

Opinion: Aid workers get a bad rap – but too often they're thrown in at the deep end

March 22 2017, by Corinna Frey



Credit: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid., CC BY-NC-ND

Acute [famine](#) in the Horn of Africa, an impending food crisis in [Yemen](#) and ongoing civil war in Syria are among the main causes of today's global refugee crisis. Currently there are more than 65.3m people displaced across the globe and over [5,000 refugees](#) died or went missing in the Mediterranean in 2016 on their way to Europe, making it the deadliest year on record.

While humanitarian organisations struggle to cope, it seems to be standard and accepted practice for the media to bash them for their work. Criticism is varied and extensive, but what the media seems to agree on is that humanitarian NGOs, charities and UN organisations are all [inefficient and expensive](#). They are accused of [disappointing](#) efforts to come up with better aid programmes and ultimately [failing to provide any results](#) for their work.

Dangerous work and constant rotations

But it is a risky job to deliver aid in crises environments. In 2015, the [Guardian reported](#) that it has rarely ever been more dangerous to be an aid worker. And the statistics speak for themselves. In 2015, [148 attacks on aid workers](#) were recorded with 109 people killed, 110 injured and 68 kidnapped.

In order to protect their [staff](#), many organisations operate a strict rotation policy, which means that staff members have to leave an acute emergency operation after every three to six months or every second year. Such policies ensure that people can alternate between more and less dangerous posts, allowing them to rest and recover. OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for instance, has an [emergency response roster](#) with staff deployed to crises outbreaks usually for six to eight weeks.

Other organisations such as UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, works with roving positions. To respond immediately to crises and subsequent displacement, roving staff can be deployed to any emergency operation within 72 hours to assist local offices. A roving staff member whom I met during my research told me she sleeps next to her suitcase packed and ready, always on the move.

Little long-term memory

Such rotation policies are necessary, but they obviously present a challenge to the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian work. Emergency relief needs to be extremely fast paced, setting up camps, providing food, water and health services to thousands of displaced people in a matter of a few days.

In such context, staff should ideally rely on lessons learned and a good institutional memory of the local operation, but constant turnover makes information sharing difficult and the development of a long-term institutional memory is hard to achieve. And while new staff members in other organisations learn from colleagues who have been doing the same job for a few years, frequent staff rotations between Rwanda, Syria or Yemen make personal handovers almost impossible. So humanitarian workers often find themselves thrown in at the deep end.

Passing on knowledge

In order to deal with these challenges, humanitarian organisations need to be creative. The UN Refugee Agency, for instance, is currently piloting a [global platform on good practices](#) for staff assisting urban refugees, highlighting ways of addressing sexual violence or employment assistance that proved successful in other countries. The aim is to disseminate lessons learnt and best practices online. Humanitarian workers can proactively search for examples that might work in their own contexts by searching and filtering the database, instead of relying on personal handovers.

Another charity, Engineers without Borders, often working in the aftermath of a first emergency response, publicly celebrates failures through its [annual Failure Report](#). Its purpose is to give others the chance

to learn from failures faster. Meanwhile, Save the Children is [investing heavily](#) in online learning courses. Staff members are trained on general operational systems or security procedures online before being sent to an emergency. Other training courses are designed to foster a better understanding of the organisation's values and ways of doing things in order to develop a more global institutional memory.

Humanitarian organisations can easily be dismissed as inefficient and not effective, but they are operating in a challenging environment, constantly on the move to tackle global [emergency](#) and refugee crises.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Aid workers get a bad rap – but too often they're thrown in at the deep end (2017, March 22) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-opinion-aid-workers-bad-rap.html>

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