



Promoting a Blended Risk Management Approach: the place of programming and diversity within a security risk management strategy

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Introduction

When Van Brabant and colleagues (1998) introduced the initial 'security triangle' method, two decades ago, it transformed the approaches aid organisations used to address security risk management (SRM). The security triangle model postulated that an organisation would use either acceptance, protection or deterrence as an SRM approach, and that the choice was typically determined by the broader risk level in the location. During the last twenty years of practice and experience, this initially static and often siloed model has evolved to address the shifting contexts in which aid organisations work. The experience of CARE USA has demonstrated the need to move beyond viewing these foundational strategies as a set of distinct and often sequential options, and instead use a blended strategy to achieve the best results.

The acceptance approach is a traditional baseline for SRM in the sector, but it is increasingly insufficient in a high number of operating contexts when applied by itself, as conflict and criminal actors increasingly ignore conventional humanitarian protections. By blending acceptance, protection, and deterrence approaches, it is possible to incorporate acceptance practices in some of the sector's most insecure environments, whilst still mitigating risk via protection and deterrence approaches. It is also essential to remember that acceptance itself is not a singular model, as it encompasses degrees of acceptance ranging from tolerance or consent to being genuinely welcomed by a community. In some contexts where INGOs work it may never be possible to move beyond the level of tolerance.

Rather than relying on one SRM strategy or moving from approach to approach, CARE has found success when using a blended method. This is achieved through investment in meaningful and collaborative relationships with programming teams and placing an emphasis on recruiting and retaining staff of diverse profiles, both within the security team and more broadly within our country offices. Each of these approaches has resulted in specific and applicable lessons learned, on which CARE's security team is building. Furthermore, in some hostile and fragile contexts, SRM concepts must be integrated, and the blended approach may mean that acceptance – while still foundational – is a limited component of the SRM strategy. Several case studies will clarify these ideas by situating them in CARE's experience.

Collaboration with programming staff

In CARE's experience, acceptance is best used when it is one component of a balanced SRM strategy and co-owned by programming and security teams. Conflict and criminal actors do not always respect humanitarian protections, and in recent years increasing levels of violence targeted at aid workers have made clear that acceptance cannot be the only SRM strategy applied in many of the contexts in which CARE works. To enable sustainable programming and staff safety, it is essential to pursue a blended SRM approach that incorporates acceptance, protection, and at times deterrence. Further to this approach, the experience of the

CARE security team has also revealed that effective operational acceptance cannot be owned by the security function alone; rather, programming teams must share ownership of any acceptance approach. Co-ownership ensures understanding of and buy-in to the protection and deterrence measures that are applied. The incorporation of programming teams as participants and proponents of an SRM framework based on acceptance is also key to moving beyond a community perspective that falls into a tolerance or consent category and into genuine goodwill, as programme quality and delivery is critical to maintaining this.

In practical terms, blending security strategies to resolve issues in the field is a tool for all staff – and particularly programme staff – rather than solely the remit of security teams. Indeed, the involvement of staff with a security function can occasionally detract from a locally led resolution by programme teams (see example below). As such, it is crucial that training for all staff mainstreams deliberate avenues for clearly articulating the mission of the organisation and resolving conflict in a manner that allows sustainable programming to proceed, rather than only focusing on tactical responses in the event of a security incident.

For example, CARE Yemen operates food distribution programming – a high exposure activity – across much of the country, amid protracted conflict and dire levels of humanitarian need. Yemen is a complex and high-risk context in which to work, and one that does not fit the traditional security triangle model for an acceptance-based approach. Security incidents occur at food distributions with greater frequency than anywhere else that CARE works. However, it is neither practical nor advisable for security staff to be present at distributions, as this can be perceived by recipients and local authorities as ‘securitising’ this service (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). CARE’s work is life-saving and carried out in a transparent and principled manner that allows staff to clearly articulate the process for selection of recipient communities. Transparency around selection processes and deliberate communication of CARE’s mission provide a strong baseline for acceptance, even in areas where CARE does not have a long history of providing services. Through internal training programmes run by the security team, which include conflict resolution and personal security, programming staff are taught how to explain these approaches to communities in an effort to support an acceptance-based SRM approach.

Nevertheless, acceptance is not always sufficient, and it is not uncommon for distribution teams to encounter armed individuals disrupting activities or threatening personnel. In order to enable a food distribution programme to proceed safely, for example, acceptance, protection and deterrence strategies are used in combination. In this instance, staff take action to protect themselves – either evasive or conciliatory – and cease programme activities (deterrence) until the threat can be appropriately managed. Resolving a threatening situation such as this requires nuanced understanding of local affiliations and skilled negotiation between CARE staff, community leaders and authorities to guarantee staff safety and allow distributions to resume. While staff have been trained by security teams in how to manage such situations, typically there are no security staff present throughout the process. This highly successful combination of strategies has helped enable the CARE Yemen team to sustain services in incredibly challenging circumstances.

It is more straightforward to assume acceptance where an organisation has a long history of quality programming within a community. Building trust is not an overnight activity, and CARE’s experience of living and working within communities for decades is often key to a healthy acceptance-oriented SRM approach. However, this is often not possible in the case of new humanitarian crises in areas where the organisation has not previously worked – such as Syria. This does not rule out an acceptance-based approach, but typically these settings require a more deliberate blending of protection in the initial phases. It is also crucial that organisational leadership is aware of when acceptance levels are low, to ensure that any new programme activity or area falls within the organisation’s risk appetite. An acceptance analysis is a key component of any proposal to expand operations in an insecure environment. This ensures that both operational teams and leadership are cognisant of the potential challenges.

Breaking down barriers that exist between the security and programming teams to better foster collaboration is also key. This involves connecting at more than a technical level and becoming partners in strategic endeavours, such as programme strategy design, support on grant applications, providing bespoke information and awareness sessions targeted to specific staff and programming profiles, as well as being accessible to those staff

with questions and concerns. In the same way that building acceptance within the community does not happen overnight, it also takes time to build relationships that foster and prioritise acceptance as an SRM approach. A key element of this is recruiting and retaining staff of diverse backgrounds.

Recruiting diverse staff

For CARE, the importance of recruiting a diverse and inclusive staff population is a moral imperative to localise the aid sector and is also an advantage in strengthening the acceptance components of an SRM plan. Staff diversity as a component of an organisation's SRM portfolio is an area in which CARE's security team is making significant contributions. What a diverse staff profile looks like is location and context-specific, and could involve gender, professional background, or ethnicity. To date, much of the security team's work in this area has focused on recruiting a diverse team across the headquarter and country office levels. Security team diversity, particularly when it brings in staff from different organisational and professional backgrounds, is instrumental in creating connections across functions within a country office. Additionally, by drawing on the experience of staff from diverse professional backgrounds and through collaboration with programme staff, CARE has seen an increase in the application of a blended SRM approach, rather than over-reliance on one approach or a traditional scaling of approaches (applying acceptance, protection, and deterrence sequentially). Staff diversity within programming and field-based teams is also crucial in building an organisation's acceptance by the local community.

Security staff from diverse profiles bring invaluable skills and experience to their positions, are more reflective of both the staff and community populations, and are often viewed as more approachable by colleagues, which in turn builds security culture. For CARE, this is best exemplified within the Safety & Security Focal Point (SSFP) programme, which sees staff appointed or volunteering to run the SSFP office in low and moderate risk locations. Through this programme, CARE has created opportunities for staff from non-security backgrounds to enter into and progress within the security sector. While much depends on the individual's goals and approaches, through internal training programmes and technical

coaching, CARE has seen staff progress within the security field, moving from the voluntary SSFP programme into full-time international safety and security manager positions. This programme has encouraged staff with no or limited safety and security backgrounds to become safety and security champions, including staff from administration, IT, and programme backgrounds. While not possible in all contexts, developing avenues for current staff to learn about and build a career in safety and security within the organisation is an opportunity to both diversify the field and capitalise on pre-existing connections to internal programming and operational teams.

Recruiting and investing in local capacity – both security and programme staff – at the hyper-local level has been key in pursuing and maintaining an acceptance-based SRM approach for CARE in insecure environments. This approach creates a cadre of trained and talented local staff who best understand the local context and who can navigate the contextual nuances far better than a non-local, which in turn enhances CARE's acceptance strategies. This insight into local contextual nuance is at the core of a blended SRM approach: acceptance can and will only work to a point, particularly in insecure environments. Local and diverse staff are able to flag when a reconfiguration of approaches may be needed to respond to local changes or threats. Similarly, they best understand how and to whom in the community core messaging needs to be communicated.

CARE's work in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya provides an excellent example of hiring from within the affected population to provide services to the community in education, community outreach, and WASH. In this instance, program participants became staff, who became advocates for the organisation and were able to explain CARE's mission, approaches, and objectives to fellow community members more successfully than outside staff. By virtue of their membership in the community and their local awareness, the safety of staff, the programme, and the recipient population is better served than if equally skilled people from a different location were brought in. There are, of course, situations where CARE observes significant tensions with local host communities who experience the economic and physical strain of hosting refugees and internally displaced people on what are often already marginal resources. In these instances, tensions can be eased by providing

employment to local community members that is proportional to employment for members of the refugee or internally displaced community. One good example of this is in South Sudan, where CARE has hired a large proportion of local staff in various cities and regions. This has been a conscious strategy to build relations with local communities and has resulted in limiting disruption to operations due to ongoing youth protests related to employment opportunities.

However, this approach can also create issues, particularly when it is mandated or overseen by local or national authorities. When hiring locals to staff programmes is required but cannot be supported by appropriate capacity building (including lack of training access, limited education opportunities or professional experience, or due to perceptions of bias), this can have the opposite impact on acceptance. In such instances, improperly or inadequately trained staff can impact on programme quality and consistency. This leads to resentment and can imperil organisational acceptance and raise questions regarding the sustainability of programming. By investing in the local communities with whom we work, through employment and training opportunities, CARE shows a commitment to those communities. In turn, efforts to build and maintain local acceptance are understood as genuine and authentic by those communities. While it is not a fool-proof approach, it has yielded more success than not in recent years.

Lessons based on CARE's experience

Acceptance remains a key and foundational strategy for the SRM model in the aid sector. However, it needs to be balanced and contextualised as a blended rather than siloed approach. Experience has generated three transferable lessons for the sector.

The first lesson is that, as a security team, it is important to think beyond the tactical approaches to staff and organisational security and take the time and effort to build out soft skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, and articulating CARE's mission in a clear manner. The professionalisation of the aid sector, as well as increasingly direct threats against humanitarian actors, has led to the development of professional security teams and resources in most aid organisations. This evolution has become

more pronounced as security departments are required to address more than tactical approaches to operational security, and to build out a culture of security in an industry that has not traditionally needed to rely on such a structure. As such, the building of soft skills through both external and internal training – facilitated or hosted by programme teams – has been a key element of building these essential relationships and ensuring that security and programme teams complement each other.

The second lesson is that this process takes time. It cannot be rushed, and there is no formulaic approach to building relationships. This is true both internally, as lessons are learned from prior experience, and externally, in relationships with the multitude of actors who have an influence over an organisation's presence in a community. Funding influences much of this reality, as grants tend to run in two- or three-year cycles (or less for many humanitarian programmes) and recipient communities are very aware of this fact. Continued presence and engagement through consecutive grant cycles – or even outside of them – along with meaningful employment, capacity developing opportunities, and consistent quality programmes are all essential components of building genuine and long-term community acceptance. While CARE's largely restricted funding profile makes this approach difficult, there are opportunities here for organisations with a more flexible funding structure.

Finally – while much of the success of a blended acceptance approach is dependent on actors external to the security structure – effort and leadership must come from the security team. An adaptive and inclusive security team is an essential part of success. While security 'owns' SRM (and thus acceptance as an approach), in reality it is influenced by many other organisational actors. Security must drive this process through proactive and consistent engagement with programming teams, acknowledging the competing priorities of different functions, and enabling sustainable, quality programming. This also ensures that, when and if it becomes necessary, programming teams understand why security advises a modification of programming to incorporate elements of protection and deterrence as a situation moves beyond the scope of an acceptance-only approach.

Security teams can work to harness the benefits of an acceptance-based SRM approach. However,

quality programmes that meet articulated community needs are what ultimately support an acceptance strategy. Adapting and blending approaches to account for varying degrees of acceptance is essential, and reliant on building comprehensive cross-functional relationships and ensuring that diverse and local staff are part of this process.

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