

Abstract

The aim of this descriptive study is to identify the current practices of staff care for expatriate field staff in humanitarian organisations based in Switzerland and to propose improvement recommendations for their safety and security support. Data was collected with a self-administered Internet based questionnaire distributed to expatriate field staff, semi-structured interviews with headquarters staff of six humanitarian organisations and analysis of staff care manuals.

There are wide variations of staff care practice between organisations. Staff on development assignments is usually better prepared but receives less support during the mission. Emergency relief staff is often sent to the field without adequate preparation. Selection process varies, however psychological aspects are mostly neglected. While pre-departure preparation includes a systematic briefing, the availability and timeliness of pre-departure training is insufficient. During the mission a heavy workload, management and organisational issues lead to high stress levels reflecting the challenges of distance/field management. Medical problems in the field are prevalent and preferably solved in country. Psychological support still follows a reactive approach and lacks adequate preparation of field staff and monitoring. Security training and management is neglected in the majority of the organisations and standardised security incident reporting uncommon despite of the increasingly dangerous and complex working environment. Although debriefing is systematic, confidentiality and stigmatisation issues are causing low uptake of psychological debriefing. 74% of staff report adjustment problems, however organisations are usually not aware and supportive of reintegration. Evaluation and specified budgets of staff care are uncommon.

The development and relief sectors face different challenges, therefore not one approach to staff care will fit all organisations. Recommendations resulting from this study are:

- a) Pay attention to adequate staffing and provide management training of human resources and field managers
- b) Standardise the induction to cover security, stress management and health
- c) Ensure access to medical and psychological support in the field
- d) Establish procedures for critical incidents including reliable reporting
- e) Provide follow up during reintegration including psychological support