

**Tending the Helper's Fire:**  
Mitigating Trauma and Stress in International Staff  
and Volunteers

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## CONFERENCE AIMS AND GOALS

“Tending the Helper’s Fire: Mitigating Trauma and Stress in International Staff and Volunteers” was a first-ever effort in the U.S. to bring together human resources professionals, researchers, program directors, and international humanitarian aid staff to examine how organizations provide psychosocial support to staff and volunteers working overseas. *The aim of this conference was to provide a platform where professionals could share information, learn from expert perspectives, and pool resources for future collaboration.*

## CONFERENCE FORMAT

The conference addressed three broad themes. Daily activity began with a plenary session. Then, breakout sessions allowed participants to explore a variety of subtopics within that theme.

### THEME 1

Plenary Session: *Pre-Deployment*

Breakout Discussions:

- Safety and Security
- Screening and Human Resources
- Pre-Deployment Support to Expatriate Staff
- Training Models for Preparing Staff/Volunteers
- Pre-Deployment Support to National Staff

### THEME 2

Plenary Session: *In the Field*

Breakout Discussions:

- Chronic Stress and Secondary Trauma
- Organizational Support, Peer Support Systems
- Responding to Critical Incidents

### THEME 3

Plenary Session: *Re-Entry Issues/Transitions: Moving Toward Home*

Breakout Discussions:

- Overview of Re-Entry
- Involuntary and Unplanned Terminations
- Transitions Home or into Another Assignment

## OPENING REMARKS

### Helping the Helpers: Critical Themes and Issues

Mike Wessells, PhD  
Christian Children's Fund & Randolph-Macon College

It's a great honor to open this important conference. I'd like to thank the Kroc Institute for its hospitality and Lindsay Stark for her superb work in bringing us together.

The work of this conference is congruent with an ancient adage: To heal the world, we must heal ourselves. To apply this to the contemporary context, we should recognize that our journey of healing cannot be an individual journey but involves the transformation of the structures and agencies within which we conduct our humanitarian and peacebuilding work.

To set the context, it's important to remember that psychosocial work has become a familiar element of humanitarian work in emergencies relatively recently. The stunning growth in psychosocial supports for war-affected people stems from the insights, passion, and commitment of people—many of them in this room—who recognize that the emotional and social wounds of war are often as devastating as the physical wounds and provide enormous obstacles to peacebuilding, social justice, sustainable development, and the construction of societies that respect fundamental human rights.

However, the expansion of psychosocial programming in emergencies has not been matched by our collective commitment to and sophistication in helping the helpers, in tending the fire that enables compassion and quality humanitarian assistance. Our profession, although noble in aspiration, faces significant risks: primary and secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, overwork, emotional and physical distance from loved ones and support groups, abrupt or jarring repositioning of values and sense of place in the world, burnout, substance abuse, and relational problems, to name only a few. These and other issues have not been addressed adequately by psychologists or the wider humanitarian community, which in too many cases has taken a "Keep a stiff upper lip" attitude in the face of human suffering amongst its workers.

The costs of not attending to these issues is illustrated by a case of a young man who did humanitarian work in a war zone and who brought to his task enormous gifts of intelligence, passion, love of local people and culture, commitment, and quality writing. Over time, he took on too many responsibilities, shouldered difficult experiences, and received too few supports. He became irritable, remote, and self-absorbed, and he took challenges to his ideas as deeply personal challenges that he responded to increasingly with undermining or direct confrontation. While staff conflict proliferated and morale plummeted, he sank into depression and made increasingly dangerous decisions regarding staff security. Ultimately, his behavior and psychological condition was not only an

individual issue but had profound repercussions for the quality of the program, staff relations, security, and the wider impact of the programs he oversaw.

As this case illustrates, we discuss at length sustainable development but devote little attention to sustainable helping or the sustainable humanitarian work required for enabling long-term development. If we fail to establish or allow eroding systems of support for helpers, we will not enable psychosocial assistance to achieve its full potential, we will depart from our wider journey of healing, and worse yet, we put ourselves at risk of doing harm.

This problem has many facets that we will explore together over the next two days. To help define our agenda or at least stir thinking about key topics, I want to mention four key themes.

### **1. Diversity of humanitarian aid workers**

The phrase “humanitarian aid worker” implies a degree of uniformity that does not exist in reality. In fact, aid workers vary enormously by sectors, the contexts in which they work, personal background, quality of support networks, and coping resources. One cannot assume that all have similar experiences or even that they interpret their experiences through a common lens. Ultimately, a “one size fits all” approach to supporting aid workers is likely to fail.

To unpack the diversity, we need to think about expatriates who have pre-assignment needs, support needs during an assignment, and post-assignment needs. Despite romanticized images of the return home, the reality may be that aid workers change as a result of their experiences and the societies to which they are returning are constantly changing. The person who returns home may in a very real sense not be the same person who had lived there previously, and the home context may have changed irrevocably as well.

We need also to think about national staff, many of whom may themselves be survivors of war, displacement, and horrific events that shape how they respond to future challenges and stresses. Trauma is often the tip of the iceberg in terms of the psychological issues they face. Not uncommonly, their bigger issue is not knowing where their loved ones are and whether they are safe. In many cases, national staff continue to live and work in dangerous, highly stressful situations where they accumulate shocks and losses. In such contexts, it is misleading to think about “post” assignment support, particularly single episode debriefing, as adequate.

We need also to think about local staff, some of whom may have culturally constructed belief systems that differ greatly from those of expatriates (or from national staff who live in the capital city) and that have profound implications for the types of support that may be most helpful. In Angola, many staff reported that their greatest stress was not that they had been attacked and their homes destroyed and family members killed. Rather, the greatest self-described stress was their inability to perform the culturally prescribed burial rituals

for their loved ones. In their belief system, the failure to perform these rituals broke the bonds between the living community and the ancestors and left the spirits of loved ones in a state of spiritual distress since they could not transition to the realm of the ancestors. According to local beliefs, the unavenged spirits cause problems ranging from misfortune to crop failure or even more war. Western style counseling may not be appropriate in this kind of situation, which challenges us to think in much more diversified ways about how to support staff through, for example, the conduct of local rituals.

In short, we have to think not only about past experiences of traumatic events but the cultural lenses through which they are interpreted. We need to think as much about the stresses of the current situation and the stresses it imposes as about past violence. And we need to avoid getting trapped in an exclusive deficits focus that obscures important sources of coping, resilience, and indigenous support.

## **2. Organizational Responsibility**

The second theme is organizational responsibility. Here the question is whether support for humanitarian aid workers is the integral part of the organizational philosophy, daily operations, and life that it ought to be? Our tendency is to focus on individual needs and on stress management and support for individuals. Our broader focus, however, should be on transforming organizations and their policies, values, practices, organizational culture and management approaches.

We tend to think about supporting individuals through processes such as post-assignment counseling, but in fact a much wider array of organizational supports are needed in areas such as hiring, security, training, response to critical incidents, and conflict management. For example, in Angola when the city of Bie was under attack, there was a mass evacuation by air but amidst the shortage of seats, most agencies evacuated expats. CCF chose to evacuate its local staff and their families, and CCF staff still speak of this as the day they knew that their lives are as valuable as those of expats. The question is not just one of security but whether agencies will treat local staff as equals and live up to their stated values.

Often the greatest stresses result not from critical incidents but from management styles, daily indignities, and organizational policies and practices. For example, if management operates in a hierarchical manner and marginalizes local staff, stresses are increased, damage is done, and important opportunities for capacity building are missed. Similarly, if local staff are expected or allowed to work extended hours during an emergency with few break periods included, there will probably be a high price in terms of burnout, depression, and related issues. In some situations, management fails to address the ethnic and inequality issues among its staff, and this too can impose enormous stress. Too often, the local team becomes a microcosm of the wider conflicts that rack the society. With regard to critical incidents, management often promotes a culture of toughness rather than a culture of care. For example, following the bombing of the U. S. embassy in Nairobi, the response toward many expats was one of “if you’re really suffering, maybe you’re not tough enough to be in this business.” In many agencies as in many societies, seeking help or counseling is

stigmatized and perceived by many workers as a path not toward health but toward being sidelined professionally.

As these examples illustrate, support to humanitarian aid workers cannot be an afterthought or a one-time response to extraordinary events. It has to be woven into the fabric of the organizational vision, policies, practices, and culture. It ought to be owned as a priority at all levels, endorsed fully by management, implemented systematically, and evaluated and enriched in the same, professional manner as our ongoing programs. Throughout this conference, I hope we will address these wider issues of organizational responsibility, moving beyond the individualized frame that dominates the industry.

### **3. Power, Voice, and Agency**

A key question is whether our agencies unintentionally continue patterns of colonial domination and marginalization in which many emergencies are rooted? Here again, organizational issues come to the fore: Does headquarters impose its will on national staff in ways that create dependency and deepen already internalized feelings about the inferiority of local people and culture? In regard to staff salaries, is there a privileging of expats over national staff? Between local staff and national office staff, many of whom are university-educated and highly colonized in orientation, is there abuse of power or a sense of excessive hierarchy and privileging?

In Afghanistan, for example, the stresses born by women are richly interconnected with issues of power and patriarchy. Even following the fall of the Taliban, the local view is that women should not be in the presence of men to whom they are not related unless appropriate cultural chaperones are present. Even a small hint that something is amiss can result in the devastation of a woman's reputation and her family's honor, which can result in honor-related violence against her. More prosaically, patriarchy often expressed itself in a paucity of female staff, the relegation of women to very low-level positions, and practices that isolate women from the normal flow of business in the agency and with outside stakeholders. This is not just a matter of stress on individual women—it is about supporting patterns of subjugation and inequality that threaten the long-term development and well-being of Afghan society. The issue is one of how humanitarian agencies can contribute to gender equity in its own staff and beyond.

The issues of power, voice, and agency have particular salience in regard to expats, who typically wield considerable power personally, technically, and managerially. Taking a self-critical stance, we need to be continuously vigilant, interrogating our own values and practices and taking time to reflect on the unintended consequences of our actions. At the end of the day, will we look back and see that we fueled processes of dependency and powerlessness that are antithetical to our mission, to peace, and to human well-being?

### **4. The New Context of Humanitarianism**

As evidenced by the direct targeting of humanitarian aid workers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries, humanitarian aid workers are no longer protected by virtue of their

mission. The increased threats sharply increase the stresses felt by all humanitarian aid workers, who once enjoyed the luxuries of relative immunity from attack and also the belief that “right now, I’m not in a zone of active fighting so am safe.” Insecurity is heightened by the intermixing and blurring of boundaries between military and humanitarian operations. On the ground, it is increasingly difficult for local people to tell who is military and who is humanitarian. In Afghanistan, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams systematically intermix military and humanitarian operations, potentially making humanitarian aid workers more desirable targets since they are unarmed but may be presumed to be military personnel.

More challenging still is the reality that for U. S. agencies, there is increasing strength of connection between humanitarian aid and U. S. foreign policy. Increasingly, Western aid workers are viewed as an extension of imperialist U. S. policies and as carriers of cultural and spiritual contamination. After all, many workers bring with them alcohol, violent media, and habits of dress and sexual behavior that may be highly offensive to local people. In contexts such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, Western aid workers may be viewed as infidels who seek to dominate and subjugate Muslims or to exploit their societies for oil and other resources.

These patterns, which will reshape the humanitarian enterprise but which have barely begun to seep into our collective consciousness, have significantly increased the stress levels of all aid workers. Many stresses arise from the complex ethical issues associated with operations such as those in Iraq. For example, did operations in Iraq shortly following the fall of Saddam’s regime tacitly legitimate and support the U. S. war effort? Although individuals and agencies no doubt differ in their answers to such questions, they would all probably agree that such ethical dilemmas and the daily political and work-related pressures associated with them impose new burdens of stress. Here again, one sees that trauma counseling and post-assignment debriefing is but a small part of a much larger set of issues. Agencies need to be much more proactive and deliberate in preparing themselves and their workers to meet these challenges.

Addressing these and related challenges is what this conference is about. The conference provides a reflective space in which we can learn from each other and deepen our awareness of the problems, causes, and the interconnections between various issues. It also provides a transformational space: our challenge is to create different ways of approaching these issues and to develop strategies for organizational change and personal growth. Our challenge is to do this not alone but together, for it is through collaboration that we stand to construct better, more comprehensive approaches to these issues.

This conference builds upon previous meetings in Europe and other regions. The occurrence of multiple meetings on the topic indicates that the topic is ripe—it’s as if the issue is in the air and there is a readiness to address it more seriously. It’s our task to step into this space and to use the next two days in the most constructive manner possible, doing our part to “Tend the Fire” and making humanitarian work sustainable.

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

### *1. Plenary: Pre-Deployment*

Moderator: John Ehrenreich, Professor of Psychology, State University of New York  
Panelists: Larissa Fast, Assistant Professor, Conrad Grebel University  
Sharron Forrence, Consultant  
Michael O'Neill, Security Director, Save the Children

Relief workers routinely experience stress and have demonstrated a clear need and desire for more attention to stress management, including enhanced training opportunities and a culture shift in the organizational attitude toward stress. At the pre-deployment stage, there also tends to be a general lack of preparedness for the field. It is critical to give more attention to security issues. As of now, there are few scenarios or role plays utilized that would prepare staff for crises.

Proposed improvements include strengthening the relief worker's resilience, fostering caring relationships, establishing realistic expectations, and providing opportunities for leadership. In addition, pre-deployment activities should include both emotional and physiological preparation. It is also helpful to recognize the needs of different groups (national staff, expatriate staff, females, etc.) and the potential for these groups to serve as support networks.

The breakout sessions that followed the plenary explored these issues in greater detail.

### *1a. Breakout Session: Safety and Security*

Moderator: Larissa Fast, Assistant Professor, Conrad Grebel University

Security issues exist under a variety of conditions, and are exacerbated when we fail to operate with vigilance. Particularly dangerous circumstances arise when staff members consider themselves immune from harm, as well as when organizations fail to recognize security threats that exist outside of areas of conflict.

Security and training strategies that have been found to be effective include:

- Exercise awareness as a basic safety precaution (awareness of self, culture and environment, as well as of how the community perceives you and your colleagues).
- Many NGOs use 'acceptance' as a security strategy: forming and maintaining relationships with people in the community and gaining their respect instead of forming walls and isolating field staff from the community.
- One effective training model combines classroom and experiential training. Experiential training helps staff identify what they are feeling and thinking in certain situations and enables them to modify their reactions to work.

- The time between training and deployment of staff should be minimized for training to be as effective as possible in the field.
- Group members reiterated the need for repeated training to make sure the learning sticks.
- Safety and security resources were recommended, and will be listed on psychosocial.org.

*1b. Breakout Session: Screening and Human Resources*

Moderator: Sharon Forrence, Consultant

A major challenge for human resources professionals is screening prospective staff so that they do not cause harm to themselves or others once in the field. This discussion resulted in suggestions that would create more institutional standards for this process.

First, include screening in the training process. Organizations that use this method proceed in two steps. The first is to accept recruits for training (which does not imply that they are hired), and then enlisting them in an intensive training. Training may include simulated experiences and tests as well as team-building tests. Those who successfully complete this training then undergo a face-to-face interview. Only after the interview are candidates selected for hiring.

While this practice is considered optimal for job recruitment, it remains difficult to implement in selecting volunteers. Submitting volunteers to rigorous training may be discouraging and may even reduce financial contributions of volunteers who are required to secure their own funds to support their activities in the organization. Furthermore, this practice entails higher costs because more people are trained than are eventually hired.

An alternative screening method employs a behavioral assessment as a predictor of future behavior. Some participants wished, however, to have a standardized text outlining how to conduct such an assessment. Furthermore, concerns were raised that although psychologists may be good at carrying out such an assessment, their unfamiliarity with the field may impede the results of their assessments.

*1c. Breakout Session: Pre-deployment Support to Expat Staff*

Moderator: Eileen Borris, Director of Training, Alliance for Resilient Communities

Appropriate next steps depend on gathering reliable information and sharing this information with different NGOs. Ideas for next steps include:

- Establishing a solid research base and maintaining up-to-date, readily available information through a community forum such as idealist.org (it would be necessary to identify funding sources for obtaining and organizing this information).

- Tapping into knowledge and experiences of staff.
- Designing trainings for the support network (administrative staff, everyone in home office, funders), not just those in the field.
- Maintaining a strong feedback loop.
- Conducting a needs assessment for all involved (field workers, management, families).
- Establishing fundamental standards and procedures that can guide organizations.

*1d. Breakout Session: Training Models for Preparing Staff/Volunteers*

Moderator: Penelope Curling, Stress Counselor, UNICEF

Pre-deployment preparation in the international aid community should evolve in the direction of creating and institutionalizing minimum standards and policies, and use a variety of training opportunities to satisfy these objectives. Topics should include:

- Security: preparing staff to work in conditions of hardship and danger.
- Mental health issues, with particular attention to stress management.
- Physical health: medical evacuations, benefits, vaccinations, and HIV awareness.
- Providing orientation to the organization, in order to cover the administrative aspects of a new post (e.g., new hire paperwork and familiarization with the organization's mission, structure, policies, programmatic approach, and values).
- Providing orientation to the country, including its culture, history, and local conditions. Training in cultural sensitivity is also recommended.
- Absence management: who/what staff are leaving behind, and what role their family and friends will play while they are away. It is also imperative that staff begin preparing for their return when they first go abroad.

Suggestions for materializing these concepts: Media training (i.e., a video of aid workers discussing their experiences, web-based training, brochures, books, and CD-ROM).

*I.e. Breakout Session: Pre-deployment Support to National Staff*

Moderator: Michael O'Neill, Security Director, UNICEF

When organizations formally recognize the dual status of the national staff (employees and local residents) they can then adjust procedures and support to accommodate this reality. When refining pre-deployment programs to reflect this, organizations need to consider providing pre-deployment orientation and trainings for national staff, and need to set goals to gain commitment and incorporate national staff views by way of involving them in discussions regarding organizational policies, strategies, and procedures.

Relations between international and national staff are often a source of stress and should be addressed at the pre-deployment stage. In addition, national staff's vulnerability to security threats may be increased because of their organizational affiliation and it is therefore important for the organization to take measures to address their security needs.

National staff often act as a bridge (cultural, emotional, and organizational) between the organization and the local community and should be recognized as an important part of the team.

*2. Plenary: In the Field*

Moderator: Jim Guy, President, Headington Institute  
Panelists: Anne Anderson, Coordinator, Psychologists for Social Responsibility  
Lynne Cripe, Regional Technical Advisor, USAID  
Beth Stamm, Professor, Idaho State University Institute of Rural Health  
Laurie Sullivan, President, Response Management International, Inc.

Secondary trauma experienced by staff members of humanitarian organizations is an occupational hazard that can affect productivity levels. Self-care, peer support, and organizational support systems are the best lines of defense. These approaches, however, do not remove responsibility from the donor organizations that provide humanitarian support; these organizations need to provide the requisite resources to address secondary trauma and it is important that the responses be strategic as opposed to ad hoc.

It was observed in the plenary that some NGOs seem to believe that the best way of managing the risk of stress and trauma in staff is not to speak or deal with it in any formal manner, while other NGOs are more open to recognizing the need for staff support and have adopted different psychosocial support services. These services are typically oriented toward either one or both of two objectives: educating staff in self-care practices, and counseling and debriefing staff. To date, only a few NGOs have developed support systems involving both preventive measures and reactive responses.

There is a need to establish several complementary forms of psychosocial support and to adapt support models to different contexts. It is important to give due recognition to local psychosocial support systems such as local healing practices.

Another important topic is defining what constitutes a critical incident. Managing an appropriate response depends on correct understanding and diagnosis of the situation. A critical incident may be defined by the individual's reaction rather than specific criteria related to the incident, calling for closer attention to staff cumulative stress levels.

Training can protect against secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. It should be recognized that while national staff may have had more exposure to trauma and violence, this does not make them immune to the debilitating effects of such experiences. Quite the contrary, such greater exposure demonstrates a need for support. The need for training and support should be formalized by building it into proposals and budgets.

#### *2a. Breakout Session: Chronic Stress and Secondary Trauma*

Moderators: Beth Stamm, Professor, Idaho State University Institute of Rural Health  
Amy Hudnall, Research Assistant Professor, Institute of Rural Health

This group session reviewed some of the complexities of working in situations where workers may be exposed to malevolent environments, indirect trauma, and direct trauma.

#### **Emerging Themes:**

- Secondary trauma can catch a person off guard. Training and preparation are important to help workers brace for potential trauma, but organizations also need to provide ongoing support to workers. Many organizations see secondary trauma as a sign of weakness rather than as an understandable response to chronic stress and traumatic stress, and this misconception results in both inadequate support for workers and the stigmatization of individuals who exhibit signs of stress and trauma.
- While self-care is important, using “self-care” carries a potential stigma when trauma occurs—you must have failed to care for yourself properly if you ended up hurt.
- When dealing with massive disasters, workers may feel that they cannot leave for restorative time off. Expatriates may feel guilty because as an outsider they have the luxury of leaving. They may feel that they owe it to the local people to stay, or may fear what will happen to their own emotional stability should they stop working. National staff members also feel many of these things, and face the additional dilemma of living long-term in the situation as well as working in it.
- Staff may feel the need to share their experiences with others, but talking to the same people that you work with every day may not be enough.

- Even in awful environments, both national and expatriate staff still have some bright spots in their lives. How can we help them connect to those bright spots in a way that will not seem disrespectful of the suffering endured by other people?
- Workers may need some time to be alone, which can be difficult if they share quarters with others or if they work in a culture that has a different expectation of privacy.

**Best Practices:**

For a healthier and less traumatic workplace, the participants were unanimous that:

- People at the lower levels of organizations generally know what is wrong with an institution. Therefore, NGOs need to find ways to get ideas from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top.
- NGOs need to create an organizational culture of caring. This means taking mental health seriously by frequently asking how workers are feeling and creating an atmosphere in which it is okay for people to say that they are having a hard time. Ways of doing this include:
  - a) Debrief with workers and make their emotional state a part of the conversation. It is important not to overdo this or make it a “witch hunt.” If the debriefing is an ordinary part of the work, it creates an opportunity to ask for help when something arises or to celebrate if the person is doing well.
  - b) Hold weekly staff meetings, which offer continuity and a chance for staff and managers to reconnect. Start off by asking how people are doing and be open to discussing emotional well-being.
  - c) Make time to hang out together and relax informally.
  - d) Create shared rituals or habits that give people a chance to share with the group and reaffirm unity.
  - e) Work across NGOs (or across regions) to expand the group of people that workers have access to. Provide weekly phone calls or e-mail chats to let workers connect to people who are removed from the local situation.
  - f) Consider implementing policies that require staff in high-stress situations to take breaks. This relieves them of the guilt of deciding to leave during a crisis. National staff should also be given breaks—they may not be going on a “vacation,” but can still benefit from seeing their families.
  - g) Organizations should facilitate space for workers to spend time alone. This may require an effort to communicate expectations of privacy with locals who are used to spending much of their time with other people.

*2b. Breakout Session: Organizational Support, Peer Support, Systems*

Group 1 Moderator: Lynne Cripe, Regional Technical Advisor, USAID

This group discussed the challenges of caring for field staff, considered the resource implications of staff care programming, and identified potential actions for the future.

The following issues emerged during this session:

- Psychosocial support for field staff should be an intrinsic component of the activities of any aid agency.
- The character of humanitarian work has changed significantly in recent years. For example NGO work is no longer neutral. Field staff are increasingly vulnerable to dangers, and there are often complex political situations in the countries of operation. Thus, when developing support services, organizations should take these circumstances into consideration.
- Psychological support strategies are often reactive. It is important for humanitarian organizations to develop systemic and comprehensive psychosocial support strategies that are both proactive and reactive.
- Cultural Issues: When developing psychosocial support services for field staff organizations should be aware of cultural differences in the understanding of, and in attitudes to, stress and trauma.

Group 2 Moderators: Jim Guy, President, Headington Institute  
Joan Laidig, Associate Professor, Headington Institute

Participants discussed how to convince an organization of the need to develop psychosocial support services for field staff and broadly agreed that:

- It is often more fruitful to emphasize to managers that they have an ethical responsibility to care for their staff than it is to argue that they may be held liable if they fail to do so. Contrary to liability arguments, ethical arguments reflect positive values, which are closely related to the identity of relief and development organizations and to their commitment to promoting good.
- Staff support is a competitive advantage. Given the competition for recognition, funding and staff faced by relief and development organizations, it is in the interest of an individual organization to be at the forefront in developing psychosocial support services and not to lag behind other organizations.
- Since psychosocial support services are aimed at keeping up work morale and capacity among staff members, they can help the organization to operate better and to be more resilient when facing urgent crises.
- It would be helpful to have more research on stress-related experiences of field staff to back up arguments in favor of psychosocial support services. Relevant data

could be compiled through staff surveys, exit interviews, and the recording of staff experiences that happened during critical incidents.

Participants also discussed basic considerations for implementing psychosocial support services and agreed that:

- Staff care should be incorporated into the culture of the organization as a whole, but primary responsibility should be assigned to a particular place in the organization (not necessarily in the human resources department) so as to avoid confusion.
- The starting point of any psychosocial support strategy should be to communicate to staff that it is not only normal but important to be concerned about stress.
- Psychosocial support should be offered on a continual rather than temporary basis, and several forms should be put in place, e.g. instruction in self-care practices, programs to promote peer support, and regularly available professional counseling.

The participants in the groups identified the following potential actions for the future:

- Since lack of resources often constrains the implementation of psychosocial support, it would be necessary to incorporate staff support into the budget for field activities and obtain approval for this budget item from funding agencies.
- By setting up peer support systems an organization can promote an office atmosphere in which staff members mutually support one another. This can be done by appointing one staff member as a resource person to whom others may turn, creating a context in which staff can reflect about stressful experiences, and organizing retreats and other outside activities that allow staff to relax and have fun together.
- Making counseling a requirement for all staff members of an organization can prevent cases in which the staff members who are in dire need of counseling shy away from taking advantage of available services.

### *2c. Breakout Session: Responding to Critical Incidents*

This session was divided into two discussion groups. These groups looked at what makes experiences traumatic, how to identify the symptoms, how to tend to those involved and what might be done to mitigate the effects of such incidents.

Group 1 Moderator: Anne Anderson, Coordinator, Psychologists for Social Responsibility

Critical incidents include events which are life-threatening, sudden, and intense. They may be expected (e.g., a rebel attack) or unexpected (e.g., car accidents). They generate fear and create physical, psychological, and emotional trauma.

- When a critical incident occurs, staff will often have “I should have...” thoughts, some may be too traumatized to tell others what happened, some may experience intense anger, and some may rise to the occasion and provide support for others.
- Critical incident trauma is compounded when it is difficult to take remedial action. Often the “crash” occurs after the immediate response to the critical incident, when there’s no more action to take – this means long-term psychosocial help is needed.
- The region where the incident occurred now has the incident added to its history as far as new rules, ideas, and commemoration are concerned; it also affects the history of the organization and may cause some “organizational trauma.”
- Staff reactions may include an attitude of “I am a humanitarian worker so I should be able to take it,” difficulty sleeping, bad dreams, and fixations on specific events. Additional trauma may come from having people not believe your story. Other considerations: What else is happening in the staff member’s life (e.g., family at home)? How easy is it for staff to accept help, feel helpless, or need somebody else?
- There is often conflict between the wants, needs, and expectations of the staffing organization and of those who experienced violence. For example, organizations can have their response impeded by getting caught up in bureaucracy, legal culpability may be of more concern than staff well-being, and the organizations may respond by following a checklist rather than adapting protocols to address the specific circumstances of an event.
- Critical incidents may be complicated by their connection to organizational politics or to the political and cultural context of staff’s location. Politics of the response can cause more trauma and feelings of isolation.
- A time delay for international response to staff trauma exacerbates the staff’s feeling of isolation.
- A community-based process that includes the victims and survivors of the event, if they are interested in being included, is a useful response to a critical incident.

Group 2 Moderator: Laurie Sullivan, President, Response Management International, Inc.

Organizations can form action plans to deal with critical incidents in two principal ways: standard responses to core incidents (e.g., staff death, injury, grave threat, etc.) and flexible, ad hoc responses to staff members’ perceptions of a critical incident. Another possibility is devising *gradations* of critical incidents (according to severity) and then developing policies proportionate to these events. The issue of *cumulative stress* is important for

addressing critical incidents – staff may respond disproportionately to a relatively ‘minor’ event due to pent up stress and trauma. Managers should be trained to recognize signs of cumulative stress in staff members.

Many reactions to critical incidents tend to divide and not unite staff, especially in the case of international and national workers. People tend to group along language and culture lines in times of crisis, effectively isolating others. A sense of patriarchy may arise, with international staff wanting to assert control even though local staff probably have a more comprehensive understanding of the situation.

### **Best Practices for Humanitarian Organizations:**

- Define critical incidents clearly so as to formulate effective preventive strategies and responses for staff.
- Promote self-care among humanitarian workers. Training and support should be provided to national staff, and added efforts should be made to partner with local leaders to empower them to continue self-care and psychosocial services.
- Make provisions for external psychosocial support as an option for staff who feel more comfortable confiding in people outside the organization.
- Provide forms and protocols to report critical incidents and make sure staff know what a critical incident is (e.g., robbery may be common in the field and staff do not see it as a critical incident and thus let it go unreported), but allow space for adapting protocols to specific incidents.
- Set clear communication protocol (who calls whom and when), and establish role playing and mock incidents to test protocols for weaknesses.
- Provide an opportunity for people to get together, relax, or have dinner as a group after the incident. Encourage but don’t require participation.
- A sense of humor is a significant characteristic of resilience.
- Recognize that sometimes a local response is more effective than external organizational protocols. Involve both nationals and expatriates in the response. What local resources are there? Make this clear to staff so they utilize resources available to them.
- Understand that people who have been through critical incidents often recover best if there’s something for them to do (i.e. staff may not be able to bring back the victim, but they can help the victim’s family).

### *2d. In the Field – Concluding Comments*

Conference participants agreed that psychosocial support for humanitarian aid workers in the field is an essential component of humanitarian work. Field workers are often exposed to life threatening conditions, extreme cases of human suffering and fear of uncertainties. Such conditions render them extremely vulnerable to stress and trauma in the form of cumulative trauma, chronic stress and secondary vicarious trauma. If left unaddressed, stress and trauma experienced by humanitarian field workers impedes work, lowers morale, and diminishes capacity. It places great strain on their interpersonal relationships and negatively affects team performance.

Psychosocial support ought to be addressed at three inter-related levels. At the *individual level*, there is need for self-care. This includes taking regular breaks from work, being aware of bodily responses to events, and acknowledging the importance of self-care as a vital component of psychosocial support. At the *interpersonal and team level*, there is a need to encourage discussions of psychosocial needs among field staff and to strengthen peer support in dealing with such needs. At the *organizational level*, it is important to raise awareness at headquarters of the need to offer psychosocial support to field staff. Humanitarian organizations need to incorporate psychosocial support into their cultures and establish a working mechanism for evaluation and rapid response to situations of trauma and stress. As no psychosocial support strategy can be sustainable without sufficient funding, it is important to lobby donors to acknowledge staff care as a legitimate budget line.

There was a broad consensus that relief and development organizations have much to learn from each other in terms of psychosocial support for field staff and that they all would benefit from engaging in active resource-sharing. A first step would be to pool the resources of the organizations attending the Helper's Fire conference, such as by compiling a list of best practices. The participants also affirmed the need to carry out more research into why and in what ways field staff experience stress and trauma, how experiences of stress differ between national and expatriate staff, and what the cultural implications of different psychosocial practices are. To this end, relief and development organizations could intensify their cooperation with academic and research institutions.

### *3. Plenary: Re-entry Issues/Transitions: Moving Towards Home*

Moderator: Amber Gray, Consultant, Restorative Resources Training & Consulting  
Panelists: John Fawcett, Consultant  
Winnifred Simon, Director, Antares Foundation

Two central questions raised in the plenary set the tone for later small group discussions:

1. What do we individually need to know or understand to help us make transitions?
2. What do employers need to do in order to aid in those transitions?

The struggle between the desire to explore and the desire for familiarity and permanence leads to transition shock. Individuals who make successful transitions find ways to satisfy both by allowing themselves to grow and to be shaped by experience, bringing past experience into their current life. Much transition stress emerges from an unrealistic desire or expectation to go back to a life which no longer exists. The challenge is to decide what unchangeable aspects of their lives make up who they are, and to find ways of maintaining their connections to those things.

What can organizations do to support their staff members during transitions?

- Seek staff feedback in order to learn from the experiences of departing employees.
- Train and prepare for transitions.
- Develop a structured way for staff to return to process and talk about their experiences.

The NGO sector as a whole is in agreement on the need to address these issues. Our task is to take concrete steps toward sector-wide institutional change.

### *3a. Breakout Session: Overview of Re-entry*

Moderator: Liz Piwowarczyk, Co-Director, Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights

Preparation for re-entry is a process that starts before deployment and lasts until after re-entry. In order to consider the entire process, it is necessary to consider the challenges in the field in addition to the challenges of returning. Some of the new challenges facing NGO workers abroad include the increase in intra-state conflicts that make political neutrality difficult, and the targeting of NGO workers. How workers deal with stress during the assignment is a major determinant of how they will deal with the challenges facing them during re-entry. Challenges of re-entry can include everything from finding a new job and housing to feeling that no one can relate, going through an identity crisis, and grappling with existential issues. Many attest that the most “mundane” tasks such as going to the supermarket after seeing crushing poverty can provoke intense personal questioning.

The first step is for NGOs to take these issues seriously. What else can NGOs do to assist workers in their re-entry challenges?

- Have appropriate training materials and review them thoroughly with workers.
- Formally prepare workers for re-entry challenges while they are still on-site.
- Conduct exit-interviews for all.

- Refer workers or provide access for workers to counselors or psychologists (some of these professionals might be willing to participate on a pro-bono basis).
- Provide ways for workers to keep in contact with colleagues from the assignment through alumni networks.

### *3b. Breakout Session: Involuntary and Unplanned Terminations*

Moderator: Mary D’Arcy, Psychological Consultant, Maryknoll Lay Missioners

The most common reasons for involuntary terminations are political instability, physical illness, cultural maladjustment, safety, and incompatibility with the work or project. Some of the challenges of a smooth transition relate to who makes the decision to leave, the level of confidentiality surrounding the departure, how quickly the decision is made, how to share the news, and whom to inform. Also, session participants discussed the need for organizations to help staff make the decision to return and the need for confidentiality during the process. The person should be involved in deciding how and how much to inform group members. Lastly, the session discussion noted the impacts of involuntary terminations, the importance to provide support for humanitarian workers, and the local group left behind in such abrupt terminations.

### *3c. Breakout Session: Transitions Home or into Another Assignment I*

Moderator: John Fawcett, Consultant

NGOs can offer their field staff structural mechanisms to aid in making transitions. Designing a management structure that reduces the stress of transitions (an approach that may be more effective than traditional counseling approaches to mitigating stress) is a practice that is lacking in the NGO field. Insights into the current atmosphere include:

- International aid workers often lead a “transient” lifestyle, which becomes a culture within itself, making it difficult to relate to more sedentary people, and making retirement daunting.
- Experiences related to going home are both positive and negative.
- Transitions involve two forms of grief –not finding a real “home” when returning from abroad, then having to negotiate between the two worlds.
- Family separations add a second layer of re-integration to manage.

How can NGOs reduce the stress and trauma of transitions?

- Pay for travel expenses that ease transitions. For example, by decompressing vacations at the end of service or bringing family members to the field site.
- Maintain on-going training during service to help staff keep future transitions in mind while making day-to-day decisions.
- Screen staff based on ability to manage transitions.
- Support a sector-wide network for returned staff and volunteers.
- Help prepare separated families for the return of family members from the field.

How can individual aid workers prepare for transitions?

- Maintain ties with the expatriate community in host country.
- Maintain relationships with family and friends, and keep abreast of changes in their lives.
- Share experiences with friends and family upon return, and then be available for questions (e.g., structured slide presentation).
- Seek an audience of people interested in learning about the workers' experiences.

### *3d. Breakout Session: Transitions Home or into Another Assignment II*

Moderator: Jon Hubbard, Research Director, Center for Victims of Torture

How can international aid organizations make reentry processes as supportive and practical as possible? We have a lot to learn in this area. Although evidence of successful methods is scarce, it would be useful to review how other sectors address transition (for example, the State Department, Peace Corps, and international business).

While exit interviews are becoming more commonplace, formal post-deployment follow-ups are rarely conducted with mental health workers or development staff. The individual's depth of experience and length of assignment, the size of the organization she worked for and whether she returned home or transitioned into another assignment all greatly influence how the transition should be approached.

To address these issues, it is essential at the outset to build communication and supportive relationships between the field staff and the organization. Strategies for addressing transitions should be built into program designs from the start. Post-deployment guidance brochures should be provided during orientations and again as staff approach transitions. Organizations also need to develop explicit plans that meet the needs of all their staff (local and expatriate) and that take into consideration the individual's post-assignment plans. In

addition, materials should be tailored to the needs of particular program and staff conditions. Follow-up assessments should be scheduled several months after the transition as some may experience delayed psychological effects. Additional options for staff support include Idealist.org chat rooms, other web-based forums and 24-hour phone support.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Based on the survey results conducted after the conference, highlights for attendees included:

- “Macro level discussions targeting industry-level needs coupled with identification of options for next steps, while still responding to needs of individuals and organizations.”
- “Networking - An incredibly successful meshing of minds and missions from so many different disciplines and types of organizations, e.g., academics, NGOs, providers, and macro- to micro- sized organizations.”
- “The topics and sessions were excellent and very timely for many organizations.”
- “A mixed group of people all coming together to show concern for field staff. This is the first time I have heard of such a gathering. It is timely and necessary given the current trends in humanitarian aid.”
- “The outstanding speakers, participants, and opportunity to reflect in small groups.”
- “Seeing the beginning of a movement for staff care in the US.”

Overall, participants agreed that there is a great need for continued dialogue. Attendees expressed interest in another conference next year, periodic local meetings for socializing and professional development around these issues, and a listserv to share resources, ask questions, and stay connected.

The most pressing need, according to attendee feedback, is for an online resource center devoted to the broad range of psychosocial support issues. This new site – at [www.psychosocial.org](http://www.psychosocial.org) – is currently underway and will connect humanitarian experts, aid workers, and academics to provide them with the training materials, best practices, and research results needed to support their work.