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Acceptance under stress: old recipes for new problems?

Pascal Daudin • Co-founder of Anthropos Deep Security

In some ultra-violent and politically complex contexts in which humanitarians operate, the approach of gaining the acceptance of both the population and the various forces involved has its limits. For the author, it is necessary to rethink the way this work is done and, if necessary, to know how to pass the baton to other actors.

In 1986, along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a tribal chieftain and mujahideen military commander stopped me on the road and asked who had given me the right to help his people. I remember giving an answer about the mandate of the organisation, humanitarian concern and alleviating suffering. But it was a wake-up call for the rest of my humanitarian career: a deep awareness that my best intentions and a unilateral "gift" were not necessarily a good starting point. In my experience, humanitarians operate in a space that exists between assisting the weak and "denouncing" the strong.[1] It is a narrow space, especially when stakes are high and the competition between warring actors ramps up. I cannot remember a single situation that did not call for vigorous negotiations or endless talks; maintaining a licence to operate was at least half of the job. For me, this is a reminder that even thirty-five years ago negotiation was already at the heart of humanitarian endeavour and acceptance was never obtained at face value.

From the outset, I want to make it clear that I do not suggest we throw away acceptance as a strategy but instead that we avoid using it when it gives a false sense of security. Acceptance only works when a critical mass of potentially hostile actors explicitly refrains from hostile action and has the influence and power to convince others to follow.

Even though a "golden age" when humanitarian agencies could work freely and without too much concern for their security is pure fiction, seasoned practitioners will tell you that times have changed. The past decade has seen much soul-searching and experimentation around operational adaptations that revisit the concept of acceptance in the context of security risk management.[2] The issue is as relevant as ever. For example, data shows that in 2020 alone, 160 humanitarian workers were reported as kidnapped in sixty incidents around the world.[3]

[1] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, University of California Press, 2012.
[2] Larissa Fast and Michael O'Neill, "A closer look at acceptance", Humanitarian Practice Network, June 2010, https://odihpn.org/magazine/a-closer-look-at-acceptance
[3] Insecurity Insight, *Aid workers kidnapped 2020*, May 2021, http://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2020-Aid-Workers-Kidnapped.pdf

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A new security environment

In the 1990s, security incidents where we could demonstrate that a party had intentionally targeted humanitarian actors did exist but were relatively exceptional.[4] Severe incidents were mostly the result of misunderstandings, mistakes, errors of judgment, negligence, individual initiatives or a faulty chain of command. We could deconstruct an incident, learn from it, correct and adapt. Fundamentally, there was a degree of consensus that, even in the midst of war, civilians should be kept outside of hostilities and that aid actors could legitimately help them. Despite accusations of political bias or a hidden agenda, we could usually find some common ground and enjoy a reasonable level of acceptance, or at least tolerance, and security.

Historically, acceptance strategies were developed to address a specific category of problems mainly stemming from divergent interpretations of humanitarian intentions, suspicion of political partiality and dubious affiliations. All these strategies presuppose that you can reach some sort of "island of agreement"[5] despite profound disagreements and mistrust.

In some contexts, the ecology of risk has thus changed considerably. We now see serious incidents perpetrated by actors who have included humanitarian organisations on their list of legitimate targets as a symbolic war prize[6] or as pawns in an ideopolitical power struggle. In Afghanistan, for example, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff have been directly targeted three times since 2016, forcing the organisation to reduce its presence in the country. During one of these incidents, a physiotherapist was killed by a patient seeking treatment in Mazar-i-Sharif. In another, six (national) staff were killed in the northern part of the country while providing assistance. In 2018, in Nigeria, two midwives working for the ICRC were executed by a Boko Haram faction which later declared that "the Muslim midwives were killed because they had abandoned their Islam the moment they chose to work with the Red Cross".[7] In 2020, in Kabul, twenty-four people were killed when gunmen entered a Doctors Without Borders maternity hospital.[8] The perpetrators allegedly filmed the operation and used the footage to launch a fundraising campaign in the Middle East. In these examples, the "humanitarian island", as small as it may have been before, was rejected and acceptance therefore lost all significance.

New problems, old solutions

At present, the sector's response largely advocates the need to improve acceptance by elaborating increasingly sophisticated access strategies, agreeing on standards to be applied, good practices to be implemented by integrating comprehensive institutional policies and fixing bad programming.[9] But

[4] Jessica Alexander and Ben Parker, "Then and now: 25 years of aid worker (in)security", *The New Humanitarian*, 25 February 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2021/2/25/then-and-now-25-years-of-aid-worker-insecurity

[5] Gabriella Blum, *Islands of Agreement: Managing Enduring Armed Rivalries*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

[6] Gilles Carbonnier, "Humanitarians as targets of violence?", *Global Challenges*, no. 5, April 2019, https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/5/humanitarians-as-targets-of-violence

[7] *BBC News*, 16 October 2018.

[8] *BBC News*, 16 June 2020.

[9] Adele Harmer, Abby Stoddard and Katherine Haver, *Safety and security for national humanitarian workers*, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2011, https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Safety%20and%20Security%20for%20National%20Humanitarian%20Workers%2C%20PDSB%2C%202011%2C%20English.pdf ; Julia Steets, Urban Reichhold, and Elias Sagmeister, *Evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies in DG ECHO funded interventions*, Global Public Policy Institute, 29 June 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2012/GPPi_Access-Report.pdf

much of these solutions are based on the same mantras, revolving around a set of more or less standard responses:

- proximity with the victims and communities;
- extended dialogue with all parties to the conflict;
- deep understanding of conflict dynamics and sensitivity for local cultures;
- extended advocacy and communication;
- approaches that respect neutrality, impartiality and independence;
- inclusivity policies and localisation of aid;
- "smart" programming.

To assume that security problems can be solved through better practices and smart reforms is sometimes based on a false causality.[10] The underlying assumption is that problems with acceptance and security are mainly due to errors in the humanitarian organisation itself. The motivation of an individual or a group to commit a targeted violent act is attributed to, for example, an organisation's political associations, staff misbehaviour, military cooperation, ignorance of conflict dynamics and overall incapacity to deliver timely and relevant services. However, these are not convincing explanations; for one, the violence used is totally disproportionate to the grievances expressed or alleged.

An inadequate assessment of context and risk

The literature on humanitarian security often insists that aid actors are rejected because of their identity, wrongdoings and poor communication. This may often be true, but it ignores the need to assess changes in a given risk ecosystem and creates an illusion that organisations can control their environment. Too often the idiosyncratic nature of the working environment is misinterpreted, misunderstood or flat-out ignored. The proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups in some contexts – such as in Libya, Sudan, and Afghanistan – and the sheer number of factions involved makes comprehensive operational dialogue practically impossible.[11]

There are other, more fundamental transformations that alter external environments, including the lack of distinction between criminal and political violence: to sustain their operations and existence, ideologically motivated armed groups can ally themselves with organised criminal groups and may themselves resort to extortion, trafficking and predatory strategies. The same applies to ideological or religious radicalisation: radical thought, in particular the rejection of Western values and culture attributed to the humanitarian endeavour, rejects compromise and common ground, which are considered to undermine the revolt narrative.

The aforementioned security incidents are an expression of a profound confrontation of ideologies and raison d'être. The radically different assumptions of the aid enterprise and violent radical actors give rise to operational perspectives that are irreconcilable. This points to a radical rejection of the humanitarian endeavour itself. Here, making the standard "good practices" better is not enough to gain the desired acceptance and ensure continued operations, nor of course to ensure acceptable security conditions.

[10] Rolf Dobelli, *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, Harper, 2014.
[11] The ICRC has identified 660 different armed groups which influence the lives of more than 150 million people across the world. In 44% of the countries experiencing an internal conflict, this conflict had between three and nine opposing forces, and 22% had more than ten. See ICRC Casebook, *Syria, the battle for Aleppo*: How does law protect in war?, July 2017, https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/syria-battle-aleppo

Reliance on local actors

Some experts assert that salvation lies in aid operators' capacity to secure the support of the affected local community,[12] believing that the interest of the local community can help gain overall acceptance and circumvent direct negotiations with hostile or reluctant actors. However, the traditional assumption which says that the population in need will always persuade armed groups or State authorities to maintain space for humanitarian actors no longer seems to hold true everywhere.

The acceptance of some communities and the protection they can offer is often weak, for example because of the pressures exerted on them and the threats of retaliation for accepting external assistance. In many contexts (e.g. Afghanistan, Mali, Niger), traditional and moderate leaders have seen their status and influence plummet, with the result that some communities are targeted by local government and militia forces or other armed groups such as criminal gangs. In these cases, communities' capacity to intercede with radicalised groups does not facilitate acceptance but, on the contrary, puts them at risk. Here, civil society and the local population are unfortunately part of, not totally outside of, the violent confrontation. Humanitarian organisations, despite their genuine efforts to steer clear of controversy, are fully immersed in these environments: far from being amorphous foreign bodies, they are in a way part of civil society. If communities are targeted, so can the humanitarians. Furthermore, some academic research[13] suggests that perceived competition between humanitarian actors and violent outfits for the control of the local population can trigger hostile action.

Operating without acceptance

From the outset, humanitarian actors have had to interact with States and organisations carrying out violent actions in divided and polarised societies, and that challenged their presence or activities. It must be recognised that even neutral and independent organisations *de facto* disrupt conflict dynamics and thus collide with political ideologies or military plans. In 2016, in Urum al-Kubra (a town in western Aleppo governorate in Syria), a United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy was attacked by air, killing at least fourteen aid workers and injuring at least fifteen others. The attack also destroyed seventeen trucks along with food, medicine, children's clothes and other supplies destined for families in the governorate.[14] It was quite clear that this perfectly justified humanitarian operation was thwarting the attackers' plans. This example illustrates that it is becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous to help people stay when others want them out, feed families that others want to starve to death, treat wounded people that others would rather see dead or help besieged people when one wants to subdue places of resistance.

Whatever the intention of humanitarian action, interfering (voluntarily or not) with military, political, criminal or even messianic objectives represents a risk that increases according to the radicality of

[12] Shaun Bickley, *Personal Safety & Security Handbook*, CARE International, 2014, https://www.care.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CI-Personal-Safety-and-Security-Handbook-2014.pdf ; Adelicia Fairbanks, *Going local, going safely*, Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog, 8 August 2018, https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2018/08/08/going-local-going-safely ; Andrea Schneiker, *Humanitarian NGOs, (In) Security and Identity: Epistemic Communities and Security Governance*, Routledge, 2015; Jessica Skelly, *Community Acceptance: a cornerstone of humanitarian security risk management*, Global Interagency Security Forum, 16 February 2021, https://gisf.ngo/blogs/community-acceptance-a-cornerstone-of-humanitarian-security-risk-management ; Thomas Donnelly *et al.*, *Community-based approaches to safety and security: Lessons from Kosovo, Nepal and Bangladesh*, Saferworld, March 2013, https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/Community-based-approaches-to-safety-and-security.pdf

[13] Amanda Murdie and Craig S. Stapley, "Why target the 'good guys'? The determinants of terrorism against NGOs", *International Interactions*, vol. 40, no. 1, 18 February 2014, pp. 79–102.

[14] ICRC Casebook, *Syria, the battle for Aleppo…*, *op. cit.*

each. This is not new, but over the years organisations have developed strategies to extend the dialogue with a multitude of stakeholders. Thus, intense sustained contact with radical thinkers and influencers helped to secure guarantees of security and to forge a fragile but acceptable working space. Some radicalised States or armed groups, even when isolated and apparently fiercely independent, are supported, financed and sheltered by third parties who use them as strategic proxies for their own political objectives. Supporters and mentors of armed groups or authoritarian regimes that have demonstrated their violent rejection of action based on humanitarian principles should be a main target of humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy, and those responsible for targeted attacks should be held accountable. But the current configuration of the jihadi "nebula", for example, has reduced the possibility to use these channels to obtain a "political" licence to operate. The fact that this, sometimes fragmented, nebula spans many national borders has only complicated any attempt to establish a coordinated dialogue that would guarantee reliable results.

Ways forward

Philosophically, acceptance lies at the heart of the humanitarian endeavour, especially for a supporter like me of the traditional approach based on a privileged relationship with all the protagonists and not only the affected people. It defines why humanitarian actors are there and why they are not simple service providers. Humanitarian action is first and foremost an opportunity to discuss the behaviour of actors of violence towards those who need protection and assistance. Unfortunately, there are strong indications that we are experiencing situations where the methods used so far have a limited effect. If acceptance is uncertain, or denied, it may be necessary for organisations in particular contexts to fundamentally revise their strategies. Among the various possible options, and without claiming to be a substitute for a classical approach, the following ideas could represent avenues for reflection:

Reverse access

Facilitating the access of impacted populations to humanitarian actors rather than access of humanitarians to beneficiaries.

Dematerialisation of aid

Favouring the dematerialisation of aid, for example through cash transfers and similar solutions. While these methods can have undesirable effects (risks of inflation, poor targeting, diversion, etc.), they have the advantage of minimising the physical exposure of humanitarian actors.

Expanding digital proximity

In the absence of physical proximity, digital communication tools as well as tools such as remote sensing or remote monitoring can overcome the disadvantages.[15]

Maintaining a minimal footprint on the field

When acceptance cannot be totally secured, transparency becomes a liability. Operating below the radar through informal channels and via intermediaries may provide concrete results (with the risk of creating suspicion if this strategy is exposed).

[15] Tina Bouffet and Massimo Marelli, "The price of virtual proximity: How humanitarian organizations' digital trails can put people at risk", *Humanitarian law and policy Blog*, 7 December 2018, https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2018/12/07/price-virtual-proximity-how-humanitarian-organizations-digital-trails-put-people-risk

Weighing in on principals and their accomplices

Sponsors and mentors of armed groups or authoritarian regimes should be the main target of humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy with States. Those who commit or facilitate targeted attacks against aid actors should be held accountable. Humanitarian organisations should think seriously of mobilising legal mechanisms aimed at prosecuting perpetrators and mandators as a collective response to reduce impunity. However, be aware that this option can expose personnel in the field – just like keeping quiet to gain access to populations at risk. This is an old and familiar dilemma which, I am aware, would require a clear assessment of the risk-benefit balance.

Handing over to other actors

Humanitarian actors are bound by a robust ethical framework that limits their choice of actions. If a situation is desperate and principled intervention is impossible, then it is important to have the humility to hand over to others. Humanitarians in fact do not have a legal right to intervene. And they cannot claim a monopoly in responding to people in need if they can no longer act in their own way. the right to protection and assistance cannot be reduced to a specific category of actors, especially when they are not or no longer able to intervene.

These different options, while inherently imperfect and largely unsatisfactory in the long-term, may nevertheless provide some measure of continuity in violent and hostile environments such as those we have mentioned. Each option is *ad-hoc*, and depends on the political and operational context. The fundamental question is how humanitarian actors can reinvent themselves in order to pursue the mission they have taken on without being killed, kidnapped, injured, or severely impeded in their activities. If the context is such that the risks prove to be particularly high and therefore unmanageable, their choice will be between maintaining their presence at the cost of major consequences, or withdrawing and acknowledging a state of helplessness. Denying this state of affairs could lead some actors, as Fabrice Weissman has remarkably put it, "to drift toward an embrace of humanitarian martyrdom, consistent with what's happening within the broader aid sector".[16] The heroisation of the humanitarian will not serve in any way the people who are waiting for his help.

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Biography • Pascal Daudin

He joined the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1985 and served in more than twenty different conflict situations including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Kuwait, Caucasus and Central Asia, holding positions of Line Manager and Protection Expert as well as managing institutional reform. Between 2003 and 2007, he worked as senior analyst and deputy head of a counter-terrorism unit attached to the Swiss Ministry of Defence. In 2007, he was appointed global safety and security director for CARE International's operations and institutional policy. In 2011, he returned to the ICRC as senior policy adviser on humanitarian action-related matters. He has been actively involved in the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (a joint initiative of the World Food Programme, the UN Refugee Agency, the Humanitarian Dialogue Centre, Doctors Without Borders and the ICRC), which was established in 2016 to enhance professional exchanges and peer

[16] Fabrice Weissman, "Dying to help: A drift towards humanitarian martyrdom", *The New Humanitarian*, 26 November 2020, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/11/26/afghanistan-msf-hospital-aid-worker-safety

learning among frontline humanitarian negotiators. He is the co-founder of a risk management consulting company: Anthropos Deep Security (https://www.anthroposdeepsecurity.ch).

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