Duty of care? Local staff and aid worker security

by Katherine Haver

Where security considerations compel the withdrawal of international aid workers, humanitarian agencies rely increasingly on national staff. Agencies tend to assume that locals are at less risk but this is not necessarily the case. They have largely failed to consider the ethics of transferring security risks from expatriate to national staff.

Since 1997 the number of major acts of violence (killings, kidnappings and armed attacks resulting in serious injury) committed against aid workers has nearly doubled. A recent study by the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)[1] compiled the most comprehensive global dataset to date of reported incidents of major violence against aid workers. Overall, there were over 500 reported acts of major violence against aid workers from 1997 to 2006 involving 1,127 victims and resulting in 511 fatalities. Violence against aid workers is most prevalent in Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Most aid worker victims are deliberately targeted, for political and/or economic purposes, rather than being randomly exposed to violence.

The study found that insecurity is not affecting all institutions in the same way. Historically the UN and ICRC have endured a greater number of casualties per staff member in the field than the NGOs. However over the last four years, international NGOs have become more insecure than their UN and ICRC colleagues. In addition, international NGOs have recently seen their international staff become safer, while their national staff and partners suffer increasing casualties. National staff represent 79% of all victims. For the first time, in 2005 the reported rate of incidents against national staff (seven per 10,000 workers) surpassed that of international staff (six per 10,000 workers).[2]

Too often agencies have not identified the specific risks faced by national staff. There tends to be a blanket assumption that local staff enjoy greater acceptance by the host community and therefore require fewer security measures overall. Sometimes local staff may benefit from greater community acceptance but this may not be the case for a national posted to a distant part of the country. Also local staff may be 'too local', assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be aligned by ethnic or religious affiliation with a party to a conflict. In some contexts they risk being attacked due to their access to cash or agency assets, such as computer equipment or vehicles. They also face a potential loss of income for themselves and their families should a programme be terminated.

Despite the fact that local staff make up over 90% of all field workers they tend not to figure highly in agencies' security policies. The study found a significant discrepancy between local staff and internationals in their access to security-related training, briefing and equipment. The fact that local aid workers are not always considered when designing security policy has negative consequences, not only for local staff themselves but for the organisation as a whole. Local staff possess a breadth of knowledge and information about their environs that is often not fully used by international organisations as a security resource. This may be due to barriers between international and national staff because of language, a distrust of national staff for fear they may pass information onto local belligerents or an otherwise dysfunctional organisational culture.

International staff often fail to realise that national colleagues may find it exceedingly difficult to decline potentially dangerous work for economic and/or altruistic reasons.

Remote management – a trend where international staff withdraw or have their movement restricted when insecurity increases while national staff continue the work – is increasingly used in places such as Somalia, Iraq and parts of Darfur in order to continue to reach beneficiary populations despite security or access constraints. In some cases, international staff continue to act as key decision-makers designing and programming the humanitarian response at a distance by delegating to national staff, local partner organisations, local government, private contractors or community-based organisations. This avoids the complete closure of programmes, allows people in need to continue to receive aid and gives agencies profile in crises where there may be high media exposure.

Remote management is currently practiced in a way that is ad hoc and unplanned. Few organisations have a specific policy on what security-related equipment would be handed over to national staff or local partners when security deteriorates and international staff have to leave. The practical challenges of remote management – less efficient service delivery, difficulties in ensuring strategic focus and accountability, and risks of corruption – have not been fully thought through. The approach is still seen as an option of last resort, to be used in rare situations of high insecurity, but unfortunately such situations are occurring with increasing frequency.

Part of the reason that local staff security and remote management are difficult to talk about is that practical responses can seem to reflect a hierarchy of values placed on different lives: those of international

staff, national/local staff and the beneficiary population. While these issues are undoubtedly difficult and ethically fraught issues, not addressing them only delays the formation of clearly communicated, transparent policies and practical, field-based operational plans. National and local staff deserve better. Humanitarian agencies have an equal duty of care to all employees, regardless of nationality.

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1. A Stoddard, A Harmer, and K Haver, *Providing aid in insecure environments: trends in policy and operations*, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, and New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2006. www.odi.org.uk/ hpg/papers/hpgreport23.pdf
2. This is particularly striking because incidents against national staff are less likely to be reported than those against international colleagues.