



Acceptance under Stress: old recipes for new problems

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Introduction

In 1986, along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a tribal chieftain and mujaheddin military commander stopped me on the road and asked who had given me the right to help his people. I remember an answer about mandate, humanitarian concern, and alleviating suffering. This question and the subsequent realisation provided a wake-up call for the rest of my humanitarian career: a deep awareness that despite my good intentions I was not always seen as a guest, and that a unilateral gift was not necessarily a good starting point for sound human relations. In my experience, humanitarians operate in the space between assisting the weak and ‘denouncing’ the strong (Fassin & Gomme, 2012). This space is narrow, especially when stakes are high and the competition between warring actors increases. I cannot remember a situation without need for a robust negotiation or a lengthy palaver; maintaining a license to operate was at least 50% of the job. For me, this is a reminder that even 35 years ago negotiation was already at the heart of humanitarian endeavour and acceptance was never obtained at face value.

However, even if the golden era when humanitarian agencies could work freely and without concern for their security is a fiction, seasoned practitioners will tell you that times have changed. For example, according to Insecurity Insight (2021), in 2020 alone 160 humanitarian workers were reported as kidnapped in 60 incidents around the world. As a result, remote management has become the ‘default choice’ for some agencies, even when a direct presence is possible. In 2010, Larissa Fast and Michael O’Neill wrote a pioneering article taking a critical look at acceptance, identifying room for improvement and the need to revisit the concept of acceptance in the context of security risk management.

A changed security environment

In the 1990s, security incidents where we could demonstrate that a party had intentionally targeted humanitarian actors did exist but were relatively exceptional (Alexander & Parker, 2017). At that time many severe incidents resulted from misunderstanding, mistakes, error of judgment, negligence, individual initiatives, or a faulty chain of command. We could trace the rationale for these incidents, learn from and act upon them. Even in the midst of war, there was some consensus that civilians had to be segregated from the hostilities and aid actors could legitimately help them. Despite accusations about alleged political bias or the pursuit of a hidden agenda, we could usually reach some common ground and in many situations enjoy a reasonable level of acceptance, or at least tolerance and security. Today, it is possible to identify serious incidents perpetrated by actors who have included aid organisations on their list of legitimate targets as a symbolic war prize (Carbonnier, 2019).

In some contexts, the ecology of risk has changed. For example, in 2017 the ICRC announced that it was reducing its presence in Afghanistan after having been directly targeted three times since 2016. During one of these incidents, a Spanish physiotherapist was shot down by a patient in Mazar-i-Sharif and six local staff were killed in the northern part of the country while delivering assistance. In 2018, two midwives hired by the ICRC in Nigeria were killed by a Boko Haram faction who later declared that ‘The Muslim midwives were killed because they had abandoned their Islam the moment they chose to work with the Red Cross’ (BBC News, 2018). In 2020, in Kabul, 24 people were killed when gunmen entered an MSF maternity hospital. MSF Director General Thierry Allafort-Duverger said that while

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he was aware that the agency's presence carried risks, 'we just couldn't believe that someone would take advantage of the absolute vulnerability of women about to give birth to exterminate them and their babies' (BBC News, 2020). The perpetrators allegedly filmed the operation and used the footage to launch a fund-raising campaign in the Middle East. These examples all point to a changing security environment.

New problems, same responses

What does this mean for acceptance? At present, the sector's response largely advocates the need to improve acceptance by elaborating sophisticated access strategies, agreeing on standards, mainstreaming comprehensive institutional policies, and fixing bad programming (Harmer, Stoddard & Haver, 2011; Reichhold, Steets & Sagmeister, 2012). This approach is based on a belief that hostile acts can be attributed to dubious political associations, staff misbehaviour, military co-optation, ignorance of conflict dynamics and overall incapacity to deliver timely and relevant services. Many organisations continue to promote and stick to the same mantras, revolving around a set of more or less standard responses:

- proximity with the victims and communities;
- extended dialogue with all parties to the conflict;
- deep understanding of conflict dynamics and sensitivity for local cultures;
- extended advocacy and communication;
- neutral, impartial and independent approaches;
- inclusivity policies and localisation of aid;
- smart programming.

Recent studies (McQuinn & Terry, 2020) have shown that beyond implementing humanitarian principles (Daudin & Labbé, 2016), organisations must act coherently and consistently with their humanitarian claims. However, good practices are not enough to guarantee security. It is difficult to acknowledge armed groups, and assertive states view humanitarian actors as political pawns or symbolic targets, justifying violent action against them. Some organisations plead to move beyond the 'monster myth' (Sjöberg, 2020) and have tried

to establish a dialogue with the most radical agents, but this has shown limits. Many organisations who still operate in conflict settings are reducing hostile actors' opportunities to strike by withdrawing from dangerous places, 'bunkerizing' their infrastructures and operating from fortified outposts, launching cross-border operations, and using local staff and partners. Although it is not openly admitted, this has resulted in a dramatic shrinking of humanitarian space (Stoddard et al., 2017).

An inadequate assessment of risk

In any crisis, it is crucial to identify causes of hostility and to demonstrate their effects on an organisation's capacity to fulfil a principled humanitarian mission. The literature on humanitarian security insists that aid actors are rejected because of their identity, wrongdoings, and communication, and does not integrate the idiosyncratic nature of their working environment. The tendency to focus on such explanations ignores the need to measure changes in the current risk ecosystem, and creates an illusion that organisations can control their environment. In other words, claiming security problems can be solved through better practices and smart reforms may result from a false causality (Dobelli, 2013).

Yet the examples above suggest a changed external environment. The fundamental transformations are numerous. For example:

- **The proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups:** in some contexts – such as Libya, Sudan, and Afghanistan – the multiplication of forces at work renders the establishment of an operational dialogue almost impossible. The ICRC has identified 660 different armed groups which influence the lives of more than 150 million people across the world. In 44 per cent of the countries experiencing an internal conflict, this conflict comprises between three and nine opposing forces, and 22 per cent have more than ten (ICRC, 2021).
- **The lack of distinction between criminal and political violence:** armed groups resort to extortion, trafficking and predatory strategies in order to sustain their operations, including submission of local populations and expulsion of outsiders.

- **Ideological or religious radicalisation and the rejection of Western values:** radical thought does not create space for activities that may serve people without adverse distinction. The social and economic causes of many conflicts include a concomitant interpretation pointing at corrupt governments and their sponsors. All actions aimed at mitigating the consequence of their incompetence and wrongdoings may be considered as weakening the revolt narrative.

On one hand, acceptance is understood as a method of enabling safe access to people in need and facilitating dialogue based on physical proximity (Jackson, 2015). In this sense, acceptance is clearly a utilitarian philosophy aimed at guaranteeing success and results. On the other hand, acceptance is also considered a core value of humanitarian action that defines relationships between humanitarians and those with whom they interact. Lack of acceptance creates another category of problems revolving around the legitimacy of humanitarian action itself. The security incidents mentioned above may reveal a lack of dialogue or political sensitivity but they could also indicate a profound confrontation of perspectives between political or military objectives and the aid enterprise. In this view, lack of acceptance not only challenges an organisation's technical capacity to operate, it also suggests the ultimate rejection of humanitarian endeavour itself.

An inadequate approach to collaborating with local actors?

In such conflict situations, civil society or the local population is part of the violent confrontation. Humanitarian organisations, despite their genuine efforts to stay out of controversies, are fully immersed in these environments. Academic research suggests that perceived competition between humanitarian actors and violent outfits for the control of the local population could trigger hostile action (Murdie & Stapley, 2014). The classic assumption which says that the population in need of relief assistance will persuade armed groups or state authorities to leave some space to humanitarians (because it is in their ultimate interests) no longer seems to apply.

Two other assumptions based on well-intentioned aspirations likewise deserve revisiting. The first is the imperative to localise aid. This goal is

legitimate when the objective is to trust local partners, empower national responders, and decolonise the humanitarian enterprise by devolving responsibilities. The concrete manifestation of this policy is often to put partners on the frontline in charge of implementing programs designed and calibrated by headquarters staff and foreign donors. Yet when local aid workers and local partners outnumber internationals and incur more casualties, is it ethical to outsource our humanitarian efforts?

A second issue is proximity with local communities. Some experts repeatedly affirm that the salvation lies in aid operators' capacity to secure community cooperation (Bickley, 2014; Fairbanks, 2018; Schneiker, 2015; Skelly, 2021; Donnelly, Poudel & Chakraborty, 2013), believing it possible to thereby obtain overall acceptance and circumvent direct negotiations with reluctant actors. The acceptance and protection offered by some communities, however, is weak because of the pressures exerted on them by armed actors or assertive governments. In many contexts (e.g. Afghanistan, Mali, Niger etc.), traditional and moderate leaders have seen their influence plummeting, whereas other communities are themselves targeted by local government/militia forces or by armed groups. In these cases, communities' capacity to intercede with radicalised groups puts them at risk. Risk transfer to third parties is definitively not a valid acceptance strategy for principled humanitarian organisations.

Can humanitarians operate without acceptance?

Historically, acceptance strategies were developed to address a specific category of problems stemming from misinterpretation of humanitarian intentions, suspicion of political partiality, and dubious affiliations. All these strategies presuppose that you can reach some sort of 'island of agreement' (Blum, 2007) despite profound divergences and mistrust.

Humanitarians have always interacted with states and intolerant organisations waging war in divided and polarised societies, where interfering with military, political or messianic objectives is risky; radicalism postulates that there is no space for neutrality. We must concede that intense contact with radical thinkers has produced positive results in the past, but the current configuration of jihadi nebula, for example, has reduced the possibility to use these channels to obtain a 'political' license to

operate. In many cases, humanitarian organisations have convinced themselves that they have missed something or bear responsibility for what they have (or have not) done. However, a close examination of recent tragic incidents does not prove this to be a convincing explanation about the alleged motives of attackers, because the violence used is totally disproportionate to the possible misdemeanours of aid organisations.

In many circumstances, even principled humanitarians disrupt conflict dynamics and collide with political ideologies or military plans. The illusion that some organisations are more insulated from these dynamics does not hold. Helping people to stay when others want them out, feeding people that others want to starve, treating wounded people who are former enemies, or assisting people under siege are counter-intuitive actions in war. In 2016, in Orum al-Kubra (western Aleppo governorate), a United Nations/SARC (Syrian Arab Red Crescent) convoy was attacked by air, killing at least 14 civilian aid workers and injuring at least 15 others. The attack also destroyed 17 trucks and, with them, food, medicine, children's clothes and other supplies destined for families in the governorate (ICRC Casebook, 2021).

I do not suggest we throw away acceptance as a strategy but instead that we avoid using it when it gives a false pretence of security. If acceptance or tolerance doesn't concern the majority of groups with clear capability and intent to harm organisations, it becomes misleading. In other words, acceptance only works when a critical mass of potentially hostile actors explicitly refrain from adverse action and have the power to convince others to follow them.

Ways forward

Acceptance is first and foremost the essence of humanitarian endeavour, especially for an orthodox practitioner like me. It defines why we are helping others and why we are not simple service providers. However, in the future, given the nature of risks prevailing in some contexts, organisations may have to rely on different strategies to manage risk. These options could include:

- **Reverse access:** managing the access of impacted populations to humanitarian actors and not the contrary. Safe access might be supported through the establishment of protected safe zones where

aid organisations could operate.

- **Dematerialisation of aid:** cash transfer and similar solutions might have serious drawbacks (such as risks of inflation, wrong targeting etc.) but they do minimize humanitarian exposure and vulnerability.
- **Expanding digital proximity:** in the absence of physical proximity, digital communication tools may play a positive role despite their drawbacks (Bouffet & Marelli, 2018). Use of remote sensing and monitoring is also a possible solution to overcome incapacity to assess things on the ground. The recent COVID crisis has demonstrated that this was possible, despite the risk of excluding those with less or no digital access.
- **Maintaining a minimal footprint:** when acceptance cannot be totally secured, transparency becomes a liability. Operating below the radar through informal channels and via intermediaries may provide some results (with the risk of creating suspicion if this strategy is exposed).
- **Focus on sponsors and mentors:** some radicalised states or armed groups, even isolated and apparently fiercely independent, are supported, financed and sheltered by third-parties who use them as strategic proxies for their own political objectives. Sponsors and mentors of armed groups or authoritarian regimes, having demonstrated their violent rejection of principled action, should be the main target of humanitarian diplomacy/advocacy, and those responsible for targeted attacks should be held accountable. Humanitarian organisations should think seriously of legal mechanisms aimed at prosecuting perpetrators and mandators as a collective response to reduce impunity.
- **Handing over to other actors:** humanitarian actors are bound by a robust ethical framework. If a situation is desperate but you are not able to work according to your own principles, do not keep the ball but pass it on.

These options are not perfect or sustainable in the long-term but they may provide some operationality in lieu of a fully-fledged humanitarian response. The immediate question is how to reinvent ourselves in order to pursue our self-proclaimed mission without being killed, kidnapped, injured, or impeded from carrying out humanitarian activities.

Unfortunately, there are strong indications that we are living in an era in which the benefits of an acceptance approach, particularly one geared to technical issues, are limited. Denying this is the case may push some actors, as Fabrice Weissman (2020) claims, 'to drift toward an embrace of humanitarian martyrdom, consistent with what's happening within the broader aid sector'. If the context is such that casualties are inevitable, the choice is between acting in spite of this or withdrawing and recognising that humanitarian action is not possible. The configuration of conflicts or disaster has always prompted humanitarian organisations to adapt to their new reality and find ways to overcome difficulties. The present issue is to reconcile our moral compass and the humanitarian imperative without running the risk of being harmed or harming others.

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