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Somalia: Working in High-risk Environments and Fragile States

As the security situation continues to deteriorate in Somalia, humanitarian organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to achieve their desired results. Working conditions for these organizations in Somalia are particularly harsh when compared to those in other developing countries. Humanitarian-aid workers must accept these risks as a fundamental requirement of their involvement, and donors must be prepared to take more chances in these environments as well.

by Ann Mary Olsen [Danish Refugee Council]

Somalia's humanitarian context is one of the worst in the world. It is a place of extremes for intended beneficiaries and for aid workers. Those who survive the conflict, suffering, vulnerability and indignity have reached their limit. For those seeking to assist, much of Somalia remains difficult to access, a dangerous place to operate and full of dilemmas which challenge humanitarian principles.

The humanitarian community must find a careful balance between the imperative to address humanitarian needs and the perils encountered in Somalia, such as costs and risks in terms of financial resources, the possibility of corruption, security concerns and the threats to humanitarian principles.

Taking well-accounted risks and achieving results are interlinked in Somalia. Humanitarian agencies can and should work in Somalia, and indeed they have delivered assistance and results in a manner consistent with humanitarian principles. However, a number of critical areas are crucial to consider in order to mitigate risks. Risk management is a prerequisite for operation and achieving the results necessary to assist the people.

Negotiating Access

The international community needs to constantly reaffirm independence and impartiality, meaning that in negotiating access to beneficiaries, ideally humanitarian organizations should not tolerate interference from the various insurgent groups seeking to influence their operations.

At the same time, humanitarian organizations need to engage and talk with the different groups on the opposing sides of the conflict (local leaders, armed groups, state and non-state actors, and groups perceived as illegitimate) in order to negotiate and achieve unhindered access to those they wish to assist. Humanitarian-aid workers cannot refrain from discussing and negotiating access for those in need with local leaders or armed groups, even if organizations or their do-



Meeting with local representatives is the first step toward developing a community safety plan.
All photos courtesy of Peter Müller.

nors do not appreciate their politics, standpoints or actions. If organizations did so, they would violate all fundamental, humanitarian-work principles, as organizations would compromise the most important foundation for their work—the humanitarian imperative—by not reaching those in need. Organizations would compromise their impartiality and their obligation to assist on the basis of need alone. Furthermore, they might be seen as driven by a political agenda, thus compromising their independence and possibly, security.

Staying Onboard

Violence, insecurity and the near impunity of many armed groups and *de facto* authorities have led to great difficulties for aid workers to move around safely and monitor the results that humanitarian organizations set out to achieve.

In most locations in Somalia it is possible to have a wide outreach with just national staff or with expatriate manage-

ment and technical staff on temporary visits, to support and guide the national teams and monitor results. As a precondition to the work carried out in the field, a strict security protocol must be in place. Organizations need to conduct everyday risk assessments and consider security threats.

Aid Workers and Safety

Staff is our main asset, and ensuring their protection is crucial. Clear strategies help to reduce staff vulnerability. In the Somali context, simple precautions and security measures must be part of daily routines and can help save lives. For instance, respecting curfews, having a limited amount of cash, driving in older cars or convoys, using logos and T-shirts to identify staff and equipment, and using radios, identity cards, etc., are a few ways to help prevent problems.

A very important element in the security strategy is continuing to place great importance on community acceptance. Despite the fragmentation of traditional leadership structures and their loss of authority, the community still provides a foundation for staff security, and the local community, often through the local councils of elders, frequently helps lessen tense situations while facilitating access.

Safeguarding Finances

When handling funds from institutional and private donors, organizations have an obligation to do their utmost to avoid fraud and corruption. In Somalia, corruption is a constant risk. The different types of corruption are many and sometimes extreme: from the taxation of registration, road blocks and gatekeepers to threats, bribery and the misuse of entrusted funds.

Financial-risk management is crucial in this context. Since individual staff members are under constant pres-



DDG facilitator ensuring that men and women from local communities can voice their concerns and priorities.

sure, the organization, not the staff, should take responsibility for minimizing and avoiding the likelihood of corruption. As employers in insecure work environments, the organizations are responsible for mapping and analyzing risks and developing guidelines to mitigate these risks.

Accountability

Accountability is a key requirement for the humanitarian community, because it is challenged by humanitarian work's fundamental principles and values. No one can act in an ideal manner in the Somali environment, and therefore it is crucial that any deviation from the ideal is revealed and accounted for.

Organizations should not have to face the challenges alone, especially since pushing operational principles creates implications for all organizations operating inside Somalia. All stakeholders must take on their responsibility, and to make that happen, accountability and transparency need strengthening.

Last but not least, accountability toward beneficiaries is crucial when striving to improve the quality of work. Being accountable to beneficiaries means allocating "rights" to them: a right to know the organization and how and with what the organization intends to assist them, a right to participate and

inform the organization about their views and wishes and a right to complain and be heard if the organization does not live up to its promises.

Meaningfully engaging people usually fosters several benefits: greater degrees of empowerment, mutual respect, dignity, agency security, beneficiary resilience, and program relevance and effectiveness. The link between accountability to beneficiaries and better quality programs is well established. The more difficult the situation in Somalia gets, the more important the issues of accountability and quality management become. ♦



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