

Diversity in risk

How do the evolving demographics of the humanitarian sector affect how we determine risk?

Adelicia Fairbanks, Research Advisor at EISF, discusses the changing makeup of aid organisations and associated shifts in risk profiles.

The demographics of humanitarian actors are changing. What was once a field led predominantly by Western white men is now increasingly composed of young professionals of different races, ethnicities, genders and other personal characteristics. The global push for localisation is also resulting in a greater number of local staff leading humanitarian response activities in their home countries.

Is the humanitarian community equipped to ensure the security of this diverse group of aid workers? Recent research by the European Interagency Security Forum (EISF) suggests that it is not. When it comes to protecting aid workers with diverse profiles, aid organisations are falling short in meeting their duty of care.

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Diversity and risk

All aid workers have personal characteristics, such as biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical and cognitive abilities, race and ethnicities. These and other facets of an individual's identity can overlap, resulting in intersectional identities. These intersectional identities interact with the individual's role and organisation, as well as the context in which they work. How these three different elements interact will affect the risk an individual is exposed to.

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Legal responsibilities

Most aid organisations treat their staff as a homogenous group when it comes to their security. If there is differentiation, then it is limited to gender, race, ethnicity and/or whether they are international or national staff.

A homogenous approach by aid organisations can be explained by a fear among decision-makers that if they treat individuals differently then they may be infringing staff member's rights to equality, privacy and non-discrimination.

While this is true, organisations also have a duty of care towards staff, which means ensuring that the organisation is aware of and informs staff of the risks they may face due to their personal profiles, and to put in place mitigation measures that address these risks.

"There is this [misperception] that it is illegal to ask for information about people's individual profile. This is not true. You absolutely can ask, and in fact, you probably can't fulfil your duty of care unless you do ask. There are two issues associated with this that are central to the processes within our organisation:

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the first is that we provide opportunities for staff to refuse to tell us (e.g., tick a box that says, prefer not to say) about their personal identity. The second is that we have established transparent and secure approaches to gathering data and associated data protection."

Head of operations, INGO, UK (excerpt from EISF research)

Humanitarian organisations must ensure that they meet their duty of care towards staff while still respecting staff members' rights to equality, privacy, and non-discrimination. A balance between the two must be found. Developing an inclusive security risk management framework is a crucial step to achieving this balance.

Inclusive security risk management

Most aid workers with minority profiles who contributed to EISF's research stated that they would welcome a more transparent and open discussion on diversity in risk.

However, aid workers reported that a "don't ask, don't tell" approach for hidden characteristics was common within aid organisations. While some said this helped them carry out their work, others reported that they felt the need to conceal aspects of their profile and for some this had a profound impact on their wellbeing and mental health.

"I work for a development organisation, and there is a line in our security policy that states that everyone who goes on an overseas deployment must be able to drive a car. As someone who is partially sighted, this effectively excludes me from these opportunities. There is a little bit of me that feels like this might be discrimination, but I don't want to make a big deal of it in case it backfires, so I stay quiet."

Aid worker, INGO, USA (excerpt from EISF research)

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Inclusive security risk management measures can be put in place to ensure that key organisational security processes consider diversity in the collection of data, the sharing of information and decision-making, while still respecting individuals' rights to privacy, equality and non-discrimination.

Ignoring diversity in risk means ignoring the relative vulnerability aid workers may have when carrying out their work in given contexts. No aid worker is exempt from this, no matter what their profile is.

Aid organisations that are committed to the equality of their staff should implement appropriate mitigation measures that ensure that all aid workers – no matter their personal profile – face an equal level of risk when carrying out their work.

To learn more, please see EISF's new research paper "Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles."

www.eisf.eu/library/managing-the-security-of-aid-workers-with-diverse-profiles

