

# An Exploration into the Experiences of Aid Workers in Conflict Environment: Case Study of Hargeisa, Somaliland

Maureen Njoki., MA Graduate Student; Hdip.( CIng. )  
University of Manchester/KAPC





## Who is an Aid/Humanitarian Worker?

- ❖ Aid worker in the study was defined as one who is concerned with human welfare and the alleviation of suffering based on humanitarian principles such as impartiality, non-political and not peacekeeping operations that are concern with political and military issues.
- ❖ The foundation of humanitarian action differs fundamentally from those of military forces. Humanitarian action is always within the consent of the authorities concern while military action is not. Peacekeepers are often not mandated to protect aid workers and international law has limited ability to apprehend those who challenge it (Smith, 2002)

# Context of Humanitarian Aid

- Humanitarian aid is primarily delivered in one of two contexts: natural disaster or aid delivered in the context of a complex emergency (UN OCHA, 2008; Spiegel, 2005).
- A complex emergency refers to extensive loss of life and displacement as a result of man-made events such as violence, economic breakdown, internal conflict and war, such as the civil war in Somalia, whereas a natural disaster refers to widespread human losses as a result of a sudden natural event that is beyond the affected populations ability to cope with its own resources

# What is their role?

Humanitarian comes from the term 'humanity', meaning a desire to "prevent and alleviate human suffering" usually in the aftermath of a large-scale disaster or crisis



# Challenges of Humanitarian Aid work



- Psychological - Mental Health and Psychosocial health
- Physical - Injury, Illness and even death!

## Case of Hargeisa, Somaliland



According to UN estimates, 3.2 million Somalians (or 43 percent of the country's population) are dependent on foreign humanitarian aid for survival. The militants in Somalia understand the importance of international aid to internal stability, and have sought to use attacks against aid as a weapon against the government. Groups such as the al Qaeda-linked and [Al-Shabab](#) have launched many attacks against humanitarian aid workers since 2006 and have been able to use kidnapping and assassination to drive most of the foreign aid workers out of the country.

- Hargeisa, capital city of Somaliland is considered to be the safest part of the bigger Somalia. Somaliland is a self-independent state with a government in place which is based on clan system. However, Somaliland despite being calm most of the time it is however faced by increased incidence of internal conflict and resulting violence and miscommunication, increasing the physical and psychological risks to civilians and humanitarian workers alike.

# Objective and Methodology of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of humanitarian aid workers in conflict areas; the challenges faced working in such environment on the front lines of service delivery. Taking the case study of Hargeisa, Somaliland, twelve individuals from seven nationalities aged 28-42 years participated in a focus groups discussion where they were asked to describe their experiences and challenges, how they cope and if there any psychosocial support intervention or system within their organization in response to their needs.

# Findings

- Humanitarian field can be stimulating and richly rewarding, both personally and professionally. However, with rewards can come some psychological costs that result from living and working in the midst of disastrous, violent situations and facing challenges that often seem overwhelming.
- There several psychological effects associated with humanitarian work! However, **STRESS** is the main psychological effect

# Experiences & Challenges

<b>Experiences</b>	<b>Effects</b>
<b>Safety and Insecurities</b>	<b>Physical Harm, death or behaviours such as excess use of alcohol, drugs or even engage in risky sexual behaviours.</b>
<b>Nature of the work e.g Refugee Asst, Ops etc</b>	<b>- Over-involvement or over-identification with beneficiary = Depression -moral dilemmas such as negotiating with warlords, Recruitment = Vulnerability etc</b>
<b>Loss of friends, family events, loss of traditional home delicacy , movement, privacy etc.</b>	<b>-Family break ups/Divorce -Sickness -Re-adjustment</b>

# Cont.

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Effects</b>
<b>Confinement/ isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- A combination of social, cultural and geographical isolation can evoke feelings of abandonment, despair and fear (McFarlane, 2003).</li><li>-Cut off from local community</li><li>-Confinement =Over working= work burnout!</li></ul>
<b>Social cultural change</b>	<p>Depression, frustration etc</p> <p>Clanisms effects</p>
<b>PSTD</b>	exposure to severe traumatic stressors -such as a direct assault or abduction (primary traumatisation) or witnessing the death or abduction of a colleague (secondary traumatisation)

# Coping Mechanism

- Socialization among aid workers
- Exercise
- Acceptance and Adapting
- Resilience
- Learning
- Be realistic /Maintaining low expectations
- Organizational support e.g. Psychosocial support, Debriefing etc

# *Psychosocial interventions*

- There some unstructured PS system for some INGOs and not standardized
- Some agencies strategy was stress focused. Which questions is ‘counselling all about stress?’”
- Organizations with such PS system in place report very little demand for actual counselling = Stigmatizations and Service delivery. E.g Some participants expressed fear that by accessing these services, management would use it against them such as non renewal of contracts.

# Lessons Learnt!

- In complex disaster environment, aid workers may suffer intense or protracted psychological distress as they are subjected to personal trauma, losses and threats in much the same ways as the affected population.
- The way in which health care is provided affects the psychosocial well-being of people living and working in conflict
- It has Implications to Beneficiaries = Services delivery
- It has Implications to donor/Aid funding

# Recommendations

- **Counseling provision in an organization should be clearly thought through with an eye to policy for the organization, procedures to make it effective and marketing to keep it viable (Carroll 1996).**
- **Briefing and debriefing should be mandatory for all in emergency assignments to be conducted before, during and after missions. It should be in person, and must include psychological and emotional issues such as, individual's personal and emotional reactions to their work environment, and not merely the programmatic or administrative issues encountered. Studies in various settings have shown that untrained, poorly briefed staff suffers most from stress-related illness (Ursano & McCarroll, 1994).**

## Cont.

- **Effective psychosocial support requires intersectoral coordination among diverse actors (IASC, 2007). Hence, psychosocial intervention should be well integrated, coordinated, institutionalized and regularized supervision.**
- **There is also need for research to investigate the low uptake of Counselling services available from those organizations that have psychosocial services like counseling in place.**
- **Further research on the appropriate psychosocial system for aid organization in different complex emergency setting need to be carried out including the psychological challenges faced too by the local aid worker.**

# Something to Ponder

- Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
- They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
- You may give them your love, but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts.
- You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
- You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

Kahlil Gibran

“The Prophet” - 1923

**Mehetsane and Inshallah!!!**



Thank you!