

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS WORKING PAPER

Operating in disputed territories: humanitarian access in areas under non-state armed groups' influence

Issuance date: 4 February 2025

Application Deadline and Instructions:

Applications must be received by 3 March 2025.

All applications must be submitted electronically to pauline.poupart@sipri.org and marie.riquier@sipri.org with, in the subject line "WP – Humanitarian access".

1. Introduction

The Research and Action for Peace (RECAP) project, funded by the European Union, is implemented by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 18 countries of West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin. The overall objective of the project is to strengthen the role of civil society, including regional, national, and community practitioners and researchers, in the promotion of effective peacebuilding, crisis management, and prevention of conflict and violent extremism in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin to enable more informed decision making by policymakers. The present call is administrated jointly by WANEP, SIPRI, and DRC.

2. Rationale

WANEP, WANEP, DRC and SIPRI are soliciting proposals for research from RECAP network members for the development of a working paper on **Operating in disputed territories: humanitarian assistance in areas under non-state armed groups' influence**.

In this context, the study will explore the state of humanitarian operations in areas under influence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and identify the barriers impeding assistance delivery. It will also identify and assess the measures implemented by humanitarian actors to avoid and mitigate risks, ensure aid reaches people in need, and safeguard the safety of humanitarian personnel and beneficiaries in these areas.

The work will provide insights into the risks and opportunities faced by humanitarian actors, along with their strategies to deliver assistance to vulnerable populations. Additionally, it will also assess the impact of access constraints on these populations and explore what community have put in place or can do to secure their access to humanitarian assistance

2.1 Background

The Humanitarian crises in conflict-affected areas, including territories under influence of non-state armed groups, are characterized by a complex and volatile operating environment with severe access constraints which hinder aid delivery and limit vulnerable populations' access to life-saving assistance.

Based on Hofman and Schneckener's definition, the concept of a non-state armed group refers to a group or organization that uses violence to achieve its objectives and is not part of any recognized and formal institution. As a result, it enjoys a certain degree of autonomy.¹ In the context of West Africa and the Sahel, this includes jihadist groups, militias, self-defence groups, and rebel movements.

While factors such as environmental constraints, bureaucratic and logistical issues impede humanitarian operations, armed conflict remains the primary driver of humanitarian needs and access constraints.² Overall, the operating environment worsened in 2024, the deadliest year for aid workers on record.³ In the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, escalating conflict not only intensifies suffering but also limits the ability of humanitarian organizations to operate and access those in need, particularly in zones affected by jihadist and militia activities.⁴

Humanitarian organizations, operating within specific mandates, navigate these territories under influence by adopting strategies to mitigate risks while upholding the humanitarian principles like neutrality and ensuring staff and beneficiary safety. More specifically, humanitarian organizations operating in the Sahel face complex challenges when addressing urgent needs, including ensuring the safety of both aid workers and beneficiaries amid shifting power dynamics, the presence of NSAGs, as well as uncertainty.⁵ This volatile situation has prompted humanitarian organizations to put in place strategies and mechanisms to deliver aid, including negotiating access with NSAGs. In turn, communities also implement mechanisms to ensure their access to assistance and basic services where state presence is limited and contested.

This working paper is relevant in view of the deteriorating state of humanitarian operations, including in relation to access, in the Sahel region and globally. By identifying the risks and opportunities for delivering aid in disputed territories, the study provides recommendations to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian operations in these areas. The paper aims to inform policy makers on how to support humanitarian operations in regions controlled by non-state armed groups, while promoting a conflict sensitive approach to address urgent needs in a manner that safeguards both personnel and vulnerable communities.

2.2 Research objectives

The overall aim of this study is to produce an evidence-based working paper that will serve as a tool for influencing policy and practice with a view to improve and maintain humanitarian access and services in areas under NSAGs' influence. The study should propose practical recommendations that can be applied to the stakeholders concerned. This working document could also serve as an advocacy document for the various stakeholders working in humanitarian operations, on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and violent extremism in the Sahel.

¹ Hofmann, C., & Schneckener, U. (2011). *Engaging non-state armed actors in state- and peacebuilding: Options and strategies*. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(883), 603–621.

² ACAPS. (n.d.). *Humanitarian access*. ACAPS.

³ ACAPS (note 2)

⁴ OCHA, (2023, January 17), *Almost 33 million people in the Sahel need lifesaving humanitarian assistance and protection services*.

⁵ International Review of the Red Cross. (2022, December 12). *Challenges to the implementation of humanitarian access norms in the Sahel*. International Review of the Red Cross.

Specifically, the objectives of the working paper are to:

- Assess the current state of humanitarian access in disputed territories and zones under influence of NSAGs in the Sahel,
- Identify key challenges and opportunities for delivering assistance and reaching the people in need in regions with limited and contested state presence,
- Identify relevant mechanisms and strategies to avoid and mitigate risks in operating in disputed territories, examine their effectiveness in order to determine gaps and identify potential better practices,
- Inform and guide relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, in better understanding humanitarian operations in disputed territories,
- Provide evidence-based recommendations to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian responses and support for vulnerable communities in disputed territories across the Sahel.

This working paper will be presented by its author and discussed during Recap Network online research “Meet Up” with fellow authors, members of the REcAP network, the EU and interested stakeholders and partners.

3. Scope of work and methodology

The researcher(s) or institution should clarify their research question, methodology, geographical scope and work plan in their proposal, indicating how the objectives of the research and working paper will be achieved.

The study should focus on at least one disputed territory or a zone under the influence of NSAGs such as jihadist groups, militias or rebels. This area may be located in one of the following countries: Mali, Niger or Chad. Candidates are also welcome to propose an alternative zone or country in West Africa and the Sahel, with a detailed explanation for their choice.

The researcher(s) will be responsible for the implementation of all stages of the study, from the design of the methodology to the drafting of the final report, including document review and data collection in the field. The researcher(s) will apply the highest standards of rigour, quality and professionalism.

The researcher(s) will carry out:

- An in-depth **literature review**, based on academic and non-academic publications, of community resilience mechanisms in the targeted countries.
- Drawing up a **preliminary preparatory report** highlighting: the definition of the subject of the study; the research and data collection methodology to be used in the field; the methodological approach to data processing and analysis adopted; the findings and conclusions of the literature review. It will be validated together with the Scientific Committee as part of the Inception report.
- **Individual interviews and/or discussion groups** with grassroots youth and women's organisations, traditional and/or religious leaders, civil society organisations, technical and financial partners, including European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) etc.
- **Field visits** to selected localities based on the security context, the particular experience of one or more areas, or other criteria to be defined jointly with the project secretariat.
- **A working paper** compiling the main findings and policy recommendations arising from the research.
- **Produce a PPT presentation of the conclusions**, which will be presented during research “Meet Up” to the REcAP Network, the EU and interested stakeholders and partners.

If travel is required, the researcher(s) or institution will be responsible to arrange transportation, accommodation, insurance, securing proper visas and research authorizations for their research activities and to make adequate provision in the Financial Proposal. The researcher(s) or institution is also responsible for any staff or sub-consultant they may engage as part of this mission. The final research product is subject to REcAP’s internal review and editing process, and the researcher(s) or institution will resolve all necessary revisions within the scope of the contract.

Based on a request from the REcAP Project Secretariat, and conditional on the final product not revealing information that can put anyone or an organization in danger, the researcher(s) or institution might present a briefing of the findings for the public with a focus on targeting practitioners in the field, policymakers, and financial and technical partners.

4. Expected deliverables & timeline

The Researcher(s) or institution will submit the following deliverables as mentioned below and according to the proposed timeline :

- A working paper in French or English.
- The working paper should be approximately thirty (30) pages, excluding the cover page, the executive summary in French and English (no more than one page each) , the table of contents, the list of abbreviations and acronyms, the list of references (single spacing using Calibri 12) and the appendices. Appendices should include at least the list of people met/interviewed and any other tool or element required to assess the methodology used for the study.
- The researcher(s) will provide the deliverables by e-mail to pauline.poupart@sipri.org and marie.riquier@sipri.org
- The researcher(s) might be invited to a virtual meeting with REcAP’s Scientific Committee to discuss the contents, including policy claims and positions, intellectual arguments, and other issues.

Expected deliverables	Indicative description	Maximum expected timeframe
Inception report	Inception meeting with project secretariat and/or Scientific Committee to clarify ToRs. The contents will include methods, approaches, research tools, calendar, detailed research questions as well as approaches to be adopted to supervise and support countries experts.	5 working days after signing the contract
<i>Comments</i>	<i>Comments & Feedback from the project secretariat or Scientific Committee</i>	2 working days
Draft working paper	Desk research, work meetings and analysis. The draft working paper embedded with in-depth situation analysis, key findings and action-oriented recommendations is presented to the REcAP Scientific Committee. The researcher might be invited to a virtual meeting with REcAP’s Scientific Committee and the EU FPI to discuss the findings.	20 working days
<i>Comments</i>	<i>Comments & feedback from the Scientific Committee and/or the EU FPI</i>	7 working days
Final working paper	Final version taking into consideration comments & feedbacks from the Scientific Committee and/or the EU FPI	7 working days

5. Duration of the assignment and payment schedule

- The assignment is expected to last for 32 working days throughout a maximum of two (2) months from the contract signature date.
- The maximum budget available per working paper is six thousand euros (6,000 EUR).
- The payment schedule will be as follows:

Instalments	Indicative description	%
First instalment	Upon approval of the Inception report	30%
Last instalment	Upon approval of the Final version	70%

6. Eligibility, qualification, and experience required

Interested candidates are expected to have the following qualifications:

- Be a member or a prospective member of the REcAP Network. Members of the REcAP's Scientific Committee cannot apply. However, other researchers from their respective organisations can apply.
- Have a Master's degree or PhD in a relevant field.
- At least 3 years of research experience in the field of Security Sector Reform and/or Security Sector Governance
- Excellent command of French (spoken, read, and written)
- Proficient in English (spoken, read and written)
- Female researchers are strongly encouraged to apply.

7. Application

Interested researcher(s) should submit the following documents to pauline.poupart@sipri.org and marie.riquier@sipri.org before **23:59 GMT on 3 March 2025**:

- a **technical narrative proposal** demonstrating the technical and operational capacity of the researcher(s) or institution and his/her team to carry out the assignment within the given timeframe, with an updated curricula vitae of the lead expert and the overall approach and methodology with proposed timeline. If you plan to work with additional colleagues, describe their role, their level of knowledge, and how their experience is related and beneficial. Describe the overall staffing plan for the project.
- a **financial proposal** detailing the estimated number of working days and fee rate per expert mobilised, transport and subsistence costs (in case of missions) and other reimbursable costs required to fulfil the assignment. The amount of VAT/indirect tax, if applicable, must be indicated separately. Purchase of mobile phones or computers is not eligible. As the project financing this research is funded by the European Union, the financial proposal must be in Euros (EUR).

Only those shortlisted will be contacted.

8. Evaluation criteria for research proposals

The following criteria will be used by the Scientific committee to evaluate research proposals:

No.	Criteria	Max. Score
1	Education: Master's degree or PhD in a relevant field;	10
2	Languages: Excellent command of French (spoken, read, and written). Proficient in English (spoken, read, and written).	10
3	Research Experience: At least 3 years of research. Familiarity and knowledge of the selected topic/theme as well as evidence of previous research experience in the selected theme/topic	20
4	Relevance technical narrative proposal: Does the research proposal address the objective of the research? Are the research objectives and research questions well-constructed and easily understood? Do they align with the research problem?	25
5	Methodology: Technical soundness and quality of the proposed methodology including understanding of the assignment and innovativeness of the approach to undertake it.	25
6	Overall quality of proposal: the degree to which the proposal complies with the application guidelines and is of high quality (table of contents, organization, pagination, margin and font size, ideas effectively presented, referencing, well prepared vitae etc.)	10

The sum of the scores of the criteria mentioned above gives the technical score.

The best financial offer scores 100. Scores of the other financial offers are calculated pro rata. For instance: 5000 EUR is the best offer and receives a score of 100. Other offers are 5500 EUR and 6000 EUR and will receive financial scores of 91 ($5000/5500=90,9$) and 83 ($5000/6000=83,3$), respectively.

The final score is determined by the following formula:

$$Final\ score = \frac{financial\ score + technical\ score}{2}$$

The offer with the best final score is selected to conduct the research.