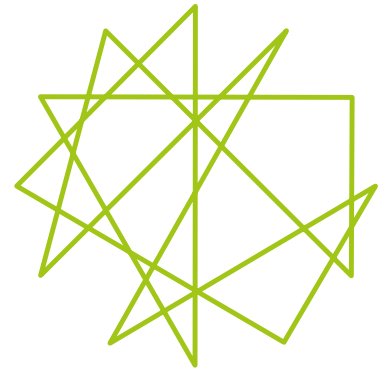


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Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: challenges and opportunities for security risk management

GISF publication





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GISF is an independent entity currently funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and member contributions.

www.gisf.ngo

Suggested citation

GISF. (2021) *Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: challenges and opportunities for security risk management*. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF).

Acknowledgements

Editors: Léa Moutard and Larissa Fast with the support of Chiara Jancke.

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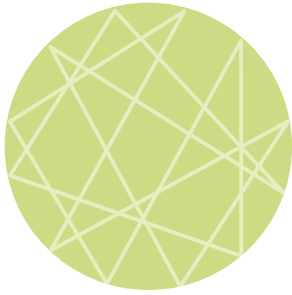
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Introduction

Léa Moutard and Larissa Fast

Acceptance is one of the three pillars that humanitarian organisations typically use as part of their security risk management (SRM) strategy to ensure both access to populations affected by conflict and disaster and the safety of their staff and programmes. Acceptance is:

‘founded on effective relationships and cultivating and maintaining consent from beneficiaries, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders. This in turn is a means of reducing or removing potential threats in order to access vulnerable populations and undertake programme activities.’

(Fast & O’Neill, 2010)

For many humanitarian organisations, acceptance best aligns with their ethos, principles, and mandate. Beyond its SRM function, acceptance encourages the establishment and maintenance of genuine relationships with affected communities and other stakeholders while also upholding humanitarian principles such as humanity, impartiality, and independence. Operating with acceptance distinguishes humanitarians from other actors in conflict settings, such as military forces or the private sector, and can also provide the legitimacy, support, and consent necessary for effective programming.

A changing context for acceptance

As many organisations know all too well, however, acceptance is not the answer to all problems. The targeting of aid workers, enduring obstacles to humanitarian access, and debates around the legitimacy, independence, and effectiveness of aid actors, continue to challenge humanitarian organisations’ acceptance. From outright targeting by armed groups (Johnson, 2020) and deliberate attacks or hostility shown by host governments (Sider, 2021) to criticism of the neo-colonial nature of aid operations (The New Humanitarian,

2020; Paige, 2021), humanitarian organisations continue to struggle to be accepted by different stakeholders. Reflecting the professionalisation of the SRM sector, debates and research projects investigating acceptance have multiplied over the past two decades. The last comprehensive report to conceptualise and analyse acceptance in a holistic way was published ten years ago (Fast et al, 2011). The project focused on answering key questions, including how to gain and maintain acceptance, how to measure it, and how to determine its effectiveness. Since then, more recent works have discussed the limits of acceptance in highly insecure environments (Cunningham, 2017), the difficulty of managing threats related to mis/disinformation (Fairbanks, 2021), and the obstacles to developing and implementing acceptance approaches to SRM (Childs, 2013; Collison & Duffield, 2013; Jackson & Zyck, 2017).

Considering the crucial role acceptance plays in the humanitarian sector, whether for local or international NGOs or for the Red Cross and UN agencies, it is necessary to continue exploring how humanitarian organisations seek acceptance and succeed or fail to implement acceptance strategies, as well as how the context generates new conditions and challenges. Among these continually evolving conditions, the increased use of social media and digital technology, the large number of programmes delivered in urban environments, the push to ‘localise’ aid, conspicuous calls to target humanitarians, and the growing use of remote management in violent environments and during the COVID-19 pandemic all affect acceptance. Each presents challenges, be it how to seek acceptance in an online environment, how threats in the digital world affect acceptance in the physical world, analysing the specific provocations of a violent urban environment, or the effects of varying profiles of diverse staff and organisations. As a result, current models of acceptance may no longer be fit-for-purpose and may need to be updated or adapted to take account of these evolving circumstances.

Revisiting opportunities and challenges for acceptance

The current context raises various questions about degrees and practices of acceptance: are humanitarian organisations less accepted now than before, and have they always been more tolerated than accepted? Is it wishful thinking to seek acceptance in highly insecure contexts? When, if ever, should acceptance be abandoned as a SRM approach? Moreover, many questions remain about the practicalities of implementing acceptance. What systems, organisational cultures, and internal functioning enable organisations to implement successful acceptance strategies? Who is included in developing acceptance strategies and how are strategies being communicated between headquarters and frontline offices? Are humanitarian organisations changing the way they measure and approach acceptance considering the current challenges, and if so, what implications does this have?

This publication cannot answer all these questions. Nevertheless, it aims to explore key aspects and to prompt further reflection based on the ever-changing contexts in which humanitarians work. Its goals are threefold:

1. To further demystify the practices and policies of acceptance as a SRM strategy. This means having a clearer understanding of how different organisations 'do' acceptance in practice.
2. To explore current challenges related to acceptance in the aid sector and analyse how changes in the aid environment or aid organisations affect this acceptance.
3. To spark debates and raise awareness about the relevance of acceptance for SRM and programming. Developing and implementing effective acceptance strategies requires collaboration across humanitarian organisations and this publication seeks to support this dialogue.

At the start of this project we defined SRM in the humanitarian sector as allowing greater access to and impact for crisis-affected populations through the protection of aid workers, programmes, and organisations, and balancing acceptable risk with programme criticality. Security risk management thus supports organisations in carrying out their work while putting in place safeguards that ensure

that the organisations' most important assets – their people – are not unduly placed at risk.

According to the definition of acceptance by Fast and O'Neill given in the first paragraph, it and SRM are strongly interlinked, as they both aim to ensure safe access and operations. Acceptance therefore represents a foundational strategy of the SRM triangle, alongside protection and deterrence. Acceptance itself is not an either/or – it occurs along a continuum (Fast et al, 2011). Five degrees of acceptance can be identified:

- **'Endorse':** *stakeholders actively promote and intervene on behalf of the organisation to protect its staff, assets, or reputation.*
- **Consent:** *stakeholders provide safe and continued access to vulnerable populations and may also share security related information.*
- **Tolerate:** *stakeholders tolerate the presence of NGOs in the community, largely because they provide goods and services that the stakeholders want and need, or from which they can benefit.*
- **Reject:** *stakeholders undermine NGO programmes or access to vulnerable populations.*
- **Target:** *stakeholders actively threaten or attack NGO staff, programmes, assets, or reputation.'* (Fast et al, 2015, p. 219))

Yet much has changed in the last decade. Humanitarian organisations now seem, increasingly, to refer to and reflect on achieving 'tolerance' instead of acceptance. Several of the articles in this publication reflect on these limitations, drawing on some of the more challenging humanitarian contexts (such as Syria, Somalia, and Afghanistan) to illustrate the potential harms that result from misconstruing the context or the consequences of achieving tolerance in lieu of acceptance. This change in perspective reflects the professionalisation of the SRM sector, and the shift away from a 'passive acceptance' that assumed acceptance by virtue of the assistance, programmes, and services organisations provided, and away from a siloed approach to acceptance, protection, or deterrence. Instead, acceptance is now more integrated into SRM, and acceptance practices complement the risk mitigation activities of protection and deterrence in the most insecure environments. Indeed, most of the articles analyse acceptance in light of SRM more broadly, rather than as a specific element of an SRM approach. As security professionals have developed

more nuanced risk assessments and stronger mitigation measures, the choices and options for acceptance, tolerance, protection, and deterrence may become more apparent. Equally, such perspectives raise questions about whether more instrumental perspectives about acceptance equate it to its basic SRM function rather than its larger ambition, that of building genuine relationships and looking for common ground with affected communities and other stakeholders.

This publication presents diverging and in some cases contradictory viewpoints on these and other issues. Depending on their specific experiences, the authors in the publication provide different interpretations of why acceptance sometimes fails, as well as recommendations and strategies for how to address current challenges. Instead of taking a stance, we feature a diversity of perspectives and aim to present and support robust exchange. In doing so, we acknowledge that there is neither a single way to view nor to 'do' acceptance.

Overview

The publication is divided into three sections, each highlighting some of the challenges identified above. The first section explores various dimensions of the current operating environment and the implications for acceptance. The second section examines practical approaches to implementing acceptance, featuring several organisational perspectives. The final section proposes a series of adaptations and evolutions, from building a supportive organisational culture for SRM and security, to communications and negotiations approaches that can strengthen acceptance. Below, we briefly summarise the articles and conclude by identifying key themes and topics worthy of additional reflection.

Section 1 – Rethinking acceptance as a SRM strategy

The first section reflects on the limitations to acceptance in the current operating environment. Drawing on several decades as a humanitarian and security director, **Pascal Daudin's** article raises questions about the implications of a changed security environment for humanitarian organisations and a traditional acceptance approach that sees a lack of acceptance as resulting from

miscommunication, bad behaviour, or ineffective contextual analysis. Using various examples, his article suggests the need to rethink SRM and acceptance in order to achieve humanitarian goals. In a second article, **Rob Grace and Alain Lempereur** examine acceptance through the lens of humanitarian negotiation theory and practice. They argue for using principles of negotiation to strengthen acceptance practices, thereby crystallising key debates and choices that organisations face when seeking to improve organisational acceptance in conflict settings. The final article of this section by **Lena Schellhammer**, investigates how counter-terrorism legislation (CTL) can limit acceptance strategies. Delving into some of the legal and operational constraints generated by CTL, she provides insights into the coping mechanisms adopted by humanitarian organisations, including the widespread use of a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach.

Section 2 – Acceptance in practice: exploring different organisational approaches

The second section of this publication presents different organisations' approaches to acceptance, providing insights into the challenges of and lessons emerging from their experience of 'doing' acceptance. The first article, by **Regis Billaudel**, introduces a simple and structured methodology developed by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) to enable their frontline teams to assess and develop acceptance strategies under time pressure. Their methodology seeks to address some of the challenges preventing the implementation of acceptance, including lack of time and dedicated staff. The second article, by **Chris Williams, Penelope Kinch and Lyndall Herman**, presents the acceptance strategy of CARE USA, which adopts a blended approach to the SRM triangle. Their article highlights the importance of collaborating with programming staff to implement effective strategies, and emphasises the value of having diverse teams. Through their innovative Safety and Security Focal Point (SSFP) programme, CARE's example illustrates a unique approach to increasing diversity in security teams while simultaneously raising SRM awareness in the organisation. In a third article, **Fiona Terry, Jean-Philippe Kiehl, Robert Whelan and Tamás Szenderák** present their analysis of International Committee

of the Red Cross (ICRC) security data. Using these statistics, the authors question assumptions about the increasing dangers of humanitarian action and highlight the implications for acceptance. In doing so, they discuss three observations for maintaining acceptance and the organisational adaptations that have resulted.

Section 3 – Responding to ongoing challenges: adapting and improving acceptance strategies

The third section of this publication examines ongoing challenges to acceptance and strategies that can support organisations addressing them. In the first article, **Araba Cole and Panagiotis Olympiou** remind us that in order to build sound acceptance strategies, organisations must build and sustain a positive organisational SRM culture. Through the lens of ‘choice architecture’ theory, which focuses on staff perceptions, behaviours and communications (also known as the ‘nudging’ approach), the authors present different techniques to maximise SRM buy-in within the organisation, thereby improving the implementation of acceptance. The second article, by **Eric Jean and Christine Persaud**, investigates the role of intercultural communication in gaining and maintaining acceptance with affected communities and relevant stakeholders. Reminding readers of the importance of soft skills in SRM and acceptance, the authors present some of the risks that emerge from cultural misunderstandings and ways to improve staff capacity. In a third article, **Juliette Jourde** from the International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA) explores the role of private security contracting within acceptance. Recognising this growing practice amongst humanitarian organisations, the author suggests a more nuanced approach to this topic which helps to identify both the challenges and opportunities for SRM and acceptance. In particular, she highlights that private security guarding may be the most consequential for acceptance. In a fourth article, **Ziad Al-Achkar** argues for the importance of the digital environment in assessing risk and its implications for acceptance. He examines the risks of mis/disinformation and the misuse of data, and proposes strategies to address these risks and positively influence acceptance.

Looking forward

The articles included in this publication illustrate the various ways that acceptance practice has advanced over the past decade, and recognise the limitations of such an approach. In this final section, we highlight three key issues that cut across multiple articles and raise several questions requiring further investigation.

Of particular note is an increasing recognition of staff diversity as integral to effective SRM and how personal characteristics may affect an organisation’s acceptance. Several articles explicitly or implicitly mention diversity as an asset in seeking acceptance but one that requires awareness of the nuances of staff diversity and culture in relation to acceptance from various stakeholders. For instance, CARE’s article highlights the value of working with staff who have different expertise and backgrounds to develop effective acceptance strategies, and presents a unique approach to doing so, while the article on intercultural communication highlights the ways that culture, both inside and external to an organisation, affects communication and, as a consequence, acceptance. Left unanswered across the articles, however, are many questions about how other aspects of diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or race, affect acceptance in different contexts. GISF started work on this topic in 2018, through the paper *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles*, and is looking to do further work on the matter.

A related point concerns the desire to design acceptance strategies and aid operations that are more inclusive of local perspectives and support local action. As COVID-19 has accelerated conversations around the ‘localisation’ agenda (HPG, 2021), the articles show that while some steps are being taken to better support local actors’ leadership of humanitarian action, the link between acceptance and current conversations on ‘localisation’ has not yet been sufficiently explored. Further research should investigate how debates around local action and calls for the decolonisation of aid could and should affect acceptance strategies and acceptance itself. This requires representation from affected populations and other stakeholders in order to better understand their perspectives, something which we acknowledge is a crucial gap in the articles in this publication.

A final theme that appears across multiple articles is linked to the growing impact of mis- and disinformation on humanitarian SRM and operations. The digital environment enables a more rapid and more pervasive spread of rumours, which pose heightened threats to humanitarian operations that reach far beyond a specific operating environment. This change significantly influences affected communities' perceptions of humanitarian organisations, and it could help to explain the rise of civilian attacks against aid workers, as the ICRC analysis in this publication acknowledges. The aid sector must grapple with this risk, and security managers must consider measures within their acceptance strategies to mitigate the impact of mis/disinformation.

As we indicate above, many more questions related to acceptance need further attention. This publication represents only a first step in reviewing the challenges and opportunities that acceptance offers for achieving safe operations. Toward this end, we invite new contributions, to be included in future web-based additions to this publication series. Such articles could address crucial topics, such as the perspectives of local communities and stakeholders or the effects of 'decolonisation' and anti-racism efforts on acceptance; acceptance strategies and challenges for staff with diverse profiles; acceptance for health providers; acceptance and security risks in urbanised crises; security risks and acceptance for advocacy or human rights organisations; acceptance and security in the 'triple nexus' (humanitarian, peace, development); or acceptance for UN agencies and the private sector. If you would like to contribute to this body of work, please contact the GISF secretariat (gisf-research@gisf.ngo).

Clearly acceptance practices have evolved over time, as have the challenges for organisations operating in dynamic and dangerous environments as well as in more stable environments. We hope this publication prompts further debate in the sector and thereby contributes to the development of acceptance and SRM.

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Section 1

Rethinking Acceptance as a SRM Strategy

1. **Acceptance under Stress: old recipes for new problems**
2. **Four Dilemmas of Acceptance: insights from the field of humanitarian negotiation**
3. **Counter-Terrorism Legislation: a limiting factor in the gaining and implementing of acceptance**



Acceptance under Stress: old recipes for new problems

Pascal Daudin

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

* The author would like to thank Maarten Merkelbach for his contributions to this article.

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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Four Dilemmas of Acceptance: insights from the field of humanitarian negotiation

Rob Grace and Alain Lempereur

Introduction

The practice of humanitarian negotiation is essential to an acceptance approach (Fast et al, 2013). Indeed, the twin notions of acceptance and humanitarian negotiation both foreground the importance of building and sustaining working relations with a wide array of stakeholders to facilitate humanitarian operations, as well as the centrality of humanitarian principles and humanitarians' reputations in these engagements. One can see this conceptual overlap with acceptance in the definition of humanitarian negotiation offered, for example, by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (2019):

'...a set of interactions between humanitarian organizations and parties to an armed conflict, as well as other relevant actors, aimed at establishing and maintaining the presence of these organizations in conflict environments, ensuring access to vulnerable groups, and facilitating the delivery of assistance and protection activities. Negotiations may involve both state and non-state actors. They include a relational component focused on building trust with the counterparts over time and a transactional component focused on determining and agreeing on the specific terms and logistics of humanitarian operations.'¹

(p. 19)

Moreover, in practice, implementing an acceptance approach often entails negotiating with different stakeholders, which has been coined 'responsible negotiation' (Lempereur, 2011; 2012a et 2012b). Nevertheless, the wealth of insights from the growing body of research on humanitarian negotiation has yet to be adequately integrated into the ongoing policy discourse on acceptance (e.g., Mancini-Griffoli

& Picot, 2004; Magone, Neuman & Weissman, 2011; Grace et al, 2015; Lempereur, 2016). Furthermore, for humanitarian actors, there remains an abundance of underexplored wisdom from the broader field of negotiation, which has produced decades worth of thinking, theorising, practical tools, and empirical findings on negotiations in other domains (business, international, and legal settings, for example).

This article takes a step toward closing the gap between negotiation theory and the practice of cultivating acceptance. In particular, the article seeks to leverage insights from the field of humanitarian negotiation – as well as the broader field of negotiation scholarship – to probe underexplored challenges, risks, and shortcomings inherent in employing acceptance as a tool of security risk management and humanitarian access more broadly. Is acceptance always the best approach? Does acceptance always work as intended? What difficulties can and should humanitarians anticipate when engaging with a wide range of stakeholders while pursuing acceptance? This article addresses these questions by laying out four dilemmas of acceptance, all of which are informed by theoretical negotiation scholarship. These are:

1. the 'humanitarian negotiator's behaviour' dilemma,
2. the 'right distance relationship' dilemma,
3. the 'multi-level game' dilemma, and
4. the 'no deal' dilemma.

The article presents each of these and concludes by offering remarks about the long route ahead in terms of bringing negotiation theory and humanitarian practice into further conversation with one another.

¹ Although this definition specifies applicability to conflict settings, humanitarian negotiation can also be relevant in other humanitarian response environments, including natural hazards and disease outbreaks.

The ‘humanitarian negotiator’s behaviour’ dilemma

A long-acknowledged yet under-examined aspect of security risk management is that one’s best approach depends on the approach that the counterpart adopts. The ‘security triangle’ lays out a menu of three overarching security risk management options: acceptance, deterrence, and protection (Van Brabant, 2000). How should humanitarian decide when to lean into acceptance and when to downplay acceptance-based approaches?

Negotiation scholarship offers an answer. Lax and Sebenius (1986) present a framework, which they dub ‘the negotiator’s dilemma’, that illustrates the consequences of choosing between two overarching approaches to negotiation. One approach is cooperative (integrative in nature, based on collaboratively seeking creative solutions, or ‘creating value’), and this is congruent with acceptance. A second approach is competitive or distributive (competitive, based on threats, pressure, and coercion, or ‘claiming value’) for which the aim is to emphasise to the counterpart the adverse consequences of rebuffing the negotiator’s requests (i.e., granting access or cultivating a secure environment for humanitarian work). A competitive approach is more akin to (although not entirely congruent with) a deterrence approach, which relies on threats or counterthreats to ‘deter’ or prevent attacks. A negotiator who adopts a competitive approach can maximize gains, but only if the other side adopts a cooperative posture, thus exposing

themselves by communicating otherwise private information about their preferences and the values that they attach to different options. If both sides adopt a competitive approach, both fail to maximise the gains they otherwise would have reaped if they had both assumed a cooperative posture. The resulting dilemma is that the negotiator is torn between two risky options: adopt a competitive approach and potentially miss out on the fruits of cooperation, or adopt a cooperative approach and risk being exploited. This framework can be useful for assessing the implications of different stakeholder engagement strategies. Figure 1, below, maps out these different possibilities.

However, it is also important to highlight the asymmetric power relationship that often exist between humanitarian actors and their negotiation counterparts. Humanitarians – in contrast to armed actors, for example – have only certain ways of exerting ‘soft’ pressure at their disposal. One way is public denunciation. By publicly condemning (or threatening to condemn) a counterpart for denying (or seeking to exert superfluous control over) humanitarian access, the humanitarian negotiator can aim to ‘shame’ the access gatekeeper into facilitating access.³ A second measure is scaling down operations, withdrawing entirely from the context, or cutting off the negotiation (or threatening to do so). These modes of ‘soft’ pressure are more congruent with a deterrence strategy, by which humanitarians might use public denunciation or withdrawal (or threats thereof) in an effort to deter attacks. However, withdrawal is ethically challenging for humanitarian negotiators because this avenue

Figure 1: The ‘humanitarian negotiator’s behaviour’ dilemma²

		Counterpart’s approach	
		Cooperative	Competitive
Humanitarian’s approach	Cooperative	<i>Second-best outcome for both parties</i>	<i>Best outcome for counterpart</i>
	Competitive	<i>Best outcome for humanitarian</i>	<i>Worst outcome for both</i>

² This table is adapted from that which appears in Lax and Sebenius, p. 157. Whereas the original table lays out the negotiator’s dilemma in broad terms, this table adapts the concepts specifically for humanitarian negotiation, using the same logic but with slightly revised language.

³ The term ‘access gatekeeper’ refers to an external stakeholder, such as a government official or non-state armed group, that has the ability to facilitate, restrict, or block access for humanitarian organisations seeking to operate.

essentially means abandoning the populations that humanitarian organisations aim to assist (Brooks & Grace, 2020). Moreover, scholars have probed empirics related to successfully employing acceptance, including the limitations of what acceptance can achieve (Childs 2013; Fast et al, 2015; Cunningham, 2017) but researchers have just begun to do the same for competitive approaches. There remains a lack of solid empirical data to confirm the conditions under which these modes of ‘soft’ pressure are effective, despite a growing body of case study and large-N research produced on the topic (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.; Bussmann & Schneider, 2016).

There is an overarching issue toward which the ‘humanitarian negotiator’s behaviour’ dilemma points: when pursuing acceptance, it behoves humanitarians to be wary that the counterpart might take advantage of them. Conversely, when straying from an acceptance approach – employing modes of ‘soft’ pressure more in line with a deterrence approach to access and security risk management – the humanitarian risks losing out on possible gains, depending on how the counterpart behaves, meaning that security risks could actually increase, rendering acceptance more difficult to secure in the future.

The ‘right distance relationship’ dilemma

A second issue – the ‘right distance relationship’ dilemma – challenges the concept of acceptance at its core. The notion of acceptance is that an interconnection exists between means (relationship-building) and ends (mitigating security risks and facilitating humanitarian access). In contrast, negotiation theory turns our attention to an important question: how close to an interlocutor can a humanitarian get without compromising the substantive gains sought (i.e., more principled humanitarian action)? Savage, Blair and Sorenson (1999) offer an analysis of this dilemma in non-humanitarian negotiation settings, positing that negotiators who prioritise their relationship with the counterpart over the substance of the negotiation are more likely to subordinate themselves to their counterparts’ interests and positions. In humanitarian negotiation, this could mean an aid worker accepting compromises on access (for example, agreeing to shape programming around an access gatekeeper’s preferences, as opposed to a purely impartial approach based on needs) to

maintain the relationship with the access gatekeeper and facilitate a long-term presence in the context. In Syria, for example, aid agencies operating from Damascus have received criticism for accepting excessive constraints imposed by the government (Balkhi, 2021). These dynamics can be especially prevalent when acceptance is cultivated on an individual (as opposed to organisational) level. As one humanitarian actor has stated of counterparts during negotiation processes:

‘When they feel that, because they have a relationship with you, they can basically ask anything – to the point that another counterpart in the authority was almost hinting, basically actually asking for a bribe. And during those kinds of situations, it becomes more difficult, when you have a relationship with that person, to say no’

(Grace, 2020a, p. 29).

In such a context, relationship-building can have the opposite of the intended effect, complicating (rather than facilitating) efforts to cultivate acceptance for principled humanitarian programming.

Additionally, the value that humanitarian negotiators place on the counterpart relationship can feed into the aforementioned asymmetric power dynamic between humanitarian negotiators and state or non-state access gatekeepers, especially given the inter-organisational dimension of operational humanitarian environments. When a counterpart negotiates with various humanitarian organisations in parallel on similar issues, the relationship with any one of these organisations is likely to be less important to the counterpart than to the humanitarians. In short, humanitarians often need the negotiation to succeed more than their counterparts do.

This does not mean that humanitarian negotiators are necessarily doomed. As Clements (2020) argues, humanitarians have a wide range of tools at their disposal to surmount this asymmetric power dynamic, including:

1. persuading counterparts that humanitarian programming has inherent value or can serve a counterpart’s interests (for example, facilitating humanitarian access can enhance an access gatekeeper’s legitimacy, a particularly relevant consideration for certain non-state armed groups);
2. exhibiting greater commitment to pushing their agenda than counterparts are to resisting it;

3. forming coalitions with other humanitarian organisations (although difficult to actualise in practice given the fragmented nature of the humanitarian field); and
4. creating new alternatives (as occurred regarding Syria with the UN Security Council's authorisation of humanitarian access even without the Syrian government's consent) (Bouchet-Saulnier, 2014).

Nonetheless, the 'right distance relationship' dilemma illuminates the notion that relationship-building is not always an enabler of humanitarian programming, but can actually bring forth challenges for maintaining humanitarian principles. In other words, relationship-building as a means of acceptance does not always further the end of enabling access and risk mitigation for principled humanitarian programming. Quite the contrary – relationship-building efforts sometimes drive humanitarians toward compromises on humanitarian principles. Indeed, it is important for humanitarians pursuing acceptance to guard against the temptation to excessively prioritise relationship-building as an end in itself, especially if this tendency comes at the expense of access and security.

The 'multi-level game' dilemma

Acceptance is a multi-level game during which humanitarians negotiate with a wide array of different stakeholders – local community members, authorities and armed actors (state and non-state), colleagues within their own organisations, practitioners in peer organisations, and donors – all of whom have distinct concerns and interests. Consequently, the 'zone of possible agreement' that satisfies all these stakeholders can be small, can shift over time, and might not even exist.

One can draw insights from the 'two level game' notion introduced by Putnam (1988) to explain international negotiations. As Putnam argues, international negotiations constitute a two-level game by which negotiators must find an overlap between 'win-sets' that their international interlocutors and their domestic constituencies will find acceptable. Humanitarian negotiators find themselves in a much more challenging position. There are not simply two levels (per Putnam's conception of international negotiations) but many more.

Consider the case of the Dutch section of MSF (MSF-Holland, nd) in Myanmar during the 1990s and early 2000s. Whereas other sections of MSF faced severe access constraints in the country, MSF-Holland ran, as Terry (2011) writes, 'the largest medical programme of any aid organisation in Myanmar. It treat[ed] twice as many AIDS patients as the government and all aid agencies combined, and [ran] clinics across four of the country's states and divisions' (p. 110). Many perceived that the head of MSF-Holland had become a 'collaborator' who was too close to the authorities; he once visited a commander at a golf club to successfully obtain permission to open up a clinic (ibid). This example makes clear an underdiscussed notion that is central to the concept of acceptance: cultivating acceptance with one stakeholder can jeopardise acceptance from others, and even heighten security risks for aid workers. In an ideal scenario, working across lines in territories controlled by different parties to the conflict would increase security risks only in the short-term, and ultimately offer greater protection as stakeholders gained an appreciation for the fact that humanitarians are not aligned with one side or the other. However, this balance is not always easy to strike. For example, developing a relationship with the authorities can hinder one's credibility with segments of the local community, as well as peer organisations operating in the same context.⁴

In armed conflicts, this dilemma can be particularly acute, as humanitarians must negotiate with opposing parties to a conflict, sometimes simultaneously. A quality relationship with state actors can raise suspicions from a rebel group about a humanitarian's loyalties, and vice versa. This tension is exacerbated even further when host governments or governmental donors have dubbed one or more rebel groups to be terrorists. The 'multi-level game' dilemma is that the humanitarian negotiator must navigate, across different counterparts, potentially incompatible 'zones of possible agreement' or 'win-sets,' often forcing the humanitarian to decide which stakeholder to leave unsatisfied (Lempereur and Pekar, 2017).

To make matters more complex, the dynamics of overlapping (or non-overlapping) 'win-sets' are context dependent. For example, in Myanmar a close relationship with the authorities brought humanitarians' credibility into question, but the opposite has been true in South Sudan, where

⁴ For an examination of the tension between 'help and complicity', see also Slim (2015, p. 18).

working through and with local authorities was a key component of acceptance (Fast et al, 2015). Consequently, it is important for aid actors to confront difficult questions about acceptance. Which stakeholder wields the most influence over a humanitarian organisation's access to affected communities? Which stakeholder constitutes the main security threat to operations? Which stakeholder would inhibit access and/or security the least if left unsatisfied? The 'multi-level game' dilemma points toward the importance of integrating these considerations into stakeholder analyses while pursuing an acceptance approach.

The 'no deal' dilemma

Even in light of the difficulties discussed thus far, perhaps the ultimate dilemma of acceptance is the 'no deal' dilemma. No deal for the humanitarian negotiator can mean failing to meet the most basic needs of any segment of a particular vulnerable population, and indeed, an inability to fulfil an organisation's mandate. In short, the humanitarian negotiator struggles to walk away from the negotiation.

In usual negotiation theory, negotiators are told to develop their 'best alternative to a negotiated agreement,' or BATNA. Otherwise, according to Fisher, Ury and Patton (1991), 'you are negotiating with your eyes closed' (p. 51). But for the most part, humanitarians lack a viable BATNA, i.e. a WATNA, a worst alternative to a negotiated agreement. To be sure, there have been circumstances when humanitarian organisations have temporarily halted operations in certain contexts – in Syria, Central African Republic, and Yemen, to name just a few examples – or entirely withdrawn due to concerns about aid disruption and/or security for staff or affected communities (Nebehay & Miles, 2016; Ratcliffe, 2017; Coker & Schmitt, 2018). Indeed, there are contexts where withdrawal has appeared to be the most ethical choice, as MSF and the International Rescue Committee concluded, for example, about operating in Rwandan refugee camps in Goma in the 1990s (Terry, 2002). Withdrawing temporarily can even have the effect of ultimately improving acceptance by demonstrating to stakeholders that one's organisation will only operate under circumstances that allow for principled humanitarian action.

But overall, the BATNAs for humanitarian negotiators (meaning the alternatives to pursuing acceptance)

tend to be unappealing or highly expensive. For example, airdropping aid – as the World Food Programme has done in besieged cities in Syria (Miles, 2017) – is one mode of surmounting access obstacles but is not economical and yields major risks of diversion, given that there can be a lack of control over who actually receives the aid. Another common alternative in insecure environments is to transfer risk to local humanitarian responders. In this scenario, humanitarian negotiators give up on acceptance with one stakeholder in the hope that pursuing acceptance with another will bring a certain degree of protection (meaning that the humanitarian organisation simply accepts tolerating a certain degree of risk). Humanitarian organisations can also discard acceptance in favour of a protection approach, by which their operations become 'bunkerised' behind heavy fortifications. Humanitarian actors pursuing acceptance are therefore stuck with either grappling with the dilemmas discussed in this article or abandoning efforts to favourably shape the external operating environment.

Conclusion

As this article has examined, the dilemmas that humanitarians face when pursuing acceptance are numerous. A cooperative approach can drive the humanitarian toward being exploited (the 'humanitarian negotiator's behaviour' dilemma) or toward further compromise (the 'right distance relationship' dilemma). There is a narrow set of principled solutions likely to satisfy all relevant stakeholders (given the 'multi-level game' dilemma). Nonetheless, the humanitarian negotiator struggles to walk away from the negotiation (as highlighted by the 'no deal' dilemma). Indeed, walking away is tantamount to giving up on providing assistance to those in need. These dilemmas can frame how humanitarian actors think about navigating negotiation processes aimed at achieving and supporting acceptance. Given that these issues are central to relationship- and trust-building in humanitarian response contexts, to how cultivating relationships can be approached, and to how the process can go wrong, these dilemmas live at the heart of what it means, in practice, to pursue an acceptance strategy.

Yet, the concepts discussed in this article remain just the tip of the analytical iceberg. The marriage between humanitarianism and negotiation scholarship requires more bridges. Negotiation

scholarship has much more to offer the field of security risk management (and humanitarian negotiation more broadly) on a wide range of themes, including the role of emotions in negotiation (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005; Cropanzano, Becker & Feldman, 2012), the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction (Avruch, 2004; Grace, 2020b), the influence of identity characteristics and personality type (Du Pasquier, 2016; Alsalem & Grace, 2021), the impact of cognitive biases (Thompson, Neale & Sinaceur, 2004; Caputo, 2013), and tools for negotiators' self-exploration (Ury, 2015). Moreover, the converse is also true. Just as humanitarians can benefit from a more analytically informed assessment of the dynamics at play during their negotiations, negotiation scholars have much to gain by sinking their teeth further into the humanitarian field. Indeed, despite the progress made in the past two decades in the field of humanitarian negotiation, the dialogue between negotiation theories and humanitarian practice has just begun. For the field of security risk management, especially for actors seeking to influence external stakeholders in the operational environment, additional future research efforts that examine these issues through the lens of negotiation scholarship will only further enhance practitioners' understanding of how to execute the challenging task of gaining and maintaining acceptance.

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Counter-Terrorism Legislation: a limiting factor in the gaining and implementing of acceptance

Lena Schellhammer

Introduction

Acceptance as a security strategy relies on building relationships with stakeholders that could impact a humanitarian organisation's ability to remove or reduce threats. In environments characterised by a lack of state authority and rule of law, these stakeholders can include non-state armed groups (NSAGs), who often control territory and essentially govern local populations.

However, due to counter-terrorism legislation (CTL), engaging and building relationships with such groups can become particularly difficult when they are designated as 'terrorist' groups. This creates serious obstacles for humanitarian organisations' acceptance strategies. CTL is based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1373, which requires states to:

'Criminalise the wilful provision or collection, by any means, directly or indirectly, of funds by their nationals or in their territories with the intention that the funds should be used, or in the knowledge that they are to be used, in order to carry out terrorist acts'

(United Nations Security Council, 2001, p. 2)

While this legislation intends to combat terrorism, it can pose major challenges for humanitarians and their operations (Hilhorst & Desportes, 2019; Mackintosh & Duplat, 2013; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018). The lack of an internationally accepted definition of 'terrorism', various interpretations of CTL, and different lists of 'terrorist'-designated groups can hinder the work of humanitarian organisations and even criminalise it, while also having implications for their acceptance.

When a group has been designated as 'terrorist', engagement with and material support for this group

(such as the provision of training, expert advice or assistance, personnel, or transportation) can be sanctioned by governments. As a result of these barriers, some humanitarian agencies refrain from delivering aid in areas where terrorist-designated groups are active, despite the high needs of the population (Quack, 2018; Roepstorff, Faltas & Hövelmann, 2020). For example, in Somalia, the local population living in areas controlled by the 'terrorist' group Al-Shabab saw USAID reduce its funding by 88% between 2008 and 2010 and allocating the remaining funds to areas not under the control of Al-Shabab (Jackson & Aynte, 2013). This is at odds with the humanitarian principle of 'impartiality', which calls for aid to be solely provided based on who needs it most. This compromise on humanitarian principles can affect an organisation's reputation and acceptance, as local stakeholders may end up perceiving the organisation as behaving in a way that is not equitable.

Some humanitarian agencies still decide to deliver aid in 'terrorist'-controlled areas where populations require assistance. When they adhere to an acceptance-based security strategy, they proactively need to build and maintain acceptance from 'terrorist'-designated groups to gain access to these populations and minimise security threats. Nevertheless, due to barriers imposed on direct engagement with 'terrorist' organisations through CTL, frontline humanitarian organisations and their staff often find themselves in a legal grey space. In this grey space, humanitarian organisations develop different strategies to continue engaging with groups and to enable their operations to carry on safely despite the sanctions. These strategies may include using a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach, transferring risks onto local NGO partners, or entering clandestine negotiations to build acceptance and gain access.

This article investigates the implications of CTL for an acceptance-based security strategy. It argues that CTL impacts the gaining and implementation of acceptance, increases the utilisation of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approaches, and influences NGOs’ relationships with communities. The analysis is based on a case study which looks at the situation in Idlib, north-western Syria where the ‘terrorist’-designated group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) govern. After providing a brief overview of the context in north-western Syria and the methodology, this article will focus on the two main actors whose acceptance in Idlib is required to deliver programmes: HTS/SSG and the local population. The article will then discuss CTL’s impact on NGOs’ acceptance strategies and explain why CTL increases the utilisation of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach and the risks this bears. Finally, the implications of CTL on the acceptance of Idlib’s local population will be analysed, and this will also take institutional donors into account. Institutional donors play a significant role because they have different interpretations and instructions regarding CTL and can challenge the implementation of humanitarian assistance and an acceptance-based security strategy.

Case study: gaining and implementing acceptance to safely operate in Idlib, north-western Syria

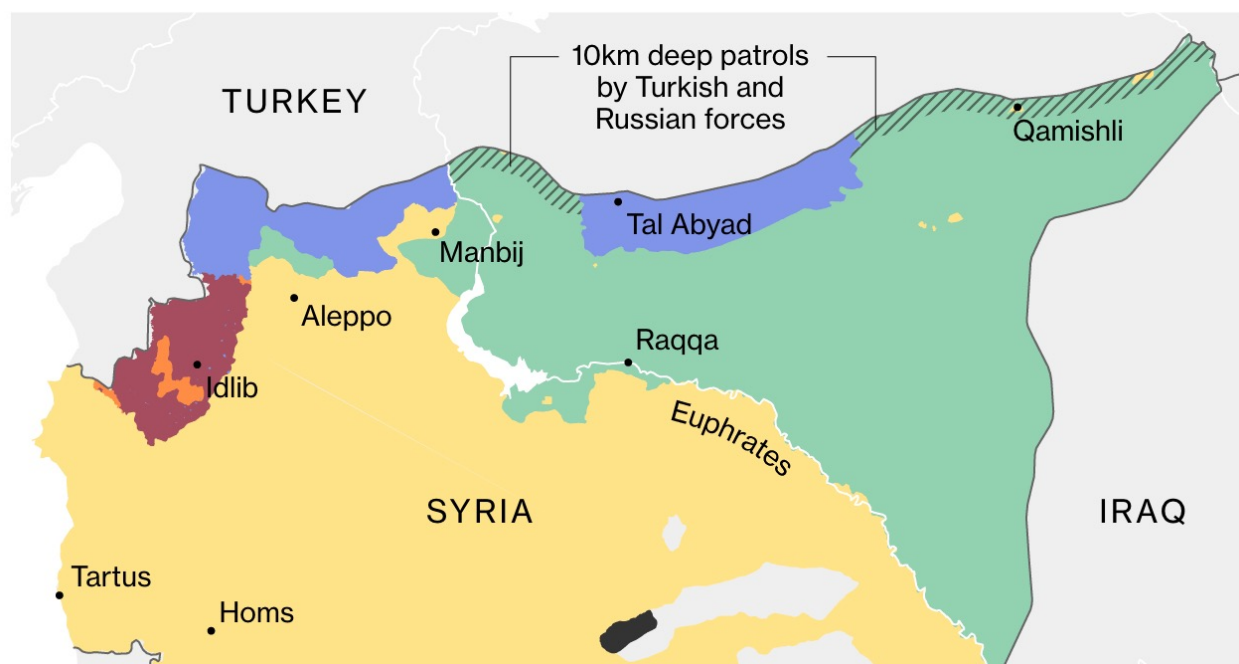
The context of Idlib

As the Syrian conflict enters its eleventh year, 13.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Long-term (political) solutions are not being actively pursued by all conflicting parties. On the contrary, quasi-state institutions that take over governmental and administrative duties have consolidated in parts of Syria that are not under the Government of Syria’s control.

The NSAG Hayat Tahrir al-Sham controls most parts of Idlib. Since 2018, it has been designated as a ‘terrorist’ group by the United Nations and states like the US and Turkey, among others (United Nations, 2018 and CSIS, 2018). HTS was established by a merger in January 2017 and its roots lie within its main predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra (Lister, 2015). Jabhat al-Nusra was proclaimed in early 2012 and

Zones of Control

- Syrian government
- Jihadist opposition
- Turkish army and Syrian opposition
- Kurdish forces
- Syrian opposition (Turkey backed)
- Islamic State



Sources: Turkey’s state-run Anadolu Agency; Jane’s Conflict Monitor, areas of control as of Sept. 6, 2021

is an offshoot of al-Qaeda's transnational jihadist movement. This group pursued an ideological agenda and intended to establish an Islamic state. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded and announced its separation from al-Qaeda (Jawad al-Tamimi, 2018).

Despite the merger and rebranding, HTS is perceived as being the extended arm of the 'terrorist' network al-Qaeda, and HTS' violence towards civilians is another reason that it has been designated as a 'terrorist' group (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018; Jawad al-Tamimi, 2018).

In November 2017, the Syrian Salvation Government was created, which is interwoven with HTS by sharing government responsibilities (e.g., there is no defence ministry within the SSG, since HTS is taking over these responsibilities). This emphasises HTS' government and state-building efforts (Crisis Group, 2019). Since both stakeholders are perceived by governments and institutional donors as one actor, mainly to protect themselves from any consequences under CTL, HTS leader, Mohammad al-Jolani, is increasing his advocacy towards Western governments to repeal HTS' designation and to achieve international legitimacy for the SSG (Al-Khateb, 2019; Boghani, 2021; Crisis Group, 2021).

Humanitarian organisations must include CTL considerations into their operations and strategies in north-western Syria, whilst fulfilling the humanitarian imperative and safeguarding humanitarian assistance (e.g., with vetting processes for staff and contractors to ensure that no financial payment is directly benefiting HTS). The complexity of the situation is aggravated by the population's high needs; of the 2.7 million people living in north-western Syria, 2.2 million need humanitarian assistance and protection, and 1.9 million are in extreme and catastrophic need. To address these needs, humanitarians need to find a solution to navigate CTL and deliver humanitarian assistance.

Methodology

This analysis of the impact of CTL on gaining and implementing acceptance is based on previous field research I conducted in Gaziantep, Turkey in July 2019, which focused on negotiations on humanitarian access with HTS in north-western Syria (Schellhammer, 2021). As part of the research, I interviewed project managers, security managers, and executive directors from local and international NGOs as well as from international organisations operating in north-western Syria. The interviewees

gave me insight into their engagement approaches and strategies for ensuring humanitarian access and implementing and gaining acceptance, and into the limitations posed by CTL.

Limitations and impacts in gaining and implementing acceptance

Acceptance strategies aim to build a safe environment for humanitarian operations; hence, many stakeholders need to be considered, including HTS, the SSG, and the local population. HTS is a key stakeholder due to its predominantly military control of parts of Idlib governorate. Rejection for humanitarian organisations and operations on the part of HTS can result in lack of access and violent behaviour towards humanitarians, for instance at checkpoints. The SSG, its subordinated Ministry for Development and Humanitarian Affairs, and the wide range of local councils are other key actors for outreach and communication activities to gain acceptance. As gatekeepers, they provide approvals, agreements, and support for humanitarian operations. Gaining acceptance by local communities is also crucial to build a safe operating environment and to receive their support in solving problems. Furthermore, institutional donors should also be taken into consideration when implementing acceptance-based security strategies. Institutional donor preferences regarding project location and activities not only challenge the application of the humanitarian principles, but also the implementation of acceptance-based strategies.

How did CTL impact NGOs' organisational acceptance strategies?

HTS/SSG are two challenging actors for gaining acceptance, because interacting, engaging, and negotiating with them can be framed as direct or indirect support to a designated 'terrorist' group under CTL. Humanitarian organisations choose different engagement strategies with HTS/SSG based on their individual interpretation of CTL, their resources and organisational background (e.g., being a local or international NGO), and their donor agreements (Schellhammer, 2021). For instance, one interviewee emphasised that although, in practice, negotiations with HTS/SSG are currently not forbidden *per se*, concrete coordination, sharing of information, and diversion of aid are totally forbidden. Another interviewee added that in some cases even 'donors know that communication with HTS takes place, but not officially'. They 'close their

eyes to some NGOs, some places, some projects'. However, in other cases, humanitarian actors 'cannot say that we are dealing with them [HTS/SSG]' at all. Hence, in these cases 'each NGO does negotiations on their own and tries to get [individual access] permission[s] [from HTS/SSG]' Schellhammer, 2021, p. 35).

Organisations' resources, staff and structures can influence to what extent humanitarian actors can engage with designated groups like HTS. For instance, since humanitarian assistance is mainly distributed by local NGOs, who have (in comparison to INGOs) a less established reporting and accountability system, there is an increased risk of being susceptible to compromise due to pressure on personal relationships (Schellhammer, 2021).

Acceptance is a dynamic process and NGOs are sometimes able to achieve acceptance from one local council, but not from another. This difficulty to achieve acceptance from all local councils contributes to the already competitive environment that is perceived by humanitarians – e.g., humanitarians compromise to achieve acceptance, to ensure and maintain access, and finally to receive funding for projects (Schellhammer, 2021). For instance, for some NGOs it is a reasonable compromise to hire a guard or waste worker who is affiliated with HTS/SSG, to ensure acceptance and access for humanitarian operations, while for other humanitarian organisations this compromise would be unacceptable. Having different engagement strategies to achieve acceptance and access from the SSG or local councils results in a lack of joint boundaries or 'red lines', and common engagement procedures under CTL. In the end, due to these differences HTS/SSG can play humanitarian organisations off against each other.

Once HTS/SSG perceives flexibility from its counterpart, requests such as taxation, registration fees, or involvement in recruitment processes in exchange for acceptance and access can increase. Various organisational acceptance strategies, including clandestine interactions and negotiations, impact the working environment of humanitarian organisations and their ability to achieve acceptance. If NGOs are not able to achieve and maintain acceptance by HTS/SSG, they might choose to adopt deterrence strategies and suspend humanitarian assistance as a last resort strategy. For example, in 2018, HTS demanded registration fees for cars and drivers delivering humanitarian assistance at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing

between Turkey and Syria and newspapers reported on the 'terror tax' (Ensor, 2018) and warned 'that sending aid to Syria's Idlib could be a 'terror offence' (Hooper, 2018). To prevent direct and indirect support to HTS – and potentially being convicted for violating counter-terrorism legislation – the aid departments of the USA (USAID) and Great Britain (DFID, now FCDO) suspended their funding for three months (Schellhammer, 2021). While this strategy of aid suspension might be successful due to HTS/SSG government-building intentions, other NSAGs in different contexts might not be receptive to it. In any case, choosing aid suspension as a strategy to restore access on the ground can have huge impacts on the local communities and affect other NGOs' operations.

Indeed, despite the legal grey area around CTL:

'Engaging with non-state armed groups, regardless of whether or not they are DTGs [designated 'terrorist' groups], is a key element of gaining and maintaining secure access for people in need. Engagement also helps to establish consent and acceptance for humanitarian organisations' activities, which is vital to ensure staff safety.'

Norwegian Refugee Council, 2020, p. 3

Why does CTL increase the utilisation of 'don't ask, don't tell' approaches?

The impact of counter-terrorism legislation on NGOs' organisational acceptance strategies results in a dilemma that is creating a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach, leading to a general absence of open and transparent dialogues on engagement and outreach strategies among humanitarian actors and with institutional donors (Jackson, 2014).

Due to a lack of clear guidance by CTL itself, field staff and/or local humanitarian organisations feel unable to openly discuss dilemmas and risks. Thus, they interact and engage with relevant identified stakeholders inside Idlib without involving the senior management in the headquarters in Turkey, Jordan or elsewhere, and therefore bear most of the risk alone (Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF), 2020). Moreover, local staff might not have the same understanding of what kind of information is acceptable to share; sharing sensitive information about staff might be a red line in HQ, but local staff might see the SSG as the governmental institution with whom this information must be shared. Achieving acceptance by the SSG is often necessary to ensure access, and when NGOs are

rejected rather than accepted, access negotiations become more difficult, and eventually result in more compromises on the NGOs' part. The access and security department, sometimes only an individual focal point, chooses strategies based on their individual interpretation of CTL and organisational resources and structures to ensure a safe operating environment by implementing the acceptance-based security strategy. Due to bearing the responsibility and risk alone, it became clear during my research that the strategies that led to acceptance and access are not shared. Instead, only the result of achieving acceptance and solving access constraints is reported to the headquarters in Turkey or elsewhere.

The lack of instructions by institutional donors on how to implement CTL contributes to the 'don't ask, don't tell' approach. Acceptance strategies that are chosen by humanitarian organisations to safeguard operations in an area controlled by a designated 'terrorist' group are often influenced by donor preferences for sectors and areas as well as by (political) statements (Schellhammer, 2021). Should a humanitarian organisation that implements projects in Idlib governorate, and is funded by various donors that have different ways of interpreting and implementing CTL, build different acceptance approaches for each project? If humanitarian organisations adopt different acceptance strategies, could some strategies cancel out the others? For instance, if an NGO chooses to be more open to compromises to achieve acceptance by HTS/SSG for a specific project, it could be more difficult for the NGO to emphasise that it solely follows humanitarian principles when providing assistance on another project.

Different engagement strategies not only affect the organisation itself, but also the operating environment of other NGOs. Institutional donors play a crucial role by having different interpretations and instructions regarding CTL and can challenge the implementation of humanitarian assistance and create conditions that encourage 'don't ask, don't tell' approaches.

How does CTL impact NGOs' relationships to communities?

In north-western Syria, CTL not only impacts and limits the acceptance strategies vis-à-vis HTS/SSG, but also affects NGO's relationships with local communities.

Delivering humanitarian assistance in a territory that is controlled by a designated 'terrorist' group can lead to violations of humanitarian principles; targeted areas might not be chosen based on the highest needs, but on whether the NGO risks getting sanctioned for operating in an environment where HTS/SSG is active (Jackson & Aynte, 2013). This can result in local communities perceiving humanitarian organisations as partial, when they get the impression that humanitarian assistance is denied to them because they are living in an area that is controlled by HTS/SSG (Roepstorff et al., 2020). Therefore, an acceptance-based security strategy can be hampered, and NGOs may end up in a challenging situation where they must explain that the fact that they are unable to operate in the respective areas is not their choice but due to their donor's position. Because they follow their donors' positions, NGOs can be perceived as being less neutral and too politically affiliated.

NGOs' lack of acceptance from HTS/SSG can impact their acceptance by local communities and might end in reputational damage and increase the risk of attacks and protests. The culture of silence and individual strategies to achieve acceptance can also influence local communities to reject not only specific humanitarian organisations, but also the whole humanitarian environment.

Conclusion

When applying acceptance as one corner of the security risk management triangle, humanitarian organisations have to balance all stakeholders and their individual interests, motives and perceptions of NGOs. The acceptance approach builds on constant interaction and engagement with all stakeholders in the field of operation. In the case study highlighted here, adding CTL to this working environment is impacting the strategy of gaining and implementing acceptance by HTS/SSG and the local communities by creating 'don't ask, don't tell' approaches, which can jeopardise access and put staff safety at risk.

The article also illustrated the challenges of achieving acceptance by actors with very different interests and perspectives. Generally, the culture of silence on engagement strategies with a designated 'terrorist' group, whether to achieve acceptance or ensure access, jeopardises the humanitarian environment, challenges the adherence to the humanitarian principles, and complicates

guaranteeing staff safety. By entering into sustained dialogue around the implications of CTL and by the implementation of exemptions in CTL for principled humanitarian assistance and the decriminalisation of activities, the limitations on the acceptance-based security strategy could be eased.

Finally, developing a joint strategy and clear instructions on CTL, with both humanitarians working at the field level and institutional donors, would ensure that risks are being shared more equitably between all stakeholders. It is essential to advocate for fairer risk-sharing practices, especially for local partners, who often end up bearing most of the risks associated with operations. There is a need to create open communication channels about the limitations of CTL between local humanitarian organisations, INGOs, and institutional donors. Such channels should make it easier to discuss and agree joint red lines that guide engagement with bodies such as HTS/SSG, but also enable sustained dialogue around the implications of CTL. Ultimately, this would also enable humanitarian agencies to develop a stronger negotiating position.

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Section 2

Acceptance in Practice: exploring different organisational approaches

4. **Measuring and Improving Acceptance:
ACF's experience and perspectives**
5. **Promoting a Blended Risk Management Approach:
the place of programming and diversity within a
SRM strategy**
6. **Debunkering Acceptance: a view from the ICRC**



Measuring and Improving Acceptance: ACF's experience and perspectives

Regis Billaudel

Introduction

In the humanitarian sector, the word acceptance is commonly associated with *protection* and *deterrence* as one of three possible risk reduction management strategies. However, it is the most complex to define and, by the same token, its assessment is equally complex. Unlike the other two strategies, acceptance cannot be imposed, but it can be earned. Acceptance expresses a perception that affects the attitude of other stakeholders towards humanitarian organisations' presence and is contrasted with *tolerance* or *hostility*. Acceptance is usually a condition for organisations to gain free and unrestricted access to affected communities and, therefore, carry out their operations.

Given its impact on access, it is essential for organisations to monitor and measure their acceptance levels regularly and effectively. This work is necessary to anticipate potential issues and address problems that can jeopardise not only an organisation's acceptance but also the success of their entire operation. However, it is also notoriously difficult to measure acceptance and few organisations have the time, resources, and expertise to invest in monitoring acceptance levels. According to the Humanitarian Practice Network, 'There is no simple way of knowing how an agency is perceived and whether (and why) it is accepted, especially in more divided and fragmented environments. But it is important to try to assess this, rather than simply assuming that Acceptance has been achieved' (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2010, p. 68).

This article provides an overview of the operational methodology developed by Action Contre La Faim (ACF) to assess its level of acceptance, and, in doing so, highlights some of the obstacles to monitoring acceptance. I present a simple methodology we developed to help teams measure and monitor their

levels of acceptance. This methodology encourages collaboration among staff and is simple by-design to facilitate quick implementation. ACF started to use this tool in different high-security risk countries and has found it well adapted to the challenges and time pressure with which its teams work.

Why is it difficult to monitor acceptance?

Monitoring acceptance effectively requires a good understanding of the context of operations and proximity with local stakeholders. Keeping this in mind, ACF developed its tool to meet the needs and realities of teams which operate at the local level and are therefore the most likely to understand the constraints and nuances of the context. To maximise the success and adoption of the acceptance tool, ACF first considered which obstacles the local teams face that might prevent them from adequately assessing acceptance levels.

The first obstacle is time. It is difficult for teams to dedicate the time needed to question themselves on their level of acceptance. Our managers in the field often complain that they already have too many documents to read, write or fill in, and they are right. Therefore, given the ongoing administrative burden weighing on office and field coordinators, it is the responsibility of country directors to create an environment in which teams can complete the acceptance evaluation exercise. This involves emphasising the influence of acceptance on the success of operations and the teams' safety, as well as the importance of not taking it for granted. In making the assessment of acceptance levels a priority, country directors should make time and space for their teams to apply the tool. Indeed, it is always preferable not to wait for a major incident to

occur, such as an attack or suspension of activities, and then suddenly realise that our organisation is not accepted.

Another obstacle to the evaluation of acceptance levels is that such measuring involves a certain degree of subjective feeling which is not always easy to define or justify. Some of our team members are too quick to think that we are always accepted because we provide assistance. Others may say that we are only tolerated even if we do lifesaving programmes; they recognise that recipient populations may accept the assistance because they really need it, but remain hostile to our western habits and origin. In addition to this subjectivity, teams and organisations have to take into account the different facets that make up the image of an organisation, some of which will be accepted while others will not.

Acknowledging the time pressure faced by its teams, ACF prioritised simplicity and structure in its methodology, thus creating a tool that can be quickly deployed. Indeed, we find that there is often a dichotomy between those who have the time to create a very sophisticated tool and those who lack the time to complete it. In this area, the best is the enemy of the good. We have, therefore, designed the tool to be used at the field office level, with the field office manager and the national security coordinator leading the process in a dynamic and close collaboration.¹ This approach has the benefit of enabling the entire team to own the analysis, and results in a corresponding positive impact on our acceptance.

To address the influence of subjectivity on this assessment, teams also go through a sensitisation session before the exercise, which enables them to adopt a common vocabulary for expressing and counter-checking their perceptions of acceptance.

A structured methodology to evaluate acceptance

In this article, I refer to two tools which we use during the evaluation of acceptance. The first is the *Actors and levers of influence analysis table*, which presents a list of the relevant local stakeholders, a brief presentation of the background the organisation has with them, and the positive or negative influence

they have on the organisation's work. The second is the *Acceptance self-evaluation grid*, which I describe below and is used as part of the three steps to assess acceptance.

The first step is to bring the whole field team together in a room to create an opportunity to raise awareness of acceptance issues. As these ideas are often not very clear to our teams, we created a technical sheet used by managers to hold the awareness session, which includes a definition of acceptance and the presentation of humanitarian principles. Among other things, the session and document address sensitive issues related to recruitment, team composition, respect for traditions, and adopting proper behaviours. Holding this session is essential to ensure the team adopts a common vocabulary and reduces the risk of misunderstanding.

The session then seeks to highlight and raise awareness of the endogenous and exogenous factors influencing acceptance. Amongst the endogenous factors, teams will discuss elements related to our internal organisational set-up, our policies, staff behaviours, and the level of awareness and understanding of acceptance within our team. These factors differ from the exogenous in that we have direct control over them. By contrast, we do not have direct control over the exogenous factors. These can include the expectations and objectives of stakeholders operating in the area. For example, specific armed groups may see some human rights programmes as inappropriate to the rules they want to impose. Some authorities may envy our means of action or be hostile to our work, for instance when our activities are misunderstood or when they go against the host country's politics. This is sometimes the case when there are pre-existing tensions between refugee and host populations and ACF is providing assistance to the refugees. A combination of endogenous and exogenous factors contributes to shaping the perception and understanding of our presence.

We estimate that this session should be completed in two hours. Understanding the elements influencing acceptance and the foundations of ACF's acceptance strategy is a prerequisite for the teams to be able to complete the second step in a meaningful way.

The second step is to fill out the *Acceptance self-evaluation grid*. The grid seeks to trigger

¹ The tool introduced in this article has been trialled in one of the most complex security contexts ACF operates in and is informed by the organisational structure present in this environment. The roles and responsibilities referred to are therefore specific to this example and can differ in other organisations.

reflections and drive the teams to take ownership of the assessment, by justifying and explaining their perceptions of acceptance. While the first step needs to be conducted with the entire team, it might be wiser to select only key players among the programs and logistics teams to complete the grid. Having a mix of national and international staff is important to ensure a wide variety of perspectives are represented and to produce a reliable image of stakeholders' perceptions of our presence. National staff are often more able to read between the lines and perceive nuances due to their familiarity with the context, culture, attitudes, and protocols. International staff can enrich the conversation by bringing external perspectives, sometimes offering a broader view of acceptance in the context or showing more familiarity with the organisation's activities and practices in other countries.

The third step is to analyse the results of the acceptance assessment and propose an action plan. The same team will analyse the information recorded in the *Acceptance self-evaluation grid* and highlight salient points that require action, particularly if the team has identified feelings of hostility coming from a stakeholder. When teams identify tolerance rather than outright hostility or rejection, it remains important to take action to improve these feelings. This is particularly the case when organisations are tolerated by the population and civilian authorities. Considering the influence that these two actors have on programming and access, it is worth investing efforts to cultivate their acceptance. During this third step, we invite teams to brainstorm and propose actions to be implemented towards stakeholders who tolerate or reject the organisation, with special attention to stakeholders who appear to be hostile. Staff with expertise in access and security issues will then advise teams on how to implement certain actions, for instance providing recommendations on how to conduct sensitive negotiations.

The Acceptance self-evaluation grid

Our grid includes three categories of information:

1. **A comprehensive stakeholders list** (or actor mapping) developed by the team. This mapping can include specific civil minorities at the local level, leaders (political, traditional and religious), security forces (army, police and self-defence groups), non-state armed groups (NSAGs), and influential businesspersons.
2. **A grading of acceptance on three levels:**
 - **Accepted:** this is evident when a stakeholder helps us in conducting our activities or takes action to protect our personnel or our reputation.
 - **Tolerated:** this is the case when a stakeholder does not hinder access, but would not expose themselves to protect us or advocate on our behalf.
 - **Rejected:** this is evident when a stakeholder makes public comments aimed at harming the reputation and image of our organisation, takes action against us, or when they refuse to give us access. It may include threats, or verbal or even physical assaults against our staff or property.
3. **An analysis of each stakeholder's acceptance levels of four elements:**
 - International aid agencies, in the broadest sense, present in the area
 - Our organisation itself, as ACF
 - The programs that we conduct in the area concerned
 - The team itself (its composition and its behaviour)

This results in the following table:

Stakeholder list	Stakeholder's perceptions of			
	International agencies in the area	ACF	ACF programmes in the area	ACF teams
Example: NSAG	<i>rejected</i>	<i>tolerated</i>	<i>accepted</i>	<i>tolerated</i>
Example...				

We consider that it is not necessary to be more precise at the self-evaluation stage because notions that are more refined would create unhelpful hesitation, as teams might struggle to decide the appropriate level of acceptance. The purpose of the exercise is to evaluate real risks and propose corrective actions which are easy to implement.

This exercise also helps staff to take ownership of the issues that can be influenced, develop realistic measures, and, where possible, adapt their behaviour to reduce hostility.

Addressing subjectivities in acceptance assessments

It is challenging for teams to identify and define the exact factors that work against our acceptance. There will always be an element of subjectivity in acceptance assessments, as the self-evaluation appeals to notions of 'emotional intelligence'.² While there is no perfect way to eliminate subjectivities, it is possible to reduce biases by asking staff to justify their answers by using examples based on tangible and measurable facts. Using objective criteria – such as the free participation of the population in activities, the degree of assistance provided by the authorities and/or communities in the management of conflicts, and the sharing of critical security information with teams – enable us to limit biases and base judgments on visible elements.

Once the analysis is complete, teams must think of priority actions to cultivate acceptance. Most often, our teams can identify priorities and objectives and, in most cases, implement the recommendations rapidly. Very often, these actions will be related to improvements in our external communication, or conversations with staff members on how to adopt more appropriate behaviours. In other cases, they can also involve reconsidering our programmes, activities or objectives in the context.

Our acceptance tool in action

Over the last few months, ACF field teams conducted this self-evaluation exercise in several locations where we operate. In Burkina Faso, for

example, the Access and Security Coordinator visited all the offices and initiated the process. The coordinator worked with zone coordinators to co-lead the sessions in our six Burkina Faso offices. In five bases, the teams felt they had a good level of acceptance by the highest local political authority. However, one base reported that this authority only accepted their activities and merely tolerated the organisation and its staff. The team attributed the government official's attitude to the fact that at the very beginning of ACF's programme in the area, this official had tried to interfere in ACF activities and influence our selection criteria. Our teams had refused these conditions but, after lengthy negotiations, had managed to obtain an agreement to be allowed to implement their activities. However, following the incident, our team was publicly blamed at every official coordination meeting. During the assessment exercise, the team recognised that they needed to try as much as possible to improve their communication with this authority and to clarify the situation by visiting them more regularly to demonstrate the value of our action, with the aim of improving our relationship and increasing acceptance.

In another Sahel country, the exercise revealed a very good level of acceptance by the population and civilian authorities. Even the (radical) non-state armed group present – who are openly hostile to international organisations – was assessed as tolerating ACF, its programmes and teams. However, the national army appeared systematically hostile to ACF on each of the four criteria mentioned above. Faced with this destabilising finding, teams decided to investigate ways to better communicate with the military forces.

In the Middle East, at a field base level, the team consistently mentioned access constraints as a result of harassment at military checkpoints, although other INGOs seemed to not experience those constraints. Following the self-evaluation exercise, the team understood that these problems were related to the Ministry of Interior, whose local representative had a powerful influence over the military and security forces in the field. Indeed, the rest of the table showed a very good level of acceptance from all other stakeholders on all four criteria. During the exercise, a few staff members explained that this difficult relationship was the result of an incident which happened two years ago, over a conflict related to a water supply project. At

² The ability to recognize, understand and control one's own emotions and to deal with the emotions of others popularised by Daniel Goleman in 1995.

the time, the Ministry of Interior intervened on the site and brutally stopped ACF's activity, refusing to allow the community to have its own water point. ACF's project manager was then summoned, and the head of the Ministry of Interior threatened to close ACF's office. Following that incident, teams started to experience harassment. However, due to staff turnover, the new management was not aware of the incident. Following the acceptance assessment, the team decided to ask for a meeting with the highest level of local Ministry of Interior staff, in order to improve our image. The recently hired liaison officer is still working to build a better relationship with the office.

Conclusion

In most of these cases, teams put a lot of effort into completing the exercise, which allowed them to better identify the contours of what we call acceptance. Most of the time our teams already have the necessary information, and support from headquarters is not always necessary. As described in the examples above, the actions to be taken are often straightforward. The value of this self-assessment tool is that it raises teams' awareness of the endogenous factors of poor acceptance, and empowers them to take actions to improve them.

Once the action plan is validated, progress should be followed by a monitoring system. We usually suggest repeating the exercise after the action plan is completed, to evaluate if the actions implemented had a visible and positive impact. In addition to measuring the specific actions to be carried out, the exercise also contributes to raising the awareness of the teams of the importance of acceptance, thus encouraging them to take on board the concepts discussed. While it is not an easy task to get buy-in to new tools, in our experience, teams gradually accepted the methodology.

At ACF, we have identified specific countries recently affected by new types of conflict, particularly in the Sahel and Lake Chad region. In these countries, we had to shift from implementing structural support to providing emergency response. This change means that we cannot rely anymore on the level of acceptance we used to have. Some new actors in the conflict are openly hostile to 'humanitarian influence' and target NGO workers. This rapid change of context has caught our teams off guard, as it is difficult for them to accept the seriousness of the conflict and, at the same time, to question their usual attitudes. The teams have slowly learned how to adapt to the necessary changes in their mode of operation and to the new constraints linked to the proper management of their security.

This phenomenon will affect more and more countries in the coming years as we see complex emergencies unfolding in volatile countries as well as changes in international relations. These deteriorations are not only evident in the Sahel, but also in other regions, such as the coastal countries of West Africa. The speed of these deteriorations (e.g., the province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique) is impressive. Given this growing complexity, it is urgent to closely monitor our level of acceptance from all stakeholders. In such contexts, our self-assessment tool remains useful to enable ongoing monitoring of acceptance, but also needs to be completed alongside in-depth studies and with the support of experts in security and access.

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

Chris Williams, Penelope Kinch and Lyndall Herman

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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Debunkering Acceptance: a view from the ICRC

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Introduction: the relationship between acceptance and security

The first pillar of the ICRC's security model is 'acceptance' (Brugger 2009), a concept embedded in the ICRC's DNA that goes beyond concerns about security. Bestowed with an official mandate by states and enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL), the ICRC's standard operating procedure is to gain approval for its presence and actions from both state and non-state parties to armed conflict. This formal agreement of the ICRC's role and presence is intended to accord security and safety to its staff and integrity to its premises, and to provide the legitimacy that is essential to the ICRC's efforts to persuade the parties to armed conflict to conduct hostilities in accordance with IHL.

The notion of 'acceptance' also underpins three of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: neutrality, impartiality and independence. 'Neutrality' is often incorrectly misunderstood as a moral position. Instead it is an operational posture that aims to foster acceptance of the ICRC in even the most highly politicised contexts of armed conflict. As the principle explicitly states, the Red Cross does not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies for a reason – 'to enjoy the confidence of all' (ICRC 2015:4). Acceptance is fostered by adhering to the principles of impartiality (not making any adverse distinction regarding who receives humanitarian assistance, giving priority to those most in need) and of independence (acting without interference from extraneous political, military, economic or other influences). To be effective, these principles must be explained and applied consistently.

The principles are further operationalised through several working modalities that also seek to enhance

acceptance. By treating any observed breaches of IHL with strict confidentiality so they can be discussed in bilateral dialogue with the assumed perpetrators, the ICRC aims to gain acceptance of the need to respect humanitarian norms. Being transparent about what the ICRC does and why helps to allay suspicions of hidden agendas and considerable effort is placed on disseminating knowledge of the ICRC and broader Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Acting consistently across contexts so as to be predictable and coherent is important in promoting acceptance at all levels.

Whilst this framework never provided guarantees of either access nor security – to which the tragic deaths of ICRC delegates and blocked access attests – it has allowed the ICRC to save lives and alleviate suffering in conflict zones throughout the world for more than a century. Certain trends in armed conflict over the last decade, however, challenge some fundamental ideas underpinning this approach and warrant more attention. This article takes a closer look at the ICRC's security incident data before unpacking some of these new challenges, such as the proliferation of armed groups in contexts around the world. It then describes some of the ICRC's security concepts and practices intended to address these challenges before concluding with thoughts on moving forward.

Has humanitarian action become more dangerous?

The last few years has seen lively debates over whether the contexts in which humanitarians operate have become more dangerous.¹ Much of this debate is centered around the use and interpretation of data on security incidents against humanitarian actors. Data from monitoring organisations show a global trend suggesting that

¹ For a summary of the issues see Stoddard, Harmer & Harver 2016.

serious security incidents involving aid workers have gradually increased year-on-year. The number of recorded attacks on aid workers in 2019 exceeded the number in each of the years previously recorded by the Aid Worker Security Database (Stoddard et al. 2020).²

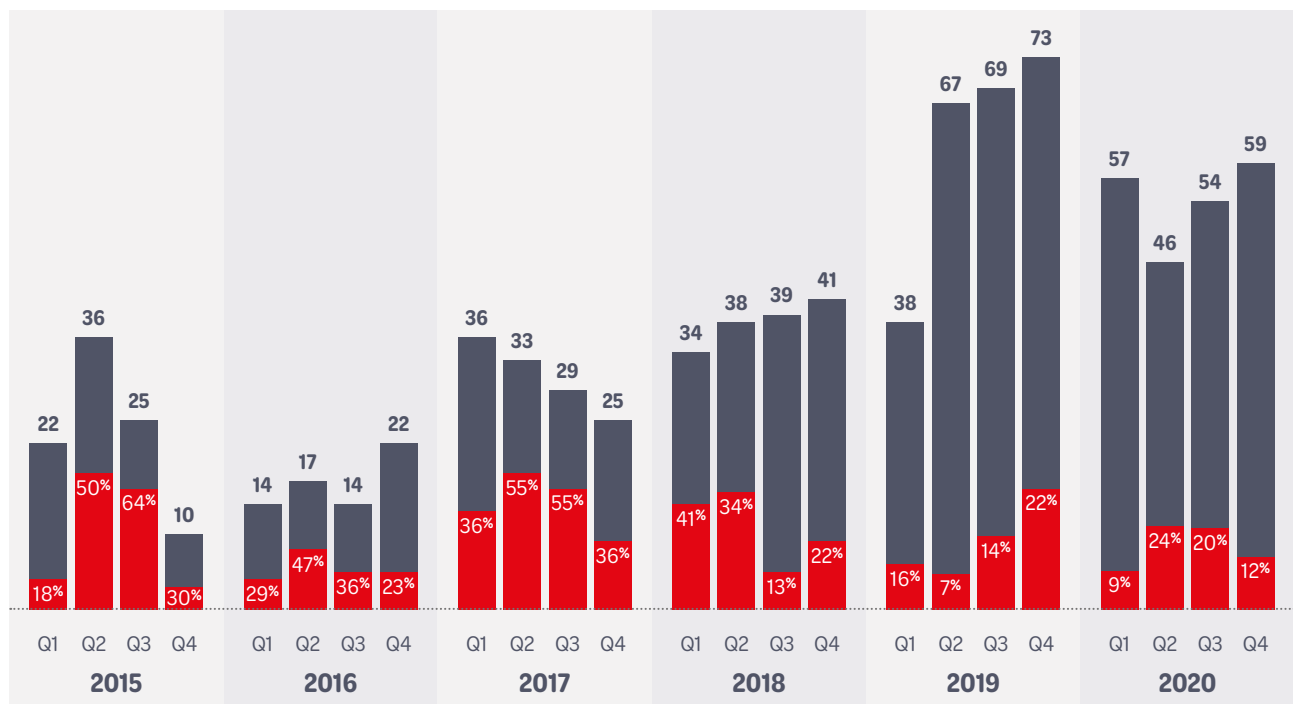
The ICRC's own data does not mirror this trend.³ While there has been an increase in security incidents reported in recent years, this largely reflects the organisation-wide adoption of a custom-built internal reporting system, the *Security Management Information Platform* (SMIP), which was specifically designed to enable more comprehensive and integrated reporting of all security incidents. For each security incident report, ICRC staff record whether the evidence suggests that the ICRC was deliberately targeted or not, or whether this factor is unknown. Importantly, data from the last three years shows that the proportion of incidents targeting the ICRC has remained stable at around 20 percent, irrespective of the overall quantity of incidents. Furthermore, taking account of the growth in the ICRC's operational footprint over the last five years – from around 14,000 staff and 290 structures worldwide in 2015 to some

20,000 staff and 318 structures today – we see that proportionally the *rate of harm* for ICRC staff has steadily decreased and in 2020 stood at around one third of what it was in 2015.

Of course, there is much that the data does not say: it would be foolish to draw conclusions about the ICRC's level of acceptance on the basis of these numbers alone. The data does not show the number of places where it is too unsafe to work, such as much of south-central Somalia, or in which an armed group or authoritarian government has rejected the presence of humanitarians outright. Nevertheless, tracking security incidents – from seemingly innocuous stone throwing at cars by young children to direct threats against the lives of ICRC staff – enables us to monitor the local mood, review the context analysis and security strategy as required, and address misconceptions or errors on our part before they fester. Improvements to the ICRC's ability to monitor security are described further below.

In fact, one unexpected finding in the data is the rise in the number of incidents attributed to civilians. Those attributed to military forces, armed groups

Figure 1: Evolution of recorded security incidents since 2015 by quarter, showing the proportion of incidents (in red) deemed to have involved deliberate targeting.



² At the time of writing, data on attacks against aid workers from 2020 is still being collated.

³ The ICRC has been collecting data on security incidents for decades although it cannot be relied upon to be complete, accurate and reliable in all instances. The definitions of key terms, the data capture and validation processes, the challenges around the subjectivity of reporting, the structure of the data models and other factors all represent limitations in the utility of the data. Hence while every effort is made to ensure a reliable dataset, there may be impediments to drawing solid conclusions from it.

Figure 2: Graph depicting the types of security incident⁵ caused by different perpetrators recorded in the year 2020. A large proportion of incidents (%) are caused by civilians and criminal actors. (Null values removed).

	Incidents without operational consequences	Important incidents	Serious incidents
Civilians	45 (30%)	26 (29%)	1 (10%)
Criminals / Bandits / Organised crime	33 (22%)	17 (19%)	3 (30%)
Non-state armed groups	17 (11%)	22 (24%)	4 (40%)
Military	18 (12%)	13 (14%)	1 (10%)
Unknown	17 (11%)	7 (8%)	1 (10%)
Police	11 (7%)	3 (3%)	

and criminal actors have remained proportionally stable or declined over the last three years, while incidents caused by civilians – for example, disgruntled employees, communities not included in aid distributions, religious fundamentalists, ultra-nationalist or protest groups – have increased by 50 percent or more, predominantly in Asia and the Middle East.⁴ Although carrying less severe operational consequences than incidents involving fighting forces or criminals, the increase in harm by civilians warrants deeper analysis, particularly to see whether this is more prevalent in protracted conflicts where aid has become an important stake in local economies, given that a large proportion of these threats have an economic motive. We shall return to this point below.

So, whilst the ICRC has not seen an overall increase in harm, some of this is due to a scaling back of exposure. The aspiration for acceptance everywhere has had to be tempered with the realisation that in many contexts our level of acceptance sits on a spectrum with acceptance at one end and rejection at the other. The mid-point is ‘tolerance’ of the ICRC.

The spectrum is dynamic, shifting in accordance with internal and external events, and needs to be assessed for every relevant source of authority: the ICRC might have full acceptance from some and little from others. Identifying indicators of where to place the cursor on our level of acceptance along this spectrum is tricky.

Challenges to acceptance

Expanding our gaze beyond security statistics, the ICRC’s observations on the ground highlight three developments of particular note that challenge the ICRC’s capacity to foster acceptance.

First, the proliferation of armed groups – the vast majority of which have decentralised organisational structures (having either splintered from a larger group, as in Colombia, or emerged from communities as in Libya) – hinders the possibility of relying on a hierarchical chain of command to authorise access and give security assurances. The number of non-international armed conflicts has more than

⁴ Different types of perpetrators such as ‘armed groups’ or ‘civilians’ are not precisely defined but security specialists who review each incident apply their expertise to classify the main elements of each incident as consistently as possible. That said, there are many incidents where complex factors and unique combinations of elements defy simple classification, for instance when civilians and armed groups combine to perpetrate an incident.

⁵ The ICRC classifies security incidents under three categories: 1) A *serious* incident is an event that causes major harm to the physical or mental integrity of ICRC staff members and/or has a significant impact on operations. 2) An *important* incident is an event that constitutes a danger to the physical or mental integrity of ICRC staff members and may affect operations; 3) Incidents are designated as *without operational consequences* when the event constitutes a danger to the physical or mental integrity of staff members but did not affect operations.

trebled over the last two decades from around 30 at the end of the 1990s to around 100 today, and more than one-third of them involve three or more parties to the conflict (Nikolic, Ferraro & de Saint Maurice 2020). Furthermore, there is an increased regionalisation and globalisation of armed groups and their support networks. While contact with field level leadership is generally possible, communication with regional and global leadership is far more difficult. The fluidity of the environment and the speed at which alliances form and change hinders our ability to foster mutual understanding between aid organisations and armed groups. Moreover, we see an increase in the number of states intervening in armed conflicts beyond their territory, notably as part of coalitions, in partnerships or in direct support. Many of these states are ‘middle powers’ and may be assertive, and/or have had limited engagement with the international humanitarian sector in operational theatres, and thus have a different interpretation of humanitarian action. Throughout its history, humanitarian action has been manipulated and instrumentalised in the service of political interests (Terry 2002) but this tendency seems to be on the rise. The post-Cold War celebration of humanitarian ideals began to wane with the ‘war on terror’ of the early 2000s and has suffered an accelerated demise as dedicated aid departments are absorbed into bodies which reorient aid towards serving political and economic interests.

Second, the relationships between aid organisations, the communities they seek to help, and the authorities in charge have become increasingly transactional, part of what Alex de Waal (2018) terms the ‘political marketplace’ in which political services and loyalties are exchanged for material resources.⁶ As mentioned above, in many protracted conflicts, humanitarian aid is part of the fabric of war economies. Where once humanitarians assumed they were safe by helping the people for which the armed group or government professed to fight, the ‘capture’ of aid resources by a group (local warlord, government authority, business community or other gatekeepers) for economic gain or as a tool of patronage is a growing phenomenon. Having a vested interest in keeping the aid enterprise spending money that can be tapped or directed to ‘client’ groups, those practicing ‘aid capture’ apply

pressure to humanitarian organisations to act in a way that can undermine humanitarian principles, and can pose security threats to aid agencies that wish to address this issue. The rise in identity politics – political attitudes that promote the interests of a group based on racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity – further complicates attempts to explain the principle of impartiality, especially if needs are greater on one side.

The transactional nature of humanitarian assistance is not new: acceptance and access have long been premised on an unspoken understanding of the indirect benefit of providing vital social services to the population under the control of an armed group. It alleviates some of the responsibilities of governing. But this *quid pro quo* presupposes an affinity between the population and the armed group, which is not always the case: the Khmer Rouge-controlled IDP camps along the Thai-Cambodian border were off-limits to aid agencies in the 1980s. Over the last decade no access has been possible to regions of Afghanistan with high concentrations of foreign fighters because they have no local constituency to care for (Terry 2011). In some contexts, the regionalisation and globalisation of networks of armed groups exacerbates this trend, creating greater distance between populations and those who control them.

Another related challenge to establishing mutual trust with armed groups is the restrictive measures states impose on humanitarian actors interacting with certain groups, including under counter-terrorism legislation. Impediments to responding to humanitarian needs because of such legislation undermines the principles and purposes of humanitarian action, to the detriment of those in need of assistance and the reputations of humanitarian agencies.

The third potential challenge to acceptance comes from the spread of new technologies and social media. Whilst there are many positive aspects of making armed groups and communities more accessible through internet platforms and telecommunications, there are also risks to this ‘digital proximity’.⁷ Many armed groups are deeply suspicious of new technologies’ potential for spying: this is certainly the case of Al Shabaab in Somalia which lost several senior members including its

⁶ For excellent research around this theme see LSE 2021.

⁷ See ICRC blog series beginning with Marelli 2020.

leader, Ahmed Godane, in targeted missile attacks (Martinez & Hughes 2014), which led to tight restrictions on who could access the territory they control, and limiting communication equipment. Another potential threat stems from the speed at which misinformation spreads and the risk that a malicious rumor about an aid agency could spread rapidly and rally an aggressive crowd. Misinformation might help to explain the rise in incidents perpetrated by civilians, highlighted above.

Adapting the ICRC's security management system to contemporary challenges

The ICRC's security management system has evolved over time to reflect these growing challenges. Its decentralised nature has not changed, based on the conviction that those closest to the field are best placed to understand the context (see Krähenbühl 2004). This approach emphasises understanding the ICRC's mandate, humanitarian principles and the application of the 'pillars of security'. But more recent emphasis has been placed on developing a systemic approach to security management across the whole organisation that aims to improve the quality and circulation of information and analysis to support the definition of acceptance strategies and overall decision-making. This has required maintaining a balance between a 'heuristic' approach to security based on experience, and a structured and inclusive process based on professional standards, procedures and institutional learning.

The ICRC has invested in its capacity to gather and analyse information on security incidents and potential threats and established a digital reporting system to help ICRC staff monitor trends. Looking at trends over time can help pinpoint incident triggers and better understand the 'weak signals' of impending risk and supports our acceptance approach. There is still work to be done to harmonise definitions and identify objective indicators to help mitigate factors such as 'confirmation bias' (whereby people tend to interpret data as confirming pre-existing assumptions rather than challenging them), and in collecting, processing and analysing data on cross-border armed conflicts and humanitarian operations. The ICRC has invested more time and

resources in producing political analyses of conflict-affected settings, with a dedicated research stream on the role of aid in the political economy of conflict and its consequences. This research stream might help to make sense of the increase in violence by civilians against the ICRC as we dig deeper into identifying the winners and losers of the economic windfalls injected by the aid sector and its impact on acceptance.

Managing and analysing information in a 20,000 strong workforce is a challenge in itself, particularly one organised along professional sectors (health, economic security, water and habitat, protection, communication, law.) The Security Unit at HQ has been working to embed principles of security management into each sector in the field and at HQ, including the obligation to apply 'minimum security requirements' across all ICRC sites. Its purpose is to systematise, through training and on-site support, a security risk management process that capitalises on the different knowledge, experiences and opinions of staff with very different profiles and functions, including different perceptions of acceptance. A thorough analysis of the ICRC's operational ambitions and footprint within the local political context is key because it helps us define the right balance between acceptance and other mitigation measures: on the one hand, privileging acceptance-only might expose staff to unforeseen dangers, but on the other, resorting to armored vehicles, armed escorts, or heavily guarded compounds can undermine efforts to gain acceptance. Such measures may also bring other risks, for instance paying for security services potentially fuels violence and associates aid organisations with those providing the services. A sound security risk management process, undertaken with an inclusive and participatory approach, takes all these factors into account and helps define the best approach.

A dedicated security forum operates both at HQ and in field structures to help ensure access to security information updates and procedures, as well as to flag and address emerging threats or challenges. On a quarterly basis, the Security Unit provides an overall view of the most exposed delegations' security risk exposure. This reporting is combined with initiatives led by other sectors of the ICRC, such as the annual mapping of the ICRC's relationships with non-state armed groups, to enable a broader

understanding of where successes and impediments lie in efforts to be understood and accepted.⁸ Stakeholder mapping and analysis includes security management issues, such as notifications made to local authorities of ICRC's plans in an area and green lights obtained from them to proceed. Other indicators of the ICRC's acceptance include the quality of the ICRC's dialogue with an armed group (what subjects we can broach); with whom are we permitted to speak; and the number and type of interactions allowed. Having a strong security risk management system in place helps us identify risks and opportunities holistically, assess the solidity of our network and avoid a siloed approach to acceptance.

Conclusions and implications

This article has sought to connect an ideal – acceptance – to one of its roles in preserving the security and safety of humanitarian staff. In doing so, the article has explained some of the practical ways that the ICRC has sought to better understand and mitigate risk. But there are some higher-level considerations linked to the challenges identified that need deeper consideration.

One major area of further work is to consider whether the current structure of the ICRC – reflecting its historical past – is capable of addressing the new challenges highlighted above. The ICRC remains quite state-centric and is structured and staffed to respond to the bureaucracy of states. The proliferation of non-state armed groups and their regionalisation and globalisation suggest that the ICRC might need to adapt its set-up to be better equipped to deal with such transnational entities. Recent research has helped us understand sources of influence on the behaviour of members of state armed forces and armed groups, based on their organisational structure, and demonstrated the need to engage with a greater array of potential influences if we are to make inroads into promoting restraint on the battlefield (ICRC 2018). We now need to improve our ability to work in the borderlands and

across borders. To do this we need to reinforce regional hubs so they can play a more central role in networking with and reaching out to groups that increasingly join transnational networks and support systems, with a view to increasing engagement opportunities and thereby acceptance of the ICRC.

The rise in security incidents committed against ICRC staff by civilians also warrants greater attention, particularly with regard to how it affects our acceptance. We need to dig more deeply to understand the circumstances of these events, whether they are connected to something the ICRC did, or failed to do, and how to reverse this rising trend. We also need to link this observation to ongoing research into misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in armed conflicts and its influence on the attitudes and behaviour of civilians (see Tiller, Devidal & van Solinge 2021).

The proliferation of armed groups, the growth of identity politics, and the increasingly transactional nature of relationships between humanitarians and state and non-state entities is likely to make it harder to gain acceptance as a neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian organisation. But it is difficult to envisage another means of gaining acceptance to reach those in need, regardless of who they are or what they may have done, other than to put these principles into practice and demonstrate the purely humanitarian intention of our aid. The expanded access to the internet and hence to information across all corners of the world make acting in a consistent and coherent manner across different contexts all the more important. The principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence provide a vital thread through which to consider how different groups might perceive ICRC actions and communications. Acceptance from communities and political authorities of the ICRC's presence and operations is best promoted through proximity to the people most in need, and here the specificity of humanitarian security management is precisely to support acceptance-related efforts holistically, from context analysis to programme designing, and not to force a security-driven bunkerisation of humanitarian action.

⁸ In 2020, the ICRC was in contact with 465 armed groups worldwide. Although this number fluctuates each year, it represents thousands of direct and indirect interactions with armed groups across hundreds of sites and at all levels of an armed group's hierarchy.

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Section 3

Responding to Ongoing Challenges: adapting and improving acceptance strategies

7. Choice Architecture and Organisational SRM Buy-in
8. Intercultural Communication: a foundation to acceptance
9. Private Security Contracting and Acceptance: a dangerous match?
10. Digital Risk: how new technologies impact acceptance and raise new challenges for NGOs



Choice Architecture and Organisational SRM Buy-in

Araba Cole and Panagiotis Olympiou

Introduction

Choice architecture is the deliberate design of the context in which choices are offered to a targeted group of people, and it is the responsibility of the choice architect – in this case, the SRM practitioner – to facilitate or hinder desired behaviours through the way in which choices are presented (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Choice architecture is used in multiple areas, such as government and advertising¹, to facilitate the desired behaviour of targeted groups. This article explores how choice architecture can be adapted to increase SRM buy-in within humanitarian organisations, which we consider essential to strengthen the acceptance component of the organisation's SRM strategy.

SRM buy-in from within an organisation and its staff at all levels is essential both to preserving the wellbeing of personnel and to support their ability to deliver effective, do no harm programming. In turn, achieving these objectives helps to safeguard an organisation's acceptance by external actors. If buy-in is not achieved, individual actions as well as organisational shortcomings in the implementation of an otherwise sound SRM approach can affect both an organisation's results and perceptions of their operation and delivery. Therefore, maximizing buy-in from within can play a significant role in both the robustness of SRM per se as well as acceptance more broadly. Choice architecture – along with other aspects of cognitive and behavioural research – can help explain why buy-in sometimes fails, and provide insights and practices to help increase it.

Fundamental to both SRM buy-in and acceptance by external actors is perception: perceptions guide behaviour, and behaviour shapes individual choices (Kahneman 2013). The technical aspects of SRM – which come in the form of standard operating

procedures (SOPs), guidelines, etc. – often do not account for *actual* human behaviour or fluctuations in personal diligence. While SRM may correctly identify security risks and propose logically coherent solutions, these solutions are not always followed by individuals, which often turns out to be the weakest link of the SRM chain. There are two ways in which SRM can engage with the human element to improve organisational buy-in: addressing perceptions, and utilising choice architecture. SRM professionals can address staff perceptions of SRM by considering the following questions. Do staff also see risk where the security professionals do? Do staff consider the measures implemented to be commensurate to programmatic objectives? Do external stakeholders perceive the organisations' activities as aligned with the do no harm principle? Perceptions are often a target of security professionals, who try to influence these by means of communication, training, and as a last resort, human resources measures (verbal or written warnings, termination of contracts or other disciplinary actions as a result of not adhering to the security protocols of an organisation's actions). While work on perceptions is important, it is also fleeting in a domain that is very dynamic, results-driven, and characterized by high staff turnover within missions. These approaches are thus not failsafe, and they may leave behaviours unaltered with little other recourse available to ensure buy-in throughout the organisation, hence the importance of choice architecture as another means of improving buy-in.

Instead of targeting staff perceptions, knowledge or skills, choice architecture aims at intervening in the environment in which staff operate, and so directly affects their behaviour. Instead of solely seeking to change behaviours by instruction, it *induces* the desired behaviours by offering a particular choice or set of choices, in a particular way. We propose that

¹ Choice architecture has already been deployed very successfully in other sectors. Thaler & Sunstein (2008) developed the concept of the 'nudge' which has gone on to see practical application in the UK government by David Halpern who led the 'Nudge Unit' or, more formally, the Behavioural Insights Team. By capitalizing on behavioural insights and cognitive biases they had significant successes in affecting citizens' decision-making to help improve results in areas such as tax collection and unemployment. Another arena where such understanding has paid enormous dividends is in marketing and advertising (Shotton 2018), and data on consumer choices is becoming one of the biggest commodities on the market (Matsakis 2019, Melendez & Pasternack 2019).

this approach is both essential and complementary to other SRM techniques, as it facilitates better organisational buy-in which in turn enables the safe and effective program delivery essential for sustained acceptance by external actors throughout the program lifecycle.

Our analysis begins by examining the limitations and obstacles to SRM buy-in within organisations, taking into account issues of perception, communication, and resourcing surrounding security risk management. We then look at relevant research and its value to NGO SRM. Finally, we demonstrate how the learning from these research reports can be applied to SRM practices in NGOs in order to gain stronger organisational buy-in.

Obstacles to organisational buy-in

In and of itself, SRM can be a burden to the operations of NGOs. Many staff see the implementation of SRM as detracting resources from their primary objective: program implementation. Notably, SRM often requires staff members to adjust their behaviour in a way that may be additional and external to their self-perceived core professional identity (be it a logistician, a protection expert, a humanitarian, a programme manager, or other). Moreover, SRM might call for a set of everyday (and often mundane) actions, which are implemented differently in the professional setting than in the private life of the same individual (e.g. locally hired staff driving organisational vehicles wearing seat belts, but not while driving their personal vehicles). Moreover, under time and other constraints, even diligent employees can find themselves downgrading security tasks when demands more central to their job function become urgent.

Not only can SRM be expensive and obtuse, but it can also be hard to persuade people of the value of good SRM. NGOs often lack the key metrics used to evaluate SRM performance as seen in other sectors, such as returns on investment (RoI) and return on prevention (RoP).² There is effectively a problem of negative proof: how to prove something (e.g., a major security incident) did *not* happen as a result of SRM efforts. Fundamentally, as a result of slim incentives, the significant effort and resources required, and

a conscious or unconscious lack of prioritisation, staff and managers do not always make choices conducive to successful SRM and acceptance. Choice architecture, with its foundational principles of behavioural insights and cognitive biases, can be used to remedy this.

Leveraging biases

At the heart of choice architecture is the fundamental concept that humans are not always rational decision-makers: we do not necessarily automatically choose of our own volition what is safest for us or what serves our larger and long-term objectives. We are, in fact, human, and our choices and behaviour deviate from logical expectations, and these deviations provide the space for choice architecture. In our case, where compliance and buy-in of SRM may seem logical in insecure operating environments, this is not always the norm. Significant work has been done in identifying how human behaviour deviates from a rational norm, particularly in the face of risk, in the form of cognitive biases (Taleb 2018). We will outline here some of these biases and what they can look like, and in the next section indicate how choice architecture can be used to help overcome them and improve SRM buy-in.

One of these biases, *loss aversion*, has been highlighted as a key motivator in decision making. In the face of certain loss, most people prefer a gamble, while in the face of certain gain, a gamble is very unattractive. For example, the security arm of an organisation wishes to install a new warehouse locking system to prevent possible theft, but the budget holder is willing to gamble that such theft will not occur and declines to authorise the expense (which is seen as a certain loss). Loss aversion can be a significant obstacle to SRM buy-in, with security measures being seen as a loss of time, money, energy, and sometimes all three. However, once we understand what loss aversion is and how it influences behaviour, we can use choice architecture to present the choice differently (even if the choice is a simple Yes or No – in the example above, funding or not funding the locking system). Framing a choice of behaviour on the basis of “gains or losses relevant to the status quo” (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984:343) can impact on the choice made. In the

² As a performance indicator, return on investment (RoI) evaluates the economic benefit of an investment, as compared to the investment's cost. Return of prevention (RoP) measures an organisation's economic benefit deriving from ensuring occupational safety and health. Examples of such investment pertaining to SRM could be hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) or hands-on personal safety courses, physical security installations like automatic locks, or medical evacuation and kidnap and ransom insurance.

example above, framing the installation of the new warehouse locking system as an investment which will save an organisation thousands of dollars in misappropriated stock rather than solely presenting the initial cost of the new system will be much more attractive to the budget holder and decision makers involved.

Similarly, the *fundamental attribution error* describes people's tendency to explain an individual's behaviour by attributing her actions to her personality, while simultaneously underestimating the significance of contextual and situational factors at play (Shotton 2018). Although instinct leads us to almost always believe that a behaviour is the result of one's character, social psychology experiments (Jones & Harris 1967) have shown this to be a fallacy, and that context or specific situation affects behaviour to a greater extent than we intuitively perceive. For instance, an NGO driver in rural Lebanon who fails to carry out desired SOPs at a checkpoint despite his training and instruction by management may at first instance appear to be negligent. However, upon closer inspection he may well be responding to a feature of the environment: his social ties with checkpoint personnel may oblige him to adhere to social expectations rather than organisational SOPs. Incorporating this insight into one's analysis and systems design allows for a more nuanced understanding of behavioural causes, thus opening up a wide range of opportunities for achieving the desired results by moving the focus from the individual to the environment in which she operates. While there is not one answer on whether adhering to all local social norms necessarily safeguards an organisation's acceptance, misalignments between SRM protocols and employees' behaviour flag points of friction to the SRM practitioner designing procedures.

Our perception of risks can also be similarly fickle. When thinking about risks such as causes of fatalities or assessing how dangerous something is, we often conjure images and information that we might have recently been exposed to, for instance in omnipresent social media or news. This is an example of the *availability heuristic*³ (Kahneman & Tversky 1974) which prompts us to reach for the most readily available and vibrant information to answer a question or solve a problem. For example,

let's consider a delegation of donors who had planned to visit a provincial capital in Eastern Afghanistan by road. During the fortnight before their travel, improvised explosive device attacks on this road increased from one to three, a development which led the delegation to seriously consider cancelling their visit, despite the fact that similar or even higher numbers of such attacks had been seen in multiple instances during the previous year. The fact that this relative spike was recent, however, had a disproportionate impact on the delegation's perception of insecurity, despite all other factors pointing to a normal level of risk. Once again, knowledge of this cognitive bias can provide an opportunity to SRM practitioners to ensure that relevant SRM information is salient in the minds of those choosing a course of action, and help balance the effect of recent and vibrant information in decision making.

The *representativeness heuristic* (Kahneman & Tversky 1974) is another bias that can cause blindness to risk. If something is representative of or looks like something that is safe or normal, then we are unlikely to respond; if it doesn't look like our archetypes of a threat or a danger, then we are unlikely to challenge or mitigate against it. From an SRM perspective, this can cause a critical myopia when dealing with risk, which can manifest itself as resistance to SRM by personnel within an organisation; potential threats and hazards may not always be easily recognisable and so a plan to mitigate them may be challenging to justify or enforce. This has been a significant challenge in Afghanistan, where female suicide bombers were highly effective due to women not being seen as threatening, as well as cultural barriers against searching women (either by men, or the hiring of female guard personnel). Women were not *representative* of the threat, nor were they representative of the solution.

Though it may be rational to support organisational SRM in order to facilitate safe and responsible programming and acceptance by stakeholders, this is not always the reality due to some of the deeply ingrained cognitive hardwiring described above. Choice architecture enables SRM practitioners to overcome some of these biases to help increase effectiveness and buy-in of their SRM measures. We will examine some key uses in the next section.

³ A heuristic is a means of problem solving that utilises an approximation or 'rule of thumb' rather than an optimal solution.

Uses for the SRM practitioner

In a world where trying to generate SRM buy-in can often feel like trying to sell an unpopular product to a hostile market, these insights are of significant value to the SRM practitioner who wishes to increase buy-in, make programmes safer, and gain the trust and acceptance of stakeholders. Here are a few examples:

- Choice architecture methods can be used to increase the likelihood that SRM measures – e.g. SOPs, physical security measures – are adopted by making them easy, attractive, social, and timely (the ‘EAST’ principle, Halpern 2015). If the desired behaviour – for instance, incident reporting by staff in the field – is unattractive, challenging, or inconvenient then it is unlikely to be carried out. As security practitioners we must think about making the desired choice the one that meets the least resistance. Rather than security incident reporting being laborious, bureaucratic, or incurring punishment if staff fail to complete it, incident reporting could be made available via the most convenient means for the staff member (e.g. WhatsApp voice note), and in a format that is simple and convenient. Doing so would be a point of *reward* by management, and with the EAST principle in mind, reporting on incidents would be far more likely to be carried out. This can be reinforced with positive messaging to staff that praises swift incident reporting, and explains how they have contributed to organisational safety.

Organisations can use this principle not only internally, but also to maximise the external feedback which is essential for a successful acceptance SRM approach. All too often, feedback mechanisms such as affected communities’ feedback and grievance redress mechanisms are under-used due to a lack of behavioural insight; choice architecture (like EAST) can vastly improve such mechanisms, providing organisations with the grassroots understanding vital to maintaining an effective acceptance approach.

- Rather than resistance to proposed SRM approaches being an amorphous feature of security within NGOs, we now have the insights to better understand the points of friction that can result from cognitive biases and their corresponding perceptions and behaviours. Through better understanding of resistance points or the shortcomings of measures, it is easier to overcome them and thus increase buy-in. For

instance, when there is a singular high-profile incident within a context (an outlier event, such as a kidnapping of a foreign national in Kabul), it is common to see disproportionate organisational reactions that are at odds with SRM advice (such as the widespread implementation of curfews despite no evidence of incidents being more likely at night). This is an example of the *availability heuristic* at work, where a vibrant and recent dramatic event becomes the driver of decision-making rather than a holistic consideration of the wider context. Individual reactions can then be reinforced and perpetuated by *social-proofing* as such measures gain traction across the wider NGO community. Being aware that such biases and errors are at play, an SRM practitioner now knows that she must address these heuristics in her communication with management, providing broad and balanced information, to help counter the visceral impact of a high-profile recent event on choices made. This can be achieved through regular security and context briefings, either dedicated or bolted on to existing management meetings, as well as other forms of regular security communications such as weekly reporting and circulation of relevant articles and analysis.

- Context, not only personal attributes such as role or disposition, can be utilised as a part of a choice architecture approach in SRM. By considering the context in which safety and security decisions and behaviours take place, practitioners can better understand staff members’ choices. While the exact adaptations of SRM policy will differ from one case to another, the cognitive process remains constant. For example, group-thinking in a large stakeholder engagement meeting may undermine the nuances of an NGO’s proposal, where multiple members of the local community have competing interests. By choosing a more amenable context, such as bilateral discussions with individual stakeholders in more relaxed settings, the interlocutor is better placed to create a more conducive context and gain greater acceptance, thus contributing to the safety of the NGO’s operations.
- Choice architecture can be used to combat cognitive biases that cause myopia towards risk when dealing with outlier, high impact, extremely low probability events, known as *black swans* (Taleb 2007). When framing our choices and decisions we are prone to fixate narrowly on a single course of events without

a wider perception of other outcomes, and are thus vulnerable to a host of biases. *Confirmation bias*⁴ as well as the *What You See Is All There Is*⁵ bias, can be debilitating to contingency planning and crisis management, as they fail to allow for maximum perception of and adaptation to future developments. Using exercises such as Heuer's *Analysis of Competing Hypotheses* can actively account for such biases and can widen the perspective of management when making choices under uncertainty (Heuer 1999). This can lead to more robust decision-making that incorporates a greater spectrum of outcomes, for instance when crisis management teams consider critical incidents or significant contextual developments like elections or even aggressive transitions of power. Failure in the face of critical, rare incidents is a common, albeit unrepresentative, critique to acceptance of SRM approaches, and success in this arena can greatly enhance not only organisational buy-in in the future, but also stakeholders' and communities' trust in organisational resilience, further increasing acceptance.

- Finally, a key lesson from the methodologies used in the application of choice architecture is to consider, measure, and observe peoples' *actual* behaviour, rather than what one thinks is obvious, or imagines what people *should* be doing. Therefore, SRM practitioners could greatly benefit from gaining additional understanding of the reasons driving undesired behaviour: *why* are safety procedures not being followed by staff? *Why* do management fail to integrate safety and security concerns in proposal and project design? To gain insight into these questions, SRM practitioners can use structured observation, small scale experiments, and testing of their hypotheses in different configurations of individual and group settings. Experimentation and testing not only clarifies the reasons behind the shortcomings of SRM measures, but it also engages staff and management, thus generating ownership. Introspection and the involvement of staff increases buy-in through the very process of gaining understanding.

Conclusion

Thinking and research on cognitive biases such as loss aversion, the availability and representativeness heuristics, and fundamental attribution errors can shed light on obstacles to SRM buy-in within an organisation. Armed with this knowledge, we can adjust security practices to target these obstacles, using aspects of choice architecture to facilitate desired behaviours, choices, and decisions from staff and other actors, which also helps increase acceptance. After all, acceptance as an SRM strategy often faces challenges stemming from failures to implement technical aspects of SRM. Choice architecture can equip SRM practitioners with actionable means to increase technical successes, thus maximising the organisational buy-in of security programming, including acceptance strategies.

This article presents only a fraction of the concepts and research conducted on behavioural insights, and its application in choice architecture. It does nonetheless demonstrate the role of SRM practitioners as choice architects who can utilise behavioural insights to enrich their practice and invigorate organisational buy-in of SRM strategies. This in turn leads to the safer and more effective delivery of aid and greater acceptance by stakeholders.

⁴ The confirmation bias refers to the habit of using new information to confirm rather than challenge or disprove existing beliefs, opinions or hypotheses (Oswald, M. & Grosjean, S 2004).

⁵ *What You See Is All There Is* refers to the propensity to make decisions without considering the existence of known unknowns or unknown unknowns (Kahneman 2011).

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Intercultural Communication: a foundation to acceptance

Eric Jean and Christine Persaud

Introduction

NGOs work in relatively precarious security situations with populations and local communities living in different cultural contexts. In some situations, organisations carry out their missions in locations where host populations have had little to no contact with individuals belonging to other cultural groups or coming from outside the area of operations (internationally, regionally or from different parts of the same country).¹

Moreover, local, national and international humanitarian and development workers each have their own cultural identities and must develop sound professional and interpersonal relationships to implement effective acceptance strategies. These include relationships:

1. between themselves within the same organisation (internal cultural context); and
2. with affected populations and all local and international stakeholders in order to carry out their programs and projects (external cultural contexts).

Cultural differences can result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations and negative perceptions on both sides during intercultural encounters. These situations can create security risks and prevent NGOs from developing respectful relationships and cultivating and maintaining consent from affected communities, local authorities, belligerents, and other stakeholders.

Risks related to cultural differences can create additional security risks at three levels:

1. Individual risk

psychological fatigue, emotional disturbance, culture shock, isolation, disorientation, physical and psychological violence, etc.

2. Operational risk

convoy attack, delay of activities/programs, failure to achieve objectives, non-access to the work zone/areas, employees becoming demotivated and resigning

3. Institutional / organisational risk

reputational risk including the loss of external and internal credibility, loss of funding and partnership agreement, loss of institutional agreement with the host government and/or armed opposition groups

Intercultural communication skills reduce risks associated with cultural differences and facilitate the creation of an environment of trust and security for encounters between individuals and groups from different cultural contexts. Those skills are essential to achieve acceptance. This article argues that NGOs will be able to better develop acceptance strategies in a thoughtful, articulate and sustainable manner by improving their skills to create lasting links with individuals and groups from different cultural contexts.

In this article, we present key concepts of intercultural communication before examining the risks associated with cultural differences between NGOs and local stakeholders, informed by an external cultural context analysis. We subsequently discuss the preponderant role that local and national staff play to support the cultural adaptation of their organisations. Finally, we suggest capacity-building activities in intercultural communication to promote a lasting change in the organisational culture of NGOs.

Based on our own field experiences and following numerous discussions with participants as part of our security risk management (SRM) training, we find that problems resulting from cultural

¹ Certain missions – in particular in Afghanistan-Iran, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, and Pakistan – were revealing on this subject for Eric Jean, one of the authors of this article.

differences between NGOs and local populations and stakeholders are not managed uniformly by the organisations but instead depend on the will and capacities of employees without clear guidelines. The causes are multiple: personal initiatives to varying degrees; lack of time due to an emergency mission; lack of tools and knowledge to manage cultural differences; or lack of sensitivity to them. We believe that cultural factors should be treated systematically in order to reduce the risk of non-acceptance for NGOs in the field.

Definitions and key concepts of intercultural communication

There are several definitions of culture, communication, and intercultural communication. We present a few definitions and key elements of those necessary for the understanding of our article. 'Culture' does not refer to individuals but only to groups of persons. For individuals, we will talk about a cultural identity forged by his/her experience from different cultural groups. 'Culture' refers to what is common, valued (positively and negatively) and expressed (especially through behaviour) in all its forms within a group of individuals on a day-to-day basis. It can be defined in many ways and not just in terms of common language, ethnicity, or nationality. Essentially, culture is 'the coordination of meaning and action within a human context' (Bennett, 2021).

The culture of most humanitarian or development mandated NGOs should be predicated by values such as: dignity of affected communities and employees; respect of physical and psychological integrity; gender equality; respect for local customs, etc. The expression of an NGO's culture is mainly done through their programs and activities, which must be based on the nine commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard. It is also expressed through their communication and identity (faith-based or secular, etc). When it comes to communication, one should not only think in terms of language but in terms of the process by which one wants to be understood by another person or group. The process can take place both verbally and non-verbally.

Intercultural communication takes place between two (cross-cultural) or more (multicultural) cultural contexts, either at the level of individuals or groups (organisations, ethnic groups, nations, etc.). It can be defined as 'the mutual creation of meaning and coordination of action across cultural contexts'

(Bennett, 2021). Intercultural communication is integral to an acceptance strategy, as it refers to the communications that occur between an NGO and affected communities, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders. Creating a common meaning, with all parties involved, of 'what', 'why', 'when', and 'how' the programs and activities of the NGO will take place in the field and will support the establishment of a climate of trust and security – essential elements of acceptance.

In order to have an effective intercultural communication process with all parties involved, NGOs have to develop their contextual cultural knowledge. To do so effectively they first have to understand their own internal organisational culture prior to performing a cultural context assessment of the population living on the territory of their operations. After these stages, NGOs will be able to adopt strategies to reduce the risk resulting from cultural differences between themselves and all parties involved, and thereby maintain acceptance.

Analysing the risks related to cultural differences between NGOs and stakeholders

The cultural assessment of the external context should identify the key factors and trends (generalisations) observed among local populations which could create risks to employees, programs, or activities of NGOs in the field (ISO, 2009). To initiate this analysis, we propose a list of four observational categories developed by the work of intercultural communication experts to perceive cultural differences, interactions, and misunderstandings. These categories are inspired by the external observable categories which lay the groundwork for analysing cultural differences (Bennett, 2021).

The four observational categories we propose – which can be refined according to the NGOs' programmes – are as follows:

- 1. The use of languages in the context of formal communication** – such as the usual greetings when starting and ending a meeting, negotiations, arguments, criticisms, compliments, congratulations, and apologies
- 2. Non-verbal communication** – i.e., the use of tone of voice, eye contact, body signals (gestures of the head, arms and legs), and body distance between interlocutors

3. Communication styles

4. Cultural values and beliefs

In the following sections, we address the latter two categories.

Communication styles

There are many types of communication styles. The two overarching categories in intercultural communication refer to 'High' and 'Low' context communication. These were initially presented by Edward T. Hall (Hall, 1976), who is considered to be the founder of the intercultural communication field. These are umbrella terms under which other more specific communication styles are classified.

'High' context means that the message expressed by a person cannot be taken on its verbal face-value alone. Words alone do not carry the full meaning of the message expressed by an individual; the message needs to be analysed, taking into account the overall context in which it is transmitted. This could include the social status of the speaker, the location (office, cafes, etc.), their attitude, or the relationship with their interlocutor. 'Low' context means the words used take on their full meaning and importance regardless of the overall context or the circumstances under which they were spoken (official or informal meeting, in person, on the phone, etc.). The High and Low context analysis should be performed on a continuum scale, rather than in strict terms of one type or the other.

After this first stage the analysis of more specific communication styles can be done, such as:

- Linear / circular – are discussion items presented step by step in a logical (linear) way, or presented in a seemingly random order, often without actually naming the main topic directly (circular)
- Direct / indirect – are issues addressed head-on and put directly to the person concerned, or are topics addressed implicitly by suggesting examples or metaphors, or requesting the intervention of a third party in case of conflict resolution
- Relational / task-oriented – determines whether interpersonal relationships are privileged in the context of work or if they remain exclusively work-oriented.
- Confrontational / non-confrontational – distinguishes the degree of emotional expressiveness when disputes are resolved, matching well with direct and indirect styles.

Cultural values and beliefs

NGOs should identify what is valued positively and what is valued negatively among the population of the area and/or country of operations (for example, collective actions and solidarity vs individuality; equality of men and women or not; respect of national authorities; freedom of speech vs restrictions; taboo subjects; the treatment of foreigners; etc.). It is also key to understand the population's religion and spiritual beliefs, how they put them into practice, and the opinion of the population about NGOs 'occupying' their territory. With these observations, it is possible to identify the elements likely to create negative perceptions and misunderstandings between representatives of an NGO and local stakeholders.

When analysing risk, security risk managers tend to identify the main threats and their vulnerabilities in order to reduce those risk to an acceptable level. During this same context analysis, we invite readers to identify the cultural elements in common, either between the cultural context of the population of the country/region of the mission and the NGO. These elements will be the starting point for the development of 'intercultural bridges' between the NGO and stakeholders where the contribution of national and local staff and local partners will be essential (see the section below *'The role of local and national employees and local implementing partners'*).

According to our experience in the field, cultural values and beliefs, communication styles, and non-verbal communication are the three most important categories to begin the assessment. In examining both their internal cultural context and that of the external parties they are working with, an NGO can better identify obstacles to acceptance for the realisation of their programs and field activities.

As said previously, it is essential for NGOs to clearly define their internal organisational culture in order to be able to identify the cultural differences. The raw risk of losing acceptance (Threats X Vulnerabilities) is the result of a) the cultural differences between the NGO and local groups (affected communities, authorities, and other stakeholders) experienced during b) the execution of the programs and field activities. The more cultural differences are significant, the higher the probability of misunderstanding. This risk can be mitigated by improving intercultural communication skills to better manage cultural differences (net risk). Thus, NGOs will further reduce the individual, operational

and organisational/institutional risks presented at the beginning of the article, such as NGOs' image and credibility.

It is important to highlight that cultural differences can be opportunities as well as threats. However, as the purpose of this article is to discuss the potential risks related to cultural differences, we can therefore illustrate this reasoning in the formula below:

Other factors can prevent NGOs from being accepted in their mission territory (inadequate funding, lack of technical and operational capacities, etc.). But, as indicated in our title, we believe that managing cultural differences through intercultural communication skills is central to the success of the acceptance strategy. In their process of developing intercultural communication skills, NGOs should include public communication activities aimed at the general population to explain their values, mission, objectives and the reasons for their presence in

the field. NGOs often take for granted that their organisation is known to everyone. According to the experience of the authors, even after several months in the field, it is possible that the population still ignore why a certain NGO operates in their territory. This situation can lead to rumours and negative perceptions that may affect an NGO's acceptance.

We invite readers to take a few minutes to reflect as they re-read the definition of acceptance and compare it to the risk formula presented. They will probably find that the formula correctly identifies the cause of many armed conflicts and disputes and exclusion of cultural groups in our societies.

Using the example of cultural differences in communication styles, we illustrate the analysis of the risk of losing acceptance by identifying threats, vulnerabilities and capacities more precisely in order to reduce this risk.

Figure 1: Risk of loss of acceptance due to cultural differences



SCENARIO:

Access negotiations agreements

An NGO negotiates an agreement with the local authorities for the implementation of a food distribution program. The authorities want to make sure that certain groups of the population are served first and know that the NGO needs their permission to guarantee the access and safety of its staff. The local representative is highly respected and has a high hierarchical status in the region. The local cultural communication style is oriented towards the so-called 'High context'.

During the negotiation, if the head of mission of the NGO approaches the elements of discussion head-on (direct) and takes for granted that the words spoken by the local representative must be 'taken literally', not only may the perception of the local representative towards the head of mission not be accurate – in addition, the head of mission will have a poor understanding of what the local representative will have expressed. Because the local style of communication differs from that of NGO representatives, completely different areas of communication may be emphasised.

Should the negotiations take a long time, the head of mission might lose their patience and adopt a confrontational attitude in addition to having a direct communication style with the local representative, who in turn could shut down (their style is not confrontational) making the negotiation more difficult, even longer, and possibly doomed to fail.

In this scenario, cultural differences in communication style (threat) can lead to failure of negotiation for access (vulnerability) and possibly acceptance. In return, if the NGO had developed its intercultural communication skills (capacities), it would have been able to adapt to the communication style of local individuals and would have informed and trained its head of mission according to this cultural difference to improve the probability of being accepted.

There are publications from specialised sources such as Cultural Detective and books from many authors like Hofstede and others, specialised in intercultural communications. However, aside from published studies about the specific culture of a population, the best source of information about the local culture are the individuals who are from there or live there. NGOs already have these individuals in their ranks, and collaborate with relevant experts: the local and national employees and local partners.

The role of local and national employees and local implementing partners

"There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign."

Stevenson, 1886

An organisation can improve its understanding of the operational environment by consulting, listening, and learning from its local and national staff and partners. By doing this, organisations can significantly improve their acceptance and promote long-term intercultural understanding between themselves and all groups in their external environment. In addition, local/national staff and local partners are essential in the development of NGOs' organisational culture. It is essential that their role and contribution should be recognised and formalised by their employers.

In this context:

- National/local employees and partner organisations should brief 'visitors/non-local employees' about the local culture. This briefing must be formally included in the arrival program in the same way as administrative and security briefings.

The content of the briefing should be developed based on the external cultural context analysis, using information related to the four categories explained above and putting the emphasis on specific cultural issues for the NGO in their work environment such as: the programs and activities of NGOs in the field, perceptions of the population, gender roles, intersectional profiles, NGOs' reputation and credibility with

stakeholders. This briefing acts as the starting point for the ‘cultural self-awareness’ process of visitors/non-local employees.

In addition, this process will enable the local employees responsible for the briefings to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural identity of the visitors/non-locals, which contributes to a mutual exchange about cultural differences (diversity) within the NGO.

- According to their task and level of responsibilities, and with their free and informed consent, some of the local employees and partner organisations could be recognised as representatives, “ambassadors”, and above all as intercultural translators between the culture of the given organisation and that of local groups. Their role is critical for external communications and for maintaining a climate of trust and security (essential conditions of the acceptance strategy) especially since some of them have privileged contacts with stakeholders such as affected communities, local authorities, armed group leaders, and local NGOs.

Unfortunately, these responsibilities are not always recognised for their true value nor formally considered by the leadership of an organisation, particularly when there are security issues to consider and a lack of diversity in executive management. Negotiation access is one of many examples experienced in the field; according to two studies published in 2016, more than 50% of access negotiations with non-state armed groups were carried out by national and local employees, 56% of whom had not received training (Haver & Carter, 2016).

In order to formalise the role of local staff and partners, NGOs must recognise and include communications-related responsibilities and tasks in job descriptions and in agreement with local partners. They must also reinforce the capacities of local partners and employees with means such as salaries corresponding to their real responsibilities, trainings, telephone and calling cards, representation fees/travel expenses, and in some cases, protection and relocation measures when NGOs end their missions.

From a broader, organisational perspective, and for a permanent change, all those changes will have to be initiated and supported by an NGO institutional

policy on diversity. This policy should clearly affirm the equality between all employees in order to formalise the role, contribution, and responsibilities of local employees and partners in intercultural communication and SRM-acceptance strategy in the field.

Considering their knowledge of the culture of the country/territory mission, local partners, local and national employees should be involved in strategic and operational decision-making processes in the conception, planning, and realization of the programs, field activities, and security management.

Our experience points to, notably, (Eric Jean’s) missions in Afghanistan, Haiti, Pakistan, and DRC, and (Persaud’s) missions in Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Great Lakes Region, Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan in which the positive contribution of local and national employees to the work of NGOs was directly linked to acceptance and security. With a reinforced integration of local employees and partners, international NGOs increase their capacity to understand and respect local and national cultural contexts. By considering the cultural differences as opportunities and advantages instead of constraints, they will improve their intercultural sensitivity. This respect will be appreciated by local stakeholders and contribute to developing a climate of trust and security, which is an essential condition for an effective relationship and for cultivating and maintaining acceptance.

Capacity building, challenges and issues for international NGOs and the humanitarian aid sector

Many years of experience working abroad or at an international organisation’s headquarters do not guarantee intercultural knowledge and/or intercultural communication skills. This statement represents a very large consensus among experts and the community of practice in intercultural communication. Capacity building activities should be implemented at all levels of the organisation and a systemic approach should be considered for the success of a change management process. Intercultural communication skills have to be professionalised and are among core competencies similar to administration, logistics, public

communication, etc. Below are sample activities an NGO can consider implementing as a means to strengthen intercultural communication skills.

These activities will improve intercultural communication skills at the individual, operational, and organisational levels in order to improve sensitivity to the local cultural context, adopt a more ethical cultural behaviour in situ, and contribute to the climate of trust and security. These, in turn, will influence positive perceptions and build better acceptance. The consequences of the success of the acceptance strategy will in turn promote employee safety, the success of programs, the internal and external credibility of the NGO, and its operational and financial partnerships.

Security is everyone's business, and we argue that the same is true for intercultural communication skills. Implementing the activities proposed above is the responsibility of all team members, in the field and at the headquarters, and not only security managers.

Conclusion

In this text, we have introduced our readers to the rich concept of intercultural communication from the perspective of risk management and security. This can be a means to improve the effectiveness of intercultural encounters for programs and field activities, which is a primary method for gaining and maintaining acceptance. By reducing the gap of cultural differences between NGOs and all local groups, trust and security will be easier to develop in order to maintain acceptance.

Should NGOs develop their skills in this area, they will improve their capacities to act even more positively as actors of change with their international and local stakeholders, enabling programs' outcomes of aid and development by being more adapted to local contexts and thus promote 'the mutual creation of meaning and coordination of action across cultural contexts' (Bennett, 2021). Those new skills will have to be generated by organisational

Organisational intercultural communication capacity building		
Individual level	Operations level	Organisational/Institutional level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-deployment briefing about the external cultural context of the mission for international employees • Training in the relocation process for all employees • Training in intercultural communication (cultural self-awareness) • Training on the organisation's culture (diversity of team members, and of stakeholders) • Intercultural experience debriefing for all employees after end of contract • Handover process for replacement of employees • Psychological support for cultural issues and differences to all employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences assessment and risk analysis • SOPs adapted for: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communications (external and internal) 2. Public activities & official representation 3. Programs and projects in the field 4. HR – job descriptions recruitment and throughout the employment cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of conduct (ethical and moral intercultural behaviour) • Policy of diversity and inclusion • Capacity building program in intercultural communication • Cultural context issues in the design and outcomes of projects/programs • Lessons learned and building of an institutional memory for challenges and issues of intercultural communication: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Related to the external context in the countries of mission 2. For diversity and inclusion within the organisation
Source: adapted from the training workshop 'Risk Management of Cultural Issues for Overseas Projects, IC Capacity Building for NGOs', Eric Jean (in collaboration with EIFID). 11th May 2021.		

policies and lead by high levels of management of NGOs in order to assure the success of the change management process and gain lasting results.

As presented in our title, intercultural communication is the very basis of an acceptance strategy and is also at the basis of humanitarian work abroad considering the high number of encounters between individuals with different cultural identities. By developing their intercultural communication skills, NGOs will be able to better understand the local cultural context and thus adapt their behaviour in order to be better accepted. The intercultural communication capacities of NGOs, fundraisers, and local actors should be developed in the same way that SRM strategy was about 15–20 years ago. Collectively, NGOs must empower themselves to do their jobs even better.

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Private Security Contracting and Acceptance: a dangerous match?

Juliette Jourde

Introduction

If most observers tend to recognise that humanitarian actors' security environments have changed over the last decades, few seem to pay attention to one key related issue: the use of private security providers (PSPs) in security risk management (SRM) by humanitarian organisations, and its possible consequences for the sector. Facing the realisation that they need to deal with growing security risks, many organisations seem to be torn between developing in-house security capacities and relying on PSPs. However, this second option can lead to clashes with humanitarian principles, do-no-harm policies, and acceptance. While these issues are globally acknowledged, they remain largely undiscussed in public. It is therefore crucial to open a wider debate on the implications of NGOs' collaboration with PSPs for acceptance.

Concerns over PSPs often relate to the fear that the services they provide, including guarding ones, could create a distance between humanitarians, the people they assist, and the environment in which they operate, thus limiting their potential ability to be accepted by local stakeholders and communities. Those actors may also take a dim view of certain companies, whose reputation, if negative, could undermine the relevant humanitarian organisation's image, or its perceived neutrality. However, private security contracting is not only about guarding; it also relates to the provision of security trainings, crisis management support, or even digital and cyber security services. How then are those diverse services compatible with humanitarian action and an acceptance strategy? For some, there is a gap that cannot be bridged between humanitarians and profit-driven PSPs, in terms of culture, ethos, and understandings of security risk management. For others, private security contracting can be complementary to an acceptance strategy.

The discussion around private security and acceptance lacks clear and concrete data as well as further reflection on the extent to which humanitarian organisations contract private security providers and for what services. More than a decade has passed since the data on private security contracting practices in the humanitarian sector was collected (Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2008). In this context, the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers' Association (ICoCA) launched a research project in July 2021 looking at the private security contracting practices of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including how these impact acceptance. Far from attempting to approve or reject the use of private security, the project aimed at providing a more accurate picture of current practices, to identify gaps and potential risks, and to design new guidance for NGOs on contracting responsible PSPs. In this framework, a survey, answered by more than 80 individuals, and 16 interviews were conducted (GISF & ICoCA, 2021). The results of this research serve as the basis for this article.

This article investigates the impact of contracting PSPs on NGO's acceptance and suggests ways to ensure that PSPs support rather than undermine acceptance. The first section explains that the growing use of private security contracting has serious implications on NGOs' collective acceptance. The second highlights the importance of assessing contextual factors such as conflict dynamics and social, cultural, ethnic, or religious issues to correctly evaluate the impact of PSPs on acceptance. The third section explains why special attention should be paid to the treatment of guards, as this is a PSP service which carries great implications for NGOs' acceptance. Finally, the conclusion provides recommendations on how to ensure that the use of PSPs has a positive – or at least controlled – impact on acceptance.

The growing use of private security providers and its implications for acceptance

The growing use of PSPs is often considered a reaction to external factors such as the increasingly dangerous and hostile security environments humanitarians have been facing over the last decades (Stoddard, Harmer & Czwarno, 2017). However, this practice is also linked to the sector's own internal evolution. Some argue that the way humanitarian NGOs see security has changed, with NGOs becoming more risk averse (Stoddard, Haver & Czwarno, 2016). With a growing concern for the duty of care of their personnel (Merkelbach & Kemp, 2016), NGOs have started to institutionalise SRM, sometimes under the guidance of security staff coming from the private, police, or military sectors (GISF & ICoCA, 2021). Moreover, during the last decades, it seems that humanitarian NGOs have gradually moved towards a model where support functions – including security – have been increasingly outsourced in order to improve competitiveness with donors (GISF & ICoCA, 2021). The lack of capacity, especially in security departments, as well as the desire to move the liability to external providers are also internal factors that explain the growing use of PSPs. Therefore, if it is clear that the external environment of humanitarian NGOs has shaped their behaviour, internal changes have led to new practices, including private security contracting.

The 2008 HPG report found that the use of PSPs by humanitarian organisations, including humanitarian NGOs, had become 'common' over the previous decade (Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2008). In 2021, more than 80% of the respondents to the GISF/ICoCA survey indicated that their organisation contracted PSPs.¹

The growing use of PSPs has certain implications for all humanitarian NGOs – even those that reject the practice. At the local level, affected communities often struggle to distinguish the different NGOs that operate in their area. As such, NGOs are commonly mistaken for one another, and local stakeholders may not clearly identify which NGOs are contracting PSPs and which ones aren't. If an incident occurs or if some NGOs contract PSPs that have a negative

reputation, rumours can easily spread at the national and global level. For example, this was the case for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), who saw its international reputation tarnished by the alleged human rights violations committed by contracted rangers in Congo who had been partly funded by the NGO (Beaumont, 2020). Such risks and actions can sometimes damage external perceptions of entire aid operations in a region. When considering contracting PSPs, humanitarian NGOs must acknowledge that this can pose risks for themselves and their acceptance, which in turn may affect how other NGOs are perceived.

Therefore, each NGO has a responsibility to thoroughly assess the reputation of the PSPs they contract and their potential impact on the acceptance of the whole NGO community.

The context determines the relationship between acceptance and private security contracting

The impact of contracting PSPs on NGOs' acceptance depends on the context in which NGOs operate and in which the collaboration takes place. Using PSPs to protect assets in logistic hubs such as in Kenya does not have the same impact on acceptance as posting guards at the gates of compounds in rural areas, where contact with communities and local stakeholders is more frequent. When considering contracting PSPs, NGOs must take into account several elements to evaluate the impact this may have on their acceptance levels. The elements include: the types of stakeholders they are seeking to gain acceptance from, the means by which they want to seek acceptance (i.e., direct negotiations), the level and types of risk in their context and the existence of ethnic rivalries, and also the local culture and perceptions of PSPs.

Assessing the type of environment in which an NGO operates, the negotiations it is expected to conduct, and the interlocutors from whom the NGO seeks acceptance, will indicate very quickly what the NGO can or cannot do in terms of private security. For example, in violent and volatile contexts where humanitarians have to negotiate access and security

¹ We should note that the respondent sample essentially comes from medium to large NGOs and respondents might have been interested in participating in the survey precisely because they contract PSPs.

guarantees with different armed groups, involving armed escorts might be detrimental. Contracting a PSP can also reproduce or trigger local ethnic, religious, or tribal divisions, particularly if the PSP only employs guards of a given community. This scenario has seemed to happen in various African contexts where NGOs risk being perceived as lacking neutrality and being associated with specific local stakeholders, which can undermine their acceptance.

The GISF/ICoCA research also indicates that the local culture and habits related to the use of private security are important factors to consider for acceptance. In certain contexts, for instance in Central and South America, respondents highlighted that the local population perceives contracting private security as a normal practice, especially in urban areas. Some mentioned that not having guards would differentiate their organisation negatively and increase its risk of being targeted.

However, in other places, contracting guards may be perceived by the local population as a socio-economic marker associated with the upper-class, as richer stakeholders traditionally use PSPs to restrict access to their living areas. In those contexts, NGOs that contract guarding services may be perceived as being part of an exclusionary elite, which risks damaging their acceptance with local communities.

These examples demonstrate the need for NGOs to carefully analyse their operating environment when deciding to contract PSPs. Another essential factor to consider is the type of services provided by PSPs and the risks associated with them.

The risks related to contracting different PSPs services and their impact on acceptance

The most controversial aspect of private security contracting and its most evident impact on acceptance relate to the use of armed guards and armed escorts for convoys or personnel. NGOs' concerns with armed services often relate to the impact this has on acceptance, as armed guards can be perceived as actual parties to a conflict, generating a clear divide between humanitarians and communities they assist, or be perceived as adding to local tensions and levels of violence, in contradiction with humanitarian mandates.

While considering the risks related to the use of armed PSPs is key, the reality is that most humanitarian NGOs don't use armed services. In response to the question 'what type of private security service do you contract?', other types of services were mentioned in priority:

- unarmed guarding;
- enhancement of physical protection of premises;
- medical services;
- security and awareness training;
- crisis management support;
- intelligence and situational analysis;
- travel risk management;
- security management training;
- risk and threat analysis;
- armed guarding;
- digital and cyber security services.

Several respondents mentioned that using low-profile, soft-skilled private security services has a limited impact on their acceptance and can even help improve it. For instance, intelligence and situational analysis or training can be instrumental for staff to be able to build acceptance. Along the same lines, contracting guards from a local community can raise staff's understanding of the local context and help them gain trust within that community, as guards can act as key contact points.

Thus, the tendency to limit the debate to private armed services fails to capture the whole picture including the full range of services and their varying implications for acceptance. Participants to the study often seem to be more concerned with mitigating risks coming from potential shootings involving PSPs than mitigating the most likely risks associated with their use of PSPs, which mainly concern unarmed guarding. One of the most likely risks associated with the use of guards is that staff, local communities, or anyone coming into contact with the guards could face sexual assault or harassment by them. While this risk can have serious consequences for NGOs' acceptance, it generally does not receive a commensurate amount of attention from NGOs.

Considering the widespread use of guards by NGOs, the following section focuses on the impact they can have on acceptance and explores ways to limit negative impact.

The impact of guarding and unarmed services on acceptance

There is a reason why the image of guards, armed or unarmed, is often the first that comes to mind in discussions about private security in the humanitarian sector. According to the survey, the service most contracted by NGOs is unarmed guarding. This may imply the most significant responsibilities and consequences vis-à-vis acceptance, as guards act as ‘filters’ between organisations and populations. They are often the first point of contact with local communities both during their work time and privately, thus carrying the reputation and image of the organisation beyond official communications (Fast, Freeman, O’Neill & Rowley, 2013). Acknowledging the role guards play in acceptance strategies is essential when considering whether to contract PSPs.

The negative impact of guards on acceptance and the risks associated with them are increased when they are not properly included in organisations’ security policies, which – according to the study – could be the norm. This can be due to the fact that guards are often contracted by administrative, procurement, or human resources departments, who do not necessarily consider security parameters, or because they are poorly informed and trained on humanitarian principles and standards.

One of the study’s crucial findings concerns issues related to guards’ working conditions, and, in particular, working hours and salaries. Humanitarian NGOs as clients have a duty of care to guarantee decent working conditions for their guards and to develop good relationships with them, based on dialogue and consideration. Not only is it ethical, but it is also necessary from a security and acceptance point of view. Indeed, some respondents mentioned incidents with guards who were not receiving their pay, or gaps in security at night due to fatigue during long shifts. Risks of corruption, robbery, poor security standards, and even risks for an NGO’s neutrality when guards have to accumulate other jobs to earn a decent living should all be considered when contracting guarding services. Acceptance can be particularly impacted by incidents of guards’ misconduct in public, both during work and private time, and those can also be linked to guards not feeling particularly beholden to the NGO contracting them. Building a sense of belonging among guards

starts with the provision of good working conditions, and is the first step to guarantee their involvement in acceptance strategies. Furthermore, an NGO’s treatment of its employees, including contracted staff, can be seen as a reflection of its values and therefore shapes its reputation.

Conclusion and recommendations

Understanding the current situation around private security contracting is a first step towards ensuring that NGOs continue promoting acceptance-based approaches to SRM. This paper presented reflections on getting closer to this goal, and showed what risks need to be mitigated when contracting PSPs. The following four recommendations are designed to help practitioners in this matter:

Recommendation 1: assess the impact of PSPs on acceptance

A security risk assessment should be systematically conducted at the first stage of the project planning process, in order to determine if PSPs will be needed to carry on programmes. If they are considered necessary, a careful assessment of their impact on acceptance should be done before any decision is taken. This specific assessment should, for instance, look at the compatibility between the content of programme activities and the use of PSPs, the current security practices of other NGOs operating in the area, or the background of PSPs’ management and staff.

This work should be done in close cooperation with all relevant departments, including HR and procurement. A budget should be determined in order to contract PSPs with the appropriate standards, quality of services, and capacities. In cases where the assessment concludes that PSPs would negatively impact acceptance, the NGO might want to reconsider providing in-house security solutions.

Recommendation 2: consider PSPs’ impact on other NGOs

When considering whether to contract PSPs, NGOs should also assess their impact on the acceptance of other NGOs. This can be done through active engagement in security networks locally and globally and through dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: contract locally

When contracting guards, careful staffing choices must be made in areas where tribal, ethnic, or religious dynamics might create conflicts and undermine acceptance. When operating in rural or remote areas, where PSPs are generally less common and less accepted, and where there might be high unemployment rates, NGOs should ensure that the contracted PSP hire local individuals preferably. This should be done in close cooperation and dialogue with local communities, who should be involved in the whole hiring process.

Recommendation 4: ensure good treatment of guards

Providing good working conditions to PSPs personnel and particularly guards is key to guaranteeing their involvement in acceptance strategies. Before signing contracts, NGOs should ensure they contain provisions on the exact salaries received by guards (and that these provide decent standards of living), the exact number of working hours, paid leave, health insurance, and decent equipment. During induction and throughout their assignment, guards should be informed about the NGO's values and code of conduct. NGO staff should also ensure they maintain good relationships with guards and regularly ask about their working conditions and the actual payment of salaries.

Together, these recommendations will help to ensure that contracting PSPs can support rather than undermine NGO acceptance.

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Digital Risk: how new technologies impact acceptance and raise new challenges for NGOs

Ziad Al Achkar

Introduction

NGOs are increasingly reliant on digital tools to conduct their work. Over the past decade, NGO operators have turned to new tools, software, and processes to collect data, conduct surveys, manage, and oversee projects. NGOs increasingly look towards remote management and digital tools to conduct assessments, monitor areas of interest, or provide cash aid. As a result, today's NGO actor is increasingly digital, with a larger digital footprint.

Every step of the NGO cycle can be traced and tracked digitally. In doing so, NGOs open themselves up to emerging threats that can hamper their operations, target their staff, and crucially disrupt their relationships with the communities they are working with. These threats include digital hacks to disrupt operations, steal sensitive data, and spread mis/disinformation. NGO actors must reckon with this growing reality and examine how digital risk affects their acceptance. Risk emanating digitally endangers the relationships between NGOs and local communities, belligerent actors, and authorities by creating tensions that reduce the ability of organisations to build connections and trust with various stakeholders.

NGOs have to identify how these digital threats and new risks manifest themselves (Dette, 2018). In this article, I show how some of these digital threats impact NGO acceptance, contribute to digital insecurity, and – critically – what approaches can help bolster acceptance and address digital security concerns.

Security in the digital environment

Attacks against NGOs take place in the physical realm through bombardment of facilities, kidnappings, killings, and other targeted attacks. Concurrently, other campaigns occur digitally through misinformation, disinformation, digital attacks, and hacks that impact the ability of NGOs to operate and damage their relationship with local communities, particularly in conflict settings (van Solinge & Marelli, 2021).

Physical attacks and digital attacks share the same ultimate goal: to upend and disrupt aid operations and create distrust between communities and NGOs – especially international organisations or those receiving external funding. While physical attacks represent a much more forceful action that seeks to send clear messages to NGO workers, digital attacks operate in more nuanced and subtle ways that aim directly at affecting acceptance (for a list of cyber and digital risks, see Kalkman, 2018).

Whereas physical risks can be mitigated or reduced by effective security risk management, digital risks are much harder to deal with, and restoring relationships with stakeholders following digital attacks may prove to be challenging and more time-consuming. The tricky nature of digital risks is that they can emanate from any actors, whether local or sitting thousands of miles away; they can be hard to assess, and therefore hard to mitigate; and they can have large-scale digital and physical repercussions that can have an impact on both staff and the people with whom NGOs are working. An organisation's entire operation could be under surveillance without their knowledge, and their data could be used for entirely nefarious reasons.

As NGOs increasingly rely on digital technologies in their day-to-day operations, it is important to reflect on how this transformation can lead to what I call 'digital insecurity'. By digital insecurity, I mean protocols, practices, and behaviours that can increase the risk towards an organisation, its staff, and the communities they work with. This includes practices such as poor encryption protocols; lack of strong data protection policies and practices; poor vetting of third-party actors who provide digital infrastructure and tools, and who get access to collected data; and inadvertent sharing of GPS coordinates of the location of staff and activities. (For a comprehensive list of cyber threats see Agrafiotis et al., 2018.) Digital risk, however, is never constrained to the digital space, and ultimately will have a physical risk and security component. For example, data leaked on refugees or on potential movement of NGO workers in a conflict setting has real physical security ramifications. It is increasingly difficult to uncouple the two, and understanding how digital risks translate into physical risks and harm is key. Below I discuss two types of digital risks – mis/disinformation campaigns and the misuse of data.

Disinformation and misinformation campaigns

The terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. Misinformation is when false or out-of-context information or facts are shared and reported as truth. This occurs when people unintentionally share false news or information. On the other hand, disinformation is the deliberate fabrication of information designed for nefarious purposes. Those who engage in disinformation are purposefully doing so with a specific goal or agenda in mind (Starbird, 2020). While the two often go hand-in-hand, it's important to keep in mind the difference and the critical role that intentionality plays.

Due to the ease with which information is disseminated, belligerent actors may target NGOs in disinformation campaigns (Tiller, Devidal & van Solinge, 2021). Social media posts, fake reports, and targeted campaigns against workers spread rumours and disinformation about the nature of their work, their political goals, and about other issues such as health (Elliot, 2019; Fidler, 2019; Peyton, 2020).

These disinformation campaigns, which are becoming increasingly sophisticated in nature, are typically led by groups seeking to discredit the work of NGO actors. Often these campaigns create

mistrust between NGO actors and the communities where they are operating by spreading rumours; misrepresenting statements or reports by NGO personnel; fabricating information about the intent of these organisations; or labelling them as providing intelligence support for a foreign government (Gharib, 2017; Hargrave, 2018). As a result, tensions and mistrust between communities and NGO workers can reduce the ability of organisations to operate safely in those environments or develop successful programs.

Disinformation campaigns, in turn, can increase the security risks facing NGOs and communities and affect NGO acceptance. These campaigns and attacks place a target on NGO personnel and the communities where they operate. Critically, these digital campaigns seek to destabilise the relationships that NGOs develop with local communities that are pivotal to their ability to operate and access certain areas. As such, disinformation campaigns affect acceptance by the local communities and turn the relationship into a more hostile and confrontational one (Pereira, 2021). In Syria, belligerent actors launched online campaigns linking a civil society NGO, known as the White Helmets, to terrorist groups. The goal was to discredit their work and fuel conspiracy theories about Western meddling (Solon, 2017). More recently, misinformation about the nature of COVID-19 and vaccines has led to attacks against health workers globally, creating mistrust about the pandemic and questioning the work of health organisations, which ultimately creates harm for the general population and impedes the work of these organisations (Peyton, 2020).

Risks for misuse of data

Organisations also face attacks against their services and digital infrastructure, or misuse of the data collected. As organisations collect more data on vulnerable communities or store information about their programmatic activities online, they become targets for actors looking to access this information (Parker, 2020). This is particularly important in conflict areas where NGOs operate, and where this kind of data is actionable intelligence against either the communities NGOs are working with or the NGOs themselves (*The Guardian*, 2017).

The recent report from HRW on UNHCR's collection of biometric data of Rohingya refugees is an example of this (Human Rights Watch, 2021). UNHCR collected biometric data from Rohingya refugees

in Bangladesh, informing the refugees that this was necessary and a required prerequisite for getting aid. UNHCR shared the biometric data with the host government of Bangladesh, who then shared the data with the government of Myanmar – the same government that refugees were fleeing from. This put the lives of the refugees and their families who might still be in the country in grave danger (Rahman, 2017, 2021; Hodal, 2021).

UNHCR, and legal practitioners I've spoken with, note that it is very likely that UNHCR followed protocol and did everything by the book. As a UN agency, their legal mandate with host governments would have likely required them to share the information. This particular incident raises important questions as to whether informed consent processes are the appropriate mechanism to ensure safety and the trust of the beneficiary communities. What is evident here is that even if UNHCR did everything legally, they have fundamentally broken the trust of the population they are working with, damaged their acceptance, and provided a belligerent government with sensitive information and actionable intelligence on people they have actively persecuted. NGOs, therefore, have to be careful about what kind of data they collect, how they store and secure it, and who gets access to it (Saldinger, 2021).

Individuals and communities are paying increasing attention to the practices of organisations, including how they handle any data they have entrusted to them. This is especially true as digital literacy improves around the world. Failure to handle data responsibly has repercussions both for organisations' reputations and their acceptance. The case of UNHCR and Rohingya biometric data collection reflects this. Refugees entrusted UNHCR to safeguard their sensitive information and were led to believe that the informed consent forms they signed precluded sharing the data with the government that was targeting them. This situation has long-term implications as the refugees are likely to require the assistance of UNHCR for months, if not years to come, and it raises concerns as to what the relationship between the two parties will look like moving forward. Therefore, organisations and security officers must demonstrate that they are placing the safety and privacy of individuals, both employees and affected communities, at the centre of their work.

For both of these risks, it's important to remember that NGO reputations transcend borders and territories. This is especially true for multinational

organisations that operate in numerous countries. Organisations and security teams need to understand and properly assess these risks and their ability to impact operations. Oxfam International is one of the most recent examples, where staff were accused of sexual exploitation in Haiti and DRC. As a result, Oxfam International's reputation has been tarnished globally, losing the ability to apply for financial support from certain governments, and losing thousands of donors, forcing them to cut back operations (*BBC News*, 2021). The speed and ease with which digital information is reported and shared means that information about poor or unacceptable practices committed by NGO actors in one area of operation could spread to another community or region, or country.

A need for a sector-wide approach

Three strategies in particular would help to address digital risks and, at the same time, increase acceptance.

Building internal capacity and synergies across teams

Digital security involves bolstering the technical capacity of NGOs and their staff as they increasingly operate and rely on digital tools for their day-to-day activities (Marelli, 2020). Donors need to recognise that digital security requires in-house technical expertise that small and medium scale organisations may not have the budget for (Stewart, 2021). Building in-house expertise would help train staff to avoid some of the most common practices of poor digital behaviours and build capacity to spot weaknesses and vulnerabilities in programmatic planning.

IT and security teams need to determine what is feasible or doable within the capacity available to their NGOs and plan accordingly. In some cases, that may mean scaling back the implementation of certain digital solutions to a level that is safely manageable by the organisation. NGOs should operate under the mantra 'If I can't protect it, I shouldn't collect it' as a basis of their digital and data collection operations. Such an approach could involve testing any tools or software before deployment (Gazi, 2020), or conducting an audit of messaging tools and apps that are used to communicate in the field to understand what kind of metadata is generated and who, beyond the

two parties involved, may have access to it (see, for example, Van der Merwe, 2020; ICRC, 2018). NGOs should be conducting digital audits to assess weaknesses, risks, and vulnerabilities across their digital infrastructure to mitigate any potential for harm that may come out of their work (Sandvik, Jacobsen & McDonald, 2017).

Showcasing that you take digital security seriously by ensuring that your staff have at least a baseline technical capacity is a key part of gaining acceptance and trust from communities you are working with. Communities need to know that if you are asking them to share sensitive data you have the ability to secure it and protect their privacy. Organisations should be able to answer questions about what they intend to do with the data, how they will manage the risks, and their plans for disposing of the data afterwards. Showing that you take protecting data seriously and have considered the potential harms and risks that can emanate from it goes a long way to building trust and acceptance. This doesn't mean that every person on your staff has to be an expert, but they need to be well versed, at a minimum, with what the digital risks and harms are.

Transparency

Today's digital world requires transparency about practices and sharing of lessons learned. Communities and local actors demand transparency and respect organisations that have proven to be open and good custodians of their data and to care about the digital risks and harms that can emanate from those activities. It is imperative for NGOs to view clear and continuous communication with local communities as a key component of combatting mis/disinformation and improving their digital risk environment.

One of the gaps in the digital security and NGO field at this moment is the lack of clear examples of how insecurity or a breach in digital security leads to physical or psychological harm on NGO workers or beneficiary communities. This stems from a general reluctance to share information about failures and perhaps a lack of trust among NGOs, often driven by competition for the same pool of funding (Schneiker, 2020).

NGOs working with communities should see trust and acceptance as two indispensable pillars for their ability to operate (Stoddard, Haver & Czwarno, 2016). Combatting mis/disinformation requires a

multipronged approach, since there is no technical silver bullet to this issue. Instead, it is important to view this issue through a socio-political lens, as what allows mis/disinformation to spread are people and communities. As a result, the emphasis on building trust, and building a strong rapport with communities that is driven by honesty, transparency, and meaningful engagement is key. Local communities should be consulted and involved in data collection, analysis, and implementation of projects and organisation activity through meaningful feedback mechanisms. For example, asking communities to help design programs and data collection practices will be positively reflected on the ground in increased access. Engaging with local communities throughout the process can contribute to building acceptance and fostering a better security risk management environment.

Building a community of practice

The NGO sector is made up of tens of thousands of organisations and lacks a centralised or hierarchical mechanism to coordinate efforts. However, one of the ways that NGOs can be better prepared to deal with new and emerging challenges is by developing communities of practice and networks of experts. These communities can work to develop minimum acceptable standards and protocols that could be scaled up across a large number of organisations. They could focus on specific issues and areas as they relate to acceptance, such as mis/disinformation, network and communication security, data protection, or other digital risks. The challenge is to be prepared to respond to these evolving risks, and a single organisation cannot deal with what is fundamentally a sector-wide issue.

Some of this work is already underway. Some organisations have undertaken efforts to understand how new digital risks – notably mis/disinformation – affect their work and impact on acceptance (See ICRC and DigitHarium, IMC risk assessment guidelines for more information). For example, ICRC's latest report on Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate Speech (MDH) articulates some steps organisations can take to tackle MDH, such as information ecosystem assessments that can identify who and what levers can be used to help combat MDH. The ICRC report recommends looking at incorporating MDH awareness into protection work, identifying case studies that exemplify best practice, and – importantly – building collaborations across organisations (ICRC, 2021).

Security managers, in coordination with their IT staff, will have to contribute to the development of new knowledge related to digital security risk, disseminate it throughout their organisations, and build networks. The NGO community, and particularly donors, need to emphasise and back these community-wide efforts to build capacity and expertise throughout the sector.

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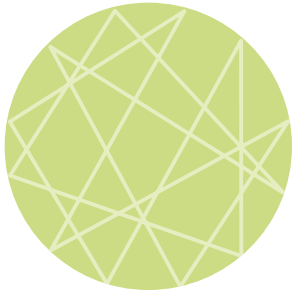
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Léa Moutard

Léa is Research Advisor at GISF. In this role, she coordinates practical research and best practice guides to help humanitarian organisations manage security risks and reach affected communities. She also supports NGOs through capacity-strengthening activities and leads on advocacy efforts to raise awareness about aid workers' security. Her work has focused on promoting risk-sharing between local and international aid organisations, supporting NGOs' acceptance with communities, and advancing inclusive security risk management. Prior to joining GISF, Léa worked on projects including refugee resettlement in Lebanon, conflict resolution in the US, and social cohesion in India.



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Larissa Fast is Professor of Humanitarian and Conflict Studies and Executive Director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Research Institute at the University of Manchester (UK). She is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersection of the worlds of academia, policy, and practice. Her research addresses two fundamental problems: how best to protect civilians, particularly those who intervene in violent conflict, and how to make such intervention more effective, ethical, and responsive to local needs and circumstances. In addition to her book *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism* (2014), she has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and policy reports, including multiple publications on acceptance.

Support Editor:



Chiara Jancke

Chiara is GISF's new Research Advisor. In addition to managing practical research projects on issues impacting the safety and security of aid workers, as GISF's former Research and Communications Assistant, she continues to be the GISF blog editor and leads on communications. She is particularly interested in acceptance, humanitarian access, and equitable partnerships and has worked with Léa Moutard on developing GISF's advocacy strategy to promote risk-sharing in NGO partnerships. Chiara previously worked in policy and context analysis roles on conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. She holds an MA in Conflict, Security and Development from King's College, London and a BA in International Studies from Leiden University.

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Pascal is the co-founder of ANTHROPOS Deep Security. After a short career as a freelance journalist, he joined the ICRC in 1985 and served in more than twenty different conflict situations including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.

Between 2003 and 2007 he worked as Senior Analyst and Deputy Head of a counter-terrorism unit attached to the Swiss Ministry of Defence. In 2007, he was appointed Global Safety and Security Director for CARE International's operations and institutional policy. In 2011, he returned to the ICRC as Senior Policy Adviser.

He has been actively involved in the CCHN which was established in 2016 to enhance professional exchanges and peer learning among frontline humanitarian negotiators.



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Rob Grace is a researcher and affiliated fellow at the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies, based at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, where he undertakes research on humanitarian-military relations. Previously, he was a USIP-Minerva Peace Scholar at the United States Institute of Peace, a Graduate Research Fellow and a Summer Fellow at the Harvard Program on Negotiation, and a researcher at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University and a doctoral candidate in political science at Brown University.



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Alain Lempereur pioneered the "responsible negotiation" framework. He mobilizes it in humanitarian negotiation training for organizations, such as ICRC, MSF, NRC, or UNOCHA, and in Responsible Negotiation courses for Senior Leaders within the UN-led Global Executive Leadership Initiative and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. He published two dozen books in many languages, including *The First Move. A Negotiator's Companion and Mediation. Negotiation by Other Moves*. He is Alan B. Slifka Professor of Conflict Resolution at Brandeis University, a visiting faculty at EUI and Sciences Po Paris, and an executive committee member and an affiliate faculty of the Harvard Program on Negotiation.



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Lena works with NGOs for the northern Syria humanitarian response from Gaziantep, Turkey and Erbil, Iraq. Before this, she worked for three years at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies, with a research focus on Syria, non-state armed groups, humanitarian assistance and access.



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Regis began his humanitarian career in 1996 as a field coordinator in Bosnia for ACF, with whom he remained involved for nine years and served as country director in Liberia and Uganda. He was then deployed with Humanity & Inclusion for five years, including as Regional Security Officer for West and Central Africa. Regis also worked for MSF, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Alima and DRC, mainly as a country director.

Familiar with both French- and English-speaking organisations, he has been deployed in 23 countries during his 22 years in the field. In July 2019, he returned to ACF as a humanitarian access advisor where he works and empowers the field teams on the ACF Access Methodology with the regional security advisors.



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Chris is the Senior Director of the CARE Security Unit and has been with CARE for 11 years. Chris joined as the Regional Security Manager in Asia and is based in Thailand. Prior to joining CARE, Chris was the Head of Security for Plan International, where he worked to develop their organisational approaches to safety and security. His first engagement with the aid sector was during the Balkans conflict, followed by service with UN in Iraq, and security training roles with IOM and UNICEF across the MENA region. Chris holds a BSc Hons in International Disaster Engineering and Management and several post-graduate qualifications in security and risk management.



Penelope Kinch

Director of Operational Security, CARE Security Unit

Penelope Kinch leads CARE USA's operational security function, and is based in Amman, Jordan. Penelope joined CARE in 2014 and has fulfilled a range of functions, including Regional Security Manager for Asia and the Middle East. Prior to working with CARE, Penelope spent four years with International SOS and Control Risks, primarily focusing on political and security risk analysis and client emergency support in the Middle East and Africa. This followed an academic career at the Australian National University's Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, alongside a range of consulting engagements for the Australian government. She is a published author and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations.



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Security Analysis and Communications Manager, CARE Security Unit

Lyndall has been with the CARE Security Unit since October 2017, initially as Global Risk Analyst before moving into her current role, based in Atlanta US. Before joining CARE, Lyndall completed her Ph.D. in the Political History of the Middle East at the School of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona. While at the University of Arizona, Lyndall taught over 25 courses both in person and online, and received her Certificate in Collegiate Education, with a focus on learner-centred pedagogy. Prior to returning to graduate school, Lyndall worked for Conciliation Resources in London, and for UNRWA based in the Gaza Strip.



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Fiona Terry heads the ICRC's CORE which was created in the wake of the landmark *Roots of Restraint in War* study of which Dr. Terry was co-author. She has over two decades of experience in humanitarian operations including Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Sudan, Myanmar, Nepal and Afghanistan, principally with MSF and the ICRC. She holds a Ph.D. in international relations and political science from the Australian National University and is the author of *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Cornell University Press, 2002), which won the 2006 Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order.



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Jean-Philippe Kiehl joined the ICRC in 2004 and has supported ICRC's humanitarian operations in Israel and the Occupied Territories, Pakistan, Liberia, Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia, Afghanistan, Colombia, as well as security oversight of the ICRC's Asia-Pacific region. He currently focuses on supervising the ICRC's operational security and crisis management team and contributes to the development of security and crisis policies, training and outreach. He holds two LL.Ms: one in International Protection of Human Rights (University of Rouen) and the other in International Humanitarian Law (University of Geneva-Graduate Institute). He is a UK-accredited mediator and certified in risk management.



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Robert Whelan works on security partnerships and security-related research in the ICRC. Robert has served in a range of positions in the ICRC, including field missions in the Philippines, Afghanistan and Israel and the occupied territories. He was trained as a philosopher and holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from New York University. Before joining the ICRC in 2008, Robert worked at the European Commission in the field of educational technology and he was as a journalist in Ireland.



Tamás Szenderák

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Tamás Szenderák currently oversees the engagement of the ICRC with Non-State Armed Groups and religious circles in the Middle East and East Africa Regions. Throughout his career, he had a special focus on impartial humanitarian action and the Arabic-speaking Middle East. He did several field missions with the ICRC in the North Africa-Middle East region (Aleppo, Erbil (Mosul support), Najaf, Gaza and the West Bank). He holds Master's degrees from Arabic linguistics, Islamic Studies and Sociology. He speaks fluent Arabic and spent an academic year at Sana'a University in Yemen.



Araba Cole

**Global Director, Safety & Security at the International Rescue
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Araba Cole is a security professional with a broad range of skills, interests, and experiences, including an undergraduate degree in archaeology, an operational tour with the British Army, and security roles with international humanitarian and development organisations such as INSO, NRC, and the World Bank. She has spent her career in some of the most vibrant and dynamic places in the world, including DR Congo, Afghanistan, Libya, and Ethiopia, and now works on creative, insightful, and delivery-orientated approaches to security risk management and operational resilience.



Panagiotis Olympiou
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Panagiotis Olympiou is a conflict and risk management expert who focuses on improving risk analysis and decision-making practices for public and private organisations. He has worked on Third Party Monitoring in Libya with Altai Consulting; on Site Management (CCCM) with DRC in Greece, where he chaired the National Site Management Support Working Group; and served as a Safety Advisor with INSO in Afghanistan. Panagiotis holds an MA in Conflict Management & International Economics from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a BA in Political Science from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He is a Second Lieutenant in Reserve of the Hellenic Army.



Eric Jean
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Mr. Jean carried started his humanitarian work in Afghanistan with MDM Canada in 2003. He then participated in eight missions for international medical organisations such as MSF, ALIMA and the WHO in 2014 in the Philippines. He worked as Logistics Coordinator and Country Director in Central and West Africa, the Caribbean and Asia.

From 2015 to 2020, Mr. Jean was the Director of the Risk and Security Management Capacity Building Program at OCCAH-ESG UQAM, where he led consulting work, conferences, program evaluations and training with the ministries of the Government of Quebec, universities and NGOs.



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Christine entered the humanitarian sector in 1999 working in places such as Chechnya, South Sudan, Darfur, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Middle East and Sri Lanka and more. She worked for a range of organisations that include MSF, Save the Children, CARE, UN and recently the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement in emergency response, project coordination, audio-visual production and security risk management.

She has researched, authored and published several papers and articles such *GISF Gender and Security: Guidelines for Mainstreaming Gender in Security Risk Management* and InterAction/GISF publication *NGO Safety and Security Training Project: How to create Effective Security Training for NGOs*.

Christine continues independently as a filmmaker and in providing humanitarian and security risk management support to various organizations, universities and government.



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As Project & Outreach Assistant in a co-funded position with the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF), Juliette supports projects and outreach on responsible private security contracting, with a particular focus on the humanitarian sector.

Before joining ICoCA, Juliette Jourde interned at ACTED in Paris, at the Organization of the American States in Bogota and at the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights in Buenos Aires.

Juliette Jourde holds a bachelor in Political Science and a Master in International Security with a specialization in Human Rights and Latin America from Sciences Po Paris.



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Ziad Al Achkar is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. His research focuses on the use of digital technologies in support of peacebuilding and humanitarian action and the evolving relationship with the private technology sector. In particular, Ziad researches how the pursuit of legibility shapes and influences the behavior of humanitarian organisations. Ziad Al Achkar has published articles, policy documents, educational guides, and given talks focused on the responsible use of digital technology and remote sensing.



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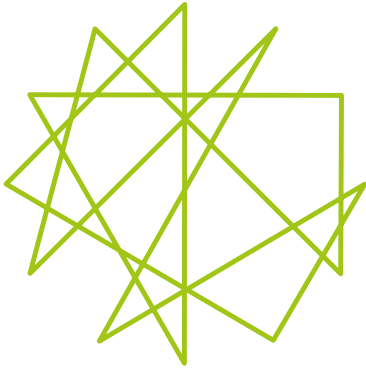
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