

# Becoming An Aid Worker – Biographies, Careers, Skills

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# Outline

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## Context

- Expansion of humanitarian aid in the 1990s; estimated increase of aid personnel between 1997 and 2005 by 77% from 136,204 to 241,654 (Stoddard et. al. 2006, p.8).
- Blurring boundaries between development cooperation and emergency relief
- Professionalization of emergency relief, codes of conduct
- Critical evaluation of impact of aid ('Do no harm'), illusion/impossibility of neutrality, (in)efficiency of aid

# Context

- Significant differences between aid organizations (NGOs, UN agencies) (pay, fringe benefits)
- Different jobs: remote field post, country office, headquarters (“mission”, “field”, “post”)
- Different situations: emergency high risk, development low risk
- Difficult working and living conditions, R & R reflect assignment as well as organization
- Appreciation of local culture, remote places (“best time of my life”)

## Data

- 44 biographical interviews with 23 women and 21 men born between 1937 and 1980 conducted between 2004 and 2006
- 17 respondents from Western Europe, 8 from North America, 3 from Central and Eastern Europe, 8 from Asia and the Middle East, 4 from Africa, 4 from South America
- working in development cooperation and emergency relief for larger and smaller NGOs as well as UN organisations; 34 worked for an NGO, 10 for an IGO at the time of the interview, 13 had worked for both NGOs and IGOs
- 14 had been aid workers for less than 5 years, 19 for five or more years, 10 for more than 10 years

# Three Patterns of Involvement

- Early interest in global justice
  - Fascination with Africa, migrant identity, role models
- Gradual Involvement
  - Travelling overseas, voluntarism, activism
- Turning Point, Epiphany
  - Dissatisfaction with work, illness, divorce, civil war

# Rewarding aspects of aid work

- Contributing to improving lives, making a difference
- Interesting and challenging work
- Travel, meeting interesting people

## Rewarding Aspects of Aid Work

*“Well, it is very interesting. It is very full-filling, or can be very full-filling if you do a good job, you get to see lots of places and things that you would not normally see. It is the opposite of a boring nine-to-five job. The money can be very good, and I mean there is a lot of freedom involved, I mean you, both, yes, the idea of going from one contract to the other while it can be stressful, it is actually quite liberating, you are not stuck into routines and particularly if you are well paid, that you have, you know, you buy freedom because you work for a period. And there is a sense of comradeship, I mean you make good friends.” (B-04)*

# Frustrating Aspects of aid work

- Lack of resources, high turnover
- Mismanagement, corruption, bureaucratic procedures
- Security situation prevents carrying out of programmes and/or restricts movement and interaction with local population

D. Loquercio, M.Hammersley, and B. Emmens (2006).  
*Understanding and addressing staff turnover in humanitarian agencies*. Network paper, Humanitarian Practice Network. London: Overseas Development Institute

## Frustrating Aspects of Aid Work

- *I hate seeing wasted resources of any kind around the world, and I see a lot of the UN system very frustrating to me, because on paper is one thing and action is another thing. (B-32)*
- *There were some parts of IGO work that ... is very bureaucratic, often people are totally unmoved by the populations that there are working to help, and yeah, so I thought if I work for an NGO again, it would be a very lean machine, no waste of money, very professional and I was bitterly disappointed by [NGO]. (B-05)*

# Continuing Reassessment and Training

- Respondents frequently assessed their job satisfaction and skills and alternated between aid work, university studies, volunteering
- Majority of respondents had university degrees (social sciences, development studies, law, economics, engineering, medicine)
- 37 respondents took part in a short-term university based programme on humanitarian assistance
- Respondents varied regarding their assessment of the support they received from their organisations)

# Conclusions

Like careers in other sectors, the careers of aid workers are “not determined in a causal way by structural and cultural factors ... [they] result from earlier decisions, from happenstance, serendipity and from chance coincidences and encounters as well as from career planning, structural and organizational changes and changes in cultural conditions (p. 64) ”

Julia Evetts (2000), “Analysing Change in Women’s Careers: Culture, Structure and Action Dimensions”,  
*Gender, Work & Organization* 7:57-67