



Acceptance as a Security Risk Management Strategy in Haiti

Acceptance is one of the pillars of aid security risk management (SRM). An acceptance strategy ensures access to populations in need while ensuring duty of care for staff and the protection of assets. A good acceptance strategy builds on effective relationships to cultivate and maintain consent from beneficiaries, local communities, local authorities and community leaders. It also includes engaging as far as possible with threat actors to avoid, prevent, or mitigate potential dangers in order to ensure access to vulnerable populations and undertake programme activities.

This document provides a list of practical steps that can be taken to develop acceptance-based security risk mitigation measures in Haiti. It draws on NGO experiences in developing an acceptance-based security risk approach in Haiti and elsewhere.

1. The context: the security situation for aid agencies in Haiti

Aid agencies operating in Haiti face numerous significant and interrelated security challenges that hamper efforts to deliver aid effectively and present considerable risks for staff. The country has existed in a permanent state of political instability since 2004 that has undermined the rule of law and weakened the authorities' ability to maintain control. Powerful and politically connected gangs have taken the opportunity to entrench their power over significant areas of the country. Many of these gangs are directly involved in kidnappings and extortion that affect aid operations. The destruction and devastation caused by a series of devastating natural disasters, including earthquakes and destructive storms, have increased humanitarian needs in a country facing many other challenges that require long-term development aid.

For more information on the security context in Haiti, visit our [website](#).

Acceptance lies on a continuum between endorsement and active targeting of aid agencies and programmes.

- **Endorsement:** Stakeholders actively promote and intervene on behalf of an organisation to protect its staff, assets or reputation.
- **Consent:** Stakeholders provide safe and continued access to vulnerable populations and may also share security-related information.
- **Toleration:** Stakeholders tolerate the presence of NGOs in the community, largely because they provide goods and services that the stakeholders want and need, or from which they can benefit.
- **Rejection:** Stakeholders undermine NGO programmes or prevent access to vulnerable populations.
- **Target:** Stakeholders actively threaten or attack NGO staff, programmes, assets or reputation.

Source: [Fast et al.](#) (2015, p. 219)

2. Entry points for an acceptance strategy in Haiti

- **Programme delivery:** The way programmes are designed, executed, communicated and evaluated directly influences an aid agency's reputation and its acceptance by stakeholders.
- **Engagement with other actors:** Other aid agencies (such as the various UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or partner agencies) and local leaders can support aid access. Engagement with these partners can facilitate access for specific programmes or programme activities.
- **Being tolerated by threat actors:** Many gangs remain threat actors, and an acceptance strategy should explore how to coexist in the presence of growing gang power.

3. Building blocks of a successful acceptance strategy

Clear, transparent and accountable communication

- Explain your organisation's actions in the community to community leaders and other stakeholders.
- Tell the truth.
- Seek feedback from communities and stakeholders and integrate such insights into communication and action.

Role model conduct

- Ensure that all staff live and act according to your organisation's values and principles.
- Ensure that staff members never engage in abuse or behave in an arrogant manner.

Relationship building

- Build and maintain contacts based on transparent and accountable communication.
- Use relationships creatively to overcome access challenges.

Using networks

- Use networks and relationships in adaptive ways to achieve your objectives.
- Listen to local staff for insights and ideas.
- Ask your partner organisations for advice and help.
- Seek the support of other aid agencies.
- Build relationships with local leaders.
- Be flexible and adaptable in your building and use of networks.



Local staff and partner organisations may be well networked in the community. Local staff may have worked for key actors in the past or their family members or friends may have important contacts.

- Harness the benefits obtainable from diverse teams and partnerships by listening to a variety of perspectives.
- Draw programme staff and partners into an acceptance-based SRM strategy.

- Carry out due diligence during the hiring process to understand the background of each potential staff member, who may have contacts with local leaders and/or gang-associated communities.

i *Some aid agencies (notably the UN and ICRC) are able to develop relationships that smaller aid agencies may find difficult to build directly.*

To benefit from opportunities for support from larger aid agencies:

- Develop a trusted and close relationship with the aid agency that may be able to provide such support to ensure that it includes your organisation when it organises tailored support.
- Respect the principles of and boundaries between different aid agencies. Seek clarification on expectations.
- Remember: Working through another aid agency is an intermediary step. It still requires considerable investment in relationship building.

i *Community leaders, including religious leaders, are very important in Haitian society. Working with and through a trusted community leader may open many doors.*

- Such relationships are built over time. Avoid high staff turnover and ensure good hand-over practices that allow established relationships to be maintained.

4. Programming principles that help an acceptance strategy

- Don't make promises that can't be kept.
- Keep the promises you have made.
- Be transparent about the use of resources.
- Programmes that are open to the whole community have a better acceptance than aid distribution based on beneficiary lists or other restricted access criteria.
- Hire local staff and work with local partner organisations.
- Maintain communication between programme staff and security risk managers to ensure that the links and interdependence are fully understood and utilised to understand risk and build acceptance.

Flexible approaches

- **Think about access in two ways:** Access involves an aid agency's access to beneficiaries and beneficiaries' access to services. If security prevents you from reaching beneficiaries, find ways in which beneficiaries' access to your organisation can be facilitated.
- **Step back and hand over if necessary:** Aid agencies' work should be bound by a robust ethical framework. If your organisation is not able to work according to its own principles, step back and consider directly or indirectly handing over responsibility for programme delivery to other actors who may be able to provide services instead.
- **Ensure good communication** between SRM and programming when designing acceptance-based strategies.

Humanitarian principles

The core humanitarian principles provide a normative basis to guide humanitarian interventions in conflict-affected areas and can help ensure acceptance by affected communities and both state and non-state armed groups. The core humanitarian principles, as defined by [UNOCHA](#), are:

- **Humanity:** Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
- **Neutrality:** Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
- **Impartiality:** Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no adverse distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinion.
- **Independence:** Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Provide an organisational policy that translates your organisation's principles into do's and don'ts and summarises these principles in a language and form in which they can be effectively communicated to actors who are unfamiliar with the concepts.

- Be explicit about the specific humanitarian needs your organisation addresses.
- Identify the issues on which your organisation will not take a position as an organisation.
- Provide guidance to local staff on how to distinguish between their private views as citizens of Haiti and your organisation's official position, which should remain neutral and independent from private views.
- Define how your organisation identifies and determines 'needs'. Communicate the process and principles of how this is done to stakeholders in a transparent manner.
- Don't neglect or exclude some groups or actors from your programmes.
- Draw up and communicate to stakeholders a clear organisational policy based on your organisation's mission and values that specifies areas of collaboration, cooperation, or coexistence with threat actors and identifies the red lines that must not be crossed.
- Draw up a French and Creole summary of your purpose and mission in a form and language that can be understood by a threat actor such as a gang leader.

Reputation management

Reputation strongly influences relationships within the aid community, and with the local community, local leaders and threat actors.

- Draw up clear policies about your organisation's values and principles and how they are applied.
- Draw up clear policies regarding expected and unacceptable behaviour.
- Ensure that all staff and partners are aware of these policies and adhere to them.
- Address any potential concerns in a transparent way.

i *Reputations can be lost through private conversations between respected individuals when legitimate grievances are not recognised and addressed.*

- Do not ignore a situation where there is a sense of injustice stemming from accusations of discrimination, abuse, or favouritism among staff or community members.
- Maintain a strong and effective policy to prevent unequal power relations from leading to sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment.
- Do not tolerate bad behaviour.

Skills and training

Effective relationship management is a skill. Staff can be trained to develop this skill.

- Train staff in intercultural communication.
- Train staff to build and maintain sensitive relationships with community leaders, authorities and threat actors.
- Participate in networks and collaborations that build trust between aid agencies.
- Security managers should run training programmes on how to ascertain community views and how to share them with the security staff team.

5. Specific challenges in Haiti and potential approaches to gain acceptance

Engaging threat actors

Engaging directly with gang leaders is very difficult. Many gang leaders will seek to dictate terms. Whether an acceptance policy is possible will depend on the leader and circumstances such as whether they may see benefits for themselves or their communities from proposed aid operations.

Possible approaches include:

- Working through intermediaries, such as local community or religious leaders who may facilitate a form of relationship.
- Providing services that are open to the whole community and that therefore also benefit the families of gang leaders. Health and nutrition programmes can often be run as open programmes.

Hiring security guards

Loyal and well-trained security guards are essential for an acceptance-based SRM approach.

- Directly hiring security guards tends to result in better loyalty to the aid organisation and adherence to its values than buying in services from an external security company.
- Due diligence in the hiring process is both essential and challenging. Potential candidates may have links to local gangs. Understanding how the individuals are perceived within the community and among threat actors should be a key selection criterion. Consider references from well-trusted security guards within the aid sector.
- Treat security guards as staff members and include them in training on the organisation's values, relationship-building skills and de-escalation approaches.

Freedom of movement/transport

The presence of gang checkpoints hampers aid agencies' freedom of movement.

- A possible mitigation approach is to seek the good offices of an intermediary such as an aid organisation, local community leader or religious leader who is able to reach and possibly influence the group maintaining the checkpoints.
- Where such relationships cannot be developed, it is better to avoid the area.

Obtaining essential supplies

- Fuel shortages have been a particular concern in Haiti, hampering transport and the running of generators.
- Contact other aid agencies, including the UN, for support to obtain supplies.
- Use your local community networks to identify places where resources may still be acquired.

6. Concluding take-aways

Be realistic

- An acceptance strategy may fail not just because of miscommunication, wrongdoings or other failures. Some threat actors are simply not prepared to tolerate aid agencies.
- There are times when security cannot be guaranteed through even the best of practices. It is an illusion to assume that an aid agency can control the environment in a highly insecure context.
- Despite all intentions to adhere to the principles of impartiality and neutrality, principled humanitarianism does disrupt conflict dynamics. Be aware that aid objectives can collide with political, tactical or strategic objectives.
- Some gangs will resort to extortion, trafficking and predatory strategies in order to sustain their operations, including the domination of local populations and expulsion of outsiders.

Keep trying

Consider the approaches proposed in this document, and strengthen in particular:

- A listening culture towards local staff and partners;
- Close relationships with other actors;
- Good and well-drafted policies;
- Clear communication;
- Good training;
- Ethical behaviour at all times;
- Context assessments; and
- The ability to consider stepping back when necessary.

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