MANAGING RISK AND SECURITY

HOW HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS ADAPT IN CONFLICT ZONES

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Managing risk and security

How humanitarian organisations adapt in conflict zones

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Title: Managing risk and security: how humanitarian organisations adapt in conflict zones

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Abstract

Humanitarian aid workers (HAWs) face increasing risks in conflict zones, with 2024 marking the deadliest year on record. International humanitarian organisations (IHOs) must address this trend to continue delivering aid and protecting HAWs. This study investigates how IHOs adapt to the evolving risks in these contexts and explores challenges that adaptation measures may entail. A qualitative research design with a constructivist grounded theory approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants from three IHOs, supported by secondary sources. Two themes were identified: (1) understanding contextual factors and (2) politicisation of humanitarian aid (HA). Risks were described as context-dependent, with threats increasingly coming from governments and a reduced respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL). To remain resilient, IHOs rely on soft and context-sensitive approaches. Adaptation measures include internal processes such as risk assessments grounded in local understanding, context-appropriate staff employment, and ensuring transparency and informed consent. These support external approaches, including acceptance strategies through negotiation, community engagement, provision of relevant aid, and advocacy. Challenges involve the meaningful incorporation of local perspectives, trade-offs in staff selection, and reduced adaptive flexibility due to the professionalisation of security risk management (SRM). Violations of IHL and a lack of accountability hinder these efforts. This study shows that adaptation is influenced by both internal strategies and external actors, embedded in contextual dependencies, social dynamics and power structures. Tensions between SRM practices and actual protection, as well as the shifting nature of threats should be explored further.

Acknowledgements

First, we want to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who took the time to be interviewed for this study. We acknowledge that time is valuable, especially for those working in conflict zones, where the workload is immense and the emotional toll of reflecting on experiences can be heavy. We deeply appreciate the time and insights they shared with us.

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A big thank you to Marcus, our supervisor, for his guidance throughout the research process. He always had a kind and encouraging word for us, and his calm, constructive support helped us through the research and writing stages. He made us believe in ourselves all the way to the finish line.

Lastly, we want to thank each other, as thesis partners and as friends. This study would not have been possible without our complementary qualities, mutual trust, and the ability to push each other forward, even during times when life threw us a few lemons. And still, we could not be happier. As someone once wrote in a TikTok video we watched after a long study session: "What a blessing to be tired in the pursuit of your own choosing".

To the strong and resilient people of Sudan, Palestine, Ukraine, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and all other places suffering from war and violence: we see you, and we will continue to fight for your peace and freedom for as long as we carry love in our hearts.

Abbreviations

DRC   Danish Refugee Council

HA   Humanitarian aid

HAW   Humanitarian aid worker

IHL   International Humanitarian Law

IHO   International humanitarian organisation

MSF   Médecins Sans Frontières

SRM   Security risk management

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Summary

Delivering aid in conflict zones has become increasingly dangerous for humanitarian aid workers (HAW), with 2024 marking the deadliest year for aid workers in history. International humanitarian organisations (IHOs) need to address this trend to continue delivering aid and fulfilling their objectives. Yet, this topic remains understudied in the literature, and research gaps exist in how IHOs deal with security risk management (SRM) in conflict zones. Therefore, this study investigates how IHOs adapt to evolving risks in these contexts and explores the potential challenges these adaptation measures may entail.

A qualitative research design with a constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted, using an inductive logic to allow theory to emerge from participants' perspectives and experiences. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants from three different IHOs. Secondary data included publicly available reports and academic literature. To identify key themes and patterns, the data analysis was conducted in two main steps: initial coding and focused coding. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured as core ethical principles, and due to the sensitivity of the topic, harm was minimised through informed consent. Methodological limitations include the researchers' influence on the data analysis and interpretation, limited generalisability and limited local perspectives.

Two prevalent themes were identified: (1) Understanding contextual factors and (2) politicisation of HA:

(1) Risks were described as context-dependent, with a perception of increased risks coming from governments. To adapt to these risks, the measures mentioned were risk assessments with a focus on contextual understanding and inclusion of local knowledge, employing staff based on the conflict context regarding individual risk factors and transparent staff consent. Challenges concerned the inclusion of local knowledge, a professionalisation and bureaucratisation of SRM hindering adaptive flexibility of IHOs, and structural imbalances impacting fairness about staff consent and hiring decisions.

(2) Humanitarian aid being not perceived as neutral, along with a decline of respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL), were perceived present risks to IHOs. Measures to address these risks include acceptance as a main strategy, with negotiation, advocacy, community engagement and provision of valuable work, and the deconfliction of operational spaces. Challenges to these measures were bunkerisation as an obstacle to acceptance, the impunity when violations against IHL happen and advocacy that is not perceived as sufficient to encounter these violations.

Overall, the findings reveal a pattern around adaptation measures with an emphasis on contextual sensitivities, communication, transparency and acceptance, pointing towards what has been defined as a soft approach to adaptation. For IHOs to remain resilient, they apply this approach regarding internal and external measures. Internal management practices focus on the measures identified in the results (1). These context-sensitive measures reflect soft approaches such as communication, transparency, and local engagement to stay resilient and help IHOs to adapt to complex and diverse operating environments internally and create conditions for

external measures to be more efficient. External measures focus on the acceptance approach, as highlighted in the results (2), to counter the risk of politicisation and gain protection from the communities. These external processes aimed at gaining acceptance align with the current discourse, which identifies acceptance as the most preferred approach to security. However, as security measures are intertwined with power structures and contextual dependencies, IHOs cannot eliminate all risks. Challenges remain regarding meaningful incorporation of local perspectives and fair hiring conditions due to individual risk factors, which themselves can undermine acceptance and hinder efficient relationship-building. In addition, even if a professionalisation of SRM can be seen as a positive change, it may decrease adaptive flexibility, leading to aid delivery delays. Further, the adaptation measures IHOs adopt become ineffective when legal protections are neglected and accountability mechanisms fail, as broader power dynamics and political will heavily affect the security of HAWs.

The study shows that adaptation to evolving risks in conflict zones is a complex process shaped by social dynamics, power structures, and contextual dependencies. It is influenced by both internal structures and external actors, and understanding these factors is important for SRM to be effective and protect HAWs in increasingly politicised contexts. For IHOs to remain resilient, SRM must be holistic, flexible, and tailored to diverse conflict settings. This underlines the importance of soft and context-driven approaches, pointing to the need for further research to better understand the shifting nature of conflicts and security threats, both within the academic discourse and for IHOs themselves to respond and adapt effectively.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The world is currently experiencing more active violent conflicts than ever before, with the number of conflict events doubling over the last five years to now exceed 200,000 (ACLED, 2024). Today, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is estimated to be over 300 million (OCHA, 2024). As the need for humanitarian aid (HA) increases, so do the risks faced by those who deliver it. As shown in Figure 1, the number of security incidents targeting humanitarian aid workers (HAW) is rising, presenting significant operational challenges for international humanitarian organisations (IHO) in conflict zones (ALNAP, 2022; GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024; IFRC, 2015). A major increase in incidents was seen in 2013 (see Figure 1), but 2024 marked the deadliest year on record for HAWs, with around 370 individuals killed (Humanitarian Outcomes, n.d.-a). These incidents range from aerial bombardments, shootings, and crossfire to kidnappings, detainments, and killings, with perpetrators including non-state armed groups, state actors, and criminal groups (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024).

The increasing risks to HAWs affect not only HAWs and IHOs but also the populations they serve. Beyond the physical and mental harm suffered by HAWs, aid programs are sometimes suspended or entirely withdrawn from high-risk areas (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). This results in vulnerable populations potentially not receiving the urgent assistance they need, while IHOs struggle to fulfil their objectives as aid providers. In response, IHOs are increasingly forced to adopt new operational practices to better manage and mitigate these threats (ALNAP, 2022). However, how these adaptations unfold, and their broader implications, remains underexplored.
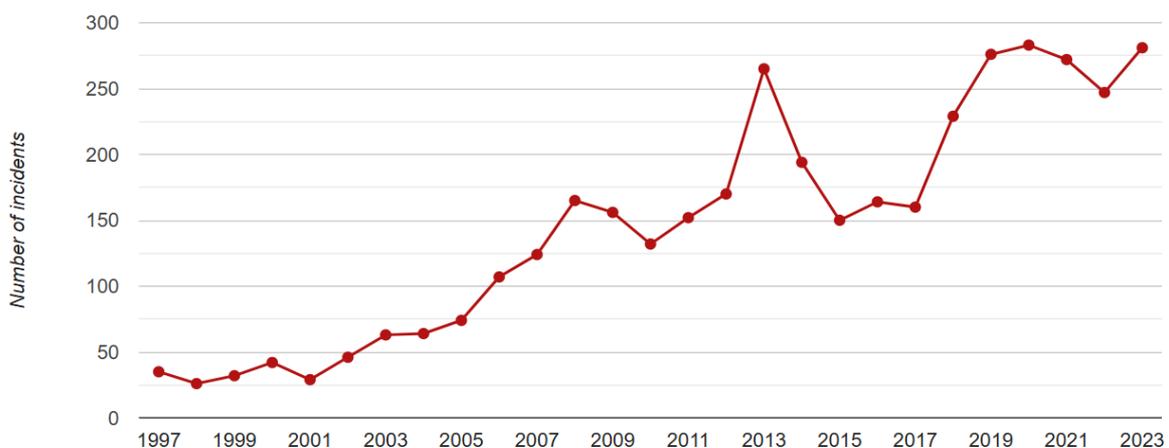
Figure 1: Number of incidents against HAWs worldwide by year, 1997-2023 (Humanitarian Outcomes, n.d.-b).

1.2 Research Gap

Despite growing attention to security incidents targeting HAWs, GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) point out that security risk management (SRM) remains largely understudied, with only a few comprehensive studies published on the topic in the past twenty years. In addition, Guisolan et al. (2022) highlight that the focus lies mainly on affected populations, while the risks and vulnerabilities that HAWs face are often overlooked, and systematic data on HAWs experiences is rare. Hoelscher et al. (2017, p. 542) add that too little is known about conflict dynamics, their interaction with humanitarian operations, and the complexities and politicisation of warfare, which he considers crucial for effectively addressing the risks HAWs encounter in conflict zones. Moreover, most scholarly research on humanitarian insecurity focuses on external threats, "neglecting the internal mechanisms that humanitarian organisations use to mitigate security situations" (Guidero, 2022, p. 162). Hoelscher et al. (2017) also recommend taking a closer look at how IHOs implement security measures and how humanitarian security can be affected differently depending on who is being deployed, as IHOs may have different ways of managing risks. These gaps reflect the need to better understand how humanitarian SRM is approached in conflict zones to be able to better protect HAWs and deliver aid to populations in need.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

Humanitarian SRM remains underexplored, with a lack of empirical insight on how humanitarian IHOs themselves respond to the security dynamics in conflict zones. Based on these concerns, the purpose of this study is to explore how IHOs adapt to evolving security risks in conflict zones and how efforts to adapt shape internal organisational practices related to protecting HAWs in violent and politicised conflict environments in order to remain resilient and continue delivering aid. The study further examines how adaptation is operationalised within IHOs' SRM through a focus on more context-driven, softer strategies, and how HAWs experience and navigate the challenges involved in applying these strategies on the ground. By focusing on how IHOs interpret and navigate risk in highly contextual and dynamic environments, the study brings understanding to how adaptation strategies are chosen and shaped in response to the complexities of the evolving risk landscape. Accordingly, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- *How do international humanitarian organisations adapt to evolving security risks and contextual diversity in conflict zones?*
  - *What challenges do they encounter in the process of adapting to evolving security risks in conflict zones?*

The study covers the period from 2014 to 2024 and is based on interviews with humanitarian professionals, and uses a grounded and inductive approach to allow key themes to emerge from their reflections and experiences.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

This section elaborates on the central concepts to clarify how they are understood and used in the context of this study.

2.1 Risk

Davis (2020, p. 102) defines risk for organisations as "how a threat could affect the organisation, its staff, assets, reputation or programmes", which aligns well with the study from a broad perspective. Another definition of risk is from Tehler (2020, p. 26): "Risk refers to the uncertainty about and the severity of the events and consequences (or outcomes) of an activity with respect to something that humans value." This definition is broad but fits in this study due to its focus on what humans value, which in this case is primarily the physical security of HAWs and their ability to continue carrying out their work effectively.

For this study, risk is further viewed as dynamic, in the sense that it shifts and evolves constantly due to, for example, differences in threats, perceptions, and vulnerabilities. How human systems adapt to their surrounding environments by altering them in social and physical ways can both create and reduce risks (Slovic, 1987). Since the system this study focuses on is intertwined with social interactions and dynamic processes, and is based on how humans adapt to their environment, risk is highly complex.

2.2 Security risk management

Security refers mainly to intentional acts of violence such as physical harm, aggression, or crime directed at an organisation's personnel, assets, or property, while safety deals with accidental or unintended incidents, events, or hazards (Bickley, 2017).

Egeland et al. (2011, p. xv) refer to SRM as "a sub-set of risk management, involving a structure to better understand the nature and level of risks to the IHO or programme. This risk should be weighed against the benefits of the programme to the affected population, and the means to effectively manage and mitigate these risks should be considered".

2.3 Resilience and a soft approach to adaptation

This study bases its idea of adaptation on the resilience theory from Becker (2014). Becker (2014) explains that for communities to develop sustainably in the complex and ever-changing world, they have to be resilient. While Becker focuses on societies, this study applies the concept to IHOs operating as a complex system. Boin and Eeten (2013) describe resilience as an important component for withstanding challenges and external threats and maintaining organisational functioning, arguing that investing in resilience is more effective than trying to defend against or control external risks. Similar to communities, IHOs must constantly adapt in order to maintain their core functions. Resilience means different things depending on the context and who is centred. For this study, resilience is understood as Pendall et al. (2010, p.

76) describe it: "resilience in a systems framework refers to the ability to change or adapt in response to stresses and strains. As such, resilience is a dynamic attribute associated with a process of continual adjustment". This definition puts emphasis on the unpredictability and layers within complex systems, aligning with our view of resilience and adaptation as ongoing processes that do not return to a fixed or "normal" state. IHOs need to be resilient in order to protect what is of value to them, in this case enabling HAWs to provide aid to populations in insecure environments.

Adaptation is one of the four functions which Becker (2014) includes in his resilience theory; the other three are anticipating, recognising, and learning, which all feed into being able to adapt. Further, adaptation is divided into five functions, preventing, mitigating, preparing, responding, and recovering (Becker, 2014). Depending on the environment and the context an organisation is operating within, these adaptation strategies may look different. However, this study focuses on something which we call "soft approach to adaptation" and it is drawn from inspiration in other literature on "soft approaches". This can be described as the ability of a system to adapt to disruptive events without fundamental changes in structure and functions related to specific stresses, but to absorb the stress through flexibility and adaptability (Bernardini, 2024) and the utilisation of so-called "soft skills". We draw inspiration from what Hagelsteen et al. (2021) describe as soft skills within capacity development, such as more invisible skills which may be harder to concretise and more related to social aspects. Examples of these are leadership, conflict resolution, reflection and learning, negotiation,)tercultural) communication, and relationship understanding, among other things, while hard skills are more related to technical functions (Ibid.). This study utilises these skills and applies them at an organisational level. Still, it is worth noting that hard and soft measures are closely linked and are often both needed for adapting (Bernardini, 2024). For this study, adaptation is understood as a dynamic, ongoing process rooted in resilience thinking. The measures are seen as concrete practices or tools through which adaptation is operationalised.

2.4 Conflict and conflict zone

This study focuses on conflict, which constitutes acts of physical violence. War and violence can cause humanitarian crises, often labelled as a complex humanitarian emergency, which is a crisis resulting in emergencies such as displacement, economic breakdown or public services being affected, etcetera (Coppola, 2020). When mentioning a conflict zone, the study refers to the physical area in which the conflict has higher intensity in terms of violence due to "war or political instability that disrupts essential services such as housing, transportation, communication, sanitation, water, and health care which requires the response of people outside of the community affected" (Prasad & Prasad, 2009).

2.5 Targeting

Targeting under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is described by the ICRC (n.d.-b) as "the use of force by warring parties – whether States' armed forces or organized armed groups – against individuals or objects outside of their control". Targeting can further be deliberate or

unintentional (Sellers, 2024). In this paper, the term 'target' will be used to discuss various ways HAWs are subjected to acts of violence such as armed attacks, kidnappings, or detainments. Targeting of HAWs is a war crime under the United Nations Resolution 1503 (Ibid.).

2.6 International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) aims to limit the impact of armed conflict and seeks to protect individuals not or no longer participating in fighting, which also entails HAWs (Foraus, 2017; ICRC, 2004). ICRC (n.d.-a) explains: "Intentionally directing attacks against personnel involved in a humanitarian assistance mission in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations is a war crime in international armed conflicts, as long as such personnel are entitled to the protection given to civilians under international humanitarian law".

3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach used for this study. First the research design will be explained and the development and refinement of the research questions throughout the research process. Next, the data collection process as well as the sampling method will be described, followed by the data analysis section. Lastly, ethical considerations and possible limitations of this methodology will be explored.

3.1 Research design

In order to investigate the measures that IHOs implement to adapt to the evolving risks in conflict zones, a qualitative research design with a constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted. By gathering and interpreting non-numerical data through, for example, interviews, qualitative research allows exploration of complex phenomena, experiences or opinions (Henline-Hall, 2024). Chun Tie et al. (2019) explain that grounded theory is "a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data", which means that concepts and theories are being developed directly from the data, rather than being shaped by pre-defined categories or assumptions; a particularly effective approach in areas where research is limited (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, the study primarily followed an inductive logic, allowing theory to emerge from participants' perspectives and experiences in a bottom-up way (Becker, 2024). This method allowed for the flexibility of revising or discarding certain themes or theoretical lenses used at the beginning of the study to guide the research process. Furthermore, we also engaged abductively by iteratively moving between emerging insights coming from HAWs and relevant literature to refine our analysis and construct meaningful concepts around these as well as to assess the knowledge gap the study aims to address (Becker, 2024; Bobbink et al., 2024).

We acknowledge that data and theory are not discovered in isolation. As researchers, we are part of the world we study, and our perspectives, experiences, and interactions inevitably influence how we construct grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This reflexive awareness aligns

with a constructivist view, where knowledge is seen as co-produced rather than objectively observed (Ibid.); thus, we remain critical about how our interpretations shape the findings of this study.

3.2 Evolving Focus and refinement of the research question

This study initially intended to investigate how IHOs react to the increased targeting of HAWs, a trend widely reported in recent years (ALNAP, 2022; GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024; Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). The timeframe 2014-2024 was chosen to capture the developments following the peak in incidents in 2013 (see Figure 1) but became less central as the focus of this study evolved. The assumption was that the perception of HAWs increasingly being a target would result in adaptation measures, which we aimed to explore along with their implications for HAWs, IHOs and the communities receiving aid. However, our data unfolded other layers of this issue, leading us in another direction, as participants had a different way of discussing physical security risks met in the field.

First, it became clear that risk is not evenly distributed, thus the framing of "increased targeting" might not be accurate in every area and operational context the respective IHOs were active in. Second, participants discussed security risks to the physical well-being of HAWs more as outcomes shaped by broader contextual factors, such as limited contextual understanding, local dynamics, perceptions of neutrality, actor familiarity, or geopolitical tensions. As a result, many of the measures described were not physical security tools but rather "soft" adaptive measures which related to communication, contextual knowledge, transparency, and so on. This led the study toward a focus on "soft adaptation" to explore how these complex dynamics in social systems are approached by the IHOs. Instead of treating targeting as the risk itself, this study explores the underlying factors leading to it and considers soft adaptation as a key response. In line with the constructivist grounded theory approach, interviews were designed to be open-ended, allowing such themes to emerge naturally from the data.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Primary data collection

Primary data were collected through interviews with 12 key informants (see Table 2) of three different IHOs (see Table 1).

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, a data collection method useful when a complex topic is addressed, as it permits exploring the participants' insights in depth and better understanding a certain phenomenon while allowing for flexibility and open discussion (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). An interview guide with open-ended questions (see Appendix) was used to provide a structure and make sure main themes were addressed, while keeping the natural flow of the interview and giving space to explore ideas that may arise in the interview (Ruslin et al.,

2022). The main areas addressed were the risks IHOs face in conflict zones in relation to staff well-being, security measures taken by IHOs to address these risks and consequences of the measures for HAWs, the organisations' objectives and the communities receiving aid. Notes were taken during the interviews to return to earlier points or to help ask follow-up questions. Two pilot interviews were conducted to test the interview guide in terms of clarity, flow, timing and alignment with research objectives (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

All interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis, which means that participants agreed to share their knowledge and insights with the understanding that their identities remain confidential (Penenberg, 2020). Anonymity protects participants and encourages them to share key insights, which in turn strengthens the reliability of the findings (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). To ensure anonymity but still reflect on the broad scope of roles and experiences, participants' names, organisations, job titles, specific geographic deployments, years of involvement or any other information that could expose their identity were removed or generalised (Social Research Association, 2021), which is particularly important when it comes to smaller organisations where roles may be identifiable. Furthermore, it will not be referred to participants using ID numbers, as quotes together with the generalised information could reveal an individual's identity. An overview of the 12 participants can be seen in Table 2.

Participants received a one-pager overview about the study (see Appendix), and confidentiality was assured in our initial outreach email to help them understand the purpose of the study and decide whether they feel comfortable with the topic discussed.

The interviews were conducted in English via Zoom, lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participant consent. All data collection was completed by March 2025.

Sampling strategy

Three IHOs were selected to represent a sample of IHOs operating in conflict zones (see Table 1). The respective IHOs are different in size and funding models, ranging from two large IHOs, one funded through private donations and the other funded mainly by institutional donors, to a smaller IHO receiving both institutional and private support. All three IHOs are registered as non-profit entities and operate internationally, having employed international as well as local staff. These characteristics allow for a broad perspective on how different IHOs adapt to the evolving risks in conflict zones.

Table 1: Overview of the three IHOs that function as a sample for this study.

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

The IHO was founded in 1956 and operates in 40+ countries to support refugees and displaced populations. With around 500 expatriates and 8 000 national staff, DRC carries out activities in protection, economic recovery, peacebuilding, WASH, and shelter, funded by a range of institutional donors (DRC, 2023).

4 participants

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

The medical IHO was founded in 1971 and provides assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters, or exclusion from healthcare in over 70 countries. The IHO is funded through private donations and employs around 69 000 staff, of which 82% is locally hired and 8% is international staff (MSF, 2024, n.d.-b)

6 participants

CADUS

Founded in 2014, the IHO provides medical and technical emergency aid. It operates in crisis regions such as Syria, Gaza or Ukraine, employs 37 staff in Germany and 65 people in regional offices and is funded mainly by institutional funding (CADUS, 2023).

2 participants

The participants were identified through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. By using a purposive sampling approach, the participants were selected based on their ability to provide the information needed to answer the research questions (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Blaikie, 2009). However, due to the difficulty in identifying and reaching suitable participants, the snowball sampling method was employed, which is also known as network or chain referral sampling, as it entails asking participants from the sample to recommend additional relevant individuals from their network to interview (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Blaikie, 2009). To ensure that our primary data are valuable, representative, sufficient to reveal changes over time and cover diverse perspectives, the participants were selected based on the following criteria (see Table 2):

- o Extensive experience in the humanitarian field (10+ years)
- o Long-term involvement in their respective IHO (5+ years)
- o Different roles among participants (field level, coordination roles, strategic and HQ roles)
- o Presence and experience in cross-regional conflict zones between 2014 and 2024.

The following table provides an overview of the participants, their involvement, and roles over the time they have been active in their respective IHO.

Table 2: Overview of interview participants and their professional backgrounds.

Total involvement humanitarian aid	Involvement in organisation	Levels of Experience	Evolving Roles	Regional Focus
25+ years	10-15 years	Field, Coordination, Strategic	Security Leadership (HQ to Field Level); Risk Governance	Asia, Middle East, Africa
10-15 years	10-15 years	Field, Coordination, Strategic	Camp Management; Access Strategy and Policy	Middle East, West Africa, Asia
25+ years	5-10 years	Field, Coordination	Country Director Roles	Middle East, North & West Africa
10-15 years	5-10 years	Field, Coordination	Country Director Roles	Eastern Europe, South Asia
10-15 years	5-10 years	Field, Coordination	Logistics & Operations	Africa, MENA, Europe
10-15 years	15-20 years	Field, Strategic	Admin; Country HR Coordinator (HQ-based)	Africa, Middle East
10-15 years	10-15 years	Field, Coordination	Nurse; Medical Lead & Coordination	Sub-Saharan Africa
15-20 years	15-20 years	Field, Coordination, Strategic	Field Worker Admin; Emergency Coordination; General Director	Africa, Caribbean, Post-conflict zones
10-15 years	10-15 years	Field, Coordination, Strategic	Medical Doctor and Coordinator; Country Director	Latin America, Africa, Asia
10-15 years	10-15 years	Field, Coordination, Strategic	Emergency Coordination; HQ Security Leadership	Africa, MENA, Global
10-15 years	5-10 years	Field, Coordination	Paramedic; WASH Specialist; Emergency Operations Lead	Europe, MENA
10-15 years	5-10 years	Field, Strategic	Safety & Security Advisor	Mediterranean, Europe, MENA

The total sample consists of 12 interviews. Due to their extensive knowledge, experience, and long-term involvement, we consider the participants as key informants, as they provide rich and in-depth insights. In addition, we asked the participants for internal documents such as security protocols, internal operational plans or similar documents to complement our secondary data collection. However, due to confidentiality, providing these documents was not possible for any participant.

3.3.2 Secondary data collection

For the secondary data collection, we consulted publicly available reports and academic literature, which was identified using keyword searches in the following databases: Google, Google Scholar, LUBSearch, ReliefWeb, Scopus and Researchgate. Keywords used were security risk management, conflict zones, humanitarian aid, targeting, adaptation, resilience, humanitarian principles, and IHL. Snowball sampling was again used to identify additional literature. This approach enabled us to develop emerging themes and concepts from the data, such as soft adaptation, as well as situating our findings within the broader academic discourse. While our focus remained on the primary data gained through interviews, comparing our findings to existing literature helped us to deepen our research and gain a better understanding of organisational responses and adaptation measures, which both confirmed and also challenged the results we identified.

Tools such as QuillBot and ChatGPT were used to assist with grammar and use of language throughout the writing process.

3.4 Data analysis

Once all primary data had been collected through the semi-structured interviews, we began the process of analysing the data to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the data. To organise the material in a structured and systematic way, we used the qualitative analysis software NVivo, which supported us in coding, organising, and categorising the data.

Following Charmaz's (2014) approach to constructivist grounded theory, we carried out the analysis in two main steps: initial coding and focused coding. The initial coding phase involves inductively identifying processes and actions by coding the data line by line or sentence by sentence in an open-ended and detailed manner (Chun Tie et al., 2019). This close engagement with the material helped ensure that no potentially meaningful segments were overlooked, in line with grounded theory's emphasis on letting categories emerge from the data without imposing predefined theoretical expectations (Charmaz, 2014). In the focused coding phase, we began identifying the most significant and frequent codes discovered after the initial coding, which were then grouped into broader categories, allowing for the first steps of conceptual development (Ibid.). At this stage, we also began identifying relationships between categories and started noticing patterns that could help explain participants' experiences. To support this process, we exported our individual NVivo code sets and combined them in a shared Excel sheet. We grouped those codes that appeared to be related and counted the number of quotations per theme to provide an overview and ensure transparency of the themes grounded in the data (see Figure 2). This helped us to track these themes, and by collaboratively discussing the findings, we could begin mapping out connections across codes and interviews.

Throughout the analysis, we maintained a reflexive and open approach, remaining attentive to how our personal perspectives could influence interpretation. In line with abductive logic, we continually moved between the data and relevant literature, refining our themes as new insights emerged. This iterative engagement with the data also led us to revisit and revise our research

questions. Further, memo-writing was conducted throughout the whole data analysis process in order to record thoughts, analytical ideas and connections emerging, which is an important component of constructivist grounded theory to inform the findings and ensure the quality of the research (Charmaz, 2014). This enabled us to engage more closely with the data throughout the data analysis process.

3.5 Ethical considerations and limitations

3.5.1 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this study topic, ethical concerns were central to the data collection process. As Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023) highlight as core ethical principles, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect participants from the first point of contact. As any information that could link them to their employer could potentially impact their position, all interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis.

As this study explores experiences related to violence, threats, insecurity and other potential harm, interviews can cause harm or distress to participants. To minimize this, participants received a one-pager ahead of the interview outlining the topic and the direction of the interview to ensure informed consent and to help participants decide whether they want to do the interview or not (see Appendix). The voluntary nature of the interview and the right to withdraw at any time was emphasized before the start of the interview (Social Research Association, 2021), along with the assurance that participants could skip any question they did not wish to answer. The data, including recordings and transcripts, were stored locally on password-protected devices and remained only accessible to us as researchers.

As human interaction formed the core of our data collection, the way the researcher interacts with participants during interviews required careful consideration, as this can influence the quality and accuracy of the data (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). While we guided the conversation, participants were encouraged to ask for clarifications at any time to ensure a respectful and comfortable atmosphere.

3.5.2 Limitations

In terms of limitations, we acknowledge that our study is subject to certain constraints, the most important of which are elaborated below. The researchers' experiences, expectations or preconceptions can unintentionally influence how the grounded theory is constructed and shape findings, which Bobbink et al. (2024) call 'selective blindness'. To address this, it is essential to remain true to the data collected and analysed and to ensure that the representation of findings is accurate and unbiased (SRA, 2021, p. 28). This study has aimed to reduce that risk by maintaining transparency in the coding phase and analytical process as well as through memo writing. In line with Bobbink et al. (2024), memos help to critically reflect on how the data was interpreted and to trace how conclusions were reached to support the integrity of the analysis. However, complete objectivity is not possible, and the findings are inevitably shaped through our lens as researchers.

Qualitative research is perspective-based; thus the findings are not statistically representative of a wider population (Henline-Hall, 2024). Given the diversity of IHOs existing, the findings of this study cannot comprehensively capture all adaptation measures taken and are impossible to be generalised onto all IHOs working in conflict zones. The limited scope of this study just allowed us to investigate the adaptation strategies of three IHOs. Thus, as the primary data collection lies on interviews, the findings represent mainly the perception of these individuals working in their respective IHO but cannot speak for either their IHO or the humanitarian landscape in general. In addition, it is important to highlight that the primary findings of this report reflect the perspectives and insights shared by the participants, as interpreted by the researchers, since we did not share the findings and interpretation with the participants for clarification, as this would be too time-consuming. Thus, any factual inaccuracies are the responsibility of the researchers alone.

Another limitation relates to the process of identifying and recruiting participants. Due to selection criteria (see section 3.3.1), finding suitable participants active in one of the three IHOs chosen for this study was challenging. As contact information is often not publicly available through websites or sources, reaching local employed HAWs was not possible. Even though we applied the snowball sampling method, language barriers limited our ability to speak to certain people as the interviews were conducted in English. As a result, the local perspective could not be adequately explored, and the primary data collection is based on the knowledge and perceptions of a selected group of 12 internationally employed participants. However, the sample size itself is not considered a limitation, as the participants are considered key informants, and the international perspective this study employs is clearly communicated and reflected in the discussion.

As we aimed to compare the three IHOs' approaches to security management with each other, we asked participants for permission to link their answers to their respective IHO, while still maintaining their individual anonymity. However, participants did not agree and highlighted that they will not speak on behalf of their organisation but as an individual reflecting on their personal experiences. This hindered us, as initially planned, from comparing the IHOs with each other or indicate which approaches are employed by which IHOs, limiting our findings to a more general overview of the humanitarian security measures.

Access to certain data, such as security protocols or internal operational plans, was restricted due to confidentiality concerns, which affected the secondary data collection. Mainly publicly available reports and literature could be used for the study, and internal insights into the organisations' SRM could be accessed only through interviews, limiting the depth of the analysis.

This study does not focus on specific conflict zones, which may be considered a limitation because significant conflict- or region-specific characteristics and dynamics shaping risk and the organisational response to it can be overlooked. However, we did not aim to investigate the conflict settings themselves but rather to explore broader patterns of how IHOs adapt to a variety of risks across different contexts so we could gain a wide perspective on the humanitarian SRM landscape. Moreover, narrowing the scope to specific regions would have

made the identification of key informants being employed in a specific organisation, place, and time challenging.

Lastly, as conflicts constantly evolve and change in nature, capturing the most current trends is difficult. Therefore, December 31st, 2024, will serve as a cutoff date for this study, and all incidents or changes in conflicts occurring after this date will not be included in the analysis.

4. Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the analysis and results are presented together. When analysing the data, a clear pattern was noticed around adaptation measures with an emphasis on contextual sensitivities, communication, transparency and acceptance, pointing towards what has been defined as a soft approach for adaptation (see section 2.3) rather than hard measures, which will be the emphasis of the analysis.

The most prevalent themes that emerged through the coding process are organised into two overarching themes: Understanding contextual factors and politicisation of HA and HAWs (see Figure 2).
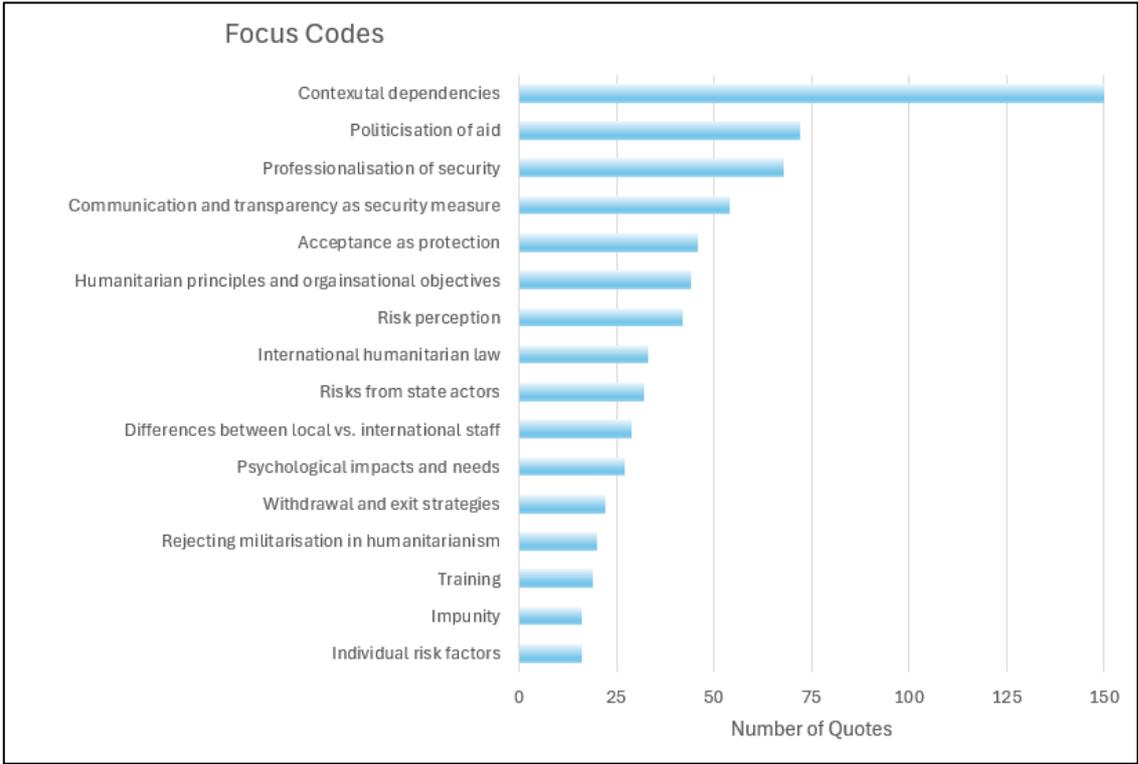

Figure 2: Frequency of Identified Focus Codes Based on Interview Data.

While these themes are distinguished in the text for analytical clarity, they are highly interconnected, with significant overlaps and linkages. The thematic structure is used to support readability and structure, but it is important to recognise the complexity of the issues being

discussed. For example, a measure adopted in response to a perceived risk may itself generate new risks, creating feedback loops that further shape organisational behaviour.

Each theme follows a consistent structure: It begins with the types of risks and contextual triggers identified by the participants, followed by the measures or adaptations employed in response, and concludes with a reflection on the challenges of these adaptations. This structure is designed to respond directly to the research questions, which focus on how IHOs adapt to evolving risks and contextual diversities, and what challenges these adaptations entail.

4.1 Understanding contextual factors

The most recurring pattern in the data was the strong influence of contextual factors on the experienced risks and the adaptation measures the IHOs put in place (see Figure 2). All participants brought up that the context IHOs operate in shapes both external risks, such as government interference, and internal risks, for example staffing decisions, internal communication, and the growing professionalisation of security. Further, it was recognised that context must be understood across various levels and as a continuous process.

> *"Every day, I need to analyse and understand the context at the international, regional, national, and community levels. I need to assess the risks our teams may face and determine how we should position ourselves".*

4.1.1 Evolving risks

Contextual triggers shaping risk

Most participants emphasised that threats and risks to HAWs are dependent on the context they work within. Therefore, understanding the context at various levels was stated to be important to assess the risks the teams may face and to determine how they should position themselves within the respective context. Thus, a lack of awareness about local dynamics was brought up as an essential contextual risk. This includes understanding of the actors involved in the conflict context and their relationships with one another, as two participants elaborate:

> *"And then, of course, there's the importance of proper actor mapping. If you don't fully understand the context or the various state and non-state actors, you need to approach them differently."*

> *"In contexts with diverse ethnic compositions, it is important to consider tensions between groups."*

The second statement highlights the importance of understanding the dynamics between local groups including different ethnicities, which can pose a risk to certain individuals, dependent on the context, as one participant stated:

"We've had contexts where, in South Sudan, for example, drivers were of a certain ethnicity and didn't feel comfortable going into a particular area."

This example emphasises that contextual factors do not affect all HAWs equally. Risk is shaped by individuals' identities (such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, or perceived affiliations) and intersect with local power structures and social tensions. To conclude, not being sensitive to local contextual factors when implementing a humanitarian program can pose risks for HAWs.

Increased risk from governments

A major change in the security risk landscape that was mentioned by 10 participants was the threat increasingly coming from governments which is currently something IHOs and HAWs have to consider:

"From 2019 onward, however, the biggest threats I've perceived in the contexts I've worked in have come from governments."

Participants mentioned diverse threats state actors impose on HAWs and their respective IHOs to hinder aid delivery, as one participant elaborates:

"State actors made it really difficult for us in the field, suspending our operations, freezing our bank accounts, accusing us of being an evil organisation, calling us spies, and claiming we were there as missionaries trying to convert Muslims to Christianity."

This also ties into the risk of being perceived as affiliated with certain groups or actors, as elaborated in section 4.2.1. In addition, bureaucratic violence was also brought up as a risk, stated by two participants:

"Previously, we might have said the main risk to aid workers was physical safety, but now it is increasingly detainment [...] another major risk staff face, linked to detainment, is legal risks or the use of bureaucratic violence, where staff are detained, arrested, or intimidated through legal systems."

This fundamental shift in risks HAWs face in conflict zones, as highlighted by the participant, is connected to politicisation of aid, which will be further explored in section 4.2.1.

Lastly, Gaza was mentioned by several participants as a context where they felt highly vulnerable and uncertain about their physical wellbeing:

"Gaza is the only location where we have safety level six. That means it is the most dangerous place to operate. We need to make sure that people are more prepared. We have to implement more measures to do that."

4.1.2 Measures

Risk assessment with contextual and local understanding

As risks are context-dependent, participants from all IHOs emphasised the importance of conducting site-specific risk assessments as a key part of adapting to local conditions. These risk assessments were not only seen as tools for identifying context-specific risks, but also for remaining responsive to changing environments. These are not static documents, but they are processes used to guide decision-making and adjust to evolving threats. Several participants highlighted the need to constantly monitor changes in contexts as a measure to adapt:

> *"[…] because the context is only valid for when you conducted the assessment. Tomorrow, the context will have evolved. So, we need to have indicators and triggers for a changing environment."*

Something frequently mentioned as an important addition to producing well-informed and relevant contextual risk assessments was local knowledge that helps gaining in-depth understanding of the context. Representatives from two IHOs highlighted how such knowledge often comes from national colleagues and the value it has for the organisation. One participant noted:

> *"It requires a really nuanced understanding and deep knowledge of local politics, something that, as an expat like me, I will never fully understand."*

Building on the use of context-specific risk assessments, many participants highlighted a professionalisation within the security management of IHOs. This results in more individuals being involved in the decision-making process and thus a higher number of people at higher levels of management are involved, making it a shared responsibility instead of key individuals being responsible for risk-related decisions. This was illustrated by one participant:

> *"The idea is to ensure that no single person is making critical risk assessments alone, especially given how high the risks are. Instead, responsibility is distributed, so if something does happen, it's based on collective assessment rather than one individual's judgment."*

Furthermore, as contexts get more complex, IHOs react with more security measures, resulting in an increase in health and security measures for HAWs in the field, such as security policies, standards, protocols, insurance systems, legal protections for future litigation or duty of care frameworks tailored to assessed context-specific risks, as two participants elaborated:

> *"I think it has changed. It has professionalized significantly."*

Handpicking staff based on context

Another important adaptation measure highlighted by participants from all IHOs was the process of selecting staff based on their suitability for specific environments, also to reduce context-specific security risks. The primary purpose of the measure is based on how an individual's identity is perceived in each context. As one participant states:

"We have many nationalities that are not allowed or that we do not match for certain contexts based on risk assessments. Even if someone is willing to go, these assessments are conducted thoroughly to determine suitability and safety. So yes, I think there is a very thorough assessment. And even when it's a nationality that's technically allowed, if there is any unofficial risk, we always err on the side of caution."

These testimonies highlight an organisational awareness of how intersectionality shapes HAWs' risk profiles.

Staff consent

Another adaptation measure identified b participants was the importance of open communication and transparency within the IHO, centred around the principle of staff consent. As the contexts in which HAWs are employed vary greatly, participants of all three IHOs emphasised that ensuring individuals understand the risks involved in their work within the respective conflict zone is essential:

"One of the most important principles is informed consent. It's about explaining [...] this is the job, these are the risks we've identified, these are the mitigation measures. There's never zero risk, there may be things we haven't thought about. Are you willing and able to take on that risk?"

Furthermore, improvement of staff consent was mentioned as a change by some participants in that today HAWs are not only informed about the context, the mission, and related risks through SOPs (standard operating procedure), but also through personal conversations. Thus, informed consent has become more of an ongoing process, as one participant elaborates:

"Since the risks have increased, I feel that informed consent has improved at every stage, not just when you start working, but continuously as the situation evolves. Ensuring that everyone at all levels is aware of the risks and has the opportunity to reassess their willingness to work in that environment is key [...]"

In addition, informed consent also includes transparency about the IHOs limitations and vulnerabilities. Participants from all three IHOs highlighted the importance of being honest about what security measures can actually be implemented, and about the risks and uncertainties that lie beyond the organisation's control, especially now, as risks have become more unpredictable. Creating an environment where open dialogue about limitations, safety rules, and the complexity of risk is possible can help reduce uncertainty and build trust among HAWs, while also supporting greater contextual awareness. In addition, talking openly and explaining

the underlying reasons for security protocols can increase trust and acceptance and adherence to security protocols. Also, the right to withdraw at any stage of the employment without having consequences or judgements and communicating this to staff is of great importance.

4.1.3 Challenges

Integrating local knowledge in risk assessments

As the IHOs part of this study are working in diverse conflict settings, one of the most highlighted measures to adapt to the different contextual factors were the choice of HAWs employed, transparency in the hiring processes and staff consent, as well as conducting risk assessments. The challenges that come with these adaptation measures lie in contextual and structural power imbalances and the implications of the measures themselves.

For example, in relation to local staff and knowledge, the participants pointed out several limitations and difficulties regarding how local perspectives are interpreted and integrated, particularly when educational or cultural differences influence communication or decision-making. These tensions can complicate efforts to fully benefit from local insight and create additional layers of complexity.

> *"We really try to include these colleagues, and we take the time to do it. But it's not easy. Even with all the best intentions, it's still hard to do. There are also cultural factors at play. People who haven't had formal education often think differently, and that can make the process even more complex. [...] At the same time, we shouldn't assume that all national staff inherently understand their context perfectly."*

While local knowledge is essential for adapting to the context, IHOs must also be mindful of how this knowledge is interpreted since all local personnel do not have the same perception and knowledge. Without engaging in a critical manner, relying on local knowledge may also mislead assessments.

Professionalisation

The professionalisation of security management results not only in more people being involved in decision-making processes, but also in a heightened number of risk assessments, protocols, or SOPs that have made the sector more bureaucratic. All this leads to more time needed to conduct risk assessments, following protocols, holding discussions, getting approvals, etc. This can slow down operational responses and limit the adaptive flexibility of IHOs on site, as one participant elaborated:

> *"And with professionalization comes structure, and with structure comes bureaucracy. [...] It removes some of the improvisation that used to be part of humanitarian work, where you identified needs in Area A, figured out how to get there, and then adapted as needed."*

In addition, one participant highlighted that operations have become safer since more access to context-based information can be gathered. However, many participants criticised this professionalisation and bureaucratisation and questioned its effectiveness:

> *"The number of times I hear that in a day: 'We need more analysis, more analysis.' My God, we need to stop doing analysis. This is madness. There's this idea that if we just keep adding risk management layers and more and more mitigation measures, we'll somehow solve the problem."*

> *"If [...] you go on a deployment and get a ton of SOPs thrown at you. [...] And then, if something goes wrong, the organisation can say, "There was an SOP in place; the employee didn't follow the SOP. [...] But does this make the whole operation secure? No, it doesn't."*

One participant explained that traditional security measures, such as risk assessments and protocols, are important, but not sufficient when addressing complex and comprehensive strategies including understanding the local contexts and dynamics or building relationships, advocating for a more holistic approach in security management.

Staff consent and structural inequalities

As informed consent and transparency about risks and the IHOs limitations were mentioned as important adaptation measures to evolving contexts, informed consent can be experienced differently by HAWs, depending on the position they hold within the IHO. Locally hired staff, in particular, do not always have the same possibilities to, for example, withdraw from missions without consequences, or they do not have the ability to individually weigh the risk that employment is imposing on them against alternatives. This can be tailored to structural power imbalances as well as to the socio-economic context they live in, which are factors IHOs cannot fully eliminate. One participant elaborated:

> *"Some would argue that the employment provides them [local staff] and their families with significant benefits, making it worthwhile. [...] but I'm sure that if they had a similar job opportunity with less risk, many would take it. It doesn't feel like the same level of fairness as it does for an international staff member who, for example, has a stable nursing job at home that they can return to at any time if they feel unsafe or if the risks become too high. Locally hired staff often don't have that same option, so the level of informed consent isn't quite the same when working in places where job security and financial stability are not guaranteed. [...] as an organisation, I don't think there's much more we can do."*

The underlying choices of accepting or remaining in a job that is affiliated with high risks are not the same level of freedom of choice, depending on structural vulnerabilities, e.g. the financial situation of individuals. Thus, locally hired HAWs often must remain in the conflict environment even after withdrawal:

"But the local hired staff, they're stuck. They need to stay [...] while international staff just come back and forth. So, of course, the dynamic is different when it's your own place, your own family."

This shows that even if an IHO does its best to provide informed consent, challenges related to structural differences and contextual dependencies remain.

Individual risk factors

In addition, risks to HAWs are not only context dependent but also depend on individual risk factors; thus, careful handpicking of staff comes with limitations. While one participant states how they consider individual risk factors, they also highlight an important implication with this measure, which is the occasional inability to hire the person who, in other circumstances, would be most fitting for the position, but not for that particular context:

"Of course, you should hire the best candidate [...] The best candidate I interviewed was an American. But she was female and an American, and I thought, 'I simply cannot do that. She will never be accepted.' As much as I wanted to have a female in that location, I simply couldn't do it."

This could indicate a trade-off between security and the competence of HAWs. Additionally, participants from one of the IHOs raised concerns about both transparency and communication issues during the hiring process.

"I had to say, 'No, sorry, we found other, smarter, and more qualified candidates.' She didn't move forward in the recruitment process, but my main reason was that she was a woman and an American."

The above quote implies that, even if well-intended, there is a lack of transparency during this hiring process. Another issue with a lack of transparency and clear communication in the hiring process is that communities could misinterpret the choices made by IHOs, as one participant explains:

"I've been in these places where you're interviewing 20 people a day to hire five. And I don't take the time to inform the 15 why they didn't get the job. If it just so happens that the five people hired are semi-related or from the same tribe, they might assume it's because I'm favouring one group. [...]. This kind of engagement with the community is critical."

Although this situation differs from the previous hiring example, as personal profiles were not central to the decision-making as we know of, but lack of transparency and communication led the community to perceive the IHO as biased. Perceived neutrality or perceived bias is a major influence on the HAWs risk landscape and will be discussed further in the following section.

4.2 The politicisation of aid and the principle of neutrality

The second most recurring pattern identified by the participants was the politicisation of aid, which broadly concerns how external perceptions influence the security of IHOs. It is a risk factor which is neither physical nor geographical. This chapter explores the main approach discussed by participants to manage this risk, which is through gaining acceptance. Acceptance includes engaging with communities and stakeholders, providing needs-based aid, negotiation and advocacy. It further explores challenges to succeed with this relationship-grounded approach.

4.2.1 Evolving risks

Humanitarian aid not perceived as neutral

A vast majority of the participants directly bring up the risk of being perceived as politicised and not neutral. This is discussed as an underlying reason for the security risks experienced in the field. This refers to how IHOs and their workers are framed as aligned with political motives or other external agendas. In other words, external perceptions of HAWs as not neutral, impartial, or independent. The group or agenda they are perceived to be affiliated with can vary widely. Some examples brought up were political sides or specific governments, ethnicities and nationalities. It can, for example, be influenced based on where the funding comes from, which is not liked by the community where the IHO operates:

> *"These external factors, the polarization. We are being seen as political players. We're supposed to be non-political, but we are viewed as a pawn in political games. We receive aid from donors who are not particularly liked on the ground, which can pose a risk."*

Politicisation is not only an issue narratively but can lead to HAWs being harmed physically. The following example indicates how political statement made from the U.S. impacted the operation in Nigeria. This example sheds light on the idea that HAWs may face risks not because of what they do, but because of incidents involving those they are associated with. Further, it is another statement about risks coming from governments which is discussed as a contextual risk factor.

> *"The U.S. Secretary of State's statement alleging that some organisations were supporting Boko Haram in Nigeria has also impacted us. In the end, this shapes the government's perception of us, leading to increased risks and security concerns and violence for our teams."*

Moreover, eight participants stated that maintaining the perception of neutrality has become increasingly difficult, and that IHOs are now more frequently perceived as politicised, which has shifted the risk landscape in which they operate. The risk of being associated with armed actors, whether directly or indirectly, is also problematic. Equipment such as helmets, armoured

vehicles, and military escort all risk blurring the line between humanitarians and military, which in turn makes them feel more at risk.

> *"The idea that aid workers are no longer seen as neutral actors is also largely true. And in many cases, aid workers and soldiers are increasingly perceived in similar ways, which is concerning."*

According to several participants, how an IHO and its staff are perceived is not simply something that can be managed through how the IHO presents itself. While IHOs might take steps to remain neutral and independent, perception is not entirely in their control. In some contexts, as roughly half of the participants mentioned, there is an active external force deliberately working to shape how the IHO is viewed. This means it is not just a misunderstanding, but a strategic move. Deliberate framing is used by certain actors to portray IHOs in a way that serve their own agendas. It can be used to manipulate public opinion and justify restricting aid or the targeting of aid personnel.

> *"Both Western governments and the governments where we work have become better at politicising and manipulating aid."*

> *"We had a major clash with the Emiratis [...]. They were blocking our presence in the camps and inciting riots, spreading misinformation and disinformation against us. At the time, we realized they were not going to shoot at our car or blow us up on the road. That was far from their approach. [...] they just twist the narrative to fit whatever they want to do to expel that person without it reflecting badly on themselves."*

While the risks above relate to the external perception of the IHO as not neutral, another concern strongly linked to the principle of neutrality is the lack of protection under IHL. There is a perception that there has been a recent decline in respect for IHL. So, beyond being viewed as political, there is also a feeling that the overall protection of HA is weakening. The next section looks more closely at this evolving risk.

Perceived decreased respect for International Humanitarian Laws

The principle of neutrality discussed above is strongly connected to IHL. Several participants expressed concern that the principles embedded in IHL, such as protection of HAWs and respect for neutral humanitarian spaces, are increasingly being ignored or somehow not working in practice. Thus, it has become ineffective in securing the HAWs in the field.

> *"Humanitarian law is there. It exists. It is clear for all countries. What has changed is that today, it is not being respected."*

To further link IHL violations to perceptions of lost neutrality, four participants discussed how the humanitarian spaces and their workers, who should be protected due to neutrality and impartiality, are now being drawn into conflict and used to support external agendas:

"Today, hospitals and clinics are often seen as instruments that can be used to create fear among the population and to manipulate, to push agendas that serve the interests of the parties. So instead of being viewed as neutral spaces, we are no more like tools that can be used for a purpose."

In addition, 5 participants used the term "They don't care" when describing attacks on spaces where HAWs work. This indicates not only a perceived erosion of respect for IHL but also an unpredictability and sense of helplessness experiences by the participants when navigating the risks they face.

Even if we communicate, even if we establish principles and agreements on how to ensure protection, even if we clearly mark facilities with symbols and signs, even if people initially accept our presence, ultimately, these places start to become a risk for us. [...] Today, this is far more unpredictable. Something is happening. Today, it's not the same as before. Especially in highly political conflicts like Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan. In these places, I think it has become less clear how much the humanitarian space will be respected."

In response to the risk of IHOs losing their neutral stamp and being viewed as politicised, alongside a perceived decline in respect for IHL, participants highlighted several strategies to adapt, mitigate risk, and maintain access.

4.2.2 Measures

Acceptance

As described in the previous section, many risks faced by HAWs are tied to how they are perceived. To adapt to the evolving risks, participants brought up the importance of changing perception to gain and maintain *acceptance*. This would not point to one single adaptation measure but rather a broader guiding approach towards acceptance. This study breaks down the acceptance approach into four practical measures that emerged repeatedly in the data: (1) engaging with communities and involved actors, (2) provide valuable work, (3) negotiation, and (4) advocacy.

Engaging with communities and involved actors

Several participants described how direct engagement with local actors and communities through transparency, communication and relationship- and trust-building helped clarify their neutral role and reduce the risk of being politicised. One participant gave an example of this when talking about the IHO being stuck between two actors' perception of being biased towards one another, which put the IHO in an insecure situation.

"So, at the end, the only way to solve that was to have the acceptance and protection of the communities, which, at some point, was somewhat achieved." The participant

continues by stating what is needed for acceptance: *"It requires a lot of effort in terms of engagement, discussion, talks, etc."*

Several participants emphasized the need to spend time with communities and locals on-site**,** build trust, explain the organisation's role, values, and goals and be mindful of how the engagement is happening. Again, it comes back to being transparent, with open and clear communication with the actors involved in the conflict to reduce hostility and the targeting of HAWs. Especially in contexts where IHOs risk being politicised or affiliated with one side of a conflict due to a lack of understanding, acceptance was the approach to counter those narratives. A few participants mentioned that gaining acceptance is more effective with non-state actors. The idea is that governments are already aware, which makes the context somewhat different between the two types of actors and possibly changes the way IHOs need to adapt to the situation.

> *"Often, when the threat comes from the other side [non-government], it's about acceptance, and with proper informing, negotiating, and discussing, you can usually achieve some level of acceptance. […] it might just be that they aren't aware… they haven't heard of your organisation, they don't know how you work, they don't know that you're neutral, […]. You can explain all that. But the government already knows it. So if they're targeting you, it's on purpose, and you feel like there's less opportunity to change that."*

The contrast between how non-state actors and governments respond to the IHOs suggests that different types of acceptance strategies may be needed. To conclude this section and move to the next, gaining acceptance happens through presence and direct engagement at the local level, which enables organisations to counter harmful narratives and explain their purpose to the community to reduce the risk of misunderstandings and, consequently, the targeting of HAWs.

Providing valuable work

Another important factor in building and sustaining acceptance with the communities in volatile or politicised contexts is through the perceived value of the work being done, which was implied by participants from all three IHOs. Many noted that when aid is needs-based, relevant, and of high quality, communities and actors are more likely to view the IHO positively and offer protection, cooperation, and acceptance, as it brings a clear value to them as well. In this way, the humanitarian action itself becomes a form of security measure.

> *"Therefore, acceptance is crucial, and we try to ensure that our work is well accepted by the population and is responding to their needs. In the end, they should feel that if they lose our presence, everyone loses. So we work on building a perception that our presence and work is valuable, needed, impactful, and improves people's lives. If we lose access or do not have the capacity to develop or implement our work, it is a loss for everyone. This is the main measure."*

In this sense, the IHOs adapt to evolving risks by staying present, communicating their intentions, and staying aware and up to date with the needs of the populations in the contexts they work in.

For some participants, the quality and relevance of their humanitarian programming was not only about meeting needs but also about demonstrating the organisation's principles in action while working. In volatile settings where politicisation is a major risk factor, being consistent between the two – what is being said and what is being done – is seen as important to gain acceptance and trust, and therefore, security.

> *"What protects us the most is our humanitarian action. We have to walk the talk. If I say I'm independent and impartial, we have to be it. The quality of our medical services will protect us much more than any gun will."*

Beyond building trust and acceptance with the communities, two participants also described how delivering relevant and high-quality aid can help with security awareness. When the organisation is trusted by some actors, it can transform into an informal security mechanism. For example, they may receive early warnings and updates about local dynamics that could affect their security.

> *"But I also think the main solution to that is doing programming that is relevant, meets critical needs, and is carried out in a transparent and efficient manner. If you do that, you will gain acceptance, I think. And if you don't gain acceptance from one actor, the people who do accept you will let you know."*

This highlights how providing valuable work that responds to the needs of recipients can build acceptance and improve the security monitoring system, since actors can provide valuable information about how other stakeholders perceive the IHO. This shows the multiple layers of acceptance as protection and indicates that relevant programming becomes both a path to acceptance and a tool for better navigating the complex conflict environment.

Negotiation

In addition to engagement and the delivery of valuable aid as a part of adapting to insecurity, negotiation was mentioned repeatedly as a key strategy. Together with the other categories highlighted above, negotiation has been framed as an integral part of how IHOs build acceptance to stay resilient in complex and violent settings. Negotiations were also discussed as part of trust-building and clarifying the organisation's identity, values, and roles, in order to gain and maintain humanitarian space to operate in safely. The process often involves ongoing dialogue with stakeholders such as armed groups, governments, and local power holders.

> *"[…]the other one is bombings. To avoid all that, what we try to do is talk with the parties in conflict, being very transparent with them, telling them who we are, what we do, our values, and that we don't take sides. […] It's a negotiation. A process that requires work so the parties understand who we are and begin to trust us."*

Negotiation includes dialogue with actors beyond the physical site, including stakeholders not physically present, such as donors. One of the participants explained how they had to negotiate with a U.S. based donor funding the IHO. They negotiated to limit the visibility of the funding in the field to avoid harmful associations and reduce the risk of being targeted.

"One mitigation measure could be removing logos, operating more covertly […]. Most donors want visibility for their donations. But I can certainly justify not displaying a logo by arguing that if you want to help these people, you have to do it low-key. If I build up that argument properly, it can be accepted."

Negotiating was also described as part of a more complex operational decision-making process when thresholds are crossed or incidents occur. One example of when negotiation was used for managing a security incident was when two HAWs were kidnapped. Negotiations occurred with the perpetrators.

"We had two staff members kidnapped and held for ransom for three months in Somalia. The amount of work that went into that and us learning on our feet how to handle a situation like that, everything from direct negotiation to internal communication, external communication, working with different governments […]"

With these examples, negotiation can be understood as a strategy both to access areas of operation and to shape the conditions under which they operate. It is one of the strategies used to gain acceptance from stakeholders and achieve the broader goal of staying secure while meeting humanitarian needs.

Advocacy

Another measure mentioned by participants, especially from one of the IHOs, was advocacy. Advocacy was described as a strategic communication tool, which takes place on a broader strategic and political level to protect and defend people's rights, such as people's right to healthcare or informing about violations to the IHL. It is used to advocate for their recipients and for the rights and security of HAWs on the ground. It is utilised to raise awareness, build trust, demonstrate values, and build political and institutional support, which can help secure their operations and protect HAWs.

One participant highlighted the need to assess how the advocating should be preceded strategically for it to be most effective. They noted that both timing and communication strategy play important roles.

"Advocacy is a tool, and it can be a powerful one. […] timing is important, and to whom the message is addressed. Because it's not the same to highlight an issue at just any time. Timing can really matter. And sometimes we need to look for and identify critical moments, when a voice, a statement, a communication, a conference, a video, a conversation, or an exhibition can have a greater impact."

Two participants emphasized a shift in advocacy levels, noting a shift from more local or regional level to a higher level and international settings, due to increasingly complex and unpredictable environments.

"In many situations now, we simply don't know. We advise as much as we can, but the risks have become more unpredictable. So, we must engage in extensive lobbying and advocacy at higher levels, even directly in front of the UN, even in front of governments that could potentially, or have already, committed these violations. This has fundamentally changed the way we think and operate."

Deconflicting operational space

Deconfliction was mentioned directly or indirectly by five of the participants. It was described as a routine strategy to stay protected by ensuring that actors are aware of their position and actively avoid targeting them. This includes clearly marking staff, vehicles and operational spaces, such as hospitals or offices. One participant explained how this is a daily practice.

"Our part in IHL is to do the confliction, which means informing all warring parties about where we are. We do that; it's our duty. If we don't do that, we cannot accuse them afterwards. In all conflict settings, every day, we send the GPS coordinates of the house, the office, the hospital, and we mark them with our logo on the roof. We coordinate our movements every day with whoever is in charge of that area. For example, in Gaza, we do that every morning, every day, with KOGA, the coordinating body of the Israeli armed forces."

While it is a more formal and structured measure than many of those discussed above, it is closely linked to the principles of neutrality and transparency. It is also an integral part of the IHL as it demonstrates their identity as humanitarian actors operating under humanitarian law.

4.2.3 Challenges

The strategies, measures, and approaches for adapting to shifts in politicisation and changing attitudes towards them can be seen as efforts to gain acceptance, either from stakeholders involved in the conflict or those with the ability to influence how they are perceived. However, these strategies also come with challenges in effectively incorporating them into their SRM.

One key challenge directly related to acceptance is that it is a dynamic, intangible, and complex approach, making it difficult to measure or translate into concrete data or statistics.

"The problem is that measuring acceptance is much more difficult. It's hard to determine if a community wants us there, how do we know? How can we test that?"

Bunkerisation

A challenge that was brought up in relation to acceptance was limited access to operational sites, as IHOs cannot engage in conversations to negotiate access and acceptance. In addition, about half of the participants highlighted that distancing themselves too much from the operational site and context, for example, through a process called bunkerisation, can negatively affect their security.

> *"The bunkerisation of aid is often a knee-jerk reaction to perceived violence and security risks. This can mean staying inside compounds, using armed vehicles, or other restrictive measures. But these do not eliminate risk; they simply change how the risk manifests."*

Several participants noted that the physical distance created by bunkerisation leads to social and contextual separation, thereby limiting engagement with communities.

> *"If you are completely bunkered down, you lose the ability to understand the actual humanitarian needs on the ground. You become disconnected from the context, you struggle to gain acceptance from communities, and ultimately, your job becomes meaningless."*

The reflections indicate that separating themselves from the context might affect their understanding of the needs on the ground, weakening their ability to provide valuable work and decreasing trust from communities. These issues can, in turn, hinder them from gaining the acceptance needed to ensure security.

Impunity IHL

In regard to the perceived decrease in respect for IHL, participants raised several concerns related to effective responses and adaptation to the threats it brings. First, since actions violating IHL are increasingly coming from governments, half of the participants stated that negotiation or deconfliction efforts are not sufficient for ensuring HAWs security, as those violations are perceived as deliberate:

> *"But when it's a government, you know it's not due to a lack of understanding of IHL, it's intentional. And that's the concerning part. It doesn't really matter what you do or how you negotiate, because the actions are deliberate."*

More than half of the participants described a growing sense of impunity for perpetrators and a feeling of hopelessness regarding mitigating strategies. When laws are ignored without consequences, organisational security measures are undermined.

> *"You can really feel a sense of impunity that's very present, and that complicates everything for us because the incidents involving aid workers are increasing, and no one really cares at the end of the day […] It's just like, okay, it's normal, it's part of the war."*

They also expressed that securing the situation for HAWs is not entirely within their control, and advocacy efforts are having little effect:

> *"There's only a political solution to that. [...] or any other NGO cannot fix that. Our job is to speak out, gather data, and prove that this is going on. Then it's up to the world leaders [...] to put pressure and keep armies and countries accountable. And apparently, that is not happening."*

The erosion of trust in legal protection and the sense of powerlessness among some participants is linked to the perception that violations of IHL are deliberate, and that conflict stakeholders and others involved have agendas that goes beyond protecting the security for HAWs. This further risks encouraging other actors to reduce their adherence to IHL if they observe that violations go unpunished.

In addition, following IHL protocols and deconflicting humanitarian space through visible markings can, in some cases, increase risks rather than reduce them. However, if protocols are not followed, it becomes difficult to hold perpetrators accountable if something does happen.

> *"And it was pretty clear that you're better off with a white van without any signs than if you have a clearly marked ambulance. [...] But nowadays, marking humanitarian vehicles is sometimes more of a strategic mitigation thing because afterward you can say, "We were clearly marked, that's a war crime." But in the end, it's a tendency that conflicting parties more and more just don't care about who's humanitarian and who's not. Of course, if you have a camouflaged vehicle, it will be tricky to explain why someone shouldn't target you."*

Limits of advocacy in politicised contexts

Advocacy was mentioned as a measure both for demonstrating values and raising concerns, especially by one IHO, also in relation to violations of IHL on HAWs. Advocacy comes with limitations as well. Due to size and complexity of IHOs, different branches may have different roles, and if advocacy statements are not coordinated with sensitivity, they can have unpredictable consequences. For example, if one part of the IHO is engaged in negotiations with authorities and another branch make a critical statement which the government dislike, it can undermine acceptance and trust of the IHO.

Another limitation with advocacy is that the results may be slow and it is difficult to put pressure, again not having the aimed effect:

> *"In my current role as General Director, I've spent the last year and a half giving weekly interviews and so have my colleagues elsewhere. We've made reports, but so far, it hasn't led to anything."*

Still, one participant critiqued their own IHO for not having made enough engagement with governmental actors about raising awareness in IHL, revealing a possible gap in adapting to changes.

"I think we may have taken for granted that governments would follow international humanitarian law. The effort to ensure safety, maintain dialogue, and negotiate with governments may not have been emphasized as much as it has been with various non-government groups."

To conclude, the challenges outlined above highlight the difficulties IHOs face when trying to adapt to risk, for example, through upholding perceived neutrality and maintaining acceptance from actors, with many factors and dilemmas to navigate. While measures such as engagement, negotiation, deconfliction and advocacy are seen as important to reduce risk of politicisation and to secure HAWs and operation, they sometimes lack effectiveness. This is particularly evident in relation to erosion of IHL, which is seen as a major risk among the participants. Simultaneously, it is important to consider internal trade-offs and strategies for adaptation, which sometimes counter each other out.

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings of this study are to be discussed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature. Given the focus on how IHOs adapt to evolving risks and the challenges that accompany these adaptation strategies, the findings are analysed within the broader context of humanitarian SRM in conflict settings. By focusing on what we call "soft adaptation", we aim to explore the more intangible measures and processes of adaptation. As internal mechanisms of IHOs to manage SRM are underexplored (see section 1.2), this discussion also aims to capture the complexity of management processes and how they interact with and are adapted to the surrounding conflict environment, such as external perceptions of the IHOs and government-imposed risks. It also aims to show how these processes are connected to the physical security of HAWs in the field, providing a more holistic understanding of adaptation. Therefore, the discussion is structured around three key themes that emerged from the data: Internal approaches to contextual diversities, security through acceptance and remaining challenges to adaptation.

5.1 Understanding risk

Before exploring the measures IHOs take to adapt to risks, it is important to clarify how the concept of risk is understood in this discussion, as it is a widely used term but often interpreted very differently (see section 2.1). This clarification, however, is based on our interpretation of how participants described risk in the interviews.

The initial focus of the study was largely on physical threats to HAWs, such as armed attacks, abductions, or drone strikes. This was due to the increasing amount of literature discussing how the targeting of HAWs has increased (see section 1.1). However, as the interviews were analysed, it became clear that participants spoke more about the factors that shape the conditions under which such threats emerge. This means that while physical harm remains a serious concern, the conversations shifted to the underlying dynamics and factors that could increase the uncertainty and likelihood of such incidents. For example, loss of perceived

neutrality was described as something that increases the likelihood of being framed as biased, which then could raise the risk of being targeted in the conflict zone. We understood that participants viewed risk as dynamic and evolving due to contextual, political, and social conditions. This perspective on risk, as used by participants, was closely related to how they discussed adaptation, and it was understood that IHOs aim to influence and alter the risk environments before physical harm occurs, as a core approach in conflict zones.

5.2 Internal approaches to contextual diversities

The most recurring theme in the data was the emphasis participants placed on understanding the context in which they operate. It was often described as the main or starting point for managing security risks in conflict zones. Not focusing on one specific conflict setting was a deliberate choice for this study. As the IHOs partaking in this study work in a wide range of conflict settings and countries, the study kept a broader scope to be able to explore diverse adaptation strategies. This allowed us to identify trends, themes and practices which go beyond a single geographical or political context. However, it is worth noting that not having a specific case may have contributed to how strongly context emerged as a theme. Nonetheless, it was evident that the participants saw great importance in interpreting and understanding the operating environment for managing security risks. Without contextual understanding, the IHOs would need to guess their way to improve security. Therefore, the first theme in the discussion focuses on internal strategies used by IHOs to effectively adapt to the complexities of diverse contexts. One example of such a strategy mentioned was through context-sensitive risk assessments.

5.2.1 Locally grounded risk assessment

Understanding the operational context when assessing risks was mentioned as a main measure enabling IHOs to adapt to local conditions (see section 4.1.2). This type of adaptation incorporates both local knowledge and continuous assessment and monitoring of context and actors, as conflict dynamics can change daily; thus, possible risks to a mission, HAWs or organisations' objectives are monitored, and the consequences they can cause are assessed, helps IHOs be more resilient. This measure relates to "recognising" as a function for resilience (Becker, 2014), where assessing and constantly monitoring risks to a system helps IHOs prepare before entering the operational site and enables them to prevent or mitigate potential security threats as well as adequately responding to monitored changes (see section 2.3). Davis et al. (2017) agree that risk assessments are a crucial step in understanding the context and assess threats and risks an organisation faces to be able to develop appropriate security measures. GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) state that risk assessments are usually very structured and follow concrete policies, which would fall more under a 'hard' measure. However, risk assessments with local knowledge and understanding are perceived as a soft approach because the importance of 'soft' skills such as communication, contextual knowledge and cultural sensitivity is emphasised, as elaborated below.

The results show that risk assessments need to be more context-sensitive and include local knowledge to be able to better and more accurately assess risks (see section 4.1.2). Hirono and Nurdin (2024, p. 2) agree that "the international aid community has begun to recognise the importance of local knowledge and to make efforts to include local knowledge in its work". Debarre (2018, p. 3) adds that "when responding to crises, international actors need to have a solid understanding of the context they are operating in to avoid inadvertently exacerbating the conditions at the root of the conflict or creating new tensions that could lead to further complications". This is important to prevent the IHOs' presence itself from creating a more insecure operational environment.

Greene et al. (2017) state that it is more difficult for international humanitarians coming geographically, economically, culturally, or socially from outside the operational context to provide aid appropriate for that specific context and to estimate which risks may have unintended consequences. Debarre (2018, p. 4) suggests, in line with our results, engaging local actors, as this "not only assists in the conflict analysis necessary for conflict-sensitive humanitarian action, but it also enables this action to be tailored to the needs of those affected and made to complement existing structures and efforts". To do so, Egeland et al. (2011) argue that regular communication between IHOs and local actors does provide valuable updates of the conflict security landscape while it can simultaneously strengthen relationships between organisations and actors. This aligns with another measure brought up: that communicating and engaging with communities and local actors can lead to increased acceptance (see section 4.2.2). Haider (2014) further elaborates that a well-produced conflict-sensitive assessment takes into account power relations, beliefs and values and these diversities among local populations, which also is considered by the participants to be important knowledge for their SRM (see section 4.1.2).

The integration of local knowledge in risk assessments comes with challenges, as stated in the results, even local actors themselves might not always fully understand their context, and differences in education or culture can lead to misunderstandings or impede communication (see section 4.1.3). In addition, Kelly (2023) agrees that input from formally educated people is receiving more attention from Western actors, which often overlooks the valuable local knowledge held by those without formal education. Further, how local actors are incorporated in the process should be carried out carefully, as Debarre (2018, p. 4) explains:

> "If seen as a positive move away from the topdown international aid system, efforts to localize humanitarian action may come into tension with the principle of impartiality, in particular in conflict-affected contexts. Local actors may not be able or politically willing to provide aid impartially, local authorities may be parties to the conflict, and civil society may be fractured and polarized, all of which present serious challenges for principled humanitarian actors."

The risk of aid being perceived as politicised or partial was also mentioned as an evolving risk by participants (see section 4.2.1) and will be further discussed in section 5.4.3. This highlights what has also been emphasised by participants as well as in the literature: the importance of transparency and communication with local actors and community members, which enables

IHOs to respond to emerging threats while also maintaining transparency and accountability toward the community. In this sense, communication acts as a soft facilitator of adaptation, supporting both decision-making and acceptance in volatile settings. GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) suggest a concept called 'inclusive risk assessment', which would include visits, consultation and discussion with community members and stakeholders to involve "as many people as possible in the risk assessment, with participation from staff across all departments and position levels" (Ibid., p. 28). This approach would lead to more people being involved in risk assessments, which was also highlighted by participants as a positive shift as responsibilities are shared, but also as a challenge, since more time is needed before aid can be delivered, referred to as a part of professionalisation (see section 4.1.3). Kelly (2023) further explains that in emergencies, local actors often lack the time, resources, or opportunity to fully share their knowledge with external actors. Thus, this measure of including local knowledge is discussed as both beneficial as needs and risks can be assessed more closely aligned to local contexts, and as a very time-consuming process, impacting not only the missions but also the aid receivers.

5.2.2 Impacts of professionalisation

A professionalisation and increasing institutionalisation within SRM were not only perceived by participants (see section 4.1.3) but also mentioned in the literature over the past 20 years (GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). This means that not only risk assessments professionalised, but security policies, tools, SOPs, training, etc. have also been significantly developed over the past decade (Ibid.). As already argued by participants, this shift affects the adaptive flexibility of IHOs, which aligns with the results of ALNAP (2022), where many aid workers reported that bureaucratic obstacles were a major barrier to reach affected populations. Egeland et al. (2011, p. 30) further argue: "By contrast, rigid, bureaucratic organisations tend to adapt slowly and become locked into ineffective operational modalities. They are therefore much more vulnerable to programme interruption when the programming environment changes". In addition, the increased institutionalisation and bureaucratisation result in risk aversion and hinder timely adaptation to changing conditions (James, 2016). Some participants highlighted that the increased professionalism does not necessarily make operations safer and advocate for a more holistic approach when it comes to SRM. Therefore, a key risk for IHOs does not lie in the external environment itself but in their inability to adapt appropriately to it. This raises the question of how much security management an IHO can actually do and when is it ever enough for security (see section 4.1.3). This uncertainty came especially to the surface when participants talked about risk increasingly coming from governments and actors not following IHL. This left a feeling of powerlessness among the participants, stating that this is a political issue and that there are only political solutions to it, which will be further discussed in section 5.4.3.

5.2.3 Staff selection and individual risk profiling

Another measure highlighted to align SRM with the context-specific conflict environment was hiring or sending HAWs to conflict zones based on their individual risk profile and the

deployment context (see section 4.1.2). Jones et al. (2018) and GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) agree that not only the external risks and context should be assessed but also understanding individual risk profiles of HAWs and their intersection with the context helps the IHO manage security risks. In addition, Arthur and Moutard (2022, p. 5) elaborate: "An individual's intersectional identity impacts how they are perceived, the vulnerabilities they have and the risks they may face. Adopting an intersectional lens is, therefore, an essential part of SRM ". An example that was brought up by participants was nationality as a factor posing different levels of risk to individuals, as one participant described that one woman could not be hired because of her US citizenship (see section 4.1.3). Duroch and Neuman (2021) elaborate on this and exemplify that US nationals have not been deployed in MSF operations in Colombia because of the risk of kidnapping. Here, the complexity between the context of conflicts and individual risk factors becomes evident. It is thus important to consider 'soft' strategies such as contextual dynamics and individual characteristics, as they can place certain individuals at greater risk. By selecting staff with low-risk profiles, it is possible to mitigate potential targeting or security risks of HAWs.

While diversity and inclusion in SRM are highlighted by GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024), this further complicates the balance that IHOs have to strike between diversification and security. In line with our results (see section 4.1.3), it has previously been identified as a trade-off among IHOs that personal identity may be chosen before professional competences (Fast et al., 2013). It could also mean there is a trade-off between security (duty of care) and equity of hiring practices. MSF, for example, acknowledges "the practice of profiling as a necessary compromise for conducting operations in some contexts [...] concerns remain as to how it should be implemented" (Duroch & Neuman, 2021). GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) further address that even if identity-based needs are to be taken into account, they increase the possibility of discrimination and inequality. To mitigate perceptions of exclusion or discrimination, being transparent about profiling or deployment decisions is a valuable 'soft' measure for internal management but also applies to the external context. It can reduce the risk of being affiliated with certain actors or viewed as political or impartial, as a participant raised concerns (see section 4.1.3), which could negatively influence acceptance. In addition, being transparent about the risks HAWs may encounter in conflict zones is also an important part of internal management.

5.2.4 Staff consent practices and contextual constraints

An informed staff consent process was highlighted as an adaptation measure (see section 4.1.2), which not only supports individuals by making better individual decisions (GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024) but also constitutes a legal duty of care NGOs must fulfil to safeguard their staff (Jones et al., 2018). In line with our findings, Bickley (2017) points out that managing security cannot eliminate all risks, and it is crucial for HAWs to understand, as part of their informed consent, that they will remain exposed to certain risks. As discussed by participants, SOPs, for example, that HAWs have to read and sign before deployment as a form of staff consent are not sufficient (see section 4.1.3). Participants from one IHO highlighted its efforts to complement this hard adaptation measure with softer approaches such as calls or

personal conversations about the risks and measures their respective IHO is taking before and during deployment in conflict zones. Hence, the emphasis lies not only on transparency and communication, but also on assessing individual capacities and resilience through conversation. Overall, according to the resilience framework of Becker (2014), staff consent could be interpreted as a soft adaptation measure to prepare HAWs for their employment, but also due to continuous updating and check-ins with HAWs on-site, could be regarded as a response to changes occurring in respective conflict settings.

One challenge that was brought up was the structural imbalances affecting staff consent as well as the security situation for both local and international staff (see section 4.1.3). This means that even when an organisation is transparent about the risks an individual may face during deployment, locally hired staff might accept higher levels of risk due to, e.g., economic necessity. Additionally, while it should be possible to withdraw from missions at any time, local staff frequently remain in the conflict environment because it is their place of residence and community. It is widely discussed in the literature (ALNAP, 2022; Duroch & Neuman, 2021; GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024; Guidero, 2022; IFRC, 2015) that power imbalances between locally hired staff and expats are present not only in staff consent but in almost every area of HA: "International and local aid actors each face different risks and security challenges in different scenarios" (GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024, p. 31). While these structural power dynamics are an essential part of risk in the intersection between context and individual risk factors, no locally hired staff were interviewed for this study. From an ethical perspective, we decided not to discuss this issue further based solely on secondary data. This was to avoid misrepresentation or assumptions about their experiences without their direct input.

5.3 Security through acceptance

One of the most recurring themes from the interviews was the risk of IHOs and their staff being perceived as political by other stakeholders. Several participants also underlined a perceived increase in their politicisation (see section 4.2.1). Politicisation of aid refers to the phenomenon when humanitarianism and IHOs, which rely on and ground their work in values such as neutrality and independence, are instead associated with external political agendas (Levin, 2024; Sellers, 2024). Scholars such as Hoelscher et al. (2017) and (Sellers, 2024) agree that politicisation is a factor contributing to increased security risks for HAWs and can even lead to deliberate targeting at times. This aligns with the concern raised by participants about feeling insecure about not being a neutral actor, but rather as a pawns in political games (see section 4.2.1). It can be harmful when IHOs are portrayed as biased, not neutral, or politically affiliated. These narratives can be exacerbated by the spread of disinformation, which can reinforce the politicisation (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2024). This reflection shows that for IHOs operating in conflict settings, it is often how they are perceived that shapes the risks they face; hence, perception becomes a risk factor itself. In reference to this, participants pointed out the importance of addressing how they are being viewed by others to be able to strengthen security in the field.

5.3.1 Acceptance as the approach

In response to these risks grounded in perception, participants often describe working towards acceptance as a key approach to improve security (see section 4.2.2). Based on the results and the analysis of this study, acceptance is not seen as a measure on its own but rather an overarching approach or end goal, which comprises a variety of interlinked practices. Acceptance is often referred to as the acceptance coming from stakeholders, who have given consent and tolerate the organisations' presence and activities (Fast et al., 2013). Another definition provided by Davis (2020, p. 4:02) is "building a safe operating environment through consent, approval and cooperation from individuals, communities and local authorities". This definition is part of the broader SRM triangle framework, in which acceptance together with deterrence and protection are the three core strategies (Fast et al., 2013; GISF, 2021). Deterrence is defined as "reducing the risk by containing the threat with a counter threat (e.g., armed protection, diplomatic/political leverage, temporary suspension)." and protection as: "Reducing the risk, but not the threat by reducing the vulnerability of the organisation (e.g. fences, guards, walls)" (Davis, 2020, p. 4:02). This study defines acceptance as a soft approach to adaptation due to the types of incorporated elements and skills which are embedded in the concept. These elements include, for example, contextual and cultural understanding, communication and trust-building, stakeholder understanding or negotiation (Fast et al., 2013), which are often complex, multilayered and rooted in social interactions. These align well with the concept used in this study to describe a soft approach to adaptation (see section 2.3). How these are being utilized within IHOs' SRM will be discussed further. While deterrence and protection were also discussed by the participants, acceptance was emphasised as the preferred or main approach for adapting to risks. Scholars argue that IHOs prefer the acceptance approach due to its close linkage to the core values most NGOs are standing on, making it a more appropriate security strategy (GISF & Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024; Schneiker, 2018). The three IHOs, DRC, MSF and CADUS, have slightly different descriptions of their core values, but they are all built on pillars such as humanity, impartiality, independence, neutrality, accountability, transparency, inclusion, etc. (CADUS, 2023; DRC, n.d.-b; MSF, n.d.-b). Many of these principles reflect the elements which previously were highlighted as important to acceptance, such as communication, cultural awareness and trust-building, making it a suitable adaptation approach to also stay true to the organisations' values.

Acceptance is not only discussed in relation to politicisation but as a broader strategy to maintain security in support of local communities. A good understanding of context and stakeholders is essential to identify suitable strategies for staff security (see section 4.1.2), for example, by knowing which stakeholders to engage and negotiate with and knowing how the IHOs and HAWs are perceived by them (Fast et al., 2013; Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2024). This example shows how acceptance and contextual understanding are closely connected. How effective the acceptance approach is as a security strategy depends partly on the understanding of the local and surrounding context. In turn, building acceptance can improve contextual understanding through community and stakeholder inclusiveness.

5.3.2 Strategies and barriers to acceptance

Four practices were identified from the interviews and were introduced as part of the acceptance approach (see section 4.2.2). These are engaging with actors, negotiation, providing valuable work and advocacy. Negotiation and advocacy can be seen as a way of engaging through communication while providing valuable work represents engagement through action. The success of each practice was understood to be linked to one another, showing how these practices function side by side to build trust and ultimately reach acceptance. As the majority of the participants highlighted, engaging with communities and actors was viewed as key to achieving acceptance. Similarly, Fast et al. (2013) point out that building positive relationships is essential for achieving acceptance, in which the staff should possess social competences, such as communication, including cultural sensitivity, awareness of local dynamics, and the ability to engage respectfully with different actors. An IHO participant stated in a report from GISF (2021, p. 29) that "Engagement also helps to establish consent and acceptance for humanitarian organisations' activities, which is vital to ensure staff safety". This reflects a broader understanding shared with participants and literature that relationship-based approaches play an important role in the security of HAWs in the operational field.

Another frequently mentioned practice related to stakeholder engagement and working for acceptance was negotiation. Negotiation is described by the participants as a process of engagement and communication with external actors, facilitating access and protection, helping create a degree of certainty in an unpredictable environment. Grace (2020) describes humanitarian negotiation as the interaction the IHOs have with external actors about protection and security efforts and the implementation of programmes. The International Peace Institute (2018) complements this by emphasising the importance of negotiation is rooted in principles of humanity. Building on this further, Fast et al. (2013, p. 230) highlight important skills needed for negotiation to be effective: "NGO staff must be equipped with specific communication and negotiation skills, including attention to tone, subtle changes in demeanour, negotiating styles, and social meanings, to build relationships and negotiate access effectively across cultural and other boundaries".

According to Becker (2014), adaptation has both proactive and reactive functions. Proactive adaptation aims to reduce the likelihood or consequences of risks, or to prepare for them, while reactive adaptation focuses on managing and recovering after a disruption has happened (Ibid.). Building on participants' descriptions of negotiation and Becker's framework, we find negotiation to be a measure which can serve both proactively and reactively. Negotiation can be used preventatively to agree about programming and conditions and establish relationships, e.g., through early communication. It can also be utilized as a response to an occurred security incident. One participant gave an example when they described the utilisation of negotiation with perpetrators who had kidnapped HAWs from the IHO (see section 4.2.2). While negotiation enables clarifying intentions and creating secure spaces to operate, maintaining the security also depends on how the IHOs' actions are perceived, which will be discussed in the next section.

First, another form of stakeholder engagement brought up by participants, especially from one IHO, is introduced: advocacy. Advocacy was described as part of the broader strategy to gain acceptance to operate securely in conflict zones. An adaptive measure used to influence power holders to act in the protection of HAWs (see section 4.2.2). Merrian-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines it as "the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal". UNHCR (n.d.) discusses the importance of engagement built on dialogue and relationships, including with those in powerful positions with the possibility to influence the risk (Global protection cluster, 2023). As advocacy efforts are implemented through communication efforts, it is considered a soft adaptation strategy in this study.

A key part of gaining acceptance, and thereby reducing risks in the field, is through providing aid that is viewed as valuable and is based on needs, according to participants (see section 4.2.2). They continued by stating that when the IHO's presence is perceived as meaningful to other stakeholders, they are more likely to accept the IHO. Therefore, HA can serve as a protective measure itself (see section 4.2.2). Assuming that delivering aid alone would not be sufficient enough to gain acceptance is not realistic, and IHOs should instead work through consent-based programming (Egeland et al., 2011; Schneiker, 2018). Malhouni and Mabrouki (2024, p. 237) further elaborate in relation to mitigating risk: "NGOs should also establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback and evaluation to ensure that their programs remain responsive to the evolving needs of the communities they serve. Finally, collaborating with community leaders can help build trust and credibility, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the local context". This highlights that aid is not a one-time action but a process of gathering inputs from external stakeholders and adapting aid delivery accordingly. By staying responsive and accountable, it is more likely for the IHO to maintain acceptance.

As conflicts and context are ever shifting, strategies for how engagement should proceed in practice must follow these shifts in order for the IHO to remain resilient and secure (McGoldrick, 2015). To do so, establishing procedures of gathering feedback and monitoring development and shifts, as well as learning, are all important aspects of remaining adaptive (Rodon et al., 2012). These procedures are easier to follow up on and establish effectively if the IHO is physically present in the communities they work in (Ibid.). GISF (2021) also argues that acceptance needs to be measured and monitored to stay alert and maintain access. However, measuring and monitoring acceptance comes with challenges. Interestingly, there was little discussion around how acceptance was monitored in practical terms, indicating a limited understanding based on the data on how acceptance is being monitored. This could potentially point to a gap regarding the operationalisation of the measure. After all, concerns were lifted about the difficulties around measuring acceptance. Participants brought up the issue of fuzziness with acceptance and soft approaches in terms of how they are measured and understood in practice, which participants believed lacked sufficient implementation strategies (see section 4.2.3). Further, Fast et al. (2013, p. 223) state that "determining whether staff members are taking specific actions to promote acceptance in communities is problematic without standards with which to measure results. In short, acceptance is neither well-conceptualised nor consistently operationalised by many NGOs", criticising the standardisation of acceptance as a security approach. One reason these measures are difficult to evaluate may be their reliance on soft skills and intangible elements like trust and acceptance, which are harder to grasp or visualise, creating barriers for effective adaptation.

A major challenge for the acceptance approach and engagement, presented by most of the participants, was the increasing distance between IHOs and the communities and operational setting. This distancing is often a result of other security measures. Several participants referred to this distancing as "bunkerisation" (see section 4.2.3). Bunkerisation is the concept of using strengthened protection and shielding measures for security, hence putting a distance between themselves and the communities (Donini, 2011). Duffield (2012) notes that this approach can be needed in contexts with severely high security concerns. However, it is also a criticised approach for resembling militarised practises or being excessively cautious, as it can undermine the more preferred approach of establishing secure access through relationships and communication (Donini, 2011; Norman, 2023). Becker (2014, p. 172) points out that a barrier to resilience is that humans have a tendency to seek control over an uncertain situation by breaking complex issues into smaller components, which may come with the cost of losing awareness of the broader systematic picture – "A strategy that becomes particularly risky as we often forget what we want to keep while focusing on what we need to fix" . In the case for IHOs providing aid and working towards staff security, it could mean that while bunkerisation reduces exposure to immediate threats, it could simultaneously erode other security strategies such as engaging with communities, communication, and trust-building. To conclude, distancing from communities can make IHOs less resilient as they lose feedback and direct insight into the operating context.

A related but distinct challenge mentioned by several participants involves another type of distancing, which is the use of shields and protective gear, or other IHOs using protective gear with which they themselves become affiliated with (see section 4.2.3). It can create a perception of them being linked with military actors. This has also been raised by Davis (2020) who argued that military affiliation undermines acceptance and may cause long-term consequences on acceptance and trust and may also increase the risk of physical harm to HAWs.

5.4 Challenges to adaptation

5.4.1 Risk from governments and violations of IHL

One of the main concerns expressed by participants was the perception of governments as a source of increased risk in conflict settings (see section 4.1.1). These threats include physical violence as well as bureaucratic violence, such as denial of access and legal detention of HAWs. A second trend identified by participants was the perceived decline in respect for IHL. Participants expressed an increasing feeling of insecurity regarding the protection offered by IHL (see section 4.2.1). While explicit rules exist that protect HAWs and their work (see section 2.6), existing literature supports participants' view on the erosion of respect for IHL (Foraus, 2017; ICRC, 2022; Nayef Alakash et al., 2024). Effective implementation of IHL's largely depends on the willingness and actions of governments (Nayef Alakash et al., 2024). These two risk trends highlighted by the participants are closely connected, as erosion of IHL makes it easier for governments to use political and legal constraints against IHO staff without having to face serious consequences.

All participants repeatedly mentioned that context is essential to grasp the differences in risks within conflict settings and also differences in levels of risk. While the participants brought up threats coming from governments, this must not mean all governments. To exemplify, while attacks on HAWs were reported in 33 countries in 2023, the majority of violent attacks occurred in Gaza, Sudan, and South Sudan (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). What is relevant is the involvement of state-linked actors and governments in these conflict contexts (Courty, 2024; Globalis, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). Gaza was mentioned by many participants as a high-risk context (see section 4.1.1). One of the IHOs even had Gaza currently pointed out as the place with most security concerns, to their organisational measurements (DRC, n.d.-a). This localised example is highlighting the importance of specifying the context in which adaptation occurs, as they differ.

5.4.2 Advocacy and accountability

An adaptive change observed by participants was how advocacy efforts have shifted from often being more localised to now targeting higher levels of political spaces, for example, international meetings (see section 4.2.2). This indicates a shift, working more with different stakeholder levels to adapt to changing risk contexts. To exemplify, all three IHOs in the study have been vocal about the situation and the needs within the Gaza context (DRC, 2024; Gruenwald, n.d.; MSF, 2025), which is a high security concern for HAWs (see section 4.1.1).

In reference to advocacy, one participant expressed concern that their IHO may have previously overestimated government support regarding IHL and the security of HAWs and questioned whether they might have reached a different outcome if they had started engaging and advocating to these governments earlier (see section 4.2.3). This may indicate that the IHO was late in anticipating or recognising a shift in the risk landscape, which delayed their reaction. As Becker (2014, p. 155) argues, anticipation is a part of resilience and is "a fundamentally proactive function in the sense of focusing on what has not yet happened." This is particularly difficult in conflict settings. Guidero (2022, p. 176) points out that external parties' effect on the SRM is hard to predict: "Even though some patterns might be predictable in the short term, major political upsets or changes in territorial control can disrupt the ability of security professionals to make forecasts in a certain location, especially in active conflict zones." Nonetheless, it is also possible that there was anticipation and recognition involved, but that does not guarantee a reaction from IHOs.

While advocacy efforts were raised, so too was also a sense of the measure not leading to any change, which was explicitly highlighted by one of the participants who had recently intensively worked with advocacy to improve security (see section 4.2.3). Another response from a majority of participants in relation to failing advocacy efforts and risk from governments was a feeling of helplessness. Participants further critiqued that the rising number of incidents against HAWs paired with a lack of accountability, indeed normalises violence against HA, making it "part of the war" (see section 4.2.1). Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) highlight the rarity of perpetrator accountability when targeting HAWs and violating IHL, which creates a feeling of impunity. Some participants doubted the ability of individual IHOs to effectively adapt, remain resilient, and ensure security in the face of these risks, for example, through advocacy alone.

They emphasised the need for engagement from other stakeholders, including political actors, to influence the broader security dynamics affecting IHOs.

5.4.3 Politicisation of humanitarian aid

Building on the above concerns regarding governments and IHL, around half of the participants discussed the politicisation of HAWs as an active strategy, which could be used deliberately by governments and other stakeholders (see section 4.2.3). This has been highlighted in literature such as Sellers (2024); Tammi (2023) who mention it as anti-aid rhetoric, and documented cases include Syria, Palestine, and South Sudan. Tammi (2023, p. 871) states that "Research suggests that both state and non-state actors routinely engage in a practice known as 'lawfare', defined [...] as the manipulation of law to attain political or military aims in war", which is linked to deliberately politicising IHOs. This tactic is discussed by Neumann (2006), who argues that utilizing laws is a form of power. It can be exercised not only through the imposition of sovereign laws but also through the strategic use of legal frameworks as tools of influence, meaning laws themselves become part of the tactic (Ibid.). For example, (Tammi, 2023) explains that HAWs in some contexts risk being wrongly perceived as supporting terrorists, and counter-terrorism laws have been used by states to frame aid as supporting terrorism. She further elaborates: "The tendency of some states to consider the provision of healthcare as an act that supports terrorism reduces the neutral operational space available for medical aid delivery, while making healthcare professionals susceptible to litigation, fines, and even incarceration by state actors. In other instances, international counter-terrorism laws have also been reported to increase the risk of physical violence against humanitarians." (Tammi, 2023, p. 875). These kinds of tactics are being discussed by the interview participants (see section 4.2.1) who describe how legal and political framing are used to delegitimise and restrict HAWs. Further, in the context of framing HAWs in harmful ways, it is relevant to mention that this does not affect all HAWs the same way. Literature suggests that local HAWs often are more likely to be perceived as biased or political, often due to their personal ties (e.g., ethnic or religious) to that specific conflict setting (Gamlen & Chakma, 2025).

5.4.4 Deconfliction strategies and visibility risks

As a final point in the discussion on adaptation strategies to evolving risks, we want to highlight the participants' reflections on the use of notification and deconfliction strategies (see section 4.2.2). Deconfliction was described as a practice to neutralise humanitarian space by informing conflict actors of their presence and separating themselves from combatants. In short, MSF (n.d.-a) explains deconfliction as a tool to help conflict actors distinguish them and be able to follow the guidelines of IHL. Worth noting is that there are differences between IHOs and their protection under IHL depending on their mandates. To exemplify, medical humanitarians have special protection when other IHOs fall under the same protection as civilians (ICRC, 2022; MSF, n.d.-a). Regardless of the differences, the strategy of notifying actors about their presence as a security tool was mentioned by participants from all three IHOs. Regarding adaptation, deconfliction is understood in this study as a soft approach to adaptation, as it relies on, e.g., communication, trust, and shared understanding of humanitarian principles. However, it is often supported by technical tools, for example, GPS coordinates and effective communication lines

(MSF, n.d.-a), which can be seen as more hard tools. Bernardini (2024) highlights that hard and soft measures often enable each other, of which deconfliction and notification are an example.

A few participants raised a critical concern about the actual security value of visibility (see section 4.2.3). The reflection was that it is possible that visually presenting themselves could, in some contexts, increase the risk of being deliberately targeted. They considered that staying civil in conflict zones might keep them more secure. Especially in contexts where the IHO and its staff face heightened risk of being politicised or perceived as combatants rather than neutral. This reflection highlights a trade-off between following established systems when operating in conflict zones, such as deconfliction, and adapting to specific risk dynamics on the ground. Moving away from visual identification can therefore be seen as a strategic adaptation to security risks in contexts where being humanitarian (or affiliated with another disliked party or donor) in itself is a risk factor.

5.5 Summary of discussion

To conclude the discussion on major challenges and obstacles to IHOs' adaptation efforts, the findings point to the deeply intertwined nature of risks in today's conflict zones. For adaptation to be effective, IHOs and their staff should understand risk as intersectional, meaning that some individuals are more vulnerable depending on how their identities interact with political and social dynamics. This requires a thorough understanding of context, including power relations, perceptions, and monitoring of ongoing developments. For IHOs to navigate these complexities, they should combine context-specific risk assessments with strategies such as context-sensitive staff selection and preparation, which are grounded in knowledge of how identity and politics intersect and shape various nuances of security risks. However, the discussion also led to the conclusion that upholding security and reducing harm to HAWs is not solely in the hands of the IHOs, who may at times feel powerless. The willingness of external actors to respect and protect humanitarian principles and uphold protection mechanisms, such as IHL is also crucial. This highlights the role of power in shaping the risk landscape. Overall, the risk landscape in which IHOs operate is highly complex, multilayered, and dynamic. These conditions pose a significant for IHOs to adapt and remain safe and resilient while continuing to fulfil their purpose in violent and politicised conflict environments.

5.6 Limitations and future research

Besides the methodological limitations already discussed in section 3.5.2, several broader limitations should be acknowledged. In general, as this study aims to show the width and complexity of humanitarian SRM, many of the adaptation measures were not explored in detail and lacked explanation of how they are implemented in practice. For example, acceptance is a widely used term in SRM, but participants did not provide clear definitions and only partially elaborated on what it entails, how it is measured and how it functions in practice. Consequently, as the meanings of such terms were not clearly defined by participants and can vary across individuals and the literature, the results primarily reflect our interpretation as researchers.

Since we discovered soft approaches to adaptation as most prominent in the data, we focused our analysis accordingly and did not include hard measures such as training or SOPs, which narrows the scope of the findings. As already stated in section 3.5.2, the findings rely on our interpretation as researchers. Additionally, participants could not cover all the measures their organisation is adopting in 40-120 minute interviews, leaving further gaps. Hence, our findings should not be interpreted as representative of the broader HA sector.

In addition, differences between locally hired staff and international staff were not only raised by participants but also widely discussed in the literature (see section 5.2.4). As we were unable to include locally hired staff as participants, this perspective remains largely unrepresented. To avoid misrepresenting this issue, we decided not to analyse this topic solely from the international perspective.

Financial constraints were also raised as a concern that can hinder the implementation of security measures or make them a financial burden. For example, the USAID funding cut heavily affected IHOs but occurred after our cutoff date and could not be investigated due to the limited scope of this study. We recommend further research on the relationship between funding and SRM.

Lastly, as shown in Figure 2, psychological impacts were also identified as an important issue in SRM. These can have serious impacts on both mental and physical health. While we recognise the importance of this topic, we decided to not include measures addressing psychological impacts due to the limited scope.

6. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore how IHOs adapt to evolving security risks in conflict zones. A focus was kept on internal practices and soft, context-sensitive strategies used to protect HAWs and maintain resilience. The two research questions were "How do international humanitarian organisations adapt to evolving security risks and contextual diversity in conflict zones?" followed by "What challenges do they encounter in the process of adapting to evolving security risks in conflict zones?".

First, risks were found to be highly context-dependent and always evolving, and a lack of contextual understanding or sensitivity is a contributing factor to insecurity. HAWs also face threats due to how they are perceived by others. This is especially true when they are seen as political actors or associated with external agendas. Also, harm coming from governments as well as reduced respect for IHL was seen as great risk contributors.

To adapt to these risks, IHOs appear to rely on what this study describes as a soft approach to adaptation, which is understood as strategies grounded in such elements as communication, transparency, contextual knowledge, and trust-building. This approach was visible both in the way IHOs manage risks internally and how they engage externally with actors in the operational environment. Internally, adaptation focuses on three main practices: conducting context-specific risk assessments grounded in local knowledge, selecting HAWs whose profiles are

appropriate and accepted within the context, and ensuring transparency and informed consent with staff. These internal strategies help to manage security from within the IHO and to create the conditions for external strategies to be more effective. Externally, the acceptance approach was a central theme in maintaining operational presence and staff security. Acceptance was seen as crucial in mitigating the risk of politicisation, influencing how IHOs are perceived, and strengthening resilience in conflict contexts. Communities were described as an important source of protection. Therefore, key practices which support acceptance included engaging directly with communities and stakeholders, providing relevant and needs-based aid, ongoing negotiation, and advocacy efforts.

These adaptation strategies also face challenges. Internally, IHOs encounter difficulties in meaningfully incorporating local perspectives into risk assessment processes. Professionalisation and institutionalisation of SRM, which lead to shared responsibilities, may also reduce flexibility and delay responses. Staff selection often involves trade-offs. In some cases, organisational security measures themselves may hinder relationship-building, reduce contextual awareness, and undermine the acceptance they aim to achieve. Finally, when legal protections are ignored and accountability mechanisms fail, adaptation efforts become less effective. A sense of helplessness was expressed due to a feeling of a systemic erosion of the IHL, highlighting that adaptation is not only about internal strategy but also shaped by broader power dynamics and political will.

Overall, this study shows that adaptation is not a fixed set of tools but a continuous, complex, and context-dependent process, with a central role of soft strategies taking social dynamics into account. While these strategies can support resilience, they are not without limitations. A nuanced understanding of how adaptation works in practice and how it is shaped by both internal structures and external actors is important for developing security approaches that can protect HAWs in increasingly politicised conflict settings. This study addresses the research gap identified in earlier literature, being that the focus has been largely on external threats while overlooking the internal mechanisms IHOs use to manage security. By analysing how adaptation unfolds in practice, the findings give empirical insight into how IHOs internally manage risk, particularly through soft and socially grounded strategies.

Rather than offering fixed recommendations, this study highlights that there is a need for continuous reflection on the limitations and trade-offs involved in SRM strategies within the humanitarian sector. Future research is needed on how IHOs navigate tensions between SRM practices like acceptance and actual protection, as well as how soft approaches to adaptation should be practised. While this study focused on organisational responses rather than the conflicts themselves, the shifting nature of threats such as those posed by governments should be explored further.

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Appendix

The appendix presents the preparations made prior to data collection through interviews with the IHOs participants.

a. The one-pager was sent to participants before they confirmed their participation. Its purpose was to provide an overview of the research objectives.

Balancing risk and relief:
How targeted attacks on humanitarian aid shape organisational work

Emelie Guth and Malu Messerschmidt
Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation, Lund University

Background and motivation:

The global need for humanitarian assistance is growing, with an estimated 300 million people requiring aid due to crises[1]. As the demand for aid increases, so do attacks on humanitarian aid workers (HAWs) in conflict zones, with 2024 estimated to be the deadliest year on record, reporting 320 fatalities[2]. In response, organisations have to adopt operational strategies to safeguard staff and uphold their duty of care, balancing security for their personnel with operational continuity to maintain aid access for vulnerable populations[3].

Research purpose:

This study explores how the targeting of humanitarian organisations in conflict zones has led to changes in the way humanitarian aid is delivered and how organisations adapt to the evolving risks and challenges. It examines the nature of these possible changes, their operational implications, and their impact on the organisations' ability to fulfil their objectives, as well as the possible consequences these changes have brought about.

Research questions:

- Has the targeting of humanitarian organisations in conflict zones led to changes in the organisational work of delivering aid?
  - How have organisations and their work potentially changed?
- What are the potential consequences of these changes on the organisations' operations, objectives, and overall effectiveness and impact?

Methodology:

- Abductive approach to identify patterns and theories emerging from the data
- Grounded theory research design to allow themes to development of theories based on systematically gathered qualitative data

Data collection:

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives from three humanitarian organizations
- Review of reports and policy documents on aid security and security risk management

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b. The second part of the appendix contains the interview guide used for the semi-structured interviews.

Interview Guide III

Emelie and Malu

Balancing Risk and Relief:

How targeted attacks on humanitarian aid shape organisational work

Research Questions:

- Has the targeting of humanitarian organisations in conflict zones led to changes in the organisational work of delivering aid?
  - How have organisations and their work potentially changed?
- What are the potential consequences of these changes on the organisations' operations, objectives, and overall effectiveness and impact?

Before the interview:

Make Emelie Co-Host

Prepare phones for recording

Introduction:

Thank you, [name], for taking the time to speak with us today. As we've mentioned, our research focuses on humanitarian aid security, particularly the increasing risks of physical violence against humanitarian aid workers in conflict zones and how organisations are addressing this issue. Before we begin, we want to assure you that your responses will remain anonymous, however we would like to refer to your organisation in our thesis, if that is fine by you. You are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer. Additionally, if at any point you decide to withdraw from the interview, you are completely free to do so. We would also like to record the audio of this interview for transcription purposes—would that be okay with you? Finally, if anything is unclear at any point, please don't hesitate to ask. With that, let's begin!

Structure of the interview:

1 - General Information and Background

2 - Risks

3 - Security Measures

4 - Consequences for staff and the organisation

1. General Information and Background

Organisation:

- a. What organisation are you working for?
    - i. Can you briefly tell us about your role within the organisation?
    - ii. How long have you been working in your organisation?
    - iii. In humanitarian aid in general?
- b. Have you ever had to engage with conflict zones in your work?

→ Short definition of conflict zones

      i.   If so, can you share details about the time, place and nature of your involvement?

Additional questions:

    a.   When working in a conflict area, do you also employ local workers?

Transition to next theme:

    a.   Is there anything you want to add to the topic before we move on to the next theme?

    b.   Emelie, further question?

2. Risks

General:

    a.   Can you describe the most pressing risks in regard to the physical well-being of staff you or your organisation <u>face today</u> when delivering aid in conflict zones?

        i.   (Particularly in relation to increased targeting?)

Change:

    b.   Have those risks your organisation faces in conflict zones increased, decreased, or shifted in nature over the years in your view?

Additional questions:

    a.   Has there been any prominent incidents happening to the organisation and its workers which has led to a shift in how aid has been delivered?

Transition to next theme:

    a.   Is there anything you want to add to the topic before we move on to the next theme?

    b.   Malu, further questions?

3. Security Measures

General:

    a. Given the risks humanitarian workers face in conflict zones (you just described), what key security measures does your organisation implement to protect staff in these settings?

        i. Example (contingency plans, protocols, frameworks, resources, training, incident management teams...)

Change:

    b. Has your organisation's security measures evolved over the time you have been active?

        i. If yes, how?

General again:

    c. Does your organisation consider individual risk factors? (provide examples if needed for example gender, ethnicity)

        i. If so, how?

    d. Have there been situations where your organization could not or chose not to change its security approach despite evolving risks? If so, why? - Should we still ask this

Additional questions:

Transition to the next theme:

    a. Is there anything you want to add to the topic before we move on to the next theme?

    b. Emelie, further questions?

4. Consequences

    a. How have the changes your organisation has made - whether planned security measures or spontaneous adaptations to emerging risks - affected (positively and negatively):

        i. Staff and their working conditions

            1. Are some groups within your organisation more affected by how the

organisational work has developed and changed?

    ii.   The organisation's ability to operate

    iii.   The aid received by affected communities

b.   Are there situations where staff security concerns limit your or your organisation's ability to deliver aid? (Trade-off)

    i.   If so, how do you manage this?

c.   Do you think these adaptations have affected the way humanitarian workers are perceived in conflict zones?

    i.   Has neutrality been impacted in any way?

Additional questions:

a.   Given the narrative about aid workers being increasingly targeted, this being true or not (more aid workers in general etc.), that influences risk perception…So how do you feel like your organisation is addressing this? Is this being addressed or not at all?

Transition to ending:

b.   Are there any other issues or concerns we didn't speak about that you would like to mention?

Thank you!!!

c.   **Additional contacts for further interviews??**

d.   **Protocols, contingency plans, etc. they wanna share?**

Follow up questions and phrases

- Do you think these adaptations have affected the way humanitarian workers are perceived in conflict zones? Has neutrality been impacted in any way?