



Humanitarian Workers Of Tomorrow

Definition

The OCHA definition of **humanitarian worker** “includes all workers engaged by humanitarian agencies, whether internationally or nationally recruited, or formally or informally retained from the beneficiary community, to conduct the activities of that agency.”¹ There were over 570,000 humanitarian aid workers in 2017.²

Key insights

The proportion of expatriate humanitarian workers will decrease, increasing the diversity of perspectives in management and decision-making

Local civil society and national NGOs will have an ever-increasing share of direct implementation and operational responsibility. Concurrently, INGOs will increasingly rebalance the proportion of local staff hired at management level and increase the degree of autonomy afforded to country offices.

Pervasive insecurity for humanitarian workers in conflict contexts

The dangers to which aid workers are exposed are unprecedented; attacks and insecurity will continue to be a problem for agencies operating with staff at the community level. Although the absolute number of staff at risk could decrease with new modalities of intervention (e.g. remote cash-based programming) and greater localization, humanitarian workers operating in dangerous contexts will continue to be at risk.

Changes by 2030

➤ **Diversity in management**

In a bid to increase the quality and effectiveness of their work, and more accurately reflect their beneficiary communities, INGOs such as Oxfam, Amnesty International, and Action Aid are moving their headquarters to the Global South to be “closer to the ground” (Amnesty’s

¹ ReliefWeb (2008) [Glossary of Humanitarian Terms](#)

² Knox, P; Stoddard, A; Tichel, L; Foley, M (2018) [The State of the Humanitarian System](#), ALNAP pg 16



Secretary General Salil Shetty's phrase).³ There has also been a trend toward putting non-Western staff in leadership positions at INGOs.⁴ Though progress is slow, this shift endeavors to address problems with the traditional expat-led model, such as frequent changes in leadership, the undervaluing of local staff, and cultural insensitivity.⁵ There reportedly is still significant inequity in salaries, with local staff systematically being paid less than expatriate staff.⁶ The rebalancing of management roles will lead to greater diversity among decision makers but could be slow to manifest.

➤ **The professionalization of the humanitarian sector**

The humanitarian sector has seen a transformation in the profile of humanitarian workers. One of the most striking transformations is toward greater professionalism. The most evident driver of this change stems from NGOs having to meet the increasingly robust international standards of quality and reporting required by funding agencies, governments in countries of response, and beneficiaries. In the 1990s, efforts were made to launch coordinated quality and accountability initiatives in the humanitarian sector, including the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International, People in Aid, and the Sphere Project. These initiatives, along with subsequent partners, created the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), a unified guide to be used across the sector. NGOs have had to professionalize their operations to meet these obligations.

The professionalization of aid work was a contested issue in the 1990s, where groups, namely Médecins Sans Frontières, debated whether such measures would restrict the independence and neutrality of their work.⁷ However, these objections have quieted, and “the tension between activism and professionalism is no longer a discussion on the agenda of

³ Moorhead, J. and Sandler Clarke J. (2015) [Big NGOs Prepare To Move South, But Will It Make a Difference?](#), 16 November 2015

⁴ Humanitarian Futures Programme (2013) [The Future of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Humanitarian Sector](#), August 2013, pg 26

⁵ Mukasa, S. (1999) [Are Expatriate Staff Necessary in International Development NGOs? A Case Study of an International NGO in Uganda](#), 1999

⁶ *The Guardian* (2016) [Secret Aid Worker: Why Do Expats Earn More Than the Rest of Us?](#), 29 March 2016, & for a more nuanced commentary: *The Guardian* (2017) [The Salary Gap Between Expat and Local Aid Workers – It's Complicated](#), 19 April 2017

⁷ Rieff, D. (2002) [A Bed For the Night](#), Simon & Schuster, New York pg 308



international NGOs. The question is now less about whether the sector should be professionalized [...] than how to act professionally in the field.”⁸

As a result NGOs are now more focused on providing administrative, financial, and human resource support for operations. They are now staffed by career salaried employees who are expected to have technical skills and work within the confines of their job descriptions. Though there have been benefits to professionalization, such as improvement in the standards of service delivery, many aid workers lament that NGOs are increasingly removed from focusing on the people they are trying to help⁹ as they meet a higher burden of accountability and reporting. Additionally, research suggests that the distribution of professionalization activities unfairly disadvantages national staff, who are not given the same opportunities as their expatriate colleagues.¹⁰

To meet the push toward professionalization, an increasing number of courses and professional trainings have been developed by academic institutions and international NGOs.¹¹ This trend is likely to continue, as professional certification (particularly when accredited by an academic institution) can be an avenue to recognizing the experience of many humanitarian workers who do not have high levels of formal education. The link between humanitarian organizations and academia is likely to strengthen in this field.

➤ **Security environment for aid workers**

It is estimated that the level of violence directed against aid workers is three times higher than it was 10 years ago.¹² Such abuse affects all populations in need of assistance as it can reduce humanitarian intervention.

⁸ Dauvin, P. (2004) [Être un professionnel de l'humanitaire ou comment composer avec le cadre imposé](#), *Revue Tiers Monde* 4 (180), pgs 825–840

⁹ Dauvin, P. (2004) [Être un professionnel de l'humanitaire ou comment composer avec le cadre imposé](#), *Revue Tiers Monde* 4 (180), pgs 825–840

¹⁰ Rigby, B. (2013) [Professionalising Aid Work: The Missing Links](#), WhyDev

¹¹ Here are a few examples of such courses and trainings: [Manager Humanitaire](#) at IRIS Sup', Humanitarian Response Intensive Course at Harvard University, [Refugees and Humanitarian Emergencies Certificate](#) at Georgetown University, various [master's degrees](#) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the [Humanitarian Leadership Programme](#)

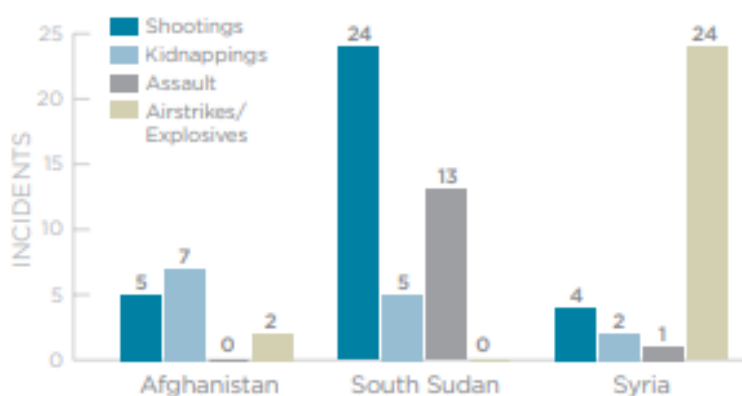
¹² Stoddard, A., Harmer, A., and DiDomenico, V. (2009) [Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Update](#), Humanitarian Policy Group, April 2009



However, the level and type of violence against humanitarian workers varies depending on the context, their personal characteristics (e.g. national staff or expatriate, or membership of a religious group), and the organization with which they are affiliated. In Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen “there were 13 times as many national staff victims as international (expatriate) victims.”¹³; “Similarly, the ratio of overall national staff victims to international staff victims rose in 2017.¹⁴” Insecurity of aid workers will require continued adaptation of modalities of intervention and composition of staff depending on the context of intervention.

Tactics and Types of Violence in the Most Volatile Contexts

Tactics used in top three most violent contexts, 2017



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes (2018) [Aid Worker Security Report 2018: Figures at a Glance](#)

Uncertainties

As the work of some humanitarian agencies shifts, the human resources that they require will also change. Beyond the trend of greater localization, as national NGOs increasingly receive funding directly rather than as subcontractors, they will require an influx of support staff to manage additional burdens of accountability and compliance. Similarly, if INGOs reduce their rate of direct implementation abroad, staff profiles will likely shift from operational expertise toward fundraising, technical skills, analysis, and advocacy. The humanitarian worker of tomorrow will be shaped by the way in which actors are structured and the dynamics of the systems in which they intervene. The ability of humanitarian actors to

¹³ Aid Worker Security Database, [Aid Worker Security Report 2016: Figures at a Glance](#) pg. 1

¹⁴ Aid Worker Security Database, [Aid Worker Security Report 2018: Figures at a Glance](#) pg. 1



adequately resource their organizations as their place in the sector adapts will determine their level of success and sustainability.

Controversies and debates

There is some disagreement regarding the humanitarian sector's current degree of professionalization, and whether this trend toward a more "professional" aid sector may actually be slowing or reversing. For instance, some reports have highlighted the need and the appetite for an even greater extent of professionalization,¹⁵ whereas other reports conclude that the sector should already be considered professionalized and underline the potential downsides to the trend (such as distance between aid worker and beneficiary, barriers to entry, and greater risk aversion and decline in innovation).¹⁶ Some humanitarian experts believe that the push toward professionalization is being challenged and may not continue to the same degree.

¹⁵ Russ, C. (2010) [Global Survey on Humanitarian Professionalisation](#), ELRHA, 9 May 2015

¹⁶ James, E. (2016) [The Professional Humanitarian and the Downsides of Professionalisation](#), Overseas Development Institute