Security of Lone Aid Workers

Published: July 11, 2016 | By Gonzalo de Palacios

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Most of the existing literature related to security risk management focuses on medium to large-scale organisations that possess the resources needed to invest adequately in security: e.g. attending security-related forums, coordinating with other agencies, hiring or subcontracting security experts, and buying expensive protection equipment. These investments are complemented by large national or international staff teams working with stable operational platforms in the countries of operation.

There is, nevertheless, another reality: that of the 'lone aid worker', where a staff member is the only representative of their non-governmental organisation (NGO) within the country or region they are working in. Reasons for lone deployment vary from partnering with a local organisation in a remote location to travelling with a view to setting up operations in a particular country. In these circumstances, aid workers find themselves isolated to a degree.

Existing security risk management tools and procedures tend to overlook the unique security needs of lone aid workers. These staff members are compelled by their unique circumstances to rely primarily on themselves

to ensure their own safety and security, and must do so by putting in place a number of basic security measures to mitigate the risk and impact of potential security incidents.

Lone aid workers and existing security risk management guidance.

Similar to aid workers responding in larger teams, lone aid workers can be placed in any context and are vulnerable to common crime, traffic accidents, sexual violence or illnesses, not to mention the risks stemming from working in violent environments.

Even though employers have a clear duty of care towards their lone staff, they face many obstacles when adapting the existing security risk management guidance to the needs of these persons. For example, security plan templates and tools are more geared towards teams rather than individuals, while general risk assessment methodologies are usually based on participatory models that need the engagement of several people: for example staff location management and reporting lines if there is a problem for timely support and response; or if a critical incident were to happen, management of the incident would usually pass to a local or national incident management team.

Lone aid workers are often forced to take responsibility for their own security, whether they are working within a local partner's organisational structure or operating in the country alone. In addition, where an aid worker is hosted by a local partner organisation, they may find discrepancies between the different security standards that the hiring organisation (or the person themselves) implements when compared with the standards implemented by the partner. These issues need to be addressed quickly in consultation with the aid worker's own organisation to avoid problems and possible duty of care issues (an organisation cannot delegate its legal responsibilities for duty of care even if the person is seconded to a different organisation).

How can lone aid workers ensure their safety and security?

There are several things lone aid workers can do in order to manage their own security (these are relevant whether the staff member is part of a local partner's structure or not):

- Clarify with headquarters and/or the local partner who is responsible for what in the event of a security incident, accident, evacuation, etc.
- Identify who is responsible for carrying out a risk assessment and who should be participating.
- If risk mitigation measures need to be introduced, establish who should pay for them and who will put them into practice.
- Establish who makes decisions in relation to the management of security risks.
- The individuals working with lone aid workers should be made aware of how to react in the event of an incident or accident in order to support the victim.
- Lone aid workers should carry a document in the local language at all times explaining what to do in case of an accident, whom to contact and to which hospital the person should be taken.
- Create and maintain a personal security plan.
- Identify a local 'buddy' who will regularly check how the lone aid worker is doing and who can raise the alarm if they cannot get hold of them.
- Establish, if deemed necessary, a regular communications protocol with headquarters so that the lone aid worker can reassure them that everything is going well. Also establish clear guidelines on what is an incident or 'near miss' that should be reported.
- Prepare for an evacuation or hibernation, keeping in mind that the support of the organisation and of the embassy can be difficult to access.
- Respect local customs and adhere to local laws.
- Maintain contact with other national or international staff who find themselves in the same situation who can raise the alert in case of an incident, and with whom the lone aid worker can exchange information and ideas about security and maintain joint evacuation plans.
- Even if only informally, aim to have an idea of the existing risks and how these risks can be mitigated, self-imposing, where necessary, behavioural rules (e.g. no-go areas, schedules, routes, etc.).
- Have access to, or know where to find, a Post Exposure Prophylaxis kit in the event of a sexual assault.

- Develop consistent de-briefings and pre-departure briefings for staff so lessons can be learnt, as well as ensure that a culture for information sharing and caring about staff in the field is developed.

Although to demonstrate duty of care security risk management should always be translated into formalised documents (even if they are simple or basic), the isolation of aid workers means that in practice this is not always done. These are important from the point of view of transparency and to ensure those they affect know the procedures and work by them. However, in order for lone aid workers to be able to carry out their work in a safe way, they should: know the context they are moving in very well, establish a reliable local protection network, and know how to act quickly and safely in case of any problems.

Further reading

Reporters Without Borders created in 2015 its 'Safety Guide for Journalists: A handbook for reporters in high-risk environments', which contains recommendations for journalists very similar to the ones that can be found in guides such as 'Staying Alive' from the ICRC or the 'Good Practice Review 8' published by the Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute; but the Reporters Without Borders guide does so from the perspective of the freelance journalist who could be covering a conflict alone.