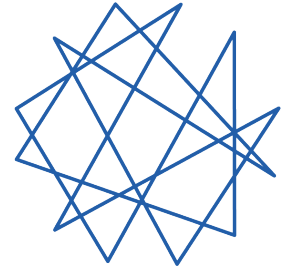


gisf



The Politics of Acceptance:

Practitioner perspectives on security risk management in politicised aid environments



ChildFund/Jake Lyell

About the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF)

The Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) is a member-led NGO forum that works to strengthen the safety and security of aid workers globally. GISF drives collaboration among key stakeholders, strengthens security risk management capabilities, influences global policy, and equips NGOs with the specialised resources, evidence, and tools to effectively manage security risks. With its membership of over 155 NGOs, GISF bridges the gap between operational realities and high-level policy discussions, ensuring aid workers can deliver life-saving assistance in even the most challenging environment.

About this paper

Acceptance is widely regarded as the foundation of humanitarian security risk management, yet its effectiveness is increasingly contested in politicised aid environments. Drawing on interviews with 20 senior practitioners and a targeted literature review, this paper explores how politicised environments reshape the conditions under which acceptance can be built, maintained, and lost, and how practitioners are responding. It finds that acceptance in these settings has become weaker, more conditional, and more vulnerable to wider political dynamics that no single organisation can control. In response, the paper sets out practical pathways for how organisations and the wider sector can adapt their acceptance strategies to environments where the traditional framework is no longer fit for purpose.

Acknowledgements

GISF would like to thank the many member organisations and sector practitioners who generously shared their experiences, reflections, successes, and challenges in implementing acceptance-based security strategies. Their insights and candour were invaluable to the development of this report.

We also gratefully acknowledge the support of colleagues at GISF, in particular Dimitri Kotsiras and Jon Novakovic, whose contributions helped make this report possible.

This report would not have been possible without the generous support of the European Union.



**Funded by
the European Union**

Suggested citation

GISF. (2026). The Politics of Acceptance: practitioner perspectives on security risk management in politicised aid environments. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF).



Contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1 Research design	6
1.2 Research structure	9
2. The shifting global dynamics of politicisation affecting aid	9
2.1 The drivers of politicisation	10
2.2 How these dynamics are playing out in the field	11
3. What do we mean by acceptance?	13
3.1 Defining the concept	14
3.2 Core ingredients underpinning acceptance	15
3.3 Challenges in applying acceptance	19
3.4 Layers of acceptance	22
4. Principles under strain	24
4.1 The fraying connection	24
4.2 Pragmatism over principled action	27
5. How politicised environments reshape acceptance	29
5.1 Navigating powerbrokers	29
5.2 Restricted windows to gain acceptance	30
5.3 Digital politicisation	32
5.4 NGO identity politics	33
6. How acceptance erodes in practice	34
6.1 Early signs of erosion	34
6.2 Programme-related issues	35
6.3 Organisational conduct and internal coherence	37
7. Collective Acceptance, Coordination, and Partnerships	39
7.1 Reputational spillover tied to the weakest link	39
7.2 Coordination: weak in practice, strong in potential	40
7.3 National staff and partners: embedded acceptance and its limits	41

8. Pathways and Implications	42
8.1 Be honest about the limits of acceptance	42
8.2 Communicate more clearly and engage more proactively	43
8.3 Conduct deeper contextual analysis and actor mapping	44
8.4 Monitor online narratives more strategically	45
8.5 Embed acceptance actively across the organisation	46
8.6 Improve your evidence base	46
8.7 Strengthen collective action	47
8.8 Choose your partners wisely	47
8.9 Push for more direct funding for acceptance strategies	48
9. Conclusion	49
References	52
Contributors (agreed to be named)	59



Acronyms

- AWSD** – Aid Worker Security Database
- DAC** – Development Assistance Committee
- DRC** – Democratic Republic of the Congo
- FCRA** – Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (India)
- GHF** – Gaza Humanitarian Fund
- GISF** – Global Interagency Security Forum
- HPN** – Humanitarian Practice Network
- ICRC** – International Committee of the Red Cross
- IHL** – International Humanitarian Law
- INSO** – International NGO Safety Organisation
- JNIM** – Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
- MENA** – Middle East and North Africa
- NGO** – Non-Governmental Organisation
- ODA** – Overseas Development Assistance
- OECD** – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- PNG** – Persona Non Grata
- RSF** – Rapid Support Forces
- SDF** – Syrian Democratic Forces
- SRM** – Security Risk Management
- UNDSS** – United Nations Department of Safety and Security



Introduction

Acceptance has long been described as the foundational pillar of humanitarian security risk management (SRM) (Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) and Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025; GISF, 2021a; Collinson and Duffield, 2013; Fast and O’Neill, 2010). As a security strategy, it rests on the simple premise that aid actors can reduce threats to their staff, assets, and operations by cultivating the consent and goodwill of the communities, authorities, and armed actors in the environments where they work. For much of the sector’s history, this premise has seemingly held. If organisations could demonstrate principled intent, deliver relevant and impactful programmes, and build relationships based on trust and accountability, they could usually secure enough legitimacy and access to operate safely.

But this premise has now come under serious strain. Recent years have seen exceptionally high levels of violence against aid workers, including by state actors, alongside a wider erosion of protections for humanitarian action as consensus weakens, access narrows, and risk shifts onto humanitarian actors (Thompson, 2026). Institutional donor funding is also becoming more explicitly tied to trade, security, and migration agendas (Dercon, 2026; Smole, 2025). Counterterrorism legislation and sanctions regimes are narrowing the legal space within which humanitarian engagement with non-state actors can take place (ICRC, 2025a; Schellhammer, 2021). Civic space is tightening and reducing access (Firmin et al., 2025), disinformation is being weaponised against humanitarian actors (GISF, 2023), and new militarised and privatised aid models¹ are blurring the line between relief and geopolitical interests (VanRooyen, 2025). Put together, these trends are not only making aid operations more dangerous but are also narrowing the space in which aid can plausibly be seen as neutral, impartial, and independent.

In this rapidly changing environment, the traditional acceptance framework seems to be less able to do the work it was designed to do. The sector has responded to these changes by continuing to apply familiar remedies focussed on access strategies, better programming and community engagement, without adequately acknowledging that the broader risk environment has itself shifted (Daudin, 2021). The gap between the framework and the realities described by practitioners interviewed for this study has not narrowed; if anything, it appears to be widening.

This paper seeks to unpack these tensions and examine how acceptance is being impacted by environments where aid is drawn into wider political dynamics; contexts in which the humanitarian principles are contested, power is fragmented, grievances are politically charged, and local perceptions of aid are shaped as much by geopolitics and narratives as they are by the quality of aid delivery. The purpose here is not to treat politicisation as a new phenomenon,² nor to suggest that aid operations were ever insulated from local political dynamics.³ Rather, it is to examine how a marked shift in the global political environment, combined with the reach and speed of digital connectivity, are reshaping the practical meaning of acceptance – how it is understood, how it is implemented, how it erodes, and how aid actors themselves judge its usefulness and limits.

To this end, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

¹ See for example the controversies surrounding the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21647259.2025.2587559>

² See the Humanitarian Policy Group’s debates from over 20 years ago (Curtis, 2001): <https://media.odi.org/documents/295.pdf>

³ See for example, HPG’s 2004 report “Beyond the continuum: The changing role of aid policy in protracted crises”, or ODI’s 2001 report “Politics and Humanitarian Aid: Debates, Dilemmas and Dissension”.

- How is the concept of acceptance understood and conceptualised?
- In what ways do politicised environments shape the conditions under which acceptance is pursued?
- How does acceptance erode in practice, and what are practitioners doing to monitor, sustain, or repair it?
- What would a realistic and useful approach to acceptance look like under current conditions?

This research paper is aimed primarily at NGO practitioners and decision-makers involved in SRM, access, programme delivery, and partnership management, while also speaking to staff in other NGO functions, UN agencies, institutional donors, and researchers engaged in this space.

1.1 Research design

The research involved the collection of primary and secondary qualitative data between June 2025 and March 2026. Secondary data collection included a review of previous research on acceptance-based SRM, principled humanitarian action, and analyses on emerging threats to aid workers. Most notably, this research builds upon GISF’s previous research papers, “Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: challenges, risks and opportunities for security risk management” (GISF, 2021a) and “Neutrality, Access and Making Localisation Work” (GISF, 2024).

Primary data for this report was based on 20 interviews with practitioners and analysts whose roles span SRM, access, partner engagement, programme management, and risk analysis. Most interviewees⁴ were identified via a snowball sampling method and have operational experience in either humanitarian SRM and/or access, with several having experience in directly implementing acceptance-based security strategies in high-risk, politicised contexts. They also include experts who conduct research in these areas of inquiry. Stakeholders interviewed ranged from international staff of INGOs, UN agencies, and independent consultants. Most spoke from regional or global roles; others drew on country-specific operational experience. Their perspectives provide tangible examples of how acceptance is highly shaped by unique contexts and specific organisational and programme-related dynamics.

Many of the interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity. Due to the highly sensitive area of discussion, interviewees were selective in the examples they shared, either to avoid undermining their organisation’s acceptance in active operational contexts or to avoid drawing attention to cases where acceptance had eroded in ways that could pose reputational risks. As a result, all cited examples used in this paper are illustrative, largely anonymised, and presented so that they cannot be traced back to the actions of a specific organisation.

There are important limitations to note at the outset. This report does not offer a representative survey of all types of acceptance-based security strategies that are undertaken in the field, nor does it outline all the dynamics at play in politicised environments. Importantly, it does not try to propose a universal set of metrics for achieving, maintaining, and measuring acceptance. The insights coming from interview material should be read as a set of situated perspectives on acceptance.

1.2 Report Structure

The report is organised in the following sections: **Section 2** traces the changing political dynamics affecting global aid. **Section 3** unpacks the concept of acceptance, its core components, challenges, and layered audiences. **Section 4** examines the relationship between humanitarian principles and

⁴ GISF took steps to ensure gender parity through specific outreach to female NGO staff. Despite this, only 25 per cent of interviewees were female. This is possibly due to an overrepresentation of men in SRM-related positions across the sector.

acceptance, and how practitioners navigate the gap when principled action no longer generates the trust the traditional framework assumes. **Section 5** explores how politicised environments reshape the conditions under which acceptance is pursued, from navigating powerbrokers to digital narratives and the politics of organisational identity. **Section 6** looks at how acceptance erodes in practice, including the role of programme design, staff conduct, and internal organisational dynamics. **Section 7** considers the collective dimension: reputational spillover, coordination, and the role of partnerships with national actors and the risks they pose. **Section 8** concludes with practical pathways for strengthening acceptance under current conditions.

On terminology

“Politicisation of aid” in the context of this paper refers to the “the violation of humanitarian space by various national and international (f)actors, which can jeopardize the effective delivery of humanitarian aid” (Thyssen, 2024, p.2). Humanitarian space here is understood in two ways: the physical environment in which aid actors can reach affected populations, and the conceptual space in which the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence can be upheld (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010).

The term “politicised environments” often used in this research broadly refers to contexts in which aid is interpreted through wider struggles over power, legitimacy, ideology, identity, security, or foreign influence. That includes situations of active armed conflict but is not limited to them. Examples of settings covered in this report include Afghanistan, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Israel/Palestine, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen, as well as broader references to the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America.

There is a dedicated section that unpacks what “acceptance” entails as a concept (see section 3).



The shifting global dynamics of politicisation

While the politicisation of aid is not new, what has changed is how openly donors, host states, and armed actors now talk about the political, security, and economic interests behind their engagement with aid. The space for organisations to position themselves as separate from those interests has narrowed, and the conditions under which aid operates have shifted accordingly. Aid is increasingly shaped by pressures that extend well beyond immediate humanitarian need, including donor priorities, the political agendas of host states and armed actors, and a growing set of security concerns that complicate how organisations operate and how they are perceived.

2.1 The drivers of politicisation

These pressures can be understood across three interconnected axes (Thyssen, 2024), which together help explain how politicisation is reshaping the global aid environment.

First, donor governments have increasingly linked overseas aid to their geopolitical, reputational, or security interests (Sinanoglu, 2025; Lind and Carter, 2025). The US government's closure of US Agency for International Development in 2025 was accompanied by an executive order requiring that all foreign assistance be "fully aligned with the foreign policy of the President" (White House, 2025). The European Commission has reframed its international assistance budget around strategic interests including migration and security (Gavas and Käppeli, 2025). And several governments, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, have folded their independent development ministries into their foreign affairs departments, formally subordinating aid decisions to diplomatic priorities. Dercon (2026) captures the current trajectory: "The recent shift in the traditional donors' approach to development aid reflects aid's essential political nature, temporarily obscured during a technocratic period of aid in the late 1990s to mid-2010s."

These dynamics are further compounded by a shrinking funding environment. Preliminary data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that total official development assistance (ODA) fell 23.1 per cent in 2025, the largest annual contraction on record, with humanitarian ODA from Development Assistance Committee (DAC)⁵ countries down 35.8 per cent (OECD, 2026). This follows a 7.1 per cent decline in 2024 (OECD, 2025), meaning that in just two years the sector has lost roughly a third of its public funding base, with the greatest impact borne by the least peaceful countries in the world (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). The US alone drove three-quarters of the 2025 decline, but cuts were widespread, with 26 donor countries reducing their contributions (OECD, 2026).

The sector has long depended on a small handful of Western donors whose funding was never neutral but politically expedient, and as that base narrows further, organisations that might once have diversified to protect their independence have fewer avenues to do so (Pearson, 2025). The pressure to align with donor priorities in order to survive is no longer a marginal concern but a structural feature of the current aid landscape.

Second, the conditions within recipient countries have changed in ways that further politicise aid delivery. Host governments and de facto authorities increasingly use bureaucratic and administrative measures, from registration requirements and movement restrictions to customs controls and

⁵ The DAC is an international forum of 34 members and associates which includes the largest providers of aid in the world.

demanding reporting rules, not as neutral administrative processes but as deliberate tools to control humanitarian operations and limit the space for action (ACAPS, 2025). In politically fragmented environments such as Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, for instance, competing authorities impose contradictory requirements that create legal uncertainty and lead to delivery delays, interruptions, and reduced operational presence (ACAPS, 2025). These dynamics increasingly sit alongside more coercive practices, including the deliberate denial of the legal right to humanitarian action itself via blockade and siege-style restrictions on supplies, and the targeting of medical facilities, aid convoys, humanitarian personnel, and civilians attempting to access assistance (Thompson, 2026). In such contexts, aid is not only constrained but actively becomes “a lever for population control, bargaining, punishment, or forced movement” (Thompson, 2026, p.4).

Third, humanitarian organisations themselves contribute to politicisation. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2025b) has warned that the lines between humanitarian, military, and political agendas are blurring, and that “with us or against us” narratives are eroding the space for neutrality. Part of this blurring is externally imposed, but part of it is self-generated. Many organisations have expanded their mandates to encompass development, peacebuilding, human rights, and political advocacy alongside emergency response, making it difficult for external audiences to distinguish humanitarian from political actors. Schenkenberg van Mierop (2015) stated that the development of the Core Humanitarian Standard in 2014 saw heated debates on neutrality within the wider NGO community, with some advocating that they should not be bound to it because it does not conform with their work. Moreover, some organisations are more actively engaging in political causes of conflict, entangling their programmes within local politics in the process (Thyssen, 2024).

2.2 How these dynamics are playing out in the field

These drivers are amplified by a narrowing legal and administrative environment. The ICRC (2025a) has warned that sanctions and counterterrorism measures are constraining humanitarian action to the point where activities that are lawful under international humanitarian law (IHL) can still expose organisations to prosecution if humanitarian exemptions are not in place, with some claiming that such measures criminalise the very engagement with non-state armed groups that access and acceptance often requires (Schellhammer, 2021; Wehbe and Thomsen, 2023). This produces a “chilling effect” (Alderson and Spencer, 2024) where financial institutions (and humanitarian organisations) restrict themselves further than the law requires simply out of uncertainty about what is permitted.⁶

The most direct pressure is the erosion of the legal and normative protections that humanitarian actors have historically relied on. The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB)’s 2025 report (Stoddard et al., 2025) describes a steep erosion of respect for humanitarian norms and the laws of war by state actors, amplified in some contexts by public smear campaigns against aid organisations and an increase in the number of arrests and detentions. This has been accompanied by historically high casualties among aid workers: 2024 was the deadliest year on record, with 383 aid workers killed (Stoddard et al., 2025), driven in large part by state actors as the primary source of violence. And more recent AWSDB data for 2025 indicates 332 killed,⁷ confirming a continuous trend of high aid worker casualties.

Running parallel to this is a tightening of civic space, more broadly. CIVICUS (Firmin et al., 2025) describes a growing crisis of resourcing alongside increasing restrictions on civil society, while the European Civic Forum’s Civic Space Report for 2025 (Narsee et al., 2025) documents how “foreign

⁶ The adoption of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2664 provides a humanitarian exemption to asset-freeze measures in UNSC sanctions regimes, but it has not provided financial institutions with sufficient reassurance that processing transactions for humanitarian organisations in sanctioned contexts will not be penalised (Alderson and Spencer, 2024).

⁷ See AWSDB’s 2025 dataset: <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>

threats” narratives are being used to cast suspicion on externally funded organisations as political agents of foreign powers. India offers a concrete example: since 2016, authorities have revoked, suspended or refused to renew the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) licenses of hundreds of civil society groups, or accused them of evading the law and frozen their bank accounts (Amnesty International, 2022). These dynamics feed directly into the operating climate for aid actors, making it easier for authorities to frame international organisations as intrusive or aligned with foreign interests.

Digital connectivity has transformed how acceptance is built, contested, and lost. Mis- and disinformation has also moved from a peripheral concern into a direct security risk. GISF has found that harmful information affecting humanitarian actors has become more pervasive and faster-spreading, and that it can erode perceptions of a principled response among communities and armed groups regardless of what an organisation actually does (GISF, 2023). The ICRC (2024) echoes this, noting that online campaigns targeting the impartiality of aid organisations make it harder for them to operate safely. But the same digital ecosystems that amplify hostile narratives also expose humanitarian actors to sharper public scrutiny of their actual conduct, with allegations of partiality, corruption or mismanagement travelling quickly across contexts (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2026). Organisations are now judged on their conduct across every context they operate in, with what happens in one environment shaping perceptions in another.

Finally, new aid delivery models are making it harder for principled actors to stand apart. The growth of militarised and privatised mechanisms, most visibly in Gaza with the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), operating in the same space as traditional NGOs is blurring the lines for aid delivery on the ground. In fact, a joint donor statement⁸ in 2025 explicitly rejected the proposed Gaza aid model on the grounds that it links humanitarian aid to political and military objectives. When parallel systems operate in the same context, all actors in that space tend to be lumped together, regardless of their actual affiliations, a pattern that both Abiew (2012) and Shannon (2009) have traced back to earlier post-9/11 experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The cumulative consequences of these trends are that the operating conditions under which acceptance must be built have shifted fundamentally. Roles between actors have become blurred, perceptions of neutrality are compromised, access, and acceptance to affected populations is hindered, and humanitarian workers are regularly attacked. These are the realities that set the stage for the practitioner accounts that follow.



Community engagement activities in Kenya

⁸ See full joint donor statement: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-donor-statement-on-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza>



What do we mean by acceptance?

As one of the three pillars of Van Brabant's (2000) widely adopted security management framework, acceptance is often treated as the preferred starting point for SRM in the field (GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024; EISF, 2015; Collinson et al., 2013; Fast and O'Neill, 2010), and it is considered the approach most consistent with principled humanitarian action (GISF, 2021a; Schneiker, 2018). Yet despite this formal consensus, what acceptance actually means in operational terms, and what it requires from organisations to manage effectively, remains far less settled than the sector might suggest.

As one experienced global security manager reflected in our interview:

“ I’ve always felt that ‘acceptance’ is quite a simple concept that you can explain very quickly in a training seminar, but it’s also quite complex in how it’s operationalised. Like, what does it actually mean? ”

Understanding how aid organisations understand and conceptualise acceptance is thus crucial for examining how they may or may not apply it effectively in their practice. This section seeks to unpack the concept of acceptance, examining its core elements, the challenges practitioners face with its application, and the layered ways in which aid actors have come to understand it in their work.

3.1 Defining the concept

Van Brabant's (2000) original formulation emphasised that acceptance is cultivated through the promotion of humanitarian principles and through building relationships with communities and potentially hostile actors alike. Similarly, Fast et al. (2015) argues that acceptance draws upon relationships with community members, authorities, belligerents, and other stakeholders to provide consent for an NGO's presence and activities. Jackson (2015) adds that positive perceptions of aid workers will generate goodwill and allow them to operate safely.

What is most notable in these definitions is the dual emphasis on consent⁹ and relationships.¹⁰ Acceptance should not be seen simply as a passive condition that follows from being present or providing aid services; it must, as the updated HPN's Good Practice Review 8 (HPN and Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p. 178) stresses, be “actively forged and diligently maintained.” Childs (2013) identifies what she terms the “passive model of acceptance,” in which agencies engage in few, if any, activities specifically designed to boost acceptance and simply trust that it will emerge as a by-product of their programming. She argues that this has significant limitations as a security strategy: it cannot counter specific threats, its geographical range is limited, and it does not create acceptance uniformly.

Importantly, acceptance is not a binary condition but exists on a spectrum. Fast et al's (2011)

⁹ It is worth noting that HPN's (2025, p.177) recent Good Practice Review 8 volume has pushed back on this term suggesting that it might not be the most appropriate way to understand acceptance.

¹⁰ See definitions for “acceptance approach” and “acceptance strategy” in GISF's online glossary, which largely mirror this terminology: <https://gisf.ngo/glossary-english/>

framework distinguishes between gradient levels:

Level	Description
High-level (Embraced)	The community actively promotes the organisation's presence to wider community members and to parties to the conflict. There is genuine investment in the agency's continued work.
Medium-level (Tolerated)	Aid agencies are tolerated enough to work safely, but community members do not have a high degree of investment in the organisation's presence or mission.
Low-level (Rejection / Hostility)	Active targeting of aid workers and an environment that is patently unsafe to operate in. The organisation's presence is neither wanted nor tolerated.

While a useful visual representation, this framework raises important questions about how an organisation can determine where they sit on this spectrum. What governs whether an organisation sits at one level or another? And who decides? To that end, Bollettino (2008) questions whether NGOs have the capacity to make the sophisticated judgments that an acceptance approach requires, while Fast et al. (2013) observe that practitioners often assume that building acceptance at the individual level will extend to organisational level acceptance. GISF's own research acknowledges that the concept is more complicated to unpack than it seems, and that there is "neither a single way to view nor to 'do' acceptance" (Moutard and Fast, 2021, p. 7).

3.2 Core ingredients underpinning acceptance

To further unpack what acceptance means, the practitioners interviewed were asked to reflect on how they would define and frame the concept. What emerged was not a single coherent definition, but a cluster of 'core ingredients' that highlight the different experiences these practitioners have had with acceptance-based security approaches in their work.

Goodwill and positive relationships

Across the interviews, one of the most frequently cited ingredients of acceptance was that it requires genuine goodwill from local stakeholders. Several practitioners converged on this point from different angles. Jamie Monteith, Global Head of Security at the Protestant Agency for Diakonie and Development (EWDE), framed community acceptance as the "starting point" of any security strategy, defining it as "the desire of the community to have you there delivering something that they want." A security manager in the Sahel described it in similarly direct terms as "tout simplement, la perception positive" ['simply put, it's about positive perception']¹¹, adding that this enables their organisation to request and receive support from local authorities and to protect field teams. Gurpreet Dhoot, Safety and Security Manager at Fauna and Flora International, labelled acceptance as the "gold standard" in SRM, characterising it as having "strong, sometimes personal, positive relationships" with community leaders, government actors, and non-state actors. His definition centred on resilience under pressure:

“**Ultimately it's about having a relationship where if something goes wrong, things don't fall apart.**”

¹¹ Translated by author from the original French.

This framing suggests that acceptance functions less as a fixed state and more as accumulated social capital, what he described as a “level of grace” that an organisation can earn over time. A security access manager interviewed pushed this idea further, defining acceptance in terms that imply active community buy-in: “people want you so much that they are willing to defend you and your ability to work the way that you want on your terms.”

What unites these viewpoints, despite their different registers, is the insistence that acceptance is an active, relational process rather than a passive condition, in line with Childs’ (2013) focus on active acceptance.

Quality programming

Equally prominent in the interviews was the insistence that acceptance cannot be separated from the quality of programming. Marieke van Weerden, Senior Director of Health, Safety and Security at Catholic Relief Services, was emphatic:

“ Quality programming is key to any sort of acceptance. This is not an operations or security thing. It starts there. ”

Monteith made a closely related argument, contending that acceptance is “not really a security function” and “not really a security word,” but rather something that emerges from “good programme design, good safeguarding, a good kind of attitude, and behaviour of your staff.” An access and security director interviewed reinforced this framing: acceptance is built when “we do what we say we will do, if we do it the way we say we will do it, without delay, with quality and durability.” Dhoot likewise asserted that acceptance is “not just about the operations and the delivery” but about “the whole communication strategy,” including “taking people on the journey, drawing people in, really selling your victories to the communities or stakeholders.”

Interviewees largely agreed that acceptance is not a specialist security activity, but a broader expression of how an organisation is perceived through its programme design, staff conduct, and engagement and communication with stakeholders.

Trust, reciprocity, and active engagement

Most interviewees also highlighted trust as an important prerequisite for gaining acceptance. Hassan Morajea, a safety and access practitioner, saw trust as comprising three layers: communities that trust the organisation’s impartiality, authorities that trust its neutrality, and a humanitarian system that supports the organisation in upholding those commitments. The third element is noteworthy because it places trust within a broader institutional architecture, signalling that systemic coordination is an important condition for acceptance (see section 7).

Several practitioners further emphasised that active acceptance is not unidirectional where an organisation has to simply earn the approval from a passive community. Van Weerden asserted that: “It is not a one-way street. It is you work with them and they work with you.” She added that, in some of the contexts she had worked in, the most reliable contextual information came not from formal coordination bodies such as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) or the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), but from local staff networks. In her view, this reciprocal exchange is one of its clearest operational expressions of acceptance. Another access and security director described a similar dynamic: when an organisation is accepted, it may be “warned, informed, or even actively protected” by local stakeholders and communities.

These accounts resonate with Jackson’s (2015) observation that a key factor shaping acceptance

is the degree to which communities develop a stake in the organisation's continued presence. They also connect to what Fast et al. (2011) describe as the relational and networking component of acceptance.

Several interviewees framed community participation not as an instrumental tactic for improving security outcomes but as a foundational condition for the legitimacy of humanitarian presence itself. Mahaut De Talhouet, a senior humanitarian access practitioner, made a forceful statement in that regard:

“ If we're doing humanitarian work and we're not even thinking of the population receiving our programme accepting us, then why are we even going? ”

Van Weerden added that genuine engagement requires “sitting down and listening” and that the starting point should be on what they need rather than what the NGO has to offer. Interviewees largely agreed that acceptance is strengthened when aid is provided in a participatory and conflict-sensitive manner, notably if there are tangible benefits that the community can observe.

Tied to this, a few practitioners also noted the importance of continued presence. De Talhouet stressed that organisations need to “show that you're present and that you're not going to come in, do a three-day visit, then disappear for six months.” If they don't actively invest in acceptance during that window, she added, then “things are going to backfire even if you're doing an okay programme.”

Fairness and transparency

As may be expected, some practitioners framed acceptance from a more operational standpoint, positing that organisational fairness and transparency are essential components that are foundational to acceptance.

Pablo Sarli, a senior safety and access practitioner, stressed the importance of being clear about boundaries with actors who may seek to co-opt you. He drew on his experience in the Middle East: “We were totally clear with the tribal leaders: this is what we're coming to do, and these are our red lines. We accept your lines; you have to accept our red lines.” Emmanuel Tronc, Senior Humanitarian Advisor at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, likewise described it as “a kind of balance” or “compromise” between what the organisation can accept and what local actors can accept in terms of engagement and risk. This language of negotiated boundaries is linked to what Grace and Lempereur (2021) identify as the “humanitarian negotiator's behaviour” dilemma of balancing access needs against the risk of conceding too much to gatekeepers.

Ian Woodmansey, Founder and Chief Executive Officer at Crucial Safety, explained that “all of these things are acceptance”: programme quality, fairness in procurement, staff behaviour, how people drive, who they socialise with, and how disputes are handled. He added:

“ Are we seen as people that procure fairly in the market? Are we seen as people who are respectful, both at work and outside work? How much do we drink? Who do we have relationships with? How do we drive when we're in marked cars? All of these things are acceptance. ”

This is an important point that moves beyond traditional community engagement approaches and aligns with Fast et al.'s (2013) identification of multiple key components of acceptance, including

staffing, image, and organisational principles, which collectively shape how an organisation is perceived.

3.3 Challenges in applying acceptance

Translating theory into practice

Despite acceptance's central role in SRM, multiple practitioners expressed serious concerns at the gap between theory and practice. Woodmansey noted that NGOs routinely declare their preference for acceptance as a security strategy but that he has "never seen any training about how to do acceptance." Monteith echoed this, observing that if someone came to him asking about acceptance, he would "probably send them off to a book first," because "no one's ever come to me to ask about acceptance, and I almost guarantee they never will." His explanation was revealing: acceptance is not always considered as an 'operational question', but rather it is viewed as a frame of mind. In fact, several interviewees – perhaps tellingly – referred to acceptance as a "principle", "value", or "mindset" rather than a practical approach or strategy.

The problem that follows is with its systematic application. De Talhouet argued that what is unsustainable is not acceptance itself, but the unserious way many agencies approach it, often "winging it" instead of treating it as a critical pillar of SRM. A UN representative interviewed added that "a lot of additional work needs to be done on explaining what we mean by acceptance, what actually needs to be done."

These assessments are consistent with findings across the literature. Collinson et al. (2013) and Fast et al. (2011) noted that while the commitment to acceptance is widespread, few organisations have implemented an active or systematic approach, and most continue to rely on harder forms of security management. Likewise, Fast et al. (2013) argue that the failure of organisations to systematise acceptance, and the absence of organisational policies and procedures around it, directly hinder its efficacy.

It requires a high level of effort and resources

Practitioners were equally candid about the scale of effort acceptance demands: "As a goal and as [an] ambition, it's great. I don't think it's achievable." They explained that the level of engagement, relationship-building, and communication required is "so huge and vast" that most organisations don't have the capacity for it. Dhoot reached a similar conclusion, noting: "you need to put an absolutely Herculean level of comms and networking in place."

Sarli linked the challenge to a structural constraint tied to programming, noting that short funding cycles don't allow the six to nine months¹² of acceptance-building that many contexts require, suggesting that it would be difficult to justify to donors looking for quick results.

It is difficult to measure

Most practitioners interviewed conceded that they do not have structured approaches to measure acceptance in their work, instead relying largely on qualitative and informal methods. Many described relying on a mix of instinct and observation, doing informal "vibe checks" with staff and local stakeholders, or relying on personal relationships with key contacts to gather information and read the environment. Others integrate acceptance measures within broader country risk assessments,

¹² Historically, humanitarian funding for protracted crisis contexts was almost exclusively short-term (6-12 months) (Levine et al., 2019). While multi-year funding mechanisms have increased over the past decade, the sector still largely relies on short-term funding cycles. See Levine, S., Sida, L., Gray, B., and Cabot Venton, C. (2019). Multi-year humanitarian funding: A thematic evaluation. Overseas Development Institute, Valid Evaluations, Institute of Development Studies, and Humanitarian Policy Group: <https://media.odi.org/documents/12809.pdf>

tracking them via proxy signals such as administrative delays, partner detentions, and social media perceptions, among others.

Part of the problem is that acceptance strategies are rarely well-defined. Jackson and Zyck (2017) found that at the field level, relatively few agencies could articulate and demonstrate coherent strategies for building acceptance. And Fast et. al (2011) also note how there is a tendency to conflate effective programming (which would reasonably include a monitoring and evaluation framework) with acceptance but without systematic assessment. Several practitioners also pointed out that monitoring is a constant rather than a discrete activity, which only strains capacity further.

A few practitioners were rather critical of informal approaches, arguing that unstructured engagement produces a flawed understanding of where an organisation stands. One senior SRM practitioner suggested using deliberate conversational techniques, including mirroring and labelling,¹³ to assess what stakeholders actually think versus what they report, but acknowledged that these are more limited, individual methodologies that cannot easily be scaled without significant effort and investment.

Among the practitioners interviewed, only one organisation had developed a streamlined assessment tool¹⁴ that can be quickly deployed via access workshops, but they were candid about its limits: “It’s not something really measurable with clear indicators because it’s really about perception, and we can be completely wrong about the way we’re perceived.” Indeed, several interviewees flagged a tension between measurement and interpretation, and a broader disconnect between evaluative tools designed at headquarters level and what practitioners find useful in the field. Sarli argued that existing tools have become “way [too] theoretical” and that field teams experience them as “more bureaucracy that they need to fill in.”

Presence is not acceptance

Several practitioners drew a sharp distinction between presence and recognition. One interviewee offered a vivid illustration in Yemen: standing outside a hospital bearing the organisation’s logo, they discovered that people in the surrounding community could not identify the organisation. For them, this was “the strongest indicator that it’s not exactly acceptance because you have your branding and because people get your services.”

This kind of disconnect between what an organisation projects and how it is actually understood is more common than most organisations admit, and it leads to a problem where presence and delivery is treated as a substitute for building trust and acceptance. De Talhouet put it bluntly:

Conflating acceptance with tolerance

Perhaps the sharpest critique raised by some practitioners was that genuine acceptance is not feasible anymore and aid actors tend to confuse it with mere tolerance. Dhoot was rather direct:

“ **If you just think that you showing up and doing a distribution is going to be enough, that’s where that realism is lacking and that’s not going to work.** ”

¹³ Linguistic ‘mirroring’ entails repeating and paraphrasing what the other person said in order to confirm that you are listening and understand them, whereas ‘labelling’ is about explicitly acknowledging and naming the emotions that the other person is feeling.

¹⁴ The tool is designed as a scoring matrix where the assessor rates different stakeholder groups from 1-3 (1=Acceptance, 2=Tolerance, 3=Hostility), adding justifications for the rating and an additional assessment of whether the stakeholder group is a positive or negative influence. It also includes a separate section to list out recent actions towards acceptance that have been undertaken.

“I don’t think acceptance really exists. I think it’s tolerance.” He further explained that in high-risk, highly politicised environments, what organisations experience is not acceptance but temporary acquiescence. Communities “don’t mind you being here now,” but they “don’t really believe in what you’re doing, or don’t fully understand it, or they have their own perceptions that you’re going to be gone soon anyway”. He concluded that when communities are in crisis and unable to think beyond the immediate future, the conditions for meaningful acceptance are simply not available.

The implication is that acceptance may not be necessary under some circumstances. Communities might simply allow the work to continue not because they have accepted the organisation but because they truly need what is being delivered.

3.4 Layers of acceptance

Acceptance of what?

Interviewees pushed back on the idea that acceptance is a single, uniform thing. Christophe Moreau, Head of Safety, Security and Support for the international relations department at the French Red Cross, raised this directly: “What acceptance are we talking about?” He then identified at least three distinct layers: the acceptance of the idea of humanitarian action, the acceptance of humanitarian organisations as institutions, and the acceptance of individual humanitarian actors. He stressed that these are not the same thing. Likewise, a UN agency representative interviewed highlighted this complexity with their agency, noting that it operates under overlapping identities as an individual entity, as part of the UN system, and as part of the humanitarian community, and that acceptance should not be assessed at only one of those levels.

Local stakeholders might support the principle of aid delivery while remaining suspicious of individual aid actors, or they may trust individuals delivering a programme while being indifferent or hostile to the organisation behind them. Each layer requires a different approach, which means that an organisation reading positive signals at one level might miss problems at another.

An interviewee illustrated this concretely. At a Syrian field site where an organisation had been operating for years, the interviewee discovered that the camp manager did not recognise the organisation by name. The field team had developed its own informal acceptance strategy by distancing themselves from the organisation’s identity and managing relationships personally. The practitioner reflected that this may have been pragmatic, but it had not produced organisational acceptance, and it meant there had been “no space for relationship-building as an organisation.”

Acceptance by whom?

Acceptance must also be negotiated with different actors simultaneously. De Talhouet stated that acceptance, like access, is “a multi-level thing” requiring attention at the governmental or authority level, at the security level, and at the community level, each of which “will probably require you doing different things.” Indeed, Tronc criticised the humanitarian sector for speaking about acceptance too loosely, as though it were singular and uniform, when in reality different actors accept different things for different reasons.

These dynamics matter because the relationships between those actors can shape whether acceptance holds in ways that are not always visible. Monteith argued that community acceptance is the “key point,” with the expectation that positive community sentiment will “trickle up” and generate pressure on governments, local authorities, or militias to allow operations. Morajea offered a cautionary example from Libya that illustrated how the same dynamic can work against you. His organisation had attributed access restrictions they were facing to the government, when in fact the authorities were simply responding to community discomfort with foreigners engaging with them in the first place. They drew an important lesson from this experience: organisations “think of security and think of access” in terms of authorities “a lot more than we think of the communities.”

Acceptance over protection and deterrence?

Acceptance does not operate in isolation from the other pillars of the security triangle. For some organisations, the relationship is formally institutionalised. One practitioner described a risk assessment tool with separate columns for acceptance and protection mitigation measures, with deterrence noted as a last resort. But the practical interplay between these strategies is more complex than such frameworks suggest.

Morajea interviewed argued that in the MENA contexts he worked in, acceptance is not one option among many but effectively the only viable long-term security approach. The risks they are confronted with, including detention, questioning, bureaucratic impediments, and kidnapping, are not ones that protection or deterrence can meaningfully mitigate:

“

I personally believe it's the only way that we can actually maintain access as well. From an access strategy perspective, protection-oriented approaches and deterrence approaches just tend to push us further away from being able to operate as opposed to gaining access.

”

However, this view must be read alongside the literature's cautions about the limits of acceptance. Cunningham (2017) argues that in some contexts, acceptance no longer functions as an effective strategy, particularly where the severity of kidnapping risk has overwhelmed non-deterrence measures. He refers to these as “zones of exception” to describe areas of extreme violence where the normal rules governing humanitarian operations no longer apply.





Principles under strain

Humanitarian principles have traditionally been understood as both the ethical foundation and the practical enabling mechanism for acceptance. The logic is that organisations which operate in accordance with humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence will be perceived as trustworthy and non-threatening, and that this perception will in turn reduce threats and secure access (HPN and Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025). But this rests on an assumption that the principles are legible, credible, and valued by the actors whose consent matters most. This in turn raises a more uncomfortable question: whether politicisation has shifted enough that fewer actors of consequence now value these principles, and what that means for acceptance built on them.

Schenkenberg van Mierop (2015) argues that the predominant response of humanitarian organisations has been to simply invoke the principles and presume that this will be enough to guarantee access. But promoting principles is not the same as applying them, and if organisations fail to demonstrate how they uphold the principles they preach, their moral authority weakens. The alternative, he contends, is greater honesty; organisations must either accept that neutrality and independence have eroded to the point of being meaningless or show concretely what they are doing to uphold them.

This section examines whether that link between principles and acceptance still holds in politicised environments, and if not, what practitioners are doing instead.

4.1 The fraying connection

When asked about the interplay between principles and acceptance, most practitioners acknowledged their importance but questioned whether they still function as intended. A UN interviewee described the principles in practical terms: they add a degree of predictability and signal to other actors what kind of organisation you are. But several interviewees argued that in politicised environments, this signalling function has broken down. Principles are invoked in formal communications and policy documents, but the gap between what organisations claim and what they can credibly demonstrate has widened to the point where the principles risk undermining rather than reinforcing trust. The strain is visible in different places: inside organisations themselves, in how external actors read those principles, and in the practical erosion of what the principles are meant to protect.

Knowledge gaps and issues with credibility

One of the more striking findings was that several practitioners noted a basic knowledge deficit within their organisations around humanitarian principles. One interviewee described conducting an access negotiations training for Libya country directors in Tunisia and kicking off by asking what the humanitarian principles meant to each participant: “I realised that half of them didn’t know what the humanitarian principles were. They just wrote random stuff that sounded nice, but it didn’t actually concretely mean anything.” The interviewee connected this to a broader trend: “There’s a lot more focus on technical expertise, but we’re losing a little bit of that identity as humanitarians.” A UN representative likewise explained how the UN had to step back and retrain internally because many staff had only a limited understanding of the principles. This is a familiar problem across the sector: O’Callaghan and Leach (2013, p. 294) found that the limited operational relevance given to the principles can partly be explained by a straightforward “lack of in-depth knowledge and training on how they can actually be used.”

Dhoot offered a different angle on the same problem, arguing that the principles carry less weight

with affected communities than the sector assumes: “Principles and documents and policies and international laws mean very little to people on the ground. Nobody looks at them as enshrined things. This is all theoretical stuff for a lot of people, especially people in need, unless they’re actually practically demonstrated.”

On neutrality

While practitioners broadly acknowledge that all principles were under strain, the one that attracted the most sustained criticism was neutrality. De Talhouet was direct: “I think we need to be a lot more realistic when it comes to principles and acceptance. In a lot of contexts, our neutrality is out of the door.” Dhoot went further:

“ The fact that you think you’re seen as neutral is naive at best. I don’t think any organisation is seen as neutral anymore, not for a long time. ”

Ukraine offered one of the clearest illustrations of this tension. International organisations scaled up rapidly after the full-scale invasion, many deploying staff who were unprepared to deal with a very active Ukrainian civil society (Noe, 2022). The question of neutrality was fraught from the outset: the response was overwhelmingly situated in government-controlled territory and funded by Western donors whose governments were simultaneously providing military support to Ukraine, and implemented alongside a Ukrainian civil society that did not draw the same distinction between military and civilian aid. National staff understandably struggled to remain neutral amid the intensifying conflict, with local civil society organisations engaging directly with conflict actors and individual staff supporting the military outside of their humanitarian roles (Norman, 2024). An interviewee highlighted how this played out in practice through national partners, describing how they often misinterpreted or inconsistently applied the principles in ways that reflected this broader disconnect. For local actors, neutrality was seen less as an approach to build trust and more as a framework that treated aggressor and victim as morally equivalent. This created a situation in which the principle that is supposed to have enabled acceptance actively undermined it with local stakeholders.

Another interviewee was candid about how aid in Ukraine is perceived: “We are very clearly part of the Ukrainian war effort because you’re sustaining the population that’s under shelling. Now, that’s not you being a military actor, but from the Russian side, of course it is.” Woodmansey agreed: “I don’t think there is much credible belief on the Russian side that Western NGOs taking Western government’s money in the context of Ukraine are interested in being neutral in the conflict.”

Another practitioner offered an equally striking example of how events in Ukraine affected access negotiations in another. They had initially expected that responding on both sides of the Ukraine conflict would strengthen their neutrality claims when negotiating access in their organisation’s operations in the Middle East. Instead, the practitioner asserted: “the way the [Ukraine] response has been handled so far by everybody has only further deepened the belief within different actors that we as Western-based organisations are absolutely not interested in acting neutrally when it’s not in the interest of our donors.” The practitioner now avoids raising Ukraine in any discussion with Middle Eastern interlocutors.

These perceptions are also no longer shaped only through direct relationships on the ground. Christina Wille, Director at Insecurity Insight, argued that the digital environment has created a new arena in which claims of neutrality are tested, and that classical humanitarian neutrality is difficult to understand for social media users accustomed to move in emotionally charged echo chambers: “The idea that you can be neutral and measured and moderate, and not take sides, is completely alien or foreign or opposed to the whole sentiment driven social media experience where people try

to link with like-minded people or seek attention through provocation or rage bating.” She provided an example where, after a deadly attack in a Sahel country, where an INGO put out a statement online declaring themselves “a neutral, independent healthcare provider prepared to speak to all parties to conflict”; but this was reinterpreted online as an admission that the organisation speaks to terrorist groups and therefore supports them. In this case, the language of neutrality turned out to be a liability rather than a protective device.

Hollowing out in practice

These practitioner accounts are consistent with what Egeland et al. (2011, p. 4) identified over a decade ago: humanitarian organisations have “willingly compromised a principled approach in their own conduct through close alignment with political and military activities and actors,” even while simultaneously calling for those principles to be respected. GISF’s (2024) research on neutrality also found that perceptions of neutrality are now shaped as much by donor affiliations and partnership structures as by an organisation’s own conduct, while Collinson and Elhawary (2012) argued that the humanitarian system’s perceived association with Western political and security objectives has contributed to it being distrusted, challenged, or rejected by local actors.

This points to a broader pattern in which the principles are not being abandoned in theory but hollowed out in practice, through earmarked funding, donor branding requirements, and the routine framing of humanitarian organisations as “implementing partners” of donor policy (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2015, p. 315). Indeed, the sector has made compromises on the principles for years, accommodating donors, governments, and armed actors in ways that have quietly thinned the practical weight of what organisations claim to stand for. As DuBois and Healy (2024, p. 111) observe, the bias towards “stay and deliver” compromises has become progressively less balanced, with each accommodation gradually reshaping what the principles mean in practice. Likewise, Barber and Bowden (2023) found that field personnel frequently approve compromises and trade-offs to keep aid flowing, often without assessing their cumulative impact, and that host governments have learned to exploit this willingness to their advantage.

Tronc drew the sharpest conclusion from these dynamics: there is now an “increasing and exponential disconnection” between acceptance and the principles that were once meant to ground it. In practice, he argued, operational pragmatism increasingly overrides principled posture. The question, then, is what practitioners are doing to navigate that gap.

4.2 Pragmatism over principled action

Practitioners described a range of pragmatic strategies for maintaining enough operational space to deliver programmes. These strategies sit on a spectrum from quiet accommodation to explicit compromise of humanitarian principles, and several practitioners were candid about the tensions involved.

At one end of the spectrum, some organisations narrow their public positioning to preserve access. One practitioner interviewed explained why in Gaza his organisation would decline to sign public advocacy letters: “it’s pointless, it’s not going to change any behaviour, and we’d like to keep working. We think it’s more important to maintain our access to the population.” Another interviewee framed the dilemma as a choice: “Do we want to be vocal and risk [our] operation[s]? Or [do] we say we don’t say anything because we want to be operational, because we still have an impact?” Van Weerden described a similar tension within her multi-mandate organisation, where public statements speaking out against violence have led to internal debates within her organisation between some who say it is “going too far” while others think it is “not going far enough.” This is a familiar bind for multi-mandate organisations, which have long struggled to reconcile humanitarian neutrality with broader commitments to development, justice, or peacebuilding (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2015).

Other practitioners described more direct accommodations to maintain access. One practitioner

interviewed took a more pragmatic view on managing relationships with authorities: “There is no problem with giving entities praise when they support you and emphasising to them that this is positive comms for you guys.” Another noted that in some Sahel contexts, communities themselves feel more confident when they see NGOs working with authorities, because that is how the state expects things to function. Yet another interviewee described a more extreme accommodation in northeast Syria, where their organisation had “given the Kurdish Syria Defence Forces [SDF] an enormous amount of control over who we hired and where we worked.” The interviewee assessed the situation candidly: “There was absolutely no independence.” But they used the existing relationship as leverage to gradually reclaim operational space, eventually achieving what they described as “a lot of independence.”

Despite these compromises, some practitioners argued that pragmatism only holds up when it is bounded. Sarli tried to draw a clear operational line. He explained that under some difficult circumstances he allows for a small bit of compromise, but only if it is time-limited: “You can do a compromise that’s approved by the SMTs [senior management teams], approved by the CD [country director], in the risk register. We need to put an end date for that compromise. If in six months we can’t get back to where we want to be, maybe we have to discuss about closing [operations].” In his view, temporary compromises can be seen as a managed risk rather than doing away with principled action altogether, but he acknowledged that this could be a slippery slope. To that end, he was very critical of accommodating so much that it crosses into providing a ‘service’ to authorities. He cited an example in a Latin American context where he had seen other organisations transporting representatives from the country’s health ministry, an arrangement he viewed as a clear red line. In his view, once an organisation crosses that line, it is no longer simply delivering its mandate but becoming a tool of the authorities. His answer in that case was not further accommodation but simply removing yourself from that context.

Tronc took this position a step further, arguing that silent pragmatism is not enough and that organisations must still mark red lines and publicly defend the foundations of humanitarian action, or they risk losing credibility and eventually acceptance itself.



WFP and its partner Caritas provide food to Ebola survivors in Katwa Health Zone, DRC.



How politicised environments reshape acceptance

Political dynamics now shape acceptance well beyond the immediate programme environment. They show up in who organisations must negotiate with, where they are permitted to work, how they are perceived online, and what their identity signals to actors around them. Aid is increasingly entangled with donor conditionalities, geopolitics, and competing narratives about what humanitarian actors represent. Across the interviews, practitioners described an environment in which acceptance is no longer primarily a function of building community engagement and programme quality, but rather one that is increasingly shaped by factors that organisations rarely control.

In these conditions, acceptance becomes harder to build and more vulnerable to pressures that extend beyond community relationships. This section unpacks the ways in which politicised environments impact acceptance.

5.1 Navigating powerbrokers

Politicised environments are often marked by fragmented authority,¹⁵ with multiple actors competing for control across the same territory (Barber and Bowden, 2023), meaning that acceptance with one level of a power structure does not guarantee safety from another. In practice, this shift means that acceptance-building requires engaging various power structures who compete amongst themselves, and these political, military, and security actors are more likely to assess humanitarian presence through a lens of strategic interest rather than need (Thyssen, 2024). As Woodmansey explained, political actors begin by trying to pull an organisation toward their side and co-opt them. However, if the organisation resists, “you’re irritating them” and then acceptance starts “on minus 10”.

What this means is that the actors who control access in politicised environments are not neutral gatekeepers, but political powerbrokers who either seek to co-opt aid organisations or view them with suspicion. In Libya, an interviewee described how access had to be negotiated through committees that included “military intelligence officials and the local Red Crescent, who are politically co-opted,” rather than through regular state authorities. In Afghanistan, another practitioner described a pattern where the Taliban operated through fragmented power centre: “the national level had one opinion, and the regional/provincial level, particularly the General Directorate of Intelligence, doing different things and making their own power plays. And that would translate into a raid on an office or an INGO being PNG’d [persona non grata], which was frequent.”

Likewise, a UN representative described the Sahel as an environment increasingly defined by “fear and distrust,” where the risk of being declared persona non grata underpinned every interaction with rapidly changing de facto authorities. To this end, a Sahelian practitioner interviewed reported that in Burkina Faso, INSO was accused of collecting information for foreign powers and hostile actors used salary information to argue that NGOs “paid nationals a lot [...] to work against their own country,” an accusation that the organisation has categorically denied.¹⁶

Navigating these different powerbrokers requires aid organisations to undertake more comprehensive actor mapping exercises to better understand how influence flows through different levels of a

¹⁵ Some politicised states operate under highly centralised authority, but for most of the contexts discussed by practitioners interviewed for this study, authority is dispersed across multiple competing actors.

¹⁶ See INSO’s press release from October 2025: <https://ngosafety.org/latest/inso-statement-burkina-faso-ongoing-detention-of-staff/>

political system. Dhoot described how he mapped influence from the top down in his context, noting that the government ministries most sympathetic to his organisation were often “small to medium players in the government structure” who could not shield it from “macro-level restrictions.” Sarli often mapped influence from the bottom up, observing that in some Latin American contexts, community leaders often “have way more acceptance than the government and the state apparatus, because they are there, they know their community.”

5.2 Restricted windows to gain acceptance

Politicised environments are not only changing who aid organisations have to engage with but are also reshaping the conditions that make the space for acceptance possible. Interviewees argued that the operating space to pursue acceptance has narrowed considerably. Where an organisation operates, or is permitted to operate, can be read as alignment with the authority controlling that territory and can potentially antagonise local stakeholders.

One interviewee described Syria during the civil war as a context where aid organisations were often forced to operate in only one of three or four different zones, each backed by different international powers who dictated access to vulnerable populations: “It was truly politicised at an international level.” Thus, operating in one area meant that you were perceived as serving the interests of one side of the geopolitical divide. They explained how their organisation’s operations in North East Syria presented a key challenge for their wider acceptance in other parts of the country: “Everyone was very aware that the local Kurdish administration was propped up by US funding and broadly by European and Western funding. [...] There was a sense that people had that we were there essentially to prop up this revolutionary government. That does create a certain level of proximity.” De Talhouet described how this overlay played out at community level: in Arab areas under Kurdish control “acceptance by the de facto authority actually sort of backfired against NGOs, because if we were there, it means the Kurdish authorities allowed us to be there.”

One interviewee described a similar dynamic in Sudan, where working through a partner in the Kordofans created significant association risks. In such a contested environment, partner activities, affiliations, or perceived relationships could potentially expose the INGO to accusations of indirect alignment with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF): “It’s one wrong move and suddenly you’re supporting [a side].” Another practitioner described similar situations in contexts across the world, such as Syria and Afghanistan pre-Taliban takeover, where governing authorities restrict NGO contact with insurgent or anti-government groups.

Several practitioners described this challenge as part of a broader pattern of systemic erosion, in which the overall conditions for acceptance are deteriorating across multiple contexts simultaneously. Tronc argued that the sector has progressively accommodated externally imposed constraints to the point where the humanitarian operating space has been effectively abandoned in some contexts:

“ We continue to accept a kind of playing rules where humanitarian exercise is totally abandoned. They have abandoned this field and after that it’s very difficult to regain it. ”

For example, a practitioner described a “gradual ratcheting up” of control in Afghanistan: “the more control they get, the more control they want.” To that effect, Dhoot cautioned that “in some countries, we have a ticking clock,” suggesting that organisations take advantage of the window they have.

5.3 Digital politicisation

All practitioners acknowledged that their wider acceptance is now contested on digital platforms, with dynamics that differ substantially from their face-to-face interactions with local stakeholders. De Talhouet observed that “I don’t think there are many fields today where the communities we’re working with are not connected. So, we don’t have the luxury of being in an area and they just take us at face value.”

Harmful narratives about aid actors rarely materialise fully formed. They often emerge gradually through wider political narratives and are amplified through digital ecosystems in ways that humanitarian organisations struggle to monitor or respond to effectively (Insecurity Insight, 2025). A regional security manager in the Sahel described how authorities actively shape perception by “paying influencers on social networks to sell this theory to the population” that humanitarians are Western agents. A crisis analyst interviewed confirmed that the “mindset of the community” is increasingly shaped by online content and influencers.

Insecurity Insight, who conduct analysis of perceptions about the aid sector on social media platforms in various operating contexts around the world, provided the clearest account of how damaging narratives form. Wille explained that harmful information does not usually emerge through a single false allegation: “It is the way some neutral information describing for example an aid project or security incidents affecting an aid agency is then linked to broad explanatory narratives, where associations between for example foreign actors or identities and other sentiments often linked to collective grievances and frustrations are being made in ways that associate aid work with something negative.” The aid sector, she noted, “very often isn’t the direct or explicit target but the harm occurs through unchallenged associations,” and organisations “can remain completely unaware of what’s going on because it’s nothing that’s said to them directly.” Clara de Solages, a Research Analyst at Insecurity Insight, added that hostile social media users “group everyone together: development, humanitarian, international, UN, everyone is grouped together,” and that “by the time it gets to public social media, it’s often too late,” because the point where a post becomes viral typically represents the late stage of a process that has matured on private messaging platforms.

Several examples were provided of how standard organisational actions were misinterpreted online, including the case of an evacuation tied to the movements of an armed group which was interpreted as evidence of collusion with that group, or equipment that was stolen by an armed group that displayed an organisation’s logo which was interpreted as a donation by the organisation itself. Such examples illustrate how incidents affecting the safety and security of aid actors can collide with the dynamics of social media, which rewards polarisation, suspicion, and erroneous claims.

The link between digital narratives and physical security is direct. As one interviewee said unequivocally: “There is no separation in terms of misinformation and physical security threats. Misinformation can lead to security threats.” They cited a case in a Middle East country where a misinformation campaign targeting an NGO led to “a price tag [on] the head of one of the staff.”

Another practitioner, however, cautioned against always labelling community sentiment as disinformation: “Sometimes I think we’re very quick to say it’s a disinformation campaign. Whereas maybe it’s just the opinion of populations.”

5.4 NGO identity politics

Narratives about aid actors being perceived as instruments of foreign governments have persisted for decades, gaining a lot of traction after evidence emerged that aid had been used as a political tool in Iraq and Afghanistan (Atmar, 2001; de Torrenté, 2004; Donini, 2011). That era left a lasting imprint on how humanitarian organisations are perceived in conflict settings, and the perception has proven far harder to shed than the policies that produced it.

This observation was reinforced by interviewees across multiple national contexts where their

presence was seen primarily through their national origin, donor affiliations, and institutional identity. One participant recounted how Mercy Corps, identified as an American NGO in the Central African Republic, faced an arson incident at its office by protesters accusing it of “being here for American interests.” Likewise, some practitioners described the escalating costs of French organisational identity in the Sahel and Central Africa, where successive military coups have been accompanied by state-sponsored anti-French campaigns and the expulsion of French-funded agencies. In Mali, for instance, the military government has banned NGOs that receive French funding (Nzuki, 2024), while Niger revoked licenses for French aid organisations in 2024 (Banchereau, 2024). One interviewee stated it plainly from their point of view: “When you take money from France in the Sahel right now, you’re being funded by a party to a conflict. It can only feed the mistrust.”

Another practitioner framed the issue systemically: “The way people perceive us, because those are our donors[...], is actually linked very much with the political systems that those countries are actually representing.”

In response to these pressures, some organisations have adapted how they present themselves. Several interviewees described downplaying brand visibility or identity traits,¹⁷ making vague references about their funding sources, or removing country-specific content from global websites to avoid drawing unwanted attention.



Action Against Hunger workers provide food and nutrition support to migrants in Danlí, Honduras.

¹⁷ A few interviewees from faith-based organisations noted that they calibrate how visibly they present their religious identity depending on the context and on whether faith-based actors are viewed favourably from the outset.



How acceptance erodes in practice

Fast (2014) argues that explanations of attacks often locate the causes externally, while overlooking the internal vulnerabilities that can undermine acceptance. Indeed, acceptance is shaped not only by the external environment but by factors within organisational control, including programme design, the quality and accountability of delivery, the management of staff and organisational perceptions, and staff behaviour itself.

If internal organisational factors can erode acceptance in relatively stable settings, they are all the more important in tense, sensitive, and politicised environments, where organisations are under greater scrutiny but have not necessarily adjusted their approach accordingly.

The interviews for this study reflect this clearly. Many of the interviewees' most detailed and candid reflections on the erosion of acceptance in politicised environments centred on things within organisational control: the uneven quality of programming, the inherent challenges faced in being perceived as fair in their targeting of local stakeholders, the poor behaviour of individual staff, the lack of coherence between security and advocacy functions, and the negative signals that organisations send through their operational choices. Moreau captured this distinction succinctly: sometimes people think "humanitarian action is not accepted," but when you examine specific incidents at field level, "it's the person who was on the field that day that was not accepted, because of how they behaved, what they said."

6.1 Early signs of erosion

GISF has identified certain indicators that can signal declining acceptance, including reduced community willingness to share security information and increased bureaucratic obstruction (GISF, 2021b). Practitioners interviewed for this study recognised these signals but emphasised that many of the early warning signs of erosion are usually quieter, informal, and easy to miss. As Monteith put it, early warning signs are 'not quite [...] things that would be captured on any kind of matrix anywhere,' emerging instead through informal conversations.

At the subtle end, interviewees reported signals like people lingering near offices and project sites, watching staff movements, or turning up unannounced to see what the organisation is doing. They read this kind of low-level surveillance as an early indicator that acceptance is slipping. De Talhouet noted that "the erosion of acceptance starts by them asking more and more questions." Other signals reported included rumours of corruption or aid misallocation circulating in communities, rising complaints, and local elders becoming harder to schedule meetings with or sending more junior representatives in their place. Another practitioner described asking local stakeholders whether they would provide advance warning if an incident were to occur: "Sometimes they will say yes straight away, sometimes they will hesitate. The hesitation for me says something by itself."

A second set of signals focussed on the institutional environment. Van Weerden described how erosion shows up as administrative obstruction: "It's harder to get stuff done. They sort of block by delaying or not signing contracts and not granting access, or they micromanage." Other practitioners reported similar patterns: slower visa or work permit renewals, new compliance demands or paperwork requirements, requests for beneficiary lists or staff information that had not been asked for before, and a rise in "routine" inspections or vehicle stops. Van Weerden also noted that measures such as office incursions, interrogations, and detentions, often appear first through local partners, "because they are lower on that threshold and it's easier to sort of grab them." One interviewee described a case in which they called local police and camp management

during a security incident saying that they need to do something about it, and they were told flatly: “No, we don’t.” The interviewee interpreted this refusal as “a big indicator that we had absolutely atrocious acceptance.”

A third set dealt with internal issues within the organisation itself. Morajea described internal discomfort and silence within teams as a warning sign that is “very telling”: “if our teams feel that they can’t say if they work for us, that’s something that worries me.” Related signals include national staff asking to be moved to lower-profile roles, reluctance to wear branded clothing or attend community events on behalf of the organisation, and a widening gap between what country teams report up the chain and what is observable from the field. A participant warned that field visits can produce performative feedback, with senior security staff shown only the people teams want them to meet.

6.2 Programme-related issues

The interviews provided numerous examples in which programme design, the targeting of specific stakeholders, and delivery modalities themselves became sources of acceptance erosion.

Dhoot described two patterns. First, he explained that many projects are designed with too much complexity for what they were trying to achieve: “too many stakeholders, too many variables [...] too many fail points.” The second problem was programming that listened to local elites but missed what communities actually wanted. Drawing on an example from a previous role, he recounted how US contractors built a town hall that senior delegates had requested but no one else needed: “The local populations got really angry. And what’s worse is they’re not getting any work out of all this building work.” In both cases, the damage to acceptance came not from external hostility but from poor programme design.

A Sahel-based practitioner provided one of the most striking examples of how programme design choices can directly threaten security. In Mali, he discovered by happenstance that a monitoring and evaluation team’s questionnaire included a question asking local communities whether their youth were being recruited by armed actors. The questionnaire was being administered in an area under the influence of JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin), a known jihadist group. The practitioner responded directly: “How do you want JNIM to perceive this question? That you are inquiring about their mechanism for recruitment?” He was clear that this was not a case of bad intentions but of insufficient conflict sensitivity in programme design, and it demonstrates how seemingly technical instruments can carry profound political implications in politicised environments.

More consequential for acceptance, however, were cases in which decisions in targeting beneficiaries clashed with local perceptions of fairness. An interviewee described a case in Yemen where threats against his organisation increased not because it lacked an acceptance strategy, but because the organisation had misunderstood how its targeting of beneficiaries was being read. When he investigated incidents in the area, one of which involved a vehicle being shot at, the person who fired on the vehicle explained: “You give money to the malnourished children. Those families have malnourished children because they prefer to spend money on qat. We have less money than them. Our children are not malnourished because we prefer to give food to our children, but we are suffering.” The interviewee reflected on this: “We understood that the criteria were not the right ones.” The targeting criteria, which were technically sound from a nutritional perspective, had failed to account for how they would be read within the local social and economic dynamics.

Another practitioner described a similar dynamic during the Ebola response in the DRC, where the UN provided substantial financial support to people who recovered from Ebola: “That created a lot of problems, that lack of fairness with the population that was already starving. They said, what, I have to get Ebola in order to get any kind of funding? This is nuts.” These examples reflect a well-documented pattern: needs-based targeting can erode acceptance among those excluded, particularly when communities and organisations define fairness differently (DuBois and Healy, 2024; Tschunkert, 2026).

One participant likewise observed that communities are attuned to the gap between organisational resources and community benefit: “They’re not stupid, like they understand that you guys have got money, which is why you’re here. Are you just here because of the cash, or are you here because you really mean it?” They described an example of how community anger increased over aid kits being prioritised for humanitarian workers with jobs and income over people who had “completely lost everything.” They noted that “people don’t call it [...] a breach of impartiality and so on. But essentially, that’s what they’re saying.”

6.3 Organisational conduct and internal coherence

Beyond programme design, the interviews identified a range of ways in which organisational conduct, including staff behaviour, issues across organisational functions, compliance failures, and institutional risk aversion, can erode the acceptance that field teams have worked hard to build. The practitioner accounts here suggest that many security professionals are well aware of these dynamics, even if their organisations are less comfortable discussing them publicly.

Monteith was direct about the role of individual staff conduct: “If you unpack some of the things that damage acceptance, a lot of it is the basics of, for example, driving your car too fast through a village. Staff behaviour is a massive and maybe slightly undervalued component of acceptance, and that colours every interaction the staff have with the community.” Another practitioner also noted an issue with staff expressing themselves on political issues on social media, which has led to dismissals.

At a more strategic level, another interviewee argued that many engagement strategies are too thin to be useful: “The majority of organisations have engagement strategies that are effectively a list of names of people, but that’s it. There’s no - why [do] we want to speak to this person, who’s going to speak to them, how we’re going to run it, what the objective is.” The interviewee was also critical of organisations who fail to recruit the right profiles for challenging environments, arguing that technical competence is not enough without an understanding of humanitarian identity, risk, long-term access, and how to navigate politically sensitive areas.

Tied to weak engagement strategies, some practitioners described a form of bunkerisation in which some staff do not really do the difficult engagement work with local stakeholders and instead remain in capitals, overestimating risk or waiting for an impossible level of certainty before acting. Tronc also argued that internal policies can create distance between national staff and the communities they are supposed to serve, reducing their capacity to engage and build trust. Duffield (2016) has documented this withdrawal from face-to-face engagement at a structural level, but Tronc’s account suggests that it also operates at the organisational level, where risk-averse organisations constrain the very staff who are best positioned to maintain acceptance.

Several interviewees flagged the lack of a coherent cross-functional approach to acceptance as a particularly acute driver of erosion. One interviewee, for example, explained how they administered a survey in a country mission where four or five of seven security managers named the advocacy team as the main source of access restrictions: “What was happening is that there was a complete disconnect between the two. While one was pushing advocacy messaging, the others were trying to deal with the impact of that in the field. There was no coordination on a coherent strategy.” This disconnect between advocacy and operations is not unique to any single organisation, but the fact that security professionals identify their own colleagues as a factor undermining acceptance suggests a structural problem that goes beyond individual cases.

Sarli likewise warned that inconsistency across country missions compounds the problem: “Each country operation has some standards from the NGO, but then it’s made by the people that are there.” This means that acceptance built in one context by one team can be undermined when staff rotate or when a different mission operates to different norms under the same organisational banner.

Another participant provided a similar example in Afghanistan, where job advertisements were inadvertently published with politically sensitive content, requiring the organisation to pull the ads, check with government contacts whether damage had been done, and ultimately strip Afghanistan from the organisation's global website. They implied that these are not major security failures but everyday operational mistakes that can lead to serious negative outcomes.

Compliance failures were also flagged as a major driver of erosion. A single administrative problem can leave staff and vendors unpaid and put every operational relationship under strain simultaneously. For example, one interviewee described how, during a registration process in Libya, the de facto authorities looked into the organisation's registration elsewhere and discovered it had been registered as a company rather than an NGO in another region, which led them to deny their application on the grounds that they lied. Fraud and safeguarding failures sit in a related category, with the added risk that a single discovered incident usually points to many more that have not surfaced. One interviewee stated: "The obvious one is fraud, safeguarding, those types of incidents. If you find one, how many dozen have you not found?"

Finally, several practitioners highlighted recruitment and contracting as key areas where issues with acceptance become visible. One practitioner stated that "if you have an unfair recruitment process, you're going to have issues," adding that these are "nothing to do with security, but they're essential for security." Another practitioner described a case in East Africa where an organisation "had employed far too many of one tribe and very few of the other," a pattern that "was not even really an issue that was on their agenda, but it was extraordinarily apparent to people looking at the organisation from the outside."





Collective Acceptance, Coordination, and Partnerships

No organisation's acceptance exists in a vacuum. Fast and O'Neill (2010) found that local stakeholders often perceive the various entities operating in their context, whether humanitarian, development, private-sector, or military, as more or less indistinguishable. This means that the behaviour of any single actor can shape how the entire sector is perceived, and that acceptance built by one organisation can be undermined by the conduct of another. At the same time, the sector's increasing reliance on national partners as the primary interface with communities raises questions about where acceptance is actually held, how it is mediated, and what happens when localisation creates distance rather than proximity. This section examines both of these dynamics.

7.1 Reputational spillover tied to the weakest link

The risk of reputational spillover was one of the strongest points of consensus across the interviews. Sarli estimated that "100 per cent, or 90 per cent" of the time, one organisation's mistakes affect everyone, and De Talhouet laid it out simply: "One NGO stepping aside ruins the work of the entire group." Wille argued that the problem goes deeper than individual incidents. Many organisations, she observed, are "more concerned about their own acceptance rather than the acceptance of the value of aid and the principles that underpin the general aid sector." They monitor whether their own brand is being criticised while missing broader hostility to aid's social role, a distinction that matters because the latter affects everyone regardless of whether any single organisation is named.

The most detailed examples coming out of the interviews focussed on issues of collective discipline, particularly when faced with political pressures from political powerbrokers. One interviewee described how in Afghanistan, organisations had been holding a firm line on women being allowed to work. When some folded under Taliban pressure, the precedent was set. They described a similar dynamic in the DRC, where M23 demanded that NGOs pay for an additional 'visa' to operate in the area. Most organisations refused on the grounds that M23 is a sanctioned group, but he noted: "some organisations just pay because they want to get access." Van Weerden captured the structural vulnerability this creates: "The weakest link has been broken in that NGO pact and it's broken open; and when they get one, they can get more of them."

One interviewee was very critical of how some actors normalise poor acceptance. They described hearing NGOs say, "Oh yeah, you know, we had stuff stolen. That's just part of the culture," and UN agencies treating aid diversion as inevitable. They were scathing in response: "There is a way to get around this if you pay enough attention and you have the acceptance, but you're not bothered." Their most damaging example concerned the Ebola response in eastern DRC, where the UN brought in the Congolese armed forces to guard convoys, tying protection of civilians to an historically abusive actor in the region. According to them, when communities attacked those convoys, "it wasn't because they didn't understand why we were there. It was because they were saying, 'you were coming into our communities, and you are abusing populations.'" The same practitioner also cited the massive sexual exploitation scandal documented by The New Humanitarian in 2020¹⁸ as a key driver of bouts of violence that targeted health workers and the broader aid sector in the Kivus.

¹⁸ See the full article in The New Humanitarian here: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/09/29/exclusive-more-50-women-accuse-aid-workers-sex-abuse-congo-ebola-crisis>

7.2 Coordination: weak in practice, strong in potential

The interviews highlighted the importance of having strong coordination mechanisms to strengthen collective acceptance, but many criticised their effectiveness. While coordination structures such as access working groups are well established and ubiquitous across operational contexts, interviewees observed that acceptance is rarely discussed explicitly. The focus tends to be practical and operational, with acceptance treated as an implicit assumption rather than something the sector actively works on together. One practitioner was pessimistic about the broader picture: “I don’t think country-level coordination happens as well as it used to happen. [...] To the extent that one INGO doesn’t know what the other one is doing or why.” De Talhouet was similarly candid: “I’m a bit jaded by coordination. I think we need it. It’s critical, but we’re also so bad at actually following through [on] our own common decisions.”

This structural weakness is not lost on the actors aid organisations negotiate with. Tronc argued that state authorities in conflict settings deliberately exploit the sector’s fragmentation: “They have one kind of objective, which is to show how we are weak, split, dis-collective and disorganised.” If acceptance depends in part on collective credibility, then a visible lack of unity becomes a direct vulnerability. The same practitioner saw little prospect of improvement, noting serious difficulty in resetting collective ways of working even at Geneva level.

Some practitioners did, however, identify contexts where collective mechanisms had worked. An interviewee described how in Gaza, joint operating principles were enforced through a practical mechanism: participation in the rotation of personnel in and out of Gaza was contingent on compliance. They explained: “If you were to step out of line, it would mean you don’t get a spot on the bus. Sometimes we need to find ways to hold ourselves to account.” Sarli also described informal peer-to-peer warning networks between security counterparts as the strongest form of collective leverage he had experienced, even when formal coordination was weak.

7.3 National staff and partners: embedded acceptance and its limits

The localisation agenda has positioned national partners as central to humanitarian action, and several practitioners described them as the primary holders of acceptance in politicised environments. Van Weerden framed this in relational terms: “The NGO is the community because look at any given location and many of the staff who work for your organisation are actually from that community, and they have a stake, and your partners as well.” Another access and security director interviewed described partners who have influence in areas where the international organisation cannot be physically present, leveraging recognition by authorities to open access.

Dhoot also noted that the economic dimension matters: partner organisations generate income and livelihoods locally, “and that also buys a level of acceptance in most contexts.” Another practitioner saw working through local partners as a capability-strengthening exercise rather than a risk-transfer device. And de Solages observed in her social media monitoring that local actors are often more positively received than international ones.

But several practitioners identified significant risks in assuming that local partnerships automatically produce acceptance. One practitioner interviewed was direct about the risk: “Those partners, it’s a bit of a black box. We don’t know what their acceptance is like. We think that it’s good, or we assume that it’s good because they’re local organisations, therefore tick.” They described cases where partners had threatened communities to suppress complaints as well as “various flavours of fraud or safeguarding type issues, because there’s sometimes a reluctance to challenge.” The assumption that local equals accepted, they argued, involves a chain of trust that is not always verified.

A UN practitioner raised a structural concern about localisation and acceptance: “You would think that localisation would lead to more acceptance, [...] [but] we’re actually much less present and much further removed from the realities. And I really think that’s affecting our acceptance.” This

reverts back to the bunkerisation critique; if localisation means that international organisations withdraw further from direct engagement, the result may be less rather than more acceptance at the systemic level, even if individual partner organisations retain community trust.

Sarli offered perhaps the sharpest warning. In areas controlled by criminal or armed groups, there may be “no civil society” in a meaningful sense, and the people who channel information and speak are those permitted by the controlling political structure. In such contexts, the “local interlocutors” through whom acceptance is supposedly mediated may themselves be products of coercion rather than community legitimacy. This radically reshapes what acceptance through local partners can mean and underscores the need for the kind of granular actor mapping, applied not only to external stakeholders but to the partnership structures on which international organisations depend.



ChildFund/Jake Lyell

Community Health Volunteer visits the home of a family in Siaya County, Kenya.



Pathways and Implications

In response to all the issues laid out above, practitioners identified a set of approaches that can help strengthen acceptance in politicised environments. These cluster around eight themes: honesty about limits, improving communication, contextual analysis, online monitoring, embedding acceptance cross-functionally, strengthening the evidence base, enhancing collective discipline, and advocating for more flexible funding.

8.1 Be honest about the limits of acceptance

A recurring theme was that organisations need to be more candid, both internally and with their stakeholders, about the boundaries of what acceptance can deliver. Several practitioners repeatedly stated that acceptance should not always be the default condition under which organisations operate, and that pretending otherwise can lead to poor SRM. Dhoot put it directly: “Just be grown up about it and just know that we’re going to work on this issue, in this location. We’re not going to have acceptance. We just know.”

Several practitioners argued that this internal honesty has practical consequences, particularly around exiting an operating environment. De Talhouet emphasised the importance of reading community signals: “If the population really does not want you, well, just stop. Actually, sometimes I think we take a bit too long before leaving some contexts.” Van Weerden described what that looks like in practice: in Gaza, her organisation refused armed escorts, rather than force operations by compromising on their red lines. Morajea pushed the argument further, asking whether the sector is honest with itself about why it stays in countries where there is no longer a clear rationale, arguing that acceptance is harder to defend when organisations stay largely because they can.

Others emphasised that the same honesty is needed when first engaging with the operational environment. Acceptance takes time to build, and practitioners stressed the importance of working with realistic expectations and being honest about the difference between genuine acceptance and tolerance.

8.2 Communicate more clearly and engage more proactively

Interviewees returned repeatedly to the importance of frequency, openness, and clarity when engaging local stakeholders. Morajea flagged that many acceptance problems are exacerbated because organisations only talk to authorities when they need something or fail to explain what they are doing and why. “I’d like to see us engage more. We pretend that we do. We really don’t. Engagement, in my opinion, is extremely low in most organisations that I’ve worked with. And it’s often extremely poor and disorganised.”

Dhoot argued that direct communication with key stakeholders is one of the most reliable ways to head off hostile narratives before they take hold: “If something comes up, you tell key stakeholders straight away and say, look, someone’s spreading rubbish, this is what’s going on.” He added that sustained communication about purpose, milestones, and results builds a buffer. Stakeholders are more likely to dismiss mis- or disinformation if they already have a strong baseline understanding of what the organisation does and why. He also stressed that communication channels have to fit the audience: “There’s no point setting up a grievance email if people don’t have access to the internet. There’s no point setting up forms to fill out if people can’t read and write.” De Talhouet described

even simpler practices: “Stay in permanent communication, even if it’s just sending a text every morning being like, ‘hey, how are you?’ Show that you’re present.”

Wille and de Solages, drawing on their social media monitoring work, argued that the challenge with communication is less about crafting a perfect rebuttal to any single narrative and more about long-term conditioning: building stronger public understanding of what aid is, what it is not, and what humanitarian actors would or would not plausibly do. A UN practitioner captured the underlying principle well: “The real solution is to get back to the human aspect, which is the connection between people, the communication, the trust.”

8.3 Conduct deeper contextual analysis and actor mapping

Several practitioners argued that organisations need to develop a much deeper understanding of local power structures, their levels of influence, other stakeholders that shape the social, political and economic environment, and what you are adding to the mix with your presence. Tronc was explicit: “Don’t think first about security per se. Think first about your footprint, what does it mean to be present on the ground? If you have a first model of security in an environment because you collected all information from ACAPS, INSO, and the others, you have [a] 100 per cent chance to fail.” His advice to security managers entering politicised environments was to start by understanding what it means to be a humanitarian actor in that specific context, and only then layer in security analysis.

Sarli stressed the importance of mapping interlocutors carefully, understanding who really channels information, which in some places will be community leaders, in others state-local authorities, as well as other actors who are given authority by criminal groups and conflict actors. One practitioner described a similarly broad mapping exercise should also include family networks, religious leaders, community leaders, ministers, de facto actors, and partner staff. Morajea offered a practical reframing and suggested prioritising actor mapping from the perspective of how others see you: “If you’re doing a route assessment and there’s a checkpoint, instead of thinking, let’s find an alternative route, think, let’s talk to the checkpoint. Because if I’m that checkpoint, eventually I’m going to realise you’re avoiding me. And that’s just going to build distrust.”

Monteith emphasised that effective actor mapping depends on institutional memory and long-term social capital: “Your organisation needs to be quite relational. Some of the senior leadership teams in these organisations, they’ve been doing it for 20, 30, 40 years. They know all the players [...], and they know the right people in the right context.” If staff rotate too quickly or institutional knowledge is not transferred and maintained, then actor mapping has to be reassessed rather than being an accumulating asset.

8.4 Monitor online narratives more strategically

The interviews revealed a significant gap between the scale of this challenge and the sector’s capacity to respond. Several practitioners converged on the view that direct online engagement is usually counterproductive. One participant noted that “the more you react, the more credibility you give” to bad faith narratives. De Talhouet described the dilemma: “If you address the source, now the message is out there and so you need to address whoever has seen it. So very honestly, it’s a nightmare.”

Sarli emphasises the need to do more regular social media checks. He asserted that WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook comments are not peripheral channels in this space; they are increasingly where curfews, rumours, and negative narratives permeate. He also framed data protection as part of acceptance rather than just compliance: in Colombia and Venezuela, tight control of beneficiary information was essential to avoid being perceived as a surveillance operation. Van Weerden described monitoring administrative friction, partner pressure, community complaint levels, and

online spikes as the closest thing to an early-warning dashboard.

Wille and de Solages argued that the fundamental problem is one of timing and collective capacity. The sector responds to crises that have already gone viral, when the window for intervention was earlier: “These things don’t come out of nowhere. When it happens, it’s because there was a long path leading towards it. The aid sector needs to develop the collective skill to identify the trajectory and engage on an ongoing basis, not when the crisis is there because that’s too late.” For example, an interviewee highlighted how their team developed a community perceptions tracker that systematically mapped keywords, geographic origins, and narrative associations. Wille also warned that organisations need to monitor beyond their own pages, citing a case where an organisation was unaware of a reputational crisis because it was unfolding on channels the organisation did not track. She questioned, however, whether every organisation should try to monitor everything everywhere, suggesting the practical route may be shared sectoral capability rather than isolated organisational systems. A UN interviewee was clear about the challenge: “[...] we’re not going to out-click, as a professional global organisation, this situation at all.”

8.5 Embed acceptance actively across the organisation

Several interviewees pushed against the idea that security teams alone should own acceptance, arguing that programme design, HR, logistics, compliance, and communications – and the organisational structure more widely – all sit inside the acceptance picture. A participant asserted that it is really “the whole administrative package that is behind security.” Dhoot demonstrated this rationale by describing how security roles are increasingly overlapping with communications: “Security roles are starting to venture much more into comms strategies to manage a lot of these non-physical risks. This is falling slightly out of our remit and into this area where we need the expertise of other departments and get the buy-in to make it happen.”

If acceptance sits across functions, then SRM staff need to be present where acceptance is actually built and observed. To this end, Van Weerden argued that SRM specialists should work in lockstep with programme staff: “For SRM, the key is to go with your programme people. Experience it yourself.” In her account, the place where acceptance is actually visible is at the point of delivery, through complaint boxes and community feedback sessions. If SRM staff never see that interface alongside programmes staff, they are disassociating from the work required to build acceptance.

Sarli described a practical tool for cross-functional consistency. His organisation developed a concise presentation and Q&A document used in all staff onboarding and retested every two months in the field, designed to ensure that all staff carry “one standard speech for everybody.” The purpose is to avoid contradictory narratives, setting false expectations, or staff improvising answers that could ultimately weaken acceptance. He also described shifting responsibility upward: regional and country safety staff should maintain a second layer of contacts so that field teams are not left holding all the risk if retaliation occurs.

8.6 Improve your evidence base

The measurement challenges discussed in Section 3 prompted several practitioners to describe what a stronger evidence base might look like. One practitioner suggested having clearer, simpler, more standardised questioning, repeated often enough to detect shifts over time. Another believed a quantified methodology that generates a score would be most helpful, but insisted the score must be accompanied by a narrative explaining how it was reached and what it means. Some participants preferred setting up operational indicators over formal scoring, considering the length of presence without major incidents, whether information is controlled, whether beneficiary data is protected, and whether field teams can move without friction (the access dimension).

Morajea argued that the focus should be on better engagement and questioning: ask authorities

and beneficiaries directly what they think; ask what upsets people, not only what makes them happy; listen for team discomfort; understand how the system actually works; and connect all of this to deeper contextual analysis. He also stressed that communications and advocacy need to be connected to field realities; otherwise, organisations can misinterpret how acceptance is interpreted both internally and externally and possibly antagonise important powerbrokers.

On this issue, more broadly, one participant argued that the humanitarian sector should expand beyond its silo and consider borrowing best practice from the private sector: “The private sector [has] done a lot of research in terms of [influencing].”

8.7 Strengthen collective action

At a wider sector-level, practitioners called for stronger shared approaches to building collective acceptance. Some argued that acceptance should be embedded into technical coordination spaces, not just discussed abstractly at senior levels. Tronc called for more collective ambition: more willingness to name red lines publicly, more joint work with local actors, and more experimentation with new collaborative models.

Strengthening collective acceptance is not primarily about creating new structures. It is about using existing ones more deliberately. Access working groups, security coordination forums, and country-level INGO consortia all offer venues where acceptance could be discussed as an explicit shared concern rather than an implicit individual one. Practitioners suggested that acceptance work could be located within these forums and resourced collectively, reducing the cost burden on individual organisations and allowing a more strategic approach to common challenges such as hostile narratives, identity politics, and coordinated obstruction by host states.

8.8 Choose your partners wisely

Collective action also extends to how INGOs work with local partners, which is increasingly where acceptance is held in practice. Partners are often the most visible face of an INGO’s presence on the ground, and their networks, affiliations, and reputations shape how the operation is perceived. A partner welcomed in one community may be distrusted in another, and ties to a political faction can compromise the perceived independence of the INGO working through them. One practitioner interviewed argued that acceptance conversations need to be embedded in partner relations specifically: “We need to be willing to have tougher conversations with partners, not when they’re getting it wrong, but when we don’t agree with their approach.”

This kind of granular mapping is increasingly being formalised as part of partner selection. Mercy Corps’ Ukraine response, for example, has built enhanced due diligence (EDD) assessments into partnership decisions, vetting local organisations across operational, reputational, security, and financial risk categories before formalising agreements (Ukraine Crisis Analysis Team, 2024). The logic is that organisations need a structured understanding of the actors they engage with and how that engagement reshapes risk. In politicised environments, where partner choices are read by host authorities, armed actors, and communities as political signals, EDD-style processes offer a way of making partnership decisions visible, defensible, and grounded.

8.9 Push for more direct funding for acceptance strategies

Finally, several practitioners flagged the challenge of resourcing acceptance work. Dhoot asked whether donors are prepared to pay for the relationship-building that acceptance requires: “Are they prepared to pay for the extra personnel to create that relationship and to build that level of trust and interaction with communities and stakeholders?” But the structural problem may be less that donors refuse to fund acceptance and more that acceptance is simply not articulated well in budgets in the first place. Much of what builds acceptance – community engagement, stakeholder

mapping, communications, complaint mechanisms, sustained presence – is often resourced under other budget headings. The challenge is that these activities are rarely framed explicitly as acceptance work, either internally or in donor-facing proposals, which leaves them disconnected from the security and risk management framework they are supposed to support. GISF's (2021b) observation that acceptance is "considered cost-effective and sustainable" might be true in principle, but it is undermined in practice when the underlying activities sit across different organisational silos.

The implication is that organisations should be able to cost acceptance more deliberately by linking existing workstreams under a coherent strategic frame, and donors should be willing to fund acceptance in this form rather than only its component parts.

OCHA/Anastasya Kahala Atassi



New Alfaqiea Camp in Sarmada, Idlib.



Conclusion

This report set out to examine how acceptance as a security strategy is being shaped by politicised aid environments. The findings do not suggest that acceptance is obsolete in these environments, but rather that it has become weaker, more conditional, and more vulnerable to forces beyond any single organisation's control. Indeed, the traditional acceptance framework remains necessary, but it is no longer sufficient, and the sector has been slow to reckon with the implications.

The practitioners interviewed described an environment where acceptance is largely determined by political, military, and security powerbrokers, who increasingly assess humanitarian presence through a lens of strategic interest rather than need. They flagged that aid organisations can no longer assume they are perceived as benign: national origin, donor affiliation, and institutional identity function as political signals that are read, contested, and exploited by actors far removed from the communities where programmes are delivered. And the digital environment, geopolitical shifts, and the conduct of peer organisations create risks that no amount of community-level relationship-building can fully insulate against.

At the same time, much of the erosion is driven by factors within organisational control. These include programme design that fails to account for the local political economy; staff conduct that contradicts the trust field teams have built; advocacy and operations pulling in opposite directions; compliance failures that cascade through every relationship an organisation depends on, and; short funding cycles that structurally prevent the sustained engagement acceptance requires. The sector's tendency to locate the causes of insecurity externally has made it easier to overlook these internal vulnerabilities, but the practitioner accounts in this report suggest they are at least as consequential as external pressures.

Moreover, the relationship between humanitarian principles and acceptance has not collapsed, but it has come under immense strain and many aid actors have been forced to make compromises to maintain access. Neutrality, in particular, was described by most practitioners as lacking credibility in the environments where they work. What has replaced it is a vision of pragmatic interventions, in which practitioners must make context-specific judgements about how far to accommodate the political realities of their operational environment, often without clear institutional frameworks for governing those compromises or learning from them.

So, what does this mean for acceptance going forward?

It means that acceptance can no longer be treated primarily as a field-level, community-facing activity. The audiences that determine whether an organisation can operate safely now include intelligence services, military committees, de facto authorities, online communities, and donor governments whose own political agendas shape how their organisations are perceived. Acceptance strategies that do not account for these actors are incomplete and likely to fail.

It also means that the sector needs to move beyond the assumption that good programming and principled conduct will, on their own, generate sufficient acceptance. They remain necessary conditions, but in politicised environments organisations need to invest further in contextual analysis and the political capital that allow them to understand how they are being read and by whom, and to adapt accordingly.

Importantly, acceptance needs to be understood as a collective problem, not just an individual organisational one. Reputational spillover is a real concern, and the sector's fragmentation is actively exploited by state and non-state actors seeking to weaken humanitarian leverage. Strengthening collective discipline, whether through joint operating principles, shared digital monitoring, or more

honest inter-agency dialogue about what actually works, is not an optional add-on but should be a precondition for any individual organisation's acceptance being sustainable.

Moreover, the localisation agenda and acceptance need to be examined together rather than assumed to be mutually reinforcing. National partners carry significant acceptance in many contexts, but the assumption that local presence automatically produces trust with local stakeholders contains risks that are rarely interrogated. If localisation means that international organisations withdraw further from direct engagement while assuming their partners' acceptance is a given, the result may be less accountability, less visibility, and ultimately less acceptance at the systemic level.

And it means, finally, that donors have a stake in this that goes beyond funding programme activities. If acceptance requires sustained presence, relationship-building, and institutional memory, then annual funding cycles, rapid staff rotation, and pressure for quick measurable results structurally undermine it. Donors who want the organisations they fund to maintain acceptance in politicised environments need to fund the time, the people, and the relationship-building that acceptance actually demands.

None of this requires a new theoretical framework of acceptance. What it requires is greater honesty about the distance between how organisations talk about acceptance and how they actually practice it, a willingness to resource it as seriously as protection and deterrence measures, and the recognition that in politicised environments, acceptance is a condition that must be actively built, collectively maintained, and honestly assessed.



Humanitarian distribution in South Kivu, DRC.

UNOCHA/Antoine Lemonnier



References

- Abiew, F.K. (2012).** Humanitarian action under fire: Reflections on the role of NGOs in conflict and post-conflict situations. *International Peacekeeping*, 19(2), 203–216: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2012.665698>
- ACAPS. (2025).** Humanitarian access overview: Spotlight on bureaucratic and administrative impediments. ACAPS: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20250120_ACAPS_Humanitarian_Access_Overview_July_2025.pdf
- Alderson, H. & Spencer, A. (2024).** Reducing the chilling effects of regulation and/or de-risking on humanitarian financing (HPG Outcome Note). Overseas Development Institute: <https://www.odi.org/en/publications/reducing-the-chilling-effects-of-regulation-and-or-de-risking-on-humanitarian-financing>
- Amnesty International. (2022).** India should stop using abusive foreign funding law: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2022/01/india-should-stop-using-abusive-foreign-funding-law/>
- Atmar, M. H. (2001).** Politicisation of humanitarian aid and its consequences for Afghans. *Disasters*, vol. 25(4): 321-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00181>
- Banchereau, M. (2024).** Niger junta bans French aid group amid tensions with France. *The Independent*: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/niger-ap-french-dakar-senegal-b2646417.html>
- Barber, M., & Bowden, M. (2023, December 15).** Rethinking the role of humanitarian principles in armed conflict: A challenge for humanitarian action. Chatham House: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023-12-13-humanitarian-principles-barber-bowden.pdf>
- Bollettino, V. (2008).** Understanding the security management practices of humanitarian organizations. *Disasters*, 32, pp. 263-279: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2008.01038.x>
- Breckenridge, M., Czwaro, M., Duque-Díez, M., Fairbanks, A., Harvey, P., Stoddard, A. (2024).** Aid Worker Security Report 2024: Balancing advocacy and security humanitarian action. Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB)/Humanitarian Outcomes: https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/awsr_2024.pdf
- Childs, A.K. (2013).** Cultural Theory and Acceptance-Based Security Strategies for Humanitarian Aid Workers. *Journal of Strategic Security* 6(1), pp 64-72: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.1.6>
- Collinson, S., Duffield, M., Berger, C., Felix da Costa, D., & Sandstrom, K. (2013).** Paradoxes of presence: Risk management and aid culture in challenging environments. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG): <https://odi.org/en/publications/paradoxes-of-presence-risk-management-and-aid-culture-in-challenging-environments/>
- Collinson, S. and Elhawary, S. (2012).** Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues (HPG Report 32). Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group: <https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/7643.pdf>
- Daudin, P. (2021).** ‘Acceptance under stress: Old recipes for new problems,’ in GISF (ed.) *Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Risk Management*. London: Global Interagency Security Forum, pp. 1-7. Available at: <https://gisf.ngo/resource/achieving-safe-operations-through-acceptance/>
- de Torrenté, N. (2004).** Humanitarian action under attack: Reflections on the Iraq War. *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 17, pp. 1–29: <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hrj/wp-content/uploads/sites/83/2020/06/17HHRJ1-Torrente.pdf>
- Dercon, S. (2026).** Making aid work in the

new geopolitical era will be an uphill battle. Atlantic Council: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/freedom-and-prosperity-around-the-world/making-aid-work-in-the-new-geopolitical-era-will-be-an-uphill-battle/>

Dercon, S. (2025). Rethinking Aid in a Contested World. (Kiel Working Paper No. 2301). Kiel Institute for the World Economy: https://www.kielinstitut.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/372a5537-a77c-4b48-a4af-711d1cc10a4f-KWP_2301.pdf

Donini, A. (2011). Between a rock and a hard place: Integration or independence of humanitarian action? *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), pp. 141–157: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383111000191>

Duffield, M. (2001). *Global governance and the new wars: The merging of development and security.* Zed Books.

DuBois, M., & Healy, S. (2024). Imperfect relief: Challenges to the impartiality and identity of humanitarian action. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 106(925), pp. 90–119: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383124000092>

Egeland, J., Harmer, A., & Stoddard, A. (2011). To stay and deliver: Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2014-11/To20STAY%20AND%20DELIVER%20Good%20practice%20for%20humanitarians%20in%20complex%20security%20environments.pdf>.

EISF (2015). Security Strategies: acceptance, protection and deterrence. European Interagency Security Forum (EISF): https://gisf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/EISF_Security-to-go_guide_Module-4_Security-strategies_Acceptance-protection-and-deterrence-.pdf

Fast, L., Freeman, F., O'Neill, M. and Rowley, E. (2015). The promise of acceptance as an NGO security management approach. *Disasters*, 39, pp.208–231: <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12097>

Fast, L.A., Freeman, C.F., O'Neill, M. and Rowley, E. (2013). In acceptance we trust? Conceptualising acceptance as a viable approach to NGO security management.

Disasters, 37, pp. 222–243: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2012.01304.x>

Fast, L., Finucane, C., Freeman, F., Rowley, E., and O'Neill, M. (2011). The Acceptance Toolkit: A practical guide to understanding, assessing, and strengthening your organization's acceptance approach to NGO security management. Save the Children: <https://acceptanceresearch.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/acceptance-toolkit-final-for-print-with-notes.pdf>

Fast, L., & O'Neill, M. (2010). A closer look at acceptance. *Humanitarian Exchange*, 47, 4–5, Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN): <https://odihpn.org/content/uploads/2010/06/humanitarianexchange047.pdf>

Firmin, A., Pousadela, I.M., and Tiwana, M. (2025). 2025 State of Civil Society Report. CIVICUS: https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2025/state-of-civil-society-report-2025_en.pdf

Gavas, M., & Käppeli, A. (2025). Big money, big questions: The EU's external budget proposal for 2028–2034. Center for Global Development: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/big-money-big-questions-eus-external-budget-proposal-2028-2034>

GISF (2024). Neutrality, Access and Making Localisation Work. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF): <https://gisf.ngo/resource/neutralty-access-localisation/>

GISF (2023). Humanitarian Security in an Age of Uncertainty: the intersection of digital and physical risks. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF): <https://gisf.ngo/resource/humanitarian-security-in-an-age-of-uncertainty-the-intersection-of-digital-and-physical-risks/>

GISF (2021a). Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: challenges and opportunities for security risk management. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF): <https://gisf.ngo/resource/achieving-safe-operations-through-acceptance/>

GISF. (2021b). Community acceptance: A cornerstone of humanitarian security risk management. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF): <https://gisf.ngo/blogs/community-acceptance-a-cornerstone-of-humanitarian-security-risk-management/>

- GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024).** State of practice: The evolution of security risk management in the humanitarian space. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF), Humanitarian Outcomes: <https://gisf.ngo/resource/state-of-practice-the-evolution-of-srm-in-the-humanitarian-space-gisf-and-humanitarian-outcomes-research-paper/>
- Grace, R., & Lempereur, A. (2021).** Four dilemmas of acceptance: Insights from the field of humanitarian negotiation. In L. Moutard & L. Fast (Eds.), *Achieving safe operations through acceptance: Challenges and opportunities for security risk management* (pp. 13–18). Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF): https://gisf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Achieving_Safe_Operations_through_Acceptance_challenges_and_opportunities_for_security_risk_management.pdf
- Guidero A. (2022).** Humanitarian (in)security: risk management in complex settings. *Disasters*, 46(1), pp. 162–184: <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12457>
- Hilhorst, D., Jansen, B.J. (2010).** Humanitarian Space as Arena: A Perspective on the Everyday Politics of Aid. *Development and Change*, 41, pp.1117-1139: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2010.01673.x>
- HPN and Humanitarian Outcomes (2025).** Good Practice Review 8: Humanitarian Security Risk Management (third edition). Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), Overseas Development Institute (ODI): <https://odihpn.org/publication/humanitarian-security-risk-management>
- Insecurity Insight. (2025).** The Shrinking Humanitarian Space on Social Media: Insight from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. *Insecurity Insight*: <https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Learning-from-Social-Media-Narratives-in-the-Sahel.pdf>
- Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025).** Official development assistance: Geopolitical tensions, economic constraints & shifting priorities (IEP Report 102). Institute for Economics & Peace: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Official-Development-Assistance.pdf>
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025a).** Humanitarian exemptions in domestic counterterrorism legislation. ICRC: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/very-final-V.4543.68_002_Humanitarian-Exemptions.pdf
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025b).** UN General Assembly: Principled humanitarian action is under increasing pressure [Statement]. ICRC: <https://www.icrc.org/en/statement/un-general-assembly-principled-humanitarian-action-under-increasing-pressure>
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2024).** International humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts: ICRC report. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 106(927), pp. 1357–1450: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S181638312400064X>
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2026).** World disasters report 2026: Truth, trust and humanitarian action in the age of harmful information (Chapter 2): https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2026-02/WDR2026_Chapter02_EN.pdf
- Jackson, A. (2015).** *Acceptance Strategies in Conflict. Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), University of Birmingham*: <https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/acceptance-strategies-in-conflict/>
- Jackson, A., & Zyck, S. A. (2017).** Presence & proximity: To stay and deliver, five years on. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Jindal School of International Affairs: https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/presence_and_proximity.pdf
- Lind, J., & Carter, B. (2025).** How the politics of global aid shape social assistance in protracted crises (BASIC Research Working Paper 48). Institute of Development Studies: <https://doi.org/10.19088/BASIC.2025.025>
- Macrae, J. (2002).** Analysis and synthesis. In J. Macrae (Ed.), *The new humanitarianisms: A review of trends in global humanitarian action* (pp. 5–17). Overseas Development Institute. <https://media.odi.org/documents/293.pdf>
- Moutard, L., & Fast, L. (2021).** Introduction. In L. Moutard & L. Fast (Eds.), *Achieving safe operations through acceptance: Challenges*

and opportunities for security risk management (pp. 5–10). Global Interagency Security Forum: https://glsf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Achieving_Safe_Operations_through_Acceptance_challenges_and_opportunities_for_security_risk_management.pdf

Narsee, A., Willamo, K., Goodwin, B., & Antonaki, A. (Eds.). (2025, June). Civic space report 2025. European Civic Forum: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-ECF.pdf>

Noe, N. (2022). Localizing the international humanitarian response in Ukraine. Refugees International: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/localizing-the-international-humanitarian-response-in-ukraine/>

Norman, J. (2024). Humanitarian principles are under fire in Ukraine (DIIS Policy Brief 2024). Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS): <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/humanitarian-principles-are-fire-in-ukraine>

Nzuki, C. (2024). The Cost of Paternalism: Sahelian Countries Push Back on the West. Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cost-paternalism-sahelian-countries-push-back-west>

O’Callaghan, S., & Leach, L. (2013). The relevance of the fundamental principles to operations: Learning from Lebanon. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 95(890), pp. 287–306: <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-890-callaghan-leach.pdf>

OECD. (2026). A historic decline in foreign aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA data. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html>

OECD. (2025). Preliminary official development assistance levels in 2024: Detailed summary note. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD\(2025\)6/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf)

Pearson, M. (2025). Humanitarian aid’s extreme donor dependency problem in five charts. *The New Humanitarian*: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/03/04/>

humanitarian-aid-extreme-donor-dependency-global-charts

Schellhammer, L. (2021). ‘Counter-terrorism legislation: A limiting factor in the gaining and implementing of acceptance,’ in GISF (ed.), *Achieving Safe Operations through Acceptance: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Risk Management*. London: Global Interagency Security Forum, pp. 58–63: <https://glsf.ngo/resource/achieving-safe-operations-through-acceptance/>

Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2015). Coming clean on neutrality and independence: The need to assess the application of humanitarian principles. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897–898), pp.295–318: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S181638311500065X>

Schneiker, A. (2018). Risk-aware or risk-averse? Challenges in implementing security risk management within humanitarian NGOs. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 9(2), pp.107–131: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12136>

Shannon, R. (2009). Playing with principles in an era of securitized aid: Negotiating humanitarian space in post-9/11 Afghanistan. *Progress in Development Studies*, 9(1), pp.15–36: <https://doi.org/10.1177/146499340800900103>

Sinanoglu, S. (2025). Strategic humanitarian aid, trust in Europe and support for authoritarianism (IDOS Discussion Paper 28/2025). German Institute of Development and Sustainability: https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/publikationen/discussion_paper/2025/DP_28.2025.pdf

Smole, E. (2025). The state of ODA in 2025: A new year and new era for development assistance. Donor Tracker:

<https://donortracker.org/publications/the-state-of-oda-in-2025-a-new-year-and-new-era-for-development-assistance>

Stoddard, A., Breckenridge, M., Czwarno, M., Duque-Díez, M. (2025). Aid Worker Security Report 2025: Defenceless: Aid worker security amid the humanitarian funding collapse. *Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB)*, Humanitarian Outcomes: https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2025

Thompson, R. (2026). Politically resilient

humanitarianism: Rethinking principles, power, and partnership in a fragmenting world order. The British Academy and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/6026/Politically_resilient_humanitarianism.pdf

Thyssen, H. (2024). Humanitarian aid as political weapon: An analysis of DG ECHO's policy in Afghanistan (GIES Honours Paper, Academic Year 2023–2024). Ghent University: https://www.ugent.be/ps/politiekewetenschappen/gies/en/research/publications/honours_paper/academic-year-2023-2024/pdf-files/hpiii_hazel-thyssen.pdf

Tschunkert, K. (2026). Procedural (in)justice: Unpacking the role of humanitarian aid targeting in shaping host–refugee relations in Lebanon. *Third World Quarterly*, 47(7), pp. 1436–1457: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2026.2622552>

Van Brabant, K. (2000). Operational Security Management in Violent Environments. Good Practice Review (GPR) 8. Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), Overseas Development Institute (ODI): <https://gjsf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/0368-van-Brabant-GPR-8-Operational-security-management-in-violent-environments.pdf>

VanRooyen, M. (2025). The Future of Humanitarian Aid: Navigating a Politicized and Fragmented Landscape. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI): <https://hhi.harvard.edu/news/2025/06/future-humanitarian-aid-navigating-politicized-and-fragmented-landscape>

Wehbe, Y., & Thomsen, M. (2023). Protection of the civilian population: Humanitarian assistance and access in armed conflict. Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre: <https://admin.diakonia.se/app/uploads/sites/2/2023/08/Humanitarian-Assistance-Report-FINAL.pdf>

White House. (2025). Reevaluating and realigning United States foreign aid [Executive order]: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/>

Contributors (agreed to be named)

Anne-Céline Okonta, Director of Security and Access, Action Against Hunger France

Christina Wille, Director at Insecurity Insight

Christophe Moreau, Head of Safety, Security and Support, International Relations Department, French Red Cross

Clara de Solages, Research Analyst, Insecurity Insight

Emmanuel Tronc, Senior Humanitarian Advisor, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI), Head of Outreach and Engagement, H2H Network

Gurpreet Dhoot, Safety and Security Manager, International Health, Fauna and Flora International

Ian Woodmansey, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Crucial Safety

Hassan Morajea, safety and access practitioner

Jamie Monteith, Global Head of Security, Protestant Agency for Diakonie and Development (EWDE)

Mahaut de Talhouet, senior humanitarian access practitioner

Marieke van Weerden, Senior Director of Health, Safety and Security, Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

Pablo Sarli Vega, a senior security and access practitioner

gisf



Global Interagency Security Forum

GISF Research and Programmes
E: research@gisf.ngo

www.gisf.ngo