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Reviewing Guidance and Perspectives on Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction

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The authors prepared this report in various capacities: David Polatty as a senior fellow at the Watson Institute at Brown University and former professor at the U.S. Naval War College's Humanitarian Response Program (HRP); Jonathan Robinson as a global fellow at CHRHS (he is also a contracted humanitarian operations specialist supporting HRP at the U.S. Naval War College, although he supported this research in his own time and in his capacity as a global fellow); Carmen Bebbington as a research assistant at CHRHS; Sierra Fang-Horvath as a research assistant at the Watson Institute; and Georgia Harrington as a research assistant at the Watson Institute.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- To date, there has been scant evidence-based research examining the various United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) managed Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction (HNS4D) that have been utilized in 11 complex emergencies around the world since 2011.
- In an attempt to fill this gap, this study explores the history of 13 HNS4D mechanisms used in 11 different contexts and eight official UN and USAID guidance documents related to HNS4D. This paper then details the findings from 17 semi-structured interviews and five focus group sessions with 29 nongovernmental, intergovernmental and governmental humanitarian professionals experienced with using different types of HNS4D about the perceived purposes, stakeholders, challenges, and potential opportunities to improve the effectiveness of HNS4D.
- The goal of this study is to provide a useful, publicly available, baseline assessment for humanitarian organizations, militaries, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners focused on HNS4D as well as a repository of open source information about HNS4D (in the appendices) that can be used for further study.
- A variety of purposes for HNS4D were revealed from this study that revolve around nine broad themes:
 - 1) HNS4D does not have a single purpose, with little consensus among various actors over what HNS4D is and is not
 - 2) HNS4D's purpose is not clear
 - 3) HNS4D's purpose is related to two distinct processes within HNS4D - notification and deconfliction
 - 4) HNS4D is an information transfer mechanism
 - 5) HNS4D is a communication tool between humanitarians and militaries
 - 6) HNS4D enables and restricts humanitarian access
 - 7) HNS4D is a trust building and breaking mechanism
 - 8) HNS4D is perceived to be a physical protection mechanism
 - 9) HNS4D does not ensure accountability
- Four main stakeholders were identified in this study as being involved or affected by HNS4D. However, it was acknowledged that there is complexity within each of these categories:
 - 1) Humanitarian actors
 - 2) Armed actors
 - 3) Recipients of humanitarian assistance
 - 4) Governments and government donors
- Eight broad challenges with HNS4D were highlighted within the study:
 - 1) NGO and armed actors do not fully trust HNS4D

- 2) There is no clear agreement on what the purposes of HNS4D are
 - 3) HNS4D's uses and purposes are viewed differently by distinct actors and at various levels
 - 4) HNS4D places the burden of responsibility on humanitarians rather than on militaries
 - 5) HNS4D's links to accountability are unclear
 - 6) There is no consensus on who is included in HNS4D and who uses it
 - 7) Data and its use in HNS4D poses a challenge
 - 8) HNS4D does not have a governance system
- Eight areas that could potentially improve HNS4D effectiveness were outlined by the study;
 - 1) Improve the response process for when a military actor violates IHL and attacks a notified site within HNS4D
 - 2) Improve the two-way communication process in HNS4D
 - 3) Involve a more trusted interlocutor for managing HNS4D mechanisms
 - 4) Rebrand and clarify HNS4D for future contexts
 - 5) Carefully use technological processes to improve HNS4D
 - 6) Establish useful metrics and standards for identifying if HNS4D is working as intended
 - 7) HNS4D needs greater focus on donors and funding for solutions
 - 8) Increase the inclusion of local actors in HNS4D
 - There is still much work to be done from both an analytic perspective and in the development of operational guidance for using and improving HNS4D in current and future contexts where civilian protection concerns and aid worker security challenges continue to cause unnecessary fatalities and injuries - and humanitarian access constraints limit the ability of aid organizations to support vulnerable communities. While technological developments may help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current and future HNS4D, a continued focus on process improvement and better coordination between civilian and military participants is paramount. Militaries, in particular, must make stronger progress in improving the transparency and reliability of the deconfliction portion of HNS4D. Due to the stark differences in targeting processes across various militaries around the world, as well as varying capacities to meet their obligations under international law, ameliorating the deconfliction process for HNS4D arguably presents one of the most significant challenges to all actors engaged with such mechanisms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

a. HNS4D Overview

Humanitarian aid workers respond daily to disasters and crises around the world, putting themselves in harm's way to provide life saving and life sustaining humanitarian aid. Anthropological crises, those caused by armed conflict rather than natural disasters, raise threats to both local communities and humanitarians involved in aid delivery.

The Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), also known as International Humanitarian Law (IHL), is intended to protect all people affected by armed conflict and specifically those who are not active participants in fighting, such as civilians, medics, and aid workers.¹ One of the most significant challenges regarding IHL and HNS4D is related to militaries meeting their obligations in taking precautionary measures during their operations, in addition to applying distinction and proportionality in attacks.²

The laws regarding conflict mitigation and attacks on non-military actors combine with customary international law, countries' principles, and common law based on precedents. Because the international humanitarian treaty law is weak or inapplicable in many cases, customary law is relied upon more. The International Committee of the Red Cross, (ICRC) is largely responsible for maintaining a database on customary IHL which is referenced in legal proceedings. The precedential value of the ICRC's database stems from its ability to be applied to non-state or non-international armed conflicts.

However, despite these developments, civilians and humanitarians have continued to be the targets of violence during conflict. It has been hard to recognize long-term trends in specific violence against aid workers in comparison to just civilians, as figures have only been reliably gathered since 1997 by Humanitarian Outcomes, an independent research organization, and since 2019 by the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), an independent humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO).³ Regardless of the source, an upward trend is evident in aid worker casualties over recent decades, both from targeted attacks and collateral damage, mirroring increased violent acts against civilians as a whole. In 2021, 141 aid workers were killed and 203 wounded around the world, a sizable increase from 39 deaths and 6 wounded in 1997.⁴

¹ "The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols", The International Committee of the Red Cross, October 29, 2010. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/overview-geneva-conventions.htm>

² 'Rule 1. The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks may only be directed against combatants. Attacks must not be directed against civilians.' Customary IHL Database, Accessed October 9, 2022, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule1 and 'Rule 14. Launching an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited.' Customary IHL Database, Accessed October 9, 2022, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule14.

³ "Aid Worker Security Database", Humanitarian Outcomes, Accessed July 12, 2022, <https://aidworkersecurity.org/> and "NGO Data Dashboard" International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), Accessed July 12, 2022, <https://ngosafety.org/ngo-data-dashboard/>

⁴ "Total Incidents" Aid Worker Security Database. Accessed Oct 9, 2022. <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/report/incidents>

In conjunction with these developments, one attempt to enhance the compliance of military actors with their IHL obligations and move towards a safer operating environment for humanitarians was the development of a Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D).⁵ This tool aims to assist military actors with identifying where humanitarian actors are and what actions they are conducting in a given area to help limit the effects of kinetic military operations on aid workers. It also provided humanitarians with a medium to communicate and share information with military actors about their actions on the battlefield without compromising their neutrality or independence, which are two key humanitarian principles followed by aid workers around the world. However, HNS4D was not designed to be a replacement of armed actors' IHL obligations to identify civilians and humanitarians in conflict settings and do everything reasonably possible to protect such actors from military attack. Instead, it was created to be a complementary tool. Beginning in 2011, at least 13 HNS4D mechanisms managed by United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have been employed in at least 11 contexts around the world to date.

b. What is HNS4D?

At its core, HNS4D can be described as a deliberate two-part process that enables humanitarian organizations to voluntarily submit information regarding their locations, activities, movements, and personnel either directly or indirectly, such as through a trusted interlocutor like UNOCHA, to relevant armed actors in a conflict. Participating parties to the conflict then take the submitted information along with their existing obligations under IHL into account when planning their operations.⁶ When these two distinct processes are combined - the notification process by humanitarian actors and the deconfliction process by military actors - they become HNS4D (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Concept of a HNS4D Mechanism depicts the two processes of notification (by humanitarian actors) and deconfliction (by military actors) that usually is managed by a trusted interlocutor.

⁵ Throughout this document, the following terms will be used interchangeably to describe HNS4D: mechanism, framework, process, system, and procedure.

⁶ In particular Rule 7 “*The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.*” https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docindex/v1_rul_rule7

Indeed, this two part process was reflected in the 2018 UNOCHA Civil Military Coordination Field Handbook, which described HNS4Ds as:

“A mechanism designed to notify relevant military actors of humanitarian locations, activities, movements, and personnel for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL).”⁷

Despite the theoretical simplicity of the mechanism, HNS4D has seen some high-profile failures in practice. For instance, in both Syria⁸ and Afghanistan⁹ armed actors taking part in HNS4D attacked sites that had been reported within HNS4D mechanisms. This has created a culture of mistrust towards the effectiveness of HNS4D, particularly from humanitarians who have been the victims of attacks. Consequently, such attacks raise doubts about how effectively militaries utilize HNS4D in conjunction with their IHL obligations, while they also call into question what the role and link to accountability is when a HNS4D does not function as intended.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There has been scant evidence-based research conducted on the use of HNS4D around the world, with previous studies typically examining one context rather than taking a holistic view.¹⁰ This paper attempts to fill this gap by examining the state of 13 UNOCHA and USAID managed HNS4Ds employed in 11 contexts around the world.

In each geographic context, the varying purposes, stakeholders, and challenges with HNS4D were explored before potential ways to improve the effectiveness of HNS4D were discussed. To do this, the study conducted a robust literature review of eight relevant and publicly available UN and USAID guidance documents, before the research team engaged 29 stakeholders familiar with HNS4D across five group sessions between March and July 2021, as well as interviewed 17 key informants separately. Each focus group session lasted approximately three hours, and semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews were conducted under Chatham House Rules and involved a mix of international and local nongovernmental, intergovernmental, and governmental humanitarian professionals experienced with using different types of humanitarian notification systems. Participants understood that identifiable information and organizational affiliations would not be included in any publications resulting from the research.

⁷ “The UN CMCoord Field Handbook V2.0, UNOCHA (2018)” UNOCHA, Page 143. Accessed July 12 2022. <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/%5BE-Version%5D%20UNCMCoord%20Field%20Handbook%202.0%20%282018%29.pdf>

⁸ “12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia”, New York Times, October 13, 2019. Accessed July 12 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html>

⁹ “Kunduz Hospital Attack” Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.msf.org/kunduz-hospital-attack>

¹⁰ Sara Miller, “The Conflict in Deconflicting: The Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction in Syria,” in Liaison Journal Volume 13, Issue 1, 2021 pages 64 - 71 Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=ZY0LUUs74Uo%3D&portalid=0>

The overall aim of these actions was to provide a baseline assessment of the available information about different HNS4D employed globally that can be helpful for other academic, humanitarian and military researchers, policymakers, and practitioners focused on HNS4D. The findings of this study will follow a brief history of HNS4D, the contexts in which UN and USAID managed HNS4D have been employed, and the guidance documents that have been developed to inform HNS4D operations in the field.

The study also recognizes that the working group participants and semi-structured interview subjects do not constitute a representative sample of a broader population of humanitarian, governmental, or military actors. The sampling was intentional, aiming to collect perspectives from actors already working on or thinking about HNS4D or in a position to offer expert commentary to provide a window into real experiences of those using HNS4D. Two important limitations are that the sample skews heavily humanitarian (a limited set of military actors participated in the research) and Global North (the sample drew largely from people in the United States, the United Kingdom, various European countries, and some Middle Eastern Countries). The research team hopes that this initial report will prompt future research in this area that specifically includes more military and government actors as well as participants from Africa, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Finally, it is important to note two other caveats with the study. The first is about terminology within this report. While it is appreciated that the term ‘deconfliction’ is often not preferred by humanitarians due to its connotations with military activity,¹¹ this study has nonetheless chosen to use HNS4D (rather than humanitarian notification system (HNS) or humanitarian notification) because it seeks to cover discussions on the notification process *and* the deconfliction process within HNS4D, as well as make the findings of this report appeal to both humanitarian *and* military actors.

The second caveat is that, by only focusing on UN or USAID managed HNS4D mechanisms, the findings of this study are limited because not all humanitarian organizations have opted to use these formal HNS4D mechanisms. Some entities, most notably the ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF),¹² prefer to implement their own bilateral notification and deconfliction arrangements with parties to the conflict. These bilateral HNS4D mechanisms are not included in this study but may offer additional highly relevant lessons learned. In addition, during the course of this study, there were reports of other UNOCHA-managed HNS4D-like systems being used historically, but the lack of publicly available and verifiable information regarding their employment resulted in them not being included.¹³

¹¹ “The UN CMCoord Field Handbook V2.0, UNOCHA (2018)” UNOCHA, Page 146 Accessed July 12 2022. <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/%5BE-Version%5D%20UNCMCoord%20Field%20Handbook%202.0%20%282018%29.pdf>

¹² Alice Debarre, “Improving “Notification” Critical to Safe Humanitarian Work”, The International Peace Institute's Global Observatory, 29 January (2019, Accessed July 12 2022. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/01/improving-notification-critical-safe-humanitarian-work/>

¹³ For example, during email correspondence with UNOCHA in September 2022, it was stated to the authors that a HNS-like model was established in Lebanon in 2016 [note: not 2006] and between October 2021 to March 2022 that was a temporary and informal system between the UN and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This system assisted with planning and conducting UN fuel distribution to health and WASH facilities with an LAF escort.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HNS4D

a. Summary

The concept of HNS4D goes back as far as the 1970s. The term “deconfliction” has been used by militaries to describe the process of attempting to prevent mistaken attacks or “friendly fire” incidents between allied actors in the same geographic area. HNS4D gradually began to proliferate into the humanitarian sector by the early 2000s, but remained ad-hoc and informal, often done on a case-by-case basis, driven by individual military liaison officers or specific humanitarian personnel. It heavily focused on humanitarian movements and limiting the impact of explosive weapons on civilians.

However, after the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, international actors attempted to establish a more official and process-oriented HNS4D mechanism to support the humanitarian community as a whole. Thus emerged the idea of HNS4D mechanisms being managed by a trusted intergovernmental interlocutor rather than by each individual humanitarian organization. Since 2011, an increasing array of humanitarian objects have been incorporated into the mechanism, with a major shift from focusing primarily on humanitarian movements to also including a permanent and static humanitarian locations. Some HNS4D have even gone so far as to include civilian infrastructure that is protected under IHL. Since Libya in 2011, ten other contexts around the world have implemented formal HNS4D mechanisms that are managed by UNOCHA, and one exclusively by USAID.

In conjunction with this expansion of these formal HNS4D mechanisms from 2011 onwards, at least eight official pieces of guidance for HNS4D mechanisms have also been developed by intergovernmental organizations since 2008. To date, at least seven guidance documents pertaining to the years 2008, 2015, 2017, 2018 (two), and 2021 (two) are publicly available from UNOCHA while one, from 2017, is available from USAID.¹⁴ These pieces of guidance have increasingly attempted to outline standards, definitions, processes, and concepts with the HNS4D mechanism, but across the sector, different mechanisms continue to lack consistency or standardization.

Analysis from a systematic literature review of publicly available open-source information from the 11 contexts where formal HNS4D mechanisms have been employed and the eight pieces of guidance for HNS4D quickly reveals that the application of HNS4D has been far from uniform. Instead, HNS4D can be better described as a series of mechanisms around the world with context-specific purposes rather than a single comprehensive or standardized mechanism. Each of these mechanisms have their own distinct characters and stakeholder experiences which align with the unique nature of the contexts HNS4D is applied and levels of application of the mechanism (i.e strategic, operational or ground level).

b. Contexts that employ HNS4D

Since 2011, at least 13 HNS4D mechanisms have been established in 11 complex emergencies around the world. UNOCHA has established ten formal HNS4D mechanisms in the following conflict settings: Libya (2011), Gaza (2013), Iraq (2014), Syria (2014), Yemen (2015), Ukraine (2017), South Sudan (2017),

¹⁴ Further documents describing HNS4D mechanisms have also been developed by various humanitarian groups and academic studies, which although not included in the main body of this study, have been included in an appendix for reference.

Afghanistan (2018),¹⁵ Nigeria (2019), and Mali (2020). USAID has established three notification mechanisms for deconfliction in Iraq (2014), Syria (2014), and Somalia (2017).¹⁶ However, in Syria and Iraq, USAID heavily coordinated with UNOCHA within a Humanitarian Military Coordination Cell (HuMICC) in Amman, which effectively merged these systems into the UNOCHA-led system, leaving Somalia the only HNS4D solely run by USAID.

From looking at each context it becomes clear that the implementation of formal HNS4D mechanisms has been incongruous. There are significant differences in the time frames in which HNS4D mechanisms have been established after international forces have intervened in a conflict. This ranges from one month in Yemen, after the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition there in March 2015, to just over 16 years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. This factor could have an effect on how well HNS4D is trusted by humanitarians and parties to the conflict, as the more time that elapses before a formal HNS4D is established could allow for more entrenched views to form against formal HNS4D mechanisms. This is more likely to hold true if there have been previous cases of parties to the conflict deliberately or inadvertently attacking humanitarian objects. It would therefore make it harder for HNS4D to penetrate through a deeply rooted culture of distrust that likely would have developed and could suggest that HNS4D mechanisms should be established as early as possible during a conflict. Figure 2 (next page) summarizes the above mentioned contexts.

In addition to this, HNS4D has not been uniformly categorized in the aforementioned 11 different contexts. Instead, HNS4D has been referred to in myriad ways, including as a mechanism, system, or process. Some of these naming conventions drop all mention of deconfliction but reference notification, while others do the opposite. In one case, the HNS4D mechanism was called “emergency coordination” (Figure 3).

¹⁵ This study explored the mechanism in place in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban’s takeover of the country in August 2021.

¹⁶ These were established under USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), which as of 2021 is now known as the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).

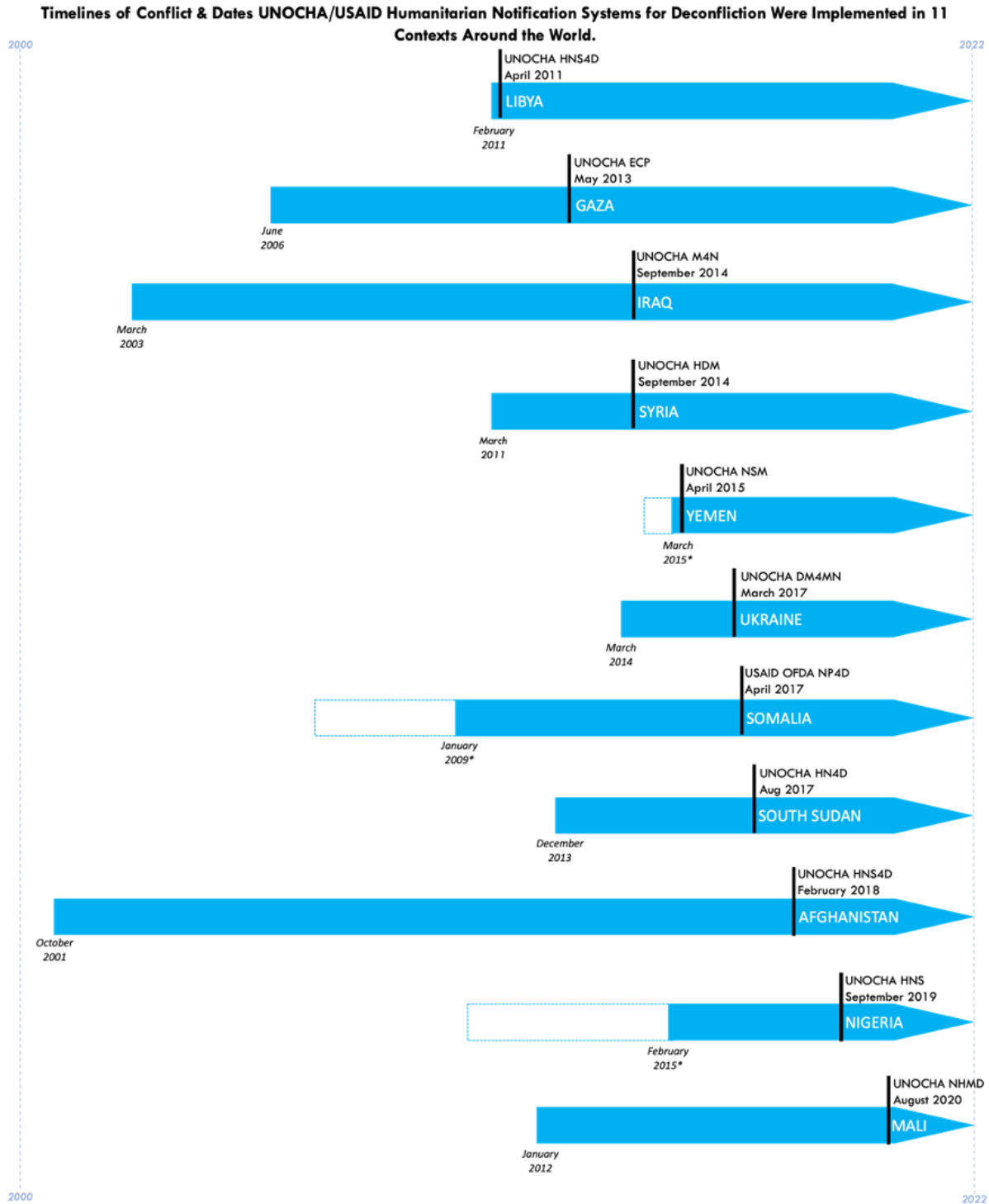


Figure 2. The 11 different contexts HNS4D has been implemented in and the time of their establishment!¹⁷

¹⁷ A note on USAID OFDA's Deconfliction Mechanisms in Syria & Iraq. USAID OFDA began offering humanitarian a deconfliction process with the U.S. led coalition in Syria & Iraq in 2014. Humanitarian deconfliction with non-U.S. led coalition entities in these locations remained the responsibility of UNOCHA. Despite this separation, USAID OFDA coordinated with UNOCHA about humanitarian deconfliction within a humanitarian military coordination cell (HuMICC) in Amman, Jordan. For this reason, USAID OFDA's deconfliction mechanisms in Iraq & Syria have not been

Summary of the Features in Formal Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction Around the World

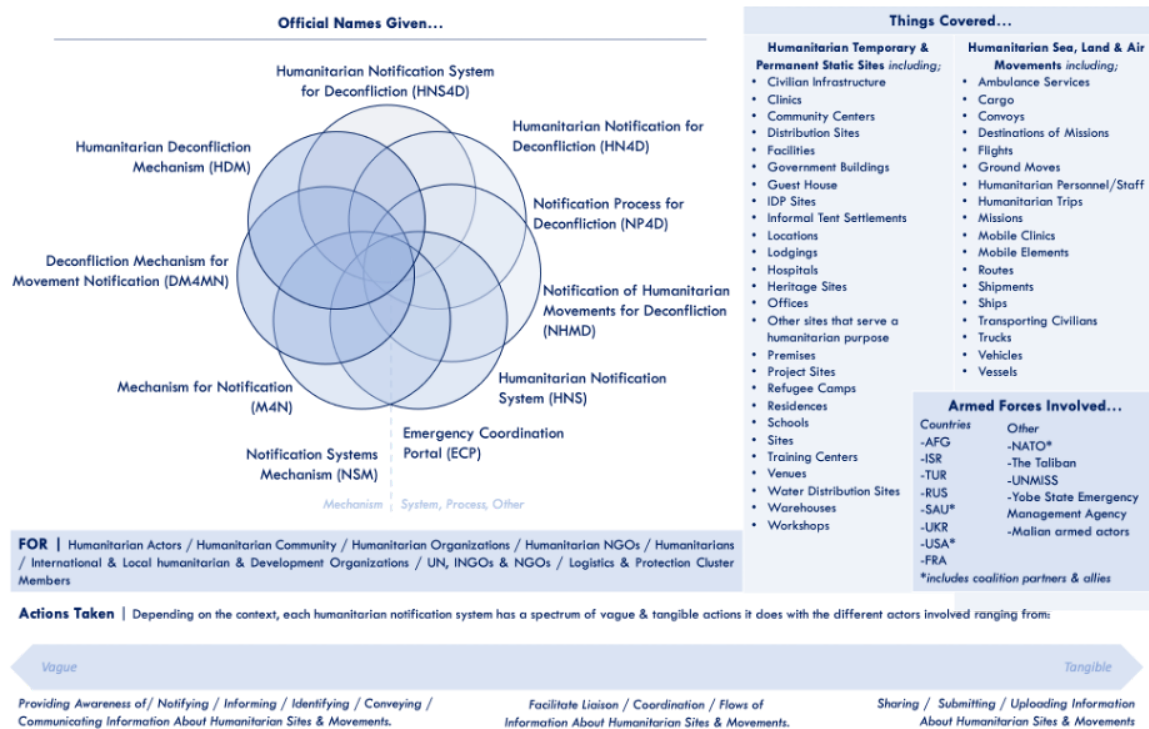


Figure 3. A summary of the 11 different contexts using HNS4D and the names, types of actors included, types of humanitarian objectives included, and the range of actions stated a HNS4D mechanism does.

included in the above diagrams. For more on USAID OFDA's deconfliction mechanisms see Appendix 2. In addition, it is hard to give an exact date when conflict began in Yemen, Somalia and Nigeria in the diagram. All countries have experienced periods of internal conflicts extending as far back as the 1990s. For Yemen, the depicted start of conflict in the country was put as March 2015. This is when a Saudi-led military multinational coalition of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco (until 2019), Qatar (until 2017), Sudan (until 2019) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) intervened in Yemen. Prior to this, a growth in conflict between groups in Yemen had been seen since September 2014, when the Houthi movement (a longstanding political armed movement) captured Yemen's capital Sanaa from the sitting government before going on to capture various other locations around the country. Therefore, an alternative start date to the start of conflict in Yemen has been shown by the dotted line on the diagram above. For more, see <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>. For Somalia, the depicted start of the latest round of conflict in the country was put as January 2009. This is when Ethiopian Troops - who had entered Somalia in December 2006 sparking a new round of internal conflict - withdrew from Somalia after experiencing a prolonged campaign against them by various insurgent groups, including Al Shabaab. This alternative start to the conflict has been shown by dotted lines in the diagram above, although it is recognized that this does not depict several periods of conflict in Somalia since the early 1980s. For more, see https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2010/02/Somalia_CSR52.pdf. In Nigeria, the depicted start of conflict was put as July 2015. This is when Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria deployed a military multi-national coalition, known as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), to fight the ISIS-affiliated insurgency group known as Boko Haram in West Africa. Boko Haram's insurgency against the Nigerian Military began in July 2009 and has steadily grown and widened since this time. Therefore, an alternative start date to the conflict in Nigeria has been depicted by the dotted lines in the above, although it is appreciated that Boko Haram was active prior to 2009. Nigeria also contains other non-state armed groups that have waged an insurgency against the Nigerian authorities since the early 2000s, such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) in the south of the country. However, these groups, although notable, have not needed significant regional military resources (compared to that needed to combat Boko Haram), which is why conflicts they have been involved in have not been included on the above timeline. For more, see <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/mnjtf.htm> and <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/boko-haram-five-african-states-agree-form-coalition-battle-islamist-group-10316387.html>

While distinctions between naming conventions may appear trivial, there can be significant differences in how these phrases are interpreted by military and humanitarian actors that, in turn, have real world impacts. For example, the term “notification” rather than “deconfliction” allows humanitarians to avoid using military terminology, as such language can be seen as having a military profile. Furthermore, using “notification” rather than “deconfliction” reaffirms that humanitarian organizations share their location data through an HNS4D mechanism in order to notify militaries of their presence instead of requesting approval. Taking part in a system also reaffirms militaries’ obligation to seek information where humanitarians may be located in a battlespace. Other issues include the fact that the term “mechanism” implies a more definitive and practical action, while “process” is less concrete in terms of action.

For more information on each context, please see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

c. Landscape of Official HNS4D Guidance.

As previously highlighted, at least eight pieces of official guidance for HNS4D mechanisms have been developed since 2008. When exploring these guidance documents in more detail, the lack of uniformity in describing the purpose of HNS4D mechanisms is clear. While this is logical given the development of HNS4D in 11 unique contexts, the varying standards of guidance over time, that detail a multitude of purposes and have no version control controlling which guidance supersedes previous guidance, may have also lead to misunderstandings about the purposes of HNS4D. Key details regarding relevant elements of guidance about HNS4D are outlined below.

The first UNOCHA guidance on HNS4D looked at in this study was published just prior to the first formal HS4D mechanism being established in Libya in 2011. Three sections in UNOCHA’s 2008 “U.N. Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) Officer Field Handbook” mention “notification” and “deconfliction.”¹⁸ This document frames notification as the “*minimum essential information that a military forces has an obligation to share with the civilian population and humanitarian actors in order to ensure that [these entities] have freedom of movement and/or safe access to the beneficiaries, know whom to contact in the event of problems, and avoid situations known to the military that may pose a risk to the civilian population or humanitarian operations.*”

Seven years later, UNOCHA dedicated two sections in their 2015 “U.N. CMCoord Field Handbook Version 1” specifically to “deconfliction mechanisms.”¹⁹ The first section outlined “Deconfliction Arrangements” as “*Established liaison between humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict to communicate the time and location of humanitarian activities and humanitarian convoys...to ensure that military operations do not jeopardize the lives of humanitarian personnel, impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities, or put recipients of humanitarian assistance at risk.*”

The second section in the 2015 Handbook described a “*notification system*” as a way to “*identify and protect humanitarian staff, offices, facilities, sites, and missions [from military kinetic operations] to the extent possible. These*

¹⁸ In “*Chapter 5: Security, Safety and Medical Services*” in the “*Military Information to be provided to Humanitarian Organizations*” section, in “*Chapter 6: Communications and Information Management*”, in the “*Minimum Communications and Information Management Arrangements*” section, and “*Analysis of Data and Production of Information*” section on Pages 55, 56, 57, 77, and 78 of [The UN Civil-Military Coordination Officer Field Handbook Version 1.0 \(2008\)](#)

¹⁹ In “*Chapter I – Humanitarian Action and Principles*” in the “*7.1 – Humanitarian Access*” section and “*Chapter VI – CMCoord in Complex Emergencies*”, in the “*De-confliction Mechanisms*” section on Pages 25 and 143 of [The UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 1.0 \(2015\)](#)

de-confliction mechanisms are designed to notify the relevant military entities about humanitarian sites in the area of operation that should be protected from kinetic action, like stationary humanitarian sites and, if kinetic action begins, the movements of personnel on humanitarian missions...The mechanism is for use by all humanitarian organizations present in the area of operation...” before detailing the types of objects included in the mechanism and how the process worked.

Two years later, UNOCHA released its 2017 “U.N. CMCoord Guide for the Military Handbook” that contained two sections on “Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D).”²⁰ HNS4D was described as “*A good practice from recent complex emergencies is the early establishment of a Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D), i.e. a coordination system to share information necessary to ensure the safety of humanitarian convoys and premises...*” and as a “*Liaison between humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict necessary to communicate the time and location of relief activities and humanitarian convoys in order to ensure that military operations do not jeopardize the lives of humanitarian personnel, impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities, or put recipients of humanitarian assistance at risk.*”

In this same year, USAID OFDA also released their only publicly available guidance on HNS4D in their 2017 document titled “Guidance for Submitting Humanitarian and Development Fixed Site Location Information in Somalia.”²¹ This two-page document stated that a “*notification process for deconfliction*” was established “*Due to the need for increased operational security in Somalia, and based on best practices in other complex emergencies, humanitarian and development organizations may want to provide information about their fixed locations in Somalia for deconfliction purposes.*”

In 2018, two further pieces of guidance on the use of HNS4D were developed. The first was within the “U.N. CMCoord Field Handbook Version 2,” which included a detailed section on “*Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction.*”²² In the most expansive UNOCHA guidance to date, HNS4D was described as a mechanism “*designed to notify relevant military actors of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The HNS4D covers static locations, such as the offices of humanitarian organizations, and non-static locations, such as humanitarian convoys...The HNS4D serves as a complementary set of information for military planners to ensure that airstrikes or other kinetic operations will not result in the harming of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel. It is for the belligerents to positively identify what they attack and to assess the risk of incidental civilian harm; it is not for humanitarian organizations to identify what may not be attacked or incidentally harmed...The stand-alone term “deconfliction mechanism” should not be used by humanitarians. Deconfliction is carried out by the military (land, sea, air), not by humanitarians. The purpose of the humanitarian notification process is intended to help promote the safety and security of humanitarian operations... .*”

The second UNOCHA guidance on HNS4D released in 2018 was the Civil Military Coordination Services (CMCS) 2018 “Operational Guidance for Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction (HNS4D) Working Paper, v1.0.”²³ This eight-page document largely complemented UNOCHA’s 2018 “CMCoord Field Handbook,” outlining HNS4D as a “*structured notification of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel in both static and non-static locations to the military for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks*

²⁰ Both in “Chapter V – Operational Civil-Military Interaction” in the “V.1 Sharing an Operational Space” and “V.3 – Security and Humanitarian Access” sections on pages 44, 45, 47 and 48 in The UN CMCoord Guide for the Military 101 Series (2017).

²¹ Pages 1 and 2 of USAID Guidance for Submitting Humanitarian and Development Fixed Site Location Information in Somalia (2017)

²² In “Chapter 6: UN-CMCoord in Complex Emergencies” in the “6.2.1.4 Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction” section from page 143 and 144 of The UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 2.0 (2018).

²³ Pages 1-8 of UN Operational Guidance for Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction (HNS4D) Working Paper, v1.0 (2018)

under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)... . The process of notification is intended to help promote the safety and security of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel but is without prejudice to the responsibility for upholding IHL which lies solely with the parties to the conflict... . The HNS4D serves as a complementary set of information for military planners to ensure that airstrikes or other kinetic operations will not result in the harming of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel... .”

The latest two UNOCHA guidance documents were released in 2021. The first was UNOCHA’s nine-page “Humanitarian Notification System (HNS) Standard Operating Procedure March 2021” related to Yemen.²⁴ HNS4D was described as “*a voluntary notification mechanism with the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC) aimed at facilitating its obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to ensure safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access... . Humanitarian notification informs parties to the armed conflict of the location of a select category of facilities and movements that are entitled to protection under international humanitarian law (IHL): civilian objects that fulfill a humanitarian function, movements of humanitarian staff and supplies, and critical civilian infrastructure... . Independent of any humanitarian notification system, all parties to the armed conflict are obliged under IHL not to direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including humanitarian staff, facilities and assets, as well as civilian infrastructure that is indispensable for the survival of the civilian population. Humanitarian notification is not a prerequisite for protection under IHL. Conversely, the absence of notification or the removal from the notification list of any given object or movement does not change its status as to its protection under IHL.*”

The final piece of guidance for the use of HNS4D explored in this study was UN OCHA’s four-page “Concept Note on Humanitarian Notification in Support of Access and Protection in Syria April 2021” related to HNS4D operations in Syria.²⁵ In this document, “humanitarian notification” was described as informing “*parties to the armed conflict of the location of a select category of civilian facilities, movements and infrastructure entitled to protection under international humanitarian law (IHL)... . Humanitarian notification does not change the IHL obligations of the parties to the armed conflict... . In certain circumstances, notification is carried out in parallel with direct negotiations for access, or by direct dialogue on the importance of protecting critical civilian infrastructure, with the parties to the armed conflict... . It is important to distinguish humanitarian notification from these other methods of engagement, even if they can often happen in parallel to support humanitarian access and the protection of civilians... . This distinction is important in order to maintain the strictly informative character of humanitarian notification described above, and to prevent it from being misperceived or misused as a mechanism to approve humanitarian operations or to debate the civilian nature of notified infrastructure... . Humanitarian notification is therefore not a prerequisite for, and does not in itself confer, protection under IHL. Conversely, the absence of notification or the removal from the notification list of any given object or movement does not reflect any judgment as to its protection under IHL and does not in itself deprive it of such protection.*”

From all of the guidance documents reviewed by this study it is clear that their descriptions of the purposes and stakeholders of HNS4D became more complex as the mechanisms were utilized more frequently over time (Figure 3). This lack of consistency may explain any confusion that exists about the purposes, stakeholders, and employment of HNS4D from actors on the ground.

For links to each guidance document since 2008, please see Appendix 2.

²⁴ Pages 1-9 of [UNOCHA Humanitarian Notification System \(HNS\) Standard Operation Procedure \(2021\)](#)

²⁵ Pages 1-4 of [UNOCHA Concept Note on Humanitarian Notification in Support of Access and Protection in Syria April \(2021\)](#)

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT NAME	STATED PURPOSES OF HNS			
	COMMUNICATION MECHANISM	INFORMATION TRANSFER MECHANISM	SAFETY & SECURITY MECHANISM	HUMANITARIAN ACCESS MECHANISM
UN CMCoord Officer Field Handbook (2008)	"...Know whom to contact in the event of a problem..."	"...essential information that a military force has an obligation to share with the civilian population and humanitarian actors..."	"...safe access to the beneficiaries..." and "...avoid situations known to the military that may pose a risk to the civilian population or humanitarian operations..."	"...ensure humanitarian actors have freedom of movement..."
UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 1 (2015)	"...Established liaison between humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict to communicate the time and location of humanitarian activities and humanitarian convoys..." and "...These de-confliction mechanisms are designed to notify the relevant military entities about humanitarian sites in the area of operation that should be protected from kinetic action..."		"...in order to ensure that military operations do not jeopardize the lives of humanitarian personnel...or put recipients of humanitarian assistance at risk..." and "...These de-confliction mechanisms are designed to notify the relevant military entities about humanitarian sites in the area of operation that should be protected from kinetic action..."	"...in order to ensure that military operations do not... impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities..."
UN CMCoord Guide for the Military (2017)	"...Liaison between humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict necessary to communicate the time and location of relief activities and humanitarian convoys in order to ensure that military operations do not jeopardize the lives of humanitarian personnel, impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities, or put recipients of humanitarian assistance at risk..."	"...A Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D), i.e. a coordination system to share information necessary to ensure the safety of humanitarian convoys and premises..."	"...Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D), i.e. a coordination system to share information necessary to ensure the safety of humanitarian convoys and premises..." and "Liaison between humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict necessary to communicate the time and location of relief activities and humanitarian convoys in order to ensure that military operations do not jeopardize the lives of humanitarian personnel, impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities, or put recipients of humanitarian assistance at risk..."	"...in order to ensure that military operations do not... impede the passage of relief supplies or implementation of humanitarian activities..."
UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 2 (2018)	"...The mechanism is designed to notify relevant military actors of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)..."	"...The HNS4D serves as a complementary set of information for military planners to ensure that airstrikes or other kinetic operations will not result in the harming of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel..."	"...The HNS4D serves as a complementary set of information for military planners to ensure that airstrikes or other kinetic operations will not result in the harming of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel..." and "...The purpose of the humanitarian notification process is intended to help promote the safety and security of humanitarian operations..."	
UN CMCS Operational Guidance for HNS4D Working Paper (2018)	"...A Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D) describes the structured notification of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel in both static and non-static locations to the military for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)..."	"...The HNS4D serves as a complementary set of information for military planners to ensure that airstrikes or other kinetic operations will not result in the harming of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel..."	"...The process of notification is intended to help promote the safety and security of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel but is without prejudice to the responsibility for upholding IHL which lies solely with the parties to the conflict..."	
UNOCHA HNS Standard Operation Procedures (2021)	"...Humanitarian notification informs parties to the armed conflict of the location of a select category of facilities and movements that are entitled to protection under international humanitarian law (IHL)..."	"...All notifications should be submitted to the NLT via the online platform. Notifications submitted outside the platform will not be processed and returned to the organization..."		"...UNOCHA established a voluntary notification mechanism with the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC) aimed at facilitating its obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to ensure safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access..."
UNOCHA Concept Note on HNS (2021)	"...Humanitarian notification informs parties to the armed conflict of the location of a select category of civilian facilities, movements and infrastructure entitled to protection under international humanitarian law (IHL)..."		"...In certain circumstances, notification is carried out in parallel with direct negotiations for access, or by direct dialogue on the importance of protecting critical civilian infrastructure, with the parties to the armed conflict. For instance, humanitarian actors may on short notice negotiate safe passage for civilians or evacuate its staff in an area with active hostilities. It is important to distinguish humanitarian notification from these other methods of engagement, even if they can often happen in parallel to support humanitarian access and the protection of civilians..."	"...In certain circumstances, notification is carried out in parallel with direct negotiations for access, or by direct dialogue on the importance of protecting critical civilian infrastructure, with the parties to the armed conflict. For instance, humanitarian actors may on short notice negotiate safe passage for civilians or evacuate its staff in an area with active hostilities. It is important to distinguish humanitarian notification from these other methods of engagement, even if they can often happen in parallel to support humanitarian access and the protection of civilians..."
USAID Guidance for Submitting Humanitarian and Development Fixed Site Location Information (2017)	"...Please be aware that all information submitted...will be used to inform U.S. military planners about the location of humanitarian and development personnel, facilities, or sites. ..."	"...Due to the need for increased operational security in Somalia, and based on best practices in other complex emergencies, humanitarian and development organizations may want to provide information about their fixed locations in Somalia for deconfliction purposes..."	"...Due to the need for increased operational security in Somalia, and based on best practices in other complex emergencies, humanitarian and development organizations may want to provide information about their fixed locations in Somalia for deconfliction purposes..."	

Figure 4. Overview of different purposes of HNS4D outlined in different UNOCHA and USAID guidance document (page 1 of 2)

STATED PURPOSES OF HNS				
FACILITATES PARTIES TO THE CONFLICTS' OBLIGATIONS TO IHL	COMPLEMENTS OTHER UN-CMCOORD FUNCTIONS	INCLUDES A COMMITMENT TO INVESTIGATE VIOLATIONS OF ATTACKS AGAINST PROTECTED SITES	IS NOT AN APPROVAL / DISAPPROVAL MECHANISM FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES	IS NOT A LEGALLY BINDING AGREEMENT
"...The mechanism is designed to notify relevant military actors of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)..."				
"...A Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D) describes the structured notification of humanitarian locations, activities, movements and personnel in both static and non-static locations to the military for the purpose of protection against attacks and incidental effects of attacks under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)..."	"...The establishment of the HNS4D is complementary to other UN-CMCoord functions, such as establishing, facilitating and maintaining dialogue between humanitarian actors and the military, raising issues and concerns with relevant military entities, identifying UN-CMCoord training needs, designing context-specific UN-CMCoord strategy..."	"...The existence of the HNS4D can be publicly announced and may include a commitment to investigate violations of the protected nature of humanitarian locations that have been notified within the framework of the HNS4D, and/or an announcement to publicly hold accountable party/ies found responsible for such attacks..."	"...The HNS4D is NOT an approval/disapproval mechanism of humanitarian movements and activities by belligerent forces..." and "...The HNS4D should NOT be used as a vetting or clearance mechanism by parties to the conflict to determine which organizations can or cannot submit a notification..."	
"...UNOCHA established a voluntary notification mechanism with the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC) aimed at facilitating its obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to ensure safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access..." and "...Humanitarian notification is not a prerequisite for protection under IHL. Conversely, the absence of notification or the removal from the notification list of any given object or movement does not change its status as to its protection under IHL..."			"...Humanitarian notification is not a mechanism for parties to the armed conflict to approve or deny specific humanitarian operations..."	"...The notification mechanism does not constitute a legally binding agreement between any of the involved parties. It does not guarantee the safety of humanitarian premises, personnel, equipment and activities..."
"...Humanitarian notification informs parties to the armed conflict of the location of a select category of civilian facilities, movements and infrastructure entitled to protection under international humanitarian law (IHL)...Humanitarian notification does not change the IHL obligations of the parties to the armed conflict..." and "...Humanitarian notification is therefore not a prerequisite for, and does not in itself confer, protection under IHL. Conversely, the absence of notification or the removal from the notification list of any given object or movement does not reflect any judgement as to its protection under IHL and does not in itself deprive it of such protection..."	"...Humanitarian notification in Syria is one of the ways in which OCHA actively supports the humanitarian community in facilitating humanitarian assistance and advocating for the protection of persons affected by the armed conflict. It is part of a range of tools that OCHA uses to engage with parties to the armed conflict..."	"...There may be instances in which a UN investigative body will request information that OCHA has recorded on attacks..."	"...Humanitarian notification is not a mechanism for parties to the armed conflict to approve or deny specific humanitarian operations (is not for 'negotiated deconfliction')..."	
				"...Submitting data does not constitute a legal agreement between those submitting information and the U.S. military, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), or the U.S. Government nor does it guarantee the safety of personnel, vehicles, facilities, or sites..."

Figure 4. Overview of different purposes of HNS4D outlined in different UNOCHA and USAID guidance document (page 2 of 2)

4. FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS

a. *Summary*

After assessing the 11 different contexts employing HNS4D and reviewing the eight guidance documents about its use, this study conducted interviews and held focus groups with experts to identify further issues with HNS4D. The findings – collected from over 17 key informant interviews and five focus groups, with 29 total people from international and local nongovernmental, intergovernmental, and governmental humanitarian professionals experienced with using HNS4D mechanisms – are given in the following sections. Discussions were facilitated around four themes about the purposes of HNS4D; the stakeholders involved in HNS4D; the challenges with HNS4D; and the proposed opportunities to begin to address the issues with HNS4D. The analysis in this section is a summary of these discussions and provides an on-the-ground perspective from those familiar with using HNS4D. This section does not directly quote any of the participants in the study.

b. *Purposes of HNS4D*

Participant discussions revealed both shared and conflicting understandings of, and desires for, the stated and inferred purposes of HNS4D. This study uncovered nine broad themes that stakeholders described as being the purpose of HNS4D, which are discussed below:

i. HNS4D Does Not Have a Single Purpose, with little consensus among various actors over what HNS is and is not. Participants were aware that HNS4D's purposes vary depending on geographic context, stakeholder engagement, and the operating levels where notification and deconfliction are occurring. Participants recognized that there is no “one size fits all” purpose for HNS4D, with many struggling to define HNS4D's exact purpose, usefulness, and effectiveness during discussion. Many participants suggested that it had multiple purposes. It was also noted that some organizations prefer bilateral notification engagements while others prioritize using managed systems, like those run by UNOCHA or USAID. Furthermore, stakeholders noted the overlapping nature of HNS4D with other systems, that it operates alongside other coordination and communication processes such as the U.N. cluster system, which further complicate efforts to isolate and clarify the purposes of HNS4D.

ii. HNS4D's Purpose is Not Clear

Participants suggested that the initial objective about the purpose of HNS4D had been lost over time, with disenchantment stemming from factors such as the absence of a clearly defined purpose in guidance documents, the one-directional flow of information from humanitarians to military actors, the lack of transparency from military actors about what they do with the information they receive in a HNS4D, and violations against sites included in an HNS4D mechanism, especially intentional attacks.. These factors have generated doubts about whether HNS4D can effectively perform the functions for which it was designed and have resulted in a lack of trust in the system, especially by humanitarian actors. Syria in particular was presented as an example of a context where HNS4D's purpose was perceived as “broken” or no longer fit for purpose which resulted in it experiencing low levels of trust from on the ground humanitarian actors

Participants also debated whether not having clear purposes for HNS4D mechanisms made it difficult to assess how effective or ineffective an HNS4D mechanism is. Discussions acknowledged that there was a misalignment between how humanitarians and military actors understand the utility and effectiveness of HNS4D, with the example given that some humanitarians link HNS4D with physical protection and accountability while some military actors link HNS4D with being a useful tool to build a common operating picture. The transparency of the system for both humanitarians and military actors, especially with regard to how information in HNS4D is factored into decision making, was also discussed as a part of why it was hard to identify the purpose(s) of HNS4D.

iii. HNS4D's Purpose is Related to Two Distinct Processes Within HNS4D - Notification & Deconfliction

Participants strongly emphasized that HNS4D entails two distinct processes: notification and deconfliction. That is, the notification process is conducted by humanitarian organizations who provide information about their location or activities, either directly or via third parties, to military actors. Then there is the deconfliction process, which is conducted by military actors who incorporate the information they receive from humanitarians into their planning activities - and can communicate their acknowledgment of receipt (and action) on the notification information. Such an action, which aims to prevent their operations from affecting humanitarian activity, is in line with their IHL obligations. Thus, these processes occur separately and are performed by different actors who view the purpose of HNS4D differently. Participants stressed that the distinction between these processes and the different perspectives about the purpose(s) of HNS4D are not always understood by all actors using HNS4D.

iv. HNS4D is an Information Transfer Mechanism

Participants noted that one of HNS4D's purposes can be described as an information *transfer* mechanism in one direction from humanitarians to military actors, rather than as a two way information *sharing* mechanism between humanitarians and military actors. Discussions noted that military actors in most historical contexts do not communicate with humanitarians about their deconfliction efforts or mention how they use the information that they have received. Consequently humanitarian actors lack insight into if and how militaries have used submitted information. It was also articulated that militaries most frequently only share information back with humanitarian actors after attacks on notified sites have occurred, rather than as a matter of consistent practice, further emphasizing the one directional nature of HNS4D.

v. HNS4D is a Communication Tool Between Humanitarians and Militaries

Participants noted that HNS4D can provide humanitarian organizations with a mechanism for communicating with military actors that would not otherwise exist and if established and managed effectively, HNS4D can be a useful tool for humanitarians to engage with military actors in a principled and thorough manner while still maintaining the separation between humanitarian and military spaces. Some humanitarian actors felt that in certain contexts, HNS4D has been a useful vehicle for productive conversations with military actors at both the strategic and ground levels about their activities and how the military can deconflict their activities with humanitarian activities. However, it was recognized that this may not have been an explicitly designed purpose for HNS4D, but rather a purpose that developed organically from practical experiences. Nonetheless, participants

stressed the overlapping nature of HNS4D with other communication forms, noting that it was one kind of communication tool between humanitarians and parties to the conflict.

vi. HNS4D Enables and Restricts Humanitarian Access

Participants noted that when humanitarian organizations use HNS4D to tell armed actors where they operate, what they are doing, and where they need to go, the system can enable humanitarian access as it provides a form of reassurance to humanitarian groups that armed actors are aware of their movements. In addition, participants noted that legal and donor regulations increasingly require humanitarians to demonstrate they have conducted duty of care procedures (i.e. groups have done all that they reasonably can to keep their staff safe) prior to operating in a high risk area, which using HNS4D can help fulfill.

Participants also noted that HNS4D can and has resulted in military actors restricting humanitarian access to humanitarian organizations. This includes military actors failing to acknowledge to humanitarians that they have received notified information in a timely manner (i.e. an email of notified information), or acknowledging they have received the notified information from a humanitarian but not stating if they have inputted the information into their deconfliction process (i.e. is an acknowledgement of receiving information the same as acknowledging deconfliction has occurred?). Both examples produce ambiguity for humanitarians regarding the deconfliction process and cause many humanitarians to wait for more confirmation or acknowledgement before conducting their humanitarian activity despite IHL allowing humanitarians to move in a battlefield with or without notifying relevant parties to the conflict. In an example from Syria, some NGO security managers described not feeling comfortable approving movement to an area unless the Russian military acknowledged that they had received a notification through the HNS4D system. Such an example shows how militaries and, in some instances humanitarians, see HNS4D as an approval-seeking mechanism for movements.

Another example of HNS4D restricting humanitarian access was given in Yemen, where NGOs were often only permitted to pass military checkpoints if they could provide paperwork proving that they had uploaded their movements to an HNS4D mechanism. Conversely, in some areas having paperwork demonstrating participation in an HNS4D mechanism with the Saudi-led coalition could lead to perceptions from some armed actors that the NGO was not neutral and was instead linked to the enemy. This resulted in some NGOs choosing to either not travel to certain areas – which thus restricted humanitarian access – or to not use HNS4D. Still, it was stressed by stakeholders that they felt that the use of HNS4D to enable or restrict humanitarian access was an unintended consequence of HNS4D being used in practice, rather than as a specifically designed purpose for HNS4D. Participants agreed that HNS4D should not be an access granting or preventing mechanism, nor should it replace other access negotiation tools that humanitarians use with armed actors.

vii. HNS4D is a Trust Building and Breaking Mechanism

Participants noted that trust must underpin HNS4D for it to function effectively. This includes trust that military actors will uphold IHL and trust that the information provided in notification systems is legitimate and will be used responsibly. However, the actions of both humanitarians and military actors has resulted in the lack of trust in HNS4D in several contexts. Consequently, an unintended purpose of HNS4D is that it is a trust building or breaking mechanism. Participants noted that

despite their obligations under IHL, military actors using HNS4D often question the motives of humanitarian actors, especially local actors, from submitted notifications (i.e. is this actor really humanitarian or is it a secret armed actor posing as a humanitarian?) despite there being little evidence that armed actors, especially non-state armed groups, maliciously use HNS4D. Stakeholders felt that this indicated that militaries do not trust humanitarian groups using a HNS4D mechanism. On the other hand, humanitarians also stated they use HNS4D to assess their trust in various military actors' intentions, especially if notified locations/movements are attacked or not and how well they receive acknowledgements.

Importantly, even though militaries have an obligation to collect information about civilian and humanitarian objects under IHL — regardless of whether or not there is an active HNS4D system in the region — it was perceived that HNS4D has created an incentive for militaries to rely *solely* on HNS4D for such information. This made participants feel that a burden was placed on humanitarian groups to establish trust with militaries rather than the other way around, which should be the norm according to militaries' IHL obligations. Questions were also raised that if an HNS4D system was discontinued, would military actors increase their demands about the locations and movements of humanitarian operations to NGOs or not, with humanitarians doubtful it would occur.

viii. HNS4D is Perceived to be a Physical Protection Mechanism

While participants acknowledged that HNS4D is designed to remind parties to a conflict of their IHL obligations in relation to the protection of civilians and humanitarians, it was noted that from experiences on the ground HNS4D often was misinterpreted as a tool to provide physical security or protection by some humanitarian actors, especially at the local level. The examples of the Syria and Yemen contexts were given in this regard, where this perception of HNS4D being a physical protection mechanism added to perceptions of outrage and injustice when a site that was notified within a HNS4D was attacked by parties to the conflict.

ix. HNS4D Does Not Ensure Accountability

Most participants agreed that accountability should not be a main purpose of HNS4D, as incorporating accountability into HNS4D could further reduce the trust different actors have in the system. Having accountability as part of HNS4D mechanisms would likely preclude militaries from taking part in it, create concerns about compromising humanitarian neutrality, blur the onus of who should uphold IHL (even though that responsibility always lies with parties to the conflict), and negatively impact humanitarian access. It was also stated that other mechanisms are better equipped to ensure accountability, therefore it should not be a main purpose of HNS4D.

Taking into account the type of information being shared, the misperceptions of the use of HNS4D, and some guidance documents noting that in some contexts, there is a commitment to investigate violations of IHL from information within an HNS4D mechanism, an unintended link between accountability and HNS4D has developed, especially for local humanitarian actors. However, the role of and link to accountability for HNS4D has not yet been well articulated in guidance documents. Nor has the role and link to accountability for HNS4D been well articulated to humanitarians if an armed actor involved in a HNS4D mechanism acts in bad faith by deliberately and or consistently targeting humanitarian sites that have been notified as part of a HNS4D mechanism, as has happened in Syria.

c. Stakeholders involved in HNS4D

This section details the stakeholders within HNS4D that participants recognized during interviews and focus groups.

i. Humanitarian Actors

Participants stated that humanitarian actors (i.e. U.N. entities, International NGOs, and local NGOs) should be included in HNS4D. However, it was noted that how humanitarian stakeholders using HNS4D are conceptualized and defined by humanitarian and military actors is a persistent tension in HNS4D.

From a military perspective, everyone should be considered a civilian in a battlespace unless directly participating in hostilities. Participants noted the concern from humanitarian and military actors that some actors in a HNS4D mechanism could pose as humanitarians when they are not, which could impact the viability of HNS4D as well as the independent and neutral profile of the wider humanitarian community. However, as stated earlier in this study, the malicious use of HNS4D by armed actors to mask their presence is a rarity. Thus, the vast majority of humanitarians using HNS4D are doing so for legitimate purposes.

Participants also raised concerns about the arbitrary definitions that determine who is and is not a humanitarian, noting that such definitions could exclude other civilian actors –such as development, civil society, or human rights actors – that inhabit areas where humanitarian actors are and where HNS4D is employed. The inclusion, support, and elevation of local humanitarian actors in HNS4D, and their involvement in the design and decision making around HNS4D was highlighted as a particular concern that needs to be addressed in current and future contexts.

The discussion also led to questions over who a trusted humanitarian broker or regulator of HNS4D could be, and if they would be an arbiter of who is and is not a humanitarian. Some participants stated that UNOCHA would likely not want to verify whether organizations or sites are humanitarian, while others noted that military actors also often want this classification of who is or is not a humanitarian as a part of their processes. However, it was highlighted that, in reality, identifying humanitarians is not so clear-cut, as sites can change from being humanitarian to being a military target quickly during a conflict with the examples of distribution sites and field hospitals being given, that on one day they can be used by humanitarians, while the next day a military group can take over the site. In general, participants stated they felt it would be better if more civilian group participants were included in a notification process instead of just including humanitarian actors.

ii. Armed Actors

Participants highlighted that several types of armed actors should be included in HNS4D. This includes conventional militaries, such as those of the United States, Russia, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, as well as non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and even private security companies. However, deciding which armed actors should be included in HNS4D mechanisms is context-dependent, and often crucial actors are either non-compliant with HNS4D (e.g. Syria), excluded from HNS4D processes (e.g. NSAGs), or not recognized as legitimate parties to a conflict by state level militaries or governments who impose restrictions on their interaction with humanitarians or UN agencies. In

particular, it was stated that NSAGs are often excluded from HNS4D processes and instead typically liaise bilaterally with humanitarians using low tech methods such as phone calls or in person meetings. In numerous conflicts where NSAGs play a direct role, this non-compliance and/or exclusion impedes the ability of humanitarians to fulfill their duty to care and receive credible assurances for the safety of their staff from armed actors.

Despite the inclusion of various conventional militaries in HNS4D, it was recognized that not all conventional military actors are involved in HNS4D. In particular, some actors who are seen as traditional adversaries of the United States, such as China or Iran, have not been included in discussions about the design and operation of current and future HNS4D mechanisms. Rather than proposing the need for these actors to participate in current systems, ongoing discussions with these military actors is crucial to inform anticipatory planning for how HNS4D may function in future conflict scenarios, including between near-peer competitors. Ultimately, HNS4D must be informed by careful context analysis and stakeholder mapping at the field level. The number, type, location, and capabilities of armed actors will dictate the best approach for humanitarians to notify them of information. It was also noted that the understanding of HNS4D often sits at the military headquarters or operational level rather than at the tactical level, which is another feature that could be improved in future iterations of HNS4D.

iii. Recipients of Humanitarian Assistance

Though recipients of humanitarian assistance are not active participants in the notification or deconfliction processes of HNS4D mechanisms, participants in the study noted that these actors are nonetheless key stakeholders in HNS4D. Discussions noted that there was disagreement over whether recipients should be informed that a site which they are using or are located is included in an HNS4D mechanism. Concerned humanitarian participants worried that if aid recipients were to know that a site they were using had been notified within an HNS4D mechanism, especially without their prior knowledge, they would choose not to access services at the location due to the fear of being targeted by armed actors. If this occurred, it could ultimately result in NGOs potentially facing a break in trust with the populations that they serve. It was also mentioned that it is unclear what actions would need to be taken to rebuild trust with aid recipients if a site that was notified within an HNS4D mechanism was attacked as previous cases in Syria have shown. Such discussions once more raised the specter of HNS4D's link to accountability.

iv. Governments and Government Donors

Government donors were also mentioned as an important group that could be used to shape and support HNS4D development. Such donors could do so through mandating certain practices and policies that could improve HNS4D and by dedicating more specific funding for HNS4D mechanisms. Concerns were also raised about the potential for government donors to subcontract out the management of future HNS4D systems to private companies as was suggested for Afghanistan prior to the US withdrawal in 2021. In particular, concerns over whether HNS4D would become monetized if this occurred, which could result in excluding many humanitarian groups who could not afford subscription costs. Other concerns over private sector involvement in any HNS4D solution included the perception that many of these entities are often disconnected from the humanitarian community and lack the experience of humanitarian work and engagement with humanitarians. It was felt this could result in potential solutions to HNS4D either being theoretical

and not rooted in reality or at worst, reinforcing existing issues in the mechanism.. It was also mentioned that many private sector entities are often based outside the contexts where HNS4D is used and international in nature, something that would likely exclude local actors as well as reinforce neocolonialist undertones in humanitarian responses.

Participants also discussed some HNS4D systems that are managed by government agencies are problematic as the governments they fall under can often play active roles in a conflict where HNS4D is used as well as act as key funders for humanitarian organizations in that context. Participants gave USAID in Somalia as an example and noted that this set-up makes it challenging for humanitarian groups to use HNS4D there as it can blur the line of independence and neutrality for humanitarian groups who use the system as they could be accused of collaborating with the US military by armed groups there. Participants also discussed feeling inadvertent pressure to sign up for HNS4D if the humanitarian organization they worked for received funding from USAID as they do not want to look substandard (in terms of security practices) in front of their donors. However, participants acknowledged that this setup is currently atypical in the HNS4D ecosystem, but should be something to consider for future contexts.

d. Challenges with HNS4D

This section expands upon the challenges associated with HNS4D that interview and workshop participants raised. Participants identified eight broad challenges with HNS4D which are discussed below.

i. NGOs and armed actors do not fully trust HNS4D

Participants noted that, in some contexts, NGOs do not trust armed actors with the information that humanitarians input into HNS4D. This lack of trust stems from a variety of reasons, including: military attacks on notified sites; militaries' lack of adherence to IHL; the perception that militaries have not had sufficient formal training on what HNS4D is for; and the lack of transparency about what militaries do with notified information once they receive it. Events in contexts such as Syria – where armed actors attacked notified sites and were not held to account – have led to the perception that HNS4D does not work, which further undermines the tool. Indeed, military attacks on notified sites led some NGOs in Syria to stop using the system to notify their locations, while other NGOs chose to deliberately share incorrect information. This, in turn, fueled armed actors' lack of trust in the system. In this way, the lack of trust within HNS4D systems from both humanitarian and military actors makes it difficult for the mechanism to work efficiently and effectively

ii. There is no clear agreement on the purpose(s) for HNS4D

As Section b) Purposes of HNS4D outlined earlier highlights, there is a clear lack of consensus on what HNS4D should be used for. Because HNS4D has been applied differently in distinct conflicts, and involves a variety of actors at different levels, it has become increasingly complicated to define. Moreover, the two components of HNS4D – notification and deconfliction – have different origins and development timelines that also complicate how HNS4D has been conceptualized by humanitarians and military actors. For example, it is widely agreed among humanitarians that notification was first used in Lebanon in 2006, while deconfliction strategies have been utilized since at least 1989, during Operation Just Cause in Panama. While humanitarians acknowledge the need for HNS4D to be adapted depending upon the context where it is being implemented, the lack of

agreement among participants about HNS4D's overall purpose(s) are key challenges with the mechanism.

iii. HNS4D's uses and purposes are viewed differently by distinct actors at various levels

Participants noted that current discussions about the issues confronting HNS4D typically focus on the operational level. However, participants also recognized that HNS4D can be used at the strategic and tactical levels, although there appears to be a lack of consensus on how to do so. For example, at the strategic level, HNS4D could serve as a political engagement tool that the UN could use to engage with parties to the conflict on the nation-state level about humanitarian and security issues. At the tactical level, it could also be a means to discuss the physical protection of humanitarian operations and facilities at the ground level, or as a way to focus on discussing attacks against civilian objects from an accountability angle. Humanitarian experts agree that this lack of clarity surrounding the tactical, operational, and strategic uses of HNS4D contribute to the lack of consensus over what the purposes of the mechanism are.

iv. HNS4D places the burden of responsibility on humanitarians rather than on militaries

Some participants noted that a key challenge facing HNS4D is that the mechanism places the burden of providing information about humanitarian sites or movements to armed actors on humanitarians rather than on military actors. According to IHL, this burden to collect information on humanitarian and civilian objects in a conflict should always lie with military actors. However, humanitarians expressed concern that an unintended consequence of HNS4D, particularly the deconfliction process part of the mechanism, has been that a dynamic has been created in which militaries rely on HNS4D and humanitarians to provide information about humanitarian and civilian objects, instead of using such information to complement what they have collected as required by their obligations under IHL. Indeed, some participants questioned whether militaries collect information on civilian and humanitarian objects or whether they solely rely on HNS4D information. Moreover, many participants felt that HNS4D's one-way transfer of information helps to reinforce placing the burden on humanitarians.

v. HNS4D's links to accountability are unclear

Experts consulted in focus groups and interviews for this study expressed concern that there are frequently no clear repercussions against parties to the conflict who commit violations by attacking sites listed in a HNS4D mechanism. This lack of automatic consequences undermines trust in HNS4D, especially for humanitarians who often experience the fatal consequences of IHL violations, and call into question HNS4D's link to and role of accountability.

While many participants agreed HNS4D is not an accountability mechanism, the lack of clear instruction or guidance of what happens when things go wrong in a HNS4D mechanism (i.e. a notified site in a HNS4D mechanism is attacked by a military actor who is also part of that system) as well as some contexts having a tangential link between HNS4D and an accountability mechanism (e.g. Syria and the IIM), has contributed to misunderstandings and a decrease in credibility for HNS4D mechanisms.

Moreover, participants noted that while HNS4D is often used as a way to highlight egregious attacks against notified sites by military actors (such as healthcare sites) it can also inadvertently deflect away

from attacks against sites that were not included in HNS4D, but are still protected from the actions of warring actors under IHL. This can lead to a feeling of pressure for humanitarians to use HNS4D in order to receive official recognition that a violation of IHL has occurred.

Participants stated that there was also a growing concern about the increasing involvement of legal counsel in HNS4D, especially its impact on humanitarian operations. Participants stated examples of legal requirements and lawyers halting or pressuring programs until humanitarian organizations could demonstrate they have adequately reduced or mitigated high risk to movements, staff, and operations. This in turn has led to humanitarians relying on HNS4D as a due diligence tool as a way to show they have attempted to meet these legal requirements and pressures to reduce risk, and another example of an unintended consequence of HNS4D.

vi. There is no consensus on who is included in HNS4D and who uses it

Participants stated that although HNS4D in theory is marketed for all parties to the conflict, from experiences on the ground it is more frequently used by conventional militaries rather than by non-state armed groups, the latter who are often excluded from such mechanisms. While this may be due to looser command structures, less use of conventional explosive weaponry, and being less technologically capable in their communication ability, participants noted that they felt fewer efforts were made to try and incorporate non-state armed groups into UN or USAID managed HNS4D mechanisms. Participants also noted that private security companies were also excluded from HNS4D mechanisms despite being a conflict actor in many contexts. Other issues with HNS4D identified by participants in the study was that such mechanisms often sit or are utilized at the military headquarters or operation level rather than the tactical level. There was also little articulation of HNS4D and its use at different levels in the current guidance. It is also important to note that who is and who is not included in HNS4D is dominated by the US military perspective, and typically excludes approaches from other non western conflict actors such as China, Russia, and Iran.

On the humanitarian side, there is also little consensus about who is and who is not included in a HNS4D and whether this should exclusively remain humanitarian or include other civilian actors that are present in a complex emergency such as human rights, development and civil society actors. Humanitarian participants also disagreed about how membership to a HNS4D should be decided: with some believing it should be determined by other humanitarian actors, while others feel that there should be a new trusted entity that regulates who is included. Generally, humanitarians agreed that HNS4D will always remain an imbalanced system that will exclude some types of civilian actors and parties to the conflict. Other participants also highlighted there can often be an over inclusion of civilian locations and infrastructure within HNS4D mechanisms that affect usability of the system. Yemen was highlighted as a specific example of this issue.

vii. Data and its use in HNS4D poses a challenge

Participants noted several issues regarding data and information within HNS4D. This included the large amount of data used in HNS4D mechanisms, that is both quantitative (e.g. the notification of the humanitarian site) and qualitative in nature (i.e. with humanitarians craving having the ability to contact and communicate with a person on the military side). Another issue regards the need for diligent data management and judgment of information (i.e. that weighs the value of both quantitative and qualitative information), something that is not always invested in current systems. For example,

while there are dedicated staff and funding for HNS4D systems run by UN or USAID interlocutors, for humanitarian entities using the mechanism there are often gaps in dedicated HNS4D focused personnel and funding, while for military actors is it unclear how much personnel and funding is dedicated for the management of a HNS4D mechanism. Also from the military side there are often perceived issues with the quality of information and data coming from notified sites that contributes to a lack of trust or credibility forming towards humanitarians.

Participants also questioned whether the information being shared in a HNS4D mechanism is being done so in the right way (i.e. going to the correct people and being used appropriately). There was also a concern that there is currently no way to assess or monitor if bad faith actors may use information within a HNS4D to orchestrate potential attacks, deter humanitarian activities, or mask their presence in a context. While participants recognized that some technological solutions were being explored for improving data management, transfer and credibility - such as using distributed ledger or blockchain technology - all participants were highly critical of such measures as they felt they still did not address the roots of the issues with HNS4D. It was also felt that technological solutions were being oversold as a solution to all HNS4D's problems, when it was more likely that it would solve small issues with the mechanism.

viii. HNS4D does not have a governance system

Participants noted that current HNS4D mechanisms do not have a centralized governance entity regulating the standards or principles of the use of a HNS4D or can act if something does not work as intended within the mechanism. The example of medical professionals being governed by state or national medical boards, or architects in the UK adhering to standards set out by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) were given as examples of having something similar to HNS4D mechanisms. Although UNOCHA oversees many HNS4D systems, participants felt that they only managed the system and did nothing more. Participants also felt that the lack of official governance in HNS4D mechanisms contributes to a burden being placed on humanitarians to uphold and monitor if HNS4D is working as intended, rather than on the military who have obligations to uphold IHL regardless of if a HNS4D mechanism is in place or not.

e. HNS4D Recommendations

This section highlights eight critical points that participants identified during discussions as potential areas to improve HNS4D effectiveness.

i. Improve the response process for when a military actor violates IHL and attacks a notified site within HNS4D

Participants noted that there is currently no clear course of action outlined in HNS4D guidance documents that can be followed when military actors participating in the mechanism strike a notified site or act in bad faith. This absence of response options was seen to discourage some humanitarian actors – especially local actors – from participating in HNS4D. It was also seen to fuel the lack of trust in the mechanism, with no clear guidance about if and how HNS4D mechanisms link to accountability. As such, efforts should be made to better articulate the link (or lack thereof) of how and if HNS4D connects to accountability in advice documents provided by agencies such as the UN and USAID.

Most participants agreed that an accountability process should not be part of HNS4D, as the mechanism is not the best tool for this. However, many also felt that concrete actions should be taken if a notified site is attacked by military actors participating in HNS4D, and these should be clearly stated in UN and USAID guidance documents as a minimum. One recommendation suggested that more efforts should be made to educate military and humanitarian actors on IHL and HNS4D mechanisms, especially on where IHL protection is given, how a site can be dual use (for both a civilian and military purpose), and how military actors factor integrate notification information into their planning and targeting processes. Furthermore, participants stated that the establishment of an independent evaluation body that ensures militaries are actually fulfilling their IHL obligations within an HNS4D mechanism could be a positive step forwards.

ii. Improve the two-way communication process in HNS4D

Participants noted efforts should be made to improve communication and information sharing between military actors and humanitarians using HNS4D mechanisms. Presently, HNS4D functions are viewed by many humanitarians as a one-directional process, with information and communications typically originating from humanitarians and being shared with militaries rather than being a two-directional communication and information sharing process where militaries can proactively communicate or share information with humanitarians as well. It was suggested that focusing on fostering direct person-to-person communication channels between humanitarians and military actors – so that discussions about information submitted to HNS4D can be conducted with as few interlocutors or technological barriers as possible – could be an effective strategy for achieving this goal. This communication should be encouraged to be regular, responsive, and proactive, so that long term relationships can be built and so that trust can be created.

iii. Involve a more trusted interlocutor for managing HNS4D mechanisms

Participants stressed the need for a trusted interlocutor that all sides feel comfortable with for formally managed HNS4D mechanisms to work. This trusted broker must have a dedicated capacity to manage HNS4D mechanisms and the ability to get all humanitarian and military stakeholders to agree on the rules and usage of any HNS4D process. Participants noted that while current interlocutors are UNOCHA and USAID, in future contexts this may not be the case and therefore efforts could be taken to explore if other entities could carry out such a duty. In some contexts where UNOCHA has lost community trust (e.g. Syria) the management of HNS4D could be transferred to another trusted broker that is regarded as credible by all sides. Carefully leveraging technology could also help to build trust among some actors, with participants suggesting that humanitarians and military actors could use a shared and publicly available interface, such as a dashboard or website, to share information and communicate (see below)..

Several participants noted that any HNS4D interlocutor should also have a focus on professionalizing the mechanism. That is, they should provide dedicated HNS4D training to military and humanitarian actors. This training could help build a cadre of dedicated staff who formally specialize in HNS4D and with the way UNOCHA currently conducts CMCoord training. Indeed, if the people managing HNS4D systems are seen as experts in their field, this could help to build further trust in the mechanism. This cadre could be used to provide additional expertise and help establish new HNS4D mechanisms or provide training in different contexts in the future.

iv. Rebrand and clarify HNS4D for future contexts

Participants recommended more clearly articulating the scope of HNS4D's purposes as well as showing how HNS4D is distinct from other forms of communication, access negotiation, protection mechanisms, and accountability processes used in military and humanitarian activity.

Many participants recommended that all HNS4D mechanisms should be rebranded to help differentiate between the different purposes and processes that exist in distinct contexts. This rebranding could involve providing a unique name for the system, creating a detailed list of purposes for the respective contexts in which it is employed, outlining comprehensive processes related to mechanism operation, and ensuring a transparent understanding of the HNS4D management team. In particular, any clarification or rebranding must involve local partners and take into account the goals and limitations of HNS4D as well as the link and role of IHL and accountability. Such a rebranding should also clearly articulate the existing obligations that parties to the conflict have in taking precautionary measures as well as applying distinction and proportionality in attacks during the deconfliction process of HNS4D.

v. Carefully use technological processes to improve HNS4D

Participants recognized technological solutions could help to improve HNS4D. Specifically, tracking the flow of information and data during the notification and deconfliction processes, assisting with improving the validity of information submitted to HNS4D systems, and helping to reduce the number of personnel required to process data through the mechanism were mentioned as areas where careful and inclusive uses of technology could enhance the mechanism.

However participants strongly emphasized that technological solutions, especially distributed ledger efforts (i.e. blockchain), were not a panacea to improving all issues within HNS4D, and a deeper understanding of potential technology advantages and disadvantages is needed. Participants also noted that technological solutions should encourage ongoing person-to-person relationships that were desired by stakeholders involved in HNS4D, rather than replace this interaction or reduce person-to-person contact. In addition, if technological solutions were incorporated into HNS4D in the future, participants noted that specific training programs and budgets must be implemented, given that not doing this may marginalize some groups from using any new system, especially some local actors. Participants also recommended that any technological solutions should not be managed by private industry as there was a perception that private companies would likely monetize any proposed solution (either immediately or over time), which would exclude many humanitarians from participating as these groups often have limited budgets.

Participants also discussed that any technological solution for HNS4D needs to be collaborative in nature. At their onset, discussions must involve humanitarians, especially local humanitarian actors, not only to ensure that the technology is user-friendly, but also because their buy-in is essential for there to be trust in any future system. Efforts must also be taken to explore locally driven and led technological solutions to issues in HNS4D, to ensure that neocolonialism aspects are not replicated and perpetuated (i.e. an imposed solution from a western entity to a local context).

vi. Establish useful metrics and standards for identifying if HNS4D is working as intended, and when processes for ending HNS4D employment is required

Participants noted that in order to solve some of the current issues with HNS4D, metrics must be developed to measure if HNS4D is working as intended. These metrics should not be purely quantitative metrics; rather, they should also look at qualitative features, such as actors' relationships and the ease of communication among different entities. This could also help to build trust in the system and identify areas for improvement. Alternatively a set of best practices could also be developed to provide operational guidance and lessons learned for those using HNS4D mechanisms, so that actors can learn from where things have worked. Along these lines, but also related to overall HNS4D operation, it was widely agreed upon that significant work is needed on identifying responsible ways for transitioning or ending the use of a mechanism - often referred to as having an "exit strategy." A special focus group of practitioners and academics should be brought together to explore the most effective manner in which HNS4D can be responsibly shut down, when appropriate.

vii. HNS4D needs greater focus on donors and funding for solutions

Participants stressed the need to increase donor support and funding so that improvements can be made to HNS4D mechanisms. In particular, stakeholders expressed a strong desire for having a dedicated funding stream and personnel to support and strengthen HNS4D mechanisms. In doing this, it could help bolster institutional memory about HNS4D mechanisms, which could counter the frequent loss of knowledge currently experienced in the sector from high staff turnover rates in the military and humanitarian fields. Donors could help provide more stable funding for dedicated personnel to manage HNS4D systems in the humanitarian sector who could regularly communicate with actors involved in HNS4D and react in a timely manner when the system isn't running smoothly. Participants noted that as a start ECHO, FCDO and USAID could be focused on to achieve dedicated funding streams as they contribute 90% of funding in the humanitarian sector. In addition, some participants noted that specific studies should be conducted exploring how militaries use HNS4D and ways to improve their participation and use of HNS4. However, it was recognized that any future change can be difficult, with the example of how safety and security management in the humanitarian sector was improved after significant investment by donors over the past 20 years was given as a model to follow.

viii. Increase the inclusion of local actors in HNS4D

During discussions, participants consistently emphasized the need to be more diligent and active in involving local actors into all aspects related to HNS4D mechanisms. This not only included local humanitarian groups of all types, but also groups representing the beneficiaries of aid (such as civil society groups), who often get excluded from the HNS4D process but are nonetheless the ones most impacted whenever something goes wrong with the system. Overcoming language barriers and capacity issues were also mentioned as things to consider with any HNS4D solution or training that could help better include local actors. Developing a more inclusive framework for local actor participation should be a top priority in both current and future contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

Recent events in Ukraine and the U.S. Department of Defense announcement to establish a civilian harm mitigation and response center of excellence highlight the critical need for improving the protection of civilians in HNS4D. Understanding the nuanced history of HNS4D and the complexity of its mechanisms are essential for better securing aid workers and the communities they serve. As part of this effort to better understand and improve upon HNS4D mechanisms, this baseline study helps civilian and military researchers and practitioners navigate the current guidance landscape as well as provide key perspectives from those familiar with the intricacies of using HNS4D on the ground.

This study shows the complexity of HNS4D's purposes in the 11 countries where it is currently employed, something that is not well emphasized in the different guidance documents or on the ground, as evidenced by the views of stakeholders in this study. Instead, HNS4D can be described as a series of mechanisms that have various complementary and competing purposes, rather than as a single comprehensive mechanism. This complexity is compounded by numerous UNOCHA and USAID guidance documents that consistently present novel stated purposes of HNS4D which do not always align with context-specific guidance or experiences of actors on the ground.

Perspectives from the field also re-enforce the incongruity between various HNS4D systems and the desire by some stakeholders to improve consistency, standardization, and trust in the mechanism. In this study, eight broad challenges with HNS4D were identified: 1) NGOs and armed actors do not fully trust HNS4D, 2) There is no clear agreement on the purpose(s) for HNS4D, 3) HNS4D's uses and purposes are viewed differently by distinct actors at various levels, 4) HNS4D places the burden of responsibility on humanitarians rather than on militaries, 5) HNS4D's links to accountability are unclear, 6) There is no consensus on who is included in HNS4D and who uses it, 7) Data and its use in HNS4D poses a challenge, and 8) HNS4D does not have a governance system.

To assist with any improvement of HNS4D mechanisms, future research efforts could explore the challenges and recommendations outlined in this report. While pursuing these, it is essential that clear and proactive communication is made with all stakeholders in HNS4D, and that involvement with all actors - from local communities and NGOs to government donors - is prioritized when new mechanisms are established or when improvements are made to existing systems. Moreover, recognizing mistakes made in the past is a critical step for building and maintaining trust in any HNS4D system. Attempting to address the above mentioned challenges will be crucial to resolving both present and future issues with HNS4D.

Appendix 1 - HNS4D Overviews By Country

Libya

In Libya, the HN4D is quite minimal and vague when compared to other conflict settings. Its stated purpose is for humanitarian actors to avoid being affected by military targeting. The mechanism is focused on the movement of cargo and shipments as well as flights, ground moves, specifically those of humanitarian personnel. Lines of communication are intended to be kept open so that humanitarian actors may access populations in need safely.

Gaza

The Emergency Coordination Portal (ECP) was established in 2011. It is an online platform built for entering information to be shared with armed actors, specifically the Israeli Forces. Exact grid coordinates, times, text descriptions, and contact details are submitted. Information is sent from the humanitarian community to UNOCHA, then passed along to UNDSS, and finally sent to the Coordination Liaison Authority (CLA). The mechanism is designated as a way to assist land, sea, and air deconfliction efforts wherever humanitarian activities are occurring. Included is the caveat that “the submission of information onto the ECP does not provide any guarantees from the UN in regard to the safety and security of facilities or staff, which remain the responsibility of the individual humanitarian organization.”

Iraq

Mechanisms for notifying about fixed locations were established in September 2014 and for data regarding movements as of January 2015. The system for NGOs was organized by OCHA, while the parallel system for UN agency data was implemented by UNDSS. The stated purpose of the was to “mitigate against the risk of being inadvertently caught in kinetic military air operations” by the Coalition military. Information forwarded to Coalition PoC should be copied to CMCS, and OCHA will receive a confirmation that the Coalition PoC received the information. Two caveats for submission of humanitarian locations and missions are that the information will not be publicized or shared by military entities, but submission equally does not guarantee safety, as there is no binding agreement. The mechanism is fairly standard for routine and emergency processes wherein information is passed up the chain of command of the US Led Coalition after it is received by UNOCHA and passed on.

Syria

OCHA established its mechanism for notifying coalition military planners of static locations of humanitarian organizations in Syria in September 2014. The mechanism was soon expanded to include the provision of movement data as well. OCHA notes that Russia and Turkey were not part of the 2014 process, but that there is now an agreement with both countries to deconflict the locations and movements of humanitarian organizations in order to limit the impact of air strikes on reporting organizations.

Throughout the conflict in Syria, air strikes have resulted in extensive civilian casualties, damage to critical infrastructure, and the suspension of humanitarian activities in various locations throughout the country. In July 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said, “Despite repeated calls by the United Nations to respect the principle of precaution and distinction in their conduct of hostilities, this latest relentless campaign of airstrikes by the government and its allies has continued to hit medical facilities, schools and other civilian infrastructure such as markets and bakeries.” In particular, attacks against medical facilities and personnel are a notable characteristic of the ongoing conflict.

Similar to the process in Yemen, OCHA is the conduit between humanitarian organizations providing information about their static locations and dynamic movements and the receiving military forces. In the case of Syria, there are four recipients of the information: 1) Coalition Forces; 2) Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which transmits the information to the Turkish military; 3) OCHA Syria, which transmits the information to the Russia Center for Reconciliation in Latakia; and 4)

International Syria Support Group Chairs based in Geneva, which are the Governments of the U.S. and Russia. OCHA shares the information with these chairs in order to “provide increased visibility and awareness at the political level that a humanitarian static location, or humanitarian movement location has been deconflicted.” Participation in this HNS4D is also voluntary and guidance on submitting data is located on humanitarianresponse.info.

Yemen

Yemen’s UN Humanitarian Country Team requested the establishment of a Deconfliction Liaison Team (DLT) in April 2015, approximately one month following the start of Saudi-led coalition intervention in Yemen. The primary objective of the DLT was to help protect humanitarian action from the coalition’s air strikes, which have garnered significant international attention throughout the conflict. In their 2018 report to the United Nations, the Group of Independent Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen stated, “Coalition air strikes have caused most of the documented civilian casualties. In the past three years, such airstrikes have hit residential areas, markets, funerals, weddings, detention facilities, civilian boats and even medical facilities.” Data from the Civilian Impact Monitoring Project (CIMP), a service of the Protection Cluster in Yemen, also reveals that air strikes caused the most civilian casualties from August to October 2018, compared to other types of violence.

In this specific application of HNS4D, OCHA is the “conduit between humanitarian organizations that wish to share their data (locations and/or movements information), and the focal point(s) assigned by the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC); Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Committee (EHOC).” As of October 2019, the DLT continued to inform the Saudi-led coalition of humanitarian movements and locations in Yemen. The foundational assumption is that if the Saudi-led coalition knows where humanitarians are located or moving, then the military will use this to inform their targeting process in accordance with international humanitarian law, thereby reducing the risk that humanitarian locations and movements will be affected by direct or indiscriminate air strikes during their operations.

As of February 2022, OCHA maintains three procedures for its notification system of static locations and dynamic movements in Yemen: 1) Temporary deconfliction of overland, sea and air movements; 2) Temporary deconfliction of venues used for the implementation of humanitarian activities (e.g., workshops, distribution sites, etc.); and 3) Permanent deconfliction of humanitarian premises (e.g., offices, warehouses, guest houses, etc.) through a No-Strike-List (NSL), which is acknowledged by EHOC. OCHA provides general guidelines and specific submission processes for each SOP, which can be found online at humanitarianresponse.info. Guidance includes that organizations should submit notifications 48 hours in advance, and at least 24 hours in case of an emergency. Organizations must also provide current and accurate information and GPS coordinates on the appropriate official template.

Ukraine

The notification system in Ukraine only covers humanitarian movements, rather than more expansive ones that include static sites. There is both a regular and emergency mechanism for notification. Information about the cargo and convoy in question is required to be provided by humanitarian organizations via email at least 48 hours in advance of movements. This information is processed by a civil-military cooperation team for the Joint Forces Operation, and the relevant military units are notified. In an emergency situation, a humanitarian convoy must call the UN-CMCoord Officer when the crossing of a checkpoint is not granted. The UN office is then responsible for liaising with law enforcement to resolve the issue.

Somalia

In 2017, USAID OFDA sent out a memo requesting fixed locations of all international and local humanitarian and development organizations in Somalia to be sent to them via email. This includes clinics and hospitals, distribution sites, IDP sites, informal tented settlements, offices, warehouses, and any other sites serving a humanitarian purpose as well as movements of

humanitarian personnel and staff.²⁶ The published purpose of the Notification Process for Deconfliction (NP4D) was “to inform U.S. military planners about the location of humanitarian and development personnel” while simultaneously warning that the sharing of information does not “guarantee the safety of personnel, vehicles, facilities, or sites. Entities operating in this environment continue to do so at their own risk.” Submissions are in various formats, but consists of grid coordinates, times, text descriptions, photos, maps, and contact details from the humanitarian community are sent (in English) to the USAID OFDA Point of Contact who then shares the data with United States Military Planners.

South Sudan

The HN4D mechanism in South Sudan is sparse. Its main purpose is logistical coordination within the UN cluster system, specifically facilitated by UNMISS rather than for the wider humanitarian community.²⁷ The 2018 peace agreement failed to create lasting economic gains in the age of pandemic-induced economic collapse. As of June 2022, South Sudan had 2.0 million internally displaced people, with 8.9 million total in need. With over 7 million individuals are projected to face acute food insecurity, humanitarian aid organizations seeking to provide assistance are being limited by security concerns.²⁸ There have been 6 targeted attacks on aid workers since May of 2021 alone. While widely condemned by the international community, these incidents have not fostered new agreements between parties to the conflict to cease such operations. Instead, humanitarian operations are regularly suspended following outbursts of violence, leaving insecure populations vulnerable.

Afghanistan

In February 2018, UNOCHA established the Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D), where humanitarians could submit information through an online portal directly to the Afghanistan Military. This system ran until the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021. Prior to 2018, no formal humanitarian deconfliction mechanism existed in Afghanistan, instead it was being conducted on an ad hoc basis. For example, various deconfliction mechanisms had been attempted by the US military's Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF) and Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLC), for example in December 2001, November 2002 and March 2003. By October 2004 US CENTCOM's Coalition Coordination Center (CCC) established a permanent deconfliction cell with Interaction, UNOCHA, and WFP. In 2007, UNICEF and WHO established an ad hoc deconfliction system during 'days of tranquility' with the US military that was annually run for several years after this.

Nigeria

UNOCHA established a humanitarian notification system (HNS) for cargo movements in Yobe State as part of efforts to scale up information sharing with the military and promote deconfliction of humanitarian activities by September 2019. Prior to this time, establishing a formal humanitarian notification system was already being discussed by UNOCHA between January and June 2019, while in April 2017, an ad hoc system for notification of humanitarian movements/ static locations for deconfliction was present in the UNOCHA Logistics cluster in Nigeria. OCHA and the state government, represented by Yobe State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), consolidate, vet and sign requests from humanitarian partners for humanitarian cargo movement. SEMA signs to indicate that the state government is aware of it and part of the vetting process. This is not the case in Borno State, where their SEMA does not have any role in the vetting and endorsement of requests for cargo movement.

²⁶ Samuel Oakford, “U.S. signals possible airstrikes in Somalia by asking aid groups for their locations”, *The Intercept*, 28 April 2017, Accessed August 4 2022.

<https://theintercept.com/2017/04/28/u-s-signals-possible-airstrikes-in-somalia-by-asking-aid-groups-for-their-locations/>

²⁷ Based on a conversation with one of this report's authors on 11 February 2020 with a UN worker familiar with the notification system in South Sudan.

²⁸ “South Sudan: Humanitarian Snapshot - June 2022”, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Coordination and Common Services, 26 July 2022.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/south-sudan/infographic/south-sudan-humanitarian-snapshot-june-2022>.

Mali

UNOCHA established a notification of humanitarian movements for deconfliction [NHMD] with the military in Mali between May and August 2020. UNOCHA further stated that the practice of deconfliction (notification of humanitarian movements) was led by UN OCHA's CMCoord officer and facilitates humanitarian access to difficult areas where military operations often take place. UNOCHA also stated that the notification of humanitarian movements will make it possible to strengthen the monitoring and the sharing of information to humanitarian actors on the operations of national and international armed actors as well as the activities of armed groups on road axes in the country. Just under a year earlier, in December 2019, discussions had been underway in the country recommending that a notification system was established.

Appendix 2 - HNS4D Reference Documents Repository

Below is a repository of country specific, publicly available documents about different HNS4D systems in place around the world today. They are presented in the chronological order in which they were established.

Libya

UNOCHA Established a Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D) by April 2011. For more, see

- https://logcluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/meeting_minutes_cairo_11041,
- <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/guidance-use-foreign-military-assets-support-humanitarian-operations-context-curren>
[t](#),
- https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_72027.htm?selectedLocale=ru,
- https://logcluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/ocha_guidance_meda_use_north_africa_crisis, and
- https://logcluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/operational_overview

Gaza

UNOCHA established an Emergency Coordination Portal (ECP) as a humanitarian notification system by May 2013. For more, see page

- 144 of [UN CMCoord Field Handbook V2.0, UNOCHA \(2018\)](#) and
- <http://accesscoordination.org/dbs/ECP/>

Iraq

UNOCHA established a Mechanism for Notifying (M4N) about static locations in September 2014, and for movements by January 2015.

For more, see

- https://www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/deconfliction_of_movements_in_iraq_guide_for_ingos_ocha.pdf

Syria

UNOCHA established a Humanitarian Deconfliction Mechanism (HDM) in September 2014. For more, see

- https://www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/deconfliction_of_movements_in_iraq_guide_for_ingos_ocha.pdf and
- www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/deconfliction_syria_for_static_non_static_feb2018_eng.pdf

Yemen

UNOCHA established The Notification System Mechanism (NSM) in April 2015. For more, see

- <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/yemen/deconfliction> and
- https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/deconfliction_sops_v4.3.pdf

Ukraine

UNOCHA established 2 Deconfliction Mechanisms for the Movement Notification (DM4MN) in Ukrainian government-controlled areas and for crossing the line of contact into Eastern Ukraine via designated exit/entrance Checkpoints by March 2017. For more, see

- https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/notification_mechanism_un-cmcoord_ukraine.pdf and
- page 44 of UNOCHA's 2018 [Annual Report](#).

Somalia

USAID OFDA established the Notification Process for Deconfliction (NP4D) in April 2017. For more, see

- <http://somaligoconsortium.org/download/5a55ad3fbb3d6/>

South Sudan

UNOCHA mentions establishing a Humanitarian Notification for Deconfliction (HN4D) by August 2017. For more see

- page 2 of https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM%20UN-CMCoord_2017.pdf.
- However as far back as 2012 EU documents suggest deconfliction mechanisms may be necessary in South Sudan. For more, see https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sudan_south_annex_en.pdf

Afghanistan

In February 2018, UNOCHA established the Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D). For more, see February 6 2018 section on

- <https://sites.google.com/dialoguing.org/home/un-cmcoord-events/hnpw-2018>.
- Page 25 of https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Stay_and_Deliver.pdf,
- pages 19, 25, 29, 32 of <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a593506.pdf> and
- page 40 of https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG212.pdf.

Nigeria

UNOCHA established a humanitarian notification system (HNS) for cargo movements in Yobe state by September 2019. For more, see

- https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/191031_sep-oct_cmcoord_overview.pdf
- Page 3 of https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1908012_ocha_nga_cmcoordreport.pdf, and
- https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20042017_nga_humanitarian_cmcoord_support_mission_to_nigeria.pdf.

Mali

UNOCHA established a notification of humanitarian movements for deconfliction [NHMD] by August 2020. For more see:

- *Accès humanitaire au Mali* page 3, 6 and 7 (French) https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/mli_rpt_humaccess_mai_a_2020_vf.pdf and
- <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2019/12/10/malis-humanitarian-crisisovermilitarized-and-overshadowed>

USAID HNS4D Focused Guidance Documents

- USAID OFDA's deconfliction mechanisms in Syria, Iraq and Somalia see: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/congressional-testimony/jul-11-2018-robert-jenkins-daa-dcha-emerging-threats-capabilities> and <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/352986/07.02.20-USG-Syria-Complex-Emergency-Fact-Sheet-9.pdf>
- page 150 of [The UN CMCoord Field Handbook V2.0, UNOCHA \(2018\)](#) and

- Pages 1 and 2 of *USAID Guidance for Submitting Humanitarian and Development Fixed Site Location Information in Somalia (2017)* see: <http://somalianoconsortium.org/download/5a55ad3fbb3d6/>

UNOCHA HNS4D Focused Guidance Documents

- Pages 55, 56, 57, 77, and 78 of The UN Civil-Military Coordination Officer Field Handbook Version 1.0 (2008)
- Pages 25 and 143 of The UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 1.0 (2015)
- Pages 44, 45, 47 and 48 in The UN CMCoord Guide for the Military 101 Series (2017).
- Page 143 and 144 of The UN CMCoord Field Handbook Version 2.0 (2018).
- Pages 1-8 of UN Operational Guidance for Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction (HNS4D) Working Paper, v1.0 (2018)
- Pages 1-9 of UNOCHA Humanitarian Notification System (HNS) Standard Operation Procedure (2021)
- Pages 1-4 of UNOCHA Concept Note on Humanitarian Notification in Support of Access and Protection in Syria April (2021)