



REPORT

ENABLING ACCESS COORDINATION: THE ROLE OF THE MALI WORKING GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

In many crises around the world, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and de facto authorities (DFAs) hold considerable sway over humanitarian access. They often have the power to inflict violence and impose restrictions that can block humanitarians from reaching people in need and prevent people from accessing assistance and protection. Engaging with them is a humanitarian necessity.



📷 Guiro IDP site in Gao, northern Mali

Despite this, humanitarians often struggle to engage effectively to negotiate an environment where assistance can be provided in a neutral, impartial and independent way, and to resolve issues that compromise principled ways of working.

An increasing number of resources and training opportunities on how to engage with NSAGs and DFAs have become available to humanitarians over the past decade, and these have gone some way to addressing practitioners' needs. Research has complemented this work by exploring the challenges the humanitarian community faces in maintaining proximity to those most in need, and how aid providers incorporate the humanitarian principles into their work.

Humanitarian access working groups (HAWGs) have also come to complement traditional coordination mechanisms such as clusters and humanitarian country teams (HCTs). Such access forums are now a common feature of many humanitarian responses, playing a key role in forming common positions, shaping access strategies and joint operating principles (JOPs), and providing the humanitarian community with an overview of the access landscape.

The groups are most often chaired by the UN, sometimes with an NGO co-chair, and usually count UN agencies, international NGOs and national NGOs among their members. HAWGs are supported at the global level by the UN's access staff and the access focal points of their NGO co-chairs. Uniquely positioned, Central and West

Africa also benefits from a Regional Task Force on Humanitarian Access, which mirrors the functions of country-level HAWGs.

Despite becoming a growing feature of the humanitarian coordination architecture, relatively little research on principled humanitarian action, negotiations and access has focused on the role HAWGs play, particularly in supporting engagement with NSAGs and DFAs.

This series of case studies is intended to address that gap. It focuses on the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Mali, Nigeria and north-west Syria, in the hope that examining different situations in different parts of the world will yield a range of experiences and recommendations to inform HAWG's future work.

RESEARCH GOALS

The remit of each case study is two-fold. It is to look at HAWG's experiences in supporting the humanitarian community's engagement with NSAGs and DFAs, and then to draw lessons from those experiences to inform future ways of working, not only for HAWGs but also the other coordination forums they engage with and receive support from.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The main body of this report consists of five sections. Part one provides a short background to the crisis in Mali and an overview of the access landscape. Part two explores how the HAWG interacts with the humanitarian community, and part three how it supports engagement with NSAGs. Part four looks at the internal and external barriers that impede more effective access coordination, and part five sets out opportunities to improve it.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology to develop a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the situation in Mali. Participants' experiences and perspectives have been placed at the centre of the research, which was deemed appropriate given its exploratory nature.

DATA COLLECTION

Around 20 humanitarian workers were interviewed in person in Bamako over a two-week period in June 2023. A few further interviews were conducted online because the participants were not present in Bamako. All participants represented organisation who are members of the Humanitarian Access Working Group in Bamako, with the exception of donors who do not sit in this coordination forum.

The participants hailed from UN agencies, national and international NGOs, coordination bodies and donors. They included both national and international staff, and many were active HAWG members. Others were more senior humanitarian staff not involved in the HAWG's day-to-day work but who held valuable insights into the humanitarian community's broader efforts to engage with NSAGs in Mali. The participants' roles varied from technical access specialists to programme directors and heads of organisation.

Participants' recall period fell largely between 2021 and late 2022, but most discussions focused on events in 2023. Most participants had been working on the Mali response for the whole of that period, some with different organisations, and many for even longer.

The participants were identified through the research team's country representatives and suggestions from other participants themselves.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with several sets of questions that all participants were asked. Follow-up questions varied depending on each participant's role and the topics that came up during their interviews. Verbal consent was secured from all interviewees.

The interview questions were drafted in consultation with consortium members and with feedback from access practitioners working at peer organisations in headquarters roles. Three pilot interviews were conducted with NGO co-chairs of HAWGs in countries that were not part of the consortium's work, and the questions subsequently refined.

ANALYSIS

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The data analysis software NVivo 12 was used to analyse the transcripts, which were coded according to recurring topics. These topics were then grouped together in different categories and key themes were drawn from the categorised data.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Given the sensitivities of humanitarian operations particular attention has been paid to confidentiality and anonymity. Any research participants quoted in the paper are referred to solely as interviewees during the transcription. Nor is any organisation mentioned by name in relation to activities in Mali. Quotes are presented verbatim, other than where there was identifying information or clarification was required, in which case square brackets are used.

REVIEW

The emerging findings were presented to consortium members and two drafts of the paper were presented to research participants and their organisations for feedback.

LIMITATIONS

While the research focused on HAWGs and how they support engagement with DFAs and NSAGs, the interviews touched on a wide range of complex issues spanning the whole humanitarian community. Given the time limitations it was not possible to explore all of the issues raised fully. The research, for example, focuses more on how the HAWG support organisations' access than on people's access.

Participants sometimes had differing views and interpretations of the same events and issues, which made it difficult at times to draw lessons learned or provide an objectively accurate picture of the events and issues being described.

Beyond this, two main limitations arise. Firstly, NSAG representatives were not interviewed. Their inclusion would have added further depth to the research, particularly in ascertaining their perceptions of the humanitarian community's efforts to engage with them and putting some of the claims humanitarian staff made to them.

Secondly, for the same reasons that prevent many humanitarians' travel to many areas of the country, it was not possible to conduct interviews throughout Mali with the humanitarian workers permanently based in the field who are at the heart of day-to-day engagements with NSAGs.

1

MALI: AN EVER-EVOLVING CRISIS

Mali has experienced a series of conflicts since 2012, from rebellions, insurgencies, and military takeovers. Despite ceasefire agreements and a peace accord, fighting not only persisted but also escalated, triggering an increase in international security and stabilisation efforts. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was flanked by other multinational interventions, including the French-led operation Barkhane and Takuba task force and a sub-regional security G5 Sahel initiative.



📷 School in the village of Koira Berry, Mali

Mali remains gripped in an ever-deepening cycle of political instability and escalating violence in the aftermath of military coups in 2020 and 2021. Most of the above-mentioned international efforts have been wound down as a result and new security providers have appeared on the scene, including the Wagner Group in late 2021.¹ MINUSMA is the latest mission to have been dissolved at the request of the Malian government in June 2023, which is likely to further complicate humanitarian agencies' operations.

The humanitarian space faces severe access constraints, protection challenges, violence against aid workers and criminality. Movement restrictions, military operations, and armed hostilities further complicate humanitarian efforts.² The phenomenon of besiegement, or encirclement, has also increased over the last two years. Research participants frequently cited the examples of Farabougou, Boni, Ménaka, and Tessit.³ Encircled areas can be cut off for months and civilians' freedom of movement and access to

¹ ACLED, [The Sahel: Geopolitical Transition at the Center of an Ever-Worsening Crisis](#), 8 February 2023.

² OCHA, [Mali: Tableau de bord Accès humanitaire](#) (mai 2023), 27 June 2023.

³ RFI, [Au Mali, le blocus jihadiste de Boni enfin levé](#), 1 Sep. 2022; DW, [A Farabougou, le risque d'un précédent pour le Mali](#), 15 April 2021.

services curtailed. Humanitarian organisations rarely manage to enter these areas, negotiations are lengthy and principled conditions are hard to establish.

Interviews with practitioners show there is an overarching understanding that without negotiations on safe and principled access, humanitarian action cannot take place in such a dynamic environment. The task is particularly daunting given the many armed actors and different agendas to deal with. The only armed actor with whom the humanitarian community sustains regular dialogue is the military (FAMA), which is engaged collectively via the civil-military coordination platform (UN-CMCoord) chaired by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Access negotiations with NSAGs are almost never coordinated among humanitarians, but rather take place bilaterally and mostly with the proxy of a community leader. Direct interactions are relatively rare and tend to occur in extremis, at checkpoints, as a result of detentions or during interference in humanitarian activities. This approach is intentional, as explained in the sections below, and is advised by guidance from the HAWG.

Operational humanitarian organisations might occasionally approach NSAGs who are signatories to the 2015 peace agreement and the communal militias in central Mali directly, given their clearer hierarchical structures and a perceived lesser degree of risk.⁴ NSAGs affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaida (AQ), however, are seldom engaged in direct dialogue. AQ affiliates tend to have a deeply rooted community presence and community leaders provide the legitimacy necessary to back up certain demands that humanitarians advance, but IS affiliates are perceived as more prone to volatile behaviour and use of violence and they have historically been less open to dialogue on humanitarian issues.

Another factor that applies to both groups and contributes to the remoteness of negotiations is the sudden and frequent change in leadership, structures and geographical presence. This has particularly been the case since mid-2019 when IS and AQ began fighting each other across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.⁵ The violence that unfolded – more than 1,000 civilians, pro-government militiamen and rival fighters were killed in a six-month IS campaign – created a chilling effect among humanitarian workers.⁶

Under OCHA's coordination, the HAWG has made efforts to address humanitarian access challenges, including through the establishment of subnational HAWGs. As this report highlights, however, restrictions persist and have become increasingly severe as a range of armed actors vie for territorial control.

⁴ [Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process](#), 2015.

⁵ ACLED, [Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province](#), 13 January 2023.

⁶ ACLED, [The Sahel: Geopolitical Transition at the Center of an Ever-Worsening Crisis](#), 8 February 2023.

2

A STATE OF FLUX: THE HAWG AT A TURNING POINT



Two people walk through a makeshift displacement site in Ménaka

2.1 GOVERNING DOCUMENTS AND STRUCTURE

The HAWG, (groupe de travail accès national, GTA-N) in Mali was created in 2017 and chaired by OCHA. The appointment of a new OCHA chair and an international NGO co-chair in 2023 elicited excitement and expectation among the humanitarian community as they started a vigorous revitalisation process. The HAWG's strength derives from its combination of strategic and operational leadership, but the co-chair's role has not been delineated clearly enough:

“The contours, roles and responsibilities of the co-lead position are not yet sufficiently defined. We are witnessing the existence of a position with no real autonomy or capacity to make propositions. Perhaps the HAWG could reflect on the precise content of their job description and clearly define the responsibilities of the co-lead in terms of support for humanitarian actors in the field and the room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the lead. These elements should be clearly written down and defined in a dedicated document.”

Consequently, HAWG members' expectations are rooted in their own interpretation of the roles. Some respondents, for example, see the co-chair position occupied by an international NGO staff member as an entry point for more operational discussions and troubleshooting, and an opportunity to increase national NGOs' participation. This has not, however, been formal discussed among members.

The HAWG's membership is intended to reflect the range of humanitarian organisations that intervene in the country. Among its 15 members, a third are UN agencies, a third international NGOs, and a third national NGOs. The international NGO forum in Mali (*forum des ONG Internationales au Mali, FONGIM*) has a permanent seat and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) and two other humanitarian organisations hold observer status. Donors are not invited to attend the meetings, which take place monthly in Bamako.

The same structure, including an OCHA chair and NGO co-chair, is replicated in the five subnational HAWGs (*groupes de travail accès régional, GTA-Rs*) located in the main towns that serve as hubs of the humanitarian response – Gao, Menaka, Mopti, Segou and Timbuktu. The fact that the Segou HAWG co-chair is a national NGO is noteworthy, because it is indicative of a drive to involve more local organisations in humanitarian coordination.

The inclusive membership is highly appreciated across the platform and seen as an effort to bring more diverse voices together, but participation and contributions oscillate. Some participants say the contributions reflect the degree of trust among members and their capacity to identify actionable solutions. Others suggested the profiles participating are too junior, and suggest having more senior profiles such as country directors who participate in the HCT and could raise access dilemmas at a strategic level. These are pending issues that the HAWG will have to address in its future reviews.

The platform is guided by an HCT-endorsed strategy that HAWG members developed in 2018 but which has not been reviewed for the past five years. It also has a workplan setting out priorities

for the services and activities it provides to its members and the wider humanitarian community. The last workplan dates to the end of 2022 and includes the creation of subnational HAWGs as a key priority, along with capacity building. A new document was expected to be drafted during the 2023 HAWG retreat which took place in July.⁷

The HAWG's strategy identifies five areas of focus for its work: advice and analysis, advocacy, coordination, capacity building and common tools, and support for access negotiations. Most respondents, however, both members and not, were unable to identify them and claimed not to have seen the strategy, though they were aware of the priorities set out in the 2021 workplan. This might be expected to be seen as an argument for updating the strategy, but some felt the HAWGs' lack of direction was a more important issue:

“ *It doesn't matter what the documents are, having a strategy is good, and so on. You make dozens of them, they end up in a closet, never used. It's a leadership problem. And it's up to us to do something with this group, you know.”*

Indeed, most interviewees highlighted the group's inefficient past management and strategy implementation as critical weaknesses that had undermined its potential impact. The leadership has fluctuated in recent years with staff turnover and the co-chair position unfilled. Many felt this had weakened the coordination architecture, which required more effort to revamp. Aware of these challenges, the HAWG leadership agrees that the group's success will be determined by its ability to create a “community spirit” among members in the coming months.

It should be noted, however, that overreliance on the HAWG chair and co-chair to lead meetings, make decisions, share information and provide input and guidance to the subnational groups makes it difficult to improve service delivery. Coupled with staff wearing various hats, it adds pressure on human resources.

In general respondents have little engagement with the HAWG outside the regular monthly meetings that are only open to its members. Very few non-HAWG members could describe its

⁷ This report does not cover developments after June 2023 such as the outcomes of the HAWG retreat and MINUSMA's pending exit from the country.

function, products or one interaction they had with it. Some participants felt the HAWG struggled to communicate about its work, both to its members and the wider humanitarian community.

“ I think it would be useful, like for the cluster meetings, if we received at least meeting minutes. I think it's always a good idea to involve donors as well, in one way or another; you don't necessarily want to tell everyone [non-members] everything, I understand that there's no problem. But there has to be communication about the products; what the group actually produces.”

Respondents involved in various coordination bodies expressed regret about their limited knowledge of the HAWG but showed keen interest in gaining more insight. They acknowledged the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the platform because of the sensitive nature of discussions, but they also said the lack of information emerging from it was a potential reason for unawareness of its activities.

The HAWG recognises that it is still in its incipient phase under its new leadership and is open to feedback and proposals for improvement:

“ Honestly, it has to be said that it has taken us [the HAWG] quite some time to be up and running, and I don't think we have yet a structured way of working.”

Many respondents were hopeful the new HAWG leadership would lead to rapid improvements that were necessary to deliver more systematic and coordinated access approaches. Others, however, were more cautious, pointing out that the group's added value to the humanitarian community was not clear. Questions were raised about how the HAWG fits into the HCT's strategic plan, which requires further clarification as the next section highlights.

2.2 THE HAWG WITHIN THE HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE

The humanitarian architecture in Mali has evolved over the past 10 years, and the HAWG needs to find a recognised place from where it can implement its mandate from the HCT and complement the efforts under way. This section outlines the group's main interfaces with the broader coordination structure.

In addition to the main structures, the HAWG chair attends a series of meetings and forums. They include the MINUSMA's Protection Unit meetings and the thematic working groups on gender, accountability, and protection. It is not always clear whether attendance is in the chair's HAWG or OCHA function.

HCT

No one among the HCT's members could remember an occasion when access had been a standing issue on the agenda in the past year. According to one:

“ At the HCT, we've heard several times: 'Well yes, but what does the access working group really do?' It's as if no one knows exactly what this group is, who this group is and how this group functions. The revitalisation of the HAWG is actually recent. Hence, it's clear that they're not known, and it's never been clear to the HCT either: is the HAWG now functional, can we ask for things?”

Access is part of the “operational updates” section of the HCT meeting, presented by a senior OCHA staff member but not necessarily the HAWG chair. Any significant updates on a region or severe ongoing access constraint(s) are included in the presentation. HCT members might occasionally put forward an access related topic and initiate a discussion.

Flexibility in the ways to prompt access discussions at the HCT offers the benefit of establishing connections between various cross-cutting issues, such as protection, and emphasising the importance of access for operational success, but it also diverts attention from the widespread constraints that can lead to the suspension of activities.

The spotlight is often directed towards regions experiencing an alarming increase in violence and access challenges, Ménaka being the most frequently mentioned. Some interviewees suggested that was at the expense of other areas that go unnoticed, allowing access constraints to become more pervasive:

“ I'm not saying that the HAWG isn't doing the job, but access requires a certain level of leadership and activism, and they should be making more of an effort. At this stage there are organisations that don't even know what the HAWG is, they don't even know the focal point. When there are problems, we see a lot of individual approaches. We have to recognise the HAWG's slowness. It takes a long time, the crisis gets worse, and then we can't do anything anymore.”

ICCT

An ICCT representative is invited to take part in the HAWG's monthly meetings in an effort to identify cross-cutting issues and ensure effective two-way communication across the humanitarian architecture. The expectation is that the HAWG will share key information with the clusters, and that they in turn will raise their dilemmas with the HAWG, but that does not always happen:

“ We have one agency attending, which is the coordinator of three clusters in Mali ... there are communication problems. If this agency comes to the meetings, it's natural for them to talk to the different clusters too, as their lead. What problems do you have delivering something [information]? The problem is that people come to listen, so it's not a working group where everyone brings something to the table. A lot is left to the chair and co-chair ... but why, aren't we all members of the same working group?”

UN-CMCoord

The HAWG chair has the same function within the UN-CMCoord in Bamako. The national cell is also known as the strategic CMCoord, as opposed to the operational CMCoord cells, which are subnational. The HAWG's terms of reference (ToR), both national and subnational, require close coordination with the CMCoord mechanisms, but the group has a recognised role in them. More a practice than a method, coordination happens as a result of shared resources rather than strategic direction.

The majority of respondents had significantly better knowledge about the CMCoord and its mandate and were satisfied with the progress made over the past two years in terms of stakeholders' engagement and outputs. They also said its success was proportionate with the investments from the UN, NGOs, the military and the donor community, who allocated resources, encouraged principled leadership and participated actively in the platform:

“ I must admit that the HAWG has been dormant for a long time. It's still not very clear to me how the HAWG works today, the link with the CMCoord, the HAWG production, the way it's coordinated, I don't see much added value yet. I think it's too unstructured and the NGOs are still taking a very individual and not collective approach to access issues.”

Respondents also revealed a degree of confusion about the roles of the HAWG and the CMCoord. Outcomes of CMCoord meetings and tasks accomplished by CMCoord officers were erroneously credited to the HAWG:

“ I was in Gao in February, I went to meet the military authorities, we talked with the governorate and they said: 'Well, here we are, we'll see how far we can support you because the situation is complicated, we can give you armed escorts.' We explained the difficulty of using military escorts in this context, especially in Mali. They understood that, in any case, they were very well-trained and well-informed about humanitarian principles, etc. I think that these are initiatives [coordinating with the military] that can be taken by the regional HAWG. But maybe this is for the CMCoord officer to do.”

The shared membership of the two platforms appeared to fuel such confusion. Several HAWG members, including the co-chairs, participate in the CMCoord, and given that both platforms facilitate access and some discussions overlap, the lines can easily be blurred. Overlapping discussions were also mentioned as discouraging engagement with and participation in the HAWG.

NGO forum (FONGIM)

The NGO forum is not officially part of the humanitarian architecture, but it is a key stakeholder in humanitarian coordination. Its director has a permanent seat on the HAWG, UN-CMCoord and HCT. The forum's membership is open to international humanitarian and development NGOs, which provides an opportunity to collect and share information across a wider range of organisations. It sits in Bamako and has subgroups in Kidal, Gao, Ménaka, Mopti and Tombouctou.

The forum does not focus any of its work purely on access, but it has led initiatives that have facilitated it for NGOs, namely the negotiations to lift bureaucratic and administrative impediments that arose from a directive adopted by the transitional authorities in late 2022. It also organises training in the humanitarian principles and negotiations, and collects information on access constraints that it brings to the HAWG.

A number of NGOs feel more listened to and involved when participating in FONGIM rather than HAWG discussions, even though they are aware that the NGO forum is not formally part of the IASC-sanctioned humanitarian response coordination structure. One reason could be that the FONGIM and NGOs share the same line ministry, of territorial administration and local communities, whereas for the UN it is the foreign ministry, as in other humanitarian settings. Since policies issued by the two ministries tend to disproportionately affect NGOs, the UN and NGOs tend to perceive the humanitarian-political environment quite differently.

The HAWG and OCHA recognise these limitations and are developing an outreach plan under which the HAWG chair and co-chair give regular briefings to the FONGIM to further harmonise and exchange information and practices:

“ There is a trend to over-formalise, which I think is a bit of the bureaucratic culture of the country as well. But it's not spectacularly unique. You cannot tell INGOs to have their fora, but we can rationalise, so that there is lighter work. Otherwise, we need to have 20 meetings on the same topic. We have to link into the humanitarian working group [groupe de travail humanitaire, GTH] of the FONGIM when it comes to access.”

The main takeaway from this cursory mapping exercise is that the HAWG does not fully exploit most synergies with complementary forums. This leaves it marginalised and under-used in informing coordination bodies' decision making. That said, it does still make contributions to a safe and accessible operational space, as the next two sections explore.

3

NSAGS: TO NEGOTIATE OR NOT, AND THE HAWG'S ROLE

One of the HAWG's key focus areas is support for access negotiations. This section provides an overview of how humanitarian organisations negotiate access in Mali, and the HAWG's role in facilitating the process and mitigating the associated risks.



📷 A group of men pose for a photo in a makeshift displacement site in Ménaka

In areas under the influence of NSAGs, humanitarian access is negotiated by individual organisations via community leaders, traditional chiefs and other local actors who are able to convey messages to NSAGs. In other words: *“It’s each partner, its organisation, its bilateral access negotiations on its coverage areas, its barriers, its network.”*

From time to time, the CMCoord team within OCHA may play a role in mediating discussions to address obstacles imposed by NSAGs in central Mali, for example in the Bandiagara district or cercle. These tend to involve the mounting of checkpoints and the imposition of unauthorised taxes for passage. The HAWG has not taken a leading role in providing more sustained engagement so far.

Respondents also pointed out that negotiation capacity is an investment made mostly by international organisations and less frequently by local NGOs. Despite the numerous training sessions offered by an array of stakeholders, all operational organisations interviewed said more was needed.

The HAWG has played a key role in organising training sessions across Mali and bringing them closer to the frontline, most recently in Ménaka. The chair and co-chair’s prioritisation of capacity building supports a culture of principled access, but the sessions are not reaching frontline humanitarian workers, which may lead to an increase in unprincipled compromises made in the name of access. The creation of subnational HAWGs will be instrumental in addressing this issue.

3.1 THE ROLE OF LOCAL LEADERS: SUPPORT OR INTERFERENCE?

Respondents emphasised the importance of community engagement in negotiating access in areas controlled by NSAGs. Humanitarian organisations rely on local leaders, such as imams or other influential individuals to act as intermediaries, in line with the HAWG's guidance: *"It is advisable to identify and engage in dialogue with community representatives outside the armed groups, who should not be considered as representatives of the communities. These community representatives may include community leaders, civil authorities, and state authorities, etc."*

Local leaders hold considerable influence in negotiations, informally securing NSAGs' consent for operations, and recourse to them is deeply ingrained in the humanitarian community. They facilitate contact, providing access to areas and conveying organisations' objectives, intentions, demands, requests and grievances. Direct negotiation does take place in certain geographical areas or with certain NSAGs, mostly signatories to the 2015 peace agreement, but they are infrequent.

Local leaders are identified based on the personal relationships of organisations' staff members and their ability and willingness to facilitate negotiations. Some respondents said their teams had received training in identifying and mapping local leaders to understand the situation and establish contacts safely, but this is an uncommon approach.

Several respondents highlighted the prominent involvement of local leaders as intermediaries, particularly their vital role in preparing missions by offering insights for the deployment of teams. Their involvement helps to ensure that humanitarian interventions are carried out in a way that meets local needs and respects local customs and sensitivities. They also help to build trust with NSAGs, dispelling suspicions, promoting more open engagement and in some cases vouching for the humanitarian workers' by citing past examples or experiences from neighbouring regions.

One interview participant explained how their organisation went about using local leaders as intermediaries:

“ *It is generally through these leaders that we establish a dialogue. We share with them our concerns and what we aim to achieve in the area in response to humanitarian needs. Community leaders often act as facilitators or intermediaries between us and the local actors. Trust is often a crucial aspect as these actors [NSAGs] typically vary. However, through discussions and interactions with the leaders, we often manage to establish access. After carrying out assistance activities, when armed actors witness the success of our actions and their apprehensions or suspicions towards our organisation diminish, they may become more forthcoming and openly acknowledge their role as leaders of the group in the area.”*

Engaging with recognised local leaders promotes mutual acceptance and improves access to intervention areas. Communicating adherence to the humanitarian principles also leads to a more principled response in areas controlled by NSAGs. Interviewees did not offer insight into how local leaders convey the significance of the principles to NSAGs, but they agreed that in most cases they were effective.

Community leaders can also contribute to the safety and security of humanitarian workers in the field by providing local guides, which significantly reduces the risk of aggression. They are valuable sources of information on the safety of an area, and they are able to suggest timings for interventions that are appropriate to local events and circumstances. Respondents also said they were consistently engaged in addressing challenges such as vehicle theft, checkpoint restrictions and illicit taxation.

The findings clearly indicate that employing local leaders as intermediaries with NSAGs has been instrumental in supporting humanitarian operations in areas they control, but it is also important to acknowledge the challenges inherent in doing so, including the fact that their involvement has been associated with increasing interference in humanitarian operations.

NGOs operating in conflict areas find it difficult to identify reliable and trustworthy interlocutors among local leaders, and there does not appear to be a systematic approach to doing so. Local NGO staff frequently rely on personal knowledge and networks to determine those suitable to fulfil the role of intermediary. Nor is there much focus on building local leaders' capacity to represent the interests and principles of humanitarian agencies effectively.

Humanitarian organisations recognise that relying on community leaders' engagement with NSAGs is a sensitive issue. Collaborating with people not affiliated with an organisation and who are not bound by its code of conduct or mandate can lead to undesired outcomes such as information leaks, unprincipled or opaque agreements and unclear communication that pose risks to both humanitarians and the people they serve. In the worst-case scenario, failed negotiations could lead to retaliatory attacks against civilians, including the assassination of community leaders, highlighting their vulnerability and leading to loss of contact and humanitarian access.

Inefficient coordination among NGOs can also potentially enable intermediaries to prioritise their own interests by conveying conflicting messages.

“That's what the access working group is for: to bring practices together, anonymise things, but still be able to draw red lines that serve all the actors, because we also have an impressive number of NGOs here, with humanitarian and development mandates, with an impressive mix of people.”

Respondents expressed concerns about corrupt practices and a lack of accountability. Some local leaders have engaged in mutually beneficial arrangements with NSAGs, jeopardising humanitarian organisations' position and integrity, compromising the effectiveness of aid and undermining the humanitarian principles.

Interviewees reported cases of local leaders delaying, manipulating or diverting aid, subverting its impartial and needs-based distribution. Such instances can also cause suspicion and mistrust of humanitarian operations among NSAGs and undermine their acceptance of them in areas they control.

Changes in community hierarchies also mean that engagement is frequently interrupted, which can have an impact on access. Leaders who acted as interlocutors might become unavailable, unwilling or lose their standing in the community. As one interviewee put it:

“Once all our principles and values are established, a dialogue with the community also takes place as leaders change frequently, creating a lot of movement. Thus, it is often necessary to restart discussions with the [new leaders].”

Some interviewees went so far as to suggest that some actors, including NSAGs or authorities, interfere with humanitarian operations by targeting and eliminating community leaders who play a role in facilitating access. One interviewee said:

“When it comes to negotiation, it's a personal process that involves working with community leaders. But here's the kicker: some NGOs end up losing touch because these leaders get targeted and, sadly, even killed. Word on the street suggests that armed groups go after these leaders because they're big shots in their communities and can be seen as a pain in the neck by certain higher-ups. These NSAGs mess with our operations by going after our go-to people, and then they use that as leverage to get what they want from NGOs.”

Overall, community leaders play a vital role in facilitating engagement with NSAGs and ensuring the humanitarian operations can proceed in regions affected by conflict. Their involvement, however, can lead to interference and is not free of risks.

Insufficient trust building and coordination, pressure, corrupt practices, lack of transparency and the manipulation of aid all have the potential to hinder the effectiveness and impartiality of humanitarian efforts. Recognising and addressing these challenges is essential to uphold the integrity of humanitarian operations and maximise their impact. The HAWG could play a larger role in analysing whether the benefits of this approach outweigh the risks to the intermediaries, civilians and humanitarian workers.

3.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Interactions with NSAGs occur almost exclusively at checkpoints and irregular controls, or when combatants show up during interventions. Sometimes humanitarian agencies are pushed by the situation and the coordination structures into taking more proactive stances, mostly with signatories to the 2015 peace agreement (see box 1) but rarely with guidance on how to represent broader interests and positions.

In June 2022, for example, NSAGs introduced new measures in Tombouctou region that compromised the impartiality of assistance. Negotiations were initiated by community members, resulting in an agreement that allowed humanitarian organisations to continue their operations.

The agreement, however, proved short-lived, and the NSAGs subsequently told NGOs to cease the direct distribution of assistance and rely instead on community leaders in the main towns. In response, the HAWG convened a working session with NGOs operating in the area, who held divergent views on collective versus individual approaches.

Ultimately, under the recommendation of the local Inter-agency Coordination Group (Groupe Interagence de Coordination, GIAC) one NGO was designated to lead engagement with community leaders and negotiate the removal of the impositions. Once activities resumed, organisations reverted to individual negotiations as their primary approach. In the words of one HAWG member:

“That’s when we realised that the leaders were playing on this lack of coordination between organisations. To some they say yes, to others no.”

Some argue that this was one of the most positive examples of a coordinated approach to access, with NGOs sharing experiences and positive practices to be leveraged for the benefit of the whole community. Others, however, maintain that the constraints have been alleviated not so much by sustained success in negotiations, but because the NSAGs’ presence in the region has diminished.

Box 1

Opportunities for collective negotiations: one size does not fit all

Some participants identified an entry point for collective access negotiations with NSAGs in which OCHA, and by proxy the HAWG, could continue to play a role. In the vast conflict landscape in Mali, NSAGs can be broadly divided into three categories: signatories to the 2015 peace agreement, communal/ethnic militias and groups affiliated with AQ and IS (referred to in quotes as “radical”). Evidence of successful negotiations with the first two categories suggests these interlocutors could well remain within the remit of the HAWG’s engagement.

“We have contacts with the leaders of non-state armed groups who are signatories to the peace agreement, as well as with community leaders in all localities within our areas of operation. In such cases, we involve them.”

“For example, if we need to deliver assistance in an area under the influence of armed groups, we check which non-state armed group has influence in the area, and we seek out the leader’s contact. We communicate with them, we explain our humanitarian principles, our mandate, and we emphasize our principle of neutrality, impartiality, and above all the satisfaction of the needs and alleviation of the suffering of the populations under their control.”

“So, in this case, we exchange with them and involve them so that they can facilitate the circulation of humanitarian actors in their zone. This is how we negotiate. We have contacts with all the non-state armed groups, but I would point out that they are signatories to the Peace Agreement.”

Signatories to the peace agreement are well structured groups with known hierarchies, and are used to participating in high-level discussions, the workings of international aid structures and the humanitarian principles. Communal militias, also referred to as “hunters” because some of them emerged from traditional hunters’ brotherhoods, are perceived as sufficiently structured to engage with more formally.⁸ As one respondent said, the HAWG “can be useful if we’re talking about access negotiations. They’ll go and see the hunters, the signatory groups, it’s easy. They don’t negotiate with radical groups, for example”.

Not all humanitarian organisations perceive constraints imposed by NSAGs in the same way, which can be a drawback of bilateral negotiations. Depending on their risk appetite, capacity and mandate, some organisations – particularly those with less experience in the country – may interpret even sporadic and time-bound constraints as too difficult to overcome. Others more used to working in hard-to-reach areas may equally fall prey to their own cognitive bias and fail to gauge when access is becoming significantly more constrained.⁸

Other internal constraints may also impede engagement with NSAGs, even if it is for the purpose of securing safe and principled humanitarian access. These too are likely to vary from one organisation to another, whether they be financial, cultural, organisational or programmatic. According to one interviewee:

““ One organisation always brings to us the same problems. And here, the HAWG doesn’t assume this role [to solve issues]. I think it lacks a bit of leadership, you know. They are there among the others. Coordination for them is done by PowerPoints with a list of things to do, but when we propose something, they are not dynamic, they don’t reach out to people.”

Negotiating without coordinated approaches limits opportunities for risk sharing. When organisations negotiate humanitarian access with NSAGs according to their rights and obligations under IHL to obtain consent from parties to the conflict, they often take the state’s consent for granted. Dialogue with national and local authorities is not as strong as it could be, and many respondents pointed to a need to be more forward looking and create more space for engagement with them.

Developments such as the adoption of a 15 December 2022 decree that places stringent requirements on NGOs’ coordination, monitoring and reporting activities have led to an increase in their day-to-day management burden.⁹ According to an April 2023 FONGIM survey of 80 international NGOs, 40% said the new requirements had led to additional costs. Almost all said they had created extra work. Sixty-four per cent said they had to wait for three to six weeks to a month to obtain government authorisations.¹⁰

Faced with an assertive central government and transitional authorities and an increase in military operations against NSAGs, several interviewees for this study raised questions about the risks that humanitarian organisations take when negotiating access with armed groups. It was clear to many, however, that the government understands that organisations would be not be able to operate in some areas without negotiating NSAGs’ consent.

““ It can represent a risk from the government’s point of view, of not being able to distinguish between our humanitarian access work to bring aid to populations in an area where the state is not present, and where we have been obliged to deal with the actor who ensures security in this area. But I think that for Mali, people know that if ... you’re working in an area where they [the state] are not present, where there are dangers, where security is absent, they know perfectly well that you can’t access this area without coming into contact with armed groups.

⁸ ECFR, [Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel](#), May 2019.

⁹ Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on Mali. S/2023/138.

¹⁰ FONGIM

“ There is a form of tolerance, from the point of view of state actors, who understand, I suppose, the need for humanitarian actors to go and help populations in places that are difficult to access. That's all I can say, but on the other hand, where we establish relations [with NSAGs], on the contrary, it reduces the risks.”

Others insisted on the sensitivity of the task, citing examples from neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger where accusations against NGOs have surfaced recently. Not coordinating humanitarian negotiations on the need to deliver principled assistance can lead to the fragmentation of the humanitarian community and the targeting of individual organisations. Interviewees also brought up cases of authorities' suspicion of operations in areas under NSAG influence and their interference in them:

“ Increasingly, we're seeing a narrowing of perceptions of the neutrality of humanitarian action, and so on. 'Why are you going to Ansongo when there are jihadists there, you're going to finance them?'. That's what we're systematically seeing: more and more interference from prefects, sub-prefects and the military. Prefects and sub-prefects of the new administration, but that's [also] the way it was before the coup.”

Many access constraints hinge on factors that humanitarian organisations can control, such as the quality of their programmes, community engagement, adherence to principles, context-sensitive adaptation and openness to dialogue and negotiations, all of which help to build acceptance. Others, however, may be triggered by factors over which they do not have agency, such as rumours and disinformation.

4

TREADING CAREFULLY: ACCESS AT WHAT COST?

Donors and operational agencies are well aware that access negotiations should be confidential, and of the need to preserve the anonymity of certain interlocutors to protect humanitarian workers and civilians from retaliation. On the one hand, most agree that a summary understanding of practices is enough to inform their positioning, adopting a “need-to-know” attitude. On the other, not jointly discussing issues in more in depth or exchanging practices undermines the trust that is much needed in the HAWG and in general in access coordination.



📷 IDP camp close to Timbuktu

4.1 DONORS, CHAMPIONS OF PRINCIPLED ACCESS?

The need-to-know approach is influenced by two main dynamics. Establishment-led anti-French rhetoric has been on the rise for the past two years, leading to the expulsion of the country’s ambassador in January 2022. The situation further escalated when, in response to Mali’s

public affiliation with the Wagner Group, France suspended all official development assistance to Bamako.¹¹ This in turn prompted Mali’s government’s to suspend the activities of all NGOs that receive French funding or other support, including those in the humanitarian field.¹²

¹¹ Government of France, [Mali: Suspension of Official Development Assistance](#), 16 November 2022.

¹² Maliweb, [Mali: Le Gouvernement de la Transition décide d’interdire les activités des ONG opérant au Mali sur financement de la France](#), 21 November 2022.

The chilling effect of these developments on the international community is palpable in Bamako. One senior representative said:

“ We don't want to give the impression that we get into the NGOs' business, we don't want to get into a French-support situation; we avoid giving the impression we manipulate them. Our feeling is that the accusations against France can be turned against any of us. We do try to keep some distance. We don't micromanage, don't ask for too much detail”.

The international diplomatic and donor community is willing to support the humanitarian response and keep abreast of the challenges NGOs face in their operations, but they do not want to expose them to unforeseeable risks. More so since the transitional authorities' growing suspicions of how humanitarians coordinate their response in NSAG-controlled areas have been publicly expressed in the CMCoord and other platforms.

The second dynamic underlying the need-to-know culture, according to donors, is decreasing respect for the humanitarian principles. All donors interviewed for this research understand the operational value of principled humanitarian action. They attach particular relevance to neutrality and independence given the tense political situation, but they also feel this has decreased the humanitarian community's accountability and donors' capacity to influence decision making. This is especially important because in the view of many operational UN agencies and NGOs international donors are now the most principled stakeholders.

Anecdotal evidence supports this perception. In general, examples identify the lack of leadership in the access domain as the systemic cause of uninformed decision making on negotiations with NSAGs and other issues.

Attempts to use armed escorts without following the standard procedures was frequently cited:

“ I have not seen a single HAWG presentation at the HCT. And that is concerning because we were about to sleepwalk on armed escorts in Ménaka. One day, an organisation asks for an extraordinary HCT meeting to use them, without showing that they have exhausted all other options. Donors had to intervene, because no one was opposing it.

“ Why have we not suspended all activities like two years ago in Menaka? Donors would listen to that. We would support that. But using armed escorts without any proof of concept? No. We have slowly assisted things getting worse, there has been no proactivity. And then this!”¹³

4.2 LIMITED ELEVATION OF ACCESS DILEMMAS

Some issues are elevated to the highest decision-making levels, as in the example above, but most humanitarian stakeholders feel operational challenges are not shared or discussed and consequently not addressed. Reporting is a challenge per se, as is common for all HAWGs. Concerns about anonymity and the use of the data collected through reporting mechanisms are among the deterring factors:

“ We also hide certain episodes to be less scrutinised. It's this dynamic of working in difficult areas where there's a big presence [of NSAGs]. Yeah, then there's schizophrenia. We have donors who don't want any incidents, diversion, basically that everything goes well. And if you want to go into dangerous areas, you have to give 10 per cent or 20 per cent of your assistance; it's like that, we don't tell them.”

Even when the opportunity presents itself, access constraints are not given the relevance and weight they deserve. In Ménaka, which was the scene of severe and sustained hostilities as of late 2022, the humanitarian leadership organised a mission to assess the situation and evaluate the operational conditions.¹⁴ Several respondents felt that the advocacy after the mission was

¹³ To date no humanitarian organisation uses armed escorts to operate in the Menaka region according to follow-up interviews.

¹⁴ OCHA, [Mali: Humanitarian situation in Menaka region - Special situation report on Menaka](#), 22 May 2022

insufficient and did not highlight the dire access situation. One interviewee said:

“ In April there was a mission to Ménaka by the UN. In the report, the focus was not at all on access, which is the most important issue, but on the gaps, the needs ... again requests for funding. We have funding, but I'd like to see how they're going to get the food there.”

Because transparent and straightforward reporting and communication on access constraints and dilemmas is limited, so is the level of attention and space granted to them in higher level forums. In addition to fears that unprincipled practices are increasingly leading to access restrictions, there are also recurrent concerns about their negative impact on programme quality.

4.3 INCREASED OPERATIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC COMPROMISES

Interviewees again cited the lack of coordinated discussions on red lines and common positions on access negotiations with NSAGs. Negotiations practices in the field or lack thereof vary based on humanitarian organisations' capacity, risk appetite, understanding of context and willingness to pursue them.

NSAG checkpoints are one of the most frequent access constraints mentioned by operational stakeholders, mainly because they carry the risk of turning into detentions, kidnappings, diversion and interference. Confronted at a checkpoint, some organisations engage in direct access negotiations to ensure safe and unhindered passage. They may be painstakingly lengthy, and with no guarantee of success.

Against this backdrop, paying for access becomes a reality for many. NGOs admitted both paying combatants at checkpoints to let them reach their destination, and knowing of other organisations that did so.

“ The main challenge we face within the HAWG is the lack of coordination of actions. When I was a member of the group, I wanted the commitments we made and discussed with the NSAGs to be collective commitments, i.e., there to be discussions and negotiations on behalf of the humanitarian community. However, some want each organisation to act individually and obtain guarantees that are different from those of the others. This has created situations where some [armed] actors have benefited more, even though they don't really want aid based on principles.”

In other cases, field staff are taking on tasks and negotiation mandates that do not pertain to their function, and taking decisions that affect their entire organisation and beyond. This happens both as a result of a lack of clear instructions and staff overreaching themselves in leveraging personal connections and networks. Anecdotal examples include the signature of framework agreements with NSAG-backed suppliers, agreeing to incorporate NSAGs' illicit tax into suppliers' overhead costs and other forms of interference during activities. These decisions lead to practices that NSAGs try to impose as the norm.

Operational compromises can also affect the quality and impartiality of programming, deviating it from a needs-based paradigm. NSAGs rarely accept some types of programme and intervention, particularly those related to education, reproductive health and other culturally sensitive topics. For humanitarian organisations to implement such activities, lengthy and recurrent negotiations and slowly-built community acceptance are the only principled pathway.

Instead some organisations simply choose not to implement certain activities, distorting their programming without attempting to negotiate. Sometimes compromises that are almost impossible to step back from are made and respected by the humanitarian community, turning them into often unprincipled norms that can become conditions for access.

“ I'm not sure that presently in certain areas, we haven't already gone too far in terms of access conditions; how far do we go in accepting NSAGs' conditions when we start sorting out the types of activities we can and can't do? When you start picking which staff can or can't get into the car, when you start figuring out whether you need one or two cars because you have a woman and a man on the team, when you start checking how staff are dressed ... you start to go quite far in terms of local conditions in certain areas.”

There is no evidence to suggest that the development of common positions or red lines, in the form of JOPs for example, would counter all these practices and less so that they would lead to accountable decision making. But the fact that such an approach is rarely discussed in collective platform such as the HAWG begs the question of why it has not at least been more carefully considered.

4.4 PARTIAL SOLUTIONS TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS

The HAWG drafted a guidance note on engagement with NSAGs in January 2023. The preamble to the guidance defines the scope of the document, which is to support humanitarians faced with dilemmas during the implementation of activities. It defines red lines that the humanitarian community should respect without exception.

The guidance is one of the HAWG's flagship products for 2023, together with the regionalisation of its subgroups across Mali, but the HCT has not endorsed it or shared it widely with the humanitarian community. Various respondents justified the lack of endorsement by citing the sensitivity of the issue, the lack of general access knowledge among different stakeholders in the humanitarian coordination structure and the lack of ownership of the messages from operational organisations.

This is something of a paradox, given that OCHA and the HAWG chair initiated the development of the guidance at the request of the HAWG members:

“ The guideline provides instructions for humanitarian actors' interactions with non-state armed groups in Mali. I've seen two versions in front of me, but I think we've finalised this tool to try and ensure that all actors adopt behaviour that is aligned with basic principles, so that certain actors can't affect humanitarian access for other actors. We often have disagreements concerning payment for access.”

The document covers several scenarios in which organisations could find themselves compromising the humanitarian principles: using armed escorts without prior HC approval; paying for access; including NSAGs on beneficiary lists and so on. It gives also generic advice on information sharing, acceptance and programmatic choices, and specifically advises using community leaders as interlocutors with NSAGs.

The lack of contextualisation and the generic nature of the advice coupled with the lack of accountability, left some interviewees asking, “so what?” Not having the public endorsement of the HCT and HC, and having not been read by many stakeholders does not help:

“ It's an initiative that was requested by the HAWG and by the NGOs, but from what I understand we shared it with the clusters so that they would be as familiar with it as possible ... but I'm not sure that's really the case. A lot of people haven't had a chance to read it, perhaps with the regional HAWGs in place everywhere it could be a tool they feel comfortable discussing ... even if people are aware of the principles, the discussions show a lot of dilemmas, so we need to think more. This document could be more useful.”

There is value in developing guidance, but there is more value in the views of the HAWG members if real-life dilemmas are discussed immediately and solutions start being crafted before constraints escalate and access becomes completely restricted. All respondents felt the HAWG should urgently and frequently discuss red lines, common positions and dilemmas.

The region of Ménaka surfaced again with dilemmas that emanate from constrained access but reverberate across protection, compliance, safety and security, accountability and more:

“*The only road that was still open was Gao-Ansongo-Menaka. There are IS roadblocks and they demand 1 million XOF per month to pass through and enter Ménaka. Within a radius of 15-20 km there are the FAMA, and after that it's the IS. The NGOs that intervene have decided to stop because they don't want to be accused of financing terrorism.*”

“*Okay, we know your humanitarian principles, but ... when you go to Ménaka from Gao, you know you have your transporters. We pay 100.000, 200.000, 400.000 ... we can conceal it, but we just transferred the risk on private carriers. Private carriers pay what they have to pay for passage, and it shows up on your [humanitarian organisation's] bill.*”

As daunting as these challenges might seem, many HAWG members interviewed are open to working together and are particularly keen to take on more tasks in addressing issues of common concern. Having been subject to turnover and reform, the Mali HAWG faces a challenge common to other access working groups – to ensure humanitarian organisations' buy-in and collaboration. Participation varies, but the enthusiasm and impatience of some members is palpable:

“*In fact, we always show up a little empty-handed. Because we're going to talk about action points, always a bit the same, from month to month, we're going to talk about fairly general policies. They're not very operational, but they lack a concrete, public aspect. When there was the Boni blockade last year, what was done about Boni? It should be simple: who has contacts in the HAWG, who has prepositioned assistance, which are the possible modalities? Who do we ask? And that would be nice. Bam, we meet again in a week, we do a tactical review, we do operational things. That's not at all the case.*”

It must be noted, however, that instead of gravitating toward the HAWG for a collective approach, several organisations are starting initiatives to monitor, analyse and negotiate access without significant efforts to coordinate them and ensure complementarity.

On one hand, this dispersion of resources is detrimental to the harmonisation of practices across the humanitarian community, but on the other many understand that it is only natural they try to address access issues on their own, because the HAWG is not delivering the services humanitarian organisations need.

“*I've got no problem funding this access project in one NGO, that other project in another NGO and so on. I've got no problem doing that ... if in the end all those pieces together mean something, but today that's not the case. That's the role of HAWG. And the fact that HAWG isn't super functional doesn't help and has created this dispersion. It's because NGOs need it. So, in the end, when we don't have a collective approach, they work individually ... They need to work on these issues, it's vital.*”

The HAWG chair and co-chair are making concerted efforts to reassemble everyone around a table, most notably with a retreat in July 2023, which it must be hoped has helped to increase trust and cohesion. To succeed, however, the HAWG will require the humanitarian community to show the same intent as it has done in supporting the CMCoord in the past.

Engagement is required on several levels, from programming and policy to influencing and funding. The arrival of the new HAWG leadership and its determination to bring the group closer to the field, make it more inclusive of ongoing challenges and give it greater relevance in the coordination of the response are promising signs of new beginnings.

5

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the HAWG's lengthy legacy in Mali, a significant proportion of the interviewees for this study remain unclear about its role, functions and possible contributions to humanitarian access specifically and coordination more broadly.



📷 Family at an IDP site posing for a photo

As this report highlights, there is an informal consensus that the HAWG and OCHA should not be the primary interlocutors with NSAGs unless humanitarian organisations ask them to be. This view is upheld by the HAWG and OCHA's leadership: preference should be given to those who are operationally active and maintain relationships with communities, authorities, NSAGs and others.

That said, the same stakeholders agree that the HAWG has a key role to play in access coordination. Even those who expressed strong scepticism about the current state of the group and its potential agreed on several areas in which collective initiatives could be most influential under its coordination.

“ The HAWG has to show that it has value, by escalating issues and having a coherent picture. They have to show coherence and efficiency of this common service. We don't know what the perception of its clients is but if they start raising questions about its utility then we have a big problem. The HAWG must present a business case – what's the value for money what is the efficiency. The group had a grace period and it's coming to an end.”

The recommendations below do not represent the authors' views. They are drawn from the responses given by participants when asked what they would expect from the HAWG in an ideal scenario.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Get the basics right: have a strategy and manage expectations

The HAWG has an HCT-endorsed strategy from 2018 and more recent workplans. Given the changing situation in Mali, there is a pressing need to **develop a new strategy** that reflects the realities on the ground, gives the group clear direction and situates it in the IASC architecture, reporting to the HCT and that access issues are prioritised on the HCT's agenda.

Reflecting the group's the new leadership, this process could create the space to **clarify and manage expectations** about what the HAWG is responsible for and accountable to .

Knowledge about the HAWG and access in general should not be taken for granted. Efforts should be made to show how the group and its strategy can improve principled humanitarian access. Developing a theory of change could bring more clarity.

Be clear about who does what

Two of the HAWG's features its members most appreciate are its inclusive membership and the NGO co-chair position, which is seen as an entry point for NGO voices, particularly local ones, to be heard. Clarity is required, however, about the chair, co-chair, and members' tasks.

To capitalise on renewed enthusiasm for the HAWG and members' willingness to contribute more, its ToR *should be reviewed jointly, shared, and implemented consistently*. Roles should be defined and understood across the humanitarian coordination bodies and operational organisations.

All humanitarian actors – UN and NGOs alike – should participate in the access coordination structures in good faith to build common situational awareness and positions that are key to sustainable humanitarian outcomes.

Coordinate practices and provide common guidance

Bilateral access negotiations have yielded mixed results. Some operational organisations succeed in working in remote areas by upholding humanitarian principles, but others have made costly compromises. Despite this, NGOs seem to prefer to continue to negotiate individually, but would like to *coordinate on the approaches to be used - red lines, and solutions that others have implemented successfully*.

To this end ensure there is space on the HAWG meeting agendas to, troubleshoot access constraints.. Subnational HAWGs also seem to provide an excellent platform if adequately prepared and resourced.

Make the HAWG the ultimate access coordination platform

Access is by its nature a cross-cutting issue, which means parallel conversations cannot be avoided entirely. The most **prominent challenges and constraints, however, and those that become pervasive must be discussed in the HAWG and advice has to be given in accordance with the humanitarian principles and the HAWG's strategy**. The same goes for subnational HAWGs, which need escalation criteria to determine when to involve their national counterpart in addressing local dilemmas.

Make your allies aware of what you're doing

Criticism of the HAWG stems largely from a lack of knowledge about its mandate, strategy, place in the coordination structure and outputs. Many have not read any of the documents underlying its work and are not abreast of the fast-paced reform taking place.

The HAWG leadership need to make an extra effort **to reach out more substantively to other coordination bodies and ensure that relevant knowledge reaches decision makers**. This includes donors, who can be strong allies.

