

Stress related to safety and security

An introduction to managing stress in humanitarian aid workers
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Max Glaser, Pax-Consultancy
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

m.glaser@pax-consultancy.com

Lead questions: *Why* do people volunteer. *What* happens to them and *How* does this affect them: motives, exposures and coping.

Security and safety of aid workers:

That insecure situations and alien environments may lead to stress is obvious. Conversely however, the same applies: prevailing stress (cumulative or acute) itself may lead to insecurity as stress reactions can cause escalation in critical situations or instabilities in teams. However, there is much more to say about exposure of aid workers to stress beyond or long before critical events such as armed-robbery, assaults, intimidation, extortion, or in the worst cases, abduction or hostage taking. Insecurity and unsafe conditions in non-violent situations is much more common than usually appraised, leading to neglect of taking simple measures which could have prevented exposure to insecurity and ensuing stress reactions.

There has been a change in the general setting of aid operations. Receiving environments tend to be more hostile and violent. There is a diminishing respect for aid operations and workers who are more often exposed to targeted actions. This trend is an expression of what has become known as the “politicisation” of aid. Although it cannot be denied there has been an increase in critical incidents such as hostage taking or assassination of aid workers, the majority of casualties and injuries are still caused by “ordinary”, easy to prevent events such as traffic accidents or tropical diseases. In addition, mental disorders and stress are much more common than generally assumed (by aid workers themselves).

Paradigmatic shifts in behaviour

Underlying this all, still, are more fundamental causes contributing to un-safety and insecurity of aid workers. Aid workers are exposed to *shifts in perceptions, attitudes and behaviour* as they move from relatively familiar situations to complete different environments in terms of climate, geography, culture, language, habits and beliefs. This may lead to shifts in behaviour and life-style, self-adapted norms and values. The high sense of duty, common amongst aid workers, may promote risk-taking and intensive life-styles. The above shifts may cause a distorted reality check on their own vulnerability and susceptibility.

Aid workers are also exposed to organisational and group pressures to perform – ‘the mission must be accomplished’. The conditions under which they live and work, in the context of value and normative shifts, may cause feelings of over- or under estimation. “I could and should have done better” or, I can do better than I have” are common reactions. The mirror of this is the underestimation of the dangers and the vulnerabilities in the work conditions and their own self-perceptions.

Managerial thresholds

The fact that aid workers operate far away from their headquarters or “superiors” creates a “managerial isolation”. Self created work norms are established, operating under pressures often unknown to the operational responsible. On top of all this, aid workers, not always full-grown professionals, are exposed to extraordinary responsibilities. They have to manage tens, sometimes hundreds of staff, expatriates and in majority nationals. They are responsible for relatively large budgets, running into millions of dollars at times. Many aid workers are not familiar or experienced with this.

Last, aid workers often forget that they do not enjoy diplomatic protection, nor are they exempted from law, including national (penal) laws. As foreigners they will be judged under different standards, sometimes lighter, often more severe than nationals. Opposite, treatment of nationals under their own laws can be harsh and ruthless. In search for accountability and justice, (expatriate) aid workers often forget this and in the drive to “sort out what happened” (e.g. a robbery), may cause immense harm by filing a complaint at local law enforcement. This has led to the imprisonment and in some occasions even the execution of staff. Needless to say, this can end in severe traumatic experiences.

What can be done?

There are two levels of imperative action, the individual aid worker (expatriate or national) and the organizational level. On the first various recommendations can be made. *First* personal behaviour of staff must be monitored. This will enable responsible managers to support, coach and correct eventually risky behaviour, be it for the aid worker, its environment (co-workers, beneficiaries, the team or the organisation as such). *Second*, personal attention must be devoted on individual basis. This can be done in individual mid-term evaluations or by informal attention. *Third*, group dynamics can be enhanced by organising informal group meetings, events and formal discussions amongst the workers. *Fourth*, relations with the environment (beneficiaries, populations, colleagues organisations) can be enhanced by deliberate attention amongst the team members to this aspect and the relation to their own personal behaviour. *Last*, Rest & Relief (R&R) must be organised and guaranteed on regular basis. This must be ensured to be implemented by deliberately monitoring whether aid workers indeed do take their R&R in time as the inclination is often to continue to work.

On the organisational level some preventive measures and managerial tools can be introduced. *First*, the line-management must ensure they know the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of the expatriates (and other staff) in the field. Behaviour, and attitude must be in line with the organisations beliefs, values, but also acceptable in legalistic and normative sense (e.g. UDHR, Code of Conduct of ICRC). *Second*, responsibilities on all levels must be clarified, either through job-descriptions or through the organisations mandate and mission statement. *Third*, clear limits must be given to as how far field workers can and must go, i.e. the limits of risk taking, in geographic, behavioural and operations must be set and stipulated as mandatory. This can be done by codifying them (Code of Conduct) and setting general policies (Security Policy, HRM policy etc). *Fourth*, support must be organised, in the sense of managerial support for the responsibilities (financial, HRM, mental and physical welfare). *Fifth*, prevention can be promoted through pre-mission preparations, courses and coaching sessions in the field. *Last*, intervention capacities can be organised to address acute incidents, both in individual cases on individual and team basis, e.g. after assaults or critical incidents. The existence of intervention capacities for extreme incidents such as kidnapping, next to avail over adequate response mechanisms, also enhances and boosts the morale, awareness and self-confidence of aid workers.

Are stress-reactions inevitable and always negative?

Although it is clear that generating more knowledge on the prevalence and causes of stress amongst aid workers, and generate preventive responses to these, it must also be noted that many of the prevailing stressors identified perhaps belong to the inevitable characteristics of the aid operations. Some are typical for aid work environments, such as often hostile and violent environments, whereas other also pertain to normal work characteristics of professionals, such as work-pressure, responsibility the pressure to perform and so forth. In part the conditions creating stressors (in aid operations) may be the very reasons why people are attracted to do aid work.

Stress and safety and security management.

The main objective of security management should be: “The implementation of humanitarian aid operations in under (risky) security prone situations, while ensuring the safety and well-being of staff, the security of premises and materials and *protection of the image of the organisation*”.

In the context of the first, ‘safety and well being of staff’ mostly attention is paid to the physical well being of staff, emphasising the physical risks (injuries or death). Often, little to no attention is given to the fact that stress (accumulated or PTSS) damages people but also promotes to unsafe behaviour.

Under stressful conditions or in dangerous events people have different reactions. The same person may also vary in reaction in different situations. Experience or recurring incidents may change these reactions. Most people do not know how they will react in challenging, strange and alien, or life-threatening situations. Equally, people who claim to know their exact responses are theoretically exposed to a different risk: overestimation. Much depends on the social-context staff operates in (team-size, competence, confidence & mutual trust, maturity & experience) as well as the individual’s and the group’s behaviour during, as well as outside work-hours. Crucial determinants are living and working conditions and the availability of (professional) support and effective, competent leadership.

There is perhaps a contradiction in the “mission” of humanitarian aid workers. A major part of the motivation to go on often dangerous or unknown missions, is out of compassion and a will ‘to do good’. However, there could be a whole set of other, more personal motivation involved; curiosity for adventure or personal challenges. These often go hand-in-hand with a certain search for tension or even stress. The other aspect of stress - or adrenaline provoking incidents - is that this is often regarded as a protective bio-physical defence mechanism, necessary, even essential, to heighten the attention in case of danger. What is often forgotten (amongst aid workers) is that exposure to high-levels of adrenaline over long periods, also has its negative, draining impact, both physically as mentally.

In the context of humanitarian assistance these aspects of ‘duty’ or ‘mission’ are often creating internal and external pressures on people to accept higher risks (or demands) than they normally would. Group pressure may have the same effect, or even merely being in a different environment, may lead to (unconscious) acceptance of different values or norms. This personal paradigm-shift can potentially lead to deviant behaviour (drugs and alcohol abuse, sexual and social) endangering both the physical and mental health of staff but also the security of the organisation as a whole.

Management of security situations, and the related stress originating from security prone situations cannot be identified only by looking at the contextual situational (factors and actors) and the external threats and risks analysis. Perhaps more importantly, the individual team-member as well as the collective team, leadership competencies and capabilities to identify (and deal) with stress due to insecurity, are the most crucial dimensions to achieve effective measures for the prevention and handling of stress in security prone conditions. “Management on distance”, so common under international aid agencies, promotes the above mentioned conditions as there is no real control or knowledge on the state-of-mind, capacities and coping-mechanisms of field managers.

Key to this is the competence and capability for communication. This does not only refer to the in-team communication provisions and settings (openness, frankness, equality) and the team-leader’s (line-manager) competence to define and communicate decisions (create consensus and acceptance). Of utmost and crucial importance is the competence of individuals for ‘internal-communication’ or introspection. The last refers to the above mentioned pattern of reaction of various people in various situations. How well does one know him- or herself? What do we know about or colleague’s reaction in security prone conditions, threat or risk in general? To which extent are people actually denying or risk as a potential threat against themselves.

The above are often summarised in the 4 C's of security, all related to how security is arranged within, around and between people themselves:

Common Sense contributes the most in dealing with safety & security, security plans and protocols only regulate the rules and practice.

Communication: Lines of communication and responsibility must be clear, yet it must always be possible to frankly discuss about (in) security, conditions, incidents, or concerns related to security

Consensus: there must be an internal (organizational, team) consensus about adequate (minimal) security measures, routines and (personal and collective) behaviour

Calmness and mutual support are essential during incidents or danger, we all know fear, but there must be the ability to know the other's fear and the capability to support him/her during critical moments

The above dimensions are often overlooked in the context of security management, both in the sense that recognition and observance of these may lead to a better and more effective security strategy, as well as that effective security management cannot exclude the objective of well being of individuals.

Suggested publications / resources:

- Brabant, Koenraad van; *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*; Humanitarian Practice Review Overseas Development Institute, 2000, ISBN 0 85003 457 4
- Brabant, Koenraad van; *Mainstreaming the Organisational Management of Safety & Security, A review of aid practices and a guide for management*; Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Practice Review, March 2001, ISBN 0 85003 494 9
- *Reflections on Humanitarian Action, Principles, Ethics and Contradictions*; Pluto Press, TransNational Institute (TNI), ECHO, 2001 ISBN 07453 1726 X
- United Nations Stress Management Booklet, *UNDPKO, UNITED NATIONS*
- RedR NGO Security Management resource material (CDROM): RedR, London, United Kingdom. Website RedR : <http://www.redr.org/>