

Acceptance Research

InterAction Forum Brief, August 2011

I. Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management: Fieldwork overview

Key challenges for relief and development NGOs are to access populations in need, ensure program delivery, and maximize staff security in complex, dynamic, and often insecure environments. This depends on effective security management. Many organizations adopt “acceptance” as one element of their security management strategy in a country. Acceptance is “founded on effective relationships and cultivating and maintaining consent from beneficiaries, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders. This in turn is a means of reducing or removing potential threats in order to access vulnerable populations and undertake programme activities.”¹

The Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management project aims to promote a better understanding of acceptance as a security management approach, including what acceptance is and in what circumstances it can be effective. Part of this project involved field research in Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan to document the perspectives of key stakeholders, including community members, NGO staff, and government officials on the following three questions:

- (1) How do organizations gain and maintain acceptance?
- (2) How do organizations assess and monitor the presence and degree of acceptance?
- (3) How do organizations determine whether acceptance is effective in a particular context?

¹ Fast, Larissa, and Michael O'Neill. 2010. A closer look at acceptance. *Humanitarian Exchange*, June, 3-6.

The field research, also referred to as collaborative learning activities (CLA), occurred in two phases involving staff members from 16 international NGOs and local organizations active in Kenya, Uganda, or South Sudan. First, to prepare participants for the collaborative learning activities, project staff held a Regional Consultation and Training Workshop in Nairobi. After the workshop, participants returned to their countries for the second phase, which included two weeks of field research in the capital city and two field locations in each country. Research teams conducted key informant interviews with NGO staff working in a variety of positions, including country directors, logisticians, security focal points, program managers, and human resource staff. The teams also held focus group discussions and interviews with local security officials, local government officials, community members (both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries) and local CBO staff. The findings focus on community acceptance rather than acceptance by belligerents and other stakeholders, reflecting the composition of our informants.

The purpose of this brief is to introduce readers to several key discussions that emerged from the field research and the project as a whole. To learn more about the project and access other project documents, visit our on-line forum *Acceptance Research* (<http://acceptanceresearch.org>).

II. Acceptance as a security management approach: Highlights from the field

Acceptance as a program and security management approach

Many organizations see acceptance as a programming strategy rather than a security management approach. At first glance, this is not surprising. Organizations already focus on program implementation in ways that enhance

acceptance, for example by meeting community needs, building relationships, negotiating access, and respecting the cultural norms and traditions of the communities where they work. At an *institutional* level, however, NGOs do not formally link these practices to security management, even though the research suggests that many NGO field staff see a clear linkage between program choices and their security implications.

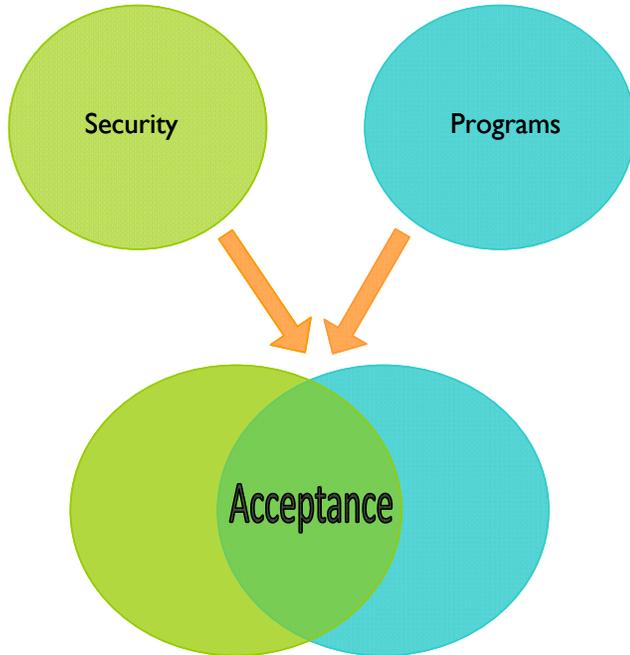


Figure 1: Security, programs and acceptance

Digging deeper into this observation reveals nuances that suggest practical steps towards stronger connections between programs, security, and acceptance. For example, limiting acceptance to program implementation practices ignores the security implications of other policies and practices across the organization in areas such as administration, human resources, and communication. In instances where organizations make these connections, this is done in an ad hoc or piecemeal manner.

Recommendations

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Make a clear and unambiguous commitment to acceptance as a program and security management approach.
- Revisit policies and procedures and apply an “acceptance for security” lens to on-going programmatic and administrative practices and decisions.

Gaining Acceptance

While the research identified multiple ways that organizations gain acceptance, we highlight only staffing in this brief.

Staffing

Regardless of location and program portfolio, NGOs recognize the importance of adequate and appropriate staffing. In relation to acceptance, research participants discussed issues including staff composition, recruitment and hiring processes, the preparation and welfare of staff in field locations, and staff behavior. While the effects of decisions about staffing are not always directly linked to security, they do affect the degree to which communities may identify with the NGO and its staff, and therefore the extent to which the NGO is accepted.

Organizational practices

Staff composition. NGO staff and community members both emphasized the importance of staff ethnicity, religion, gender and place of origin in influencing their ability to develop relationships with the community and gain acceptance. For example, in Uganda, key informants discussed the negative impact on community acceptance when organizations hire individuals from another part of the country for key staff positions. In South Sudan, government officials and community members expressed discontent with the drain in resources that non-Sudanese staff represent (with higher pay and more costly benefits) at the expense of additional services that they might otherwise receive. In Kenya, community members suggested non-Kenyans were better able to maintain neutrality and avoid tribal affiliation.

Recruitment and hiring processes. Community members in several locations identified a desire for more transparency in recruitment processes since community members do not always understand why organizations hire certain individuals. Some organizations who the research teams spoke with in Kenya and South Sudan address this issue directly. They ask community elders to sit in on job interviews, and the elders later explain to the community who the organization hired and why.

Limiting acceptance to program implementation practices ignores the security implications of other policies and practices across the organization in areas such as administration, human resources, and communication.

Preparation and welfare of staff in field locations. It is common practice for NGOs to provide a cultural orientation and security briefing to expatriate staff before placement in field locations. As well, NGOs usually support expatriate staff in locating and negotiating secure housing and transportation or they provide it directly. These same services are not necessarily provided to national staff relocating from one part of the country to another region. Instead, research in Uganda pointed out that organizations often assume that national staff will understand the local culture and security situation, even though this is not always the case.

Staff behavior

Staff behavior refers not only to staff members' ability to abide by an organization's code of conduct but also to their level of understanding of the local cultural context and most importantly, their ability to show and earn respect. The research emphasized the critical role that individual field staff play in building relationships that lead to acceptance, and the fact that the actions of one staff person can immediately damage (or improve) an organization's acceptance. In South Sudan, research participants noted, for example, that NGO staff who "tamper" with women in the community and/or cattle belonging to the community immediately lose any protected status they might have built through other acceptance-related efforts.

Recommendations

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Deliberately consider what hiring policies already exist and whether they reflect acceptance-related concerns. A starting point is to ask: How, if at all, do human resource policies reflect the need to gain acceptance for security as well as program purposes? For example, do organizations think about the identity of staff (e.g. age, gender, and place of origin) vis-à-vis the locations where they will work, and ensure appropriate orientation and support in their positions?
- Include skills and characteristics such as relationship-building, respectfulness, ability to understand the local context, and behavior in job descriptions and performance evaluations, as they are critical for gaining and maintaining acceptance.
- Place more emphasis on acceptance-related skills and responsibilities in orientation and training as well as performance evaluations, including negotiation and relationship-building skills, the ability to adapt to the cultural environment and to show respect.

Monitoring and assessing acceptance

In general, the research showed that NGOs do not have formal indicators for acceptance, nor do they systematically assess whether they have gained acceptance. However, multiple informants identified either mechanisms through which they monitor acceptance, or indicators that can be used to assess both the presence and effectiveness of acceptance. These include:

Mechanisms to monitor acceptance

- Use community feedback mechanisms such as complaints boxes or hotlines, or formal and informal conversations with community members;
- Include community engagement and participation in program monitoring reports (referred to by one organization as a "people count");
- Monitor the extent to which community members use services;
- Track beneficiary contributions toward project implementation and success (e.g. donation of land, help with construction of project buildings);
- Discuss the quality of community relations as part of staff meetings on programs and/or security.



Photo by Michael O'Neill, Focus group discussion, Kenya

Indicators to assess the presence and effectiveness of acceptance

- Lack of incidents;
- Ability to access populations;
- Community-shared information.

Recommendations

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Adapt security audit and context analysis procedures in ways that ensure that security managers and program staff regularly discuss community relations and programmatic acceptance with one another.
- Designate responsibility for assessing and monitoring acceptance to a particular position or department and incorporate this responsibility into job descriptions.
- Collaborate within organizations and among organizations to develop tools to assess and monitor the degree and presence of acceptance. This includes adapting survey guidelines and monitoring and evaluation methods to assess acceptance.

Determining the effectiveness of an acceptance approach in a context

A key challenge for acceptance as a security management approach is a lack of documentation and understanding of whether acceptance is effective and under what circumstances. In other words, does it work? Not only do organizations not monitor whether they have acceptance, the field research suggests no organizations systematically assess whether acceptance is an *effective* security management approach. Despite the lack of tools or methods to determine effectiveness, our field research revealed three categories of indicators that demonstrate the effectiveness of acceptance at the field level.

1. NGOs are able to gain access to program areas or populations. For some organizations, the ability to reach program areas and populations in need is a signal that the organization's acceptance approach is working. This is particularly apparent when one NGO gains access and others do not.

"We are measuring the effectiveness of our acceptance when we can access safely our program areas, when we can get our job done."

"For us it is easy to move and to work. We have no difficulties to access beneficiaries. Again, because they are taking care of us."

"Acceptance is having unhindered access to the victims of violence, being able to do humanitarian work without aggressive behavior toward us."

2. Community members or other stakeholders share security-related information. One way that NGO staff know that their community acceptance translates into a security benefit is when they receive information and warnings from local stakeholders. This is apparent from the following interview excerpts:

"A lot of information is provided by communities. It is like 'tam tam' but by phone. For example, last year we were informed by a community of a security incident with another NGO because they were wondering if it was us. They were willing to help us if it was the case."

"In some cases, especially in difficult areas where security is a problem, the communities share the information with us. They usually alert us to danger spots...We feel we receive this information on security because of the trust and regard they have for the work we are undertaking in their community."

"Another team was traveling to the county which was having a riot. The county commissioner called and warned not to come."

3. Community members or other stakeholders intervene on behalf of an organization to prevent or resolve an incident. Research informants described instances in which stakeholders took actions to assist organizations experiencing a security incident, or to resolve a tense and potentially dangerous situation.

One organization provided the example of paying a large sum of money to the wrong vendor. Community members offered to intervene on the organization's behalf and were able to peacefully resolve a very tense situation.

One NGO using a vehicle that was not well marked was attacked. The attackers took all the money and cell phones. The NGO recovered all items except the money, primarily through the intervention of one of the villages in which the NGO worked.

One NGO reported that the community had formed policing units to focus on protecting NGO staff.

"There is the cross border problem of hijacking vehicles. When our vehicle and staff were hijacked, we contacted community leaders who helped get our staff out of Somalia. We didn't get our vehicle though."

Clearly, acceptance can be an effective security management approach. This brief summarizes only a few of the field voices that highlight both the complexity and potential of acceptance. To learn more about additional field research and comparative findings, visit our on-line discussion and information-sharing forum *Acceptance Research* (<http://acceptanceresearch.org>).

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