The Promise of Acceptance

Insights into acceptance as a security management approach from field research in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda

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Save the Children

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For more information on the Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management Project, visit http://acceptanceresearch.org.

Cover photo by Michael O'Neill.

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I. Introduction

The Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management Project

The Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management Project, an 18-month project funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), explored acceptance as an approach to NGO security management. The Project aimed to promote a better understanding of acceptance as a security management approach, including what acceptance is and in what circumstances it can be most effective. This report is the final Project document and as such, it expands upon previous Project documents and represents the Project team's cumulative learning on acceptance[1].

In designing the Project, the team created an iterative and reflective process to ensure that each project activity built upon previous activities, thereby serving to expand, challenge, and refine the Project team's understanding of acceptance as a security management approach. To begin, the team gathered the relevant literature about acceptance, and then held two International Security Consultations (one in the US and one in Europe), which brought together headquarters level security directors and senior managers to discuss the broad concept of acceptance as a security management approach and under what circumstances it can be effective. The outcomes of these consultations, augmented by the literature review, formed the basis of an "Acceptance White Paper".[2] The second phase of the Project brought together field staff at a Regional Consultation and Training Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, followed by field research in Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan. National and regional staff from over 25 NGOs participated in the Regional Consultation and Training Workshop and served as members of the country-specific research teams, conducting field research for two weeks in each country.[3]

The iterative process created a dynamic that functioned in two ways: moving discussions from headquarters to the field level and then back to the organizational center; and, from conceptual understandings to practical applications and back to conceptual reconsiderations. First, the consultations gathered insights and experience from headquarters staff and next from field staff from different departments, as well as collecting the opinions of community members, government officials, and national staff. These activities enabled the researchers to capture experiences from all levels of various organizations and to bridge the gap between organizational policy makers and direct program implementers. This final report and the Acceptance Toolkit[4] both provide a birds-eye organizational view on implementing an acceptance approach to security management. Second, the original White Paper presented a specific *conceptualization* of what acceptance is as a security management approach and sought to identify its major components and challenges. The Regional Workshop and subsequent field research, on the other hand, generated large quantities of data and information on the *practical application* of acceptance and how organizations and individual staff implement acceptance in their everyday work, whether as a programmatic or security management approach.

This report describes cross-cutting themes, challenges, and opportunities identified in the course of the field research on acceptance in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda. It builds on both the conceptual framework presented in the White Paper and the complementary findings from the field research. All project documents are available at http://acceptanceresearch.org.

[1] For a complete list of project documents, please see Annex A.

[2] Fast, Freeman, O'Neill, Rowley, forthcoming.

[3] See Freeman et al., 2011 (Kenya); Rowley et al., 2011 (Uganda); and Fast et al., 2011 (South Sudan). All project documents and reports are available at http://www.acceptanceresearch.org.

[4] The Acceptance Toolkit is a resource for NGOs to assess and strengthen their acceptance approach to security management. The Toolkit is available at http://www.acceptanceresearch.org.

Report Objectives and Structure

The primary objective of the Project was to document how NGOs understand and implement acceptance. The Project's rationale emerged from the observation that there is a lack of research and documentation on what an acceptance approach to security management entails, and under what circumstances it can be effective. While many organizations ascribe to an acceptance approach to security management, most lack policies, procedures, and tools to implement that approach or collect evidence related to the effectiveness of the approach. The Project resulted in several key documents, including the "Acceptance White Paper" and Country Reports on the findings from each field research country. Taken together, these represent a major effort to document current thinking and practice on acceptance to identify challenges and gaps in implementation, and to make strategic recommendations for advancing both the knowledge about and practice of acceptance.

To meet this objective, the report first discusses cross-cutting findings from the Project's field research on acceptance in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda. Though it is possible to synthesize the information in multiple ways, we have organized the discussion around the three questions that guided the field research. These questions are:

1) How do organizations gain and maintain acceptance?
2) How do organizations assess and monitor the presence and degree of acceptance? (In other words, how do organizations know whether they are accepted?)
3) How do organizations determine whether acceptance is effective in a particular context? (In other words, does acceptance work?)

The field research findings reflect the views, experiences, and knowledge of a wide variety of interviewees and focus group discussion participants. Interviewees included staff from national and international NGOs–mainly national staff–in many different types of positions including, but not limited to: Country Directors, Human Resources staff, Program Managers, and Security Focal Points. In addition, local government and security officials also participated in interviews. Community members, both direct beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of NGO programs, participated in focus group discussions. Unless otherwise noted, all examples and quotations provided in this report are drawn from the international consultations or field research interviews and focus group discussions.

A particular strength of the Project and this report, in addition to its cumulative perspective, is that it builds on the three Country Reports that capture the views and experiences of national, field-level staff who are affected by security concerns every day and the views of stakeholders in communities in which these staff work. Though this report provides some context-specific examples, readers should consult the three Country Reports for additional examples of acceptance in the field. Our findings on acceptance are inevitably dependent upon the specific local and country contexts in which we conducted the research. While certain key themes and issues emerged in all three contexts, it was not uncommon for these to manifest differently depending on social, political, security, or other contextual factors. By way of example, staffing considerations were highlighted in all three contexts, but the specific considerations differed in each of the three contexts. Thus, common themes appear in all three contexts even as the themes manifest in different ways according to context. This report examines the areas of commonality and difference among the three countries and draws out key challenges, lessons, and recommendations that may also apply more broadly.

The second section of the report revisits the conceptual framework of acceptance as articulated in the White Paper, reflecting on the ways in which learning from the field research informed and modified our original conceptualization of the key components and challenges of acceptance. The concluding section provides concrete policy recommendations and next steps for research and organizational development related to acceptance. The policy recommendations are geared specifically to organizations that ascribe to an acceptance approach to NGO security management or that wish to understand better the ways in which they can implement acceptance. Our hope is that this document, along with the other Project documents, will serve as a platform from which future efforts to further strengthen acceptance as a security management approach can launch.

II. Key Findings and Implications

Framing Finding: The Linkages between Programming and Security

The findings from our field research confirmed that many organizations see acceptance primarily as a programming strategy rather than a security management approach. At first glance, this is not surprising. Many organizations have already determined that gaining acceptance contributes to successful programming by meeting community needs, building relationships, negotiating access to populations in need, and respecting the cultural norms and traditions of the communities where they work. At an institutional level, however, most NGOs do not formally link these practices to security management, even though the research suggests many NGO field staff see a clear linkage between program choices and the implications for security. For example, many staff acknowledged the importance of ensuring communities' participation in relief and development projects, but this engagement rarely involved those with responsibility for security or considered the security implications of such engagement.

In seeking to gain acceptance, organizations need to consider various ways to more systematically integrate an acceptance approach as part of good programming and effective security management. On the one hand, good programming that involves communities in a respectful, participatory dialogue and meets their needs in an accountable and transparent manner enhances an organization's relationship with key stakeholders who, in turn, prioritize the security of organizational staff and assets. On the other hand, an effective security management approach that engages many of the same stakeholders in a manner enabling organizations and their staff to access communities in need contributes significantly to successful program delivery. In short, implementing an acceptance approach for programming has implications for staff security and implementing acceptance for security has implications for programming. Instead of considering programs and security as separate domains of activity, an acceptance approach suggests significant overlap between the two. Figure 1, below, illustrates this reciprocal relationship.

Exploring this observation more deeply reveals nuances that suggest practical steps towards stronger connections between programs, security, and acceptance.

First, many acceptance-related functions are undertaken outside the purview of, or without the involvement of, security personnel, thereby missing opportunities to optimize the security benefits these activities might produce. As a key informant in the Uganda field research highlighted: *"Security managers need to be fully aware of issues in program implementation and provide a security angle (without stifling program development) while program managers need to be aware of the security implications of their relationships, management practices, and the quality of programs."* In Kenya, the research team observed that while stakeholder analyses are widely used as part of the program planning and design process, they do not usually include stakeholders outside the immediate affected communities and beneficiaries, nor are they necessarily linked to acceptance as applied to security management that is critical to program success.

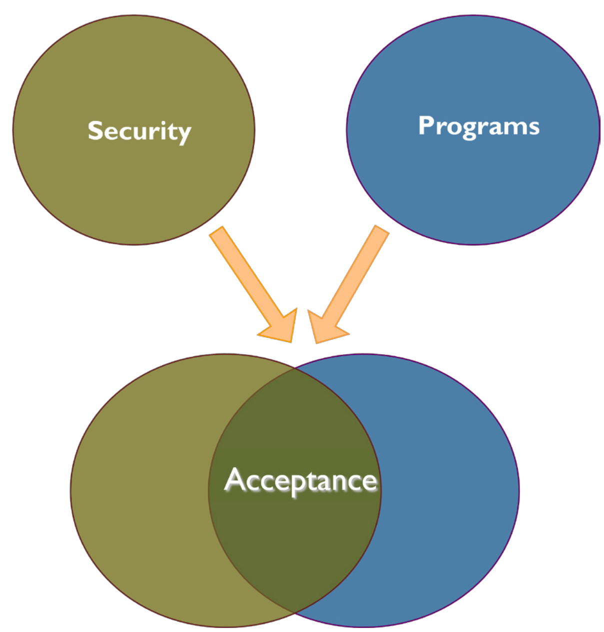

Figure 1: The Relationship between Security and Programs

The missed opportunities for conceptualizing acceptance for program purposes may occur in different ways. First, if acceptance is confined to beneficiary communities, it fails to account for other stakeholders who might obstruct programs or do harm to NGO staff. Thus, being 'accepted' by a community in order to deliver programs does not mean an NGO has necessarily addressed its security needs. In addition, NGOs often presume they have gained acceptance solely because programs are ongoing, with little analysis of the linkage between program activity or effectiveness and an NGO's level of acceptance (see discussion under "Assessing and Monitoring the Presence and Degree of Acceptance" for more about levels of acceptance). Beneficiary communities will tolerate a lot of 'unacceptable' behavior on the part of NGO staff, for instance, in order to continue the flow of assistance; this should not be misread as 'acceptance.' As one way to address this separation of activities, organizations could create a program design and planning approach that: (1) explicitly seeks to gain and promote acceptance throughout the project cycle, particularly in the initial assessment/engagement activities; (2) explores the limits and possibilities of acceptance; (3) addresses the security context and its impact on programs, staff, and beneficiaries; and (4) includes participation and input of security personnel throughout the process of project implementation.

Second, limiting acceptance to program implementation alone belies the importance other departmental policies and practices across the organization–in areas such as administration, human resources, and communications–may have on effective security management, and thus on program success. As a case in point, many organizations that seek to promote their brand with prospective individual donors engage in public outreach campaigns, often without considering how this communication may affect other stakeholders' perceptions of the organization. These perceptions may contrast markedly with the image that field staff are promoting, thereby undermining field-based acceptance efforts.

Recognizing the interrelatedness of these diverse activities among various departments is only the starting point to truly integrating acceptance throughout an organization. Security directors who participated in our international consultations posited that in order for the acceptance approach to security management to be effective, it must be consistent with and integrated into an organizational ethos. In other words, an acceptance approach to security management cannot be tacked onto an organizational structure without links to other organizational systems, processes, and values.

In some instances, individual staff or organizational policies recognize that the work of different departments affects acceptance and security, but this recognition does not necessarily translate to a systematic approach to implementing acceptance. Often it happens in an ad hoc or piecemeal manner. For example, in South Sudan, many NGOs indicated that they have codes of conduct and staff orientation/induction and training reflect the organization's mission and values. However, interviewees did not necessarily associate codes of conduct and staff behavior directly with promoting staff security. In addition, despite the existence of such codes, enforcement mechanisms are often lacking, diminishing the potential effect of this component on gaining and maintaining acceptance and on staff security.

Third, approaching acceptance from the programming perspective often limits whom NGO staff consider as important stakeholders. Typically, NGOs emphasize beneficiaries and local government officials, while omitting a host of other stakeholders (armed actors, local businessmen, etc.) who can influence staff security. In all three countries, NGO informants emphasized the importance of gaining acceptance from communities and government actors. They generally recognized the importance of a thorough context analysis, but most frequently mentioned that this analysis focuses on the perspectives, needs, and dynamics of the communities in which the NGO works. In other words, NGO staff informants did not specifically mention the need to consider the perspectives of other important stakeholders, such as armed actors, businesspeople, or others with the capacity and/or motive to do harm to NGO staff or obstruct program implementation. In limiting the range of stakeholders, organizations ignore significant actors from whom gaining acceptance is important, and perhaps critical, to staff security and program success.

Based on our research, we suggest that although in general many NGO staff interviewed appeared to have a limited concept of "stakeholders"–as primarily referring to beneficiaries or community members and perhaps local government officials–in relation to acceptance, this appeared to be context dependent. In Moroto, Uganda, for example, armed cattle raiders are originally from many of the same communities in which NGOs implement programs. As a result, gaining acceptance from community members there is more likely to denote acceptance from armed actors, as compared to other locations where a clearer divide exists between the community and armed actors. In South Sudan, NGOs were cognizant of local and national government actors as key stakeholders in gaining acceptance, in part due to changing and sometimes tenuous relationships between NGOs and these parties. In other contexts with a history of violence, where armed actors are active, or where threats from other stakeholders have previously disrupted programs, both security and program staff seemed more likely to take a broad view of "stakeholders" and their perspectives.

In summary, in order for acceptance to be most effective as a programmatic and security management approach, it should be a *deliberate and systematic process* applied as part of many organizational functions: program management, human resource management, media and communications, finance and administration, logistics/procurement, and security management. Implementing an organizational approach to acceptance requires a consistent application across various departments that does not confine activities and responsibilities solely within a security management silo.

Findings Related to the Three Research Questions

Once organizations have made the commitment to 'acceptance' as the foundation of their security management approach, challenges remain in gaining acceptance from a broad range of stakeholders, in determining if, in fact, acceptance has been attained, by whom and to what degree; and, having gained acceptance, determining its effectiveness as a security management approach. The following section explores the key findings to these research questions and highlights important lessons learned. Each sub-section also provides recommendations for how organizations can truly achieve the promise and potential of an effective acceptance approach to security management.

Gaining and Maintaining Acceptance

Gaining acceptance refers to those actions or areas of operation that relate directly to an organization's ability to gain acceptance. While the White Paper identified areas that emerged from the headquarters level consultations, this report focuses on the field-level actions and strategies employed by that NGOs in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda in order to gain acceptance, providing a standalone summary of these mechanisms. We categorize these into four areas: programming; relationships; administrative policies and procedures; and identity.

Programming

The most prominent and widely used mechanism for gaining acceptance falls under the rubric of programming–the types and quality of programs, whether the programs meet the needs prioritized by the community, and how NGOs provide these services. The first major research finding notes that successful programming is critical to gaining and maintaining acceptance. In particular, acceptance is influenced by program effectiveness, participatory approaches, entry and exit strategies, and transparency and accountability.

Program effectiveness and meeting beneficiary needs

NGO staff, community members, and government informants were remarkably consistent in their views that without effective programming NGOs and their staff will quickly lose any initial acceptance they may have garnered due to local hospitality or the promise of some benefit. Simply put, effective programs are those that meet beneficiary needs. In South Sudan, where programming tended to be more inclined toward emergency response, informants focused on meeting basic needs as a general priority. In contrast, in Kenya, where programming tended toward a developmental approach, informants expressed the expectation that program benefits would be shared equitably among the community members based on priorities they helped to identify. Even so, simply meeting needs is not sufficient in and of itself to gain acceptance, although it appears to be a prerequisite. Each country report recognizes the danger in assuming an organization has acceptance simply because it has operated in an area for years or because it has not experienced any incidents. In a similar vein, organizations should not presume positive perceptions of the organization by various stakeholders based on public relations and brand identity but should proactively determine various stakeholders view the organization, its staff, and activities.

In each of the three countries, the combination of ways in which organizations achieve program effectiveness pointed to common themes, though these varied in each context. Key factors to program success include having appropriate entry and exit strategies, fostering community engagement and participation, targeting programs and designing activities in ways that address community needs, and delivering effectively on program plans while ensuring effective communication and program transparency.

Participation

Many informants cited the value of a participatory approach to programming as a means to developing more effective programs, for establishing relationships between NGO staff and community members, and for gaining acceptance. Interviewees and focus group discussion participants highlighted the following areas for participation: conducting joint needs assessments, including analysis and sharing results; designing appropriate programs; and monitoring and evaluating program progress. They suggested that participation reflected an NGO's respect for local knowledge and capacity and ultimately resulted in programs that better met beneficiary needs and improved local "ownership." This, in turn, leads to higher program use and sustainability. Greater participation at various levels of the program process also fosters greater transparency (i.e., government and community leaders better understood program dynamics and allocation of resources) resulting in greater accountability. In addition, the degree to which communities and government leaders were involved in the program process influenced how they viewed the organization–as responsive, transparent, secretive, or fraudulent, for example–which, in turn, affects their perceptions and levels of acceptance.

Common mechanisms of participatory programming are the identification of community needs through an assessment exercise and through context and stakeholder analysis. In Kenya, for instance, community informants expressed their expectation that NGOs conduct their assessments together with them and share information and analysis about programs (although this does not always happen). As one group of physically-challenged community members in Kenya noted, *"NGOs hold community meetings but do not invite us;"* as a result they felt the NGO did not consider their particular needs. At the Kampala, Uganda, headquarters of an NGO with programs in Moroto, a program manager spoke of the utility of careful context analysis at the outset, in terms of thinking through what could happen if program staff do not fully understand what the community thinks and wants.

Community informants in Kenya also pointed out that regular, community-accessible forums for information sharing (a uni-directional process) had the added value of becoming forums for information exchange (a bi-directional process); community members could offer feedback on program activities, note any changes to the operational context, report security incidents, and share threat information that would allow NGO staff to adapt program activities or modify staff movement. In some cases, district-level coordinating mechanisms that included NGOs, local authorities, and government officials were cited as forums where stakeholders regularly exchanged information (including security information and reported incidents) and NGOs coordinated their staff movements and program activities. Community members in Kenya noted that their needs are best met (and thus their disposition toward NGOs is more positive) when NGOs coordinated efforts with each other to meet community needs, rather than competed with each other for territorial dominance. Community members in South Sudan expressed discontent with repeated needs assessments and false promises, indicating that this negatively affected their perceptions of NGOs.

Entry and exit strategy

In all three countries, and especially in Kenya and Uganda, stakeholders made frequent references to the manner by which organizations enter into relationships with communities, and how they transition out/exit from the community at the end of a project. Most NGOs claimed to take a broad consultative approach to communities by designing their initial entries to be respectful of local values. As one community member in Kenya advised, "*Before entry [the organization] should come to the* bazara *(traditional assembly) and introduce [their] group and say the programs [they] intend to bring.*"

While levels of government involvement in the registration and coordination of NGO programs in their respective constituencies varied among the three countries, those with whom we spoke generally agreed that NGOs gain official "acceptance" by following prescribed procedures for community entry. This often entails seeking approval from local/district government officials to initiate programs sometimes resulting in formal agreements and/or participation on coordinating committees. The agreements/committees have the added advantage of helping to manage diverse expectations, better coordinate various NGO programs in the same location, and provide a forum for feedback. While sometimes cumbersome and time consuming, this approach has the significant advantage of gaining acceptance from key stakeholders. In Kenya, entry into the community could not proceed without an official letter from the District Office noting that the organization had been appropriately vetted. In South Sudan, one community declared that assistance should go through "proper channels" (meaning traditional leaders and local officials), and without such endorsement they would not accept the goods or services provided.

In addition to entry strategies geared toward acceptance, communities place a high value on an organization's exit strategy. Community members desire openness and information on how an organization plans to transition out of a project once it is finished. Exit strategies should plan for ways to make projects sustainable or to link beneficiaries to other projects or services once the project ends and to inform community members of these plans in advance to the greatest extent possible. Respondents, including NGO staff, also highlighted the role of building the capacity of community-based organizations in exit planning and sustaining project impacts. One NGO reported that it develops partnership agreements with communities that clarify what the organization will be able to contribute, what its goals are, and presents a clear exit strategy.

Informants highlighted the following considerations for a successful exit strategy transition:

- Account for dependencies created by the program and ensure these are addressed as the project draws to a conclusion.
- Build local capacity to successfully manage the program after NGO involvement ends. This might include forging relationships with local officials and other support networks, developing management skills, and reporting procedures.
- Hand over responsibilities to a mutually agreed upon local NGO/CBO to augment local capacity.
- Clarify future roles and responsibilities to avoid confusion and potential conflict. This is especially important when property ownership is involved (e.g., clinic, school, or well).
- Conduct the handing over in a public and transparent manner.

Transparency and accountability

Research informants from all three countries consistently mentioned transparency and accountability as playing a crucial role in gaining and maintaining acceptance. The research revealed the high value placed upon transparency and accountability by both communities and NGOs.. In Uganda, one informant told a story of a woman who became well-known amongst community members for her fairness in managing food distributions for the World Food Program (WFP). The food distributed by WFP became synonymous with her name ("Nachan"), because she strictly organized the food distributions and ensured that all people received what they deserved. Community members appreciated the transparency and fairness of her work.

Despite the agreement on the need for accountability and transparency, there are important differences in the way NGOs believe communities view each phenomenon and how these differences in turn affect communities' perceptions of NGOs. While NGOs mentioned several outreach and feedback mechanisms to foster transparency and accountability, some community informants mentioned that these mechanisms were either inaccessible (requiring technological savvy or internet access) or that the NGOs seemed unresponsive to community comments or complaints. They noted that complaints about NGO performance go to the same NGO about which the complaint is made. As a result, some called for more donor involvement, either in terms of soliciting feedback about funded NGOs or calling for donors to follow up to ensure that the reports they receive from NGOs whose projects they fund are verified. In South Sudan, community informants called for more transparency related to budgets and expenditures. Some questioned the "value for money" of some organizations, related to the number of staff and amount of infrastructure in comparison to the services communities received.

Informants cited instances where NGOs failed to meet these transparency objectives, resulting in distrust among some members of the community who undermined acceptance; in some cases this led to programs being disrupted and staff threatened. In Uganda, one NGO failed to communicate openly with local officials, and because the impact of the project was not clear, district officials asked the NGO to leave the district. In South Sudan, some community members expressed a desire to know why some communities received assistance and others did not.

Relationships, partnerships, and networks

NGOs can gain and enhance their acceptance by developing respectful relationships with numerous stakeholders, establishing partnerships with other actors, and becoming part of a broader network of organizations. The quality and range of individual relationships, formal partnerships, and organizational networks affect levels of acceptance, particularly in terms of the willingness of the community to share information with NGOs, to grant access, and even to intervene on behalf of the organization.

Relationships

Informants stressed the importance of respect for local authorities, values, and customs in gaining acceptance for an organization and realizing program success. The theme of respect arose frequently among respondents who pointed out that NGO staff who respect local customs and norms and act in a respectful manner toward local leaders are most likely to gain acceptance. Similarly, organizations demonstrating transparency and accountability build trust among the community and local leadership. This trust, in turn, encourages communities and local leaders to seek the interests of NGOs and their staff. In all three countries, community informants expressed a desire to see staff members spend time in or with the community.

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 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 local women in the community and/or cattle belonging to the community immediately lose acceptance and any protected status they might have built through other acceptance-related efforts. In particular, community members did not appreciate arrogance.

Staff behavior and acceptance-related skills determine, in large part, an organization's ability to gain acceptance. While many organizations outline expectations about behavior and people skills in their codes of conduct, there is less consistency regarding assessment and corresponding rewards or punishments concerning whether staff members actually follow these codes of conduct.

Partnerships and Networks

NGOs have developed a range of partnerships, both in terms of program implementation (e.g., local implementing partners, local and national government partners) but also networks with other NGOs related to programming and security (e.g., networks within sectors such as health or agriculture, NGO forums, and security). Many NGOs see these partnerships as crucial to program implementation and NGO coordination, but also as mechanisms by which they demonstrate links to the local context and to local actors. Our conversations with various stakeholders indicate these partnerships also affect acceptance. In particular, community members and other stakeholders mentioned transparency and accountability as key, as well as the need for genuine, respectful relationships.

Administrative policies and procedures

Administrative policies and procedures, or what the Uganda report termed "administrative acceptance," refers to those policies and procedures within an organization that affect acceptance. These primarily relate to staffing, but also relate to other human resource, procurement, or administrative policies.

Staffing

Staffing for acceptance can be a quick win, since NGOs exercise significant control over whom they hire and where they work. Regardless of location and program portfolio, NGOs recognize the importance of adequate and appropriate staffing. Staffing emerged as a significant theme across all three countries, though with some variation according to context. Therefore, knowledge of the context should inform staffing decisions related to acceptance. And while 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. In particular, interviewees mentioned national and local staff members as key "multipliers" of acceptance–both in terms of their knowledge of the context and connections to the community, but also in terms of how their treatment of community members reflects on the organization.

Both NGO staff and community members 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. Informants made a clear distinction between 'national' and 'local' staff and the relative value placed on each in terms of gaining 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 they might otherwise receive. In Kenya, where ethnic violence recently erupted, 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 the reasoning behind certain organizational hiring practices. Some organizations with whom the research teams spoke in Kenya and South Sudan address this 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.

Staff equity

NGOs have recognized that the staff they deploy greatly influence the chances of gaining and maintaining acceptance. Some organizations cited specific hiring practices favoring local candidates for positions whenever possible (even if a local candidate's technical skills may be surpassed by a non-local candidate). As NGO human resources staff in Kenya explained, hiring local staff brings added value to the organization that offsets comparative technical shortcomings. Among the advantages a local hire brings to an organization are a greater familiarity with the operational environment, the opportunity to build upon pre-existing relationships and networks, demonstrating a respect for local values and customs, and contributing to the local economy through salary and benefits. While gender, age, and ethnic background are commonly discussed factors, geographic origin plays a less recognized but critical role. Research informants identified four separate types of staff: international (not from Africa); regional (in this case from East Africa, but also referring to other Africans); national (residents/citizens of the country); and local (from the village/city in which staff are working). The ways these individuals are able to gain acceptance and the challenges they face related to acceptance differed significantly. In South Sudan, community members explained that other East Africans (Kenyans and Ugandans, in particular) were taking jobs that South Sudanese were qualified to do. Thus, the obstacles facing regional staff are likely higher than other categories of (international) staff. In Karamoja, Uganda, community members viewed any staff member from outside the region as foreign, suggesting the need to hire locally vs. nationally, regionally, or internationally in order to facilitate the ability to gain acceptance. In Kenya, some stakeholders suggested Kenyans are "more prone to tribalism," therefore suggesting the need to exercise care in the hire and deployment of national and local staff. In general, community members in all three countries characterized international staff as more "neutral" but also as more expensive, since international staff benefits and salaries are more generous. Some communities identified this as a source of resentment or frustration ("*international staff get R&R and are always coming and going")*, thereby creating additional challenges related to their ability to gain acceptance.

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. In addition, 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 demonstrated that organizations often assume national staff will understand the local culture and security situation, even though this is not always the case. In Kenya, informants pointed out that Kenyan staff from Nairobi posted to Isiolo were often unfamiliar with (or even hostile to) local cultural and political dynamics (and should therefore be better orientated to the area prior to deployment–even if they are Kenyans).

Vehicle policies

Some informants indicated that certain vehicle policies can negatively affect acceptance. According to one interviewee in South Sudan, "*Something that people sometimes forget is that some of the NGO policies itself can be a hindrance to acceptance-for example, vehicle policies such as not allowing anyone other than NGO staff be taken in NGO vehicles, or ignoring or forgetting to set clear speed limits."* A repeated community complaint, not unique to East Africa, is related to the driving practices of NGO drivers and other foreigners–driving carelessly or too fast, or resentment related to policies against giving lifts to non-staff. In South Sudan, one interviewee told of a driver of an NGO vehicle who refused to give a ride to a pregnant woman and was later beaten. Although insurance and liability issues shape NGO policies related to vehicles, these policies also positively or negatively influence acceptance.

Procurement and contracting

A sometimes neglected but important factor related to acceptance concerns the procurement policies and contracting practices of NGOs. Although many NGOs use local suppliers and resources for programmatic reasons, there are also clear security-related reasons for doing so. This connects to malpractice related to tendering and procurement procedures (also related to programming transparency and accountability, as mentioned above) as well as who NGOs procure supplies from. Some NGOs indicated they met with local suppliers to explain tendering and procurement procedures, create lists of local suppliers, or solicit information from communities about local suppliers and NGO procedures. In Kenya, one organization indicated that the Automobile Association of Kenya inspects locally proffered vehicles as a neutral third party confirming that the vehicles meet NGO quality standards. Another NGO indicated that it specifically involved community members in construction projects to allow them to monitor progress and quality and advised contractors to use local labor. In one case, the NGO had to directly pay laborers when a contractor disappeared and failed to pay them, in order to uphold its reputation in the community. In South Sudan, one local government official complained about contractors coming only from Juba instead of providing locals with jobs or contracts. In Moroto, Uganda, one NGO informant identified suspicion between groups as creating security threats related to construction projects. In these cases, it is advisable to hire local unskilled workers, since this helps to empower local communities and reduces the risk that one group will be seen as spies on another group.

Identity

An organization's "identity," as we use it here, refers to its mission and values and the image it projects via its programs, staff composition, and infrastructure (e.g., buildings, vehicles, and other equipment). An organization's identity is both projected–meaning a specific image the organization hopes to advance through its programs, mission, and values or principles–and perceived by the various stakeholders from whom organizations hope to gain acceptance. For some, but not all, organizations, the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence are integral to their brand. Regardless, it is crucial for NGOs to clearly articulate and demonstrate the values that guide their work. The image NGOs project and how stakeholders perceive them do not always match; NGOs need to deliberately verify the ways in which stakeholders interpret organizational identity and proactively adapt their strategies as the local context warrants.

Branding

Branding has both negative and positive effects related to acceptance. Organizations "brand" their work by promoting their unique mandate or mission in a country (e.g., to provide medical care or to care and advocate for children) and linking this desired image to a logo or distinctive organizational brand. In contexts of armed violence or intense conflict, branding with organizational logos or donor logos can be contentious, and most NGOs strategically consider their visibility and raise or lower their profile depending on the context and the extent to which the organization determines that its 'brand' has been accepted by armed actors. Focus group discussions with communities and other stakeholders across all three countries indicated that they know and identify different NGOs. Stakeholder informants in Uganda and South Sudan, in particular, indicated that community members definitely distinguish one NGO from another in the field, whether because of the logo, the NGO's programs and the resources it provides, or the personal interactions between staff and community members.

Communication

An organization's communication encompasses informal and formal mechanisms of communicating in the field and at the national and headquarters/corporate level. Communication strategies often target messages to beneficiaries, other stakeholders, and both individual and institutional donors. Given today's universal access to real-time communication, the complexity of messaging and communications has dramatically increased over time. Several organizations mentioned that they monitor the media (local to international) for negative references to the organization and how this might affect their acceptance or security. One organization in South Sudan spoke about the challenges of how to explain its work in the context of independence as it debated how its stance on Sudanese independence might be interpreted by separatist movements in other countries where it also worked.

Assessing and Monitoring the Presence and Degree of Acceptance

In general, our research indicated that most organizations lack a strategy or formal tools for monitoring the presence, degree, and effectiveness of acceptance. The research showed that NGOs do not have measureable or observable indicators of acceptance, nor do they systematically assess whether they have gained acceptance. For instance, many NGO staff assume that effective programming (e.g., meeting needs, developing relationships, etc.) confers acceptance from communities. Nevertheless, multiple informants identified informal mechanisms through which they monitor acceptance, or indicators that can be used to assess both the presence and effectiveness of acceptance. This section addresses mechanisms and indicators related to levels of acceptance (i.e., whether an NGO has gained acceptance), while the next section examines mechanisms and indicators related to the effectiveness of acceptance (i.e., whether acceptance is working).

The levels of acceptance

In the course of the research, we asked and heard about different "levels" or "degrees" of acceptance. Although our research was not able to definitively identify distinct levels of acceptance, the evidence suggests a continuum ranging from complete acceptance to outright rejection and differences in degree of acceptance. These are implicitly identified in the various categories of effectiveness outlined below. A continuum of acceptance might look something like this:

> **Endorse**: Stakeholders actively promote and intervene on behalf of the organization to protect its staff, assets, or reputation.
>
> **Consent**: Stakeholders provide safe and continued access to vulnerable populations and may also share security-related information.

Tolerate: Stakeholders tolerate the presence of NGOs in the community, in large part because they provide goods and services that stakeholders want and need, or from which they can benefit.

Reject: Stakeholders undermine NGO programs or access to vulnerable populations.

Target: Stakeholders actively threaten or attack NGO staff, programs, assets, or reputation.

Of all levels, the "tolerate" level is perhaps the most tenuous because it could tip toward welcome as easily as it could tip toward rejection. Nevertheless, external events, an NGO's

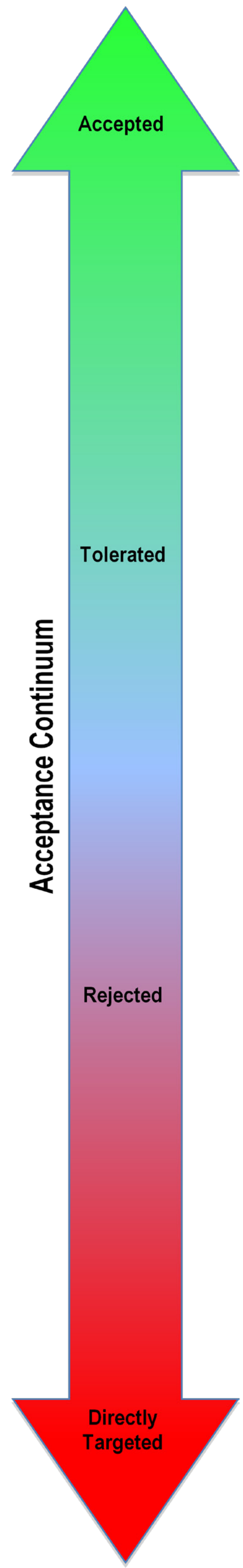

Figure 2: Acceptance Continuum[5]

[5] Adapted from Finucane, 2009.

actions, or those of its staff, could cause a slip from the higher levels toward the lower levels just as the same factors could push an NGO's acceptance higher up the continuum (e.g., a staff member is perceived as rude, which causes a government official to refuse to work with an NGO; an external event that incites tensions between religious or ethnic groups). Based on the research, it appears that trust, genuine relationships, programs that meet community needs, transparency and openness, having existing communication links, and an openness to informal communication all enhance a community's willingness to share information and to intervene to prevent or mitigate an incident. We presume that communities would be unwilling to take action to prevent or resolve an incident unless they "accepted" an NGO at the level of tolerance or above. These factors suggest the need to integrate programs and security management in order to gain, maintain, or increase levels of acceptance.

NGOs may find their level of acceptance anywhere along the continuum, both in relation to geographic location and in relation to different stakeholder groups. Thus, a particular NGO may be tolerated by armed actors and promoted by community members in one area and rejected by both sets of actors in neighboring communities.

Finally, organizations should also consider how their other security management strategies affect their levels of acceptance. In employing particular protective or deterrent strategies, organizations may decrease or increase their levels of acceptance. In Kenya, one informant pointed out that using national police to provide armed escort may help to build acceptance with district authorities because it recognizes the authority of district offices, brings financial benefits, keeps the national police well-deployed, and helps to educate district and police authorities about community and NGO activities. Having full acceptance, however, does not guarantee complete security, just as bunkers do not guarantee complete protection. Further documentation of examples of the effectiveness of acceptance will help to better define these levels and to distinguish between them.

Mechanisms to monitor acceptance

Mechanisms to monitor acceptance refer to the ways through which NGOs gather information about whether and to what extent they have gained acceptance. Interviewees referred to multiple mechanisms:

- Use community feedback mechanisms such as complaints boxes, hotlines, or formal and informal conversations with community members.
- Track levels of 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 as compared to past use.
- Track beneficiary contributions toward project implementation and success (e.g., donation of land, help with construction of project buildings).
- Track community engagement and commitment to project activities.
- Discuss the quality of community relations as part of staff meetings on programs and/or security.

Clearly, feedback mechanisms feature prominently as mechanisms to monitor acceptance. For instance, an NGO could monitor how many people attend NGO-organized events over time as a proxy indicator for levels of acceptance. Our research suggested, however, that though NGOs may have established ways to gather feedback from beneficiaries and other community members, many individuals remain unaware of these mechanisms or lack the ability to access them, thereby limiting their effectiveness as mechanisms to monitor acceptance. For instance, a feedback mechanism linked to an NGO website restricts access to only those who are literate and technologically savvy. Thus, it is crucial to raise awareness among stakeholders that feedback mechanisms exist, monitor stakeholder usage (who, how often), and demonstrate responsiveness to the feedback provided by applying the feedback to inform and modify current and future programming. In this way, a functioning and responsive feedback strategy acts as a proxy indicator for acceptance while simultaneously promoting the acceptance of the organization.

Indicators to assess the presence and degree of acceptance

"Indicators" of acceptance refers to various ways of monitoring whether or not an organization has acceptance. While few, if any, NGOs systematically assess whether they have acceptance, many interviewees provided anecdotal examples of how NGOs currently determine whether or not they have gained acceptance.

Some of the examples and indicators included below are "dual indicators," referring to their two-fold application as a means for assessing whether an NGO has gained acceptance and to determine whether the acceptance gained is effective as a security management approach. The following list, derived from the research, refers primarily to indicators that suggest an organization has gained at least a minimal degree of acceptance. (The next section discusses in more detail how these indicators may also demonstrate the effectiveness of acceptance and the related caveats/controversies.) These indicators are divided into three categories: (1) administrative indicators; (2) factors related to programs or stakeholder participation; and (3) community requests or actions.

Administrative indicators

- Existence of formal documents (e.g., Memorandum of Understanding, certifications, or formal letters of recognition or introduction).
- Lack of incidents affecting an NGO.

The following examples, from research interviewees, illustrate this category:

> Local and national government authorities expeditiously process documents or administrative procedures needed for an organization to carry out its work.
>
> Local or national government authorities provide letters of recognition or facilitate introductions that help an NGO to carry out its work.

Factors related to programs or stakeholder participation

- Levels of participation in organizational events (e.g., atmosphere during meetings, whether local leaders are willingly involved, community contributions to projects).
- Whether staff feel at ease in the community,
- NGO's ability to carry out its work (e.g., continued access to program areas, community leaders guarantee security or accompany/escort project staff, community wishes to extend a project).
- Ability to access to program areas and beneficiary populations.
- Other communities seek to join projects, or a community approaches and negotiates with an organization to continue a project.

The following examples, from research interviewees, illustrate this category:

> Community members organize meetings to sensitize others outside the community to the presence of NGO workers.
>
> Community leaders take a noticeable and positive interest in the work on an NGO.
>
> When roads were impassable, communities came out to assist the NGO to ensure staff members would be able to continue their work.
>
> "*If community feels ownership of the project then the community has self-interest in success. By sharing information with our staff that avoids an incident that might cause us to leave, the community is merely acting on its own behalf.*"
>
> Community members sometimes give NGO staff members pet names as a sign of welcome and acceptance into the community. In the Karamoja region of Uganda, for example, some organizations become "household names" and its staff are given pet names drawn from the Karamojong culture. According to one interviewee, "*Usually with a pet name one is considered a local and enjoys the protection of the community as any member would.*"

Community requests or actions

- A community approaches an NGO, asking it to intercede in a local issue.
- The community is willing to broker or mediate a conflict between NGO and other actors.
- Community members publicly commit to accept responsibility for staff safety.

- Community members or other stakeholders share security-related information with organization,
- Community advocate on an organization's behalf.
- Community members or other stakeholders intervene to prevent or resolve an incident.

The following examples, from research interviewees, illustrate this category:

> Residents in one community formed community policing units to protect NGO staff. In other communities, community members alert staff to security issues and threats, or elders accompany staff members to ensure their safety.
>
> In one community, a conflict between different groups was escalating. Both groups were armed and the military was on standby. They requested that an NGO intervene to help de-escalate the conflict. The chiefs provided security guarantees, ensuring that the staff members would be safe.
>
> Tribal chiefs and county commissioners often get involved in resolving issues. Warnings depend a lot on relationships and most on what services NGOs provide. Warnings mean good relationships.
>
> In one community, "warriors" circled an organization's staff members when the village was attacked.
>
> One NGO reported that thieves broke into their office, but a neighbor alerted a staff member who called the police. The police came in time and apprehended the criminals.
>
> One community in Kenya sent an SMS text to an NGO warning of an Al Shabab threat. As a result, the NGO was able to restrict travel and adapt its program strategies.
>
> During a program monitoring meeting, a local official accused an organization of not helping the community and demanded its withdrawal. The chief of the area stood up and defended the organization against the accusations.
>
> In one town, a community member accused an NGO of embezzling funds and reported it to local officials. The organization received letters forbidding it to operate. Beneficiaries and other community members stormed the government office, saying that the accusations were false and that the accuser was motivated by self-interest. The situation was resolved.
>
> One NGO reported that local communities share daily or weekly updates on roads or access issues, programmatic status and issues and potential security threats with NGOs.

Determining the Effectiveness of Acceptance

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 fail to formally monitor whether they have acceptance, the field research suggests organizations do not systematically assess whether acceptance is an effective security management approach. Despite the lack of tools or methods to determine effectiveness, our field research revealed four categories of indicators that point to the effectiveness of acceptance at the field level. Any of these categories may be preventative, as in the case of warnings of threats or potential incidents, or occur in real-time, such as stakeholders protecting NGO staff during a riot or demonstration. Examples may also be retroactive, such as when stakeholders help an NGO recover its stolen assets following a robbery. These indicators are divided into five categories: (1) NGOs gain access to program areas or populations; (2) stakeholders share security-related information; (3) stakeholders advocate on behalf of or promote an NGO; (4) stakeholders intervene to prevent or resolve an incident; and (5) stakeholders distinguish an NGO and its work, thereby avoiding, mitigating, or resolving an incident.

Table 1, below, shows both indicators of having gained acceptance (listed in the previous section) and indicators of acceptance being effective. Many of these indicators are dual indicators, meaning they may show that an organization has gained acceptance and that acceptance is working as a security management approach.

Indicators of acceptance		
Existence of formal documents	Indicators of gaining acceptance	
Lack of incidents affecting an NGO		
A community approaches an NGO, asking it to intercede in a local issue		
The community is willing to broker or mediate a conflict between NGO and other actors		
NGOs gain access to program areas or populations		Dual indicators
Stakeholders share security-related information		
Community members publicly commit to accept responsibility for staff safety		
Community members or leaders advocate on organization's behalf		
Community members or other stakeholders intervene to prevent or resolve incident		
Stakeholders distinguish an NGO and its work, thereby avoiding, mitigating, or resolving an incident.		

Table 1: Indicators of Acceptance

Access to program areas or populations

For some organizations, the ability to reach program areas and populations in need is the key indicator that the organization has gained a degree of acceptance. This is particularly apparent when one NGO gains access and others do not. The following quotes, from research interviewees, demonstrate this perspective:

> "*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.*"

> "*Our staff were stopped on the road by armed men who, when they identified us, acknowledged knowing about our work and seeing it positively. Then they let our staff pass.*"

The complexity of access as an indicator of acceptance

Safe and continuous access is a viable indicator of acceptance, as our research indicated. Nevertheless, it is complex, since access in and of itself does not equal acceptance. It is possible that access indicates community tolerance of the presence of NGO actors, related to the fact that they provide goods and services community members or other stakeholders need in times of crisis. Likewise, belligerent or armed stakeholders may grant access in order to project a more positive image to the international community or to ensure that services reach those populations under their control. In short, they want, need, or gain from what NGOs provide and therefore allow them access. Safe and continuous access is more likely to signal acceptance, as opposed to one-time or short-term access, or access gained only with armed escort (e.g., armed escort in a conflict setting). Likewise, if one organization has access and others do not, or have tried and failed to gain access to populations, this is more likely to demonstrate acceptance.

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. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned phone or text messages as a common mechanism for receiving this type of information. Community members and other stakeholders may share information about the overall context or potential risks, about dangerous locations, specific incidents, or trouble brewing in a particular region. In addition, they may warn agencies of potential ambush locations or the movement of armed actors, or may simply tell agencies to postpone meetings or events or move them to a different location.

Though this is a commonly cited indicator of both the presence and effectiveness of acceptance, one interviewee pointed out that it is possible that community leaders may exaggerate security threats as a way of discouraging organizations from getting involved or as a way of indicating that the organization is not well received in the community.

Community members or other stakeholders advocate on behalf of an organization, or to promote the organization

One mechanism of identifying the effectiveness of acceptance is when community members or stakeholders themselves do the work of promoting the organization or represent the interests of the NGO to others. While this provides evidence that acceptance is present, it becomes an indicator of effectiveness only if the advocacy has a preventative or mediating effect on a security threat or incident. In one case, as related by informants in Kenya, community leaders intervened on behalf of an organization with a Member of Parliament (MP) who had been quoted in the local media questioning the integrity of the organization and threatening to have it sanctioned. The community leaders called on the MP and explained the respectful nature of the organization's staff and the benefits the community had derived from the NGO's programs. The MP acceded to the community wishes, was invited to the NGO office in the capital city, and subsequently became a vocal supporter of the NGO program.

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. This is distinct from the previous category in that it involves community action vs. advocacy. Some of these incidents are "near-misses," in which an incident was narrowly prevented or avoided. The following examples from the research illustrate this type of indicator:

> One organization paid 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 group of community members stated that they alert staff of security issues, hide them from gangs and

Voices from the field

Interviewees gave the following examples of community members sharing security-related information:

> *"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."*
>
> *"When there are cattle raids, communities actually stop teams going to the field when they know there might be cattle raids."*

Photo by Elizabeth Rowley

threats, or call the police.

One NGO reported that the community had formed policing units to focus on protecting NGO staff. Another indicated that communities/community elders guaranteed the safety of food monitors during periods of unrest of violence.

> One NGO reported that community members insisted the staff member live in a hut at the centre of the village, so the staff member would be protected in case of attack.
>
> "*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.*"

A final category of indicator involves organizational distinction, an instance in which community members or other stakeholders explicitly recognize or distinguish a particular NGO and its work, and a security incident is avoided, mitigated, or resolved as a result of this recognition. This category necessitates that community members or other stakeholders clearly distinguish the organization from other organizations, and this recognition prompts the intervention. This type of indicator may involve elements of the previous categories (e.g., stakeholder advocacy or intervention on behalf of the organization) but the distinguishing feature here is the recognition of the specific NGO and the resulting action on the part of the community or other stakeholders.

> An NGO vehicle was involved in an accident and the police were reluctant to process the necessary paperwork. When a staff member called and indicated which NGO was involved, the police cooperated.
>
> Attackers stopped a group of NGO staff coming from work. They released them after the staff members explained their work in the area.
>
> An NGO vehicle came across a hostile demonstration in which a crowd was throwing stones at vehicles. Someone recognized the NGO vehicle as belonging to a particular NGO and it was allowed to pass without further interference.
>
> An attacker pointed his gun at an NGO vehicle and was ready to shoot. When he identified the NGO to which the vehicle belonged, he opted to instead shoot at the ground.
>
> In the midst of fighting between two warring communities, a youth recognized a particular NGO staff person, saying "this is X – she feeds our children so let her go." The staff person was released unharmed.
>
> In one community where criticism and harsh treatment of NGOs was extensive, local officials singled out a particular NGO as good. As a result, it did not experience harsh treatment.

III. Conclusions

Revisiting the White Paper

Prior to the field research, we prepared an Acceptance White Paper, which formed the basis of the research in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda. While the field research confirmed much of our thinking about the key and cross-cutting components of acceptance as a security management approach, it also raised several issues that point to the need to modify some of our original propositions.

First, the field research demonstrated the importance of the connections between programming and security, as outlined above. These connections (between programming and security) emerged as more relevant and better captured the distinction we wished to highlight, than did our original focus in the White Paper on the distinction between decentralized and centralized security management. While informants often mentioned the programming/security dichotomy, they rarely referred directly to centralized vs. decentralized approaches to security management. While the centralized vs. decentralized approaches may yet yield useful insight upon further exploration, it is clear from our study that both organizational structures, in fact, could do more to institutionalize the linkages between programming and security.

Second, the field research highlighted the centrality of values-driven aid work in relation to acceptance, specifically emphasizing relationships, accountability, and transparency as key ingredients for acceptance. Stakeholder informants across all three countries highlighted these three factors as critical to gaining and maintaining acceptance. In South Sudan, for example, community members indicated that respect and the way in which they were treated affected their perceptions of NGOs, as did perceptions about the large "NGO footprint"–referring to the NGO assets, number of staff, and infrastructure–in relation to the services they received. In Kenya, informants identified the importance of transparency, two-way communication, and high levels of community involvement. In Uganda, staff behavior and showing respect are critical for gaining acceptance.

Third, in the White Paper we identified negotiation as a key component of acceptance. Although negotiation and negotiation skills are important, they are especially relevant in relation to an organization's strategy for entering a new community or for gaining access to vulnerable populations. This is a broader conceptualization of access than is commonly referred to as "humanitarian access," which relates to the ability to reach vulnerable populations to provide emergency, life-saving assistance. As we conceptualize it here, negotiating access refers both to the need to negotiate for access to populations (such as in a short-term or emergency context), as well as to negotiating for entry and exit pertaining to longer-term development projects. In essence, organizations and communities constantly negotiate the terms of their relationship. NGO staff members we interviewed in all three countries identified access as an indicator of whether acceptance is working, mentioning its centrality to acceptance as a security management approach and reflecting this dual meaning. Thus, access is a key indicator and negotiation is a key skill. Re-naming this key component as "negotiating access" rather than "negotiation" reflects the broader meaning and actions related to gaining and maintaining acceptance.

Fourth, the research suggests some differences between emergency and development contexts. In South Sudan and to a lesser extent in northern Uganda, meeting the needs of the population emerged as a prominent factor in gaining acceptance, which is not surprising in an emergency context characterized by long-term violent conflict that has negatively affected basic needs. In both Uganda and South Sudan, informants more often recognized the importance of gaining acceptance from other stakeholders than in Kenya, which is more of a development context where armed actors play less of a role. This likely reflects the context and security situations in South Sudan and Uganda, in which the army and break-away factions (South Sudan) and warriors (Uganda) play important roles. It is likely that acceptance would also differ in a natural disaster situation. Evidence from other contexts, like Pakistan immediately after the 2005 earthquake, suggests that meeting basic needs is sufficient to gain a degree of acceptance in the short-term.[6]

[6] Wilder, 2008.

Fifth, the research demonstrates that organizations must deliberately and actively work to ensure the transfer of acceptance from individual staff members to the organizational level; acceptance does not automatically transfer from one to the other. Nevertheless, acceptance gained at one level can still work to an organization's advantage. In one example from Kenya, community members approached an NGO and affirmed the work of the organization, but complained about the behavior of a particular staff person. They were most aggrieved by the staff member's disrespect of local leaders. Community members indicated that in order to safeguard their acceptance, the NGO should fire the staff person. Along the same lines, an individual staff member can undermine an organization's carefully cultivated acceptance. In South Sudan, one individual recounted a story of how an expatriate staff member who arrived on a temporary assignment ruined a carefully cultivated relationship with a government official in one day. The government official perceived the expatriate's behavior as rude and aggressive and refused to work with the organization as a result.

The research demonstrates that beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in all three contexts distinguish between organizations. In South Sudan, for instance, community members and government officials identified many of the organizations active in their communities, distinguishing them based upon the services they provided. Across all three contexts, research informants provided examples of how organizational distinction helped to prevent, mitigate, or resolve security incidents, adding credence to the idea that NGO efforts to distinguish themselves from other NGOs may reap programmatic and security benefits.

And finally, the research affirmed the need to analyze the differential risks that staff face. As indicated above, staff composition, staff behavior, recruitment and hiring, and preparation and training all emerged as important factors related to acceptance. National staff, in particular, cannot be seen as a homogenous category both in terms of risk and their ability to gain acceptance. While the White Paper anticipated many of these differences, the research identified additional nuances. In South Sudan, for example, four categories of staff emerged: international staff (often from western countries), regional staff (from neighboring African countries–Uganda, Kenya), national staff (from South Sudan, but perhaps working in a different area of the country than where they are from), and local staff (working in the communities in which they work). While explicitly named in South Sudan, these distinctions held across all three countries and suggest the need to disaggregate national staff. Three of the four categories of staff are "relocateable" in security terms–meaning most organizations would relocate or evacuate them in case of unacceptable insecurity, either within the country or to a neighboring country, depending on their status–but NGOs appear to pay less attention to how these categorizations and the associated benefits affect their acceptance. National staff working outside of their communities of origin, for instance, should be seen as "expatriate" staff in terms of the preparation and training they receive, and regional staff may have more or less ability to gain acceptance, depending on local perceptions of their countries of origin. Furthermore, how organizations treat national and local staff affects how staff talk about their employers, which can affect the organization's acceptance among their family members, clans, friends, and acquaintances. For organizations with significant numbers of national staff, this can amount to a significant ripple effect.

Policy Recommendations

In this section, we suggest policy recommendations designed to help organizations achieve the promise of acceptance as a security management approach. In many cases, organizations have already implemented some of these recommendations. The recommendations are organized in terms of the appropriate implementing actor–those at the headquarters or organizational level, those at the field level, those at both the headquarters and field level, and donor agencies.

Headquarters Level

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Make a clear and unambiguous commitment to acceptance as a program ***and*** security management approach.

- Build "acceptance officers" (full or part time) into safety and security policies and request funding for these positions from donors.

- Incorporate acceptance-related responsibilities into the job descriptions of several different individuals, under the oversight of one individual (e.g., field security officer).

- Work with donors to ensure that programs are flexible and based on the needs that communities themselves prioritize.

- Educate donors about the importance of planning and budgeting for an acceptance approach to security management.

- Mandate security departments/managers to conduct further field research to determine how to gain acceptance from armed actors, local businessmen, and other stakeholders.

- Collaboratively develop methods to document under which circumstances acceptance is and is not effective in a given location. This may include analytical tools and/or guidelines to help staff determine whether to adopt an acceptance approach.

Field Level

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Expand standard stakeholder analysis assessments beyond the program-specific actors to include other stakeholders, especially those who might harm staff or obstruct programs and to analyze their perspectives and interrelationships from a programmatic and security viewpoint.

- Involve security and program staff in needs assessments at the start-up of a new program. When emergencies happen, often security people are sent in first to assess the situation. Consider having security and program staff on the same assessment teams, with a mandate to assess the possibilities and limitations of acceptance.

- Increase community involvement in all levels of program assessment, planning, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

- Negotiate a clear entry and exit strategy with communities from the start of projects. Involve broad community input into process, giving voice to traditionally marginalized groups.

- Ensure that project planning includes realistic exit strategies that build the capacity of local organizations and sustain the project outcomes beyond NGO involvement.

- Advance efforts to increase transparency and share budget information and constraints with communities and other stakeholders as a way to build trust. These measures should be evaluated in terms of accessibility to communities and responsiveness to feedback.

- Provide formal and informal mechanisms for communities and others to give feedback about NGO programs and services. These mechanisms should be accompanied with efforts to ensure that communities are aware of them. NGOs should monitor these mechanisms to ensure that stakeholders use them, and change or adapt them if they are not being used. Finally, NGOs should follow up with communities to share how their feedback is being used. (See, for example, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership standards on feedback, available from http://www.hapinternational.org or the discussions as part of the Listening Project (CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=LISTEN&pname=Listening%20Project).

- Seek explicit commitment from the community and local authorities for program integrity and staff security and support.

- Make a concerted effort to have staff participate in the life of the community. This occurs on a day-to-day basis but might imply more involvement at significant community events, such as contributing to funerals or weddings.

- Make an effort to meet with leaders in communities that NGOs travel through on a regular basis, which could help smooth tenuous relationships or improve bad ones. Just as NGOs deliberately take steps to engage communities about their mission and what kinds of assistance they can and cannot offer, as well as to build trust with communities, NGOs need to be trusting of community members and open to listening to their opinions, even if they might be negative.

- 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 meet program needs? For example, do organizations think about the identity of staff (e.g., age, gender, and place of origin) vis-à-vis the locations in which they will work, and ensure appropriate orientation and support in their positions?

- Explore options for including local community members on the committees to advise on hiring decisions, especially when hiring for sub-offices.

- Pursue MOUs at multiple levels (e.g., national, district, local), depending on the context.

- Periodically re-examine policies and guidelines to assess their costs and benefits for acceptance and other priorities. In some cases, internal policies or program activities may hinder acceptance (e.g., no-passenger policies in vehicles, repeated needs assessments without follow-up).

- Look for opportunities to involve all staff (from administration, communications, human resources, etc.) to foster acceptance. Guards and drivers should be able to clearly communicate the principles and mission of the organization to those they encounter. Communications or public relations staff could develop and periodically adapt educational materials about the organization aimed at educating non-beneficiary stakeholders.

- When hiring, organizations should consider their overall profile of employees (e.g., identity, geographic region, gender, age) and not only their identity-based profile (e.g., citizenship or ethnic group).

- Explore options for offering local, national, and even regional staff opportunities for professional development or other benefits that do not inflate the local hiring market. Similarly, NGOs could look to develop secondment arrangements with local institutions that keep local and national staff in local and government agencies and institutions, while still supporting NGO program goals and priorities.

- Undertake periodic assessments of the extent to which community members distinguish their work from others.

- Monitor references to an organization in international and local media and determine how these references may affect organizational acceptance.

Headquarters and Field Level

To achieve the promise of acceptance, organizations should:

- Increase understanding among staff in all organizational departments and at all levels of ***acceptance as a security management approach as it relates to successful program implementation and realizing the organization's mission***. This may include developing trainings on acceptance and materials for distribution throughout the organization. These materials or trainings should ensure that every staff person understands his or her role in promoting acceptance as a security management approach as it relates to his or her primary functions within the organization.

- Revisit policies and procedures and apply an "acceptance for security" lens to on-going programmatic and administrative practices and decisions.

- Incorporate building healthy and mutually respectful relationships, as well as stakeholder and context analysis into job descriptions, either as part of existing positions or in new positions, and to adapt and modify such tools to incorporate acceptance-related analysis.

- Consider how human resource policies related to benefits and salaries for all categories of staff affect acceptance. For instance, organizations should review national staff professional development opportunities (e.g., inequities between international, regional, national, and local staff).

- Include skills and characteristics such as relationship-building, respectfulness, the ability to understand the local context, and behavior, as they are critical for gaining and maintaining acceptance.

- Place more emphasis on acceptance-related skills and responsibilities (including negotiation and relationship-building skills, the ability to adapt to the cultural environment and to show respect) in orientation/induction activities and training and performance evaluations.

- Build accountability for principles and values articulated in organizational codes of conduct into performance evaluations and contract renewals.

- Justify using local suppliers and resources as part of an acceptance-based security management approach.

- Integrate acceptance-related responsibilities into job descriptions and allot staff time to specific, acceptance-related activities such as building relationships, conducting stakeholder analyses, and gathering feedback from communities on program and security issues.

- Convene internal discussions about organizational communication strategies that include those with responsibility for security management.

- Adapt security audit and context analysis procedures in ways that ensure security managers and program staff regularly discuss community relations and programmatic acceptance with each other.

- 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 could include adapting program-based survey guidelines and monitoring and evaluation methods to assess acceptance.

- Begin to collect and document agency-specific examples of acceptance and a lack of acceptance. Look at larger patterns once they have started documenting these instances–who intervenes, under what circumstances, and with what motivation.

- Research the relationship between different levels of acceptance and the effectiveness of an acceptance approach to security management (e.g., using the Acceptance Research Guide or the Acceptance Assessment Toolkit, available on http://acceptanceresearch.org).

Donors

To achieve the promise of acceptance, donors should:

- Advertise willingness to fund acceptance measures, such as staff persons with a joint program and security portfolio.

- Encourage NGOs to engage in efforts to determine how to gain acceptance from armed actors, local businessmen, and other stakeholders by funding individuals or agencies (e.g., NGO safety and security coordinating bodies) to collect examples and document best practices.

- Support NGO efforts to procure locally-based services and supplies, as part of security management.

Next Steps for Research and Organizational Development

Though we believe in the effectiveness of an acceptance approach to security management, we do not advocate acceptance as the sole approach to security management or as a panacea for addressing all possible security threats. Clearly acceptance is not effective in all circumstances or contexts. While community members may be unable to prevent incidents involving some armed actors or former staff members, organizations can directly engage these actors in order to gain and maintain acceptance. At the most basic level, though, acceptance is about a search for common ground. It would be naïve to assume that gaining and granting acceptance is not motivated in part by mutual self-interest. Communities may grant acceptance if for no other reason than to continue to reap program benefits, just as NGOs attempt to gain acceptance in order to access these same populations. Acceptance based on mutual self interest can be extremely effective and requires an ability to identify shared interests and to negotiate access and security based upon these shared interests.

Nevertheless, a potential danger exists with regard to the power differential that exists between aid agencies and the populations they serve, in which those seeking acceptance may manipulate the process in order to gain consent from stakeholders. Two assumptions underlie this concern. First, in the course of the research, stakeholders consistently suggested that relationships developed as part of an acceptance approach between NGOs and communities need to be respectful and genuine. As several interviewees suggested, acceptance is a two-way street, requiring that communities accept NGOs, but also that NGOs accept communities. In this way, acceptance can and should be a mutual endeavor. Second, acceptance is a critical approach for both programming and security management. Thus, if agencies approach acceptance only with regard to its security benefits, such as increasing the flow of security-related information, without concern for its programming implications or the quality of its underlying relationships, the approach becomes manipulative. Misusing an acceptance-based approach in a manner that instrumentalizes communities and other stakeholders undermines the very precepts that define acceptance (such as respect or the humanitarian principles of humanity or impartiality). We believe this will ultimately yield a less effective security management approach overall and likely harm the relationships necessary for effective programming.

Thus, in our discussions of acceptance in this report we assume that an acceptance approach to security management is based on genuine efforts to gain the acceptance of various stakeholders through personal and organizational relationships and other mechanisms discussed throughout the report. The sole purpose of acceptance is not to generate security-related information or to protect agency staff and assets, but to build the genuine relationships that function as the foundation for effective programming and from which to access vulnerable populations. It is precisely this dimension of acceptance that differentiates it from the "hearts-and-minds" programs that many military forces implement, in which they trade goods and services as part of force protection or counter-terrorism strategies. Without a sense of the mutuality of acceptance, it can become yet another vehicle by which those with power can exploit those without—an accusation critics often level at aid agencies.

The research demonstrates that acceptance is clearly context-specific. Yet it is also evident that despite differences in various locations, the key components of acceptance hold across contexts. Applying the acceptance framework in different contexts will undoubtedly identify other mechanisms of acceptance, especially in relation to armed actors since this was not an area of emphasis in this research. Another important context for acceptance, as it relates to the future of relief and development work, is to examine how to gain acceptance and determine its effectiveness in urban as opposed to rural contexts. In all three countries, one challenging aspect of acceptance, which was not fully investigated, is the question of how to apply it in an urban context where crime is a concern, and where agencies often do not have programs or strong relationships with neighbors. As one informant suggested, the most challenging contexts for acceptance to be effective are those characterized by high degrees of crime and banditry. Even so, pursuing an acceptance approach in these contexts is not necessarily wasted effort. It may be possible to achieve a degree of acceptance with some of these actors and to mitigate these risks in conjunction with other security strategies. Many of the examples above imply a strong and cohesive sense of community, in which some individuals, such as elders, are able to rein in other actors or to mobilize opinion and action. In urban settings, a strong sense of community or neighborhood is often missing. This makes it more difficult to identify key actors (if any) with whom an NGO should cultivate relationships as part of an acceptance approach, which makes gaining acceptance more challenging. In addition, criminals may not be part of the surrounding community and are perhaps less likely to be constrained by community leaders, making it both difficult to reach out to them and use acceptance as a primary security management approach. Deliberately and systematically applying an acceptance approach in an urban setting may yield important differences in how to gain acceptance, how to monitor its presence, and its effectiveness.

Much remains to be done, but the insights of closely examining how agencies apply an acceptance approach to security management, how they monitor and assess its presence and degree, and how its effectiveness in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda provide a firm foundation upon which others can build.

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Annex A: Project Documents

Available at http://www.acceptanceresearch.org.

Event coverage:

- International Consultation Notes, Washington, D.C.
- International Consultation Notes, Geneva, Switzerland
- Regional Consultation and Training Workshop Notes, Nairobi, Kenya
- Presentation: *In Acceptance we Trust?*, InterAction Forum 2011 and European InterAgency Forum 2011
- Acceptance Research Brief
- Acceptance Assessment Toolkit Brief

Reports:

- Acceptance White Paper
- Kenya Country Report
- South Sudan Country Report
- Uganda Country Report