



Measuring and Improving Acceptance: ACF's experience and perspectives

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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.

Bibliography

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About the author



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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.