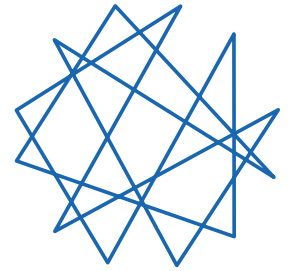


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Neutrality, Access, and Making Localisation Work

GISF Research Paper



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The Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) is a diverse network of member organisations active in the fields of humanitarian aid, international development, human rights, and environmental protection, who value security risk management (SRM) as an important element of their operations and programme delivery. In a rapidly changing global landscape, GISF values the importance of continuous documentation, adaptation, and innovation of SRM policy and practice. Therefore, we take an inclusive approach to SRM and don't believe in 'one-size-fits-all' security. We recognise that different staff face different risks, based on the diversity of their personal profile, position, context, and organisation. In summary, we are the leading NGO SRM network and a one-stop-shop for information sharing, knowledge management, coordination, and collaboration.

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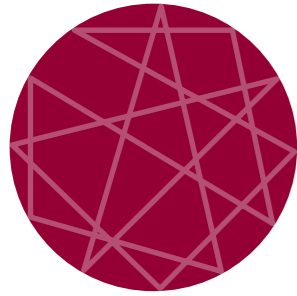
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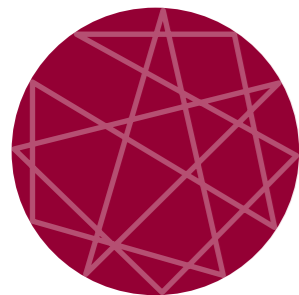
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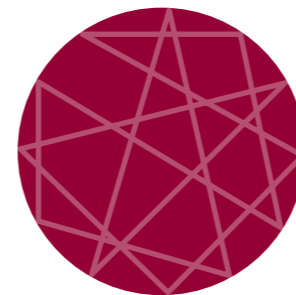


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A young person stands in front of a mural painted for World Humanitarian Day, depicting the four humanitarian principles, including neutrality.



Acronyms

GISF	Global Interagency Security Forum
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LNGO or NNGO	Local or National Non-Governmental Organisation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIAC	Non-International Armed Conflict
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
UN	United Nations



Executive Summary

Humanitarian organisations face significant obstacles in reaching communities afflicted by violence and insecurity. Traditionally, these barriers were associated with armed conflicts. However, the evolving landscape of protracted crises—marked by chronic state fragility and widespread criminality—has exacerbated the challenges of humanitarian access. This is particularly evident in hard-to-reach areas where the needs of communities are both more urgent and more complex to address.

To overcome these challenges, humanitarian organisations have increasingly relied on local and national actors as implementing organisations and partners. Local actors, with their strong community ties and deep understanding of local dynamics, can improve community acceptance and access, encouraging swifter responses to emerging needs. However, their involvement may also complicate perceptions of neutrality. Partnerships between local and international actors may become politicised. Likewise, local actors' proximity to conflict zones could expose them to threats and accusations of perceived or actual alignments with certain groups, negatively impacting their neutrality and security.

Navigating these environments has increasingly strained principled humanitarian action. Organisations and agencies are often compelled to compromise their operational standards to ensure worker safety and continuity of aid. This may lead to prioritising their presence in less volatile areas and making concessions with state or non-state actors, potentially undermining their neutrality and impartiality.

This study explores the complexities of maintaining neutrality in increasingly challenging environments. Specifically, it examines the interaction of neutrality with humanitarian access, acceptance-based strategies, and the dynamics of collaboration between local, national, and international NGOs.

The research took place in 2023. It consisted of key informant interviews with 20 humanitarian practitioners and experts with operational experience. It also included a review of data and relevant literature surrounding debates on the practicality of neutrality, access, and localisation.

Key findings

Varying interpretations of neutrality make it difficult to implement in practice

Neutrality is intended to enable organisations to deliver aid independently and without bias. But the dynamic political landscape in fragile and conflict-affected environments often complicates its implementation. Some participants viewed neutrality as an ethical and moral position, essential for maintaining trust and access in line with humanitarian values. Others interpreted it as a pragmatic tool or political stance necessary to negotiate access, maintain operational effectiveness, and safeguard staff. This divergence in understanding and application underscores ongoing debates within the sector about the relevance, necessity, and feasibility of maintaining neutrality in increasingly complex conflict scenarios.

Public advocacy and social media may complicate the application of neutrality

The humanitarian sector's approach to speaking out – also known as *témoignage*¹ – is a powerful tool for advocacy. But it may also pose challenges. Speaking out may jeopardise aid worker safety, affect their access to certain areas, or compromise their perceived neutrality, especially if they are seen as taking sides in a conflict. While these efforts aim to push for more unrestricted access and the protection of aid workers, they can inadvertently heighten security and reputational risks for humanitarian organisations and their staff. The visibility of advocacy, particularly on social media, can be interpreted as a political stance, challenging the organisation's neutrality and potentially jeopardising access and safety by attracting unwanted scrutiny or backlash. Social media's amplifying effect can intensify these risks, making it crucial for organisations to navigate their online presence carefully. Moreover, humanitarian actors can take a more pragmatic approach to speaking out, only doing so when the costs of staying silent outweigh the potential negative impacts of speaking out. Thus, the decision to speak out must balance the need to highlight urgent issues with the risk of undermining operations and community access.

Traditional acceptance-based strategies are becoming less effective in highly politicised contexts

The politicisation of aid, coupled with rising disinformation and distrust towards international actors, undermines humanitarian efforts to demonstrate neutrality and impartiality. This is compounded by increasingly blurred lines between humanitarian action and other agendas such as stabilisation, peacebuilding, and development, as well as perceptions of alignment with Western geopolitical agendas. In turn, conflict actors can rationalise these perceptions to target aid workers.

Risk aversion and avoidance have significantly undermined access and compromised impartiality

Donor risk aversion significantly influences the presence and scope of humanitarian operations, placing strict legal and regulatory frameworks governing engagements with conflict actors. This may compel agencies to prioritise their presence and visibility in areas with less acute humanitarian need. As a result, humanitarian actors often cluster in relatively secure regions (or regions aligned with donor interests). They may deliver aid primarily in more easily accessible areas to demonstrate their effectiveness, which creates 'access inertia' and gaps in operational coverage where aid is most needed. This minimal risk tolerance may hinder meaningful engagement with local humanitarian actors, who can better access those 'hard-to-reach' communities. International agencies that are unable to access hard-to-reach areas rely on local actors for implementation, even if it poses greater risk to national staff.

Through their internal policies and requirements, some international actors and donors frame neutrality as a matter of compliance

Some local practitioners expressed a localised interpretation of neutrality. They reflected on its implementation primarily as a matter of 'compliance' with institutional policies, rather than focusing on its humanitarian value or professional standards. As a result, based on their understanding of the principle, neutrality may be showcased as a form of public posturing to satisfy donors and international partners. However, participants stated that maintaining true neutrality internally, especially in conflict-affected areas, can be highly challenging. Interviewees described this version of neutrality as a concept "by the mouth, not the heart," with some even deeming it meaningless.

¹ *Témoignage* ("bearing witness"), notably linked to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), involves speaking out about the suffering and injustices observed by aid workers in crisis zones. Beyond providing aid, it emphasises the ethical duty to raise awareness, advocate for policy changes, and hold perpetrators accountable for human rights abuses.

Access disparities have led to a substantial transfer of risk to LNGOs, leaving them exposed to significant dangers while lacking sufficient operational capacity

The shift of operational responsibilities from international to LNGOs has significantly increased the risks borne by local organisations, while simultaneously highlighting disparities in support and resources. Local staff, often positioned on the front lines in conflict zones, face substantial dangers and frequent attacks with inadequate safety measures and operational support, compared to their international counterparts. In hard-to-reach areas, INGOs delegate challenging responsibilities to local partners, presenting this as their commitment to localisation. Consequently, INGOs may focus on areas that are more accessible, leaving LNGOs to respond in high-risk environments. This reinforces the view that LNGOs lack adequate capacity. It also exposes local staff to greater danger and underscores the disparity in resource allocation and support between international and local actors.

Transactional partnerships and systematic barriers undermine LNGO effectiveness

Partnerships between international and LNGOs are often seen as transactional. They may limit local organisations' decision-making authority, leadership, and access to essential funds. Subcontracting arrangements frequently lead to inadequate financial support and minimal involvement in strategic planning, impeding meaningful collaboration.

LNGOs also face biases and paternalistic attitudes from international counterparts, which restrict their administrative power and influence in policy development. Despite their deep contextual knowledge, local staff encounter professional growth barriers and are often excluded from humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Language barriers, resource constraints, and lack of recognition in coordination platforms further hinder their participation. These systemic issues, coupled with strict donor constraints, significantly undermine the sustainability and operational capacity of local organisations.



Key recommendations for stakeholders

The findings in the report emphasise the need for a shift in collaboration between INGOs and LNGOs. Interviewees highlighted the importance of trust and transparency, equitable partnerships, and local empowerment. By acknowledging and valuing local expertise, reducing administrative burdens, and advocating for LNGOs, INGOs can foster more effective and sustainable humanitarian efforts.

For the wider humanitarian community



Adhere consistently to humanitarian principles to avoid suggesting that the principles are negotiable, potentially compromising the integrity and credibility of humanitarian efforts.



Explore alternative strategies for upholding neutrality by acknowledging local interpretations and creating feedback mechanisms to continually assess the perception and impact of neutrality on the ground.



Actively engage local communities to build trust and strengthen acceptance by facilitating dialogue, adopting community-centred approaches, and promoting accountability to the communities being served.



Integrate gender and diversity considerations to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness to the diverse needs of affected populations, and to enhance acceptance strategies.



Critically review barriers to LNGO engagement in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, strengthening reciprocal flows of information, providing local actors with more opportunities to voice crucial issues, and taking co-leadership roles.

For donors and INGO partners



Shift from transactional to more equitable partnerships with local partners by involving them in operational planning, prioritising mutual trust, facilitating access to direct funding, and engaging in shared decision-making.



Adopt risk sharing approaches with implementing agencies and local partners such as jointly taking responsibility for project outcomes and collaboratively creating risk assessments and mitigation plans to reduce risks for local partners.



Foster mutual capacity strengthening and knowledge sharing between local and international partners by designing capacity-building initiatives as reciprocal processes where both parties learn from each other through joint training sessions, workshops, and collaborative problem-solving.



Streamline donor procedures to enhance the effectiveness of LNGOs by reducing donor-imposed constraints such as long vetting processes, rigid reporting requirements, and complex compliance demands, minimising bureaucratic layers that impede fund disbursements.



Enhance support to national and local NGOs through flexible and long-term funding strategies, including multi-year funding agreements, risk financing tools, and incentives for risk-taking and innovation, to allow local actors to adapt their programmes to evolving operational and security realities.

For local and national NGO partners



Enhance security risk management protocols that are tailored to the local context, including developing detailed contingency plans and conducting regular staff training.



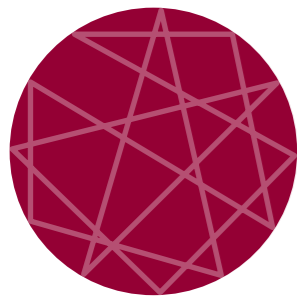
Facilitate the creation of local security networks enabling information sharing, coordination, and access to resources, enhancing collective responsibility for security within the humanitarian community.



Engage with communities in developing and implementing security initiatives through collaboratively identifying and addressing security risks to increase overall safety and reduce reliance on external actors.



Champion and implement policies that prioritise localisation and aid worker safety, increasing local ownership and reducing risk transfer by acknowledging and valuing the vital contributions of LNGOs.



Introduction

In armed conflict and protracted crises, accessing communities in need poses multifaceted challenges for humanitarian organisations. Traditionally, access issues have been primarily associated with armed conflict. But it is essential to recognise that in certain protracted crises, levels of criminality, often perpetrated by non-state armed groups, which may also be involved in armed conflict, introduce unique complexities. A confluence of political, social, security, cultural, climatic, and economic and legal factors can amplify armed violence. It may also increase forced displacement, disrupt essential infrastructure and services, intensify resource scarcity, and heighten the vulnerabilities of affected populations.

Communities living in regions with high levels of violence and insecurity—particularly those in hard-to-reach areas—typically have the most pressing and severe needs. However, these areas may become zones where access to populations is severely limited. Likewise, the community's ability to access aid and services may be minimal.

Despite the urgent need for humanitarian aid in these areas, many international organisations have developed approaches and policies that may hinder their access or compromise their adherence to humanitarian principles. Where organisations are unable to access populations, some may prioritise their continued presence in other areas. Sometimes, this means yielding to compromises or conditions imposed by state or non-state authorities, which may ultimately have implications for their neutrality and impartiality and for the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts and other applicable international legal and policy frameworks.

In response, there has been a strong call to more meaningfully engage local and national organisations. These organisations have immense potential to overcome access issues by fostering greater trust and acceptance within hard-to-reach communities. However, localisation introduces added complexities regarding perceived neutrality and impartiality. Partnerships between local and national actors with international actors can become politicised by state authorities and non-state armed groups. Furthermore, proximity to conflict zones increases their vulnerability to threats and malign influences, which can pose significant challenges in navigating conflict dynamics and adhering to principled humanitarian action.

This research explores the concept of neutrality and its intersection with humanitarian access and acceptance-based strategies. It also examines the resulting effects on fostering collaborations between local, national, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Through interviews with humanitarian actors and experts, this report aims to uncover the complexities faced by local NGOs (LNGOs) operating in diverse contexts. To this end, the research has sought to answer the following questions:

- How is the concept of neutrality understood and operationalised?
- How has the role of neutrality in acceptance-based strategies evolved in recent years?
- How does the principle of neutrality intersect with localisation, particularly when considering aid delivery in hard-to-reach areas?
- What are the implications of the principle of neutrality on the selection and management of partnerships between INGOs and LNGOs, and how does this impact security and humanitarian access?

- What practical recommendations can be offered to effectively navigate the interplay between neutrality, localisation, and aid worker security?

This paper presents a variety of perspectives and voices concerning these questions. In the longer term, it aims to support the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) in creating practical guidance for organisations to navigate evolving concepts of neutrality and to engage in advocacy efforts to highlight the security dimensions and implications of a principled humanitarian approach. This research paper is mainly aimed at individuals overseeing staff security, including leaders of national NGOs who determine the security measures for partnering or implementing programmes. It may also be relevant for staff engaged in partnerships between INGOs/United Nations (UN) agencies and LNGOs.

Research design

This research focuses on humanitarian interventions in situations of armed conflict and does not explore questions of neutrality and access in areas affected by natural hazards. This report is based on 20 interviews with humanitarian practitioners and experts. Many of the interviewees have operational experience in humanitarian access, humanitarian principles, and localisation. They also include experts who have studied these areas of inquiry. Individuals ranged from international and national staff of UN agencies, INGOs, and LNGOs working in contexts including Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Many have undergone professional training and personal reflection on humanitarian access, humanitarian negotiations, operationalisation of humanitarian principles, localisation, and related concepts. Therefore, observations presented in this paper should be viewed as indicative of key themes and questions for exploration, rather than as representative of the sector, or its policies, more broadly.

The researchers developed set questions to guide all interviews. The interviews were semi-structured. This means that apart from the standard questions, the interviewer was able to delve into other areas of inquiry where appropriate and relevant. The interviewees agreed to the interviews on the basis of anonymity. They were made aware that any quotations used in this report would remain unattributed. While the paper draws valuable insights from the interviews, there are inherent limitations of relying primarily on interviews in drawing empirical conclusions, particularly with a limited sample size.

This research also benefits from and highlights desk research aimed to enhance our understanding of themes and debates related to humanitarian access, the humanitarian principles, and engagement with local actors. It is important to note that the examples cited do not attempt to cover localisation efforts comprehensively, but serve to illustrate key ideas.

Setting the stage

Humanitarian organisations face significant challenges in delivering aid in conflict zones fraught with political tensions and violence, including political interference, restricted access, and targeted attacks on aid workers and their resources. They must negotiate and compromise with stakeholders like states and non-state armed groups, which control territory and shape the political, security, economic, and social landscape in which they operate. These actors often lack understanding of, or openly oppose, international humanitarian law (IHL), humanitarian principles, or international human rights law (IHRL), further complicating aid delivery.

These issues are exacerbated when national authorities fail to meet their obligations, making the presence of international aid more visible and highlighting the inadequacies of state services. Consequently, humanitarian practitioners are often subjected to open hostility, xenophobia, racism, insecurity, and a host of administrative obstacles while striving to safeguard principled humanitarian access for the communities they aim to serve.²

These challenges become especially pronounced in areas that are hard-to-reach, where perceptions of neutrality are more at risk of being manipulated or influenced by political, diplomatic, or security agendas. These areas are often subjected to significant access limitations imposed by authoritarian regimes and non-state armed groups. Interactions and negotiations are underpinned by power dynamics, which may force humanitarian actors to compromise on their principles in order to secure continued access to and protection for their workers.

Humanitarian organisations also face access obstacles that are, to some extent, internal and self-created.³ They may adopt operational policies and security approaches that lead to increased isolation in volatile situations. These may include ‘bunkerisation’ policies,⁴ mismatches between the needs of the affected communities and the programmes delivered, and constraints and compromises arising from counter-terrorism regulations and priorities set by host authorities and donor states. Moreover, internal competition within the sector—due to INGOs and UN agencies vying for resources and visibility in volatile areas—can impede effective coordination, hinder trust-building, and limit opportunities for local empowerment. These factors significantly impact access and pose operational challenges as organisations strive to demonstrate their neutrality and legitimacy, maintain consistent and high-quality programme implementation, and ensure their own safety.

Furthermore, international humanitarian organisations, by virtue of their principles, may be uniquely positioned to serve as neutral third parties and show both sides of a conflict the benefits of having a neutral intermediary.⁵ On the other hand, neutral humanitarian action represents just one way of ‘doing’ humanitarianism, especially when considering the growing discourse around whether localisation is essential—or even possible—for local humanitarian workers to be neutral.⁶

The strong ties LNGOs have within the communities they serve can yield both positive and negative outcomes. LNGOs’ intimate understanding of local dynamics facilitates the implementation of humanitarian activities that are sensitive to cultural nuances and aligned with contextual requirements. This can enhance community buy-in and engagement. Moreover, their continued presence, flexibility, and responsiveness empower them to swiftly respond to evolving situations and attend to emerging needs onsite. However, their proximity may also contribute to perceptions regarding their alignment with certain non-state armed groups or government authorities.

² See, for example, Egeland, J., Harmer, A., & Stoddard, A. (2011). *To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments*. Policy and Studies Series, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

³ Tronc, E., Grace, R., & Nahikian, A. (2018). *Humanitarian Access Obstruction in Somalia: Externally Imposed and Self-Inflicted Dimensions*. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.

⁴ Duffield, M. (2012). Challenging environments: Danger, resilience and the aid industry. *Security Dialogue*, 43(5), 475-492; Steets, J., Reichhold, U., & Sagmeister, E. (2012). *Evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies in DG ECHO funded interventions*. Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI): Berlin, Germany.

⁵ See, for example, Terry, F. (2011). The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: reasserting the neutrality of humanitarian action. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 173-188; Slim, H. (1997). Relief agencies and moral standing in war: Principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and solidarity. *Development in Practice*, 7(4), 342-352; Bruni, N. M. (2005). *Political neutrality and humanitarian aid: Practical implications of organisational ideology*. Duquesne University.

⁶ See Slim, H., 2022. You don’t have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian. *The New Humanitarian*; Khanna, N. (2022). *Decoding Neutrality in Humanitarianism*. Peace Insight; Kipfer-Didavi, I. (2018). *On the importance of community engagement for principled humanitarian action*. Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA).

This can make them potential targets for attacks by opposing groups. Limited resources, especially in conflict zones, hinder their ability to establish robust security measures, leaving them vulnerable to threats. Unlike international counterparts, LNGOs often lack comprehensive security training, so their staff may be ill-prepared to manage risks. While their local networks are crucial for effective humanitarian operations, they also pose risks if compromised by conflicting parties. Furthermore, LNGOs with limited political influence and international connections face challenges in their capacity to advocate for security concerns at higher levels. Maintaining neutrality becomes increasingly challenging for LNGOs, especially when they are perceived as integral parts of the local community. This complicates their navigation of conflicts and adherence to principled humanitarian action amidst heightened security risks and external pressures.

Over the years, the concept of humanitarian neutrality has encountered significant obstacles. Aid workers have faced increasing suspicion. They are potentially seen as agents of the ‘great powers’. Furthermore, assertions or demonstrations of humanitarian neutrality are not heeded or are rejected.⁷ Abandoning neutrality can jeopardise the humanitarian access granted by conflicting parties and obstructs aid actors from supporting those affected by conflict.⁸

The Four Humanitarian Principles



⁷ Leaning, J. (2007). The dilemma of neutrality. *Prehospital and disaster medicine*, 22(5), 418-421.

⁸ Gordon, S., & Donini, A. (2015). Romancing principles and human rights: Are humanitarian principles salvageable? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897-898), 77-109.



Principled Humanitarian Action and Neutrality

The prevailing model of humanitarian action has been founded on four key principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Traditionally, organisations can only be considered legitimate, or ‘truly humanitarian’ if they adhere to these principles. More recently, however, these principles have faced greater scrutiny and are being increasingly challenged within the humanitarian sector—none more so than the principle of neutrality.

While the legal foundation for neutrality may not be universally recognised, it still wields significant influence on the behaviour of states acting as humanitarian entities.⁹ Therefore, as Gordon and Donini suggest, examining this principle signifies a continuous and profound effort to clarify the essential elements of an ethical foundation rooted in humanity, compassion, and solidarity.¹⁰

Challenges with principled humanitarian action

Humanitarian organisations have embraced humanitarian principles as an imperative guiding framework for their interventions. From their perspective, upholding humanitarian principles is not just a matter of rhetoric; it directly impacts their credibility and ability to negotiate safe access with relevant stakeholders and conflicting parties. It is crucial for humanitarian actors to translate their commitment into action. Despite various pressures to compromise on these principles, such as using the administration of aid for political gains, maintaining a principled approach to humanitarian action is seen as paramount for effectiveness. OCHA explains:



“Communicating clearly about humanitarian principles and ensuring that we act in accordance with them, is key to gaining acceptance by all relevant actors on the ground for humanitarian action to be carried out. It thus helps to ensure access to affected populations and the safety of humanitarian personnel and beneficiaries. Sustained access in turn reinforces humanitarian principles in practice, for example allowing them to directly undertake and monitor the distribution of goods to suffering populations, thus ensuring aid is distributed impartially and reaches those most in need.”¹¹

Thus, engaging in negotiations with all conflict parties solely for humanitarian purposes is vital. This includes ongoing dialogue with non-state armed groups. In effect, humanitarian principles serve as the foundation for such negotiations, facilitating access in practice.

Despite common agreement on the benefits of invoking the humanitarian principles, particularly in hard-to-reach areas, there is not a universally agreed-upon approach to operationalising them within the humanitarian community or the UN. This means that humanitarians have to adapt

⁹ Mačák, K. (2015). A matter of principle (s): The legal effect of impartiality and neutrality on States as humanitarian actors. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897-898), 157-181.

¹⁰ Gordon, S., & Donini, A. (2015). Romancing principles and human rights: Are humanitarian principles salvageable? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897-898), 77-109.

¹¹ OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles, OCHA, April 2010. See also, for example, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991)¹⁰ and Resolution 58/114 (2004); *Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement)*, and the 1994 Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief.



No idea in the humanitarian world has created more confusion than neutrality.”



their application of the principles based on the extent to which external actors, such as donors, local authorities, and community leaders, understand them and how they align these principles with their interests. As an interviewee explained, “I’ve learned that it’s not about doing the right thing from a human level, or from a humanity point of view. It’s about doing the right thing from a political point of view.”

According to Labbe and Daudin, “one reason why the principles are so difficult to implement is their success. Humanitarian action has never taken place in a political vacuum – it has always been politicized and instrumentalized – but emphasizing the apolitical and near-sacrosanct nature of the principles has laid bare a number of tensions and paradoxes within the sector.”¹² This was illustrated by an interviewee who said, “to a certain extent, I think it’s fine to have these tensions as long as you’re up front about them. We need to be up front about our limits. I think the politics behind it and the political context we work in means that we are coming from a position of weakness all the time, between a rock and a hard place.”

While “principled humanitarian action continues to guide humanitarian interventions, the confluence of operational realities, such as deliberate and recurrent violations of IHL and IHRL, restricted or otherwise prohibited access, politicization of assistance, and insecurity of staff... significantly constrain and limit international interventions.”¹³ And yet, despite “solid evidence that the principled approach tends to produce more positive outcomes in the long run, humanitarian actors, driven by emergency and short-term pragmatism, often limit the use of principles that can be difficult to explain or demonstrate – particularly neutrality and impartiality – which in practice may lead to prioritizing and compromising some principles for the sake of others.”¹⁴

Defining neutrality

The complexity of neutrality in humanitarian action is evident, with divergent perspectives shaping debates within the field. Indeed, as Pictet famously wrote, “no idea in the humanitarian world has created more confusion than neutrality.”¹⁵

Neutrality in humanitarian action involves abstaining from taking sides in conflicts or engaging in activities that might appear to support or hinder any of the conflicting parties.¹⁶

¹² Labbe, J., & Daudin, P. (2015). “Applying the humanitarian principles: Reflecting on the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross.” *International Review of the Red Cross*.

¹³ Svoboda, E. (2015, August). *Strengthening Access and Proximity to Serve the Needs of the People in Conflict*. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Report, ODI.

¹⁴ Tronc, E. (2018). *The Humanitarian Imperative: Compromises and Prospects in Protracted Conflicts*. Пути к миру и безопасности, (1 (54)), 54-66.; See also Haver, K., & Carter, W. (2016). *What it Takes: Principled Pragmatism to Enable Access and Quality Humanitarian Aid in Insecure Environments*. Final Report of the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme. Humanitarian Outcomes, London; Conflict Dynamics International (CDI). (2017, July). *Negotiating Humanitarian Access: Guidance for Humanitarian Negotiators*. Access Brief No. 2.

¹⁵ Pictet, J. (1979). *The fundamental principles of the Red Cross*. *International Review of the Red Cross* (1961-1997), 19(210), 130-149.

¹⁶ Barnett, M., & Weiss, T. G. (Eds.). (2008). *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Barnett, M. (2011). *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

“ Can one be a humanitarian, acting within the framework of protection, and actually ever be ‘neutral’? ”

Proponents of neutrality contend that it enables organisations to deliver aid independently without reliance on military assistance, for example. This enhances their effectiveness in providing essential resources to those in need.¹⁷

In the current dynamic political environment, however, there is a lack of common understanding on the notion of neutrality. Despite relying on widely accepted definitions and frameworks,¹⁸ debate continues on the exact interpretation of the principle, its significance in today’s context, and the practical methods for its application in conflict situations. As Leaning writes, “Can one denounce and still be neutral? Can one protect civilians and not denounce? Can one be a humanitarian, acting within the framework of protection, and actually ever be ‘neutral’?”¹⁹ How can organisations engage with all sides of a conflict ‘equally’? Is neutrality essential to the humanitarian gesture? How can one remain neutral when confronted with violence and injustice?

Tied to this, challenges persist in navigating the practical application of neutrality, as highlighted by ongoing discussions in the humanitarian community. Some critics characterise neutrality as constraining organisations’ ability to engage in societal transformation, viewing it as a hindrance to proactive involvement in addressing underlying political issues²⁰ or as “a straitjacket for a number of organizations working in the humanitarian field. It confines their activism in changing societies, precisely because this type of engagement might be of a political nature.”²¹ While maintaining neutrality is often advocated as essential for effective humanitarian responses, there are dissenting opinions suggesting it could potentially worsen human suffering.²² This divergence ignites ongoing debates within the humanitarian community on the relevance of impartiality and neutrality.

Interviews with expert practitioners revealed a range of lively and diverse perspectives, reflecting the broader debate on this issue. Some interviewees interpreted neutrality through an ethical and moral lens in line with principled humanitarian action. One participant explained that “neutrality is abstaining from bringing an advantage (information, arms, material support, etc.) that can alter the balance of power in conflict, which humanitarians must adopt out of righteousness and rigour, but not out of concern of gaining or maintaining humanitarian access. Neutrality and impartiality are the only way to gain the trust of belligerents you are engaging with.” Another characterised neutrality as a fundamentally political principle: “Neutrality is a political principle of humanitarian action, that you politically commit to stepping back from the ideology and interests of the conflict, declaring your political neutrality in word and thought and deed.”

¹⁷ Barnett, M., & Weiss, T. G. (Eds.). (2008). *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Barnett, M. (2011). *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Donini, A. (2020). Decolonisation. In A. De Lauri (Ed.), *Humanitarianism: Keywords* (pp. 40–42). Brill; Labbé, J., & Daudin, P. (2015). Applying the humanitarian principles: Reflecting on the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897-898), 183-210; Healy, S. (2021). Neutrality: Principle or Tool?. *Humanitarian Practice Network*.

¹⁸ OCHA on Message: *Humanitarian Principles*, OCHA, April 2010.

¹⁹ Leaning, J. (2007). The dilemma of neutrality. *Prehospital and disaster medicine*, 22(5), 418-421.

²⁰ Labbé, J., & Daudin, P. (2015). Applying the humanitarian principles: Reflecting on the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897-898), 183-210.

²¹ Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2016). Coming Clean on Neutrality and Independence: The Need to Assess the Application of Humanitarian Principles. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97.

²² See, for example, Terry, F. (2003). *Condemned to Repeat?: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*. Sydney Papers, The, 15(2), 1-9; Barnett, M. (2011). *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

A national staff member of an LNGO explained how this extends to humanitarian activity in the digital space: “If you post anything related to government or anything related to a political problem, or political issue, your neutrality is not reflect[ed] there because you are now a politician. So, you cannot just post anything. Your neutrality is even online, in other words. It’s important to keep [that] in mind.” Another participant inevitably connected neutrality to impartiality and providing aid on the basis of need, describing it as being “equidistant” from the warring parties, while asserting that “we’re not taking sides in this war, but we are on the sides of the people who are suffering from it.”

Another practitioner added, “Neutrality entails treating all parties equally and refraining from taking sides, while still fulfilling our mandate. For instance, if our mandate involves advocating for the community, then we proceed accordingly. However, the approach we adopt is a separate matter, focusing on negotiation and advocacy strategies—whether open, covert, public, appealing to others’ values, or denouncing actions—as deemed appropriate.”

By contrast, some interviewees referred to neutrality as an “instrumental” principle, an “ethical forcefield,” or a “means to an end,” suggesting it is valued primarily for its practical benefits rather than its inherent worth. One interviewee described neutrality as a “vehicle” for humanitarian actions, used to establish trust and acceptance from the conflicting parties to facilitate operations. Yet another elaborated that neutrality should not be seen as a moral stance but rather as an operational posture: “I think the huge difference and where most people get neutrality wrong, is they think it’s a moral position. They think there is something intrinsically important about being neutral for the sake of being neutral. And this is completely wrong. Neutrality is an operational posture. It’s an adoption of a position where you abstain from judging the rights and wrongs of what people are doing in order to have access.”

One participant tried to encapsulate this viewpoint, arguing that humanitarian principles “should be used pragmatically, not dogmatically”, comparing them to a “business card or a symbol that all can recognise, but not a guide”. The participant concluded that this pragmatism often leads to “nuances, variations, and reorientations” that can dilute the meaning and implementation of neutrality.

Another interviewee provided the following example from Rwanda that illustrates how neutrality can be approached pragmatically in complex conflict environments:

“The [head of an INGO] would go out in the ambulance and pick up wounded Tutsi [an ethnic group targeted during the Rwandan genocide] and put them in the back and would have to negotiate his way through a series of checkpoints to reach medical aid. So, he would grab a couple of beers from the ambulance, and he would go and sit with these guys who still have blood dripping off their machetes, and he would sit and talk with them. The revulsion he felt, the horror of what they were doing; he put it all aside because his purpose was to get that ambulance through the checkpoint and to save the people inside.”

Rwanda

A father searches for his missing child during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. This violent uprising presented many challenges to humanitarian principles for aid workers.

British Red Cross

Issues with applying neutrality

Humanitarian action is rarely driven by needs alone.²³ Demonstrating neutrality is intended to “create trust that no agendas other than a humanitarian one are pursued. Those in power must have the confidence that humanitarian actors will not take a stance on the types of issues noted in the definition of neutrality.”²⁴ A range of factors, including access, security considerations, internal policies, funding availability, coordination challenges, and logistical considerations all play a significant role in the calculation of aid delivery. Therefore, a humanitarian organisation’s ability to provide assistance and its approaches to demonstrating neutrality depend on its capacity to balance all of these aspects, as well as balancing needs and perceptions to maintain acceptance.

The organisational challenge, then, is in the balance between an organisation’s mandate and autonomy and the priorities of the community—a recurring theme in both the interviews and the literature. The aid community often stresses the importance of putting beneficiaries first, even if it requires making significant compromises on principles such as impartiality and neutrality, ultimately allowing political actors to use their efforts. However, such concessions can diminish the long-term access and credibility of humanitarian organisations to carry out principled operations in the field. In many instances, humanitarians accept specific conditions set by state authorities, even when these conditions significantly limit their operational access, whether temporarily or indefinitely.²⁵

To what extent should humanitarians accommodate a situation, even if it results in restricted access to vulnerable populations, a reduced ability to gather essential data, a decline in the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, or a compromise in principled humanitarian action? What factors should we consider when determining which concessions to make?

One national aid worker interviewed illustrated this dilemma in his work in Syria: “We had practitioners who were working for an organisation that was managing refugees in the context of the Syrian conflict, and they felt that the government of this particular country was working to send—well, to forcibly send—refugees back. This was a personal dilemma, and it was difficult to remain principled in carrying out the mandate of the organisation, which was to protect refugees, while knowing that there were incentives posed by the government to get them to go back forcibly.”

Another national NGO worker spoke about a similar dilemma: “We faced similar situations in South Sudan where we are being targeted by certain groups, certain parties to the conflict, and generally, they are demanding certain parts of the aid. And based on need, based on vulnerability assessment, those people may not qualify. But in order to be able to get to those other people that would be extremely exposed, you tend to find yourself as an organisation or as individuals giving up on certain principles that you ordinarily would not.”

Often, when the perceived risk is too high, certain humanitarian agencies choose to prioritise aid delivery in safer regions. Consequently, the distribution of aid can be perceived to favour regions controlled by conflict parties supported by Western powers. Moreover, the extent of humanitarian assistance in these areas affected by war is lower than it may seem at first glance. This is because while aid groups tend to persist in the country despite facing attacks, they diminish and scale back

²³ See, for example, Calhoun, C. (2008). The imperative to reduce suffering: Charity, progress, and emergencies in the field of humanitarian action. *Humanitarianism in question: Politics, power, ethics*, 73-97; Kevlihan, R., DeRouen Jr, K., & Biglaiser, G. (2014). Is US humanitarian aid based primarily on need or self-interest? *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 839-854; Komenská, K. (2017). Moral motivation in humanitarian action. *Human Affairs*, 27(2), 145-154; Narang, N. (2016). Forgotten conflicts: Need versus political priority in the allocation of humanitarian aid across conflict areas. *International Interactions*, 42(2), 189-216.

²⁴ Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2016). Coming Clean on Neutrality and Independence: The Need to Assess the Application of Humanitarian Principles. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97.

²⁵ Тронс, Е. (2018). The Humanitarian Imperative: Compromises and Prospects in Protracted Conflicts. *Пути к миру и безопасности*, (1 (54)).

their operations on the ground. Instead, they resort to new methods of delivering aid which are often less effective.²⁶

This approach undermines principled humanitarian action in the areas where it is most urgently needed. As one national aid worker explained, “We need to deliver services to people that are mostly affected. We must not take part with the government or the armed youth because we don’t want to be in a scenario where we’re also part of the problem, or like we are taking sides. We try to be neutral so that we are not part of the problem, but our aim is to address the challenges that the children and mothers are facing. If we are not careful then the humanitarian aid that we are giving cannot go to the people that are most affected by the conflict.”

Speaking out: consequences for neutrality

When organisations engage in advocacy, this can impact perceptions of their neutrality. Organisations may face challenges in terms of collective action and decision-making about when and how to speak out. With the rise in violence, humanitarian organisations are increasingly condemning attacks publicly, actively engaging in advocacy campaigns and displaying strong stances on the protection of humanitarian and health workers.²⁷

Local humanitarian workers may share information online about the conditions in a particular country or atrocities they have witnessed. This presents additional obstacles to upholding perceptions of neutrality. This can be seen through social media platforms’ ability to mirror and amplify marginalisation, violence, and other violations. Social media in particular, “has occupied an ambivalent space within narratives of the formal humanitarian sector over the past decade.”²⁸ While some social media users might aim to raise awareness and advocate for the safety of aid workers and civilians, their actions could unintentionally challenge the perceived neutrality of humanitarian groups. One interviewee reflected on the role of social media in his work in Iraq, “When there is a kind of negotiation to get two parties together, the audience of both parties are just maybe influenced by [social media] posts, these pages, which may encourage hate, encourage segregation, securitisation, all of these issues. For me, social media can play a negative role in the process of negotiation.”

Furthermore, such public advocacy could provoke negative reactions from local authorities or armed factions, endangering both the security and acceptance of humanitarian personnel. A recent report²⁹ by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) underscored the security and reputational risks associated with social media use in humanitarian contexts. The report raised concerns regarding the potential escalation of discussions into hate speech or dissemination of false information. Additionally, there was apprehension about the risks faced by individuals if they were identified during interactions with humanitarian workers, including being targeted by hostile parties or subjected to exploitative practices. Humanitarian agencies also grappled with challenges concerning their reputation and the prospect of coordinated smear campaigns challenging their impartiality or legitimacy. Such campaigns could lead to tangible security risks and resource diversion. Consequently, some organisations opted to limit their presence on public social media platforms to mitigate these risks.³⁰

²⁶ Stoddard, A., Jillani, S., Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D., & Klimentov, V. (2017). Out of reach: how insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from accessing the neediest. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 6(1).

²⁷ See, for example, Ndiaye, A., Gauthier, L., Gosselin, C., Queval, C., Salavert, L., & Tropea, J. (2023, August 19). The risks we face are beyond human comprehension: Advancing the protection of humanitarian and health workers. ACF, MdM and HI.

²⁸ Lough, O. (2022) Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response. HPG working paper. London: Overseas Development Institute.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Some organisations, while supporting advocacy goals, hesitate to speak out publicly due to potentially high costs for their operations and presence in an area. This could include security risks, as well as the loss of local acceptance, the perception of neutrality, and access. As Brauman writes, “it might be more morally correct to condemn the atrocities witnessed by humanitarian workers than to ‘not take sides in a political controversy’, but we cannot ignore the fact that such condemnation amounts to taking a side in the controversy.”³¹

Interviewees emphasised that the challenge of speaking out publicly—also referred to as *témoignage*—lies in an organisation’s capacity to engage in political controversies. One practitioner explained that the concept of neutrality hinges on the organisation’s mandate. For instance, if one organisation aims to provide medical care in all areas by setting up field hospitals, their mandate may not include publicly denouncing atrocities. Conversely, if a protection organisation is tasked with safeguarding children and urging parties to cease violence against them, they may document and report violations of children’s rights, even if doing so complicates their access to certain areas. In this case, they may not consider that they are taking sides, but are rather presenting their observations based on their mandate.

Some interviewees indicated that an NGO’s stance and willingness to publicly condemn or speak out on issues can vary based on concerns about potential negative impacts on fundraising efforts. For instance, organisations receiving funding from the US government for humanitarian operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, or those hesitating to address or delaying discussions about a ceasefire in Gaza, may adjust their approach in accordance with the larger political climate. As a result, many opt to lean toward silence, until the costs of not speaking out publicly significantly outweigh the costs of remaining silent.



UNOCHA/Viviane Rakotoarivony

Madagascar

Médecins du Monde is an international humanitarian organisation which provides medical care. Its mandate also includes bearing witness to obstacles to health care and advocating for change by giving a voice to vulnerable people.

³¹ Brauman, R. (2019). Oases of humanity and the realities of war: Uses and misuses of international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1(2), 43-50.



The Role of Acceptance in Maintaining Neutrality

As part of efforts to reinforce the principle of neutrality, acceptance plays an integral role in humanitarian activities. In contexts fraught with insecurity and political sensitivities, achieving acceptance is paramount for upholding humanitarian principles and ensuring the safety of aid workers. As one interviewee noted, acceptance remains a “cornerstone” of humanitarian operations, particularly in highly politicised contexts. Acceptance fosters positive engagement with local communities and authorities to mitigate risks and ensure the safety of aid workers.

From an operational level, acceptance-based strategies seek to minimise the probability of deliberate attacks by diminishing or eliminating incentives for such incidents.³² Historically, humanitarian organisations have relied on a degree of positive appreciation of their efforts. This enabled them to secure ‘acceptance’ by communities, authorities, and other local actors as a by-product of their ongoing humanitarian actions.³³ However, acceptance as an operational and security strategy has since become significantly more challenging. This is particularly evident in polarised contexts such as Ukraine, Cameroon, or Syria, where humanitarian operations are increasingly constrained.



Key definitions:

Acceptance: Acceptance is a key security and access strategy. It refers to the willingness of beneficiaries, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders to receive humanitarian and development NGOs into their communities. NGOs should actively cultivate and maintain consent from local stakeholders to enable continued acceptance. This in turn will support NGO access to vulnerable populations and allow them to undertake programme activities.

Factors shaping acceptance

According to Childs,³⁴ acceptance of humanitarian aid exhibits a wide range. At one end of the scale is mere tolerance. At the other is genuine appreciation. Acceptance is influenced by three primary factors:

- 1 The quantity and quality of the aid provided
- 2 The perceived value of the aid by potential adversaries
- 3 The social distance between these adversaries and the recipients of aid

³² Van Brabant, K. (2000). *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies*. Good Practice Review 8.

³³ Childs, Adam K. (2013). “Cultural Theory and Acceptance-Based Security Strategies for Humanitarian Aid Workers.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 1: 64-72.

³⁴ Ibid.

Among these factors, aid agencies, also known as ‘providers,’ have control only over the quantity and quality of aid. The other two factors rely on the aid recipients, or ‘receivers.’

The effectiveness of this strategy can be assessed in terms of the efforts made by both the ‘provider’ and ‘receiver’ of acceptance. The aid agency, usually the ‘provider,’ depends on its operations to gain acceptance. Organisations may choose to engage in various targeted activities at different levels to increase the possibility and extent of acceptance from the ‘receiver’. While aid itself cannot directly guarantee acceptance, proactive communication and involvement with community members and local leaders can raise awareness about the aid provided. It can also potentially reinforce perceptions of a principled humanitarian presence. These efforts can enhance organisational acceptance while minimising risks.³⁵

In certain scenarios, these factors can reduce acceptance levels to the point where the risk of targeted attacks becomes intolerable. The inability of aid agencies to bridge the social distance between potential attackers and beneficiaries stems from humanitarian principles that prioritise impartial aid distribution based solely on need. Additionally, the level of acceptance garnered through aid activities depends on how potential threats perceive the value of the aid, which can be influenced by highly subjective evaluations.

Additional factors that influence acceptance were highlighted by interviewees. These include whether agencies can follow local customs and norms and how actively they engage with and include communities in decision-making and delivery processes. Furthermore, it is important that they cultivate a positive track record or ‘legacy’ of programming over years of operational presence. They must also uphold a reputation for delivering quality programming in a principled manner. They should demonstrate transparency and accountability. And finally, it is vital that they maintain collaborative engagement and coordination with local authorities.

As noted by participants, acceptance hinges on aid organisations’ ability to demonstrate their good will and commitment to providing aid and support to communities, despite facing internal and external pressures. As such, perceptions play a critical role. However, recent conflicts have seen a departure from this clear distinction. Organisations continue to operate within environments characterised by significant political sensitivities, where the politicisation or exploitation of aid has significant implications on the erosion of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. An organisation’s capacity to demonstrate and maintain a neutral stance provides assurances to the community that it is not influenced by non-humanitarian motives or functioning as a tool for broader political interests.

Acceptance challenges and security management

Practically speaking, acceptance holds a dual function. On the one hand, it remains a legal requirement, or “consent” according to IHL. On the other hand, it remains an operational necessity for the deployment of humanitarian actions. IHL requires formal acceptance, in the form of state approval for external humanitarian aid to be deployed within its borders, although states cannot deny this support arbitrarily.

While state consent establishes the legal foundation for humanitarian access, it does not guarantee acceptance of humanitarian operations by all parties on the ground. It does not safeguard aid workers from attacks or other acts of malintent either. Nor does it preclude humanitarian action from taking place anyway, as is the case for NGOs that follow the doctrine of working “without borders.” The established international moral and legal structure designed to protect humanitarian workers during conflicts is already fragile. But it becomes even weaker when there are perceptions or misinformation/disinformation pertaining to possible political and military links between these humanitarian organisations and one party to the conflict. Military actors

³⁵ Ibid.

and non-state armed groups have exploited these perceived connections to rationalise attacks, claiming that they are morally justified and valid military objectives.³⁶

An atmosphere of distrust, suspicion, and fear on the part of authorities or communities in multiple conflicts, along with the spread of misinformation and disinformation, has further complicated acceptance. In these contexts, there has always been a certain level of mistrust towards international actors, who are often perceived as outsiders. In these contexts, the security ramifications of acceptance are diverse. A community’s readiness to share information and intervene to prevent or mitigate security incidents is dependent on factors such as trust, respectful engagement, transparency, and a willingness to engage locally.³⁷

In other cases, attacks on humanitarian actors can stem from motives rooted more in criminality and financial gain rather than political considerations.³⁸ One interviewee highlighted significant, and highly visible instances, from medical programmes in Afghanistan and Haiti. In their view, adherence to humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality and impartiality, resulted in deliberate attacks in these locations. They argued that publicly expressing neutrality and impartiality in providing medical care to all, including potential armed actors, led certain individuals to perceive humanitarian organisations as aligning with their adversaries, thus prompting attacks on medical facilities.

One interviewee highlighted that access is not only determined by geographic area but also by the degree of resistance to the programme. To obtain and maintain access, frontline humanitarians might have to make difficult compromises that have reverberating effects locally, in other contexts, or across the humanitarian system. If a compromise is made in one location, it can set a precedent that raises expectations or is cited by actors in another, potentially escalating issues. This challenge extends beyond individual organisations to the sector as a whole, underscoring the importance of having aligned, if not coordinated, approaches. Navigating this uncertain terrain—where the principles are negotiated, and their role is to provide some protection and integrity in challenging conditions—has important implications for how humanitarian actors are viewed and protected.

Establishing acceptance among diverse stakeholders is therefore vital for effective programming and security management, particularly in volatile and rapidly evolving contexts.³⁹ Yet, this process can be time intensive. It relies on multiple factors, including maintaining positive and constructive relationships, adhering to principles and international legal frameworks, and delivering relevant and quality programmes.

It is thus essential to differentiate between whether an organisation has acceptance and whether that acceptance effectively prevents or lessens attacks. Risks in these contexts cannot be eliminated. So, practitioners advocate for more open and transparent dialogue about individual, organisational, and sectoral risk thresholds and risk sharing. However, this has been a source of debate, particularly in considering the degree of risk that INGOs and their donors decide to off-set by partnering with LNGOs, rather than potentially risk-sharing (see section on [security risk transfer to local actors](#)).

³⁶ Stoddard, A. (2020). Today’s Wars and the Challenge to Humanitarian Neutrality. In: *Necessary Risks*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Stoddard, A. (2020). Today’s Wars and the Challenge to Humanitarian Neutrality. *Necessary Risks: Professional Humanitarianism and Violence against Aid Workers*, 21-44.

³⁹ Fast, L., et al. (2015). “The Promise of Acceptance as an NGO Security Management Approach,” *Disasters*, 39(2).

‘Blurred lines’: impacts on neutrality and acceptance

Some NGOs working in conflict-affected areas have faced criticism for exacerbating confusion of ‘blurred lines’ between humanitarian efforts and other agendas.⁴⁰ This is particularly evident with INGOs, which tend to be multi-mandated, or work on development-type activities alongside or prior to the outbreak of humanitarian crises.

Moreover, the distinctions between military, political, and humanitarian operations have contributed to this blurring due to policy and operational concepts such as ‘integrated missions’ and the ‘triple nexus’.⁴¹

In situations where humanitarian actors are perceived by one or more conflict parties or specific segments of the population as ‘not neutral’ or being instrumentalised for advancing political agendas, reaching and assisting vulnerable populations becomes increasingly difficult and sometimes unattainable. Additionally, this diminishes trust among local communities towards humanitarian actors, potentially leading them to self-censor and opt out of accessing aid services. This suspicion also exposes humanitarian workers to greater risks, making them susceptible to targeting.⁴² One practitioner explained, “I think [local authorities] have conspiracy ideas...they think 100 per cent about security issues. So, we start communication and try to convince them of the work that we are undertaking, that we are not here to do anything, just to help and assist those children because they are living in terrible conditions. It takes a long time to persuade those actors that we are neutral so that they can grant us access to enter and provide the assistance.”

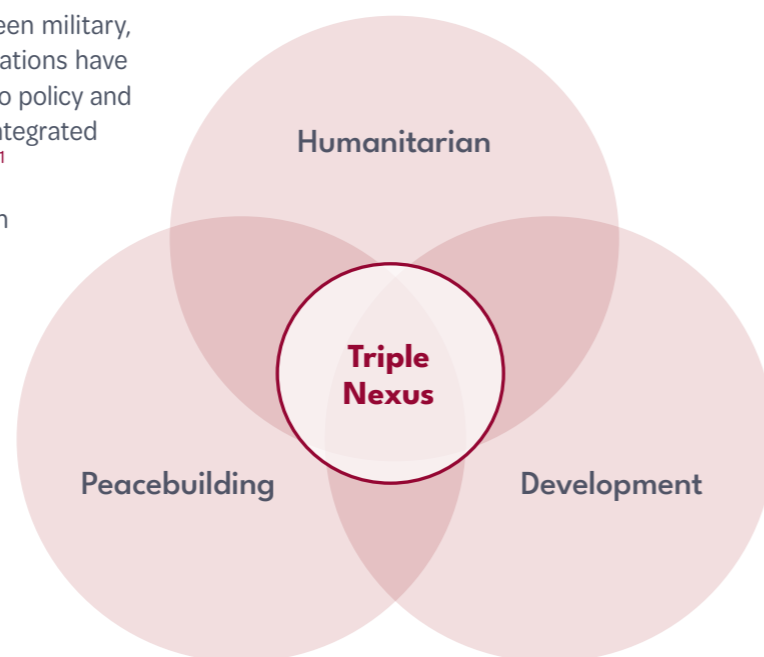
One interviewee provided a separate take on the issue, with a focus on child programming: “It is entirely understandable that people harbour suspicions when outsiders suddenly appear to offer help, especially when it involves children. These suspicions often stem from past experiences, such as instances of child exploitation or programmes being imposed on communities without their consent. As a result, when new actors arrive, there is a natural tendency for suspicion to arise.”

The notion of a ‘universal ethos’ associated with the Western NGO system further complicates matters. Indeed, the concept of universality itself is now questioned, as grounded in a form of universality aligned with Western values. The discrepancy in how principles are perceived becomes apparent when contrasting traditional Western humanitarian action with other geopolitical actors,

⁴⁰ Hofman, M., & Delauney, S. (2010). Special report – Afghanistan: a return to humanitarian action.

⁴¹ Pinnock, G. (2018). ‘Unblurring Boundaries’: Opportunities for Clarity in the Humanitarian-Development Nexus Discourse [Conference Paper]. International Humanitarian Studies Association; McGoldrick, C. (2011). The future of humanitarian action: an ICRC perspective. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 965–991.

⁴² Donini, A. (2011). Between a rock and a hard place: integration or independence of humanitarian action? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 141–157; Schwendimann, F. (2011). The legal framework of humanitarian access in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 993–1008; Terry, F. (2011). The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: reasserting the neutrality of humanitarian action. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 173–188.



“ When new actors arrive, there is a natural tendency for suspicion to arise. ”

such as China and India. The divergence in perspectives on neutrality between Western actors and these emerging players underscores the understanding that Western ideals are bundled into a broader package shaping humanitarian efforts in diverse cultural contexts, particularly as Western actors continue to ‘call the shots.’

The challenge with maintaining neutrality stems from ongoing perceptions that actors in the Global North are inherently aligned with an imperialist agenda tied to a broader Western liberal project. As a result, the identity of humanitarians makes it challenging for certain groups to view them as neutral, given the broader political positioning associated with being perceived as ‘Western.’ Secondly, authorities may see INGOs as non-neutral because, in their efforts to remain neutral and impartial, they engage with groups perceived as threats to state sovereignty.





Navigating Access Challenges

Parameters of humanitarian access

'Humanitarian access' refers to the freedom and safety of individuals in need to move without interference, acquire necessary goods and services, and access aid. It also refers to the ability of humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance and protection to communities, aligning with the humanitarian principles. The concept of humanitarian access surpasses mere physical reach. It includes the autonomy or independence to assess needs, provide assistance without interference, and safeguard rights. Grounded in the core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, humanitarian access strives to alleviate suffering and preserve human dignity during a crisis, wherever the needs are most dire.

The international legal framework⁴³ functions as a mechanism ensuring humanitarian access. It plays a vital role for frontline negotiators to establish consensus on access agreements. Within this framework, explicit obligations and rights are outlined for all parties involved in armed conflicts, encompassing states not directly engaged in the conflict and humanitarian actors. It also sets the conditions for whether humanitarian actors can achieve access to individuals in need. By offering an impartial set of regulations, the legal framework provides a shared reference point that diverse actors can use individually or collectively to secure and sustain access.⁴⁴ Many organisational and guidance materials emphasise the importance of integrating norms, especially the humanitarian principles, into access negotiations.⁴⁵ In situations where the need for humanitarian aid is ongoing, the term should encompass not only the initial access necessary for the effective delivery of goods and services but also a continuous maintenance of access for as long as it remains necessary.⁴⁶

Despite the humanitarian principles and legal norms, establishing a clear and comprehensive understanding of what defines meaningful access in hard-to-reach areas remains challenging. While it is relatively easy to pinpoint cases where access is outright denied, determining the 'acceptable' level of access, along with the necessary compromises and limitations, becomes a subjective issue that depends on individual or organisational judgment.

⁴³ According to IHL GC 4 Rule 55, access refers to allowing the free passage of medical and hospital supplies designated solely for civilians, as well as essential food, clothing, and tonics for children under 15, expectant mothers, and maternity cases. Additional Protocol I extends this obligation to include rapid and unimpeded passage of all relief supplies, equipment, and personnel. This expansion is widely accepted, even by states not initially party to Additional Protocol I. Additionally, access is supported by customary international human rights law, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), although it primarily pertains to access to services facilitating the enjoyment of rights rather than providing a specific definition related to humanitarian action.

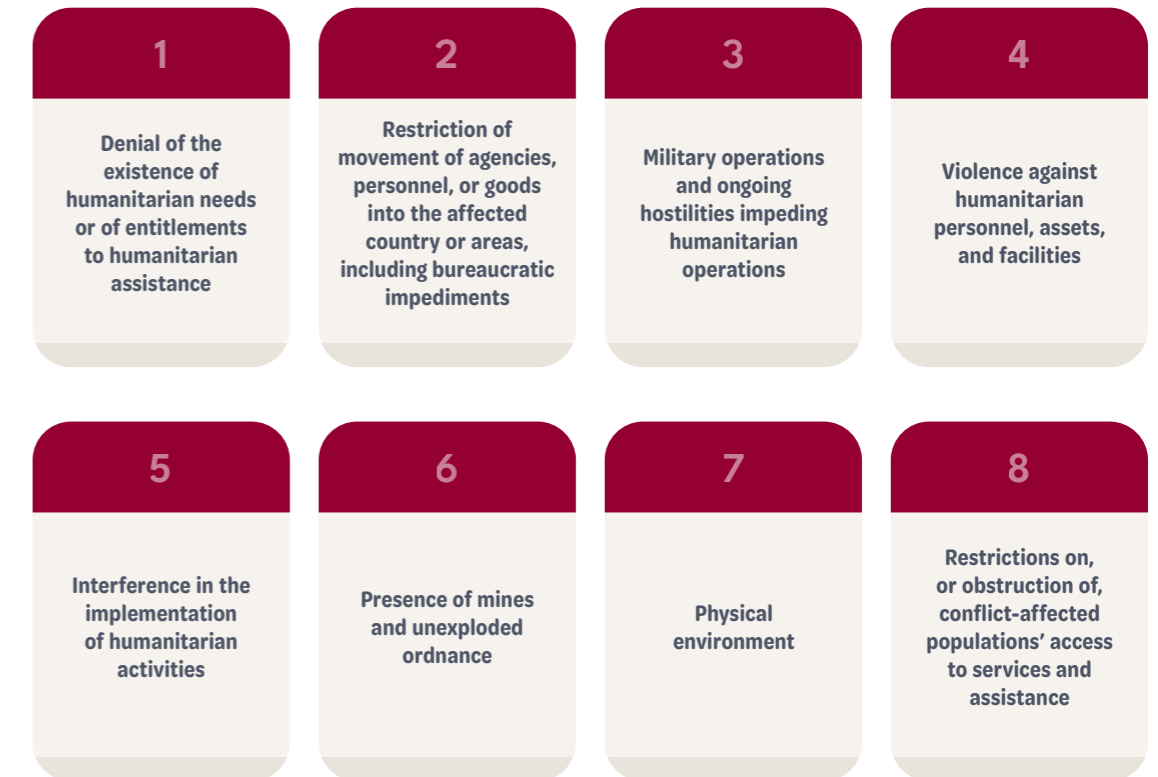
⁴⁴ Schwendimann, F. (2011). The legal framework of humanitarian access in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 993-1008.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Grace, R. (2020). Humanitarian negotiation with parties to armed conflict: The role of laws and principles in the discourse. *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 11(1), 68-96.

⁴⁶ Schwendimann, F. (2011). The legal framework of humanitarian access in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 993-1008.

In many ways, defining access often involves considering the barriers to access, which are broadly classified into eight dimensions.⁴⁷

Eight barriers to access



Each of these obstacles leads to a chain of consequences that affect humanitarian outcomes in the concerned country and potentially worldwide. Situations where access is limited require humanitarian organisations to adopt creative tactics to engage in constructive dialogue, establish trust, and educate about their value-add in support of the locally affected populations to key stakeholders to gain access.⁴⁸ In attempting to uphold neutrality, particularly in highly politicised conflicts, humanitarians face several dilemmas. These involve:

- The balance between principled and practical methods
- The conflict between maintaining confidentiality while supporting collaboration among INGOs and LNGOs
- The difficulties of communicating with difficult counterparts, particularly when considering the reverberating effect of compromises made in one context to another.

⁴⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2012). *OCHA Access Monitoring & Reporting Framework*.

⁴⁸ Collinson, S., & Elhawary, S. (2012). *Humanitarian space: Trends and issues*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

The evolution of humanitarian access

As discussed above, to ensure that aid efforts are not viewed as an illegal intrusion into a state's internal matters, humanitarian assistance must align with established humanitarian principles.⁴⁹ While humanitarian organisations faced many access challenges, often due to the process of obtaining state consent, a more centralised approach was established across the humanitarian system, which received political backing from donor governments. This support played a role in gaining the agreement of conflicting parties.⁵⁰ However, a shift in humanitarian intervention was observed by the late 1990s, marked by NATO's assertiveness in Bosnia and Kosovo. This gradually gave way to the concept of UN integrated missions⁵¹ and making "the temptation to utilize humanitarian action for political or military objectives, or to integrate humanitarian action into broader political schemes, is a recurring theme."⁵²



Democratic Republic of the Congo

Members of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) discuss their work. The rise of UN integrated missions has had some impact on the perception of humanitarian action as a political activity.

⁴⁹ See Schaffer, J. (2021). State consent to the provision of humanitarian assistance in non-international armed conflicts. *The University of Queensland Law Journal*, 40(1), 67-89; Schwendimann, F. (2011). The legal framework of humanitarian access in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 993-1008.

⁵⁰ Duffield, M. (2012). Challenging environments: Danger, resilience and the aid industry. *Security dialogue*, 43(5), 475-492.

⁵¹ Donini, A. (2011). Between a rock and a hard place: integration or independence of humanitarian action? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 141-157.

⁵² Donini, A. (2011). Between a rock and a hard place: integration or independence of humanitarian action? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 141-157; Eide, E. B., Kaspersen, A. T., Kent, R., & Von Hippel, K. (2005). Report on integrated missions: Practical perspectives and recommendations. Independent study for the Expanded UN ECHA Core Group.

Since then, negotiated access has evolved from a unified institutional structure for humanitarian entry, formally supported by Western aid diplomacy and on UN notions of neutrality, to various informal and personalised arrangements between agencies in politically fragmented settings.⁵³ In some cases, access negotiations have now splintered and diversified, with agencies aiming for individual or siloed agreements with local influencers and actors.⁵⁴ The absence of even temporary agreements among the parties in protracted conflicts underscores the urgency of partnering with local humanitarian actors. Additionally, the breakdown of collective efforts to secure humanitarian access has driven the exploration of alternative strategies. These include favouring local bilateral agreements, implementing remote management techniques, outsourcing tasks to local partners, and employing private security firms.^{55 56} These approaches have resulted in increased separation between humanitarian organisations and the communities they aim to help. As a result, the burden of responsibility and risks has fallen squarely on local staff and national NGOs, particularly in regions facing significant access challenges or where conditions have become too difficult for INGOs to operate due to insecurity, overly restrictive regulations, or logistical challenges.

Humanitarian aid is now delivered in an increasingly hostile and challenging operational landscape. Security threats are increasing and the humanitarian space is, arguably, more constrained.⁵⁷ Recent data indicates that access constraints led to the withholding of humanitarian assistance in over 80 countries between July and October 2022, depriving crisis-affected populations of urgently needed aid.⁵⁸

The politics of humanitarian access

The presence of humanitarian actors has drawn attention to the challenges in the social context where agencies operate, especially the shortcomings in state services, infrastructure, and capabilities. One interviewee noted, "you had, I think, seven UN officials that were expelled from [a country], because they were vocal about the lack of access, the lack of humanitarian assistance from the government. At the same time, [an INGO] was expelled and [another INGO was] also expelled from the country." This further drives opposition entities, including civil society and non-state armed actors, to highlight the need for aid as a manifestation of the state's weaknesses.

Another interviewee spoke about the challenges of engaging with authorities:

“It's very hard to protect neutrality when you see that a lot of injustice is happening in the communities, sometimes imposed by the state. The state is not doing what they have to do in some places; you see that, and the community tells you that... So you have to take a position where you don't [point] with your finger some guilt, but we're trying to always get a middle place in all these positions. It's hard because governments are always chasing [their] objectives.”

⁵³ Duffield, M. (2012). Challenging environments: Danger, resilience and the aid industry. *Security dialogue*, 43(5), 475-492.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ As one practitioner noted, this is a last resort and is typically only used by the UN. NGOs rarely if ever contract with private security firms.

⁵⁶ See Cockayne, J. (2006). Commercial security in humanitarian and post-conflict settings: An exploratory study. *International Peace Academy*; Rogers, C. (2006). Accessing the inaccessible: The use of remote programming strategies in highly insecure countries to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance - Iraq: a case study. Dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts in Post-War Recovery Studies, University of York; Steets, J., Reichhold, U., & Sagmeister, E. (2012). Evaluation and Review of Humanitarian Access Strategies in DG ECHO Funded Interventions. *Global Public Policy Institute*.

⁵⁷ Collinson, S., & Elhawary, S. (2012). *Humanitarian space: Trends and issues*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

⁵⁸ ACAPS. (2022). *Humanitarian Access Overview 2022*. Geneva.

Sometimes these objectives are not the objectives of the communities and it's hard to find this harmony. Furthermore, policies enforced by national governments, at times unintentionally, may block the distribution of aid to insecure regions, creating an inherent bias in humanitarian aid delivery. A practitioner highlighted the example of Mozambique and Ethiopia, where local government authorities must review and approve beneficiary lists for emergency food distribution. This process grants them the power to restrict or redirect aid to specific communities of their choosing. While this ensures government support for access to distribution, it also introduces an inherent bias into the aid system.

The rise of security-focused governance and increased pressure by authorities over international assistance and public communication have led donors and some humanitarian organisations to refrain from publicly voicing humanitarian and human rights concerns in affected areas. Despite calls for international pressure on belligerent parties to fulfil their legal obligations and meet civilian needs, some⁵⁹ have argued that the more a donor benefits politically from an aid relationship, the less impact naming and shaming have on aid decisions. This may be couched in terms of 'neutrality', though interviewees called this a lack of a "courageous" principled stance. In some cases, donors might even augment aid to a state to compensate for aid lost from other sources and maintain the politically strong relationship.⁶⁰

Donor governments have a further complex and occasionally problematic influence on the presence and extent of humanitarian operations. For instance, one interviewee noted that due to donor pressures, their organisation opted to deliver in areas that are readily accessible, to demonstrate presence and effectiveness, rather than push for principled delivery in harder to reach areas. Likewise, neutrality and impartiality are also at risk of being compromised as funding strategies and regulations discourage programming in territories controlled by opposition forces. Across various contexts, a significant disparity in aid coverage was observed, with a larger portion of aid delivered to areas under government control or aligned with Western interests.⁶¹ This prioritisation of visibility and catering to donor demands over necessity has in effect limited access and undermined core humanitarian principles.

In highly volatile and conflict-ridden environments, humanitarian efforts tend to cluster in relatively secure regions, irrespective of the actual needs in other areas. Notably, this trend diverges in capital cities, where aid organisations establish their headquarters despite the elevated risks aid workers face. Once agencies establish themselves in specific areas, they tend to maintain their operations within this established comfort zone, leading to what is termed 'access inertia.' This means that they are hesitant to expand their reach both geographically and programmatically and stick to the approaches that have worked thus far.⁶²

Another interviewee explained that only a limited number of organisations work in the most difficult environments. Typically fewer than a dozen international NGOs, supported by around twice as many national NGOs in each area, reliably respond to emergencies. These organisations extend their efforts beyond the capital and border regions, operating in the more challenging areas as well. A closer look reveals that only a small number of INGOs are truly present in these hard-to-reach locations.

⁵⁹ See Esarey, J., & DeMeritt, J. H. R. (2017). Political context and the consequences of naming and shaming for human rights abuse. *International Interactions*, 43(4), 589–618; Schaffer, J. (2021). State consent to the provision of humanitarian assistance in non-international armed conflicts. *The University of Queensland Law Journal*, 40(1), 67–89.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Stoddard, A., & Jillani, S. (2016). *The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage*. Final Report of the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme. Humanitarian Outcomes.

⁶² Ibid.

Over the past 10 years, there has been rapid growth in the number of humanitarian organisations. This has led to a saturated market where each entity vies for funding from a finite pool of financial resources.⁶³ As one practitioner explained, an additional complicating factor arises from the increasing demands placed on humanitarian organisations, coupled with diminishing financial resources. These growing expectations often extend far beyond the life-saving mission of humanitarian actors and exceed their areas of expertise. There remains a perception that humanitarian actors are the convenient choice for kickstarting programmes in a country, although this is not always the reality. This situation risks further politicisation of aid, as donors may use it as a pretext to evade their responsibilities. For instance, they might claim to have provided humanitarian relief to Yemen while supporting proxy wars and avoiding difficult political conversations and actions. This expansion has made it crucial to focus on more effective coordination and negotiation strategies to secure humanitarian access.

Restrictive engagement with conflict actors

Today's armed conflicts are characterised by fragmentation and protraction, involving diverse factions, which complicates principled humanitarian action.⁶⁴ This complexity intensifies when enduring crises overlap with natural disasters, as seen in Aceh, Indonesia⁶⁵ and more recently in Ukraine,⁶⁶ Syria, and Afghanistan.



Haiti

When conflict overlaps with natural disasters, this can complicate principled humanitarian action. This can be seen in Haiti – a country which suffers from both regular earthquakes and gang violence.

⁶³ High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing. (2016, January). Report to the Secretary-General: Too important to fail—addressing the humanitarian financing gap.

⁶⁴ Bakke, K. M., Cunningham, K. G., & Seymour, L. J. (2012). A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(2), 265–283.

⁶⁵ Waizenegger, A., & Hyndman, J. (2010). Two solitudes: post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh. *Disasters*, 34(3), 787–808.

⁶⁶ Hook, K., & Marcantonio, R. (2022). Environmental dimensions of conflict and paralyzed responses: the ongoing case of Ukraine and future implications for urban warfare. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 1–29.

Numerous hurdles hinder humanitarian access. These include ongoing hostilities, insecure environments, destruction of vital infrastructure, bureaucratic and administrative impediments,⁶⁷ counterterrorism and sanctions measures,⁶⁸ and deliberate efforts by conflict parties to obstruct access.⁶⁹ Notably, a significant proportion of current armed conflicts falls under the category of non-international conflicts,⁷⁰ exacerbating access challenges due to concerns about threats to state sovereignty.

In situations where states grapple with internal opposition, authorities frequently cite sovereignty as a reason to deny access of aid agencies to civilians under the control of non-state armed groups and vice versa. Concerned parties may disrupt or hinder humanitarian operations by directly attacking humanitarian personnel and/or assets, employing siege tactics and starvation as warfare methods, throwing intentional bureaucratic and administrative impediments in the way, or imposing difficult restrictions on the movement of humanitarian resources and personnel.⁷¹ Although direct engagement with designated groups is not explicitly forbidden, the prevailing uncertainty and risk aversion among humanitarian personnel often discourages them from undertaking essential activities, such as negotiating access to affected areas, due to apprehensions of legal liability and potential prosecution for providing direct assistance to proscribed organisations.⁷² This unintended consequence heightens the risk of aid diversion. It also hinders the principled delivery of humanitarian aid, as “negotiation and development of Memoranda of Understanding with armed groups is often the most effective means to ensure aid is not diverted or misused.”⁷³

Engaging in negotiations and formal agreements with any authority, including state or non-state armed groups, is frequently the most effective way to guard against diversion and intentional direct support that is typically criminalised through material support statutes in donor/host jurisdictions.⁷⁴ One interviewee explained that “when ISIS [the Islamic State] was in control of Raqqa, Western donors stopped providing support to those communities because there was so much fear that ISIS would control or take control of the goods and services, or the cash. But those people often were suffering ‘more’ than other people in opposition-controlled areas. The donors decided it was too risky. The international community is just as guilty, if not even more so, than local organisations in terms of their inability to follow these very basic principles of humanitarian delivery.” It is important to add here that since the onset of the Syria crisis, NGOs and other humanitarian organisations have substantially enhanced their internal due diligence and monitoring systems to prevent instances of aid diversion or manipulation.

Humanitarian efforts face added restrictions due to counter-terrorism laws and sanctions, as governments limit or restrict funding, hindering humanitarian organisations’ ability to assist civilians living in or around the geography in which a designated entity or individual controls.

⁶⁷ See IASC Guidance. (2022, January 10). Understanding and Addressing Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian Action: Framework for a System-wide Approach.

⁶⁸ See IASC Guidance. (2021, September). Impact of Sanctions and Counterterrorism Measures on Humanitarian Operations. Endorsed by IASC Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG).

⁶⁹ See Usmanov, Y., & Vergeles, O. (2022). The problem of humanitarian access in armed conflicts. *Uzhhorod National University Herald. Series: Law*, 69, 461–466; Kurtzer, J. D. (2019). Denial, delay, diversion: Tackling access challenges in an evolving humanitarian landscape. Center for Strategic & International Studies; Schwendimann, F. (2011). The legal framework of humanitarian access in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), 993–1008.

⁷⁰ Crawford, E. (2007). Unequal before the law: the case for the elimination of the distinction between international and non-international armed conflicts. *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 20(2), 441–465.

⁷¹ Schaffer, J. (2021). State consent to the provision of humanitarian assistance in non-international armed conflicts. *The University of Queensland Law Journal*, 40(1), 67–89.

⁷² Kurtzer, J. D. (2019). Denial, delay, diversion: Tackling access challenges in an evolving humanitarian landscape. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

“ The international community is just as guilty, if not even more so, than local organisations in terms of their inability to follow these very basic principles of humanitarian delivery. ”

These restrictions further complicate agencies’ access to populations in remote or non-state-controlled areas.⁷⁵ Additionally, certain clauses in donor agreements impose burdensome conditions on humanitarian agencies, particularly on local implementing partners or national NGOs. Consequently, some organisations accepted limitations imposed by donor governments on operations in areas controlled by designated ‘terrorist’ entities, despite compromising the fundamental principles of neutral and impartial humanitarian action—delivering aid to the most vulnerable,⁷⁶ wherever they are located.⁷⁷

The donor community has shifted its focus. It now places the burden of responsibility on the humanitarian sector to demonstrate compliance and reliability primarily as allies in counter-terrorism efforts, rather than as neutral and principled partners. As expected, this burden has been significantly more pronounced for local partners of large INGOs. In this case, one might consider the case of Hezbollah’s involvement in Lebanon’s political landscape. Hezbollah’s transition from being a designated organisation to holding positions within the government, including the Minister of Public Health, highlights the complexity of this issue. According to one practitioner, donors often overlook the nuanced debate regarding the extent of their engagement with such entities and how much engagement is too much engagement, leaving the burden on agencies.



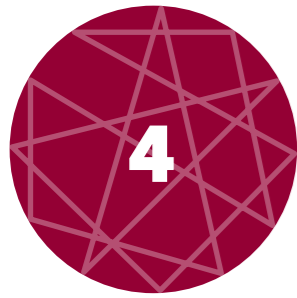
Lebanon

Some countries have political systems which can complicate humanitarian action. For instance, in Lebanon, some parliamentary seats are held by Hezbollah, which is designated as a terrorist group by several countries.

⁷⁵ Modirzadeh, N. K., Lewis, D. A., & Bruderlein, C. (2011). Humanitarian Engagement Under Counter Terrorism: A Conflict of Norms and the Emerging Policy Landscape. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93.

⁷⁶ Charny, J. R. (2019, March 20). Counter-terrorism and Humanitarian Action: The Perils of Zero Tolerance. *War on the Rocks*.

⁷⁷ Ibid.



Localisation: The Solution to Neutrality and Access Challenges?

LNGOs play a critical role in facilitating discussions between humanitarian organisations and parties to the conflict. They often leverage their community ties to support entry into hard-to-reach regions. This enables them to navigate complex dynamics and foster dialogue. Acting as intermediaries, LNGOs bridge the gap between humanitarian agencies and parties to the conflict, promoting understanding, trust, and cooperation.⁷⁸ Additionally, local actors bring valuable contextual knowledge and cultural sensitivity to programming, allowing for more nuanced and effective communication. Their understanding of the local dynamics, power structures, and socio-cultural norms enables them to navigate sensitivities and facilitate constructive dialogue, ultimately leading to improved access for humanitarian actors.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the widespread aims to localise aid and to overcome the challenges of restricted access for INGOs underline the potential for both empowerment and disempowerment of local partners. The advancement of localisation in the context of access primarily hinges on two factors. First, limited international access creates an opening for local actors to use their capabilities in humanitarian operations and, under optimal circumstances, highlight the redundancy of international actions in a given context. As one national actor who was interviewed expressed,

“The big organisations are coming to fight with us, the locals, in the very areas we are working, duplicating efforts, and fighting with us, making us suffocate. I just told one large international structure, ‘You stop that now. You do not come to cause competition among local civil society. You do not come to recreate. You come to meet with regional networks that have been in place as a result of this crisis.’”

Second, given the growing dependence of international actors on local partners, LNGOs may have an opening to leverage their position to advocate for broader localisation goals and more substantial partnerships.⁸⁰

While LNGOs play a crucial role in improving humanitarian access and promoting dialogue in conflict zones, their growing involvement brings both significant challenges and opportunities. The move towards localisation must find a balance between empowering local actors and ensuring they are not overwhelmed or overshadowed by larger international organisations. Achieving effective localisation requires acknowledging and valuing the capabilities and leadership of LNGOs, allowing them to design and drive programming in situations where their knowledge and connections are vital. Such partnerships can lead to more sustainable and culturally sensitive interventions, ultimately enhancing the overall effectiveness and reach of humanitarian aid in hard-to-access areas.

⁷⁸ DuBois, M. (2018). The new humanitarian basics. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute.

⁷⁹ Haddad, S., & Svoboda, E. (2017). What’s the Magic Word? Humanitarian Access and Local Organisations in Syria. Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper.

⁸⁰ Barter, D., & Sumlut, G. M. (2022). The Conflict Paradox: Humanitarian Access, Localisation and (dis) Empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia and Somaliland. Disasters.

Local perspectives on neutrality

While the core principle of neutrality remains central to the humanitarian ethos, its application can and does evolve within the framework of localisation. The implementation of cross-border operations into Syria from neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, for example, raised doubts about the continued relevance of neutrality as a guiding principle. Western donors directed aid predominantly to rebel-controlled territories due to various factors. First, the authorities in Damascus restricted access to both government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas, insisting that all aid pass through their channels. Second, the allocation of aid to non-government-controlled areas aligned with the interests of Western donors. This underscores the significance of understanding the specific context, fostering meaningful partnerships, collectively addressing security issues, and employing acceptance strategies. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to consider how neutrality, along with the humanitarian principles in a broader sense, continues to shape humanitarian efforts and operational choices, especially in areas rife with instability.

Although there might be a general understanding of neutrality and the principles more broadly, the interpretations of these principles have varied. As one interviewee explained, “[local actors] do know what the principles state, however, in their application, they appear to have carved out a local interpretation.” An interviewee running a national NGO in West Africa stated that for local actors, neutrality is a concept “by the mouth, not by the heart” and that neutrality is “meaningless” as a concept for those who are directly impacted by the conflict. They may say that they are neutral and may act in compliance with the principle, but “inside” they may not be able to be “totally neutral.” One interviewee added that “LNGOs are psychologically and institutionally pulled into forces of power that are much more violent and intense than for INGOs. The exteriority to the conflict provides INGOs with certain advantages. We are not more moral or competent, but this is not what makes the difference. It is that the relative externality to the conflict inspires more trust by belligerents.”

From the perspective of local staff, the interviews revealed an opinion that neutrality, seen as a norm imposed by INGOs, the UN system, and, by extension, their donors, is not promoted as a humanitarian value, a professional standard, or even a political position. Instead, neutrality has been conveyed and reported on as a matter of staff “compliance,” as indicated by a national employee of an INGO. In certain cases, and within certain organisations, “violations” of neutrality are dealt with punitively. There were also instances discussed in which consequences for breaching institutional neutrality norms were demonstrated and documented to establish the organisation’s commitment to neutrality to their donors.

This highlights the imbalanced relationship between actors. It also indicates a misunderstanding on the concept of neutrality, influenced by the biases of donors and international actors who have imposed—and enforced—their own interpretations onto this principle. Imposed interpretation may result from assumptions about how neutrality should be applied, disregarding the nuances and complexities of local situations. As a consequence, the misalignment between the interpretations of neutrality by different actors contributes to an unequal power dynamic. The perspectives and needs of local partners may be overshadowed or marginalised in favour of those of influential international actors.

In many non-Western contexts, there is a perception that humanitarian principles are derived from a ‘Western posture’, which is neither relevant nor universal.⁸¹ In certain circumstances, maintaining neutrality becomes challenging when one is deeply ingrained within the community facing the crisis. “Assuming that we can easily dismantle these deeply rooted identities is also unrealistic,” as one practitioner added.

⁸¹ Тронс, Е. (2018). The Humanitarian Imperative: Compromises and Prospects in Protracted Conflicts. Пути к миру и безопасности, (1 (54)), 54-66.

Access disparities between INGOs and LNGOs

Conflict-affected regions facing restricted access exacerbate the divide between local and international humanitarian actors. This is due to several factors, including challenges in aid distribution, increased security threats, and inadequate support for local organisations. Rather than focusing on empowering local partners, international organisations often prioritise addressing their own financial and operational risks. Additionally, donor preferences and limitations hinder the meaningful engagement of local actors in humanitarian efforts. Despite their potential to provide valuable input, involving local actors poses challenges in maintaining neutrality and avoiding alignment with particular ideologies or political agendas.

The concept of the ‘conflict paradox’⁸² highlights how conflict and limited access can perpetuate and worsen disparities between LNGOs and INGOs. This occurs through three interconnected mechanisms. Active conflict zones, like those in Ukraine, Palestine, Somalia, or Syria, are often very challenging to access for international aid groups. This creates challenges when delivering principled humanitarian action while meeting compliance requirements set by donors and various UN Member State laws, policies and practices associated with sanctions, and counter-terrorism measures. This increases the likelihood of logistical issues in aid distribution, compounded by the difficulty in meeting various compliance requirements, such as documentation, vetting, and reporting. Operating and negotiating in such environments poses significant security risks to staff without the extensive support infrastructure afforded to international staff. INGOs, in turn, focus their investments on addressing the financial and operational risks faced by LNGOs rather than supporting operational capacity.⁸³

The interviews revealed mixed feelings about involving local actors in negotiations. While their in-depth knowledge could aid negotiations, there remains concern that they might be seen as aligning with specific ideologies or political concepts, posing potential challenges regarding neutrality. Furthermore, as illustrated by Barter and Sumlut, INGOs fund LNGOs to provide aid in internationally inaccessible areas, presenting this as evidence of their commitment to localisation and fulfilling funding requirements. Having fulfilled localisation criteria in inaccessible regions, INGOs may then directly deliver aid in more accessible and less challenging areas without involving national organisations. This leads to LNGOs working in riskier zones while international agencies operate in easier-to-access areas. Consequently, the hurdles local actors face accentuates the belief that they lack capacity and reinforces the dominance of international aid organisations.⁸⁴

In the case of Syria, one interviewee explained, “you now have little NGOs trying to do everything that the donors want, and I see that the humanitarian principles are getting challenged. Their thinking is, ‘there is all of this need, but what is the donor going to fund? That’s what we’re going to do. That’s what we’re going to write our proposal around, rather than understanding the need.’” Donor-imposed limitations, largely driven by a minimal tolerance for risk, frequently hinder the meaningful engagement of local actors.

Security risk transfer to local actors

Humanitarian work operates within a web of interconnected relationships. These involve aid workers from diverse national backgrounds, those providing and receiving aid, local and national authorities and aid personnel, and donors and staff. Implementing principled programmes directs

⁸² Barter, D., & Sumlut, G. M. (2022). The Conflict Paradox: Humanitarian Access, Localisation and (dis) Empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia and Somaliland. Disasters.

⁸³ Haver, K., & Carter, W. (2016). What it Takes: Principled Pragmatism to Enable Access and Quality Humanitarian Aid in Insecure Environments. Final Report of the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme. Humanitarian Outcomes, London.

⁸⁴ See Barter, D., & Sumlut, G. M. (2022). The Conflict Paradox: Humanitarian Access, Localisation and (dis) Empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia and Somaliland. Disasters.

focus toward these relationships and questions the existing hierarchies and disparities within aid organisations and the system at large. Humanitarian organisations bear both a legal and ethical responsibility to ensure the safety of their staff, particularly those working in the field.⁸⁵ Indeed, many interviewees spoke to the importance of “duty of care” and “do no harm” as it relates to local staff and implementing partners. Yet, while this duty of care applies to all humanitarian personnel, there are notable disparities within and among NGOs concerning the safety of aid workers in high-risk and politicised contexts.

Some have argued that ‘local leadership’ serves as a euphemism for international organisations shifting the burden of risk onto local actors. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) strongly advocates against this practice in their medical operations⁸⁶, asserting that when INGOs delegate humanitarian aid to local actors, they are essentially leaving them vulnerable, without adequate support or capacity, thereby transferring risk and abandoning them rather than empowering them.



OCHA/Yasmina Guerda

Nigeria
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an example of one organisation that advocates against shifting the burden of risk onto local actors.

⁸⁵ For additional information, see the resources below. Leggat emphasises the responsibility of humanitarian aid agencies for the health and safety of their staff, encompassing employees, contract workers, and volunteers. Williamson underscores the significance of Human Resources in supporting staff operating in hazardous environments, emphasising the need for organisations to prioritise duty of care and enhance security management. Al-Zaqibh discusses the legal safeguards accessible to independent humanitarian organisations and advocates for enhancements in both the framework’s content and its implementation. Toebes highlights the legal obligation to ensure access to essential health services and the collective responsibilities of states, non-state actors, and humanitarian organisations in delivering aid and ensuring safety. See: Leggat, P.A. (2005) Ensuring the Health and Safety of Humanitarian Aid Workers. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, vol. 3, no. 3: 119-122; Williamson, C., & Darby, R. (2011). The importance of HR management in supporting staff working in hazardous environments; Al-Zaqibh, A.A. (2010). The Safety Humanitarian Aid Workers in Time of Armed Conflict: A Critical Legal Analysis; Toebes, B. (2013). Health and Humanitarian Assistance: Towards an Integrated Norm under International Law. *Tilburg law review*, 18, 133-151. See also Fast, L. (2014). *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁸⁶ Healy, S. et.al. (2019). Working with local actors: MSF’s approach. Médecins Sans Frontières.

While the presence of international actors may offer some protection, Oxfam, for example, argues that local actors face significant risk regardless of whether local or international entities are leading humanitarian efforts.⁸⁷

The transfer of risk—including security, reputational, and political risks—from INGOs to L/NNGOs in partnerships is recognised as a significant concern. But there has also been a broader failure within the humanitarian community to effectively mitigate this risk transfer to L/NNGO partners, whether intentional or unintentional. Given that international actors depend on their L/NNGO partners to execute programmes, addressing the issue of risk transfer to these partners is a critical priority. Many interviewees believe that transitioning towards a risk-sharing approach represents the most viable path forward.⁸⁸

The interviews revealed that local staff still face a disparity in treatment and perception compared to their international counterparts within the operations of INGOs. Local staff often lack the resources and options available to international staff when dealing with operational challenges and security threats. This discrepancy becomes especially prominent concerning sensitive issues like safety, kidnappings, transport or mobility, and compensation.⁸⁹ Interviewees discussed the centrality of national staff to upholding the humanitarian principles in their work. They also mentioned the differing dynamics that international versus national staff face in relation to fundamental issues, such as security challenges and exposure to risk, access to training and policy material, and preserving cultural identity. These observations emphasise the importance of continuing to examine the experiences and perspectives of national actors. In particular, it is vital to consider the unique and essential role that local staff and NGOs play in protracted conflict environments, situations of natural disaster, and in humanitarian-development contexts, as well as the elevated operational risks they are regularly exposed to. These points also raise a question, which was highlighted by a practitioner: by perpetuating the division, even in our language, between national and international staff, do we hinder the development of a unified and cohesive approach and impede genuine discussions about operational methods?

Even with improvements in security risk management, as noted by Bieńczyk-Missala and Grzebyk, national staff receive less security assistance compared to their international counterparts. From a statistical perspective, national workers make up most victims of humanitarian incidents, as they often work in close proximity to danger, sometimes even directly in harm's way.⁹⁰ Part of organisations' rationale behind this approach, as explained by a practitioner, is the belief that local staff are inherently more connected to the local social networks and can foster greater acceptance. This logic rests on the assumption that local staff are more attuned to the local context, allowing them to leverage local support networks more effectively. An international staff member illustrated this notion:

“Working in a country with different contacts, different levels of authority, and a different culture and mindset is affecting our work. I think that our national staff and our local stakeholder actors can help us in bridging this gap, using their connections... So, from my perspective, localisation is holding a very major role in the humanitarian context.”

⁸⁷ Gingerich, T. R., & Cohen, M. J. (2015). Turning the humanitarian system on its head: saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors. Oxfam International.

⁸⁸ Ndiaye, A., Gauthier, L., Gosselin, C., Queval, C., Salavert, L., & Tropea, J. (2023, August 19). The risks we face are beyond human comprehension: Advancing the protection of humanitarian and health workers. ACF, MdM, and HI.

⁸⁹ Howe, K. and Stites, E. “Partners under pressure: humanitarian action for the Syria crisis,” *Disasters* 43(1): 3–23, 2019; Hogg, J.L. (2019). *Dangerous Times, Dangerous Places: How Politics Impacts Humanitarian Worker Security in DR Congo*.

⁹⁰ Bieńczyk-Missala, A., & Grzebyk, P. (2015). Safety and protection of humanitarian workers. In *The Humanitarian Challenge: 20 Years European Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA)* (pp. 221-252). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Acceptance strategies can sometimes inadvertently compromise the safety of local staff deeply embedded in these communities. One interviewee reflected on his work in Abyei, on the border between Sudan and South Sudan. The interviewee said, “if we link this localisation aspect to humanitarian negotiations, then obviously I think it will be more helpful for the local and national actor to facilitate successful negotiations because they have comparatively more in-depth knowledge about the context.” Understanding the local context and community connections can facilitate acceptance and enable access to vulnerable populations. But it can also amplify the vulnerability of local staff to security threats due to their increased visibility and engagement within the community.

Several factors contribute significantly to this gap in security. Most notable is the increasing and extensive reliance on local humanitarian personnel or partners in the field, who are often positioned at the frontline of operations. International staff members are noted to receive more extensive attention regarding security training, safety measures, allocation of resources, media coverage, and involvement in operational decision-making.⁹¹ This practice stems partly from the distinct status of international staff compared to their national counterparts. They typically enjoy higher living standards, such as in highly secure complexes and in operational hubs. They are often on better pay scales, and have the option of emergency evacuation in the face of significant security threats. Therefore, conducting regular assessments becomes crucial to rectify discrepancies in how national staff are treated, particularly in terms of training, equipment, insurance, and medical and psychological assistance. There is also a need to significantly enhance the participation of national workers in security risk management, coordination efforts, information exchange, and ongoing dialogues regarding risks and humanitarian aid procedures, as well as ensuring increasing financial support for national staff.⁹²

In most contexts, local staff outnumber their international counterparts. As one of many contributing factors, they bear the brunt of attacks targeting aid workers today.⁹³ Humanitarian organisations often rely on local staff out of necessity, especially when they cannot guarantee security or access for international staff. One interviewee described this phenomenon in the case of Syria:

“In 2011, there was a fair number of international organisations working out of Damascus, as well as in the opposition-controlled parts of Syria. And at some point, there was a risk calculus made. By 2013, things were getting dangerous enough in opposition-controlled Syria, where international organisations, for the most part, said, ‘we are no longer going to put our international staff in this very dangerous setting and instead, we’re going to subcontract to Syrian organisations.’ There were a few international organisations that said, ‘okay, we’re going to keep operating here, but we’re just going to hire Syrian staff and we’re going to pull out our international staff out.’ So senior management was either outside of Syria sitting in Turkey, or the whole organisation was not directly operating in Syria anymore; it was just subcontracting to local organisations.”

⁹¹ Stoddard, A., Harmer, A., & Haver, K. (2006). “Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations.” Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute.

⁹² Fawcett J, Tanner V (2001) The security of national staff: towards good practices. InterAction, Washington; Bieńczyk-Missala, A., & Grzebyk, P. (2015). Safety and protection of humanitarian workers. In *The Humanitarian Challenge: 20 Years European Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA)* (pp. 221-252). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

⁹³ Humanitarian Outcome notes that in 2022, a significant trend observed was the continued increase in casualties suffered by national and local aid organisations. Despite having considerably larger teams, INGOs experienced a decline in attacks, whereas their local partners witnessed an increase in security incidents. See Stoddard et al. *Aid Worker Security Report*, 2023.

Numerous local organisations continue to voice concerns that, in terms of security, they are ‘abandoned’ when the circumstances become difficult. They argue that their safety is not given enough importance at the organisational level, and that INGOs favour the lives of expatriates over those of local partners. The cases of Sudan and Afghanistan illustrate this point. Though many organisations have improved security training and resources for both international and local staff in recent times, the required investments in time and funds remain significant, particularly for smaller NGOs and local partners.

Financing issues and donor interference

The question of funding and contractual agreements remains central when talking about engaging local partners. Numerous interviewees who are national staff or working with NNGOs noted their discontent over the slow pace of fulfilling Grand Bargain commitments, including in core funding, capacity enhancement, and donor relations. In the words of an interviewee working with a NNGO, “Our time will come when we tell [the international community], ‘even your money we do not need, if you cannot allow local organisations to work without being instrumentalised’.”

As one expert explained, funding plays a central role in shaping the dynamics of the system. The influence of financial resources drives the actions of international organisations, guiding their decisions and priorities. While those working in humanitarian aid strongly believe that localisation should be a priority, the reality is that without tackling the underlying funding issues, meaningful change is unlikely to occur. Along this line, the leader of a NNGO expressed, “Localisation, if applied, will address some of these inequalities. I’m calling it inequalities, between local and international organisations. Localisation, when it comes, will mean that the locals will have their place, when they talk about a transfer of resources from the [international] to the locals, so that they can take the destiny of their communities to heart.”

In addition to state pressures and legal constraints on NGOs, other obstacles contribute to risk aversion. These include strict anti-terrorism legislation and foreign policy objectives. As one interviewee explained, “donors have to acknowledge that there are risks all the way down the chain that they also co-own. With these ‘zero tolerance’ approaches to diversion, theft, corruption, or anything going missing, what you see a lot of the times is that the local NGO just gets cut off suddenly...often that organisation will go under because they just don’t have the margin to keep operating when their funding gets cut off. So, it’s kind of a punitive and non-cooperative relationship.” Media attention and the public perception of mismanagement also play key roles in shaping perceptions of neutrality. The concept of ‘risk attitude’ is fundamentally rooted in trust and the potential damage to safety and reputation, factors that are magnified in highly politicised conflict zones.

Key definitions:

Risk attitude: Risk attitude is the amount of risk that an organisation is willing to accept to achieve its objectives.

Moreover, donor-imposed constraints, such as vetting procedures, reporting requirements, and branding guidelines, primarily driven by a minimal tolerance for risk, frequently hinder the substantial involvement of local actors.⁹⁴ As one interviewee who worked in Syria described, “the extreme requirements on the donor side, like getting lists of beneficiaries, now ‘you have to show us your organigram’ and ‘now you have to show us who your board of directors are,’ and ‘now you

⁹⁴ Gingerich, T. R., & Cohen, M. J. (2015). Turning the humanitarian system on its head: saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors. Oxfam International.

have to do this five-day training’...LNGOs would not come to their donors with issues and learned to hide [issues or problems] because they were worried about losing their funding.”

Complications in funding distribution and donor agreements have consistently hindered the responsiveness of aid efforts, especially in challenging, remote areas, and limited the access to funds for local partners. Instances include the bureaucratic processes funds undergo before reaching the operational level or a significant donor opting to employ a private contractor for a major humanitarian initiative, subsequently engaging INGOs to handle its operations.⁹⁵

From the viewpoint of local actors, the obstacle becomes apparent when the demands imposed by donors overshadow the values and assets that local partners can offer. As one interviewee explained,

“We get stuck on the money part. If you look at the initial conversations around localisation, the measurement is how much money goes to local organisations. But if donors are giving money with strings attached, saying ‘you have to do it this way, you have to have an organisation that looks just like ours, you have to constantly prove yourself because we don’t trust that you know what you’re doing because we are the experts, and while we would prefer to be there, we’re not going to be there because we don’t want to our staff to be killed’.”

Even a ‘trusted’ LNGO with deep roots in a community might struggle to demonstrate its capacity due to the multiple audits, regulations, and policy procedures it must align with to have access to the same funding sources as INGOs. In these circumstances, many donor agencies continue to prefer collaborating with UN agencies or prominent INGOs, rather than opting to collaborate with national actors.

Aligning LNGO capacities: a long way to go?

Although local organisations demonstrate their ability to be close to communities affected by conflict, they frequently lack a comprehensive set of organisational capacities that are fully recognised by INGO partners that can affect their sustainability. Deficiencies in organisational capabilities stem from various factors. These include limited access to consistent or extended funding, a lack of core financial support, and limited opportunities for substantial capacity development. LNGOs often acknowledged these and cite a lack of meaningful or effective capacity-strengthening opportunities from international organisations.⁹⁶

The operational legitimacy of local actors is shaped and somewhat undermined by how capacity is defined and evaluated in the humanitarian sector. The current approach of conducting capacity assessments fosters competition among local agencies, putting them at a disadvantage when seeking partnerships. For instance, in contexts like South Sudan and Nigeria, studies reveal a group of local and national NGOs with substantial experience in the international humanitarian arena are forming networks and leading the conversation on localisation with international players but are also functioning in a dynamic that undermines localisation.

Selecting partners that align with international standards and that uphold humanitarian principles remains a significant concern. International organisations often vie for the so-called ‘best’ local actors.

⁹⁵ “Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships,” Christian Aid, February 2019.

⁹⁶ See Howe, K., Munive, J., & Rosenstock, K. (2019). Views from the ground: perspectives on localisation in the Horn of Africa. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University & Copenhagen: Save the Children Denmark, Boston.

These are the ones deemed the most ‘capable,’ ‘reputable,’ and ‘successful’ by global standards. Prioritising a few local organisations in this manner can amplify concerns, as those meeting these standards often comprise relatively elite, educated, or privileged individuals within the affected community or in the diaspora. In the context of Syria, an interviewee explained,

“There was a real preference for the international community to partner with the Syrian diaspora organisations. Why? Because they could speak English, they didn’t need interpreters. Because they knew how to do a PowerPoint presentation. The local organisations were often quite resentful, because sometimes the diaspora organisations would be getting press or would be getting direct meeting time, face to face time with different powerful donors, or stakeholders and the local organisations were completely ignored. LNGOs would say to me, ‘Who do you think is actually doing the work?’”

Standard capacity assessments often do not offer a fair perspective on capacity demonstration and development. Local agencies bear a significant burden of proof to showcase their credibility, needing to establish not only their integrity, impartiality, and neutrality but also their ability to deliver humanitarian aid more efficiently, affordably, and effectively than their international counterparts.

The concept of capacity building raises questions about which parties are enhancing each other’s abilities and whose skills are considered essential. Local actors share their expertise with external entities, but this valuable knowledge is often disregarded. The failure to acknowledge local expertise poses a major hurdle to fostering more effective partnerships and complementarity between local and international agencies. The concept of ‘complementarity’⁹⁷ is also influenced by various factors, including coordination methods, donor perspectives regarding financial and reputational risks, government policies, lines of accountability, accessibility to affected populations, and the nature of the crisis.

At the core of these issues is the misconception that capacity flows in one direction—from international actors to local actors. Rather, it should be recognised as a reciprocal exchange where both sides acknowledge each other’s capacity, attributes, and challenges. According to LNGO representatives, building capacity for the purpose of better meeting compliance requirements set by INGOs and their donors does not necessarily lead to better NGO capacity. Local actors are cognisant of this trend. While they may value the support provided by INGOs in accessing and complying with specific grants, they nevertheless question whether the needs of those affected by crises are truly prioritised in these top-down approaches.

As a result, the capacities of local actors are frequently underestimated, undervalued, and disregarded. When discussing examples of positive partnerships with LNGOs one interviewee said, “I can’t think of a single context where the international system...really enabled and supported the local civil [society/ third] sector. It’s possible that it happens more in the natural disasters, but there’s a really big difference between violent conflict related crises and natural disasters, especially where you have cyclical natural hazards, and both the government and national civil society organisations are very well developed.”

Paternalistic attitudes and biases

INGOs value local actors for their contextual and cultural insights, as well as their roles in programme implementation, especially in hard-to-reach areas. But this appreciation does not automatically translate into trusting them with administrative decisions to shape the future direction of their organisations on the ground. Despite being well-versed in the history, culture, and rapidly changing politics of a context, local aid workers encounter a ‘glass ceiling’ that restricts their professional growth

⁹⁷ Barbelet, V. (2019). Rethinking Capacity and Complementarity for a more local humanitarian action. Humanitarian Policy Group.

and ability to influence policies.⁹⁸ A national NGO interviewee illustrated this problem by explaining,

“This year alone, how many of our staff have been recruited, taken away, by these large international organisations? It shows that we are not doing badly because our staff, we train them. We take the time to train them. We are proud of it, but it should not be to the detriment or killing local organisations. Our human resources person was just taken away from us to become a human resources person in one of the large international organisations. And they keep doing this over, and over, and over. So, when they give us a project, they will not put a correct salary for staff so that they will come and take our staff with the small competitive salaries to lure them. This is something we are decrying and calling for more participatory funding. So, I asked her, what was the difference in salary, because we are poor. We live in a poverty-stricken area; our conflict is ravaging, and people need to make ends meet. The difference was \$200. One year later she came back. [The INGO] said it was over for them.”

Local staff are often presumed to better grasp the operational context. In many cases, they have stronger ties to local networks of influence and protective mechanisms, including communal, family, or ethnic affiliations and with diaspora groups⁹⁹. One interviewee reflected, “there is another aspect of localisation and neutrality which is highly problematic, which you see increasingly with the European and American humanitarian organisations, that are, themselves, removed from the frontline, and who continue to outsource responsibility for frontline actions to local actors. Their ability to maintain a neutral position from their families, their clans, their tribes, their businesses and their communities is very limited.”

Another interviewee explained that in Somalia clan affiliations and relationships with diaspora groups raise trade-offs between principles and operational priorities:

“Local networks have a big impact on the thinking and the way in which INGOs work, including with their local partners. If you have a field officer and you want your field officer to be very influential in a local community, how does that influence come? Influence comes by what they are able to bring to their community. Power and influence depend upon, to a certain extent, wealth and what they can do for their clan. In the end, if you have a zero-tolerance policy for anything perceived outside of [humanitarian principles], then your field officer is not going to be influential anymore. And suddenly, when you want to get access, and your field officer is sent out to negotiate and make sure all of your security conditions are met, maybe they don’t have the power to do that anymore.”

However, the support that local organisations offer to INGOs could be their downfall. While LNGOs might have the advantage of accessing areas international staff and organisations cannot, this advantage might be negated by their vulnerability to exploitation, manipulation, or intimidation.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the externality of international actors can support in-depth network development and local capacities to engage on a context-by-context basis. It is important to note that although local expertise holds substantial value, it is not entirely sufficient, as local actors are also exposed to the unpredictable conduct of armed groups. They must navigate through “temporary windows of opportunity,” engage in compromises and negotiations, and ensure the continued relevance of aid.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Hugo Slim, “The Continuing Metamorphosis of the Humanitarian Practitioner: Some New Colours for an Endangered Chameleon.” *Disasters* 19 (2): 110–126, 1995.

⁹⁹ Eckroth, K. R. (2010). “The Protection of Aid Workers: Principled Protection and Humanitarian Security in Darfur.” NUPI Working Paper 770, Security in Practice. The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

¹⁰⁰ Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2018). Local Humanitarian Actors and the Principle of Impartiality. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97.

¹⁰¹ Howe, K., Munive, J., & Rosenstock, K. (2019). Views from the ground: perspectives on localisation in the Horn of Africa. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University & Copenhagen: Save the Children Denmark, Boston.

“ Expecting local organisations to be neutral is totally an illusion. ”

A persistent bias remains that local actors possess lower administrative, technical, and operational proficiency and adopt a more ‘flexible’ approach to neutrality, as compared to international actors. Some studies have also suggested that some INGOs collaborate with local partners who, as standalone entities, may not always uphold neutrality.¹⁰² As a national interviewee said, “sometimes local and national actors may be viewed as aligning with certain ideologies or certain political concepts.” Another interviewee argued that INGOs do not consistently adhere to humanitarian principles in their activities themselves: “there will never really be localisation, and the idea that somehow local organisations are less principled than international organisations is wrong. I don’t find the international humanitarian system to be particularly principled, and certainly not more principled than local actors.”

Another interviewee said, “we can’t say that it’s impossible for local organisations to be neutral. I don’t believe that. But I do believe that they face greater challenges in perceptions of their neutrality, if they are coming from the local context, and the local context is divided by a conflict.” Others have questioned whether it is even necessary for humanitarian organisations to be neutral. As one interviewee said, “localisation is perceived as a universal good, it’s the way to go. But I think for local organisations, it’s much more difficult to stick to principles. Expecting local organisations to be neutral is totally an illusion.” Bringing the example of Ukraine, another interviewee explained, “you can be a local Ukrainian NGO and say, ‘no, I’m not neutral. I’m a civil resistance organisation trying to rescue people from cities under Russian bombardment. I’m not neutral. I’m a humanitarian, trying to do that, because I’m a good Ukrainian, hoping we will win the war. And my effort in that war is a humanitarian one like a fireman or ambulance person.’”

This reflects the position of a host of LNGOs. In an open letter to international donors and NGOs who aim to help Ukraine, signatories wrote,

“We know that aid is rarely “neutral.” Yet we are being prevented from receiving much-needed resources because of a bias towards this assumption about “neutrality” [...] We do not want to remain “neutral.” The value of human life must come first, and supporting the needs of those on the front line can significantly reduce the amount of civilian aid needed and the number of casualties. Whilst we recognise that international organisations may want to be perceived as such, it should be up to local civil society in these circumstances to determine our own approaches and priorities.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² De Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F., & Chéilleachair, R. N. (2017). More than the money: Localisation in practice. Groupe URD and Trócaire, Final Report.

¹⁰³ National Network of Local Philanthropy Development. (2022, August 24). An open letter to international donors and NGOs who want to genuinely help Ukraine.

Poor inclusion in coordination and collective action

Local and national NGOs are critical actors in facilitating access to hard-to-reach areas. However, they are significantly underrepresented in the humanitarian architecture and coordination frameworks guiding humanitarian efforts—a trend observed in various case studies. Ineffective coordination practices hinder better relationships between international and local entities in three primary ways:



LNGOs often face challenges in participating in international humanitarian coordination platforms and initiatives due to obstacles like physical access limitations, language barriers, and lack of resources.¹⁰⁴ This situation has raised concerns about the aid system’s tendency to exclude, exploit, and weaken local actors. As one practitioner added, taking part in coordination is a very expensive in terms of time and resources. Few donors will cover the costs associated with participating and leading coordination, making this even more problematic. One interviewee explained, “if you really look at this issue of localisation, you have the problem of the instrumentalisation of LNGOs by international actors. INGOs are the ones who say, ‘we insist upon this neutrality. No, we’re not going to bother to define it. No, we’re not going to push the duty bearers to do anything.’ Yet they are dependent upon local actors to politically interpret, politically understand, and therefore, the political actors are able to capture these international institutions.”

There are ongoing obstacles to involving local actors in coordination mechanisms and platforms. These include language barriers, the use of specialised terminology or jargon, significant cultural or political disparities, gender or racial discrimination, technological limitations, and access challenges.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, issues like insufficient credentials to enter meeting spaces, restricted staff availability, and resource constraints contribute to these challenges. An interviewee emphasised the difficulties in coordination within the international system, noting that it is fragmented, with each organisation acting autonomously. There is often no effort to connect with or recognise existing local initiatives, and local actors are rarely included. When LNGOs are eventually involved, the approach is usually top-down and heavily influenced by international perspectives, which does not effectively support the key players on the ground.

Recently, there have arguably been gradual improvements in integrating national actors. These include practices such as supporting local partners to lead discussions, conducting meetings in local languages, and using accessible communication tools like Zoom and WhatsApp.¹⁰⁶ However, these initiatives do not fully ensure equal participation for local actors, support their decision-making authority, provide adequate opportunities for them to voice crucial issues and approaches, or commit to co-leading cluster mechanisms with national partners.

¹⁰⁴ De Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F., & Chéilleachair, R. N. (2017). More than the money: Localisation in practice. Groupe URD and Trócaire, Final Report.

¹⁰⁵ “Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms,” IASC, July 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Robillard, S., Atim, T., & Maxwell, D. (2021). Localisation: A “landscape” report. Final Report to USAID, Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance.

The involvement of LNGOs in coordination platforms has primarily focused on localised efforts within specific operational contexts, rather than at a broader policy level.

There is limited data on how this type of local participation impacts response effectiveness, quality, or efficiency, and little information on whether these efforts genuinely enhance equal partnerships, strengthen local leadership, or improve decision-making processes.

Although coordination mechanisms have their shortcomings, they present an opportunity to address the inherent power imbalances within the humanitarian system. A significant shift in power dynamics between local and international actors can occur when international organisations are required to rely on local partners in hard-to-reach areas for humanitarian interventions. This dynamic was evident during the conflict in Ukraine. In the years leading up to the 2022 Russian invasion, the Donbas conflict highlighted the essential role of local actors due to stringent access restrictions imposed by separatist authorities. Despite their smaller size, local agencies played a crucial role in filling the gaps left by larger organisations. In certain situations, the authoritative stance of state authorities towards humanitarian agencies might tip the balance in favour of local organisations. However, this shift can strain trust, challenge perceptions of legitimacy and integrity between international and national NGOs, and escalate competitive tensions in some cases.

Additional vulnerabilities

The challenges recurrently encountered by LNGOs in conflict zones profoundly affect their approach to neutrality, humanitarian access negotiations, security, and acceptance-based strategies. A primary hurdle stems from capacity deficiencies. This is often caused by unpredictable funding and inadequate capacity development efforts. This poses a critical threat to the perceived neutrality of LNGOs. As LNGOs are compelled to adhere to international administrative standards and donor expectations, their impartiality may also be called into question. In places like South Sudan and Nigeria, LNGOs often find themselves at a crossroads, torn between conforming to global norms and honouring local cultural and operational realities. This dilemma forces them to balance international expectations with the imperative of maintaining legitimacy within their communities, which is vital for acceptance and effective engagement.

Moreover, the reliance on international donors risks jeopardising the perceived neutrality of local organisations. The considerable control exerted by these donors over funding allocation can lead to the perception of LNGOs as extensions of foreign (namely 'Western') agendas, rather than autonomous entities serving local needs. Rigid and risk-averse funding structures not only constrain the flexibility of LNGOs to adapt to evolving circumstances. They also limit the capacity of LNGOs to provide timely and contextually relevant assistance. Embracing more collaborative and trusting relationships with donors could potentially foster greater innovation and adaptability, particularly in rapidly evolving security contexts.

Negotiating humanitarian access in conflict settings leverages the local networks and knowledge that LNGOs inherently possess. However, capacity assessments that favour certain 'elite' LNGOs can fragment partnerships and reduce overall effectiveness. This preference can hinder the ability of LNGOs to negotiate access and deliver aid across diverse regions. Security and acceptance-based strategies are also impacted by INGOs' biases and practices. LNGOs, deeply embedded in their communities and often comprising staff from various clans or ethnic groups, can effectively navigate conflict environments, facilitating acceptance and security for humanitarian operations. However, the practice of international organisations poaching local staff can destabilise LNGOs, diminishing their influence and capacity to secure operations.

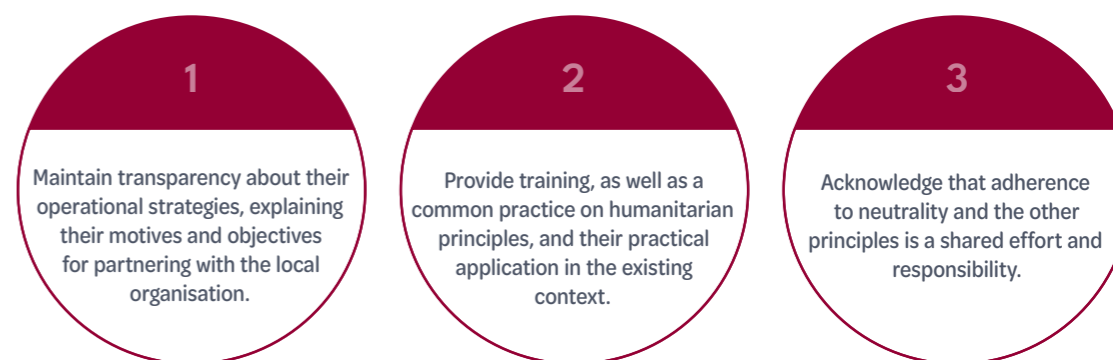
When discussing equal partnerships within the framework of localisation, the focus is on establishing relationships that are fair, valuing local expertise, access to challenging areas, and understanding the social and cultural factors affecting humanitarian efforts. Some organisations

considered partnerships positive when they involved practices like joint proposal development and equal access to funding. However, certain LNGOs interviewed perceived their collaborations with international counterparts as transactional and unequal, as was described earlier in the report. Typically, they engage with INGOs in supportive roles, such as conducting needs assessments and implementing local programmes. One interviewee described this relationship as a "master and servant" relationship. LNGOs expressed concerns about the lack of dialogue, trust, and decision-making capacity. They aspire to have more independence and authority. Trust was a central theme in conversations about effective partnerships. The level of trust between international organisations and local partners significantly influences decision-making and shapes perceptions of how open international agencies are to relinquishing control over coordination efforts.

As noted earlier, most international funding continues to flow to local actors through subcontracts or partnerships. These are often structured in ways that limit their decision-making authority, agency, and access to essential operational funds. Subcontracting transfers responsibilities and risks but does not provide local actors with sufficient funding for basic administrative needs and for longer term organisational sustainability. It also denies them an equal or meaningful say in decision-making processes and rarely leads to opportunities for direct funding or leadership roles in the future. Moreover, this approach overlooks the chance for international organisations to tap into local actors' deep understanding of the context and their networks to enhance programme design and implementation. The concept of 'assets' in partnerships should expand to include non-financial aspects. This could include the significance of understanding local contexts and the ability to engage with and represent communities.¹⁰⁷ Shifting from transactional to transformational partnerships necessitates involving various local entities in operational planning. These include government bodies and civil society organisations like trade unions, social movements, the diaspora, women's groups, agricultural organisations, cooperatives, community associations, and political entities.

Ways forward

The literature suggests three approaches to address potential misunderstandings regarding the humanitarian principles, perceptions, and their impact on the credibility of LNGOs. When collaborating with an LNGO, international organisations should:



Demonstrating transparency and engaging with the community are the most effective means of maintaining perceptions of neutrality, gaining acceptance and, as a result, securing humanitarian access to communities in remote locations. Therefore, it is essential for INGOs to employ staff members representing diverse religions, ethnicities, communities, cultures, and other significant dimensions.

¹⁰⁷ De Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F., & Chéilleachair, R. N. (2017). More than the money: Localisation in practice. Groupe URD and Trocaire, Final Report.

Downward accountability was also described as a means of ensuring a principled response. This includes involving beneficiaries and community representatives in project design and providing feedback mechanisms that allow communities to hold aid organisations accountable. Additionally, LNGO representatives highlighted that regular monitoring and evaluation of activities provide evidence of a principled response. However, it is worth noting that LNGOs often lack the resources to engage in the same level or quality of monitoring and evaluation as INGOs (e.g., third-party monitoring, complex research design). Moreover, LNGOs are more likely to operate in areas that pose challenges for straightforward monitoring and evaluation, which can strain LNGO-INGO partnerships. INGOs may quickly interpret monitoring difficulties as evidence of LNGOs' lack of principled action. While monitoring can demonstrate a principled response, its absence may be misconstrued as corruption, aid diversion, or non-principled behaviour.

One potential consequence of this oversimplified interpretation is that LNGOs may lose motivation to work in hard-to-reach areas.¹⁰⁸



Key definitions:

Downward accountability: Downward accountability refers to processes whereby organisations are answerable to the local communities and groups they serve.

The delivery of humanitarian aid depends not solely on principles but also on the process of interaction, the attitudes of personnel, and their personal values. Organisational culture, methods of partnership, and strategies for community engagement all impact humanitarian operations.¹⁰⁹

Equitable partnerships require reducing subcontracting and fostering more collaborative relationships between local and international NGOs.

This change in approach will enable organisations to transition from short-term, project-based efforts to enduring strategic collaborations grounded in mutual reliance, shared decision-making, risk, and resources.

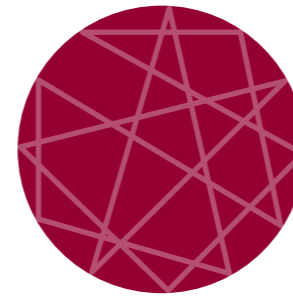
The most effective and fair partnerships develop over time, involving engagement before and after acute crises.



Kenya
Engaging is community dialogues is an important way of ensuring downward accountability.

¹⁰⁸ Howe, K., Munive, J., & Rosenstock, K. (2019). Views from the ground: perspectives on localisation in the Horn of Africa. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University & Copenhagen: Save the Children Denmark, Boston.

¹⁰⁹ Tilleke et al, "Towards Principled Humanitarian Action."



Conclusions and Recommendations

As threats and violence against humanitarian workers and agencies have escalated in recent years, concerns have grown about the ability of humanitarian organisations to maintain a principled approach that includes unfettered access and ensures the safety of staff and partners. At the same time, the humanitarian sector is increasingly recognising the importance of shifting decision-making and leadership roles to local and national partners.

This report examined the intersection between neutrality, access, and localisation, summarising the views and experiences expressed by both local and international humanitarian practitioners through interviews. Several key themes were highlighted. These include ambiguity surrounding the principle of neutrality and its application, the negative impacts of risk aversion and avoidance on access and acceptance, the risk and access disparities between local and international actors, and a significant gap between policy priorities and their practical implementation in the field. Additionally, the report unpacked the reluctance of donors and INGOs to revise internal processes and to encourage and enable more direct funding and equitable partnerships with local actors, despite expressed aspirations to do so.

In dynamic environments, access to hard-to-reach areas changes rapidly and is influenced by various social, economic, military and political factors. Frequently, the degree of access available to humanitarian agencies is highly localised and hinges on dialogue with multiple stakeholders on all sides of a conflict. While maintaining access for humanitarian operations is crucial, several additional factors impact assistance. These including funding availability and flexibility—particularly for local actors—the capacity of partner agencies, the tolerance for risk (and its transfer to local actors) by international organisations and donors, and the ability of agencies to uphold a principled operational space.¹¹⁰

Additionally, the adaptability, flexibility, and local connections of local and national NGOs provide unique opportunities for engagement where international actors may face limitations. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to exploit the presence and knowledge of local actors as implementing partners, rather than cultivating more enduring and meaningful relationships and supporting them in developing their own unique capacities.

Moreover, INGOs and donors often shift high compliance requirements and operational risks to their local partners. This results in substantial time burdens, distorted reporting and operational incentives. It ultimately undermines local capacities to mitigate against risks and deliver aid. It is important to design programmes that aim to optimise access to populations in need, ensure impact, and reduce dependency while also keeping in mind the needs and security of the local partner.

While funding and capacity-building are crucial, other dimensions of local empowerment and leadership should not be overlooked. This includes fostering trust and opportunities for mutual learning, and avoiding practices that undermine local capacities. When addressing access-related capacities, humanitarian organisations should recognise unique values and assets of local counterparts, such as contextual, cultural, and linguistic understanding, which are crucial for humanitarian engagement and acceptance.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, the Start Network Regional Hub system model which allows for locally-led fund activation for quick response programmes.

The key is to support local organisations in determining how they wish to lead, what they need to do so, and listening to and learning from them with the goal of co-designing partnership agreements and strategies.

Reflections for key stakeholders

The findings in this report, drawn from the interviews, offer numerous recommendations for the humanitarian community, INGOs, donors, LNGOs and partners. With these recommendations, all parties can continue to reflect on how to create more meaningful partnerships, especially with LNGOs.

Broadly speaking, the humanitarian community should revisit the definitions and implementation of neutrality and localisation and consider what this means for local partners in practice. Programmes and humanitarian operations aiming to strengthen relationships with local actors to overcome access restrictions should emphasise enhanced collaborations (and reduced competition) among local actors. They should value and elevate local knowledge and capacity. And, they should sustain partnerships beyond project completion, continuing to invest in capacity building, joint programme design, fundraising, and risk management strategies.

INGOs could enhance their cooperation with a wider variety of local agencies to achieve a more thorough understanding of principled behaviour and acceptance from all conflict parties. Hiring staff from different community groups involved in a conflict can be a successful approach to building acceptance and trust. Additionally, forming partnerships with a diverse range of local organisations, differing in mandate, profile, and reach, can strengthen the perception of neutrality and impartiality.

To foster meaningful and equitable partnerships with LNGOs, it is essential to approach problem-solving with authenticity and equality. This means reassigning authority, trusting the skills of LNGOs, and having INGOs and donors support rather than direct them. INGOs should serve as conduits for sharing effective practices from LNGOs and advocate for them with donors. Both INGOs and donors should also help LNGOs manage risks without exposing them to unnecessary dangers through risk-sharing and effective resourcing to mitigate these risks. It is crucial to involve beneficiaries and LNGOs in all contexts, considering long-term development goals alongside emergency aid to avoid perceptions of bias and ensure a more effective and principled response.

For the wider humanitarian community



Adhere consistently to humanitarian principles

As much of the research noted, there are times when actors may feel compelled to compromise on principles to fast-track aid or have felt that it is impossible to implement them fully in reality. Despite these difficulties, it is important that humanitarian actors consistently uphold humanitarian principles to prevent the perception that these principles are negotiable. Failing to prioritise them can erode trust and credibility, which may increase the risk of conflict actors targeting humanitarian actors.



Explore alternative strategies for upholding neutrality

By transitioning from rigid enforcement of frameworks to a more nuanced approach to neutrality, humanitarian organisations can better navigate local power dynamics and gain broader acceptance from all parties involved in a conflict. This might involve transparent communication strategies, working with local partners who understand the subtle dynamics at play, and creating feedback mechanisms to continually assess the perception and impact of neutrality on the ground. By engaging with local stakeholders and not imposing global interpretations of neutrality, humanitarian organisations can develop more practical and context-sensitive approaches to neutrality that balance impartiality with effective crisis response. This ensures that neutrality is both relevant and operationally effective, fostering trust and acceptance, and enhancing impact.



Actively engage local communities to build trust and strengthen acceptance

Demonstrating transparency and engaging with the community are the most effective ways to maintain perceptions of neutrality, gain acceptance, and secure humanitarian access to remote locations. Downward accountability is also vital for ensuring a principled response. Involving beneficiaries and community representatives in project design and providing multiple feedback mechanisms allows communities to hold aid organisations accountable. When communities have a stake in the operations, they are more likely to engage with and sustain the initiatives, leading to more resilient and enduring outcomes. Strengthening trust and fostering local ownership are fundamental to creating a more responsive, adaptive, and effective humanitarian framework capable of withstanding challenges and delivering lasting positive impact.



South Sudan
A Red Cross worker dresses the wounds of man who has been hit by gunfire. Neutrality is a fundamental principle of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

OCHA



Integrate gender and diversity considerations into humanitarian action

It is essential to integrate gender and diversity considerations into all aspects of humanitarian programming. This includes ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness to the diverse needs of affected populations. Hiring staff from different community groups could improve acceptance in an area and strengthen partnerships with diverse ranges of local organisations, including those with different mandates, profiles, and reach, to best strengthen the perception of neutrality and impartiality. Additionally, it is advisable to provide comprehensive training programmes for aid workers covering gender inclusion, cultural competency, conflict sensitivity, and negotiation skills to navigate the local context while upholding humanitarian principles.



Critically review barriers to LNGO engagement in humanitarian coordination mechanisms

This should include addressing the challenges faced by LNGOs, such as complicated administrative rules, limited financial resources, and barriers to accessing important information due to language and technology constraints. It is essential to provide more opportunities for local actors to voice crucial issues and commit to co-leading cluster mechanisms with national and local partners. Additionally, efforts should be made to involve LNGOs in broader policy discussions, not just localised operational contexts, and to collect data on the impact of local participation on response effectiveness, quality, and efficiency. Addressing these barriers and promoting inclusive knowledge-sharing platforms will improve coordination, leverage LNGO expertise, balance power dynamics, and strengthen local leadership and decision-making in the humanitarian system.

For donors and INGO partners



Shift from transactional to more equitable partnerships with local actors

Building more meaningful partnerships involves fostering deeper, collaborative relationships where local and national partners have a significant role in decision-making and shaping humanitarian interventions. By valuing local knowledge, prioritising mutual trust, and engaging in shared decision-making, INGOs and donors can empower local actors to take more leadership and shape acceptance-based strategies and access negotiations on the ground. Key strategies include engaging local partners from the start of programme design, investing in their capacity development through training and resources, and maintaining open and transparent communication. Additionally, regular assessments of the partnership's impact can ensure that all parties are contributing to meaningful and equitable outcomes.



Adopt risk sharing approaches with national and local partners

To reduce risks, INGOs, donors and national/local partners can jointly take responsibility for programme outcomes, collaboratively assess risks and create mitigation plans, and create adapted and accessible administrative processes. It is essential that INGOs and donors avoid knowingly exposing national and local partners to higher degrees of risks. Considerations should include how funds are allocated, the relationship dynamics between INGOs and their local counterparts, and collaborative efforts needed to explore how international actors can best support local actors in leading humanitarian efforts and conducting access negotiations.



Foster mutual capacity strengthening and knowledge sharing between local and international partners

Capacity-building initiatives should be designed as reciprocal processes where both local and international organisations share skills and learn from each other through joint training sessions, workshops, and collaborative problem-solving. This two-way exchange allows for a more nuanced and contextually relevant alignment on the applicability of neutrality and other humanitarian principles. It also enables a clear understanding of operational risks, which can enhance complementarity in their collaboration and better equip them to respond to security challenges.



Streamline donor procedures to enhance the effectiveness of LNGOs

Simplifying these processes involves reducing donor-imposed constraints, such as long vetting procedures, rigid reporting requirements and complicated compliance measures. It also involves minimising bureaucratic layers that can delay fund disbursements. By developing more adaptable and context-sensitive reporting requirements, donors can ease the administrative burden on local organisations, allowing them to focus on delivering aid rather than navigating convoluted donor frameworks. Additionally, providing targeted capacity-building support to help LNGOs understand and meet donor standards can bridge the gap between donor expectations and local operational realities. Adopting flexible risk management strategies that trust local expertise while allowing for pragmatic responses to challenges will further support principled humanitarian action, ensuring that aid is delivered in a manner that respects local contexts and maximises impact.



Enhance support to LNGOs through flexible and long-term funding strategies

To bolster the effectiveness and resilience of LNGOs, funders should implement flexible, long-term funding mechanisms that allow these organisations to adapt their programmes based on evolving security realities. This includes prioritising multi-year funding agreements and risk financing tools like insurance or contingency funds, which enable NGOs to manage security-related costs and respond to emergencies without the constraints of short-term funding cycles. Additionally, creating incentives for risk-taking and innovation in programming would encourage more adaptive approaches to address security challenges while delivering impact.

For local and national NGO partners



Enhance security risk management protocols that are tailored to the local context

Locally tailored assessments are needed to understand specific threats and challenges faced by LNGOs. Protocols should include developing detailed contingency plans that address potential risks and outline clear response strategies to ensure the safety and continuity of operations. Additionally, organisations should conduct regular staff training activities to equip personnel with the skills and knowledge needed to uphold principled approaches and manage security threats effectively. By customising these protocols to reflect local circumstances and working closely with international partners, LNGOs can ensure that both parties are better prepared to navigate complex security environments. This not only reduces risk transfer but also strengthens the ability to secure access to hard-to-reach areas and deliver consistently and safely.



Facilitate the creation of local security networks

Local security networks allow for LNGOs to share real-time security information, best practices, and lessons learned, improving their ability to respond to emerging threats and challenges. Coordinated efforts within these networks ensure a unified approach to security, reducing duplication and enhancing efficiency. Access to pooled resources, such as early warning systems and emergency support, can help organisations to better respond to access challenges. They also strengthen the overall security posture of the humanitarian community. Connecting these networks to wider humanitarian coordination mechanisms can also ensure that local insights are amplified and used in wider strategic planning.



Engage with communities in developing and implementing security initiatives

Building strong relationships with local communities is essential for the success of humanitarian missions. By actively engaging community leaders and members in discussions about humanitarian activities, organisations can gain invaluable insights into the local context and foster greater acceptance and trust. Involving communities in developing and implementing security initiatives empowers them to take ownership of their safety, which not only enhances security but also reduces dependency on external actors. Facilitating community-led safety initiatives allows local populations to collaboratively identify and address security risks, fostering resilience and a sense of ownership over their safety measures. This participatory approach ensures that security protocols are contextually relevant and widely supported, ultimately leading to a safer and more effective humanitarian response.



Advocate for policies prioritising localisation and workers' safety

It is crucial for LNGOs to push for systemic changes that prioritise and embed localisation within humanitarian policies and practices. This means advocating for policies that not only increase funding and resources for local organisations but also recognise their essential role in delivering aid, strengthening acceptance and overcoming access challenges. Enhancing local ownership involves ensuring that local actors are actively involved in decision-making processes and that their unique knowledge and capacities are fully integrated into humanitarian strategies. Moreover, policies should address the substantial risks local actors face, such as security threats and operational challenges, by providing targeted support and resources to mitigate these risks.

Switzerland

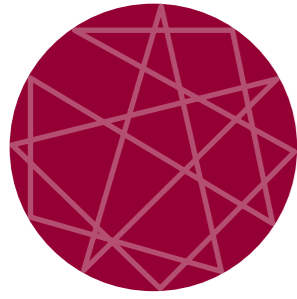
Events like the United Nations Security Symposium can provide a platform to advocate for policies prioritising localisation and aid worker safety.

United Nations Security Symposium 2024



Conclusion

Conclusion



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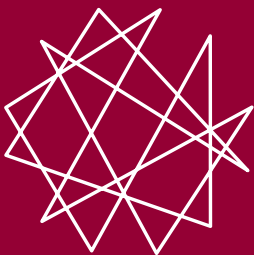
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