HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Security and Risk Management: protecting teams and maintaining access

Course handout · Week 5 : Building acceptance and negotiating access

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to manage the security and risks of a humanitarian organisation: duty of care, context analysis, risk assessment, plans and procedures, acceptance and access negotiation, incidents, crisis management and kidnapping, staff health and wellbeing, digital security and data protection, organisational risks and compliance, risk sharing with partners, governance and business continuity. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

https://humanitairejobs.org/en/academy/mini-mba-securite-risques/semaine-5/

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Week 5 : Building acceptance and negotiating access

Objectives

- Build an acceptance strategy grounded in principles, programme quality and dialogue with all actors.
- Measure acceptance with concrete indicators rather than assuming it.
- Prepare and conduct a humanitarian access negotiation with an armed actor, setting your red lines.

Acceptance cannot be taken for granted

Acceptance is the active or passive consent of the actors who can harm the organisation. It cannot be decreed: it is built and maintained, and it can be lost in a single day.

It rests on several pillars:

- **Principles**: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, understood and perceived as real.
- The **quality and relevance** of programmes: aid that is useful, fair and well targeted.
- **Accountability**: communities know what they can expect and can complain.
- Staff **behaviour**: respect, discretion, no arrogance, no exploitation or abuse.
- **Dialogue** with all actors who have influence, including non-state armed groups.
- **Consistency**: the same criteria everywhere, the same message to everyone.

Acceptance is often **local and personal**: it depends on a team, on a respected manager. It is not automatically transferred from one area to another, or from one person to another.

What destroys acceptance

Losses of acceptance often come from the organisation itself:

- Targeting perceived as unfair or captured by an elite or a group.
- Recruitment perceived as favouring a clan or excluding the local population.
- Broken promises, programmes stopped without explanation.
- Visible association with a party to the conflict (military escorts, armed forces logos, presence at publicised military meetings).
- Personal behaviour: dangerous driving, conspicuous alcohol consumption in a conservative context, relationships seen as inappropriate.
- Careless public communication: a headquarters press release or a social media post read locally as taking sides.

> One tweet from headquarters can undo months of acceptance work in the field: external communication is part of risk management.

Measuring acceptance

Acceptance is too often assumed ("people like us"). It can be **measured** with indicators:

- Do communities and leaders know the organisation, its activities and its principles? (perception surveys, interviews)
- Does the organisation receive spontaneous **warnings** ("don't go that way tomorrow")?
- Are its access requests granted, and how quickly?
- Do the complaints received concern the quality of the aid or the presence of the organisation itself?
- Do incidents target it more or less than other comparable organisations?

Example. Perception survey of 300 people in two districts: district A, 78% know the organisation and 70% consider the aid "fair"; district B, 41% know it and 35% consider the aid "fair". Acceptance is clearly weaker in B, where the team nonetheless felt "well accepted". Actions: community meetings, dissemination of targeting criteria, review of lists with committees, more balanced local recruitment.

Negotiating access: preparation

Humanitarian negotiation aims to obtain access to populations, the security of teams and respect for principles, in a dialogue that is often asymmetrical. Structured methods (for example those of the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation, CCHN) stress preparation:

- **Analysis of the counterpart**: interests, motivations, norms, constraints, network, whom they themselves have to convince.
- **Analysis of your own mandate**: what you can offer, what you cannot.
- **Red lines** set and approved in advance by line management: no payments, no diversion of aid, no imposed beneficiary list, no escort by the armed group if it compromises neutrality.
- **Negotiation space**: the points open to exchange (timetable, modalities, communication, choice of sites).
- **Team**: who negotiates (an accepted person, language, profile), who supports, who decides.
- **Plan B**: what do you do if it fails? (best alternative to a negotiated agreement)

Negotiating access: conduct and follow-up

Principles of conduct:

- Start by building the **relationship** and trust; listen before asking.
- Talk about the **needs of the populations** that the counterpart claims to defend: many armed actors want to be seen as protecting "their" population.

- Explain the principles in concrete terms: impartiality = aid according to need, for everyone; neutrality = not taking sides, including against them.
- Never promise what you cannot deliver; never give in on a red line under pressure: ask for time and refer upwards.
- Keep a **record** of what is agreed, and inform the other actors concerned if necessary, without putting anyone in danger.

Follow-up. An access agreement is tested in practice: do the teams actually get through? Are commitments kept on both sides? Any violation (taxation, diversion, threats) is analysed and met with a proportionate response: reminder, partial suspension, total suspension, coordination with other organisations to prevent a group from playing the NGOs off against one another.

Coordination and common positions

Negotiating alone exposes the organisation to demands it cannot refuse without risk, or that another organisation will accept. **Coordination** strengthens everyone's position:

- **Common operating rules** (ground rules) between organisations in an area: no payments at checkpoints, no armed escorts except in exceptional cases, collective refusal of imposed lists.
- **Access working groups** led by OCHA, which monitor access constraints and carry joint advocacy.
- **NGO security forums** that share information and analysis.

Limits: coordination must not cost each organisation its **independence**, nor associate it with political positions. Some organisations, such as the ICRC, conduct their own confidential negotiations. Coordination is about principles and practices, not blind alignment.

Exercise: a checkpoint that "taxes"

Situation. An armed group controls the road to 3 displacement camps (25,000 people). For the past two weeks, it has been demanding USD 50 per aid truck and asking for 10% of the food to be "handed over to the fighters who protect the camps". Two NGOs have started paying "so as not to abandon people". Your organisation distributes food and runs a health centre. A recent perception survey shows that 74% of camp residents know you and consider your aid fair.

Task. 1) What are your red lines? 2) What levers and what interests of the group can you use? 3) What is your plan if the negotiation fails?

Answer. 1) No payment or share of the aid to a party to the conflict (a violation of principles, of donor rules and often of counter-terrorism laws); no distribution under the group's control; beneficiary list drawn up by the organisation according to need. 2) Levers: strong acceptance in the camps (the group wants to be seen as the protector of the displaced); the importance of the health centre, including for the fighters' families (impartial care for all); a common position with the other organisations through the access working group; the intervention of religious or traditional leaders respected by the group. 3) Coordinate with OCHA and the NGOs so that payments stop collectively; if access remains conditional, temporarily suspend food convoys while explaining why to the communities and to the group; consider alternative modalities (cash transfers if markets allow, local purchases in the camps); keep the health centre running if its access does not depend on the convoys; document and inform donors.

Key takeaways

- Acceptance is built, maintained and measured, and can be lost in a day.
- Targeting, recruitment, behaviour and public communication: the main causes of lost acceptance.
- Negotiating: analyse the counterpart, set red lines, know your negotiation space and your plan B.
- No payment or share of the aid to a party to the conflict: a common red line.
- Common rules between organisations strengthen each one, without sacrificing independence.

Quiz

1. Which sign indicates genuine acceptance?
   A. Staff feel good
   B. The community gives spontaneous warnings about dangers
   C. The donor is satisfied
   D. The offices are well protected

2. A negotiation red line must be:
   A. Set and approved in advance by line management
   B. Improvised during the meeting
   C. Negotiable if the counterpart insists
   D. Secret even from the team

3. An armed group demands 5% of the aid. The response consistent with principles:
   A. Accept in order to keep access
   B. Pay in cash rather than in food
   C. Accept in secret
   D. Refuse, seek a common position and other levers, suspend if necessary

4. Why coordinate common rules between organisations?
   A. To share budgets
   B. To remove each one's independence
   C. To prevent an actor from playing organisations off against one another
   D. To avoid talking to communities

5. In a survey, 40% of residents know the organisation in a district where the team believes it is well accepted. Conclusion:
   A. The survey is wrong
   B. Acceptance is probably overestimated; strengthen information and dialogue
   C. The district must be left
   D. Nothing to do

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. A · 3. D · 4. C · 5. B