

# GUIDANCE NOTE

## MEASURING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS SEVERITY

**Analysing access to hard-to-reach (H2R) areas is a challenge for both the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the wider humanitarian community. Measuring levels across diverse settings is difficult because the local realities that determine access must be abstracted enough to be comparable. Such an exercise, however, allows any organisation that relies on access to understand its reach and what limits it, and to target and prioritise with a standardised birds-eye view that would otherwise be impossible. The value of access severity snapshots lies not only in organisational knowledge, but also informed decision-making in the humanitarian programme cycle, which does not currently do enough to integrate access into its planning steps.**

This guidance note describes the methodology NRC uses to measure the severity of the access impediments it faces in its areas of operation. It also provides advice on data collection and associated topics for organisations that want to replicate it or develop their own access indicators.

### Access indexing

NRC defines humanitarian access broadly as our ability to reach people in need and their ability to reach our services. More specifically it is the extent to which people in need can reach humanitarian services safely and with dignity, and the extent to which we can reach people in need to assess, plan, implement, deliver and monitor aid in a principled way. This is based on the definition of access set out by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which understands access as a two-sided concept. The access indicators NRC uses also reflect this concept.

NRC uses a composite index to measure access severity. Indices are numerical representations of the characteristics of a reality, and they are used widely in economics, social sciences and other fields. To build ours, we break down the concept of access into concrete indicators that are easier to measure, and then aggregate them back into an overall measurement. OCHA does similar with its [access, monitoring and reporting framework \(AMRF\)](#), on which our conceptual framework and indicators are based.

Other organisations, such as the Danish Refugee Council and Action Against Hunger, have their own indices to measure access severity, with varying sets of indicators. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has also put forward guidance on how to classify a group of access impediments known as bureaucratic and administrative impediments (BAIs)<sup>1</sup>. Our methodology uses the IASC classification.

1 IASC, [Guidance Understanding and Addressing Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian action: Framework for a System-wide Approach](#), 2022

## NRC's methodology

Our methodology to measure access severity starts from its breakdown of the issue across two dimensions, as described above, and three types of impediments. Each dimension has a set of seven indicators intended to capture the range of impediments that we and people in need encounter. Two refer to BAI, two to conflict-related impediments, and three to logistical and climatic impediments. The table below provides an overview.

We use an expert review amongst our staff knowledgeable of each area to be assessed to generate scores for each of the 14 indicators. They rank the indicators on a scale of one to five in a coding workshop with help of a facilitator. The higher the number, the greater the access constraint.

1	2	3	4	5
Inexistent or not impeding access	Limited impact (delays) on access	Impact (delays, limitations, or principle deviations) on access	Severe impact (delays, limitations, or principle deviations) on access	Extremely severe impact (delays, limitations, or principle deviations) on access

The scores given to each indicator reflect the severity of the impediments they represent. They are not calculated by counting events in which the impediment occurred, because its severity is not determined by its frequency but rather by its intensity and impact. An impediment may occur often but be of little consequence for our ability to reach people in need, for example, or it may be much less frequent and yet cause severe disruption. The consequence of each impediment is determined by the degree to which it obliges NRC or people in need to deviate from unrestricted access. As an example of interference, a local authority might demand to inspect or amend a list of beneficiaries. This might happen regularly but be of no consequence because staff are able to deny the request without further problems. Or it may happen only occasionally but with relatively severe consequences, if the authority does not accept the denial and any attempt to negotiate leads to escalation, threats or any other outcomes that oblige us to deviate from our plans. We have developed guidelines and examples to help scoring staff understand this difference.

Similar reasoning applies to conflict-related impediments. Small-scale but frequent criminal activity such as thefts are access concerns that will have a degree of impact, but it will be far less severe than a much rarer targeted armed attack against vehicles with visibility.

The unit of analysis we use for the scoring is the second or third level administrative subdivision of each country. The realities that impede access often occur at different levels, from the national to the municipal. To keep the measurement feasible, however, we average out any impediments occurring within these subdivisions, also known by geographic information system (GIS) analysts as admin 2 and 3. In Niger, for example, they correspond to each of the country's 36 départements, while in Norway the equivalent would be the country's 357 kommuner.

The access severity score or hard-to-reach score, terms that are used interchangeably, brings together the two dimensions of access and the three types of impediments.

- The score for each type of impediment is the weighted average of all indicators from both dimensions that make up that type. The weighted means are calculated by dividing the sum of the indicators multiplied by their weights, by the sum of the weights.
- The access score is the maximum value out of the three scores for each type of impediment.

## Compared: NRC's conceptual access framework and OCHA's AMRF

People in need's access	ARMF equivalent	Dimensions	NRC's access	ARMF equivalent	Types of impediments
Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or entitlements to assistance	Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or of entitlements to humanitarian assistance	Indicators	Restriction of movement (staff, goods) into & within the area	Restriction of movement of agencies, personnel, or goods into the affected country. AND 3. Restriction of movement of agencies, personnel, or goods within the affected country.	Bureaucratic and administrative (BAI)
Restriction and obstruction of access to services and assistance	Restrictions on, or obstruction of, conflict affected populations access to services and assistance		Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities	Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities.	
Violence threats or violence against people affected or in need	Military operations and ongoing hostilities impeding humanitarian operations		Violence threats or violence against humanitarian personnel, facilities, and assets	Violence against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities	Conflict
Presence of landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosive remnants of war (ERW), and unexploded ordnance (UXO)	Presence of Mines and UXO.		Presence of landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosive remnants of war (ERW), and unexploded ordnance (UXO)	Presence of Mines and UXO.	
Terrain and climate barriers and obstacles	Physical environment		Terrain and climate barriers and obstacles	Physical environment	Logistic and climate
Infrastructure barriers and obstacles	Physical environment		Infrastructure barriers and obstacles	Physical environment	
Communication and connectivity barriers and obstacles			Communication and connectivity barriers and obstacles		

Indicator score	Weight
1	1
2	1.25
3	1.5
4	1.75
5	2
<b>Access score</b>	

Accessible and restricted areas			Hard-to-reach areas	
1	2	3	4	5
Unrestricted access	Slightly restricted access	Restricted access	Severely restricted access	No access

The weighting system emphasises greater over lesser values, priming constraints over other indicators with lower scores. The goal is to capture the increase in access severity that each element creates.

Two indicators, the “restriction of movement (staff, goods) into & within the area” and “interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities” capture impediments that may arise either from national-level issues, such as visa denials, or from area-level circumstances, such as poor relations with de facto or local authorities. To reflect this, the scoring for each unit of analysis in these two indicators takes either the area or the country-level score, whichever is higher, meaning more constrained.

The score for these indicators within each assessed area is decided as described above. Their score at the country level is the weighted average, with the same weight table as presented above, of the items in the table below, rated on the same one-to-five scale. The seven elements are taken from the IASC guidance on BAIs.

Restriction of movement (staff, goods) into & within the area	Registration and MoU	Complex, costly and time-consuming registration and/or MoU process for the organisation. Registration, re-registration and/or MoU approval denied or randomly assigned.
	Entry requirements	Constraints on visa/permits for international staff.
	Importations and customs Impediments to transport of essential relief	Constraints on imports of relief items or equipment. Taxes, fines or quotas on the passage of goods to reach people in need.
Domestic movement restrictions		Cancellation/postponement of field visit/work-related travel. Constraints on internal travel to the affected areas. Requests to use armed escorts or protection.
Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities	Administrative delays or refusals	Extensive reporting requirements. Unclear & lengthy administrative processes and procedures. Constraints on communication equipment.
	Human resource management	Constraints on independent recruitment.
	Interference	Programmatic interference (usually by political or military actors) with humanitarian activities during or after their implementation. This may include pressure to work in specific geographic area or insistence to link humanitarian assistance to a specific political or military agenda.

## Implementing an access severity index in practice

Because an access severity index is based on the expert knowledge of frontline staff rather than a count of events, their understanding of the concept of severity is paramount, as is their capacity to point out differences between the areas they cover if they exist, particularly for indicators that tend to have similar scores across more than one area, such as the denial of needs or those related with other attitudes of authorities.

To understand the concept of severity, it helps to keep in mind that for BAIs and conflict-related impediments the intent of the originator matters. Crossfire incidents are serious, for example, but they tend to have less impact on our reach than targeted attacks against us or people in need.

It also helps to address any preconceptions staff may have about access. They often believe, for example, that it relates only to remoteness or insecurity, discounting BAIs and the obstacles that authorities or non-state armed groups (NSAGs) impose on people in need on their way to receiving our services. This indicator captures impediments such as authorities asking people in need for excessive documentation, discrimination, and coercion not to participate in certain types of programme, such as protection.

Another element to consider is that any methodology which gives an access score to a predefined geographical area, such as administrative divisions in our case, will have to integrate differences among the populations present in the territory. Having defined areas is a necessity because any index is based on units of observation, but capturing the multidimensional nature of access in a single score can produce counterintuitive results.

An urban area free of conflict and logistical hurdles, for example, may still be affected by intractable BAIs that produce a very high access severity score. This might be the case when governments unequivocally deny entry visas or travel permits. If the area is occupied by a population that is heavily discriminated against, it may lead to severe BAIs next to areas with unimpeded access. If there are variable proportions of people affected by BAIs and those that are not within the same area, then the scoring as proposed in our methodology should balance these against each other. Such losses of contextual nuance are a necessary evil that allows us to build an index that is comparable at a much larger scale.

It is also important when scoring not to discount the anticipation that often guides an organisation's actions. If, for example, it has decided to target an area that is being evaluated for conflict-related impediments, what matters for access severity is the extent to which the area is safe enough to reach according to its own evaluation. Staff will not encounter conflict-related incidents if they do not go in anticipation of them being too likely. What defines the consequences in terms of access is this anticipation, rather than whether staff do or do not encounter incidents.

Assessment workshops should provide time to review these nuances, introduce the different types of access impediment and contextualise them. They should be held, whether online or in person, but with participants having work posts as close as possible to the origin of the impediments, so that they have encountered impediments themselves. In most cases this is likely to mean more than one workshop in any given country. We find that these sessions tend to last between three and four hours, depending on the how many areas need to be assessed.

The workshop should be led by a facilitator who is very familiar with the methodology, and participants should ideally represent a cross-section of staff who can collectively speak about all the indicators under consideration. This might include an area manager and a mix of programme, support, and security staff.

It is useful to divide the workshop into two parts. In the first, the facilitator explains the access framework and tools and discusses an example to help participants think the process through. In the second, the participants discuss each indicator. It is quicker to structure the discussion by indicator and then cover all areas for each one, rather than vice versa.

As discussed above, the “restriction of movement (staff, goods) into & within the area” and “interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities” indicators are assessed twice, at the area and the national level. We suggest holding a separate workshop with members of the management team to do the national-level evaluation.

Once the data has been gathered through these workshops, it is useful to validate it. We have done so within our methodology. We use a two-step process to do so. First, we cross-reference it with the open-source event-type datasets of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS). Although the relationship between the frequency and severity of access incidents is not linear, checking for correspondence provides an indication of whether staff have evaluated their access landscape using similar criteria.

Second, we put the data through review by access experts. This is necessary because teams may evaluate similar situations differently, or be prone to biases, for example normalising impediments that are very frequent and discounting their consequences. Levelling these differences is important for the validity of the index.

## Assessment results for NRC in 2023

### Overall findings

The main obstacle to NRC’s operations worldwide is bureaucratic and administrative impediments. They include barriers that authorities impose on our movements and scope of work or independent decisions in targeting, recruiting, or procuring. Although these interferences occur frequently, they do not pose the most significant threat to our operations, as offices address them through negotiation. Some forms of interference, however, can be highly disruptive. In Afghanistan, the country-wide ban on national female staff working from our offices blocks part of our operational capacity. Other forms of BAI, such as movement restrictions that hinder programme delivery, may occur less frequently across country offices (COs) but are more challenging to resolve in the places they do arise. They include the restriction of movement into certain areas, or the continual need to seek permits.

BAIs might arise from national or local authorities. In Libya and Myanmar, the refusal to grant visas for international staff limits our access to the whole country. In Iran and Sudan, it is national-level authorities which impose access impediments into some areas, while in other contexts such as Burkina Faso, local authorities have diverging attitudes that create within-country disparities in our access levels. These differences are often given by diverse state capacities or levels of administrative centralization. In several African countries, the need to negotiate the same programming with several governance levels increases greatly the costs of securing access. The BAI access landscape also includes impediments that authorities impose on the people we work with. They involve denying their needs or obstructing their access to services. In some countries, the existence of humanitarian crises is politicized, or the needs of certain groups are dismissed.

Conflict impacts PIN more than it affects the access of NRC to them. While NGOs are sometimes directly targeted, most access challenges we encounter in conflict zones stem from persistent hostilities that render the environment hazardous for operations. This finding goes beyond the descriptives presented in this report. A modelling analysis suggests that BAI first and conflict, to a lesser degree, are the factors most likely to drive areas above the H2R threshold of our access severity score. These findings are most robust for obstructions on the mobility of PIN and NRC, as well as interference, another form of BAI.

The logistic and climatic factors we face are common and severe, especially in Central Africa and South America. However, these issues generally cause fewer disruptions than BAI or conflict-related obstacles. Figure 1 shows the proportion of COs’ operational areas that are H2R, this is, with a four or

above in our one-to-five access severity score. We define an area as each subnational administrative division in which they work, rated four or higher on our one-to-five scale of access severity. Figure 2 presents their average access scores. A significant link exists between the two sets of rankings, with certain countries (e.g., Libya, Sudan, and Yemen) appearing high on both. However, some countries have only a small proportion of regions classified as H2R, but their average access severity score is still notably high. Afghanistan and Burkina Faso are such cases, indicating that despite fewer H2R areas, their access is consistently restricted across most regions they serve.

## Regional comparison

While consolidating scores from the subnational to the regional level can obscure important information, it also reveals strong overarching trends. In Asia and Latin America (ALAR), authorities' attitudes and actions in Afghanistan, Iran, and Myanmar contribute to an exceptionally high average of BAI scores, exceeding those in the Middle East (MERO).

The persisting hostilities in Northern Nigeria and the Sahel, together with the wars in Sudan and Yemen, as well as the ongoing conflict in Somalia, are the primary causes of the elevated average scores for conflict-related access challenges in the Central and West Africa (CWA) and East Africa and Yemen (EAY) regions.

Figure 7 shows the average of each type of access impediment by world region. If we separate Asia from Latin America, it would reinforce the comparative severity of BAIs in Asia while emphasizing that Latin America is high on logistic impediments. Nevertheless, the exclusion of Central America, where violence and BAIs could be important, might be undermining their averages in the region.

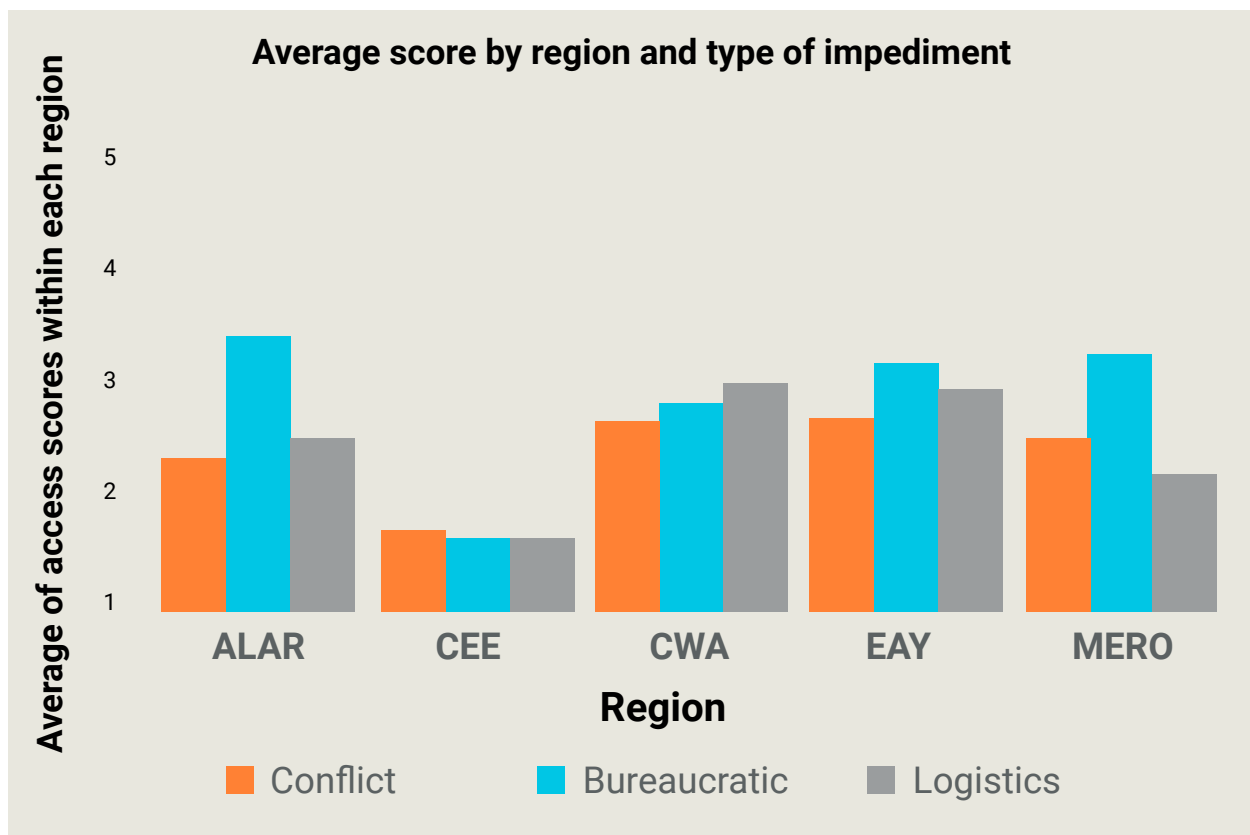
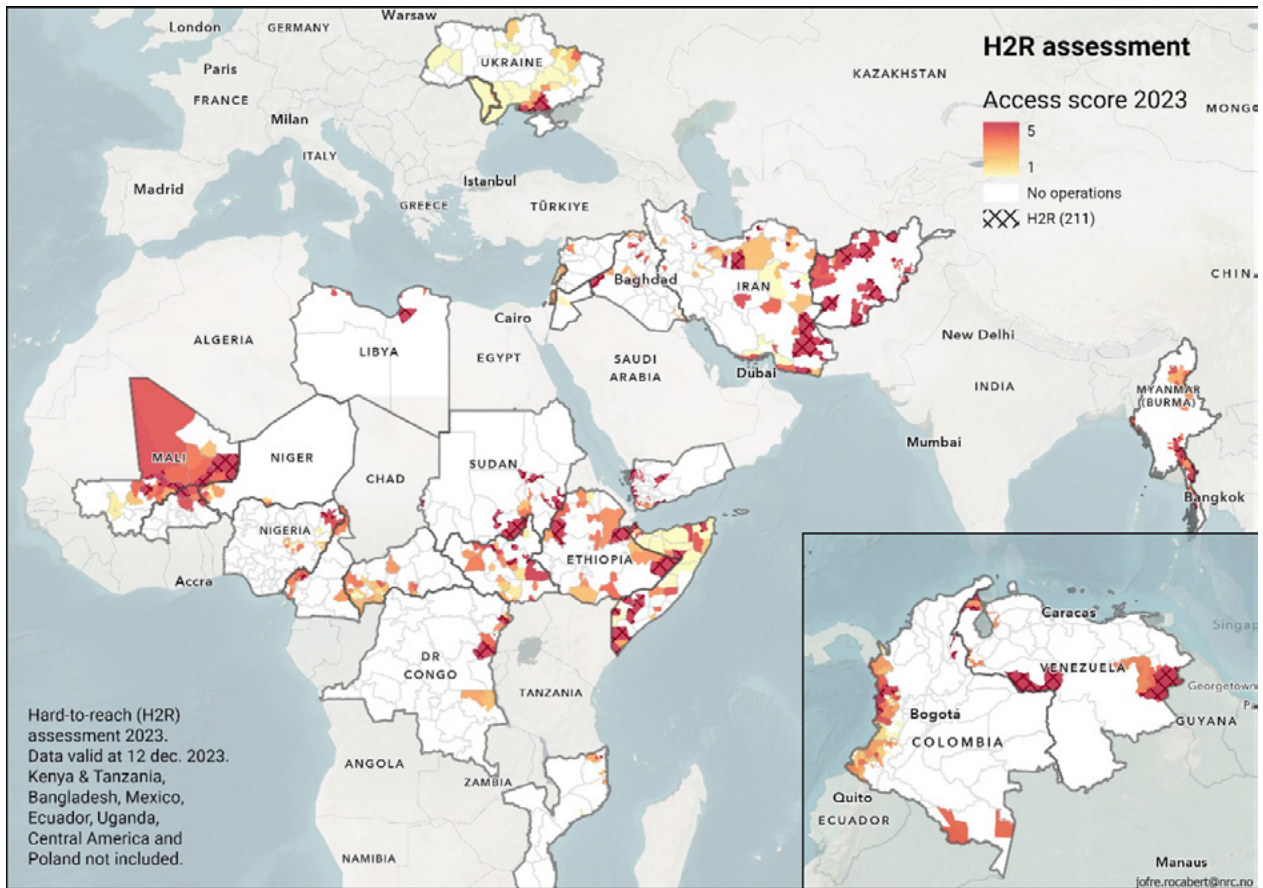


Figure 1. Average H2R scores by region and type of impediment.



Map 1. Global context.



## Conceptual access framework

This table provides further description of each indicator in the table of NRC’s conceptual access framework.

### People in need’s humanitarian access

Impediment	Types of impediments	Description
Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or entitlements to assistance	BAI	Information related to statements, declarations, or measures demonstrating discrimination or denying humanitarian needs, rights, or entitlements for a population group.
Restriction and obstruction of access to services and assistance		Information related to affected people or people in need being prevented from moving freely or accessing humanitarian actors/ aid.
Violence threats or violence against people affected or in need		Information related to violence or security threats. These can be either general/indiscriminate or targeted to all or a specific group of people in need. Violence can be inflicted by any actor, authority or group with influence.
Presence of landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosive remnants of war (ERW), and unexploded ordnance (UXOs)	Conflict	Information related to the suspected or confirmed presence of IEDs, ERW or UXOs in the area of intervention or an area in a route that must be necessarily crossed, and how it impacts the ability of people affected/in need to access aid.
Terrain and climate barriers and obstacles		Information related to physical constraints created by weather, environment or terrain features that impact people in needs’ ability to reach humanitarian services. For example, mountainous terrain or rivers that slow down the movement of people in need, flooding or other extreme weather events that restrict the movements of people in need. This may be because these conditions or events render roads unusable or because they affect the means of people in need to move to where relief is available.
Infrastructure barriers and obstacles	Logistic and climate	Information related to infrastructure constraints or obstacles and how it impacts the ability of people affected/in need to access aid. Infrastructure refers to bridges, roads, tunnels, gas stations airfields etc.
Communication and connectivity barriers and obstacles		Information related to communication and connectivity constraints and how it impacts the ability of people affected/ in need to communicate with relief actors and access aid. This includes people in needs’ ability to receive information on the existence of aid in their area or elsewhere directly from aid actors. This category includes the existence, stability and reach of cell networks and other mediums of communication, such as VHF radio, GPS trackers, and Satellite phones.

## NRC's humanitarian access

Impediment	Types of impediments	Description
Restriction of movement (staff, goods) into & within the area	BAI	Bureaucratic and administrative barriers affecting the entering or mobility of NRC staff or aid within a country, area within a country or population in need.
Interference into the implementation of humanitarian activities		Information related to measures or conditions impeding NRC from assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating interventions according to humanitarian principles.
Violence threats or violence against humanitarian personnel, facilities, and assets		Information related to violence or security threats. These can be either general/indiscriminate or targeted to all or a specific group of aid actors. Violence can be inflicted by any actor, authority or group with influence.
Presence of landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosive remnants of war (ERW), and unexploded ordnance (UXOs)	Conflict	Information related to the suspected or confirmed presence of IEDs, ERW or UXOs in the area of intervention
Terrain and climate barriers and obstacles		Information related to physical constraints created by weather, environment or terrain features that impact aid actor's ability to reach people in need. For example, mountainous terrain or rivers that slow down movement, flooding or other extreme weather events that restrict transportation. This may be because these conditions or events render roads unusable or because they affect the means of aid actors to move to where relief is needed.
Infrastructure barriers and obstacles	Logistic and climate	Information related to infrastructure constraints or obstacles impeding humanitarian actors' ability to reach people affected/ in need and transport/deliver aid. Infrastructure refers to bridges, roads, tunnels, gas stations, airfields etc.
Communication and connectivity barriers and obstacles		Information related to communication and connectivity constraints and how it impacts the ability of actors to communicate with people in need. This includes actors' ability to receive information on the existence of needs in their area or elsewhere directly from people in need. This category includes the existence, stability and reach of cell networks and other mediums of communication, such as VHF radio, GPS trackers, and Satellite phones.