Engaging Armed Groups in Afghanistan and Colombia: Lessons from Covid-19.

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Executive Summary

Many of the environments within which NRC and the humanitarian community operates have evolved over recent years with significant implications for the ways in which the organisation engages non-state armed groups (NSAGs or armed groups). Conflict dynamics in both Afghanistan and Colombia, for example, have shifted amid military gains, peace talks, fluid intra-group alliances, and the changing territorial control of these groups. Covid-19 drove further contextual changes that affected the behaviour of NSAGs and offered new opportunities for them to grow and consolidate their power.

Despite these changes, long-standing approaches to NSAG engagement in Afghanistan have enabled the humanitarian organisations to stay and deliver, even during the Taliban takeover of the country. This research nevertheless points to important questions regarding the viability of some of these engagement strategies, now that the Taliban took the country.

For the case of Colombia, the viability and safety of humanitarian operations have been profoundly challenged by fundamental changes in the conflict landscape since 2016 that have been magnified by the global Covid-19 pandemic. These transformations have undermined traditional engagement modalities and have pushed agencies and organisations to modify their approach to engaging armed groups in the country. This research explores the obstacles and opportunities for engagement with NSAGs related to these contextual shifts. Despite the marked differences between these contexts, this report identifies five key lessons, as outlined below:

Highlights

- **Covid-19 amplified existing patterns of behaviour among armed groups rather than introducing new ones**. In both Afghanistan and Colombia, armed groups have taken advantage of the pandemic to advance their strategic interests. The retreat of the state and absence of human rights and humanitarian actors (particularly in Colombia) has afforded new opportunities for NSAGs to expand and consolidate their control or influence over both territory and communities. The pandemic also offered armed groups opportunities to enhance their legitimacy whilst undermining that of the government, particularly in Afghanistan.
- **Community acceptance remains necessary (but may increasingly be insufficient)**. The Taliban appears determined to retain popular support as a governing force in the country. In contrast, self-interested and economically-driven armed groups in Colombia are increasingly hostile to communities within their areas of operation. Yet resilient and creative communities have developed sophisticated and effective coping strategies, and thus routinely maintain a significant degree of leverage over these groups. Community support and acceptance therefore remains central to NSAG engagement strategies. And in Colombia, community-led self-protection initiatives will likely be central to realising humanitarian access for years to come. But for

very different reasons, the central role of communities in armed group engagement strategies may be reducing in both countries. In Afghanistan, the Taliban increasingly demand more direct and unmediated lines of communication with humanitarian actors. And in Colombia, the changing nature and interests of armed groups have eroded the influence communities once had. In both countries, an over-reliance on communities to negotiate humanitarian access will place them at significant risk and may expose humanitarian operations to manipulation.

- **Challenged and restrictive governance will make humanitarian access more puzzling in Afghanistan.** Uneven levels of governance at the province and district level, and a strict interpretation of the Sharia Law -including restrictions to female staff and beneficiaries- will force the humanitarian sector to adapt its access and engagement strategies to an even more nuanced approach. In such context, it is of vital importance to scale up the coordination between international organisatios and the UN agencies, especially regarding the humanitarian principles and red lines.
- **Violence and insecurity are likely to continue to increase in Colombia**. As rival armed groups continue to vie for territory and lucrative trade routes, violence is widely anticipated to increase over the coming years. These power struggles will increasingly pit communities and NSAGs against one another, further eroding opportunities for humanitarian action. In both contexts, this volatility will increase the stakes for humanitarians engaging with armed groups.
- **Understanding local dynamics remains key to effective engagement strategies**. Dynamics within both contexts remain heavily localised. District and provincial differences within armed groups were stark throughout Afghanistan in terms of power structures and relations. This radically alters the viability of certain approaches and requires that engagement and negotiation strategies are highly nuanced. Local differences were even greater in Colombia due to the proliferation of armed groups, compounded by their fluid structures and continually-changing relationships with other NSAGs. These variations suggest humanitarian actors must pursue different (or at least nuanced) engagement strategies and modalities in different areas of each country.

These findings suggest that across both Afghanistan and Colombia (and most likely beyond), NRC and the humanitarian community should consider ensuring it engages NSAGs as directly as security and the law allow, whilst leveraging existing community structures and maintaining high levels of community acceptance. Similarly, effective engagement strategies in both countries should seek more concertedly to strengthen and build upon existing local structures and networks to facilitate access and build relationships. In parallel, it is important to continue investing in inter-agency coordination processes that build shared knowledge and reduce competition between humanitarian actors. Such efforts will also increasingly be required with donors to ensure they endorse (and perhaps even support) future NSAG engagement, as well as provide the funding required to assess and expand operations in areas under armed group control.

This research also demonstrates the benefit from building or maintaining multi-layered engagement strategies that target different blocs within each armed group – including vertically (from frontline soldiers to leaders) as well as horizontally (between different factions, such as between civilian and military wings). Finally, this research also suggests there to be a need to strengthen in-country analytical capacity and foster more strategic internal approaches to engagement and humanitarian negotiation. Despite current efforts to engage NSAGs in a strategic, systemic and structured way, the "traditional" approach in both Afghanistan and Colombia has tended to be informal, often left to national field staff to broker deals. This has the potential to increase the risks for frontline staff whilst reducing institutional knowledge and the linkages that ensure access approaches align with programme and operational strategies. Strengthening the current efforts to be more systematic and strategic when approaching NSAG engagement will also feed into global knowledge and best practice that enable to access areas under the control of armed groups more quickly, more safely, and with greater impact than the organisation is currently able.

1 Introduction

Conflict dynamics in both Afghanistan and Colombia have shifted markedly over recent years, altering long-entrenched power structures, changing group interests, offering new opportunities for consolidating power, and transforming relationships between and within the NSAGs operating in each country. These developments have impacted the humanitarian access environment in Afghanistan and Colombia, requiring the humanitarian community to take stock of their approach to NSAG engagement and negotiation. The Covid-19 pandemic introduced an added layer of complexity to these fluid contexts, during which certain NSAGs appear to have leveraged the public health crisis to their advantage, potentially compounding the challenges facing humanitarians seeking to operate in areas under the influence of these groups.

This project aims to identify the evolving positions and motivations behind NSAG behaviour in each context. It seeks to map the impact on humanitarian access of recent contextual changes and any measures imposed by armed groups related to Covid-19. This research also aims to create an evidence base that identifies opportunities for refining NSAG engagement strategies in Colombia and Afghanistan, as well as to contribute with evidence and analysis to a more strategic engagement with armed groups.

This report considers ‘engagement’ to constitute the multiple ways in which NGOs and UN agencies interface with NSAGs to facilitate humanitarian access and the promotion of international norms related to the protection of civilians, including through direct or indirect dialogue, the use of intermediaries, building community acceptance, organisational positioning, or certain types of public messaging. ‘Humanitarian negotiation’ – a component of humanitarian engagement – is understood as “a process through which humanitarian actors seek to secure agreement from parties to a conflict for the safe and principled provision of assistance and protection for civilians facing humanitarian needs.”[1]

The use of the term ‘non-state armed group’ or ‘armed group’ is intended to cover organisations which bear weapons in the pursuit of their objectives that are not formally integrated into state structures. During the following discussion on Afghanistan, NSAG is used interchangeably with the more common ‘armed opposition group’ (AOG). In contrast, the distinction between NSAGs and gangs or criminal groups in Colombia is often unclear in practice, and indeed, is central to many of the operational challenges faced by humanitarian agencies in the country.

Section 1.1, below, details the research approach and section 1.2 identifies challenges and imitations faced by this project, including the complexity of each context, legal and security obstacles, time constraints, as well as discrepancies in the quality of data available for each focus country. Section 1.3 outlines the structure of this report.

1.1 Research approach

The initial phase of research involved an in-depth review of relevant literature on the conflict and access environments in Afghanistan and Colombia (including the border areas with Venezuela). The review also explored the interests and internal dynamics of key armed groups operating in each country, drawing primarily on publicly available data, such as humanitarian reporting, including from UN agencies and NGOs, specialised information products from ACAPS, INSO, and ACLED, as well as media and think tank reporting. Research also looked at the changing operating environment in each country to analyse the evolving roles and norms of armed actors, particularly related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and explored opportunities for engaging NSAGs.

It is important to note that the used data is relevant to the period in which this report was written and it is relevant also to the context ow writing. i.e. COVID-19 pandemic and it's impact on conflict dynamics in both countries.

The project team subsequently expanded the scope of the research by hiring two local consultants (one for each focus country) who were responsible for conducting field-level research, interviews, and analysis. In total, 49 semi-structured interviews were held with key stakeholders and informants (26 for Afghanistan and 23 for Colombia, see appendix 2). Informants were selected who were able to shed light on the behaviour and motivation of NSAGs in each country. Interviewees consisted predominantly of NRC staff, the staff of other humanitarian organisations, human rights actors, and analysts. Some interviews were also held with health workers, government officials, individuals working in the private sector, as well as community leaders.

1.2 Challenges and limitations

This research faced a number of challenges and limitations that impacted this analysis. NRC staff generously supported this research. Nevertheless, the organisation's operational complexity, combined with travel restrictions related to insecurity and the global pandemic, somewhat limited the ability of the research team to develop a more complete picture of operational challenges and engagement modalities. More significant, however, was the complexity of the context, constraints faced by participants, and the limited time available to conduct this work, as detailed below.

Complexity

Both countries were characterised by pronounced differences between areas. As detailed below (see local variations), local dynamics across Afghanistan varied enormously with a significant impact on approaches to engaging NSAGs. Colombia also saw dramatic disparities between regions and departments. More challenging, however, was the proliferation, diversity, and fluid nature of armed groups across the country (see complexity and contextual fluidity). These dynamics forced the researchers to make difficult choices regarding the level of detail required for this analysis versus the ability to contribute to country-wide strategic positioning. Given the broad scope of this multicounty research, local dynamics in both countries have inevitably been given less weight than they deserve.

Legal, reputational, and security constraints

The sensitivity of the issues at the centre of this research presented a range of legal, reputation, and security risks for prospective participants. These constraints undermined the ability of the research team to engage some types of actors and may at times have restricted the information which participants were willing to share. In Colombia, the research was conducted at a time when targeting killing were high. Similarly, a bombing campaign in the Afghan capital, Kabul, limited movements and increased the risks associated with this project. Individuals who were well-placed to speak on many of the issues on which this project focused – particularly local journalists, scholars, and researchers – were consequently less ready to do so. Representatives from the church in Colombia were also reluctant to participate in this research, despite their pivotal role in NSAG engagements across the country. Given the sensitivity of the issues touched on through this research, a degree of trust between the researcher and participants was necessary. The research team included one local researcher in each country who tapped into their existing networks to overcome some of the constraints outlined above. Where appropriate and safe to do so, NRC's attachment to the project was explained to help build trust and confidence. Some interviews were instead held remotely by the lead researcher to reduce perceived risks.

Uneven data and analysis

With decades of research and analysis on humanitarian engagements in Afghanistan, the following research is based on a plethora of secondary data. In contrast, very little research has been made public that looks directly at humanitarian negotiations and engagement with NSAGs in Colombia.

1.3 Report structure

This report provides an overview of research findings for each country, followed by recommendations that apply to both contexts. Section 2 describes engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan. It first details the armed group's response to Covid-19 (section 2.1), followed by an overview of how humanitarians typically engage its members, highlighting the role of communities and elders (section 2.2). Section 2.3 discusses the key challenges related to Taliban engagement, emphasising its increasing capacity and desire to exert influence over humanitarian operations, as well as changing national dynamics and local differences. It also highlights the limitations of community engagement, it suggests how divergent approaches within the humanitarian community can undermine NRC's position, and points to some of the risks associated with engaging the Taliban. Section 2.4 provides a forward-looking narrative of the expected engagement environment over the coming years and summarises the impact of Covid-19 on the context.

Section 3 explores NSAG engagement in Colombia. It first outlines the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the engagement environment, offering new opportunities for armed groups to expand and consolidate their control over communities, just as the government has retreated from rural areas (section 3.1). Section 3.2 provides an overview of the access environment, outlining key actors and groups. Section 3.3 discusses the primary engagement modalities across the country, emphasising the role of communities, and pointing to a range of local opportunities that could be leveraged in future. Section 3.4 outlines the key challenges to engaging armed groups in Colombia, highlighting the reduction of legitimacy-seeking actors, the declining viability of communities and other traditional interlocutors, as well as the emergence of 'micro-contexts' with distinct dynamics in each. It also outlines the legal impediments to engaging NSAGs in the country, as well as difficulties associated with weak command structures and the inaccessibility of counterparts. Section 3.5 describes the future engagement environment and summarises changes to the context brought about by Covid-19.

Section 4 provides a series of recommendations based on the preceding analysis, including the importance of engaging counterparts as directly as possible and at multiple levels, as well as building on existing community structures to maximise leverage and opportunities. It also points to the need to strengthen engagement processes internal to NRC, invest more in contextual analysis, and to continue to prioritise inter-agency coordination. Finally, section 5 concludes with a summary of the key findings related to changes to NSAG engagement brought about by Covid-19 and other contextual changes.

2 Engaging the Taliban in Afghanistan

During the two decades since the Taliban was toppled by the US-led military alliance, the group gradually re-emerged and continued to gain momentum throughout the 2010s. As of early 2021, one report estimated that the Taliban was in direct control of a fifth of the country, with nearly half of all districts contested.[2] Many areas that where nominally under government control nevertheless had only a minimal presence of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in urban areas.[3] One participant estimated Taliban influence had spread to over 90 per cent of the country, with another claiming the group would control the entire country before long. Indeed, research for this project demonstrated that Taliban influence already extends well into government-held areas, cementing their central role in relation to humanitarian access.

Interviews for this research confirm that territorial control for the Taliban had become hybridised through partnerships with local government officials and service providers, often constituting something of a competitive symbiosis rather than a binary or zero-sum proposition (see also increasing Taliban governance capacity, below). Taliban officials no longer appear to be determined to displace government counterparts, but often work alongside or co-opt official structures.

The following section details the impact of Covid-19 on the context, arguing that the pandemic has not fundamentally altered the Taliban's behaviour or interests, but has instead provided an opportunity for the group to consolidate and expand its control, demonstrate its legitimacy at the expense of the reputation of national authorities, and brought humanitarian actors and the Taliban closer together (section 2.1). Section 2.2 outlines the key engagement modalities deployed by humanitarian actors over recent years, emphasising the central role played by communities. It also provides a brief overview of a recent attempt by NRC to open an office in a Taliban-controlled area, Mizan.

2.1 Covid-19: Business as usual?

The first Covid-19 case in Afghanistan was reported on 24 February 2020 – the same week in which the US-Taliban deal was signed in Doha. The country's strained health system was quickly overwhelmed by the pandemic, and the virus spread relatively unchecked throughout the country. Amid minimal capacity to test for infections, health officials announced in April that up to half of Kabul's residents and nearly a third of the country's population had likely been infected.[4]

International actors reportedly hoped initially that the pandemic could open doors and build trust between the international community, national authorities, and Taliban officials. Yet interviews for this research suggest that alleged "missteps" in how the response was handled may have increased fractures between the groups and undermined the standing of some NGOs in the eyes of the Taliban. Some humanitarian actors were nevertheless reported to have effectively leveraged the pandemic response to reach out to health commissioners and district focal points.

Ongoing violence kept combatants on the frontlines and unable to socially distance. The conflict also continued to drain resources that could otherwise have been channelled into public health measures and undermined initiatives to contain the spread of the virus. Attacks on health workers and facilities also continued throughout the first half of 2020, "significantly undermining healthcare delivery," reported the UN.[5]

The Taliban response

The Taliban initially denied Covid had spread into areas under their control. Some members of the group were even reported to believe the virus was psychological warfare from the west. The AOG was nevertheless able to come to an understanding that allowed health actors to continue to operate in areas under its control.[6] Interviews for this research also suggest the Taliban had allocated 500,000 AFN (6,500 USD) per province for 14 provinces as part of the group's Covid-19 campaign. The armed group repeatedly rejected calls for a nationwide ceasefire, although did commit to a truce in heavily affected areas, in what one analyst described as a "de facto ceasefire" and evidence of "budding cooperation" with national authorities (findings that were substantiated through interviews for this research, as detailed, below).[7]

The Taliban also began to encourage people with Covid-19 symptoms to submit to testing at government hospitals. It launched an information and awareness campaign via social media, also holding village-level workshops. And the group distributed pamphlets advocating social distancing and the maintenance of proper hygiene to help check the spread of the virus.[8] The Taliban cancelled public gatherings, imposed quarantines in areas under its control for those suspected of having the virus or returning from abroad, and even asked people to pray at home rather than risk exposure by attending mosque. The armed group allegedly channelled their response through its 'health commission' and provincial public health officials.[9] Respondents for this research suggested, however, that field-level health focal points had limited authority and were unable to guarantee access or resolve administrative obstacles that impacted relief operations.

By the middle of 2020 Taliban leaders had announced that they would provide safe passage and guarantee the security of government health staff and NGOs working to prevent the spread of Covid-19. "All they have to do is ask for our permission," insisted a Taliban leader who purported to be the group's provincial public health director in Baghlan province, north of Kabul.[10] In early 2021 a Taliban spokesperson similarly insisted the group would "support and facilitate" a nation-wide coronavirus vaccination campaign.[11] Human Rights Watch questioned the impact of these measures, however, cautioning that many of the Taliban's initiatives in response to the pandemic had been neither enforced nor properly maintained.[12] Indeed, respondents generally perceived the Taliban's Covid-19 response to be driven primarily by their need for legitimacy, community acceptance, and their desire to undermine the government. Activities were therefore often seen as ineffective and superficial, designed more as a public relations exercise than a genuine public health. The Taliban was also understood to face significant capacity and resources constraints that made it unlikely it could have mounted a serious response to the pandemic, even if it had genuinely wanted to.

Covid-19 offered an opportunity for the Taliban who were "quick to trumpet their readiness [to combat the virus]."[13] Their legitimacy appears to be predicated (at least in part) on the group's ability to be *seen* to administer areas under its influence more effectively than national counterparts. The Taliban's rapid and public response to the pandemic (albeit, largely ineffective, according to both interviews and reports surveyed for this research), combined with their commitment not to fight in affected areas, suggests they were determined to leverage the virus to demonstrate its ability to act responsibly in the face of a global crisis.

For their part, interviewees suggested that communities were somewhat aware of the limited impact of the Taliban response. Yet, by facilitating government and NGO interventions in parts of the country, the Taliban appeared to have been able to claim a degree of credit for these initiatives. One participant described how the Taliban in one district in eastern Afghanistan, reversed a tax imposed on government cash distributions targeting pandemic-affected communities, following an appeal from local communities. Another participant in this research described how the Taliban were known to cover the costs of medical referrals to Pakistan for some individuals, allegedly bolstering their reputation among the poor. Another community member described how the group's response to Covid-19 was perceived in their area: "[the Taliban] have the speed of actions and responsiveness, which attracts the attention and admiration of locals."

The pandemic does not, however, appear to have fundamentally altered the group's interests or behaviour. Rather, as discussed further below, Covid-19 presented the Taliban with yet another opportunity to demonstrate its legitimacy as an effective governing force whilst undermining national authorities.

Health care under the Taliban

The Taliban response to Covid-19 appeared to be consistent with their approach to health care, more broadly. Taliban structures reportedly varied between provinces, based largely on available resources, the degree of control wielded by the group, and the strategic importance of an area (see also local variations, below). Generally, field level health focal points are responsible for a district or clinic and report to a shadow provincial health representative who is appointed by the health commission. Health focal points monitor clinics and health staff attendance, among other functions. They were widely described by respondents to be less influential than their military counterparts, meaning they were rarely believed to be able to guarantee humanitarian access or resolve access issues (see also opaque and fluid power structures, below).

The distinction between government-run facilities and those under Taliban-control appears to have become blurred in some provinces. During the armed group's response to Covid-19, field research found that local health authorities were at times working alongside Taliban officials – a dynamic that appears to have been in place prior to the pandemic. Ashley Jackson concluded in a 2018 report that Taliban health and education governance structures had often co-opted or augmented government services[14] – a trend supported through interviews for this research (see increasing Taliban governance capacity, below). And just as with education,[15] the NSAG appeared to have increasingly sought to control, influence, and take credit for the provision of health care in areas under its influence.

As with the Taliban's response to Covid-19, the group's health governance initiatives appear to have been driven in large part by self-interest rather than altruism. In addition, efforts to improve health care in areas under Taliban control were also reportedly linked to the armed group's desire to ensure their own fighters receive higher quality care, just as they saw the need to stem the spread of Covid-19 to protect their fighters.

2.2 Engagement modalities

The humanitarian community appears to rely heavily on local communities to negotiate with AOGs, but also engages bilaterally, where necessary (for example to resolve access incidents). Interviewees report that Taliban officials can be easily met and are often keen to engage humanitarians. Their increasing accessibility is thought to be related in part to the US deal which has meant they are no longer at risk of drone attacks. The group's increasing influence (see section 2.4, below), as well as its desire to demonstrate its legitimacy and viability are also understood to contribute to the receptiveness of Taliban leaders.

Systems and strategies for operating in Taliban-controlled areas appeared to be mature and largely effective. The relatively few access issues that have arisen over recent years were reportedly resolved by escalating the issue to the provincial or national level without significant operational or principle-level compromises. Participants generally perceived AOG engagement to be positive and productive in Afghanistan. One interviewee described the relationship with the Taliban as "very smooth." Nevertheless, this research suggests that an over-reliance on communities can transfer the risks inherent in humanitarian negotiation and can expose humanitarian activities to manipulation. Some participants also raised concerns over the tendency among humanitarian actors in Afghanistan to use so-called 'strategic staffing' (hiring staff to facilitate access on the basis of their identity or relationships) to expand their access. Such an approach can mean that access is reliant on one or a small group of well-connected national staff with minimal oversight and limited institutional connections. During Covid-19, most expatriate staff reportedly worked from home, making it even more difficult to monitor remotely and provide oversight.

The NRC case

Access for NRC tends to be negotiated at the field level through local security and access coordinators, with oversight and guidance from management. Obstacles encountered at this level are generally referred to the area office and then the National Access Adviser and Access Coordinator, if they cannot be resolved locally. This approach was widely considered to be effective. In addition, given the relative autonomy of field staff, management has a database system were regular reporting provide details of challenges, escalations and analysis for resolution to the identified problems.

The types of access issues raised with the research team included the seizure of humanitarian goods in transit, staff being stopped and detained *en route* (allegedly for failing to properly communicate their travel plans, for example), taxes being asked to humanitarian staff, requests for NRC to share beneficiary lists or include specific individuals and villages in planned activities, pressure to recruit specific staff, and localised objections to hiring female programme staff. Although challenging, NRC has managed to never cross any it’s redlines, and has kept operating based on internal and external rules and regulations. Further, blanket restrictions appear to be in place regarding the use of satellite phones and GPS devices in Taliban-held areas, presenting a significant security and logistical challenge. NRC has also faced refusals to permit expatriate staff to travel to certain areas. Ongoing hostilities also impacted the access environment during 2020, and women-focused activities and the recruitment of women were still felt to present issues for the armed group.

Communities have long been an essential go-between for the aid community in Afghanistan. They provide a degree of deniability and safety, and invariably have a greater awareness of the power structures and decision-makers within AOGs operating in their areas. Community leaders may also have leverage over armed groups due to their proximity and the desire for the Taliban to foster their own legitimacy among communities. Therefore, they can support organizations by acting as mediators when necessary. However, as communities are not obliged by the humanitarian rules and regulations, the engagement procedure with Taliban for provision of humanitarian assistance in their controlled areas is ultimately defined by the organisation. Communities have therefore frequently been able to negotiate what appear to be more favourable agreements than would be possible through bilateral negotiations. The Taliban have also proven to be determined to keep communities on their side. Indeed, the Taliban is often embedded within communities and have become part of the local social fabric in certain areas, giving elders a degree of protection when pressing for greater access and more favourable deals on humanitarian assistance. Moreover, civilian *shuras* – understood to be in place in each district and province under Taliban control – play a formal intermediary role linking the armed group with communities.

Interagency research on negotiation modalities in Afghanistan found that dialogue mediated through community and religious leaders was widely perceived to be crucial for enhancing the legitimacy and acceptance of humanitarian agencies. Communities often created a bridge between humanitarians and AOGs and were usually considered to have a strong capacity to influence the outcome of access negotiations, whilst also contributing to greater levels of accountability.[16] Most humanitarian actors have therefore incorporated humanitarian access as part of their community engagement strategies, which are complimentary to the more traditional organisational approaches, including regulations, humanitarian principles, red lines, dilemmas, risk management and the Do No Harm approach.

Yet several participants in this research pointed to the limitations of community-brokered access, as discussed below (see community roles).

2.3 Challenges to engagement

From Increasing Taliban governance capacity to de-facto authorities

Participants in this research generally perceived the capacity of the Taliban to govern areas under their control to have increased markedly over recent years. One immediate impact of these developments appears to have been the increased involvement of Taliban officials in humanitarian activities, as detailed below (see increasing Taliban involvement in humanitarian action). A further impact on Taliban engagement strategies relates to the consolidation of power within the movement. Interviewees generally conceded that negotiations between humanitarian actors and the Taliban have tended to be highly local and ad hoc – an approach that has been necessary due to the group's decentralisation, in which significant power was vested in local leaders. Amid the Taliban's efforts to centralise and tighten its control over the country, now that they are the de-facto authorities, these local and reactive engagement strategies are likely to become increasingly problematic. As power within the armed group is increasingly centralised, the access of communities to decision-makers within the group will decrease, thereby reducing their influence and undermining historical NGO engagement modalities.

There was disagreement among participants as to whether the Taliban were becoming more centralised or was trying to build decentralised structures and processes. Generally, however, evidence suggests that local counterparts were increasingly unwilling or unable to reach agreements on key issues or resolve access challenges, and instead would defer to their superiors, which often lead to significant delays. Where local deals may have been sufficient just a few years ago, access was generally understood by interviewees to be increasingly dependent on higher-level approvals, further reducing the influence of local leaders and communities.

Participants also raised questions around the armed group's ability to implement its own policies, suggesting it was limited by resource and capacity constraints that impacted its ability to effectively govern and take timely decisions – despite its aspirations to do so. Given regular communications gaps and complex power relations within the Taliban (see opaque and fluid power structures, below), multi-level negotiations appear to be increasingly necessary to guarantee humanitarian access (see also recommendations).

Increasing Taliban involvement in humanitarian action

Linked to the Taliban's increasing capacity and desire to govern, is the group's increasing involvement in humanitarian action. Research suggests that long-standing structures have only recently moved from rhetoric to become a reality. The group has reportedly become more organised in terms of humanitarian activities. For example, where it used to be possible to move ahead with ad hoc approvals, Taliban officials are now understood to routinely require specific documentation and approvals. And where phone calls and text messages were sufficient to constitute project approvals, the movement is reportedly becoming more bureaucratic, often demanding letters and paperwork.

The Taliban also appears to have become more prescriptive regarding the activities that can be undertaken whilst also becoming more demanding of the deliverables of these programmes (sometimes even requiring NGOs to provide evidence of their impact). Some interviewees reported increasing interference from the armed group with staff recruitment and beneficiary selection, although participants in other areas (particularly the west) reported little interference from the group. Humanitarians have also reportedly begun to receive appeals from Taliban officials to undertake certain activities in areas under their influence. Participants cautioned that this had introduced principle-level issues related to impartiality and independence. "The Taliban is really starting to feel like a shadow government," observed one interviewee. The group was widely perceived to be very strict with its demands: "if we don't adhere, there are consequences," reported one participant in this research, presumably in terms of travel denials, revoked permission to operate, increased taxes, or even a removal of security guarantees.

The Taliban had also reportedly become more determined to register NGOs operating in areas under their control. Some NGOs are fearful this could introduce reputational issues or create problems with donors. Others are reportedly concerned that registration will entail sharing project budgets and staff lists with Taliban officials, opening themselves up to direct taxation.

Whilst ideology continues to play a central role in Taliban decision-making, participants generally described a pragmatic shift within the armed group over recent years. These changes were widely attributed to a conscious break with the past and a desire among its leaders to govern the country with a degree of popular support and international legitimacy, leveraging health and NGO actors to do so. Local leaders within the group nevertheless appear to still enjoy a degree of autonomy that may explain divergent experiences between provinces. The capacity of the group to maintain and further centralise decision-making will also become evident with time.

Opaque and fluid power structures

Most participants conceded that power dynamics within the Taliban movement were complex, fluid, and often poorly understood by humanitarian agencies. Local staff in certain areas appear to have an excellent grasp of the relationships and positions of relevant interlocutors within the armed group, but this knowledge rarely appeared to have been shared within or between agencies. Moreover, participants felt there were still some areas of the country – particularly new areas of operation – in which few humanitarian actors had limited knowledge of local dynamics within the Taliban. This limited knowledge in some areas may have been compounded by the reliance of humanitarians on local communities and interlocutors, inhibiting humanitarian staff from developing stronger relationships and understandings. Whilst most humanitarian agencies were perceived to have limited institutional knowledge of local power dynamics and how they were likely to impact humanitarian engagement and negotiations, many national staff were nevertheless understood to have in-depth awareness of key counterparts and relationships – particularly those from the local area or those working in logistics, access, and security roles. Several participants also insisted that effective brokers usually exist within humanitarian agencies or the local community who could facilitate and mediate engagements with AOGs.

Marked regional and provincial differences were also apparent through the research, with lines of command at times appearing to be highly informal. Indeed, the Taliban movement is not monolithic, and local decision-making was reported to be influenced by personalities and individual relationships. These traits significantly impacted negotiations and led to significant variances in how policies were interpreted and implemented at the field level. Several participants, for example, stressed that NGO Commissioners – the official point of contact for humanitarian actors at the provincial level – were often not the best placed or most influential contacts. And as one interviewee stated, “it is very dangerous to rely too much on the written structure.” This lack of clarity and ambiguity reportedly makes it hard to know whose approval is needed, potentially leading to misunderstandings and delays. Access negotiations can also become inadvertently bound up in tensions or power struggles between Taliban officials, for example between rival civilian administrators and military commanders, or between an NGO focal point and district-level officials. In one case shared with the research team, approval was reportedly given by one faction to transport humanitarian supplies as part of the NGO’s response to Covid-19. Fighters aligned with a rival faction rejected the approvals, seizing the supplies and detaining the drivers. Other participants described similar risks but did not provide details.

This ambiguity can lead to marked local and regional differences in the ways in which Taliban leaders implement policy. The lack of clarity may however be (at least partially) by design, allowing the disparate movement to accommodate different positions on divisive issues as well as avoiding confrontation with international actors (whose support the Taliban appears to be increasingly concerned to maintain).[17]

There was also reported to be a disconnect between different levels of the armed group – both horizontally (particularly between military commanders and civilian officials) as well as vertically. Not all sections of the Taliban appear to be well connected with each other, meaning that information does not always flow quickly or effectively within the armed group. Some interviewees raised concerns, for example, that negotiations in Doha often did not translate to the ground, particularly when agreements were not written down and not shared with provincial and district officials. This feed into what one participant described as "constant confusion in the field." High level engagements through Doha therefore appear to be necessary but not sufficient to realise field level access.

Local variations

Access issues often appear highly localised. As discussed above, the ways in which the Taliban are structured and implement policies at the field level can vary enormously, meaning the issues over which humanitarians engage the group and the ways in which they effectively do so also vary significantly. High profile areas and areas of strategic priority also appear to be more subject to central control, according to interviews, whilst power is more decentralised in several more remote areas.

Relationships and power dynamics between provincial-level military and administrative officials were understood by participants to vary, depending largely on personalities and the specific context of each province. Generally, respondents understood military officials to be dominant within provinces witnessing ongoing armed conflict. Administrative officials were generally understood to exercise greater influence in areas with a more entrenched Taliban presence.

Western provinces appear to be more insulated from some of the developments and challenges outlined above. Participants were divided, however, on whether this constituted distinct dynamics or a delay in adopting centrally-derived practices and policies.

Disparate approaches: the two-level game

Several participants raised concerns over the divided approach to access and engagement with the Taliban among humanitarian actors in Afghanistan. When not properly coordinated, negotiations can involve a dual process of external engagement with counterparts as well as internal negotiations to establish each party's interests and positions: a so-called 'two-level game.'[18] The concessions agreed to by one agency may serve as a precedent for future negotiations by others – for better or worse.[19] And divided and inconsistent positions can significantly undermine the negotiating position of individual humanitarian agencies. One interviewee described the lack of a unified approach among humanitarians as the *main* access challenge currently faced in Afghanistan.[20] Many participants raised the issue of the sharing of beneficiary lists, the payment of tax, and influence over staff recruitment as being key issues on which NGOs had adopted different approaches, undermining the negotiating position of other agencies with the Taliban.

The dynamic of a two-level game (common in many humanitarian contexts)[21] appears to have been exacerbated by the maturity of the context. Many humanitarian actors have worked in the country for much of the two-decades of the conflict and appear to have little reason to discuss reflect on their approaches to engaging and negotiating with armed groups.[22]

Many NGOs also appear to have approached AOG engagement gradually, perhaps never making a strategic decision to negotiate bilaterally and instead finding themselves increasingly interfacing with Taliban officials out of necessity. Collective, coordinated, multi-agency approaches to Taliban engagement appear to have consequently been rare.

Community roles

Engaging through communities, community elders, or well-regarded professionals was widely seen as the primary and preferred modality for most NGOs in Afghanistan. This finding matches research conducted by the Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) in early 2019, which argued the predilection for indirect negotiation stemmed predominantly from a lack of understanding or clarity regarding organisational policies or procedures on NSAG engagement, concerns over donor compliance related to counterterrorism requirements, fear of harassment by national authorities, and concerns over staff safety or security from undertaking direct negotiations with AOGs.[23] These findings suggest that the central role that NGOs afforded communities was less of a strategic choice and more driven by necessity. Interviews suggest that few humanitarian actors appear to have reflected on the continued appropriateness of this modality.

As discussed above (see the role of communities), communities were seen to bring distinct advantages to negotiations with AOGs whilst reducing some of the risks. Communities were seen to bring their own leverage on the Taliban, often leading to more favourable agreements. As Jackson observed, “civilians may be better able to bargain with Taliban officials where they are internally united and coherent, and where customary governance structures are influential, respected and responsive to the demands of their constituencies.”[24] In contrast, however, the above HAG study found communities may be more vulnerable to interference by third parties and may manipulate humanitarian actors without direct contacts with the Taliban.[25] One participant, for example, shared an example in which they were unclear whether communities or the Taliban were behind proposed changes to an intervention. In areas in which the Taliban is less embedded in the local context, however, communities may be less able to establish access and provide the necessary security guarantees for humanitarians to operate.

Some organisation’s heavy reliance on communities introduces other risks. First, several participants raised concerns related to biased targeting, in which one community may be disadvantaged in a humanitarian response due to the central role played another. Others suggested that community leaders would sometimes press for interventions and modalities that were not considered priorities for humanitarian actors or were not in keeping with humanitarian principles. Indeed, one interviewee insisted that Afghan communities are not trained on humanitarian engagement and cannot fully defend or articulate key aspects of humanitarian action and humanitarian operations to AOG counterparts.

Perhaps more important, however, were concerns over reputation and risk transference. Many participants in this research acknowledged that negotiating through communities could result in a transfer of risk, thereby undermining the safety of community members or leaders. By placing communities at the centre of AOG engagement strategies, local leaders were at risk of either angering Taliban officials or of being subjected to government retaliation for their perceived proximity to the AOG. One example shared by a participant in this research led to community volunteers being detained when the Taliban grew frustrated with an NGO operating in the area. These challenges may be more pronounced in areas that have been more recently acquired by the Taliban in which community connections with the armed group are shallow. Participants nevertheless did not describe specific instances in which risk transference had directly harmed community members.

2.4 Going forward

Lessons from Covid-19 in Afghanistan

The Taliban were slow to meaningfully respond to Covid-19. Months into the pandemic response, however, the armed group appears to have seen the disease as an opportunity to further its interests. The Taliban was reportedly initially concerned that the disease could impact its members, compromising its ability to fight and administer areas under its control. The group also appears to have seen an opportunity to leverage its response to demonstrate its legitimacy, capacity to govern, build community acceptance, and undermine the government. These objectives open new opportunities for NGOs to engage constructively with the group, particularly on health-related activities.

Given the NSAG's limited resources and capacity, however, (and perhaps a lack of genuine commitment), its response has largely been perceived as shallow and ineffective. Nevertheless, its efforts appear to have been positively received by some communities, and the armed group appears to have derived a degree of legitimacy by facilitating NGO and government interventions. Leaders within the movement appear to be open and willing to build stronger and more direct relationships with NGO representatives, representing an opportunity for fostering higher-level and more strategic bilateral engagement. Some agencies, like UNICEF, leveraged this opportunity to establish formal commitments from Taliban leaders related to education and immunisation campaigns. It is unclear from this research whether or how other humanitarians have capitalised on this opening.

Covid-19 has fostered a competitive symbiosis between elements of the government and Taliban administrators. It has also thrust humanitarians and the Taliban more closely together, encouraging more NGOs to operate in areas beyond government control and affording the armed group an opportunity to leverage greater control over humanitarian operations.

3 Engaging NSAGs in Colombia

Colombia's conflict landscape was significantly altered when a peace accord was agreed in late 2016 between national authorities and the country's largest armed group, *Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The group began its transition to a political party the following year, marking an end to more than half a century of its armed struggle against the government. But FARC's dissolution left a destabilising power vacuum. Violence escalated across much of the country as new and existing armed groups attempted to fill the void, vying for control over former FARC territory. The ensuing turmoil prompted the International Crisis Group (ICG) to observe, "the country may be watching its tentative but hard-won progress toward peace start to unravel."[26]

Among rival NSAGs were dissident FARC members who formed nearly 30 new factions with new agendas. These NSAGs are largely perceived to have rejected the pretext of self-defence and the ideological underpinnings of the country's previous conflicts, and are understood to be driven primarily by their desire to control illicit industries like mining, logging, extortion, human trafficking, coca cultivation, and the drugs trade.[27] Their activities spilled across the porous border with Venezuela, introducing a regional dynamic to the crisis.

The arrival of Covid-19 in Colombia in early March 2020 further destabilised the country. By the middle of the month the government had restricted international arrivals, suspended schools, and began to impose targeted curfews in some areas. The president declared a state of emergency on 17 March and introduced a slew of economic measures intended to limit the impact of the crisis. The following week saw a nationwide lockdown that lasted until early September, whilst tighter restrictions were intermittently imposed in more heavily affected areas. Nearly one million people in Colombia had tested positive to Covid-19 at the time of research in late 2020, with over 28,000 confirmed deaths from the virus.[28]

The following section details how armed groups took advantage of the pandemic to consolidate their control and cement their dominance over communities (section 3.1). Section 3.2 describes the shifting access environment, and section 3.3 provides an overview of the key modalities through which humanitarians engage NSAGs in Colombia, focusing on the role of communities, the church, and local initiatives. Section 3.4 details the key challenges to engaging armed groups, including legal obstacles, the indifference of many groups towards their perceived legitimacy, as well as the declining viability of key interlocutors like communities and the church. It also describes the emergence of complex 'micro-contexts' that undermine efforts to engage NSAGs, as well as the weak chains of command and the inaccessibility of interlocutors within these groups. Section 3.5 suggests how the engagement environment is likely to change over the coming years, and summarises the impact of Covid-19 on the context.

3.1 Covid-19: Pandemic opportunism

At the most basic level, the response by Colombia's NSAGs to Covid-19 appears to have reflected their determination to ensure the virus did not spread among their ranks, thereby weakening their capacity to operate and fight. The pandemic also offered these groups an opportunity to consolidate their control over the communities under their influence by imposing strict measures in the name of public health. "Armed groups are using the public health emergency to exert more control over local populations," argued one journalist.[29]

NSAGs in Colombia responded to the pandemic by imposing their own lockdowns, curfews, and movement restrictions that at times prevented even the sick from leaving their homes. Some armed groups prohibited public gatherings and imposed isolation requirements on new arrivals from other states. Certain sectors and businesses were also prohibited from opening, whilst residents in some areas were themselves forced to implement the edicts of NSAGs by establishing health checkpoints, ensuring outsiders did not enter their communities, and enforcing curfews on their own neighbours. These demands were issued by way of public statements, social media pronouncements, or through pamphlet distributions. Breaches resulted in fines and threats of violence. And in at least five states, NSAGs were reported to have resorted to violence, including murder, to enforce their public health measures.[30] The largest remaining leftist guerrilla movement in the country, *el Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN, the National Liberation Army), cautioned in March 2020 that it may be "forced to kill people in order to preserve lives."[31]

Public health restrictions imposed by many NSAG's combined with a lack of economic opportunities and the preceding surge in violence had undermined the ability of many of the country's poorest communities to access essential services. ICG cautioned, "the pandemic has made the strangulation of rural communities yet worse."[32] Access to food for families living in poverty was also undermined during the government-imposed lockdown and the harsh restrictions enforced by NSAGs in some areas. The United Nations reported that more than 45,000 people were confined to their homes by mid-2020, with nearly 15,000 displaced by clashes between armed groups.[33]

Children were made particularly vulnerable through school closures and movement restrictions that left them even more exposed to recruitment by armed groups.[34] Indigenous communities were also among the most vulnerable to the effects of Covid-19. Some indigenous groups attempted to secure the areas in which they lived to prevent the introduction of the virus. These measures at times put them at odds with NSAG's looking to impose their own restrictions on areas under their control in the name of public health. The resulting tensions reportedly further isolated indigenous communities from accessing essential services – particularly Afro-Colombian communities living in the pacific region.[35]

Humanitarian access to conflict areas was also affected by these developments. Measures imposed by both the government and armed groups at times restricted the movement of humanitarian personnel. And increases in levels of armed violence in the leadup to the pandemic, combined with the growth of illicit activities, were reported to have further undermined access at a time where vulnerabilities were growing among Colombia's poor. Women have disproportionately experienced the effects of the worsening context, facing higher levels of displacement and increased levels of gender-based violence.[36]

Throughout 2020 participants described a growing sense that the peace process had failed. In parallel, the state has largely been perceived to have retreated further from remote regions and conflict areas amid Covid-19, compounding the perception among many communities that they have been "abandoned." This sense of an absence of civil authorities was cited as a compounding factor that fuelled recruitment by NSAGs among disillusioned communities. The pandemic also reportedly compounded existing crises facing communities across the country, particularly food insecurity, and access to education and health. Armed groups appear to have seized this opportunity to impose their own rules and measures to contain the virus, thereby undermining the credibility of national and local authorities and leveraging community frustrations. As Foreign Policy magazine summarised:

> The government's historic absence in the remote territories where illegal trades such as drug trafficking and illegal mining thrive has long put communities in the crossfire. The coronavirus pandemic lockdown has left them further detached from basic health services and food supplies. Armed groups are now capitalising on the fear caused by the pandemic to expand control over these vulnerable communities.[37]

Covid-19 also appears to have undermined the effectiveness of a key go-between with armed groups, *la Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia* (*Defensoría* or Ombudsman's Office, see engagement modalities, below), which was perceived to have become more partisan and less active since the public health crisis unfolded. More broadly, Covid-19 has reportedly eroded the few effective checks on armed groups that had developed: "the pandemic has weakened the presence of key actors to protect communities," insisted one participant.

Participants in this research suggested that the pandemic had kept some NSAGs apart, preventing them from forming lasting partnerships. In contrast, Covid-19 appears to have offered opportunities for other groups to weaken their rivals and carry out vendettas against their opponents. Some groups also appear to have been able to consolidate their control and become more robust, whilst others were reported to have used the absence of the state to band together and consolidate as larger and stronger fighting forces.[38]

Many communities expressed dismay at humanitarian actors who they perceive to "come and go," leaving them alone in moments of armed violence. Amid the worsening violence, these communities have increasingly demanded a more permanent presence.

3.2 Access environment

Colombia has witnessed a fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups over recent years, due predominantly to the vacuum created by FARC's demobilisation and the failure of the peace process to reintegrate former combatants. This dynamic was cited by virtually all interviewees as a defining characteristic of the crisis (see also complexity and contextual fluidity, below). The pre-2016 conflict environment consisted primarily of organised and structured groups that, by the time of research, had given way to an abundance of disparate armed actors – including dissident FARC groups, paramilitary groups, and criminal gangs, some with alleged links to international drug cartels – that vie for control over territory. Most are understood to be driven more by profit from illicit businesses than an ideology or political agenda, and few appear to consider themselves bound by the terms of the 2016 peace agreement.

Interviewees regularly asserted that the conflict in Colombia had deteriorated over recent years, evidenced by increasing levels of cruel and extreme forms of violence against communities, including massacres, assassinations, mass confinements, torture, forced recruitment, and sexual violence. Ethnic groups (indigenous and Afro-Colombians) were widely perceived to be the most affected. NSAGs were reported by interviewees to have routinely co-opted civilians and assassinated prominent community leaders in pursuit of social control. These groups also became more physically and structurally embedded within communities, undermining the ability of community members and leaders to speak up or report on the conduct of NSAGs (see also inaccessibility of counterparts, below). The success of smaller armed groups appears to depend in large part on their ability to dominate communities rather than their capability to directly confront the state. This has reportedly resulted in increasing numbers of incidents of confinement, and increased threats, extortion, and murder among communities and rights groups.

In parallel, there was a perception among many participants in this research that NSAGs have reigned in violence so as not to provoke a strong response from the state. They have reportedly adopted an approach of *violencia gota a gota* (drop by drop violence), in which acts of violence are no longer large scale or highly visible acts that attract the attention of the media or authorities. Rather, violence perpetrated by Colombia's armed groups has allegedly become more mundane, routine, and endemic. Most respondents believed that today's levels of violence and displacement rivalled or even surpassed previous higher-profile periods. Yet much of the impact of these contemporary forms of violence remain mostly unseen by outsiders and largely unreported, obscuring the scale of humanitarian needs across the country.

This degradation in the conflict environment has reportedly included cases of torture in Urabá, beheading and exposing corpses in Bajo Cauca and Sur de Córdoba, and brutal acts and exposure in the South of Cauca and North of Nariño, among many other types of incidents. One participant described this as a “return to forms of violent action that had not been seen for years.”

Participants widely shared the view that non-state armed groups were now active in almost all departments, their presence having been strengthened by the pandemic. Nevertheless, each region of Colombia appears to experience different conflict dynamics. The most affected areas were reported to be Norte de Santander, Bajo Cauca, Norte de Antioquia, and Urabá. In the Pacific, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca were also perceived to be heavily impacted. Putumayo and Nariño were cited by some interviewees as evidence of *violencia gota a gota*, in which targeted murders and family-by-family displacements regularly occurred with limited visibility from elsewhere in the country.

According to UNHCR, 86 events of mass displacement were reported in Colombia in 2020, affecting around 7,000 families (comparable to the previous year in which 83 events of collective displacement were recorded). In absolute terms, however, 26,500 people were estimated to have been confined in 2020, in contrast to 5,800 people affected four years earlier.[39] The areas most affected by these dynamics are reported to be Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander.

Many participants perceived national authorities to be under-invested in the peace process, demonstrating little commitment to take measures to reduce the escalation of violence. Moreover, several reported collusion between armed groups (particularly paramilitaries) and security forces.

Armed actors were reported to have regularly restricted humanitarian assistance in areas under their influence, often forcing humanitarians to cancel planned missions. Humanitarian assets were sometimes subject to theft, and staff had been robbed by armed groups in Buenaventura, Chocó, Urabá, Nariño, and regions dominated by the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (see below).

In previous years, most armed actors reportedly respected the presence of humanitarians as well as the United Nations. Yet recent reports of violence (such as car jackings and direct threats against UN officials) were cited as evidence of the changing nature of NSAGs in the country. Participants widely reported that the political cost of attacking UN agencies and personnel or other international actors no longer appeared to function as an adequate deterrent for armed groups: “the UN is no longer respected. [Armed groups] no longer care about their image but [want to] maintain their economic profits," claimed one interviewee. Several participants suggested there were areas where the ICRC could also no longer access, despite its historically high levels of acceptance among most factions.

3.3 Engagement modalities

Amid the deteriorating access environment, an ‘entry and exit’ approach to delivering humanitarian assistance in many parts of the country has been adopted, providing short-term assistance followed by withdrawal. Neither the state nor armed groups are perceived to welcome the long-term presence of humanitarian actors in conflict-affected regions. Yet many communities – largely beyond the protection of the state and highly vulnerable to armed groups – are reportedly requesting a longer-term presence.

Communities

Communities have long been central to humanitarian engagement with armed actors in Colombia. The government has assumed the power to negotiate with NSAGs, allowing only the Church and a select few actors to legally engage these groups. In practice, however, most communities (through their leaders), are reported to have established relationships and communication channels with armed actors operating in their area. In some cases, communities have even reportedly negotiated humanitarian agreements on access or demining. Some of these deals have also served as the basis for peace processes, such as the FARC agreement in 2016. National authorities are reported to have accepted these so-called 'pastoral dialogues' throughout the country, through which members of the Catholic Church address armed groups directly to establish minimum security guarantees for communities, or broker the release of hostages. These dialogue processes have served as an indirect channel and point of influence over many NSAGs in the country.[40]

During more than six decades of conflict and violence in Colombia, communities have built effective and resilient strategies for self-protection, often leveraging local and international advocacy opportunities. A study by conflict prevention and peacebuilding organisation, Conciliation Resources, concluded that these dialogue processes achieved successes because local actors leveraged national religious networks with significant influence over both society and the government, thereby fostering widespread national and international support. It also found international human rights and humanitarian organisations played a substantial role in these deals.[41]

Yet since the 2016 signing of the peace deal, much of the violence in Colombia has selectively targeted leaders and human rights defenders. This has led to significant losses in leadership and communications already established with armed actors and the State. Individual communication strategies with community leaders mean a more substantial risk and leave them visible to armed actors. Some communities have consequently established collective protection mechanisms – particularly for indigenous communities in Cauca or Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó.

Whilst these processes have been impacted by Covid-19, they are nevertheless perceived to be resilient due to their long-standing and enduring history, and therefore are reported to continue to offer opportunities for further dialogue over humanitarian norms and the de-escalation of the conflict in some areas. Indeed, most participants in this research emphasised the need for humanitarians to tap into local communication processes and agreements with armed actors.

In addition to communities, the church was almost unanimously perceived by participants in this research as a central actor. It was understood to have two key functions related to NSAG engagement. First, it serves as a neutral actor that is capable of convening parties to the conflict to reach agreements and is tolerated by the government. Second, the church has a presence in almost the entire country that it can leverage to engage all armed groups, especially areas affected by violence.

The 'Pact for Life and Peace'

Amid worsening violence throughout 2020 in the Pacific and Southwest of Colombia, more than 130 civil society organisations promoted the 'Pact for Life and Peace.' The initiative aimed to address the lack of compliance and implementation of the 2016 peace agreement and sought to bring humanitarian relief to the regions most affected by violence. The alliance also included sectors of the church and some institutions of the state, like regional governments and mayors. The pact was published in September 2020 and included the main concerns of communities related to the escalation of violence in their territories. It demanded that armed actors implement humanitarian ceasefires and guarantee assistance to vulnerable communities and included specific requests for 'territorial humanitarian agreements' to be reached with indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The Pact also urged parties to allow the resumption of humanitarian missions and demanded respect for the tenets of IHL. The impact of the Pact remains unclear, given it only came into force as research for this project began.

Leveraging local opportunities

Many participants insisted that national and regional dynamics differed so significantly that it rarely made sense to engage in country-wide discussions. They argued instead that it was necessary to focus on local contexts to determine the viability of establishing communications with armed groups and developing engagement strategies. Moreover, several interviewees suggested that humanitarian agencies should pursue highly local, time-bound, and specific humanitarian agreements with NSAGs, as distinct from engaging in broader negotiations. One participant reported some success with this approach in Chocó, Antioquia, and Córdoba.

Interviewees broadly agreed on the need to support and strengthen local communications initiatives with armed actors. Many also insisted on linking the church and neutral actors such as the ICRC through these initiatives, with several pointing to the potential for dialogue between communities and armed groups over humanitarian norms to open the door for peacebuilding.

Several participants in this research also stressed the need to maintain channels of communication through both la Defensoría and the church – both perceived to have the most significant presence and credibility on the ground. Indeed, the promotion of dialogue with armed groups through the nexus of communities, the church, and la Defensoría were perceived to offer a degree of protection against reprisals for community leaders and reduce the risks of stigmatisation by the state. Several interviewees insisted that an effective means to communicate with NSAGs had historically been through 'pastoral dialogues,' in which the community links the church as mediator and guarantor to avoid criminalisation and possible reprisals.

3.4 Challenges to engagement

Legal and reputational impediments

Colombian law restricts all parties, with the exception of representatives expressly authorised by the national government, from entering negotiations, signing agreements, or engaging in dialogue with armed organisations.[42] Those groups or individuals that engage NSAGs without the express permission of the president are vulnerable to incurring criminal charges. The Colombian Supreme Court of Justice appears to have substantiated this legal position, cautioning that holding meetings with the leaders of paramilitary organisations outside of government-sanctioned peace talks would amount to conspiracy to commit a crime.[43]

Some interviewees also warned of the negative perception across much of Colombian society towards NSAGs. Humanitarian and human rights organisations could consequently face hostility and reputational damage if future talks with armed groups become public. This was understood to both limit the strategic approach of humanitarian actors towards engagement as well as their ability to advocate for greater NSAG engagement.

Changed logic of violence

The most significant challenge to engaging NSAGs identified through this research was the shift among most armed groups away from pursuing specific political objectives and a political ideology. As detailed above (see access environment), recent patterns of violence perpetrated by armed groups in Colombia no longer appear to have a political end but are instead grounded in the need for each group to consolidate its control over communities – either as an end in itself or to facilitate its profit-making from illicit activities in the area. NSAGs have thus largely evolved from politically-motivated guerrillas to criminal enterprises, many of which are reported to be linked to transnational criminal and narcotics networks that have been reinforced through the opportunities afforded by Covid-19. Several interviewees reported a more visible relationship between conflict and the control of illegal economies, such as drug trafficking and illegal mining: "the relationship between coca and violence is now much more visible," argued one participant in this research. Cartels reportedly finance various groups, providing incentives for them to fight one another for supremacy within illegal economies in areas like Nariño, Cauca, Bajo Cauca, and Atlantic Coast. Some interviewees nevertheless cautioned that many armed groups do not appear to want broader alliances for fear of turning themselves into a larger target for government retaliation.

Participants widely perceived that the lack of political ideology among most contemporary armed groups rendered them non-negotiable. Some groups were also seen by interviewees to lack operating guidelines and rules, making them highly unpredictable and presenting a significant obstacle to engagement.

Several interviewees pointed to ELN, however, as something of an exception. The NSAG was still widely perceived to be motivated by a political agenda, thereby increasing the viability of engaging with the group on humanitarian issues.

Declining viability of interlocutors

Several participants expressed alarm at what they perceived to be targeted violence against community leaders and human rights defenders. Both the armed actors and the State reportedly stigmatise the role as mediators, requiring the support of the church as well as international organisations. Social organisations are also understood to have lost some of their ability to negotiate with certain non-state armed actors, such as AGC, with whom participants reported there to be virtually no dialogue from community leaders.

To overcome this challenge, humanitarian actors should consider promoting community strengthening actions and leadership for negotiation, perhaps through low-profile initiatives, where necessary. Community self-protection strategies could be strengthened if they have the support of human rights and humanitarian organisations. The support and accompaniment of representatives from la Defensoría and Personerías was also perceived by many participants to be essential to engaging NSAGs. Yet several interviewees also expressed concerns that the reach and credibility of the office had contracted during the pandemic, with others pointing to a perception that la Defensoría had been undermined by recent political appointees.

Despite its historical role, some interviewees believed the role of the church was also in decline, pointing to recent and unprecedented threats levelled against its representatives in some areas. This was perceived to have begun to undermine its ability to play a mediating role. Representatives from the church approached to participate in this research did not respond. The research team saw this as a strong indication of the institution’s growing concerns.

Complexity and contextual fluidity

A further challenge to engaging NSAGs in Colombia relates to complexity. Conflict dynamics, areas of influence and control, the armed actors themselves, as well as the relationships between them are subject to continual change. Even the strategic interests and leaders within most armed groups are understood to have rapidly and continuously changed since the 2016 peace agreement was reached. Moreover, the proliferation of armed groups can itself present an obstacle to analysing each area and operating within them. Participants reported that it can often be unclear which actors are present or who an interlocutor within an NSAG is and exactly what they represent (see also inaccessibility of interlocutors, below). Communities have reportedly witnessed an “explosion” of groups: “people we’ve never seen before. They walk through communities without an emblem,” insisted one interviewee.

Even long-standing groups are reported to have changed over recent years. The acts of violence of these groups are routinely understood to have become more unpredictable, driven by fragmentation and competition between NSAGs. In areas that have experienced recent conflict, participants generally cautioned against entering directly into dialogue with armed actors that were perceived to be particularly unstable and unpredictable. Even communities were reported to have few contacts with some of these groups and were unsure of the power structures, relationships, and even at times the perpetrators of violence against them. In other areas participants cautioned that engaging certain groups could generate greater violence against the community.

Factions within larger armed groups also appear to exercise a high degree of local autonomy. Whilst many participants perceived the ELN, for example, to be a viable interlocutor (see changed logic of violence, above), others cautioned that the group was not homogeneous. Indeed, there were reported to be significant variations between units, each of which was understood to exercise a degree of autonomy that could undermine the viability of engaging the group.

These elements of complexity and fluidity present significant problems for devising humanitarian engagement strategies. Many interviewees consequently stressed the need to analyse the local context rather than broader regional or national dynamics – what one respondent described as “micro-contexts.” Others suggested that humanitarian access could only be achieved through systematic negotiations with the leader of each unit or group: “commander-by-commander,” as one participant described the process.

Weak internal command

The fluid makeup and rapidly evolving composition of many of Colombia’s armed groups frequently lead also to weak internal lines of command and communication. Without sufficiently strong internal checks and controls, the outcome of any future negotiations held with a group’s leaders could be disregarded on the frontlines or may be ignored by other factions within the NSAG. It could therefore be problematic to rely on agreements reached with such groups – whether formal or informal.

Some actors such as the ELN or FARC dissident groups were perceived by interviewees to be more cohesive and more organised. Many participants consequently believed dialogue could be possible with such groups, depending on the specific areas and commanders in question. Nevertheless, as this research demonstrates, the conflict dynamics and power relations of each NSAG can vary from region to region (see complexity and contextual fluidity, above). The ELN, for example, was reported to have different structures and operations in Chocó from Catatumbo. One participant described NSAGs as “atomised groups with autonomy,” which often had little unity around decision-making processes.

Inaccessibility of counterparts

Interviews frequently reported that communities, leaders, and human rights defenders were increasingly silent about NSAGs active in their areas out of fear. Recent violence perpetrated by armed groups appears to have had a silencing effect on social initiatives. NSAGs have also effectively co-opted members of many communities, instilling a sense of fear: “the people are silent,” reported one participant. Another insisted, "people don't want to talk.” Other interviewees described how it was difficult to know who one can safely speak with.

Many communities affected by violence are also remote and lack effective communications infrastructure and connectivity. When humanitarian actors are not present in these areas, information can be particularly poor and often out-of-date. Several areas of the country are also reportedly affected by antipersonnel mines, like Bajo Cauca, which obstruct individuals from moving safely to share information. These challenges are widely perceived to weaken the relationships between humanitarian actors and affected communities, and to undermine early warning, analysis, and response activities. Delays in information and internal security constraints frequently delay responses – sometimes assistance may come weeks after displacement. In Chocó, for example, confinement and displacement events were often not known for several days as communities reportedly did not share information or record the events for fear of reprisals. Other interviewees related their inability to reach community leaders in Catatumbo and Chocó, with whom they had previously been able to speak regularly.

NSAGs may themselves be largely inaccessible to humanitarians: “armed groups are like ‘ghosts’ – it would be difficult to establish direct contact,” insisted one interviewee. Direct negotiations between humanitarian actors and armed groups are therefore likely to face significant logistical obstacles related to identifying and communicating with relevant counterparts, aside from the legal and security challenges of doing so.

Some organisations have undertaken initiatives like a “community-based early alert” system, designed to alert human rights and humanitarian organisation of emerging needs. For the most part, however, these are reported to have achieved only limited successes due to communication difficulties and restrictions related to the pandemic.

The humanitarian zone of Puente Nayero, Buenaventura

In Buenaventura (Valle del Cauca), one of the territories hardest hit by violence, there is an example of constructing a ‘Humanitarian Space’ from the community base. In several interviews, they mentioned the Puente Nayero humanitarian zone in Buenaventura as an example of organising and building a safe space to receive humanitarian assistance.

The Humanitarian Space was formed in response to the escalation of violence in Buenaventura when the FARC and residual groups of the Calima Bloc of the

Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) disputed territorial control. In 2013, the residual group “La Empresa” entered Puente Nayero and spread fear in the community, establishing some houses as their center for criminal activities.

In 2014, community leaders, with the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace support, and the Bishop of Buenaventura, entered the neighbourhood and established the “humanitarian zone free of armed actors.” The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures to the 302 families that made up the space and ordered the State to take steps to protect them. They are currently under threat from armed paramilitary actors and criminal groups fighting for control of this strategic area.

Despite the criminal threats and neglect of the State, the Puente Nayero area is an example of a community organization to achieve safe humanitarian spaces distinguished by the armed actors. The support of national and international human rights organizations is vital for its maintenance in a context of intense violence: "I trust a lot in spaces like Buenaventura: it is possible to overcome fear. We must trust in the capacities of the communities. Prevention and protection are sought from the visibility, international accompaniment, and field accompaniment of human rights organizations and the church.”

The Puente Nayero case is not a case of negotiation with armed actors but of community and social organisation at different levels, including advocacy strategies for making visible serious human rights violations. Several armed actors and criminal gangs persist in the territory, but the Puente Nayero community is an example of peaceful resistance and protection through international accompaniment.

Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space, Picture: Marta Castro, 2016

3.5 Going forward

Participants in this research agreed that the current levels of violence would likely remain alongside the continued growth and proliferation of armed actors. Most were not encouraged by the short and medium-term trajectory of violence in Colombia.

This return to the patterns of violence of previous decades and the so-called “Central Americanisation” of the conflict were widely anticipated to drive further changes in the makeup and relationships among NSAGs across the country. In parallel, the Colombian state was widely perceived to have neither the capacity nor the will to meaningfully address the factors that are fuelling the proliferation and success of NSAGs in rural areas. Under these conditions, few observers were optimistic about the viability of engaging armed actors or reaching humanitarian agreements. Indeed, most felt that in the current context of targeted killings, massacres, and forced displacement, bilateral negotiations with most groups were not realistic.

Nevertheless, several participants anticipated that the new US administration would likely increase pressure on Colombian authorities to revive the failing peace process. Over the short-term, the 2022 Colombian. presidential elections were also seen as a potential turning point. Several interviewees expected the status quo would continue if the *Centro Democrático* party of President Duque retains power next year. Indeed, they anticipated that the state would likely escalate military operations against NSAGs in the leadup to the elections. NSAGs were also predicted to scale up violence, seeing the election as an opportunity for their own expansion in the face of the government’s focus on re-election. Yet, a change in leadership could bring opportunities for increasing humanitarian space and engaging armed groups more strategically and directly than today. With further political commitment to the peace process, levels of violence could reduce, thereby weakening the degree of control NSAGs exert over communities. Some participants also pointed to historic agreements over humanitarian issues that had reportedly compelled the state and armed actors to negotiate, thereby reducing tensions and building trust.

Humanitarian organisations must still grapple with the combined effects of the power vacuum created by the 2016 peace agreement as well as the opportunities for consolidation and growth afforded armed groups by the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants widely argued that the most effective way to do so – regardless of the ways in which the conflict evolves – was to seek opportunities to strengthen social and community processes to reach humanitarian agreements with NSAGs. In particular, it was felt that humanitarians should support community initiatives that are already functioning, such as the Protective Houses of Antioquia or the humanitarian spaces established in Chocó and Buenaventura. Nevertheless, this type of initiative may not be viable in some areas in which armed actors have shown little interest in adhering to local agreements, particularly in areas under the influence of certain FARC dissidents. Moreover, these initiatives are likely to be undermined if the government does not make corresponding commitments (which do not appear to be readily forthcoming).

Some areas that have been largely abandoned by the state in which violence has escalated (such as Guanía, Vichada, Amazonas, and Putumayo) may also require a longer-term ongoing presence by humanitarian actors, rather than an entry-exit approach. For such activities to be viable, however, they will likely have to strengthen and be integrated into existing social processes. Strengthened inter-agency coordination was also widely seen to be vital for humanitarians to increase their field presence, building on one another’s local knowledge, analytical capacity, and contacts. It may also be beneficial, for similar reasons, to enhance coordination and analysis *between* related areas.

Lessons from Covid-19 in Colombia

As the government has largely retreated from rural areas amid the pandemic, NSAGs have seized the opportunity to expand their presence and increase their social control, leading to clashes among some groups and alliances among others. The pandemic allowed armed groups to adopt hard-line containment policies than underscored the ineffectiveness of the government whilst consolidating the control that these groups wielded over communities. The economic and social impact of Covid-19 also provided opportunities for armed groups to increase their leverage and recruit new members from hard-hit communities. These shifting dynamics have increased humanitarian needs and require humanitarians to take stock of the effectiveness of their existing engagement modalities. These changes also suggest that NGOs in Colombia should strengthen their ability to navigate and better analyse the contexts in which they operate, as well as coordinate more closely with other agencies.

Covid-19 eroded the few effective checks on violence perpetrated by armed groups. Human rights and humanitarian organisations severely restricted their field activities, creating ideal conditions for armed actors to flourish. It also undermined the effectiveness of key interlocutors like La Defensoría and reduced the moderating presence of activists and journalists in rural areas. Communities were left highly vulnerable to unscrupulous NSAGs, just as the role and effectiveness of the church was increasingly coming into question. Throughout 2020 and 2021, however, communities continued to pursue sophisticated and often seemingly-effective self-protection strategies. These opportunities are highly localised, but exist in some form in many areas of the country, offering opportunities for humanitarians to build on and leverage as part of broader NSAG engagement strategies.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Prioritise bilateral engagement (where safe and feasible)

This research suggests that there is reasonable success working through communities to convey messages to NSAGs in both Afghanistan and Colombia, managing to convey some key messages to NSAGs. Nevertheless, this approach introduces risks for communities themselves and can expose the organisations to manipulation. Moreover, the role of communities is diminishing in both contexts, requiring the humanitarian community to pursue more direct forms of engagement, when safe and legally permissible to do so.

Bilateral talks allow humanitarian negotiators to build direct relationships that facilitate trust, acceptance, and understanding between the two parties. By bypassing or working alongside communities, humanitarians can also receive security guarantees more directly and reduce their vulnerability to being manipulated.[44] Indeed, a 2016 study by Geneva Call on NSAGs perceptions of aid actors found that armed groups were uniformly averse to granting access without prior consultation, suggesting negotiated outcomes will likely be more favourable if agreed bilaterally.[45] It is nevertheless critical to retain community engagement and acceptance for agreeing to details and resolving low-level issues.

Finally, the above discussions related primarily to operational access. If protection is a central component, however, it is likely that direct engagement modalities will be the only way to effectively enhance the compliance of NSAGs with international norms related to the protection of civilians.

4.2 Mitigate risks from indirect negotiations

Engaging NSAGs via communities and community leaders require more attention to mitigating the risks of doing so. This may require the use of alternative interlocutors that are identified based on local dynamics. It may also entail a greater emphasis on collective community-led prosses that mitigate the threat to individual negotiators as opposed to relying on community leaders (particularly for indigenous Colombian and Afro-Colombian communities). Effective engagement strategies may also entail multiple interlocutors, for example using la Defensoría, Personerías and the ICRC community leaders, as well as the church in Colombia. Efforts should be made, however, to reduce risk transference, whereby communities bear the dangers of engaging armed groups over humanitarian norms. Efforts to promote community self-protection mechanisms, such as the Pact for Life and Peace, were also widely seen as key in Colombia.

4.3 Capitalise on the legitimacy-seeking aspirations of NSAGs, where present

This research demonstrates that the pursuit by armed groups of domestic and/or international legitimacy can provide opportunities for engaging them on humanitarian issues. Most NSAGs in Colombia were perceived to have little or no desire for community acceptance and little need to enhance their domestic legitimacy. Some, however (most notably ELN), continued to pursue a political agenda that was perceived to require a degree of public support. This was widely reported to present an opportunity for humanitarians to directly or indirectly engage the group to press for greater humanitarian access or the protection of civilians.

In contrast, the Taliban's growing need for both domestic and international legitimacy, as evident during its more recent responses to the pandemic, was widely perceived to introduce new opportunities for humanitarian engagement. Some agencies leveraged this opening to secure humanitarian agreements with the armed group throughout 2020. Largely, however, the humanitarian community in Afghanistan does not appear to have capitalised on the AOG's newfound openness in relation to health interventions and other humanitarian activities.

4.4 Build on existing structures

Participants regularly stressed the need to strengthen and build upon existing structures to enhance NSAG engagement. In both Afghanistan and Colombia, this generally entailed working though communities whose systems and coping mechanisms had evolved alongside decades of conflict. In Afghanistan, district-level civilian representatives and *shura* may be similarly important to strengthen. Social structures in parts of Colombia have been more directly contested and are reportedly often in need of greater support. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the need to continue to strengthen the work within these communities and community structures, and to leverage the self-protective initiatives they have already put in place.

4.5 Deploy multi-layered engagement strategies

Humanitarian actors should deploy multi-layered engagement strategies to reduce the impact of the complexity and fluidity of NSAGs. This research demonstrates that humanitarian access can rarely be secured by engaging one individual or unit within an armed group. Instead, these groups must be engaged at multiple levels, both vertically (from frontline soldiers to leaders) as well as horizontally (between different factions). Different types of issues will also have to be addressed at each level, with complex and sensitive issues likely requiring escalation to more senior members of an armed group. Multi-layered engagement strategies can also help reduce personal tensions and keep field-level counterparts in check if they know more senior members have already endorsed a particular course of action.

In Afghanistan, for example, respondents emphasised the need to negotiate approvals in Doha as a precursor to local-level engagement. Similarly, systematic engagements at the district, provincial, zonal, and central level appear to be more effective at securing agreements over humanitarian access. Whilst participants did not share examples of engaging both civilian and military officials within the Taliban, the frequent disconnect between these two sections suggests there would be value in doing so.

Multi-layered strategies in Colombia will likely look different (although if NRC is able to foster bilateral engagements with certain groups, lessons from Afghanistan and elsewhere may well be relevant). Instead, NRC may look to target NSAG engagements through multiple stakeholders that are able to reach multiple levels within a group. Community leaders, journalists, and local government officials may be in a position to engage field commanders, whereas the church, human rights and social organisations, academics, or environmental groups might have other avenues worth pursuing.

4.6 Strengthen and formalise internal negotiation protocols

Frequently, interviews suggest that field staff often engage NSAGs in the manner they deem most appropriate, often lacking formal guidance and oversight. This has reportedly reduced connections between approaches to humanitarian access and longer-term programme and operations strategies. This also risks leaving national staff exposed if relationships deteriorate. Moreover, these field-led processes forgo opportunities for NRC to learn from what works and what does not, and apply these lessons elsewhere.

4.7 Continually explore and evaluate alternative access modalities

Humanitarians should continually explore alternative access modalities that allow it to remain relevant and responsive to evolving needs. As a complement to the preference for direct programme implementation, alternative modalities can increase options and improve quality. Local partners may be appropriate in some contexts, whilst a greater emphasis on remote monitoring and evaluations, the private sector, or cash assistance and vouchers could overcome access challenges and strengthen bargaining positions. In Colombia, for example, it might be possible to operate through so-called ‘humanitarian corridors’ in Chocó, Antioquia, and Córdoba, or ‘protection houses,’ as in Antioquia. Whilst the risks of implementing these protective houses may be high in areas experiencing regular clashes over territory or controlled by criminal groups with little respect for prior agreements, such as Cauca, Nariño, and Chocó, in other regions there appear to be land-sharing agreements that could favour humanitarian agreements, despite the fluidity of the conflict. And in Afghanistan, cash does not currently appear to incur a tax from the Taliban in all areas (although one participant raised concerns that this may change). Private sector operators already offer a popular transport and distribution channel across frontlines in Afghanistan.

4.8 Enhance strategic and coordinated approaches to NSAG engagement

Given the rapid and ongoing contextual changes, the multitude of armed actors (especially in Colombia), and the complex local dynamics in both countries, The humanitarian community should strengthen in-country research and analytical capacity. This function should focus largely on analysing conflict trends and evolving dynamics within and between NSAGs across each country to inform access and engagement strategies, and should map centres of power and influence of each armed actor to support micro-targeting and local operating approaches.

In parallel, efforts should continue to seek opportunities to strengthen the capacity of the humanitarian community in both countries to engage effectively with NSAGs and share best practice among organisations. There was a perception among participants that access and NSAG engagement had tended to be overly reactive, forgoing opportunities to be more proactive and strategic. Organisations should thus explore opportunities to build internal negotiation capacity, drawing on national, regional, and global resources. As part of this process, it’s important to consider holding a workshop to refine their access and NSAG engagement strategies and processes, ensuring they are aligned and support the objectives of programmes and operations teams. These workshops could help to validate and operationalise the findings of this research and should form the basis of multi-year access and engagement strategic planning that reflects anticipated operational needs and likely contextual changes. As part of this process, the humanitarian community should continue to work to overcome the taboo associated with engaging NSAGs (particularly in Afghanistan) to foster more open dialogue between agencies and solicit greater buy-in from donors.

5 Conclusion

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Colombia have undergone significant changes over recent years, with each country seeing a dramatic shift in the role and makeup of non-state armed groups. These groups were offered new opportunities to expand and consolidate their influence through the global pandemic of 2020. Covid-19 did not, however, significantly alter the interests or behaviour of NSAGs in Afghanistan and Colombia. Rather, it enhanced pre-existing patterns as armed groups attempted to consolidate their control, demonstrate their legitimacy, and undermine the state, even to the point of taking over.

Despite these similarities, however, a key difference between the Afghanistan and Colombia relates to the role of legitimacy in shaping humanitarian engagements with NSAGs. Community acceptance and domestic as well as international legitimacy appeared to be central to the Taliban's positioning and its response to Covid-19. This offers NGOs opportunities to establish relationships with the group and advance humanitarian norms. In contrast, armed groups in Colombia are increasingly hostile to the communities around them and have leveraged the pandemic to dominate and co-opt civilian populations. Humanitarians are therefore left with little leverage and few options, and must therefore build on opportunities created by other actors with more influence.

As the Taliban continues to consolidate its influence across Afghanistan it will attempt to exert greater and more consistent control over humanitarian activities. This will likely present increasingly frequent principle-level issues for humanitarians related particularly to independence and impartiality. Humanitarian actors will therefore need to become more adept at engaging them more directly and managing its demands through multi-layered negotiations that do not overly rely on communities. Negotiated outcomes will also depend, in part, on the ability of different humanitarian agencies (and donors) to coordinate more effectively with one another on engagement strategies, contacts, and red lines.

In Colombia, the fragmentation and contextual fluidity will continue or increase over the coming years. The proliferation of NSAGs, their constantly-evolving structures, and their fluid alliances, were perceived to undermine both the viability of negotiation process and the political will to pursue them and take them to a successful outcome.

As the viability of both communities and the church to serve as effective interlocutors declines, the aid community will have to broaden its engagement strategies to draw in new actors, like la Defensoría. Humanitarians should also look to strengthen and leverage existing self-protection mechanisms adopted by communities over decades to cope with violence. Collective measures and short term, local agreements have proven to be viable modalities in many conflict-affected rural areas.

Agencies must also remain willing to temporarily withdraw from certain operational areas as a last resort if NSAG engagement strategies fail.

In both countries, engagement strategies will have to be highly localised and tailored to the unique (and fluid) dynamics of each province, department, or district. There is a need to become more strategic in its approach to NSAG engagement to provide greater oversight, minimise risks to individual staff members, and ensure greater consistency between access, programmes, and operations. More strategic and systematic approaches to engaging armed groups will also enable negotiators to learn from other operations in other contexts and to contribute to global best practice, rather than limiting learning to only those individuals directly involved with each engagement.

Ultimately, effective engagement strategies require a profound understanding of the interests and behaviours of one’s counterpart. This project is a step in this direction. Humanitarian access and NSAG engagement strategies will also benefit from enhanced analytical capacity at the local level that is connected to national and global capabilities.

Annex 1: Abbreviations

AGC	*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AOG	Armed opposition group
AUC	*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*
ELN	*el Ejército de Liberación Nacional*
ELP	*Ejército Popular de Liberación*
FARC	*Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*
HAG	Humanitarian Access Group
JOP	Joint Operating Principles
NSAG	Non-state armed group

Annex 2: Research participants (coded)

CODE	ORGANISATION / INTERVIEWEE PROFILE	AREA
AFGHANISTAN (26)		
AFG101	NRC	Kandahar
AFG102	NRC	Herat
AFG103	NRC	Kabul
AFG104	NRC	Faryab
AFG105	NRC	Kabul
AFG106	NRC	Kabul
AFG107	OCHA	Kabul
AFG109	Academic	Afghanistan
AFG201	Aid contractor	Kabul
AFG202	DACAAR	Faryab
AFG203	Private sector	Country-wide
AFG204	Private sector	Wardak
AFG205	Researcher / analyst	Jalalabad
AFG206	Community leader	Kunar
AFG207	Community leader	Laghman
AFG208	Directorate of Local Governance	Herat
AFG209	Community member	Kunduz
AFG210	Director of Health	Wardak
AFG211	Researcher / analyst	Balk, Samangan, Jawzjan
AFG212	Researcher / analyst	Kabul & Parwan
AFG213	Private sector	Kapisa
AFG214	Former researcher / analyst	Jawzjan
AFG215	Education Department	Helmand
AFG216	NRC	Faryab
AFG217	NRC	Balkh
AFG218	NRC	Nangarhar
COLOMBIA (23)		
COL101	NRC	Bogotá
COL201	NRC	Bogotá
COL202	UNHCR	Bogotá
COL203	Amnesty International	México

COL204	Oxfam	Bogotá
COL205	NOMADESC	Cali
COL206	Indepaz	Bogotá
COL207	Coljuristas	Bogotá
COL208	Chocoan Women’s Network	Quibdó
COL209	AFRODES	Cali
COL210	Somos Defensores Program	Bogotá
COL211	International Crisis Group	Bogotá
COL212	CRIC	Cauca
COL213	OHCHR	Bogotá
COL214	Ombudsperson office	Bogotá
COL215	Insight Crime	Bogotá
COL216	Ombudsperson office	Bogotá
COL217	Human Rights Watch	Bogotá
COL218	ConCiudadanía	Chocó
COL219	Peace Brigades Colombia	Bogotá
COL220	SweFor	Bogotá
COL221	NRC	Pacific
COL222	NRC	Northeast
COL223	Truth Commission	Chocó
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