Private Security Contracting and Acceptance: a dangerous match?

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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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