A STRATEGY TO ESTABLISH A FIELD PRESENCE IN ALINDAO, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

LEARNING REVIEW 2018

© Christophe da Silva for Action Against Hunger

A STRATEGY TO ESTABLISH A FIELD PRESENCE IN ALINDAO, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Benjamin Viénot

Former Country Director
Central African Republic

BACKGROUND: ACTION AGAINST HUNGER'S RESPONSE TO THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN ALINDAO

In 2017, the South Eastern parts of Central African Republic (CAR) experienced a series of violent and sudden armed clashes between armed groups and communities. In particualr, the city of Alindao in the Basse Kotto prefecture witnessed heavy clashes between two armed groups in May 2017; which forced about 80 per cent of its population to be displaced. In the following months, almost all villages around Alindao were attacked. The total displaced population in the city reached 35,000 individuals. The very high level of tensions between communities also led to several, and largely unaccounted, killings of civilians.

As the humanitarian situation in Alindao was becoming one of the most severe across the country, Action Against Hunger decided to establish a presence there and respond to reported acute needs. However, it quickly appeared that the operational environment posed major challenges to the quick and effective deployment of humanitarian action; especially outside of Alindao city. All three humanitarian actors active in the area had been unable to deploy or sustain a presence outside Alindao city, as a result of targeted attacks against humanitarians and further threats from armed groups.

Despite these challenges, Action Against Hunger has now been successful in establishing a presence in Alindao and has positioned itself to be one of the first actors to reach out to affected populations outside of the city. Two main elements have been identified as crucial in achieving this result: following a strict strategy planning method and accepting to have a limited scope of operation.

FOLLOWING A STRICT STRATEGY PLANNING METHOD

The access strategy for Alindao was designed strictly following a five-stage methodology:

i. Zoning: Based on secondary information related to humanitarian needs, actors' presence, security and logistic constraints; the area was divided into three zones with different level of access. This helped to structure the next phases by common geographical areas.

ii. Security Risk Analysis: A security risk analysis was performed, which helped identify major security risks, ranked according to their likelihood and impact. Associated mitigation measures were developed (see security triangle pillar below).

iii. Actors mapping: Stakeholders, both

civilians and armed groups, were mapped to support efforts to build acceptance (see below). The team identified segments of the community that could be a threat and those who could support with activities. Identifying the points of contact of armed groups outside of Alindao was key to allowing a safe deployment of teams in the second stage of the access strategy.

iv. Humanitarian needs analysis: Few humanitarian actors were present in Alindao. The humanitarian needs analysis therefore included an analysis of the ongoing humanitarian response in order to look for synergies and to avoid duplication of efforts, while highlighting the ongoing response gaps.

v. Identification of levers using the security triangle: The security triangle is a well-known theoretical model categorising the different security levers available to the organisation into three pillars: deterrence, protection and acceptance. The results of the security analysis were strategic at this stage.

1. DETERRENCE: In accordance with a principled humanitarian approach, Action Against Hunger communicated to every stakeholder that it would suspend activities, or even withdraw from the area in case of any security incident that targeted its premises, employees or activities.

2. PROTECTION: Protection measures were adopted based on the security risk analysis. In addition to the usual protection of buildings, emphasis was placed on protecting staff from the main risk identified: stray bullets (safe rooms); as well as on our capacity to rapidly evacuate (delocalised staff hosted in an Action Against Hunger-rented guesthouse and equipped with adapted communication). The limited availability of evacuation flights (8 max capacity) forced Action Against Hunger to limit the size of the team present in Alindao.

3. ACCEPTANCE: Acceptance is the security pillar that has been applied the most extensively within the Alindao access strategy, across the following two components:

A Active Acceptance: Active acceptance regards how, when and what to communicate to stakeholders. The actor mapping was used to support active communication towards main stakeholders about Action Against Hunger's mandate, charter and work. Dedicating human resources (a national liaison officer) in support to the Field Coordinator was key in succeeding here. Communicating with stakeholders within Alindao city was quite easy whereas actively building acceptance outside of Alindao took much longer as counterparts were hard to reach safely.

B Passive Acceptance: Passive acceptance refers to the perception stakeholders retain of Action Against Hunger, which can be influenced by the type and timing of activities a humanitarian organisation implements. In the initial phase, in order to rapidly and widely gain acceptance, Action Against Hunger decided to first focus on quick-impact, highly visible activities. The aim was for Action Against Hunger to be perceived as an organisation able to quickly make a difference in peoples' lives. A good example of this was the drilling of new boreholes and implementation of health activities targeting children. In the second phase, Action Against Hunger expanded its scope of activities in Alindao city to less visible, but still impactful, provision. The third phase expanded provision to villages on the outskirts of Alindao, for example setting up mobile clinics for children under five.

With consideration of the sensitivity of the context due attention was placed on ensuring that every step of project implementation would follow a participatory approach, in full transparency with local stakeholders. This, along with a strictly impartial selection of staff and beneficiaries, helped Action Against Hunger remain perceived as a neutral and impartial organisation, which was key for gaining acceptance. Some activities have been purposely discarded. The threat of armed groups rendered highly visible or sensitive activities inappropriate (for example, activities involving heavy cash management).

ACCEPTING TO HAVE A LIMITED SCOPE OF OPERATION

The phasing described in the passive acceptance paragraph above was recognised as fundamental for the success of this strategy. With Action Against Hunger being new to the Alindao area, initially restricting presence in remote areas enabled a sufficient amount of time for a positive reputation to develop. Action Against Hunger then benefited from the perception that it is an active organisation, one that can make a swift difference in peoples' lives.

It was really tempting to move quickly to villages outside Alindao, but we resisted this urge. Debates were continuously ongoing amongst the team about whether we should move quicker. However, the team managed to reach a common understanding and Action Against Hunger closely followed this phasing approach, which ultimately proved successful.

CONCLUSION

The approach described in this article is not new and should not represent a major breakthrough for Action Against Hunger. Still, this strategic method could be considered as a minimum for any base planning to open in a challenging environment. It must also be noted that the strict implementation of this approach will not prevent all potential challenges. Continuous analysis of the local environment is therefore necessary, with a swift capacity to adapt accordingly.

For more information contact: irobin@ actioncontrelafaim. org