Acceptance Strategies in Conflict

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Acceptance is a risk management strategy based on reducing threats to aid workers by reducing the motivation of others to harm them. The thinking is that if aid work is viewed positively, it will generate goodwill towards aid workers and allow them to work safely.

Degrees of acceptance can vary, ranging from a high level of acceptance (when community members actively promote acceptance with other community members or conflict actors); to toleration (when community members allow aid agencies to work but do little to promote their acceptance); to outright rejection and targeting of aid workers.

In practice, gaining acceptance is more complex than doing good work and expecting it to guarantee aid worker safety. Acceptance rests on three core factors: the quantity and quality of aid provided; the degree to which potential attackers value this aid; and the social distance between those benefitting from aid and potential attackers. If aid is delivered in accordance with the humanitarian principle of impartiality and on the basis of need, aid workers can only control the quantity and quality of aid provided. They have little influence over the other two factors.

Within these parameters, aid workers can take important actions to influence acceptance. Strict adherence to neutrality, impartiality and independence may increase acceptance by convincing potential attackers that aid workers are not involved in the conflict and are only interested in helping civilians. Following the principle of 'do no harm' and taking a conflict sensitive approach to avoid exacerbating underlying grievances or conflict drivers, can also be helpful in maximising acceptance. Establishing dialogue with conflict actors to gain their consent to work may reduce the risk that aid workers will be attacked. Aid agencies can cultivate community buy-in through participatory needs assessments and the

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requirement that communities contribute directly to an activity (i.e. providing labour, donating land). Maintaining a low profile can help ensure that aid workers do not create unnecessary attention or generate resentment. Beneficiary feedback mechanisms can also enable agencies to gauge acceptance and address any grievances or dissatisfaction.

Acceptance cannot be taken for granted but must be cultivated and monitored on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately, acceptance as a risk management strategy remains poorly and inconsistently understood across aid agencies. Few agencies consistently devote enough time and resources to maintaining acceptance. Rigorous strategies for actively maintaining acceptance can be costly and time consuming. They require long-term investment in staff training, outreach and communication, and these costs may be more difficult to justify to donors than 'hard' security expenditures such as blast walls or armed guards.

Acceptance is not the only option for aid delivery in volatile environments and may not always be the most desirable. The Security Triangle, acceptance, deterrence and protection, presents acceptance as one way of reducing potential threats. Protection (i.e. armoured vehicles or heavy fortification of aid agency premises) focuses on defence against potential threats while deterrence (i.e. armed guards) requires aid agencies to create a counter-threat to reduce risks.

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive; protection and/or deterrence may be combined with acceptance. However, protective and deterrent measures may impact the degree to which aid agencies are accepted. Many humanitarian aid workers refuse to use armed guards for fear that this would associate them with the conflict and reduce their acceptance. Yet where they are unable to attain sufficient acceptance they may agree to use armed guards or escorts.

The core readings below further explain the theory of acceptance and illustrate the challenges of achieving and maintaining acceptance in practice.

Readings

Reading 1: Childs, A. (2013) Cultural theory and acceptance-based security strategies for humanitarian aid workers, *Journal of Security Studies*, *6*(1), 64-72.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1216&context=jss

Reading 2: Fast, L., Rowley, E., O'Neill, M., & Freeman, F. (2011). *The promise of acceptance: Insights into acceptance as a security management approach from field research in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda.* Washington, DC: Save the Children Federation.
http://acceptanceresearch.org/reports/final-report/

Reading 3: Collinson, S., & Duffield, M. (2013). *Paradoxes of presence: Risk management and aid culture in challenging environments* (Humanitarian Policy Group Commissioned Report). London: Overseas Development Institute.
http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8428.pdf

Reading 4: Crombe, X. (with M. Hofman). (2011). Afghanistan. Regaining leverage. In C. Magone, M. Neuman, & F. Weissman (Eds.), *Humanitarian negotiations revealed: The MSF experience.* London: Hurst and Co.
http://www.msf-crash.org/livres/en/afghanistan-regaining-leverage

Reading 5: Jackson, A. (2014). Gaining acceptance: Lessons from engagement with armed groups in Afghanistan and Somalia. *Humanitarian Exchange*, *62*.
http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-62/gaining-acceptance-lessons-from-engagement-with-armed-groups-in-afghanistan-and-somalia

Questions to guide readings

- What are the key challenges to achieving, maintaining and monitoring acceptance?

- What is the relationship between adherence to core humanitarian principles (including impartiality, neutrality and independence) and achieving acceptance?

- What are some of the practical and operational requirements for achieving and maintaining acceptance? How do these differ from the requirements associated with protective and deterrent strategies?

- When might acceptance not be an effective strategy for delivering aid? What are the alternatives?

- What evidence exists to support common assumptions about the effectiveness of acceptance strategies? What areas or issues merit further research or examination?