

Providing aid in insecure environments: trends in policy and operations

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By any measure, international aid work is a dangerous profession. For aid workers, as for soldiers and others who work in war zones, the risk of death or serious injury is ever-present. Rising numbers of attacks against aid workers in Darfur, and the murder in August 2006 of 17 staff members of the NGO Action contre la Faim in Sri Lanka, promise to make 2006 one of the deadliest years in a half-decade that has already seen unprecedented levels of violence against humanitarian operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Opinions differ on the causes and extent of the problems – overly close cooperation with military and political actors in the post-9/11 environment, new global threats posed by transnational terrorist movements and a rise in general criminality in many developing countries have all been cited – but whatever the assumed cause, a pervasive sense of growing danger has prompted changes in policy and in the conduct of field operations.

While militaries are able to mitigate the consequences of these risks, a serious incident against a civilian aid organisation can shake the confidence and disrupt the operations of the entire aid community. Yet up to now there has been no comprehensive empirical analysis to support or refute the claims of increasing violence against aid workers relative to their numbers in the field. To address this issue, the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) launched a joint study in 2004 to provide a quantitative analysis of the changing security environment for civilian aid operations, and to examine related trends in security policy and operations over the last decade.¹

Measuring insecurity: findings from the incident data

Drawing on the most comprehensive global dataset to date of reported incidents of major

violence against aid workers from 1997 to 2005, the study found:

A marked increase in violence against aid workers, in absolute terms

Since 1997, the absolute number of reported major acts of violence (killings, kidnappings and armed attacks resulting in serious injury) against aid workers has risen sharply, particularly in the second half of the period. On average, annual incidents nearly doubled (a 92% increase) between 1997–2001 and 2002–2005. All told, 408 separate acts of major violence were perpetrated against aid workers over the nine-year period, involving 947 victims, including 434 fatalities.²

Global incident rates up slightly, in relative terms

When the number of victims is compared to the increasing population of aid workers in the field, the global incidence trend appears to have risen by only a small amount. The study calculated that the total aid worker population rose by 77% over the period, from an estimated 136,000 in 1997 to an estimated 242,000 in 2005. Using these population estimates, the annual number of victims per 10,000 aid workers in the field averaged five in the first half of the period, and six in the second. In the six most dangerous contexts – Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, North Caucasus, Somalia and Sudan – the overall incident rate per field staff member *decreased*. In other words, the rise in the number of incidents was outstripped by the number of new field staff being deployed.

¹ The statistical methodology can be found in the full report available at www.odi.org.uk/hpg.

² The figure of 947 includes those killed in the Canal Hotel bombing of August 2003, but not the roughly 150 people injured in that incident. Records are insufficient to determine the number and affiliation of the injured.



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Figure 1: Trends in casualty rates by institution, 1997–2005

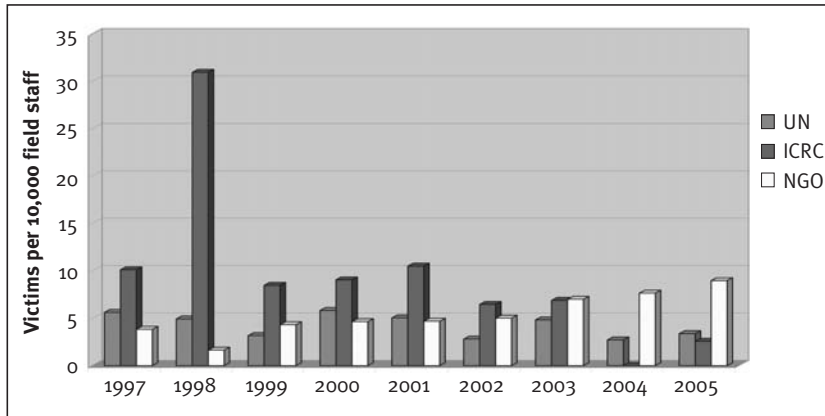
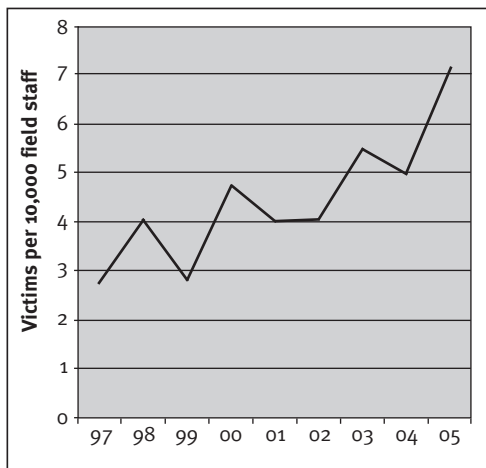


Figure 2: National staff victims relative to their numbers in the field



Falling numbers of incidents for UN and ICRC staff, while NGOs and national Red Cross workers experience increasing casualties

UN and ICRC aid workers have both seen a decrease in major violent incidents, while NGOs have endured increasing numbers of incidents in absolute, relative and proportional terms. UN and ICRC staff represented a decreasing share of total victims (falling by 10% and 63% respectively), while the number of NGO and national Red Cross society worker victims

increased by 161% and 133%. This divergence may be due to the increased conservatism of the UN and the ICRC for a period after the bombings in Iraq in 2003. Another factor could be the increased number of NGO operations in high-risk areas over the past few years.

National staff at increasing risk

The majority of aid worker victims (78%) are nationals of the host country. The average number of national victims more than doubled over the period. The incidence rate for internationals is stable or declining, while it is rising for nationals, particularly in the most dangerous contexts. Programming adaptations that curtail the movements of internationals and rely increasingly on national staff as implementers are probably driving this trend.

Aid worker violence does not correlate with the intensity of conflict, or the presence of specific political/military actors

The most dangerous operational environments for aid workers are not those with the highest level of overall violence, as measured by conflict-related deaths per year. In fact, incidents against international staff slightly increase in areas where there is no active conflict, or where a UN-sanctioned peacekeeping force is present, suggesting that, in these contexts, a sense of increased security may be leading to freer movement and less vigilance. Overall, there were no statistically significant correlations between aid worker violence and the following conflict variables: the presence of great power (e.g. US) military forces, the presence of global terrorist cells and the use of the integrated mission approach by the UN.

Most victims are deliberately targeted, with political targeting on the rise

In the vast majority of incidents aid workers were deliberately targeted. Where perpetrators and intentionality could reasonably be determined, incidents with political motives outnumbered those that were purely economic in nature. The number of politically motivated incidents rose during the period, exceeding the rise in (purely) economic incidents by a factor of nine. Taken together, these findings suggest that, while there is no correlation

Table 1: Yearly breakdown of incidents

Year	Total incidents	Total aid worker victims	UN	ICRC	IFRC	NGO	Donor/other	Killed	Wounded	Kidnapped	Nat'l	Int'l
1997	34	77	26	9	10	31	1	39	8	32	43	34
1998	26	69	24	26	5	14	0	36	15	18	54	15
1999	31	66	16	8	4	38	0	29	15	20	41	25
2000	41	94	31	10	0	51	2	58	25	11	74	20
2001	29	94	28	11	3	52	0	27	20	47	66	28
2002	47	88	17	7	5	58	1	38	23	25	73	15
2003	62	145	31	8	20	86	0	86	49	8	118	27
2004	66	140	18	0	11	107	4	60	55	24	109	31
2005	72	174	24	4	5	139	2	61	95	17	159	15
Totals	408	947*	215	83	63	576	10	434	305	202	737	210

* The figure of 947 includes those killed in the bombing of the UN's Baghdad headquarters in August 2003, but not the estimated 150 people injured in that incident. Records are insufficient to determine the number and affiliation of the injured.

between violence against aid workers and the specific politico-military factors examined, the perception that aid workers are associated with political processes clearly exists in the minds of local belligerents. Seeking not to heighten this perception is thus a legitimate concern.

Somalia and Sudan show the highest levels of violence against aid workers

Many have speculated that the two 'outlier' cases of Afghanistan and Iraq skew the picture, with relatively high numbers of security incidents. However, in both absolute and relative terms (with the exception of Iraq in 2003–2004), Somalia remains the most violent place for aid operations. In incident numbers over the time period, Somalia is followed by Sudan, with Afghanistan and Iraq coming in at numbers three and four.

Policy and operational responses to aid worker insecurity

Humanitarian organisations have taken steps to professionalise and institutionalise security management. These efforts have included the development/upgrading of security guidelines and training, creating senior posts responsible for security, and developing technical systems to record security incidents. Major reforms and new initiatives include:

UNDSS. The UN Department for Safety and Security was created in 2004 as the successor to UNSECOORD, with a higher level of leadership in the UN system, greater resources, conceptual and strategic innovations and a clear vision for enhancing security to enable vital programming. Relations with this body and humanitarian agencies have improved recently. However, the new approach has been slow to implement, and many complain that operational restrictions remain the principal security strategy used by the UN in many field settings.

Incident reporting. Although the level of incident reporting, recording and analysis remains poor overall, a few notable initiatives (such as the UNDSS Security Incident Reporting Service (SIRS) and the World Vision-led Virtual Research Associates (VRA) software platform) could substantially improve security awareness and analysis. Although the reporting of security incidents has been prioritised and has attracted significant investment, critical gaps remain.

NGO security networks. NGO working groups have developed security innovations and collaborative mechanisms, such as InterAction's Minimum Operating Security Standards. Donors with strong programming ties to international NGOs, including the European Commission's humanitarian aid department (ECHO) and the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), have also provided training and funding for better security management.

The seriousness with which agencies now speak of security management is still not matched in practice. Furthermore, very few of these efforts have

been undertaken in a coordinated way, except where severe security pressures demand it. This presents a serious challenge, since in matters of security aid organisations are highly interdependent. In many organisations, national staff are underutilised (for their information and local outreach), and undersupplied with security resources. Despite the fact that national aid workers experience significantly greater numbers of incidents than internationals, training, equipment and other inputs for their security remain unjustifiably low.

New dimensions to the security triangle

The 'security triangle' paradigm consists of *protection* (reducing vulnerability), *deterrence* (presenting a counter-threat) and *acceptance* (cultivating relationships with the local community and dialogue with conflict parties).³ The Red Cross/Red Crescent and most NGOs continue to emphasise acceptance, but recent years have seen a decline in active acceptance strategies among some organisations. Agencies have found such strategies costly in terms of staff time and resources, and they have been difficult to implement in complex conflict environments.

New types of protective measures have been adopted in some situations. Some agencies have used very low-profile or even 'clandestine' modes of programming, where all organisational identity is removed from facilities, staff and vehicles. Other organisations have taken the opposite route, adopting highly visible deterrent measures such as armed escorts, or heightened physical protection for homes, vehicles and workplaces. Both of these approaches can compromise security in the long run. Once an organisation has confined its staff to a compound, accepted military protection or adopted clandestine programming, its access to security information becomes extremely limited.⁴ Increased isolation from beneficiaries and the host community has the dual effect of making programming more difficult and eroding security by distancing the agency from sources of security information.

Aid agencies typically lack a careful strategy, rely heavily on localised solutions and leave a large risk burden with local staff and organisations.

Localisation of aid as a response to insecurity

Aid actors faced with insecurity have responded by placing international staff at a distance from the affected area and relying on national staff or partner organisations to maintain operations. So-called

³ Koenraad Van Brabant, *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies*, Good Practice Review 9 (London: Humanitarian Practice Network, 2000).

⁴ Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

'remote management' allows vital operations to continue. But it also creates a number of challenges, including less efficient service delivery, difficulties maintaining a strategic programme focus, corruption risks and accountability concerns. There is general acceptance that programme quality will suffer, but little appreciation of innovative programming approaches to mitigate this.

Humanitarian organisations have also largely failed to consider the ethics of transferring security risks from expatriates to national staff or local NGOs. One of the core assumptions of remote management is that national workers are at less risk than their international counterparts. This assumption is often unfounded, and nationals may find it exceedingly difficult to decline aid work for economic and/or altruistic reasons. Viewed against the significant rise in the relative risk to national staff in the most dangerous contexts, this trend raises serious questions for the international aid community, especially when the programme in question is not a life-saving intervention.

Security is not a zero-sum proposition, and

enhanced security for internationals does not necessarily cause or entail an increased risk for nationals. However, moving to 'remote management' in times of heightened insecurity is currently unplanned and uncoordinated, and has not been thought through as a policy issue. This creates both physical and ethical hazards. More strategic policy formulation and a set of guiding principles are needed to ensure that programme effectiveness is maintained when international staff and organisations withdraw, and that the risk to national providers is accurately assessed and mitigated. The development of local capacities for aid response should be seen as an objective, rather than a by-product of operating in insecure environments.

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Recommendations

Operational agencies

- Within each agency, develop incentives for reporting field security incidents, making use of existing software platforms rather than creating new, parallel systems.
- Develop and invest in proactive 'acceptance' strategies, which are continually pursued and maintained through the life of the programme.
- Identify and support an equitable level of security inputs for local staff and partners, including proportionate representation in security training and briefings and the provision of security materials in national languages, as well as access to security assets.
- Incorporate security-related adaptations such as remote management into programme planning and preparedness exercises, and develop criteria covering when to deploy them (ideally, within an interagency security forum at the field level, so that plans can be shared and coordinated).
- Develop guiding principles and a practical knowledge base on remote management and other adaptations in programming. Guidance will include consideration of how to accurately assess risks to local staff.
- Where possible, explore programmatic ways to emphasise and invest in local response capacity.

Inter-agency issues

- Increase the sharing and storing of sanitised incident information and analysis – based on indicators agreed through inter-agency fora. Establish interagency field security services (such as the NGO Security Office (ANSO) in Afghanistan) for this purpose.
- Include security resource requirements in Consolidated Appeals or Work Plans as programme-related costs, and consider standardising this costing at the sector level.
- Survey and promote the common development and

sharing of recent innovations in the financing of core and programme security resources.

- Share and document experience of engaging commercial security providers. This should lead to a baseline for promoting standards.

The United Nations

- Make clear what services UNDSS can provide to UN agencies, and its limitations. Agencies will have sub-field and implementation costs that need to be supported independently, so donors and agencies should agree on an appropriate division of labour.
- Support UNDSS in its dialogue with UN member states over a clearer set of guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of host governments in aid worker security.

Donor governments

- Consider and address the implications for partner agencies' branding/visibility policies, as well as the pressure strategic interest places on agencies to respond or stay engaged in a particular context.
- Engage systematically with the implications of remote management in terms of costs, quality and impact.
- Given that insecurity may persist, and local actors may remain at the forefront of service delivery, consider mechanisms for partnership similar to those in natural disaster preparedness and mitigation.
- Establish an inter-governmental donor forum to share security information and develop common positions on security issues. Possible fora for this discussion include the Humanitarian Liaison Working Group (HLWG), OCHA's Donor Steering Group (ODSG) or the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative.
- Assist in efforts to better define the roles and responsibilities of host states, and support UNDSS' efforts to encourage host states to live up to their obligations (through the Host Country Agreement).