush risks[25,49]. ACAPS and OCHA analyses highlight that humanitarian access in Somalia is a fluid, hyper-local process shaped by clan dynamics, shifting territorial control, and the perceived legitimacy of humanitarian actors, requiring granular context analysis rather than national-level assumptions[26,50]. In South Sudan, inter-communal violence in Jonglei and Upper Nile created localised security risks independent of national conflict dynamics, demonstrating how micro-level tensions can derail operations even when national-level agreements exist[20,25].

6.2 Political Conditions: Political preconditions are often undermined by contested authority, bureaucratic obstruction, and politicisation of humanitarian assistance. These dynamics create fragmented governance environments where humanitarian organisations must navigate contradictory rules, opaque approval systems, and politically motivated interference. In Syria, multiple overlapping authorities (Government of Syria, Kurdish Self-Administration, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) imposed contradictory registration and movement requirements. The conflicting permit requirements from different authorities controlling adjacent districts made the operational environment difficult and unpredictable, often requiring separate negotiations for movements within a single governorate[51,52]. In Myanmar, post-coup restrictions severely limited humanitarian access, with permissions frequently denied or delayed for political reasons. The military authorities blocked travel authorisations for humanitarian staff, used telecommunications shutdowns, surveillance, and travel bans to obstruct humanitarian action, effectively shrinking humanitarian space[17,18]. In Ethiopia (Tigray), government-imposed administrative blockages prevented humanitarian supplies, fuel, and cash from entering Tigray region for months, creating operational paralysis despite high levels of need[9,22,23]. In Somalia, humanitarian access is constrained by Al-Shabaab's parallel governance structures, which impose taxation, restrict movement, and require intricate informal negotiations for access to areas under their control, blurring the line between political and security constraints[26,50,53].

6.3 Legal and Regulatory Conditions: Legal frameworks often constrain humanitarian action through restrictive laws, counter-terrorism policies, and sanctions. Humanitarian NGOs are particularly affected by restrictive laws, policies and administrative processes by the diverse authorities in the operational environment. These regulatory pressures create environments where humanitarian organisations must balance legal compliance with principled access, often under threat of criminalisation. For example, some counter-terrorism laws effectively limit the extent to which humanitarian organisations can engage with designated groups, preventing dialogue with armed actors who control critical humanitarian corridors. This forces humanitarian agencies to rely on remote programming in some contexts. In Somalia, Somalia's Provisional Constitution, Anti-Terrorism Act, and security directives issued by the Federal Government and regional authorities prohibit any form of "material support" or "engagement" with Al-Shabaab. These provisions make humanitarian dialogue legally risky, complicating negotiations for access, even when Al-Shabaab controls vast areas and critical humanitarian corridors[8,19,53]. Nigeria's Terrorism (Prevention) Act criminalises contact with Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), both responsible for severe harm and human rights violations. Humanitarian organisations have faced legal scrutiny and temporary suspension over alleged links to designated armed groups in the northeast, demonstrating how legal ambiguity can be used to restrict operations[8,54,55]. In Afghanistan, post August 2021, donor-driven counter-terrorism frameworks restricted engagement with the Taliban after they came into power. The post-2021 sanctions by some western countries imposed banking restrictions severely limiting financial transfers, blocking funds needed for medical supply procurement, delaying

procurement processes, and preventing timely staff payments. This seriously undermined operational continuity[8,35,56].

- 6.4 Social and Community Conditions:** Community acceptance is often undermined by misinformation, polarisation, and local power dynamics. These pressures are amplified by digital ecosystems where rumours spread rapidly and can trigger violence against humanitarian actors. Across diverse volatile settings, humanitarian organisations face not only physical threats but also digital risks, misinformation campaigns, and deliberate manipulation of humanitarian assistance for political gain. In the DRC, rumours that Ebola responders were spreading the virus led to attacks on health workers, with several Ebola treatment centres attacked due to misinformation about response teams[34,57]. In Haiti, gang-controlled neighbourhoods accused humanitarian actors of supporting rival groups, resulting in threats and access denial, with some gangs restricting access based on perceived political alignment[27,28]. In Lebanon, misinformation campaigns during the economic crisis portrayed humanitarian aid organizations as politically biased, reducing trust among host and refugee communities and complicating community engagement efforts[58,59].
- 6.5 Operational and Logistical Conditions:** Operational feasibility is frequently disrupted by infrastructure damage, fuel shortages, and supply-chain constraints. These disruptions reduce the reliability of movement planning, weaken contingency options, and increase the cost and complexity of delivering assistance. In Ukraine, shelling destroyed bridges and rail lines, cutting off access to frontline communities and preventing delivery of medical supplies to besieged towns[60,61]. In Sudan (Darfur), fuel scarcity and insecurity along supply routes forced repeated suspension of humanitarian convoys, preventing delivery of critical lifesaving humanitarian assistance including medical supplies[62,63]. In Mozambique (Cabo Delgado), insurgent activity and cyclone damage combined to block access to displaced populations, demonstrating how conflict and natural hazards interact to create severe logistical barriers[64,65].
- 6.6 Coordination Conditions:** Coordination challenges arise when agencies adopt divergent negotiation strategies or when authorities exploit humanitarian fragmentation. Weak coordination reduces collective leverage, increases exposure to political manipulation, and creates inconsistent access outcomes. In Yemen, inconsistent negotiation approaches with Ansar Allah led to unequal access permissions across humanitarian organisations, with some NGOs securing access through concessions that undermined collective negotiation positions[9,63,66]. In Syria (Northwest), differing positions on cross-border operations created tension within the humanitarian community and weakened collective leverage, resulting in fragmented advocacy and inconsistent operational outcomes[15,16,67]. In Central Africa Republic (CAR), humanitarian organizations' reluctance to share security information resulted in incomplete threat assessments, leading to gaps in shared analysis and increased exposure to avoidable risks[68,69].
- 6.7 Ethical and Principled Conditions:** Maintaining neutrality and independence is difficult where authorities politicise humanitarian aid or demand coercive oversight. These pressures undermine humanitarian legitimacy and expose organisations to reputational and operational risks. In Ethiopia (Tigray), authorities pressured humanitarian organisations to share beneficiary data, undermining impartiality, compromising neutrality, and violating data-protection norms[9,22]. In Gaza, humanitarian actors faced pressure from multiple sides to align assistance with political narratives of dominant authorities, making principled negotiation extremely challenging[32,33]. In Myanmar, military authorities attempted to influence programme design and restrict engagement with certain communities, directing humanitarian actors to avoid specific ethnic groups and thereby undermining impartiality[17,18].
- 6.8 Financial Conditions:** Financial continuity is often disrupted by donor restrictions, sanctions, and risk aversion. These constraints reduce operational flexibility, delay response activities, and force programme suspensions. In Afghanistan, post-2021 banking restrictions imposed by several western countries, delayed salary payments and procurement, forcing programme suspensions and undermining staff retention[35,56]. In South Sudan, donors paused funding after security incidents, leaving critical health

and nutrition programmes unfunded and reducing humanitarian presence in high-need areas[9,25,63]. In **Yemen**, banking fragmentation between different governed Sana'a and Aden complicated financial transfers, creating delays in procurement and operational payments[63,66,70].

6.9 Organisational Capacity Conditions: Organisational capacity is constrained by staff movement restrictions, leadership gaps, and limited crisis-response systems. These constraints weaken decision-making, reduce oversight, and undermine operational resilience. In Syria, national staff faced movement restrictions that prevented access to certain districts, leaving programmes understaffed and reducing monitoring capacity. National staff were routinely unable to cross checkpoints controlled by different armed actors, creating operational blind spots[15,21,63]. In Burkina Faso, escalating insecurity forced international staff to relocate, reducing operational oversight and slowing decision-making [71,72]. In Somalia, high turnover among international security personnel weakened organisational risk-management systems, reducing institutional memory and consistency in security analysis[63,73]

6.10 Community Engagement and Accountability Conditions: Accountability mechanisms often fail in environments with digital blackouts, mistrust, or community fragmentation. These failures weaken community trust and reduce the effectiveness of feedback systems. In Myanmar, internet shutdowns prevented communities from accessing feedback channels, rendering hotline systems unusable and undermining accountability[17,74,75]. In South Sudan, inter-communal tensions made conflict-sensitive programming difficult, with aid distributions triggering disputes and occasionally violence[25,26] In Afghanistan, women's restricted mobility limited their ability to participate in feedback processes, reducing programme inclusivity and weakening community engagement[35,56].

The challenges observed highlight that humanitarian organisations face persistent, overlapping implementation challenges across conflict-affected environments. Fragmented authority structures, volatile security dynamics, restrictive legal frameworks, polarised social conditions, degraded infrastructure, weak coordination, ethical pressures, financial constraints, and uneven organisational capacity undermine safe and predictable humanitarian access. These challenges interact to produce environments where negotiated arrangements are frequently invalidated as bureaucratic systems become obstructive, misinformation erodes acceptance, supply chains falter, and collective leverage weakens. At the same time, principled humanitarian action is contested, funding is unstable, and internal systems struggle to keep pace with escalating operational complexity. Together, these pressures illustrate that humanitarian access is never static but must be constantly renegotiated, safeguarded, and operationally reinforced to remain viable.

7. Implications for Humanitarian Access and Operational Safety

7.1 Implications for Humanitarian Organisations — Strengthening SRM, BCP, and Access Strategies

Humanitarian organisations must recognise that safe access in armed conflict and volatile political environments depends on the integration of Security Risk Management (SRM), Business Continuity Planning (BCP), and principled access strategies[4,5,10]. Strengthening SRM requires investment in dynamic threat analysis, actor-mapping, hybrid-threat monitoring, and community-based early-warning systems that capture micro-level shifts in armed-group behaviour and effective security risk management measures which are context specific[4,5,10]. Significantly, building predictive analysis capacities in humanitarian organizations. Predictive analysis capacities are the set of analytical, technological, and organisational capabilities that allow humanitarian organisations to anticipate threats before they happen especially in environments, where threat patterns are volatile, armed actors fragment rapidly, and digital risks evolve faster than traditional security systems can track[4,5,10]. Strengthening SRM also entails integrating digital incident-tracking platforms, and ensuring national staff are trained in context-specific risk identification, as they often have the most accurate localized situational awareness[4,5,10].

Organisations operating in Mali, South Sudan, and Cabo Delgado demonstrated that combining localised security intelligence with structured risk-mitigation protocols significantly reduces exposure to armed actors and inter-communal violence. In Mali, humanitarian organizations that invested in granular route-risk mapping and community liaison networks were able to maintain access to JNIM-affected areas where others could not[4,7,25,49]. In South Sudan, organisations that embedded protection focal points within field teams were better able to anticipate inter-communal tensions before they escalated[4,76,77,78]. In Cabo Delgado, partnerships with local civil-society monitors improved early-warning accuracy during non-state armed groups advances[79,80].

Strengthening BCP is critical in armed conflict and volatile environments. BCP principles must evolve to match the complex realities of conflict-affected environments, adapting to conditions shaped by displacement, diverse and shifting security threats, fragile infrastructure, and highly volatile access patterns[4]. In this respect, BCP must develop beyond traditional contingency planning, to incorporate remote-management modalities, digital resilience, and multi-route supply-chain strategies[4]. The experience in Ukraine shows that humanitarian organizations maintained operations despite infrastructure destruction by shifting to rail corridors, local procurement, and redundant logistics pathways[4,81,82]. In Myanmar, humanitarian organisations that invested in offline-capable digital tools and decentralised decision-making structures were able to continue programming during repeated telecommunications shutdowns[8,18,74,75]. BCP must also include staff-care systems, such as psychosocial support systems, critical-incident support mechanisms and rest, recuperation and rotation. This is in recognition that staff burnout and psychological stress are major operational risks in high-volatility environments[4].

Access strategies must be principled, coherent, and adaptive, ensuring that negotiations with state and non-state actors remain consistent across organizations. Experiences from Yemen and Syria show that fragmented negotiation approaches weaken humanitarian leverage, whereas unified messaging through humanitarian country teams strengthens acceptance and reduces bureaucratic obstruction[4,7,8,25]. In Somalia, humanitarian organizations that aligned negotiation positions on taxation and movement permits were able to reduce arbitrary demands from local authorities[63,83]. Collectively, these implications underscore the need for organisations to treat SRM, BCP, and access as interdependent systems, not parallel technical functions.

7.2 Implications for Donors and Governments — Supporting Safe Access Frameworks

Donors and governments play a decisive role in shaping the enabling environment for humanitarian access. Their policies must support flexible, multi-year funding, humanitarian exemptions within counter-terrorism and sanctions regimes, and predictable regulatory frameworks that allow humanitarian organisations to operate safely and lawfully. In Somalia, donor-supported humanitarian exemptions enabled organizations to conduct deconfliction dialogue with Al-Shabaab without violating counter-terrorism laws[63,48,84]. In Afghanistan, donor engagement with financial institutions helped establish humanitarian carve-outs that allowed cash transfers despite banking restrictions, preventing programme collapse and enabling continuity of health and protection services[35,36,56].

Governments must also avoid securitising humanitarian action, such as, imposing data-sharing requirements or politically conditioned funding, which undermines neutrality and increases operational risk. The experience in Ethiopia (Tigray) demonstrates how political pressure to share beneficiary data compromised humanitarian principles and contributed to access blockages[9,22,23]. Similar pressures emerged in Lebanon, where authorities sought beneficiary lists during periods of political tension, raising protection concerns[58,85].

Donors should instead incentivise principled access strategies, support shared security-analysis platforms, and fund contingency reserves that allow humanitarian organisations to respond rapidly to deteriorating conditions[4,5]. Multi-year funding models also enable organisations to invest in local partnerships, staff capacity, and infrastructure resilience, all of which strengthen long-term access[4,5]. These implications highlight that donor, and policy frameworks must reinforce not constrain the structural and security preconditions required for safe humanitarian access.

7.3 Implications for Field Operations — Practical Adjustments to Maintain Presence

Field operations must adapt continuously to shifting conflict dynamics, political volatility, and logistical disruption. Practical adjustments include diversifying supply chains, pre-positioning essential items, strengthening national staff leadership, and designing accountability systems that function even during digital blackouts or insecurity[4]. In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado, pre-positioning supplies ahead of insurgent activity and cyclone season ensured uninterrupted assistance despite repeated access constraints[7,8]. In Burkina Faso, empowering national staff with advanced security analysis and remote-management skills allowed programmes to continue when international staff were relocated due to escalating insecurity[8,71,72].

Field teams must adopt conflict-sensitive distribution models to prevent humanitarian aid from exacerbating local tensions, as demonstrated in South Sudan, where community-agreed beneficiary lists reduced disputes between rival community groups[63]. In Yemen, humanitarian organizations that adapted distribution schedules to avoid peak conflict hours were able to reduce exposure to shelling and checkpoint interference[63]. Additionally, operations should incorporate redundant communication systems, such as, satellite devices and in-person feedback mechanisms to maintain accountability during internet shutdowns, as seen in Myanmar[40,63]. Field operations must also strengthen local procurement networks, mobile-team modalities, and low-visibility movement strategies to reduce exposure to armed actors. These implications show that field operations must be agile, locally informed, and structurally resilient to maintain presence in high-risk environments[4,5].

As highlighted from the diverse insecure humanitarian contexts, humanitarian access and operational safety depend on the combined strength of security risk management, business continuity planning, and coherent access strategies, all of which must function as an integrated system rather than isolated technical tools. Humanitarian organisations must invest in dynamic threat analysis, adaptive continuity measures, and principled negotiation approaches to navigate volatile environments where risks shift rapidly and bureaucratic, social, and infrastructural barriers routinely disrupt operations. At the same time, donors and governments must reinforce these efforts through flexible funding, supportive regulatory frameworks, and non-securitised policy environments that enable lawful, principled engagement. Field operations must remain agile, locally informed, and resilient able to adjust supply chains, staffing models, communication systems, and distribution modalities as conditions deteriorate. Collectively, these implications highlight that safe humanitarian access requires continuous adaptation, strong organisational resilience, and coherent system-wide alignment across operational, political, and security domains.

8. Recommendations to Navigate and Operate Safely in Armed Conflict and Volatile Political Environments

- 1) **Strengthening Security Preconditions:** Humanitarian organisations should invest in dynamic, context-specific HSRM systems that integrate real-time conflict analysis, actor-mapping, and hybrid-threat monitoring. Building relationships with local communities and non-state armed actors through principled negotiation enhances tolerance and reduces operational risk. In Mali, humanitarian organisations improved convoy safety by coordinating movement schedules with community leaders

and negotiating predictable checkpoint behaviour with JNIM factions[49,75]. In South Sudan, organisations reduced exposure to inter-communal violence by deploying community-based protection monitors who provided granular early-warning information[8,75]. In Nigeria, humanitarian organisations reduced exposure to ISWAP checkpoints by coordinating movement windows with local vigilante groups who provided early warning on armed actor shifts[54,86]. In Colombia, organisations improved staff safety by negotiating predictable movement corridors with FARC dissident factions and embedding community liaison officers in field teams[87,88]. These approaches demonstrate that adaptive, locally informed security systems are essential for safe access.

- 2) **Navigating Political Preconditions:** To operate effectively in politically volatile environments, humanitarian organisations must adopt flexible negotiation strategies and maintain consistent, unified messaging with authorities. Establishing long-term dialogue platforms with government ministries/departments and de-facto authorities helps reduce bureaucratic obstruction. In Myanmar, humanitarian organisations improved access by engaging both national and township-level administrators to harmonise movement-permit processes[8,75]. In Syria, humanitarian actors strengthened political acceptance by coordinating cross-line negotiation strategies through the UN-OCHA reducing contradictory requests that previously triggered access denials[8,75]. In Iraq, humanitarian organisations improved access by establishing joint negotiation committees with federal and Kurdish regional authorities to harmonise permit requirements[89]. In Sudan, humanitarian organisations strengthened political acceptance by maintaining parallel dialogue channels with both national ministries and local administrative councils in contested areas[90,91]. The examples show that political navigation requires coherence, persistence, and multi-level engagement.
- 3) **Managing Legal and Regulatory Constraints:** Humanitarian organisations should proactively analyse domestic laws, sanctions regimes, and counterterrorism frameworks to ensure compliance while safeguarding principled access. Establishing legal advisory capacity and advocating for humanitarian exemptions can mitigate operational paralysis. In Somalia, humanitarian organisations worked with donors to secure exemptions allowing limited engagement with Al-Shabaab for deconfliction purposes[8,75]. In Nigeria, organisations navigated the Terrorism Prevention Act by establishing internal legal review panels to assess engagement risks with communities under Boko Haram influence[8,54,92]. In Afghanistan, organisations adapted to banking restrictions by shifting to regulated cash-transfer mechanisms and negotiating with financial institutions for humanitarian carve-outs[4,5,8]. Similarly, in Yemen, humanitarian organisations mitigated banking fragmentation by negotiating compliance-based financial waivers with banks in both Aden and Sana'a to maintain liquidity[47,48,93]. These cases highlight the importance of legal preparedness and structured advocacy.
- 4) **Enhancing Social and Community Acceptance:** Building trust through transparent communication, conflict-sensitive programming, and community-driven feedback systems is essential for safe access. Humanitarian actors must counter misinformation proactively and engage diverse community stakeholders. In DRC, Ebola responders improved acceptance by establishing community advisory groups that shaped response strategies and dispelled rumours[8,34,57]. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, humanitarian organisations improved acceptance by working with village elders to dispel rumours linking aid distributions to political agendas[94,95]. In Haiti, humanitarian organisations partnered with local mediators to negotiate access with gangs and reduce perceptions of political bias[8,27,28]. In Pakistan, humanitarian actors strengthened trust by engaging religious leaders to clarify programme intent and counter misinformation circulating on local radio networks[96,97]. These examples demonstrate that community acceptance is not static but must be actively cultivated.
- 5) **Strengthening Operational and Logistical Resilience:** Humanitarian organisations should diversify supply chains, invest in contingency stockpiles, and develop alternative transport routes to maintain operational continuity. In volatile environments remote-management systems and digital tools can sustain programming when physical access is restricted. In Ukraine, humanitarian organizations used rail

corridors and local procurement to bypass destroyed road networks[4,8,75]. In CAR, humanitarian organizations maintained operations by shifting to river transport routes when road networks became inaccessible due to armed group activity[98]. In Mozambique (Cabo Delgado), humanitarian organisations pre-positioned supplies ahead of cyclone season and insurgent activity, ensuring uninterrupted assistance[4,8,75]. In Nepal, humanitarian organisations sustained logistics during monsoon-related disruptions by pre-positioning supplies in multiple district hubs and using drone-based mapping for route planning[99,100]. These strategies show that logistical resilience is central to sustaining humanitarian presence.

- 6) **Improving Coordination Mechanisms:** Effective coordination reduces duplication, strengthens negotiation leverage, and enhances collective security analysis. Humanitarian actors should commit to shared risk thresholds, joint negotiation frameworks, and transparent information-sharing. In Yemen, coordinated negotiation through the Humanitarian Country Team improved access consistency across organizations[4,8,75]. In Ethiopia, coordinated negotiation through cluster systems reduced contradictory messaging to regional authorities and improved access consistency [23,101,102]. In CAR, joint security analysis groups reduced information gaps and improved early-warning systems[4,8,75]. In Lebanon, humanitarian organizations strengthened collective leverage by establishing joint humanitarian-municipal coordination forums during periods of political instability[103,104]. These examples illustrate that coordination is a structural enabler of safe access.
- 7) **Upholding Ethical and Principled Humanitarian Action:** Maintaining neutrality, impartiality, and independence requires robust internal safeguards and principled negotiation strategies essential for preserving humanitarian space. Organisations should resist coercive demands and ensure programme design remains needs-based. In Ethiopia (Tigray), humanitarian organizations protected beneficiary privacy by refusing to share sensitive data despite political pressure, relying instead on anonymised reporting[4,8,75]. In Myanmar, humanitarian organizations protected impartiality by refusing military-requested beneficiary lists and instead using anonymised verification systems[105,106]. In Gaza, humanitarian actors maintained neutrality by coordinating messaging through OCHA to avoid alignment with political narratives[4,8,75]. In Iraq, organisations upheld neutrality by rejecting pressure from local militias to prioritise assistance to politically aligned communities[107,108].
- 8) **Ensuring Financial Flexibility and Continuity:** Humanitarian organisations should advocate for multi-year, flexible funding and establish contingency reserves to respond to sudden escalations. Diversifying funding sources reduces vulnerability to political shifts. In South Sudan, humanitarian organizations sustained operations during donor freezes by drawing on internal emergency funds[4,8,75]. In Afghanistan, organisations adapted to financial restrictions by using mobile-money systems and negotiating humanitarian exemptions with banks[4,5,8]. In Yemen, organisations maintained programme continuity by using dual-banking arrangements to navigate currency volatility and regional banking restrictions[83,109,110]. In Syria, organisations sustained operations during donor pauses by relying on pooled emergency funds and local procurement networks[111]. These examples demonstrate that financial resilience underpins operational continuity.
- 9) **Building Organisational Capacity for Crisis Environments:** Strengthening leadership, surge capacity, and crisis-response systems enables organisations to operate safely despite volatility. Investing in national staff development enhances continuity when international staff face movement restrictions. In Burkina Faso, humanitarian organisations improved field oversight by training national staff in advanced security analysis and remote-management techniques[8,71,72]. In Syria, humanitarian organisations maintained programme continuity by empowering local teams to make operational decisions when access for international staff was blocked[111]. In Afghanistan, humanitarian organisations improved crisis response by training national staff in remote management and digital monitoring during periods of restricted movement[112,113]. In Mozambique, organisations strengthened operational resilience by

establishing mobile surge teams capable of rapid deployment during insurgent escalations[114]. These cases highlight the importance of internal resilience.

- 10) **Deepening Community Engagement and Accountability:** Humanitarian organisations should design feedback systems that function even during digital blackouts or insecurity and ensure programming does not exacerbate local tensions. In Myanmar, organisations used in-person community consultations when internet shutdowns disrupted digital feedback channels[7,8,75]. In Iraq, humanitarian organisations maintained accountability during internet outages by using mobile field teams to collect feedback directly from communities[115,116]. In South Sudan, conflict-sensitive distribution models which included community-agreed beneficiary lists significantly reduced tension between rival community groups[7,8,75]. In Nigeria, humanitarian organisations reduced tensions by establishing conflict-sensitive community forums that addressed grievances before distributions took place[54, 92,117].

Taken together, these recommendations form a coherent, practical framework for navigating and operating safely in armed conflict and volatile political environments. They show that safe access depends on simultaneously strengthening security systems, managing political and legal constraints, cultivating community acceptance, reinforcing logistical and financial resilience, and building organisational capacity that can withstand shocks. When applied collectively, these measures enable humanitarian organisations to maintain principled operations, protect staff, and sustain humanitarian assistance even as conditions deteriorate. Ultimately, they demonstrate that safe humanitarian presence is achieved not through any single intervention, but through an integrated, adaptive, and resilient approach to risk, access, and operational continuity.

9. Summary — Structural and Security Preconditions as the Foundation of Safe Humanitarian Access

Safe humanitarian access in armed conflict and politically volatile environments emerges when structural, security, and organisational preconditions align, rather than from isolated policies or separate operational decisions. Structural preconditions include political permissions, legal frameworks, administrative predictability, and community acceptance. They form the external enabling environment within which humanitarian organisations negotiate their presence and legitimacy. These elements determine whether humanitarian organizations can operate with recognised status, predictable procedures, and social acceptance among affected communities.

Security preconditions form the safety environment required for programme delivery, movement, and staff safety. They represent the minimum safety envelope within which humanitarian organisations can operate without unacceptable risk, but in contemporary conflict they are increasingly complex, fluid and volatile. They encompass threat stability, the behaviour and tolerance of armed actors, the presence of hybrid threats (criminal, political, digital), and the security risk management measures humanitarian organizations put in place to reduce exposure to harm. Crucially, Structural and security preconditions are mutually reinforcing. Structural acceptance without security stability results in fragile or symbolic access, while security stability without structural permission produces unsanctioned, inconsistent, or unsustainable access. Effective humanitarian action requires both to function in tandem.

In armed conflict and politically volatile environments, structural and security preconditions alone do not guarantee operational continuity. Their effectiveness depends on the organisation's ability to absorb shocks, adapt to volatility, and maintain operations in difficult situations. This is where business continuity planning (BCP) and organisational resilience become very important. BCP transforms available enabling conditions into sustained presence by ensuring that supply chains, communications, staffing models, and programme modalities can withstand disruption. Experiences from Ukraine, Cabo Delgado, South Sudan, and Myanmar show that humanitarian organisations with robust continuity systems, redundant logistics routes, remote-management capabilities, pre-positioned stocks, and empowered national teams, maintained

life-saving assistance even when structural or security conditions deteriorated. Organisational resilience therefore acts as the internal engine that converts external preconditions into practical, durable access pathways.

10. Conclusion — Integrating Preconditions for Safe, Principled, and Sustainable Access

The synthesis of structural, security, and organisational elements reveals a central conclusion. Safe humanitarian access is an ecosystem, not a single negotiation outcome or technical procedure. Structural preconditions establish the political, legal, and social space for humanitarian action. Security preconditions ensure that this space can be navigated without unacceptable risk. Operational resilience ensures that access can be sustained through deterioration, disruption, and uncertainty. When these components align, humanitarian organisations can uphold neutrality, deliver principled humanitarian assistance, and maintain presence in the world's most complex emergencies. When any one component weakens, access becomes inconsistent, contested, or impossible.

For humanitarian organisations, donors, and policymakers, the implication is clear. Strengthening security risk management, reinforcing structural access frameworks, and investing in resilient organisational and continuity systems are not parallel tasks, they are interdependent responsibilities that collectively determine whether humanitarian action can be delivered safely and sustainably. The future of humanitarian access in conflict-affected environments will depend on recognising and operationalising this interdependence to produce the conditions necessary for safe, principled, and sustainable humanitarian presence. This is a 21st-century challenge.

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