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Section B: Operational Security

Module 8: Acceptance and the changing security environment



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Introduction to the series

The pandemic continues to impact not only the security risks that NGOs may face but also the way risk treatment measures are developed, implemented, and communicated to staff. As we get used to new ways of working with COVID-19, and the focus is, rightly, on the pandemic and its impacts, we must ensure that we do not lose sight of ongoing and emerging security situations and issues.

Introduction to the module

How an aid organisation and its personnel are perceived influences whether they are accepted by relevant stakeholders (such as communities, government actors, and nonstate armed groups). Acceptance, in its most basic interpretation, means an aid organisation has relevant actors' consent and cooperation to be present in the affected area and to carry out activities.

Acceptance requires building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders and, when effective, can result in the reduction or even removal of potential threats. Poor acceptance can restrict an organisation's ability to carry out programmes, for example, through direct denial of access or insecurity resulting from attacks against aid workers. For this reason, safer access to target populations – a fundamental component of effective aid delivery – depends significantly on acceptance [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the security environment in which many aid organisations operate in numerous and unexpected ways, turning low-risk contexts

into higher-risk ones, and making high-risk contexts even more complex. Whether aid organisations are responding directly to COVID-19 or working on other aid projects within a context affected by the pandemic, there is a need for all aid organisations to understand how COVID-19 impacts their acceptance and, consequently, their security.

Acceptance:

- can be seen as a continuum, on the one end is 'rejection' and on the other 'acceptance'
- needs to be proactively built, measured, and monitored
- should never be assumed

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Fairbanks (Independent Consultant and
Research Associate at Humanitarian
Outcomes), based on a literature review and
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[1] Acceptance is one of a number of strategies that an aid organisation can employ to improve security. Strategies such as protection and deterrence can be equally important in given contexts and should be considered along with acceptance.

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Why is it important to consider acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Changes in the environment affect acceptance

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the environments in which aid organisations operate. There have been shifts in patterns of crime, political unrest, changing views of governments and aid organisations (especially foreign ones), and new and frequently changing government rules. These and other changes have varied over time and across countries.

Many governments have opted for restrictions on movement and travel, sometimes widely supported while at other times resulting in unrest and anti-government sentiment. These measures have also not

always been equitably applied across all segments of society, creating human rights and social inclusion concerns. Some governments have relied on the police and/or military to enforce COVID-19 measures with varying outcomes, some positive and others extremely negative. The African Union and UNDP found that the implementation of lockdown and movement restrictions in several Horn of Africa countries resulted in severe violence, such as extrajudicial killings by police in the enforcement of restrictions.

Aid organisations have also seen the politicisation of the pandemic and public health measures in a number of countries. In the Philippines, Cambodia and Hungary, the pandemic was used to pass legislation to increase government emergency power, which has weakened governmental checks and balances. Sierra Leone introduced a oneyear state of emergency which effectively banned protests. The Ethiopian government's decision to delay the national election in 2020 due to COVID-19 intensified tensions within the country, culminating in outright conflict between the federal government and non-state armed actors. Early on in the pandemic, many international aid organisations struggled with xenophobia arising from perceptions that COVID-19 was a foreign disease.

Lockdowns have reduced crime in some places, such as Mexico and Brazil. In other contexts, such as South Sudan, there has been a rise in crime. Experts have noted a particular rise in cybercrime, likely linked to movement restrictions and a rise in working from home arrangements.

There has also been a rise in crime related to the forging of COVID-19 documentation, such as vaccine certificates and negative COVID-19 tests.

Many countries have also seen a surge in gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence. The Central African Republic, for example, saw a 69% rise in gender-based violence since the start of the pandemic. The UN has called the global surge in violence against women 'The Shadow Pandemic'.

The pandemic has also seen a proliferation of information, misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and related issues, drawing attention to the important role that online platforms, especially social media, play in the spread of information during epidemic outbreaks.

These changes in the operating environment can affect an organisation's contextual security, its freedom of movement, its ability to access communities in need, and how it is perceived by external actors. In particular, these changes can affect an organisation's ability to maintain and manage relationships with affected populations, government actors, their staff, and other stakeholders, and, consequently, the organisation's ability to maintain acceptance to operate.

Risks and acceptance are likely to be most challenging during the start of an epidemic when fear is high and reliable information is hard to find, and at peak times when there are high numbers of infections and health systems and other basic services are overwhelmed.

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Further Information

CARE (2020) Security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for NGO security risk managers – Module B12: COVID-19 Related Threats and Mitigation Table

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for NGO security risk managers – B7. Risk assessment for country operations



Useful Sources

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(2020) How will the Coronavirus reshape
democracy and governance globally?
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Herbert and Marquette (2021) COVID-19, governance, and conflict: emerging impacts and future evidence needs. K4D

Nivette et al. (2021) A global analysis of the impact of COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions on crime

UN Women: The Shadow Pandemic:Violence against women during COVID-19

UNDP (2021) COVID-19 eroding social cohesion and triggering rise in civil unrest in crisis-affected countries, alert UNDP, g7+

UNDP (2021) Overcoming the Setbacks:

Understanding the Impact and Implications of
COVID-19 in Fragile and Conflict-affected
Contexts

Changing programmes changes acceptance

The movement and travel restrictions imposed by many governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 have forced organisations to change their operational approaches, such as reducing programming, working exclusively through local staff or partners and, in some cases, closing programmes altogether. These operational changes inevitably change how organisations were perceived.

While an organisation may have originally enjoyed good acceptance, the sudden closure of programmes may unavoidably create resentment within local communities as well as local staff who have been made redundant. Managing the closure of or changes to programmes, therefore, becomes an important consideration to maintain positive relationships with different stakeholders and retain acceptance.

Conversely, some organisations have been able to start new programmes in response to the pandemic.

Organisations that have stayed and delivered despite COVID-19 have found their acceptance improving. Some organisations have noted an improvement in acceptance also due to greater visibility of national and local staff among communities and other stakeholders, such as government actors, as reliance on these staff members increased during the pandemic.

Community acceptance impacts security

Epidemics exacerbate insecurity, and insecurity exacerbates epidemics. Previous responses to epidemics have shown that a failure to effectively engage with affected communities can result in negative perceptions of responders and even spark violence. In the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (2018-2020), a failure to carefully consider and engage with community needs and priorities, and thereby foster acceptance, heightened tensions between community members and responders. This resulted in attacks against aid workers and forced the closure of health facilities.

While the data on COVID-19 related security incidents is likely not comprehensive, the data that has been gathered highlights that the risks faced by aid workers, and particularly health workers, during the pandemic are not negligible. Insecurity Insight reported 412 attacks against health care workers related to the COVID-19 pandemic between January and December 2020. The Aid Worker Security Database recorded an all-time high number of attacks against aid workers in 2020 for the second year in a row, despite the restrictions on travel and movement imposed by the pandemic.

Recent data also shows communities to be the primary perpetrators of security incidents affecting aid workers. Data from the ICRC indicates that most security incidents experienced recently by the organisation were perpetrated by civilians rather than armed groups. Insecurity Insight's data also found that 83% of perpetrators of reported incidents related to COVID-19 measures were civilians. This reflects similar findings from the Ebola response in DRC where community resistance was a major threat to responders' security.

Effective and proactive community engagement and acceptance, therefore, must be an essential component of an organisation's security strategy during the pandemic.



Useful Sources

Humanitarian Outcomes (2021) Aid Worker Security Report 2021

Insecurity Insight (2020) Attacks on Health Care During the 10th Ebola Response in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Insecurity Insight (2021) Violence against health care during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020

Terry, Kiehl, Whelan and Szenderák (2021) Debunkersing Acceptance: a view from the ICRC. GISF



Further information

Crawford and Holloway (2021) The Democratic Republic of Congo's 10th Ebola response: lessons on international leadership and coordination. ODI

Kalenga et al. (2019) The Ongoing Ebola Epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2018-2019. The New England Journal of Medicine

Distrust, misinformation and disinformation

Epidemics, especially novel diseases such as COVID-19, are often accompanied by uncertainty, heightened emotions (especially fear), and extensive media attention. The fast spread of information, some true and some not, has implications for how responders are perceived and, consequently, whether they are accepted.

False information about COVID-19 has spread quickly and widely through different media platforms and resulted in the WHO declaring a parallel 'infodemic' alongside the pandemic.

Distrust, misinformation and disinformation are common in epidemic settings and can exacerbate existing tensions and affect acceptance, with implications for the security of aid operations. In South Sudan, there were heightened tensions between communities and the UN when the first COVID cases in the country were reported among UN staff members, with newspapers and social media posts blaming the UN for bringing the disease to the country.

In some countries, organisations have faced a backlash for promoting COVID-19 measures, such as wearing masks, due to the widespread perception that COVID-19 is not a real disease, or that it 'does not kill black people'. The reasons why certain rumours are believed, and others are not, is an important and growing area of study within the public health and humanitarian fields.

Recent epidemic outbreaks have demonstrated how affected communities rely on social media for information during an epidemic, this is especially the case when there is widespread distrust of traditional media outlets. Unfortunately, social media content is not verified before being shared, making it a breeding ground for false rumours. Rising levels of misinformation and disinformation on un-curated social media platforms about COVID-19 can negatively impact the reputation and acceptance level of an organisation that is linked to the information spread. However, it is important to remember that the information shared on these platforms can be true, as notably exemplified by the reports of corruption, exploitation, and abuse of power during the recent Ebola response in the DRC.

In cases of disinformation, misinformation or even rightful allegations, organisations need to track the information that is being shared about them online and among the local population and evaluate how it may affect the way the organisation is perceived.



Further information

GISF (2020) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for security risk managers, Module A.2. Information Management

Tiller, Devidal and van Solinge (2021) The 'fog of war'...and information. ICRC Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog



Useful sources

Anyadike (2020) What's behind South
Sudan's coronavirus inspired UN-backlash.
The New Humanitarian

Cohn and Kutalek (2016) Historical Parallels, Ebola Virus Disease and Cholera: Understanding Community Distrust and Social Violence with Epidemic. PLoS Curr. 2016 Jan 26:8

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Using Community Feedback to Guide the

COVID-19 Response in Sub-Saharan Africa:

Red Cross and Red Crescent Approach and

Lessons Learned from Ebola. Health Security

Insecurity Insight (2020) Social Media
Trends: Democratic Republic of the Congo

O'Neill (2020) Information Contagion: The Infectious Nature of Misinformation in a Pandemic. Novetta

World Health Organisation (2020) Call for Action: Managing the Infodemic

Good practice for security risk management: acceptance and SRM during the COVID-19 pandemic

Expect an ever-changing security environment

COVID-19 has created new humanitarian needs in many contexts and compounded existing crises. The pandemic, therefore, has changed the security environment in many countries in which aid organisations operate, particularly by changing key relationships and communication between different actors.

Regular context analyses and risk assessments are required to effectively understand how COVID-19 is impacting an organisation's acceptance. See GISF's guidance on risk assessments for country operations during COVID-19, and a list of possible COVID-19 related threats and mitigation measures. Risk treatment measures should consider these changes and related risks and aim to reduce them.

Additionally, aid organisations should consider:

- Carrying out regular actor mappings that focus on how the pandemic is changing power relations among groups to identify the current key actors with whom the organisation needs to build relationships.
- Adjusting acceptance activities to ensure that relationships and acceptance are maintained while restrictions are in place (e.g., travel restrictions).
- Regularly assessing local perceptions of COVID-19, the response and aid organisations in general. See, for example, Novetta Mission Analytics media monitoring of perceptions for the PERC Dashboard.
- Carrying out a conflict sensitivity assessment to understand contextual dynamics in operational areas and to unpack how the organisation impacts these through its presence and activities and what implications there are for the organisation's acceptance.



Useful sources

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for NGO security risk managers – B7. Risk assessment for country operations

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for NGO security risk managers – Module B12: COVID-19 Related Threats and Mitigation Table

PERC COVID-19 Decision Support Dashboard

Adopt an organisational approach to acceptance

The organisation-wide implementation of an acceptance strategy is central to its success, particularly as a cornerstone of acceptance is for all staff to act consistently, predictably,

and coherently in all interactions with relevant stakeholders. This means that security staff must work alongside programme staff and other departments to ensure the consistent application of the acceptance strategy across the entire organisation.

A notable example is the central role that programme staff play in negotiating access and maintaining relationships to ensure that the organisation has programmatic acceptance to implement projects. Security staff should work alongside programme staff to ensure that engagement and negotiation efforts support programme aims but also meet security needs.

Aid organisations also need to ensure that risk assessments relating to COVID-19 are not limited to the internal health and safety risks associated with staff contracting the virus, but also consider how COVID-19 has changed the risk context, including organisational acceptance. This may mean broadening the responsibilities of security focal points or ensuring that staff responsible for health and safety work closely with security focal points.

Organisations should train their staff on the different aspects of implementing an acceptance strategy, e.g., in humanitarian principles, negotiation, diplomacy, soft skills, and conflict resolution.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent
Movement's Safer Access Framework helps
illustrate how the different functions of an
organisation, from security to
communications, must work together to
obtain acceptance and, therefore, gain safer
access to affected populations.



Further information

Johns Hopkins: COVID Behaviors Dashboard

WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard

Save the Children (2021) Conflict Sensitivity
Guider: A practical roadmap to mainstream
conflict sensitivity into programming

ICRC Safer Access Framework

Meet community expectations

Programme effectiveness, participatory approaches, considered entry and exit strategies, and transparency and accountability are essential foundations for gaining and maintaining acceptance. In epidemic settings, the quality of programming and the relevance of that programming to the needs of the community are particularly important.

During the DRC Ebola response, a failure by responders to accept that Ebola was not a priority humanitarian need for affected populations, especially in the face of regular violent attacks by armed groups and more prevalent diseases, was met with violent backlash from the local populations.

Organisations that changed tactics by listening to the priorities of communities and adapt their approach to meet these expectations were able to improve acceptance.

In many contexts, COVID-19 is not seen as a humanitarian priority. Organisations, therefore, need to ensure that activities respect and meet the needs and expectations of local communities. Some organisations have found success in adding COVID-19 programming, such as the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), to existing programmes that meet the voiced priorities of affected populations.



Useful sources

Fast et al. (2011) The Promise of Acceptance. Save the Children

Nguyen (2019) An Epidemic of Suspicion -Ebola and Violence in the DRC. The New **England Journal of Medicine**

Engage in two-way communication

Meaningful two-way communication with communities and other stakeholders is essential to ensure the organisation is meeting local expectations. Open and regular dialogue is also important to respond to fears and uncertainty, which are natural reactions to novel epidemic outbreaks. Hesitancy about response measures, including vaccines, are also to be expected.

Unfortunately, many public health efforts tend to focus on one-way messaging, e.g., wear a mask and wash your hands. This mass messaging is important, and there are positive recent examples of Ministries of Health translating COVID-19 guidance into local languages to reach groups that have historically been marginalised. However, previous responses to epidemics have shown that to effectively engage with communities and obtain their acceptance, organisations must provide local populations with the space and opportunity to voice concerns and ask questions. Organisation staff must also be trained and prepared to answer these questions and, where possible, address concerns.

One way of fostering this dialogue is to identify the sources of information that affected populations most trust. Responders need to be aware of these trusted sources, which could be medical professionals, religious leaders, certain media outlets and even social media platforms, and actively use these channels to share information and create a space to engage in a two-way dialogue.

Other strategies can involve ensuring that community visits include a medical professional (such as a doctor or nurse) who can answer medical questions about COVID-19 and related issues. Other options to encourage dialogue may be to provide a free phone number that individuals can anonymously call to ask questions, or organising events with trusted leaders to provide the time and space for communities to raise questions and concerns, whether about COVID-19, the organisation's other projects, or how the organisation will ensure that community members will not contract COVID-19 when accessing services.

Admittedly, this approach takes time. But a failure to actively engage with communities early on in a response can severely hamper an organisation's acceptance and consequently the security of its staff and operations, as most prominently evidenced by the serious attacks experienced by responders to the 10th Ebola epidemic in DRC, which many argue resulted in the unnecessary prolongation of the outbreak.

Useful sources

Insecurity Insight (2020) Attacks on Health Care During the 10th Ebola Response in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Manage disinformation and misinformation proactively

To tackle the spread of misinformation and disinformation, organisations need to proactively provide regular and factually correct information about COVID-19, the organisation, and its response to local communities, staff, and other stakeholders.

Organisations should especially ensure that they are the central source of information on COVID-19 for staff at all levels. This can take the form of, for example, a page on the organisation's intranet site with global and country-specific verified information about COVID-19.

During infectious disease outbreaks, users of social media are particularly vulnerable to misinformation due to a lack of gatekeepers on these platforms and the creation of isolated online communities that spread and reinforce false information. These same platforms, however, can also be used by organisations to proactively address incorrect information about the pandemic and their organisation's work. For example, as part of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, the Red Cross and Red Crescent used social media platforms like Facebook to engage with communities and address rumours, questions, suggestions, and concerns.

In recent years, many communities have seen expanded access to the Internet. This means that information about what an aid organisation does and says in one context can more easily reach local populations and stakeholders in other countries. Information and messaging by the organisation must be consistent and coherent across all contexts.

Where false information is deliberately being spread (i.e., disinformation), organisations should aim to understand the motivation behind it, and how this disinformation can affect how the organisation is perceived by different stakeholders.



Further information

GISF (2020) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for security risk managers, Module A.2. Information Management

World Health Organisation: Infodemic Management

Monitor and measure acceptance

In practice, acceptance can be seen as a <u>continuum</u>, on the one end is 'rejection' and on the other 'acceptance'. An organisation's acceptance can fall anywhere on this continuum and can also vary from actor to actor. For example, an organisation may be 'tolerated' by a community but 'rejected' by a non-state armed group.

Organisations should, therefore, aim to formally measure and regularly monitor acceptance to ensure the security of their staff and operations. Organisations can use this knowledge to take proactive steps to obtain and maintain acceptance with each relevant actor.

There are several complementary ways in which acceptance can be measured and monitored:

- Regular perception evaluations or surveys
- Programme/community feedback mechanisms
- Security incident tracking and analysis
- Media monitoring
- Recording permission or denial of access by different actors
- Quality, type, and level of engagement with different actors (e.g., communities, local leaders, government representatives, armed groups, etc.)
- Evidence of local support for an organisation's security through information and warnings

See page 27 in the <u>Acceptance Toolkit</u> for a list of indicators to assess the degree of acceptance of an organisation.

Ideally, organisations should establish a system that formally collects information from different sources and inputs this into an acceptance measurement tool. This information should be centrally stored to allow analysis, similar to a security incident information management system. Some organisations, such as Action Contre la Faim (ACF), have already developed a tool to support their staff with measuring acceptance across different actors.



Useful sources

Billaudel (2021) Measuring and Improving Acceptance: Action Contre La Faim's experience and perspectives. GISF

The Acceptance Toolkit

Assess partnerships and coordination

Organisations responding to COVID-19 or within an affected context will inevitably have to work with a variety of new actors, including for example, the police, military, Ministries of Health, private sector entities, and local/national organisations. These new relationships offer opportunities for enhanced responses but may also prompt suspicion on the part of local populations and other stakeholders. Staff need to be conscious of the fact that cultivating acceptance with one stakeholder can jeopardise their acceptance from other actors. The brutal response by police and military actors in some contexts to enforce COVID-19 measures, for example, could have implications for any organisation seen to be associated with these security forces.

Interactions with new actors, therefore, need to be proactively assessed in each context to avoid negative perceptions and to maintain acceptance. Where interactions cannot be avoided, training staff on how to communicate about the organisation's mandate and humanitarian principles can support acceptance and access efforts.



Useful sources

Gibson-Fall (2021) Military responses to COVID-19, emerging trends in global civil-military engagements. Review of International Studies

Adopt common rules of engagement

How one organisation interacts with a community can affect that community's perception of the entire response. Many organisations responding to the 10th Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC were broadly perceived as part of the 'riposte' - that is, as part of the broader response without distinction made between different organisations – with implications for each organisation's acceptance and security. Aid organisations need to coordinate with each other and adhere to common rules of engagement, e.g., around the use of armed escorts in active conflict settings, to ensure that the actions of one do not negatively impact the acceptance of all.

Many humanitarians argue that adherence to the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence are essential for obtaining acceptance. Any common rules of engagement developed could, therefore, use these principles as foundations to guide behaviour if this is deemed appropriate to the context and by the operating organisations.



Useful sources

Fairbanks (2020) Security and access in the DRC: implementing an acceptance strategy in the Ebola response. Humanitarian Practice Network/ODI

Build internal acceptance: risks and organisational policy

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities within organisations with differing security implications, most noticeably the heavy reliance on local staff to travel to programme areas, international staff having greater access to vaccines, and with some staff demonstrating vaccine hesitancy.

It is essential, therefore, for organisations to consider how COVID-19 has affected internal dynamics and how these may have affected perceptions and acceptance of the organisation among staff members themselves and any risks that may result internally from poor perceptions. Organisations should consider implementing organisational policies and guidelines to manage these challenges.

This may include:

- Addressing uncertainty around the availability of vaccines for all staff
- Engaging with and aiming to address the concerns of any staff who may be hesitant to get vaccinated
- Addressing concerns of staff who may feel unnecessarily more exposed to risk due to travel arrangements and movement restrictions
- Responding to concerns around vaccine passports and how these promote inequities among staff and opportunities for travel

Some organisations may feel that a stick, rather than a carrot approach can be more effective, e.g., making vaccines mandatory or forcing all staff to return to the office. However, in contexts where governments have imposed strict vaccination measures, such as Pakistan, there has been a rise in fake certificates and other methods to avoid vaccinations. Senior management may find that a more balanced and engaging internal

approach that fosters acceptance within the organisation may be more appropriate and effective in the long term. Security focal points should, therefore, actively consider the risks that may arise from contentious COVID-19 related organisational policies and guidelines, and inform senior management when assessments indicate that stricter measures may result in more harm than good.



Further information

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

Consider your security approach

Finally, an acceptance strategy is not a guarantee of security or access. Organisations will need to assess which security approach (whether acceptance, deterrence, protection, or a combination of these - i.e., a 'blended approach') will be most effective in each context according to the findings of a comprehensive context analysis and risk assessment. Organisations must, however, remember that maintaining an acceptance strategy requires just as much time and resources as other approaches, and should therefore be adequately invested in.



Q Further information

EISF (2017) Security Risk Management: a basic guide for smaller NGOs

GISF (2020) Security to Go: a risk management toolkit for humanitarian organisations (4th Edition)

Williams, Kinch and Herman (2021) Promoting a Blended Risk Management Approach: the place of programming and diversity within a security risk management strategy. GISF

ODI (2010) Operational Security Management in Violent Environments (Revised Edition)

Inclusivity considerations for acceptance

How an organisation is perceived, and whether it is accepted, can be linked to its broader image, the work it does, and how it engages with different stakeholders as an institution. However, the perceptions and actions of one or several staff members can also have a great impact on how the organisation as a whole is perceived. Organisations implementing an acceptance strategy should, therefore, address both individual and organisational acceptance.

To appropriately consider and build individual acceptance, senior managers need to be conscious of the diversity of their staff and aim to be inclusive in the measures adopted:

Image:

- During COVID-19, some organisations saw greater acceptance following the increased visibility of local staff in programme management.
- Organisations can benefit from actively recruiting staff with particular profiles who are best placed to negotiate access and gain acceptance (e.g., staff from particular contexts or ethnicities). Please note, however, that a staff member's profile can also place them at heightened risk, and this must be factored into assessments and decision-making.
 See GISF's paper Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles.

Actions:

- During the Ebola response in DRC, the exploitation and sexual abuse perpetrated by a number of response actors negatively impacted the way their organisations and the response as a whole were perceived by the affected population.
- Organisations should ensure staff adhere to organisational codes of conduct, quickly address misconduct, and ensure relevant stakeholders are informed of measures taken.

Motivations:

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies were laying off staff due to travel and movement restrictions.
 Understandably, local and national aid workers were worried about the closure of programmes and losing

their jobs. A lack of motivation to carry out work and maintain positive relationships to foster acceptance is understandable in the face of this kind of uncertainty.

 Organisations need to be conscious of the personal circumstances and motivations of their staff and maintain active and transparent communication to address concerns.

Personal circumstances, including mental health:

- COVID-19 has placed a significant strain on individuals, with understandable consequences for their mental health and their ability to deal with challenges in their professional and personal lives. The mental strain of the pandemic, and also fears over job security, may have impacted staff members' work and their interactions with external actors.
- Organisations should be flexible and provide staff with the support and resources needed for their well-being (e.g., psycho-social support, flexible working hours, etc.)

Changes in work responsibilities:

- Due to the absence of international aid workers in many contexts, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled many national and local staff to take on greater work responsibilities and, occasionally, leadership roles within aid programming. In many instances this has been well-within the capacity of staff, but sometimes the expectations placed on them has been beyond their knowledge or skillsets.
- Organisations should use this opportunity to strengthen their investment in national and local staff by jointly identifying gaps in capacity with these staff members and devising structured plans to strengthen capacities. This will help turn the temporary promotions that resulted from the pandemic into a permanent transfer of power to local and national actors.

Differentiated risks and needs:

• The disproportionate effect that the pandemic has had on minority groups, and the rise in domestic violence cases have shown that the consequences of COVID-19 and related response measures, such as restrictions in movement and travel, affect individuals differently depending on who they are, where they are, and what they do.

Risk assessments and treatment
measures need to consider the
differentiated risks faced by staff of
different profiles and aim to be inclusive.
The best way to ensure inclusivity is to
make organisational processes
participatory. This fosters greater
internal acceptance of the organisation,
and also improves external actors'
perception of the organisation,
demonstrating the senior managers'
commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The need to build both individual and organisational acceptance is a foundational element of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's <u>Safer Access Framework</u>.



Further information

Fast et al. (2011) The Promise of Acceptance. Save the Children

Mind: Coronavirus and work



Useful sources

EISF (2018) Managing the security of aid workers with diverse profiles

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for security risk managers, Module B11. Inclusivity and security risk management

Conclusion

While acceptance is not a guarantee to safer access, nor should it be the only strategy employed by an aid organisation to keep its staff secure, it is an important building block that aid organisations must consider in their operational decisions and as part of their security approach in any context. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown this to be true and presents new angles to consider.

Aid organisations must invest the time and resources required to effectively build and maintain relationships with a multitude of

actors to build and maintain acceptance during the pandemic.

This means:

- Understanding the context in which the aid organisation is working, especially if the security environment is changing, and the groups that influence the organisation's ability to carry out its mandate.
- Ensuring that all staff implement the acceptance strategy by being consistent, coherent, and predictable in their dealings with external actors.
- Strengthening staff capacity in negotiation, diplomacy, soft skills, conflict resolution and how to present the organisation and its work externally.
- Ensuring that the organisation is meeting community expectations and engaging in two-way dialogue with affected populations.
- Proactively managing information and addressing misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic and related response measures.
- Measuring and monitoring the organisation's acceptance.
- Assessing partnerships and coordination efforts, and adopting, where possible, common rules of engagement to ensure consistency across responding organisations.
- Building internal acceptance.
- Considering acceptance as part of a broader security risk management approach.
- Considering the diversity of staff and equally building individual and organisational acceptance.

COVID-19 has significantly changed the environment in which many organisations operate with implications for how aid organisations are perceived, how they can operate and maintain relationships, and their acceptance levels among different stakeholders. Responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and previous epidemic settings, such as Ebola in eastern DRC, demonstrate that to continue to safely access vulnerable communities in this type of complex operational environment, organisations can benefit from implementing an acceptance security strategy.