



**Summary of discussions in panel 32: Career and/ or calling?
Employee and Employer Perspectives on Humanitarian Work**

This report contains the minutes of the discussions held during WCHS panel 32. The panel focused on the question whether humanitarian work is solely a calling, a job in which one can have a career, or a combination of both. Seven contributors presented the results of their research. Some of these studies focused on issues related to the individual level (professional attitudes and employment paths of humanitarian aid workers), whereas others focused on the organizational level (HRM). The panel was concluded with two presentations reflecting on the panel contributions.

***Silke Roth (University of South Hampton, United Kingdom)
Becoming an aid worker - biographies, career, skills***

The discussion focused on the background and experiences of field workers. For example, one group of aid workers consisted of professionals who experienced a lack of intrinsic rewards in the work domain for which they were trained (i.e. doctors, accountants, logisticians). These professionals therefore chose to work in the humanitarian aid sector, but remained in the occupation they were for trained for. Furthermore it was asked why aid workers return to the field, after they stated they would not do so. It was argued that after aid workers return to their home country, they re-evaluate their situation. For example, aid workers in their thirties (and especially women) often say they want to stop for a while to have a family or to have some rest, but then discover at home that they cannot share their experiences from the field with their friends and relatives. These might lead to feelings that their work is more rewarding than having a social life at home and hence they return to the field. Another point of discussion pertained to the field experiences of aid workers from the 'south' and from the 'north'. The study showed that employees from the south experienced more support from their organization, whereas more employees from the north experienced a lack of support, and addressed the things they did not receive from their employer.

Uma Narayanan (Independent consultant, Malaysia)
To be or not to be – an aid worker in Pakistan and Afghanistan

The panel and the audience discussed the differences between aid workers who see their work as a career or as a calling. Aid workers who see their work as a career predominantly aim to develop into a professional aid worker, whereas aid workers who perceive their work as a calling have the desire to do good first. The presenter also identified a third category of aid workers who have an economic motivation for doing aid work, such as local staff who needs income to care for their family. However, their economic orientation may change into a calling once these employees are confronted with the reality of humanitarian work and the mandate of the organization they work for. With regard to HRM, it is emphasized that it is important to invest in personal relationships as well as in the consistent implementation of HR policies. In addition, the presenter argues that there should not be a difference between expats and local staff; they should be treated as one.

Bronwen Blake & Fernanda Claudio (University of Queensland, Australia)
Beyond the technical: perceptions & experiences of Australian humanitarian workers

After the presentation it was asked how to understand the discrepancy between (positive) expectations of expats and their (negative) field experiences. The presenter suggested that this discrepancy is the result of a combination of different factors, such as insufficient information beforehand, personal characteristics and disappointment that the team causes problems (instead of ‘something bigger’ as the work itself). Secondly a discussion evolved regarding the importance of debriefing. The research showed that respondents were not obliged to have a debriefing, and that they did not ask for a debriefing themselves, because they felt it might have a negative impact on their career (even though it was anonymously). Respondents said that they would have gone when the debriefing was already scheduled for them. Suggestions for improvements based on these conclusions refer to anonymous and external debriefings.

Magdalena Bjerneld (Uppsala University, Sweden)¹
Motives and challenges for western humanitarian aid workers

The discussion focused on the results of one of the four sub-studies presented, which was an analysis of the messages conveyed in letters and photographs of aid workers as posted on websites of MSF. This study was decided on, because previous research showed that prospective aid workers use these letters and photographs as a source of information to find out what humanitarian work is about. It was argued that the pictures do not reflect the reality of aid work in the organization studied because they place the expat in the center of attention, hinting at their heroic work and position, and showing them in a helping instead of collaborating position. In addition, the local staff remains anonymous (although they are very important in humanitarian project) and beneficiaries are presented as grateful, passive actors. In this way, unrealistic expectations with prospective aid workers are raised. However it was also stated that it is difficult to make pictures that represent the real situation. In addition, the experiences of field workers were discussed. First, it is discussed why some field workers stay overseas very or too long. This relates to the discussion of the previous presenter (see above). It is argued once again that aid workers often lose their network at home and experience a lack of understanding. To make sure that aid workers continue to do a good job, attention should therefore also be paid to their well-

¹ Co-authors: S. MacSpadden, M. Garrett, B. Maina Ahlberg & G. Lindmark, same university.

being at home. Secondly team conflicts are discussed. It is suggested that these conflicts result from the fact that humanitarian aid workers are self-actualized persons with strong personalities which does not always go together with team work and cooperation. Preparing new employees for team work during recruitment is therefore found very important.

Liz Crawford (MSF United Kingdom)

Investigating the impact of NHS's Modernizing Medical Careers (MMC) initiative on doctor's opportunities to work for Médecins sans Frontières

The discussion focused on the changing training requirements for British medical doctors, especially in terms of stricter and higher demands, and the consequences this has for MSF UK to recruit British medical personnel. The danger of this development is that doctors become too specialized for MSF, even though the organization is not completely dependent on the British workforce. For example, ten years ago there was a program for nurses to take time off and go abroad (with MSF, for example). This has become more difficult in the new medical training system. Furthermore a question is posed regarding MSF's 'allies' in this matter. The presenter argued that little opposition is experienced concerning MSF's worries and that different organizations (for example the English board and the British Medical Journal) have been helpful to think through how MSF's interests can be reconciled with the need for better medical training. Beside these context issues also a question regarding non medical training for medical staff is discussed. MSF stimulates people to go abroad before they start working for MSF and tries to get across to people that they have to work in teams and work with different cultures. Another issue to which attention is paid is the enrollment of good managers and the question how employees with managerial skills can be recognized.

Valeska Korff (University of Groningen, the Netherlands) - Patterns of Professionalization: The Development of Human Resource Management Policies in Humanitarian Organizations

During the discussion the main focus was on the humanitarian and broader context in which the HRM trends develop. In the presented study, the newsletter of People In Aid was used as an indicator for HRM trends in the humanitarian sector throughout time. For further research additional sources will be used, for example from ALNAP. In addition, also broader HR trends might be relevant, since the humanitarian sector does not operate in a vacuum, especially since there seems to be a trend that HRM policies in the humanitarian sector are more and more made by Human Recourse experts instead of humanitarian professionals. Based on the analyses for the presented paper, it is possible to draw some first conclusions regarding the link between general trends and policies, however, content analysis, which will be conducted in later research, will provide more information regarding this link. Future content analysis can also provide insights into for example contradicting policies on the same subject. In the future, another sub-study will focus on the implementation of HRM so that insights might be acquired regarding the influence of regional differences on HRM.

Liesbet Heyse (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)²

Turnover in humanitarian projects: an exploratory case study of patterns and causes

First, a discussion evolved around the suitability of using performance evaluations for research purposes, since it can be expected that not everything will be written down, due to the strategic context in which these evaluations take place. Nevertheless, the results of this study do not differ much from the interview results found in the other studies. Second, it is asked why line managers often give negative statements regarding the personal characteristics (personality traits) of the employees. The presenter answers that these aspects relate more to competencies than to personalities, such as whether employees are good team players, etc. Since this is explicitly asked for in the evaluation forms, this might explain the high number of statements. Third, the value of performance evaluations for HRM in organizations is discussed. Evaluations can provide insight into the job related aspects aid workers are not satisfied with (such as job profiles in this case) as well as input for career development. Fourth, based on the many negative statements regarding Country Management, it is argued that a fundamental challenge for HRM in the humanitarian sector is to achieve correct and effective implementation of HRM policies at the country and project level. Finally, it is suggested to compare these results with research in other organizations in order to study to what extent problematic issues (e.g. communication and quality of management) identified in this study are unique or common in other organizations.

Plenary discussion

The panel is concluded by Rafael Wittek (Full Professor in Sociology, University of Groningen) and Jonathan Potter (Executive director People In Aid) who both presented their views on the papers and discussions of panel 32, as a “kickoff” of the plenary discussion.

Rafael Wittek reflected on the papers by specifying an emerging big picture. He reconstructed the theoretical arguments of the papers, explored potential gaps, offered alternative theoretical approaches and discussed ways to move on. The basic argument of this presentation was that all papers presented valuable and relevant empirical insights into the subject matter of the panel, however, with an implicit use of theory. These implicit theories were made explicit and it was shown how these theories failed to explain some of the identified problems regarding humanitarian careers and HRM. Alternative suggestions were done for other theories which might better explain these problems. For example, Maslow’s theory of a hierarchy of needs was used a few times in the papers. However, this theory fails to explain why employees change their goals or substitute them, whereas Social Production Function Theory offers more potential to understand such phenomena.

Jonathan Potter reflected on the learning points of the panel, by sketching the elements of his design of a new international humanitarian NGO: NGOs should pay attention to its profiling (transparent “employer brand”, consistent message), (re-)emphasize the organizations principles and mandate and prioritize employee engagement and employability. A comparison is made to the Maslow triangle: within the organization employees both need a legal (the lowest part of the pyramid) and a psychological contract (the upper part of the pyramid) to the organization, and only if the legal contract is sufficiently realized, there is room to develop a psychological contract. Different HR-instruments are discussed to meet the different needs of employees and to improve the quality of work (see Figure 1 for the instruments that are discussed).

Figure 1 HR instruments suggested for new humanitarian NGO - Panel-based HR-practices

- Motivation criterion for recruitment
- Tests of skills
- Job specification
- Training
- Travel budget for HR team
- Look after aid workers on projects, coach for every aid worker
- Continuous (informal) debriefings
- Force employees to take time to reflect
- Reflection on team work, pay attention to team building
- Internal career arrangements (but also attract people from outside)

After these presentations there was a plenary discussion in which the major focus was on issues of turnover and retention of employees.

First, there was a discussion on the impact of life events (such as marriage, running out of money) on humanitarian careers. The point was made that these events are not taken into account in the models discussed during the panel, even though they have a significant influence on the employment careers of aid workers. For example, MSF has done a survey among 400 employees, of whom a very large part (85%) said that they will certainly go overseas again. However in reality only 60% comes back which is due to life events, amongst others. For organizations these life events are difficult to take into account in HR policies. Another contributor suggested that keeping contact with these leaving employees is very important in this respect. If employees still have contact with the organization when they are older they might return.

Second, the role of resources was discussed. A participant states that people wanting to work in the humanitarian sector are asked to invest a lot, however they do not necessarily get it back. Furthermore it is suggested that in organizations the old dilemma of resources plays a role. Organizations need to justify the money they use. In interviews it is mentioned that training is the first thing to go when there is a lack of resources. Furthermore there is the dilemma of sending younger employees overseas or more experienced employees who have a family ('baggage').

Third, attention is paid to the decrease in motivation of aid workers in the course of their career. The intention of humanitarian aid organizations is to improve the lives of beneficiaries, but their own workers are often forgotten in this respect. The traditional separation of expats from local staff ('north' versus 'south') is deemed problematic in this respect. It is noted that almost all papers focus on expatriates, even though the percentage of national staff in humanitarian projects is higher. When these employees are approached in a collective way, this can maybe address a lot of problems discussed during the panel, for example regarding teamwork and the fit with the local context.

Fourth, some remarks are made about how to think about careers and retention in the humanitarian sector. For example retention can be defined and measured as keeping people in the organization, but also as keeping people in the sector. The presentations show that there are different careers in the sector, so besides the question how organizations can retain their employees another question is how organizations can retain aid workers for the sector as a whole. It is suggested that maybe in the (very) long term it would be beneficial to have a more coordinated humanitarian labor market. However, it is also recognized that this is partly already going on, because the type of job shifts aid workers have are both dependent upon where jobs are and what life events people experience (for example employees start in emergency relief, but move to development positions or to the headquarters due to their life situation).

Finally, Liesbet Heyse brings the panel to a conclusion by asking the participants as to how to proceed from here. All ideas are welcome and everyone is invited to communicate ideas to the panel organizers. Furthermore she thanks the presenters and audience for their contributions and looks back at a very productive, high-quality and interesting panel.