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Work Stress of Humanitarian Delegates

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"The words 'despair' and 'frustration' cannot adequately express the depth of my feelings. I wish I could shelter all of the people I see now living in the streets in my heart and protect them from the violence and cold nights. And yet, we too, as humanitarian workers are not immune to this suffering."⁽¹⁾

Humanitarian Aid Worker in Gaza

The stress humanitarian workers endure in today's climate is unlike anything we have seen. Amid delivering aid and support for those in need, which is extremely difficult in and of itself, humanitarian workers must navigate the risky nature and ambiguity of modern warfare, the emotional burden of suffering, and the despair of loss. Above all, humanitarian workers often work under the conditions of unpredictable circumstances with personal risk. In an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) study, nearly 40% of staff were at risk for at least one mental health condition⁽²⁾. As the demand for humanitarian aid workers continues to increase, we must understand the effect of global challenges and the increasing complexity of their job, which can in turn impact on performance and mental states. It is equally urgent to create innovative programs and work organizations that can ensure the safety and well-being of humanitarian delegates while delivering protection and humanitarian aid to the victims.

Definitions and Distinctions

A humanitarian delegate is a professional representative who works for humanitarian organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) or the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). These humanitarian

delegates are deployed to conflict zones, disaster areas, or regions facing severe humanitarian crises. Their roles involve a wide range of activities aimed at alleviating human suffering and protecting the rights and dignity of affected populations.

The ICRC's mandate is rooted in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, which grant it a unique legal basis to operate in conflict zones. The Geneva Conventions give the ICRC the authority to protect and assist victims of armed conflict, including prisoners of war, the wounded, and civilians. Other humanitarian organizations, while operating under various legal frameworks and international laws, do not have this specific mandate under IHL. They typically derive their authority from agreements with host countries, UN resolutions, or their organizational charters.

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Humanitarian workers can be employed by a wide range of organizations, including international NGOs, local NGOs, UN agencies, and sometimes government agencies. The scope of organizations they can work for is broader than that of delegates. Humanitarian workers cover a wide array of functions, from emergency relief and development work to logistics, health care, education, and community development. Their work tends to be more hands-on and operational, directly involving the delivery of services and aid to affected population.

While both humanitarian delegates and humanitarian workers aim to alleviate suffering and provide aid, humanitarian delegates tend to

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have more specialized, mandate-driven roles with representational duties, whereas humanitarian workers have a broader, more operational focus on direct service delivery.

Focus of this study

While work stress can be experienced by Humanitarian Delegates and Humanitarian Workers, this study focuses on the occurrence of work stress by Humanitarian Delegates. The reason for this special focus is due to the fact that a first publication on work stress published in 1990 by the first author was based on an analysis of work stress of Humanitarian Delegates of the ICRC. This second study aims at comparing the stress factors and manifestations of today's Humanitarian Delegates in general including the stress of ICRC Delegates but going beyond a single Humanitarian Organization. Future studies clarifying the stress factors of Humanitarian Workers would be very relevant in light of the fact that conflicts are growing and attending to victims are shared concerns of Humanitarian Delegates and Delegate Workers.

Contemporary circumstances

According to the United Nations (UN), the demand for humanitarian aid is at record levels, with 360 million people in need of humanitarian assistance as of June 2023⁽⁴⁾. This demand is a direct result of a world facing mounting polarization and conflict as reported by OCHA (2022)⁽³⁾. The Global Peace Institute's (GPI) 2023 Report described 2022 as "the deadliest year for armed conflict since the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the deadliest year in the history of the GPI" (p. 3)⁽⁴⁾. In view of the increases of violence against increasing violence against people who provide aid, Switzerland, an elected member of the UN Security Council, took the initiative to negotiate a draft resolution on the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel. The adoption of the resolution is an important signal for the protection of civilians. The resolution garnered widespread support, with a total of 97 UN member states co-sponsoring the initiative. (FDFA, 24th May 2024)

In every continent, inequality, ethnic strife, and geopolitics create new triggers for aggression and violence between various warring factions. All the more, humanitarian workers are called upon to deliver

essential resources into increasingly desolate and dangerous environments. Their resilience and agility when faced with adversary conditions determine their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities and missions, and indirectly impacting the survival and vulnerability of the victims. Thus, it is important to evaluate the impact that factors affecting their working conditions have on the mental well-being of humanitarian workers.

Today, the nature of war has made the role of a humanitarian delegate more demanding and more risky. In decades past, the neutral role of humanitarian workers in the context of war was respected. Humanitarian workers wore uniforms and bore symbols that signaled their neutrality, and combatants respected their role as an impartial humanitarian third party⁽⁵⁾. International humanitarian law also protects civilians from direct attacks. However, the rise of splintered rebel groups and non-state militarized factions has drastically changed the boundaries of combatants, civilians, and humanitarian delegates on the battle ground.

Heavily populated areas are becoming a common site of conflict, causing mass casualties among civilians (Brehm, 2012). In addition, combatants of armed groups are no longer wearing identifiable uniforms or insignia anymore as an evasive strategy or camouflage. Thus, from 1989 to 2010, 60% of rebel groups and 50% of government forces now deliberately and indiscriminately attacked civilians⁽⁶⁾. The lack of respect for civilian life has also impacted the treatment of humanitarian workers. 108 UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) staff have been killed aiding civilians in Gaza since October 2023⁽⁶⁾. 19 aid workers were killed in Sudan from April to August 2023⁽⁷⁾. Humanitarian workers must now assist and protect innocent civilians without the guarantee that their own safety will be respected. The emotional and mental toll these circumstances have on humanitarian workers cannot be overstated.

Contracted private military and security companies (PMSCs) have also contributed to more dangerous working conditions for humanitarian workers. PMSCs act as militarized factions that operate outside of public view, making them a favorable option for some

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countries to achieve national interests without being subject to much public backlash for brutal actions and human rights violations (Saner, 2015). Because PMSCs are a relatively recent development, they operate in a vacuum since national regulatory frameworks are often absent and cannot be subject to international law for human rights abuses due to their non-state actor status (Del Prado, 2011). As such, PMSCs have made serious human rights violations that have also impacted aid workers. UN experts from Working Groups on The Use of Mercenaries concluded that the Wagner group, a PMSC linked to Russia operating in the Central African Republic, “conducted gross and systematic human rights violations, including mass summary executions, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, looting, enforced disappearances and torture during interrogations,” in addition to “harassment of peacekeepers and aid workers.”⁽⁸⁾ Aid workers state that negotiations with PMSCs are entirely different from rebel groups in that they operate under different interests⁽⁹⁾. PMSCs add another dimension to the already challenging work of humanitarian delegates as they are an actor that perpetuates human rights abuses, refuses demands for humanitarian aid, and threatens the safety of humanitarian workers.

The safe humanitarian space is also being breached due to the pervasive intrusions caused by digital actors. Humanitarian aid workers must also confront the possibility of cyber-attacks as technology has increasingly been weaponized to retrieve data, spread misinformation, and threaten aid workers. During times of conflict, combating parties may decide to manipulate the trust and credibility of humanitarian spaces for their interests. During a rise in ethnic tensions in Assam for example, false social media posts indicating renewed attacks on the Muslim population caused substantial humanitarian impacts. This example illustrates how misinformation can significantly impact humanitarian operations⁽¹⁰⁾. Information communication technologies (ICTs) have also been utilized to threaten and agitate attacks on NGOs. In Mogadishu, militant Somali group Al Shabab attacked a UN Development Programme (UNDP) compound, directed a personal threat to UN Resident Representative Nicholas Kay, and shared personal details of two staff members who were killed (Vazquez Llorente et al., 2014). This demonstrates

the ability of militant groups to access personal information and spread fear through broadcasting threats on the internet. Humanitarian aid workers must face the growing threat of attack in the digital space as ICT infrastructure is further integrated into their operations.

Beyond the context of conflict, the growing impact of climate change is ramping up the need for humanitarian aid. In the last decade, climate-related disasters almost tripled in comparison to the 1980s⁽¹¹⁾. The uptick in disasters has triggered 24.9 million new displacements in 2019⁽¹²⁾. In many areas where conflict already creates demand for humanitarian aid, climate change further exacerbates conditions for aid to be delivered. Yemen, a country already riddled with conflict, is experiencing climate-induced water shortages which further provoke an already desolate situation⁽¹³⁾. It is estimated that by 2050, 1.2 billion people could be displaced due to natural disasters⁽¹⁴⁾. The growing demand for humanitarian aid will stress an already under-resourced and under-financed sector, which will in turn contribute to greater stress on the populations already suffering from war and environmental crises as well as on the humanitarian delegate working in these hardship environments without sufficient means to offer relief and support.

Compounding factors that have given rise to increased demand for humanitarian aid are creating funding gaps that contribute to the stress and work overload of humanitarian workers. Although the generosity of donors today has been unmatched, funding gaps for humanitarian assistance have gone from \$4.6 billion in 2013 to \$22.2 billion in 2022⁽¹⁵⁾. There is evident donor fatigue at a time when humanitarian crises have intensified greatly. For humanitarian workers, this gap translates into job cuts and site closures, creating work overload, threatening service delivery and vigilance over human rights violations. On a personal side, these saving measures or cuts create uncertainty for their careers and well-being. In 2023, the ICRC’s funding gaps created 1,800 job losses and the closure of 26 global sites⁽¹⁶⁾. Besides its Ukraine operation, all other humanitarian operations around the world have a negative funding outlook, which will impact the effectiveness of the ICRC’s operations and consequently its mission of protecting the victim of war. It goes without saying, humanitarian workers are

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dealing with an increasingly difficult workload with fewer resources. Work related stress symptoms will most likely increase significantly and could become a prevailing part of the organizational life of an ICRC delegate, especially in already difficult locations and postings.

Scope, theory, and sources of stress

This article builds on an initial paper written by the first author (Saner, 1990) who worked as an ICRC delegate and expert in Human Resource Management and Training. He described the difficult conditions of aid work in daily life reflecting on the pioneering work of Hans Selye (1976) and applied pioneering knowledge of some of the occupational stress concepts developed by Davidson & Cooper (1981) which were then broken down into the work arena, home arena, social, cultural and environmental arena, and individual arena. He also added categories that are more directly related to the humanitarian work of an ICRC delegate such as fight-flight impasse, unpredictability of emergency situations, work ambiguity and cognitive dissonance. Some of these categories are described below.

Since this initial report, many studies on the effects of stress on humanitarian workers have been conducted by different researchers such as De Jong et al. (2022), Ager et al. (2012), Yunn et al. (2023), and Antares Foundation (2012). These studies have increased the general understanding of the effects of stress on humanitarian workers. This article recognizes and incorporates the work done by these studies and expands on the contemporary theory of stress in this field by offering a comparative analysis of support strategies and furthering recommendations for the well-being of aid workers.

With the aforementioned contemporary circumstances, the documented stress exhibited by humanitarian aid workers is significant. In a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2018) research project, approximately 30% of international staff reported significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after returning from their assignments. In Uganda, Jordan, and Sri Lanka, between half and two-thirds of the staff in these three countries showed clinically significant levels of depression. A different study by Ager et

al., 2018, found that 39% of humanitarian workers in South Sudan experience depression and 24% are estimated to have PTSD (Ager et al., 2018). Although each context has different stressors, it is essential to understand the recurring themes in humanitarian work that trigger mental health deficiencies, the existing strategies deployed to support aid workers, and opportunities for growth in ensuring the mental health of aid workers. Findings of these three interconnected inquiries help promote the sustainability of humanitarian operations in the long run and will also support humanitarian organizations to comply with a human centered management policy and managerial practices. Some of the following stress factors are specific to the ICRC Delegate in regard to their work of visiting Prisoners of War in detention centers, other stress factors are affecting all Humanitarian Delegates.

Fight-flight impasse

When entering prisons and detention centers, an ICRC Delegate sees detainees or prisoners of war alone without the interference or the presence of prison guards. The so-called EST (*“Entretien Sans Témoins”*; in English, “Interview without Witness”) creates an intimate and private space between the delegate and the detainee. Based on this intimacy and the reputation of ICRC, the delegate hears of and, at times, sees the signs of human bestiality and cruelty.

Ill-treated and sometime tortured detainees and prisoners of war (POWs) disclose their pain and misgivings to the delegate who inadvertently empathizes with the detained person and feels some of the suffering which was inflicted on this fellow human being. The normal response would be to act on the information and on his own feelings and to neutralize or eliminate the emotional impact of the stressor, in this particular context, the psychological impact caused by the behavior of the torturer-guardian or the jailer who violates fundamental ethical norms and values.

But the contract agreed upon between the ICRC and the detaining authorities severely limits the delegate’s room for reactions to the emotional stress of witnessing another human being’s suffering. He cannot openly challenge the situation of incarceration without risking expulsion from the country. In fact,

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he can only use restrained approaches as a way of intervening, such as diplomacy, negotiation, and persuasion. Anything more drastic or more aggressive as, for instance, public denunciation (as sometimes practiced by Amnesty International) would break the agreed confidentiality resulting in expulsion of the entire operation from the country, in turn jeopardizing the minimum protection of the entire prisoned POW or political detainee population. Yet the delegate cannot opt for the flight response either. He has to protect the victim. His role is to support the detainee or POW and to try to limit and restrain the conduct of the victimizing jailer. The ICRC delegate is caught in an impasse. Neither fight nor flight is possible. He therefore might easily experience a sense of powerlessness and anger. In some ways, he becomes a secondary victim, especially when a prolonged sense of powerlessness leads to feelings of impotence and hopelessness.

The unpredictability of emergency situations

Manmade catastrophes, such as war and armed conflict, are unpredictable. They can be anticipated, but full-scale planning and proactive actions are not possible. Rarely is there time for proactive planning as a way of anticipating measures needed to be undertaken during such calamities. As a result, the Humanitarian Delegate is forced to cope with an uneven workflow. He is easily overstressed during times of emergencies and under-stressed during times of stand-by.

Uncertainties of Humanitarian Work Careers

The unpredictability of humanitarian situations can also be related to a sense of career impasse. Like many humanitarian organizations, Humanitarian Organizations like the ICRC struggle to offer job security to its employees, while work stations can change rapidly. Only a small group of staff achieves a permanent employment status. The delegate cannot always expect lifetime employment. This lack of career prospects and tenure opportunities can create a sense of anxiety among the staff who may see a diminishing return of their continued field assignments, but also lack time to prepare for a career transition when returning to the home base.

Additionally, job insecurity means staff may at times consider themselves as competitors more so than colleagues, further reducing the sources

of emotional and social support available. Indeed, delegates must work with a diverse range of personalities in oftentimes challenging settings. Occasionally, these personalities can clash, adding further stress.

Work ambiguity

The delegate is also faced with the conflict of having to choose between a therapeutic as opposed to an administrative-legal approach. The delegate's primary function is to safeguard the application of the Geneva Conventions. He acts, therefore, in an administrative and legal capacity.

While visiting detainees or POWs, the delegate has to check a list of prescribed compliance items to make sure that the most important aspects of the Geneva Conventions are respected by the authorities. Yet, oftentimes, he is the only outside person that the POW or the political detainee can talk to. His presence allows for some abreaction of feelings and offers hope which can be crucial for the detainee's general mental and emotional well-being. At the same time, it would be impossible for the delegate to start a therapeutic relationship. A continuity of the visits cannot be guaranteed, nor is there a sufficient sense of privacy and security. Neither crisis intervention nor short-term therapy is possible under such circumstances to offer comfort to the suffering fellow being.

Still, something has to be offered to the detainee or POW. Checking a list of questions and sharing a cigarette is a way to interact, albeit at some distance but there is often a need to create an initially safe environment. Offering psychotherapy or counselling to the detainee or POW directly is too personal and also potentially too risky for the detainee or POW especially if the location is not safe from intrusion or eavesdropping by the jailing personnel. Such psychotherapeutic treatment may also become a challenge if delegates do not have or did not acquire these skills through special training. To find the right mix between administrative and quasi-therapeutic approaches can be extremely stressful, especially if the delegate is young, inexperienced and does not know how close the relationship should be or become between the delegate and the detainee.

Role conflict

The Humanitarian Delegate representing the ICRC

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has a multitude of official and unofficial roles to play. To the jailer and government officials he should act as a diplomat and semi-government official; to the detainee, he should be the protector, helper, healer, and friend; to headquarters management, he should be a willing, loyal, and compliant subordinate; to the local staff, he is asked to act in the role of a boss who often, as head of delegation, might be responsible for 20 people and a budget of up to half a million Swiss francs; to the community of the Red Cross organizations, journalists, and to the concerned world at large he should be able to represent ICRC and the victims at the same time.

In order to be effective, the ICRC delegate has to master all these roles and has to be skillful enough to be able to switch roles according to the demands of the situation. Not many people are prepared and able to fulfil such a job description especially when these role-switches could happen within a short span of time in the field, in the middle of conflict and shifting circumstances.

Local social and cultural context

Like diplomats, Humanitarian Delegates are expected to keep some distance from the local community in order to avoid slippage of confidential information. If such a slippage happens, this could not only discredit the organization itself but also, in the final count, harm the victims who need to be protected. On the other hand, the Humanitarian Delegates are expected to find ways to integrate themselves into the new community of the host country in order to establish an effective working relationship with various counterparts, be they government officials, representatives of other Humanitarian Organizations or local employees. To find the right mix between security needs and social and cultural integration is not easy. As a result, Humanitarian Delegates might either over-identify with the local community or remain aloof and isolated. Neither extreme is preferable, but to stay on middle ground is often a major challenge and can be very stressful.

Individual factors

In addition to stressors emanating from the work environment, Humanitarian Delegates often face multiple stressors concurrently emerging on a more individual basis. While learning a new job, which is

the protection of victims of war or armed conflict, the delegate is also learning to live, for instance, in an unfamiliar culture and climate that in some cases may reject their own ingrained cultural habits. As a result, the delegate can experience a strong sense of cultural disorientation leading to a sense of isolation.

While he is coping with cultural disorientation, the delegate is also witnessing the horrors of war and the human suffering so prevalent in detention centers. Seeing all kinds of violence committed in the name of all kinds of -isms, he is forced to re-examine the very foundations of his own belief system and, as a consequence, can easily feel more disoriented and even threatened in his own self-esteem and self-identity. Lazarus (1985) has pointed out that stress: "lies not in the environmental input but in the person's appraisal of the relationship between that input and its demands and the person's agendas (e.g., beliefs, commitments, goals) and capabilities to meet, mitigate or alter these demands in the interests of well-being." (Lazarus, 1985, p. 770)

Some of these external demands can be met through the delegate's own capabilities or be mitigated through effective in-service training programs in areas such as language skills, interpersonal skills, basic understanding of the Geneva Conventions, cross-cultural orientation, and negotiation capabilities. The difficulty over time lies in the loosening of the delegate's own belief and value system, which acts as an appraising and mitigating filter through which the perceived horrors of war and detention can be rationalized and brought under cognitive control.

Cognitive Dissonance

Prolonged exposure to cruelty and destruction can lead to an erosion of the delegate's intellectual armor and a decomposition of his own preferred '-ism' and belief system. This in turn can bring about a cognitive dissonance leading over time to confusion, aggression, depression, existential despair, cynicism, and nihilism (Saner, 1990, p. 3). Cognitive dissonance, as Festinger defined it, means "the existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions" (Festinger, 1957, p. 3).

Cruelty and atrocities occur almost everywhere. The justification for cruelty is often found in

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various ideological, religious, and idiosyncratic rationalizations. Once the delegate has seen through these justifications, there comes the dangerous moment where the protective armor of his own personal belief system becomes vulnerable. Metaphorically speaking, he might feel as if he were in a house whose roof has been removed by a tornado, leaving him exposed to empty open space. Facile explanations that based on specific groups (e.g., Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, communists, capitalists, etc.) do not hold up anymore against the evidence of observed cruelty in all parts of today's world. In response to this leveling of belief systems, the delegate might strengthen his defense mechanism, become rigid, righteous, and inflexible, or use an escape mechanism of blunting his feelings and indulging his senses in the ancient art of forgetting and pleasure-seeking.

Both approaches might work for a while until further exposure to cruelty and destruction evades these defensive maneuvers as well. It is at this stage that many delegates drop out and leave the organization in order to revert to a previously held mental equilibrium, thus confirming in this sense Festinger's rules which govern prolonged cognitive dissonance. Other delegates experience burnout and become emotionally unstable and in need of urgent support, be this through relocation to a headquarters post in Geneva, or, if need be, through assignment to an outplacement program.

For instance, there was a perception that ICRC delegates were recruited from well-to-do Calvinist families in Geneva. Working for the ICRC was like an initiation rite taking place after the completion of general education and prior to assuming full career and family responsibilities. But this old world is gone and so is the old ICRC. It was therefore no great surprise to hear Cornelio Sommaruga (1988), the first Catholic and Swiss-Italian president of ICRC state: "The Red Cross is not a philosophy or an ideology, nor is it an intellectual notion of the exercise of charity. It is first and foremost a practical action, carried out by a delegate in the field or in Geneva, an action that generally combines common sense, thought, experience and mature judgment."

The transition from a charity-type organization to a more professional humanitarian organization

probably requires a different type of delegate, namely, one who can let go of the old protective belief system while at the same time be able to cope with the cognitive dissonances and multiple stress factors inherent in humanitarian actions in the field. In the next section, we survey some of the literature that can explain and inform the challenges and approaches to addressing these stress factors in humanitarian organizations.

Cognitive dissonance can be identified as a key psychological barrier to the mental health of a humanitarian aid worker. They experience a systematic weakening of one's belief system known as the Belief-Disconfirmation Paradigm (Harmon-Jones et al., 2019). Studies by the American Psychological Association concluded that "dissonance is aroused when people are exposed to information that is inconsistent with their beliefs (Harmon-Jones et al., 2019, p. 6)."

When aid workers are exposed to traumatic experiences which test their belief system, it can cause "rejection or refutation of the information" (Harmon-Jones et al., 2019, p. 6). Such behaviors become dangerous in the context of humanitarian relief, as dissonant delegates may damage the morale and motivation of others. It is then doubly important to treat and contain cases of cognitive dissonance within the humanitarian field, as it can negatively affect both the contracting delegate and their respective delegation. Such conduct will also affect the treatment and wellbeing of the already vulnerable victims of political suppression or conflicts and war.

Cognitive dissonance, the psychological discomfort experienced when holding two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes, can significantly impact a humanitarian delegate in various ways. What follows are specific situations which can cause cognitive dissonance stress for a Humanitarian Delegate.

Ethical Dilemmas:

Neutrality vs. Advocacy:

Delegates often need to remain neutral to gain access to all parties in a conflict. However, witnessing human rights violations can create a conflict between maintaining neutrality and advocating for the victims.

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Resource Allocation:

Deciding how to allocate limited resources can create dissonance when delegates must prioritize some needs over others, potentially leading to feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

Personal Beliefs vs. Organizational Policies:

Policy Conflicts: A delegate's personal beliefs or ethical standards might sometimes conflict with the policies or strategies of their organization.

Cultural Sensitivities:

Delegates might struggle with practices and norms in the host country that conflict with their own cultural values or human rights standards.

Impact vs. Expectations:

Effectiveness:

Delegates may experience dissonance if they perceive their efforts are not making a significant impact or if the outcomes do not meet their expectations.

Unintended Consequences:

Efforts to provide aid might sometimes result in unintended negative consequences, such as dependency or exacerbation of local conflicts, leading to feelings of responsibility or failure.

Effects of Cognitive Dissonance

Emotional Stress and Burnout:

Persistent cognitive dissonance can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout. The emotional toll of constantly navigating ethical and moral dilemmas can be significant.

Decision-Making Difficulties:

Impaired Decision Making

Dissonance can impair decision-making abilities, making it harder for delegates to make clear, confident choices under pressure.

Decreased Job Satisfaction

Feeling conflicted or dissatisfied with the outcomes of their work can reduce a delegate's overall job satisfaction and motivation.

Altered Perception and Behavior

To reduce dissonance, delegates might change their perceptions or attitudes. This could lead to rationalizing certain decisions, adjusting personal beliefs, or even experiencing a shift in their commitment to the mission.

Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Professional Support and Counselling

Access to psychological support and counseling can help delegates process their experiences and manage dissonance.

Training and Preparation

Adequate training in ethical decision-making and cultural competence can prepare delegates to handle conflicts more effectively.

Organizational Support:

Strong organizational policies that address ethical dilemmas and provide clear guidance can help mitigate dissonance.

Peer Support

Debriefing sessions and peer support groups can provide a platform for delegates to discuss their experiences and reduce feelings of isolation.

Reflective Practices

Encouraging reflective practices, such as journaling or peer discussions, can help delegates process their experiences and reconcile conflicting emotions.

Strengthening personal resilience

Building personal resilience through mindfulness, stress management techniques, and maintaining a work-life balance can help delegates cope with the demands of their role.

Cognitive dissonance is a significant psychological challenge for humanitarian delegates, arising from the complex and often conflicting nature of their work. Addressing it requires a combination of personal coping strategies and robust organizational support to ensure delegates can continue their crucial work effectively while maintaining their mental well-being.

Stress management by Humanitarian Organizations

What follows are a few examples of stress management by leading Humanitarian Organizations such as the ICRC, MFS and IFRC. All three humanitarian organizations are aware of the risk of work stress on their Delegates and are developing meaningful methods to limit the impact of work stress.

ICRC

ICRC has a team of psychologists and human

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resource specialists who are aware of the risk of how stress could impact the well-being of ICRC delegates and affect the care of the victims. They study the risk of stress and publish related articles and manuals (Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, 2016) ⁽¹⁷⁾. The current wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and Yemen are causing very serious stress to the humanitarian organization and their delegates, especially when attacks and killings of humanitarian workers, for instance in Gaza, is a reality. The work-related stress is further aggravated by the financial cut-backs of ICRC's budget which led to layoffs of delegates adding job insecurity to the already embedded high operational stress.

To adapt to the countless stressors forced upon delegates in the modern era of humanitarian work, the ICRC has worked to update its staff support system to include the psychosocial aid expected from an organization of its caliber. To do so, the ICRC has implemented measures such as psychosocial support programs for field workers, including specialized staff-specific mental health and psychological support delegates, training programs to teach relaxation and de-stressing methods as well as delegation outings to connect delegates and to build team rapport ⁽²⁾⁽¹⁸⁾.

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) (MSF)

MSF appears proactive in the field of psychosocial support and treatment for its staff. The organization works to offer a wide array of resources, including mobile "Psychosocial Care Units" (PSCUs) that work to provide mental health support to staff globally ⁽¹⁹⁾. Units are designed and led by experts originating from the geographic area they support, allowing them to more effectively combat local issues. The organization's psycho-education training helps to inform staff about what to expect from postings, potential physical and emotional reactions, and maladaptive coping mechanisms ⁽¹⁹⁾.

This works parallel to the Peer Support Network, an online forum for MSF employees where delegates can exchange messages, past experiences, and news, serving as a means for tenured members to support new and incoming staff ⁽²⁰⁾. Additionally, MSF provides external counseling sessions, up to

twenty sessions a year, for staff members who need them ⁽¹⁹⁾. These services make MSF one of the more progressive humanitarian organizations when battling mental health crises.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

The IFRC has also offered support to its staff in case of stress reactions to fluid working conditions as described in previous sections of this article. To better handle such unstable contextual environment and ensuing negative impact, they have an occupational health, safety and well-being unit. IFRC workers are mandated to provide support to populations facing environmental disasters and catastrophes. Rescue operations and humanitarian support tend to take place under highly unstable circumstances, with logistic difficulties and with large number of casualties and highly vulnerable survivors. Staff were often working long hours with little breaks in order to save more lives. To "protect" their staff, IFRC have a burn-out prevention program and make a distinction between stresses that occurs at headquarters versus stress experienced in the field.

IFRC offers training in mental health awareness which includes good examples of coping with stress and advice to ensure a good work life balance. The IFRC has stress counsellors in five key zones of the world. They meet with all new delegates and explain what institutional psychosocial support is available to them. These professionals collect data, record general observations of psychosocial conditions of the staff and reflect on the evolution of work-related stressors through their annual report.

IFRC partners with other international agencies and contribute to the regularly updated guidelines of the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) who publishes the Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings that provides valuable information to organizations and individuals on how to respond appropriately during humanitarian emergencies (IASC Guidelines on Mental Health, 2007).

Overall, outdated notions of mental health were maintained within humanitarian work until the 2010s, and only workers having suffered the most

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traumatic of experiences were offered counseling. “We used to say that you’d earned your psychological debriefing if you’d been kidnapped. It had to be hardcore though: being held up on the road was not enough,” said an MSF psychologist reflecting on the situation (Joxe & Veilleux, 2023). With the evolving complexity of conflicts and a greater appreciation for mental health that accompanied the turn of the 21st century, recognition of stress among humanitarian workers has shifted from something of a taboo to an issue of immediate importance, at least within the leading organizations, such as MSF, ICRC and IFRC. Nevertheless, more progress could be made, as we explain in the recommendations below.

Recommendations

Drawing on the research and data described above, the following recommendations are made to provide suggestions to strengthen humanitarian organizations’ policies to reduce stress and support the psycho-social well-being of delegates and workers.

Recommendation 1

Psychosocial services should be reinforced similarly to the functioning of the MSF’s psychosocial units. More robust support mechanisms, particularly intra-office support originating from the head delegates in close cooperation with the local staff would allow the Humanitarian Organizations retain team cohesion and prevent the social fractures which occur when delegates over utilize social media as their primary outlet for trauma or stress release.

Recommendation 2

Delegates should be helped to understand the causes of challenges of stress they may face in the field. A concrete understanding of excessive stress, destructive coping mechanisms, and cognitive dissonance and their side effects is necessary for all field-bound delegates to help the delegate’s better cope with the inevitable stressors that are part of the humanitarian work. Staff should be jointly educated on how to aid coworkers if such problems arise during an assignment and once stress symptoms are appearing. Cognitive dissonance, as the most compromising and least understood of these issues, must be addressed systematically from an organizational standpoint.

Recommendation 3

A very important task concerning stress mitigation rests with the chiefs of regional offices be they MSF, ICRC, IFRC or other humanitarian organizations. They should understand the psychological dimension of stress, not only the bodily fatigue reaction to overwork. It is the responsibility of the head of an office to identify delegates at risk of psychological burnout or PTSD and come to their support on a one-to-one basis but also organize the team at work in a way that they can support a delegate in distress. This requires adequate pre-mission training of the delegates. It also requires differentiating between using digital social support networks (e.g., delegates retreating into their rooms to engage in digital networking after difficult prison visits) compared to supportive physical community on site, that could offer emotional and moral support a fellow-delegates struggling with stress.

Recommendation 4

Humanitarian organizations are often the first employer of young delegates. In addition, a majority of the new delegates have little or no experience in humanitarian protection and relief work. The human resource practices of humanitarian organizations should be broadened and their hiring pool be diversified and widened by age and experience of its employees. Such a broader HR policy would not only be beneficial for the mental health of the historically young staff but also ensure that humanitarian organizations do not have to face delegates suffering from burnout often resulting in higher labor turnover rates which can deprive humanitarian organizations from much-needed knowledge and know-how.

Conclusion

Recognizing the psychological toll of their work, humanitarian organizations have to find ways to cope with the inevitable stress which is part of the humanitarian work in the field. Programs need to be implemented to equip delegates with coping mechanisms. These include stress management training, access to mental health professionals, and strong peer support networks. Encouraging open communication about the emotional impact of their experiences is crucial for fostering a culture of resilience within the humanitarian organizations.

Work Stress of Humanitarian Delegates cont.

The mental well-being of Humanitarian Delegates in general is not just the concern of the respective humanitarian organization whether ICRC, IFRC MSF or other organizations working in war torn parts of the world. Governments, donors, and the public all have a role to play. Continued support for these humanitarian organizations allows them to provide the best possible care for their delegates. Recognizing the sacrifices of these individuals and advocating for their safety can help alleviate some of the burden they carry.

Despite the immense burden they carry, Humanitarian Delegates persevere, driven by a commitment to alleviate suffering and to uphold human dignity. By acknowledging the challenges they face and prioritizing their well-being, we ensure they can continue their vital work as beacons of hope in the darkest of times. Their unwavering dedication in the face of immense stress serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of humanity and compassion.

Finally, there is a need for further research on delegates' stress levels, their cause-effect linkages, and the delegates' adaptive capabilities. A thorough study followed by corresponding remedial action could help decrease the delegates' current stress levels, increase their job satisfaction and job performance, and consequently further improve the protection they can offer to POWs, to political detainees, and to civilian populations suffering under situations of armed conflict. Such studies could help better identify the competence requirements and personal adaptability that could withstand multiple stressors and in ever changing humanitarian contexts while delivering performance results. Managing personal stress effectively may be the most important characteristic or strength of a qualified humanitarian aid worker of the 21st century.

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