# Chapter 14
# Western Health Workers in Humanitarian Aid

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## 14.1 Background

During the last decades more international organisations have been established in an attempt to support those in need of humanitarian assistance. Some of these big actors were the UN organisations, the Red Cross movement, and the Non-Governmental Organisations [NGOs], including *Medicines sans Frontiers* [MSF]. International organisations send thousands of aid workers of different professions to disaster areas. Different types of expertise are required for different stages of disasters and for different aspects of the missions.

Aid workers are normally supposed to leave their ordinary work in their home country at short notice and work for short periods, from some weeks to a year, partly due to the difficult working conditions being hard. Despite this, many people around the world are willing to help others during disasters (Hearns and Deeny 2007). Large recruiting organisations receive thousands of enquiries about job opportunities in the humanitarian field every year. But there is considerable competition for the most qualified and experienced aid workers (DeChaine 2002). One increasingly important method for organisations to present themselves to a wide audience and to attract new applicants is to use the World Wide Web [www] since that is cheaper than advertisements in newspapers and reaches a wider audience. The organisations use the World Wide Web for both presenting their mandate or mission statement and for recruitment purposes (Gatewood et al. 1993).

An organisation's image, including how it is presented online, is important for applicants' decision in making initial contact (Gatewood et al. 1993). As online recruitment is a new phenomenon, little research exists in this field. However, Cober et al. (2000) suggest a model for ideal online recruitment, and emphasise

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P. Gibbons, H.-J. Heintze (eds.), *The Humanitarian Challenge*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-13470-3_14

the importance of an attractive web page containing a structure with information that is easy to understand and follow. In order to foster the interest of the reader, some kind of a testimony is recommended, for example letters written by people who are currently employed by the organisation, which is seen as a way to build a relationship with the reader (Cober et al. 2000).

It is important for the organisations to find the 'right' people. Different strategies have been tested in order to identify which people are most likely to be successful in the field. More commonly, the focus is on criteria and characteristics of the people; however, there is little research proving their value in humanitarian action. In time of disasters, when time is short, some studies have indicated that priority is often given to filling the post quickly rather than ensuring careful recruitment, including a face-to-face interview (Macnair 1995; Simmonds et al. 1998).

Earlier research by Kealey (1996) identified the ideal expatriate as a so-called "cross-cultural collaborator". This person should ideally have three sets of skills: adaptation skills [positive attitudes, flexibility, stress tolerance, patience, marital/family stability, emotional maturity, and inner security], cross-cultural skills [realism, tolerance, involvement in culture, political astuteness, and cultural sensitivity], and partnership skills [openness to others, professional commitment, perseverance, initiative, relationship building, self-confidence, and problem-solving (Kealey 1996).

For expatriates working in humanitarian action, additional characteristics include: having a sense of humour, ability to admit weaknesses, ability to share emotions, being a team player, having good communication skills, leadership abilities, abilities to motivate others and to stay calm under difficult circumstances, and maturity. In addition, knowledge of more than one language has been identified as important (McCall and Salama 1999). Important characteristics for an effective team leader are flexibility and diplomacy, ability to build teams and capacity, including the clarification of roles and responsibilities as well as being able to coach first time aid workers, command respect, to communicate, and build bridges between groups (Kealey 1990).

There are few studies focussing on aid workers' motivation to volunteer for work in the international humanitarian sector. Research in United States during 1970s on volunteers' motives (Anderson and Moore 1978) and a follow-up during 1990s (Liao-Troth and Dunn 1999) indicated that common motives included a desire to help others, feeling useful and needed, becoming self-fulfilled, improving the community, and personal development, showing that helping others ranked highest.

Most humanitarian organisations require previous field experience from people going to the field. There is an assumption among NGOs that the people who will be most competent are those who have at least one experience from the field. However, the limited research on this question (Kealey 1990) does not reveal any relation between earlier experience and effectiveness.

The methods of preparation for humanitarian work are diverse and not always satisfactory (Macnair 1995; McCall and Salama 1999; ALNAP 2002). Some organisations have unrealistic expectations of their volunteers and neglect to provide adequate preparation and support. In the difficult situations humanitarian workers often find themselves, preparatory training would have been extremely

valuable (Hammock and Lautze 2000). Although some are sceptical about academic education and imply they are surrogates for more specific schooling (Mowafi et al. 2007), there is a demand for high quality training, ideally standardised. Standards in emergency management training should define the minimum qualifications of trainers, and provide guidelines for curriculum and content (Alexander 2003).

Many problems in the area of human resource management [HRM] in humanitarian action are identified. In disasters, the recruitment officer is required at short notice to find qualified persons willing to go to sometimes dangerous and insecure locations (Taylor 1997). It is especially difficult to recruit for contracts that are longer than 3 months, which is considered the minimum period to be effective (Taylor 1997; Simmonds et al. 1998). The reasons for the difficulties in finding personnel for these missions can either be that it is difficult for health professionals to get leave from their permanent work or that the international assignments do not assist their career in their home country. Therefore, many health professionals do not want to risk their future for humanitarian works. In order to solve these problems, some large organisations such as WHO and Oxfam have established task forces of qualified persons who are able to go into the field with short notice. However, this is an expensive solution, as the task force members must be paid, even during the periods they are not on assignment (Taylor 1997; Bugnion 2002).

Another often discussed problem is the high turnover of personnel, meaning they take part only in one mission (Richardson 2006; Loquericio et al. 2006). This is costly for the organisation, as recruitment of a new delegate for ICRC in 2005 was estimated to cost about £ 15.000, including advertisement, selection process, medical checks, debriefing, travel expenses and other administrative procedures (Loquericio et al. 2006). A variety of solutions to this problem has been proposed. For example, training programmes with training grants between assignments to keep volunteers updated, development of career plans, positions in headquarters between posting overseas, and job rotation (Macnair 1995; McCall and Salama 1999; Simmonds et al. 1998; Taylor 1997). The need for a coordinated and cooperative approach to training has been identified (McCall and Salama 1999; Mowafi et al. 2007; Richardson 2006; Schaafstal et al. 2001), but is still not in place.

Another problem is to find certain types of aid workers, especially those with long professional experience, language skills, management skills, and earlier experience of disasters. A possible explanation is that these people are in the phase of their life when they want to settle down with a more secure job in their home country and with a family (Taylor 1997).

Security has become a serious issue, as relief volunteers have to work under extreme circumstances and cope with cultural and climatic differences, sporadic or non-existent electricity, water, and other basic services. Their work involves trying to provide medical and public health assistance to a huge number of people who are stressed due to flight, exhaustion, and privation, and they are subject to many deaths. At the same time, they themselves are exposed to random and organised violence (IHE 1992; Leaning 1999). Solutions that have been suggested include

in-depth discussions of hypothetical field scenarios during briefings and training sessions, more efforts to understand team dynamics, and support to relief workers in the field (Salama 1999).

The evaluation of the international response to the Tsunami in South East Asia in 2004 showed that hundreds of unprepared volunteers called 'well-wishers', working for old and new organisations failed to do a good job. Problems identified include aid workers with inappropriate experience from earlier disasters. Too many were unprepared for the work and were unaware of existing standards and guidelines and did not behave in a culturally correct manner (UN 2005). Unfortunately, one could see the same problems after the earthquake in Haiti (DARA International 2010).

The idea of making a personal contribution to help other people in the field of humanitarian assistance may contrast with growing individualism in modern western societies. Nevertheless, the mass media, the music industry, and the international aid community nurture the concept that it is important to 'stand out' and be someone special, with the frequent use of terms such as 'hero'.

A hero is a symbol that people have used for hundreds of years to summarise what people are thinking. In the Greek mythology, a hero symbolised the two sides of the human nature: the divorce and the conciliation. The hero was often a person of lower class [or a higher class without knowing it]. He or she was tested for his/her strength, fought against evil or temptations, but often lost and was killed. The heroes were generous to their admirers, but merciless to their enemies (Cooper 1986; Nationalencyklopedin 1994). The values of a hero are fearless, applied, instructed, tireless, and humble (Wellman 2004). Lanara (1981) describes heroism as the 'absolute good'—the highest manifest of humanity, being helpful, doing extraordinary acts of bravery, and having high ideals.

Many improvements have been achieved in the humanitarian sector. However, research on aid workers' perception of their experiences in the humanitarian field is sparse and has been carried out mainly with structured questionnaires (Simmonds et al. 1998).

Due to limited research, organisations working in the humanitarian sector lack much of the information required in order to develop better personnel policies and programmes and to strengthen their operations in disasters. This research project aimed to fill parts of this gap.

## 14.2 Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this project was to investigate how humanitarian organisations attract, recruit, and prepare expatriate health professionals for fieldwork, and how these professionals are utilised, in order to identify possibilities for improvements.

The specific objectives were as follows:

1) To describe how aid workers returning from humanitarian action missions perceive their experiences in the field, and the preparation and support they received in connection with the assignment.
2) To identify the main motivating factors and perceived problems and obstacles for health professionals planning to volunteer for humanitarian action work.
3) To explore how humanitarian fieldwork is presented through letters written by health professionals working for MSF, and published on MSF home pages to attract new field staff. The objective was to look at both 'what the letters said' and 'how they said it'.
4) To describe how recruitment officers in selected large humanitarian organisations perceive humanitarian aid work, how they recruit, prepare, and support their staff in order to achieve high retention, and what concerns and recommendations they have for future work.

## 14.3 Theoretical Framework

Many theories exist regarding human behaviour and needs and some have formed the framework for this research project, particularly Herzberg's theory on work satisfaction (Herzberg et al. 1993), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1970), Organisational Socialisation (Flanagin and Waldeck 2004), and Learning Organisations (Britton 2002; Senge 1990).

Herzberg et al. (1993) organised factors that affect how people feel about their work into two primary groupings which were 'satisfiers' and 'dissatisfiers'. According to this theory, motivation, satisfaction, and long-term positive job performance are determined by five factors, which he called 'satisfiers' and include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement, all of which relate directly to what people do in their jobs. Other factors, which Herzberg called 'dissatisfiers' do not motivate or create satisfaction, but their absence can lead to job dissatisfaction. These factors all relate to the situation in which work is done and include policy, supervision, interpersonal relations, working conditions, and salary (Herzberg et al. 1993; Gawel 1997).

Maslow (1970) proposed a different theory describing the role of work in satisfying personal needs and proposed that human beings have similar needs they try to satisfy, usually in the same order. According to the concept, people must have one level of need satisfied to a substantial degree, before they will pursue the next higher need (Heylighen 1992; Gawel 1997; Maslow 1970). The needs described by Maslow can be shown as a pyramid. At the base are physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, and sex. This is followed by safety, including security and freedom from fear. The next tier involves social needs—loving, being loved, feeling that one belongs, and not being lonely. Esteem, including self-esteem, is yet higher and involves achievement, mastery, respect, and recognition.

Self-actualisation, fulfilment of personal potential and the pursuit of inner talents, is at the top of the pyramid.

In an analysis of Maslow's work, Heylighen (1992) pointed out that people who have met all the lower needs appear to have everything they need; they are secure, have friends and families, are respected and enjoy high self-esteem. However, if they have not achieved self-actualisation, they may feel that something is lacking. If they experience life as boring and meaningless, they will look for ways to develop their own capacities more fully (Heylighen 1992). A self-actualised person is identified as eager to undergo new experiences, attracted towards the unknown, and can see new things to appreciate in well-known situations. In relation to problems, they are spontaneous and creative, but can have difficulties in making decisions. Even so, they have 'a well-developed system of personal values' and are open-minded and friendly, and they easily feel empathy.

Organisational socialisation is the process through which the individual learns the values, accepted behaviour, and social knowledge within an organisation. The aim is to reduce uncertainties about the organisation and the job, and to help newcomers to build relationships and to feel part of the organisation (Flanagin and Waldeck 2004).

The concept of 'learning organisations' is used in different kinds of organisations. Britton characterises a learning organisation as an organisation that recognises the need for change, provides continuous learning opportunities for its members, and explicitly uses learning to reach its goals. A learning organisation links individual performance to organisational performance, encourages inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks, embraces creative tension as a source of energy and renewal, and is continuously aware of and interacts with its environment. Five forces in learning organisations should be considered. These include: personal mastery, mental models, team learning; shared vision; systems thinking (Senge 1990).

## 14.4 Material and Methods

The starting point for this research project was personal experience as a course leader and teacher in preparatory courses for health professionals intending to do humanitarian action work and the NOHA modules in Public health in humanitarian action and Disaster management, respectively. The health professionals in these courses often expressed unrealistic expectations of their future humanitarian work and anticipated themselves as mainly performing medical tasks. They appeared unaware that they may supervise and lead others and had difficulty comprehending the complexity of the humanitarian context, including frustrations from non-functioning infrastructure.

In response to these observations, four studies were initiated, with the intention of identifying means for improvement.

In the first study, 20 health professionals (15 women and 5 men) who had returned from humanitarian action work during the last 12 months participated. An interview guide covered the preparation they had received, their work, roles and responsibilities, and how well they felt they had handled the situation, what knowledge they lacked, and how the working conditions affected their performance. Finally, they were asked what recommendations they would give to colleagues contemplating similar work.

In the second study, four focus group interviews with 19 Scandinavian health professionals, who were planning to work in humanitarian action, were performed. The interview guide covered motivation to work in humanitarian action abroad, their expectations about themselves and the organisations recruiting them, and their concerns about their assignments.

The results from the two first studies raised questions regarding applicants' expectations about humanitarian work. In the third study we therefore explored how organisations present themselves and attract potential workers to the field. In total 137 letters written by health professional field workers for the websites of MSF's offices in six European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) that were published in August 2007 were collected, together with 129 attached photos.

As a complement to the earlier studies, in the fourth study, recruitment officers in seven large humanitarian organisations, including the World Health Organisation/Health Action in Crisis [WHO/HAC], ICRC, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC]; the Swedish Red Cross; MSF in Sweden and the Netherlands; and the Swedish Lutheran church were interviewed in order to determine their opinions and concerns around the recruitment process in humanitarian action. An interview guide covered the portrayed images of humanitarian work, the standard recruitment procedures, concerns, trends, and implications for future work.

In the analysis of the four studies qualitative content analysis, photo analysis, and discourse analysis were used.

### *14.4.1 Qualitative Content Analysis*

In the four studies conventional qualitative content analysis was used, which is appropriate when theory and research literature on the phenomenon is limited (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

The text was repeatedly read to obtain a holistic sense of the content and then read sentence by sentence in order to identify codes reflecting the content. Similar or linked codes were sorted into categories and similar categories into themes. A second researcher performed parallel independent analysis of the material, and the two groups of categories and themes were compared and modified after discussion. Representative quotations were selected, and when necessary, translated from Swedish into English (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Granheim and Lundman 2004).

The photographs attached to the selected letters in study three were numbered and described in words, which were coded and grouped in categories and themes. The result was interpreted both at the denotative level [identification of people, objects and activities] and the connotative level [interpretation of the photograph, and identification of message] (Peterson 1985). Finally, the photographs were compared to the content of the text in the letters in order to check for conformability in messages.

### *14.4.2 Discourse Analysis*

Discourse analysis aims to look at how texts are produced, their functions, and possible contradictions in them. Discourse analysis focuses on words used in the text, how the story is told, and what identities, activities, relationships, and shared meanings are created (van Dijk 2008; Parker 2004). The model developed by Fairclough (1995) was used in this work, and with this model, the representations [things, places people, and events] the text included, and how identities and relationships were constructed and determined. The discourse process [how the text was produced] and the larger socio-cultural context were analysed.

### *14.4.3 Findings*

The analysis of the four studies revealed certain themes related to the expectations and experiences of the aid workers and recruitment officers and the policy of the organisations. From the material five cross cutting themes were identified, which we name motives and realities, images of field work, our basic needs, satisfiers, and dissatisfiers.

## 14.5 Motives and Realities

The main motivating factors for inexperienced aid workers were a desire to make a contribution, and altruism with a touch of heroism. Relatives, friends, or TV programmes such as ‘The Flying Doctors’ often inspired them to make the decision to work in the humanitarian field.

Another motive for work in humanitarian action was a desire to develop themselves both as people and professionally, and they expected their missions abroad would lead to such development. The chance to grow personally was perceived as being greater during humanitarian work than within routine conditions in the Swedish health care system.

Especially for the doctors, the fact that the bureaucratic system in the home country appeared to ‘take the joy out of being a doctor’, and they looked forward to be working as ‘real doctors’ during the humanitarian missions.

Linked to this was a strong aspiration to work with like-minded people in a group, something they missed in their home country. The presumptive aid workers had high expectations of the employing organisation and expected to be taken care of and never to be left alone.

Some health professionals even wanted to test their limits and to experience adrenaline flushes after particularly difficult achievements. Inexperienced aid workers also looked for an adventure, a new experience, before they became too old. They were also interested in other cultures and looked forward to learning about new countries.

The authors of the field letters and the experienced aid workers confirmed it is possible to grow as a person and feel satisfied doing something worthwhile, despite resource limitations in the work context. They also confirmed that it is possible to develop professionally, including learning new skills, for example managing complicated deliveries or helping the severely malnourished to survive. Experienced aid workers had positive feelings about humanitarian work and were impressed by the strength of the suffering people, and how they could survive, often in terrible situations.

## 14.6 Images of Field Work

Through the letters from the field, a realistic picture with many stories about very sick patients appeared. However, the dominant image was positive. Considerable teamwork was demonstrated and although local staff were suffering, they were doing a very good job. The writers did not describe themselves as heroes and emphasised how much they learned from the fieldwork.

The photographs attached to the letters strengthened the messages in the letters; however, in the photographs, the beneficiaries were shown as passively receiving assistance from the MSF staff and the local staff, and the beneficiaries were rarely presented by name in the photo text.

Interviews with experienced aid workers indicated that the work context and work content had changed during the last decades. Today, humanitarian work is more complex and aid workers are supposed to do both clinical work in hospitals and work in primary health care. The recruitment officers described the fieldwork in the same terms as the experienced aid workers, and talked about the importance of flexibility and diplomacy in a complex reality.

### *14.6.1 Our Basic Needs: Safety, Social Belonging and Good Self Esteem*

Inexperienced personnel had many worries about the security situation, and some also worried about how to handle their economic situation when they returned.

Others were worried after all the stories they had heard about people coming home to a 'big black hole' and feeling alienated from old friends and colleagues. The inexperienced health professionals did not realise that their life could be in danger from, for example, complex emergencies. When they learned about threats and the risk of death in the field during a course in International health, they became concerned about safety and whether the recruiting organisations would take adequate care of them and keep them safe. On their first mission, they did not want to take big risks, as they understood they would be mentally occupied with concerns about work, and felt that was sufficient to be concerned with. Conversely, some inexperienced doctors were not worried about security and were even willing to go into dangerous situations; they had a feeling that they would be all right. However, they did express concern that an insecure situation might make them afraid and affect their professional performance in the field.

The authors of the letters rarely directly mentioned security. Instead, the political situation was discussed indirectly when describing the local population's suffering due to armed conflict. The few exceptions were stories from the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], and Iraq, where aid workers lives were directly threatened, and sometimes even prevented them from working.

Experienced aid workers talked about security and referred to specific threats, including armed hostilities, bombing, and mines, and criminality and rape. These threats had restricted their movements, hindered their work, and resulted in evacuations and even failed missions. Other sources of stress, including difficult physical conditions, work overload, feelings of isolation, and lack of qualified local personnel were also mentioned by this group.

Recruitment officers talked about the importance of being flexible and stress tolerant, and described aid work in terms of big demands and responsibilities. Not all organisations had a system for taking care of distressed people through debriefing sessions. One organisation expected the experts to take care of themselves, and was a reason debriefing sessions were not offered to them.

For the inexperienced health workers, it was important to work in a team with like-minded people and with the same personal and professional goals. They talked about wanting to keep their ties with the humanitarian community after they returned to Sweden. The need to belong was expressed as a fear of losing contacts in their communities at home. Some were afraid that they would repeatedly volunteer and never come back to Sweden, to their own culture, families, and friends.

Through the letters from the field, an overall positive image was presented, where teamwork was something 'fantastic'. However, experienced aid workers considered it the most difficult part of the mission. Teamwork could be a source of both frustration and stress, especially in situations where the teams both worked and lived together with people they had not chosen. Recruitment officers confirmed that teamwork was often a source of frustration and sometimes caused disappointment within the groups of expatriates.

Self-esteem was mentioned by inexperienced aid workers in connection with managing difficult situations. The inexperienced volunteers expressed concern

about recognition from family members, who did not respect the inexperienced health professionals' decision to volunteer. The authors of the letters often told stories about how the beneficiaries appreciated their work and presence, something that is important for self-esteem. Finally, the recruitment officers did not consider the desire for self-satisfaction a problem; as long as aid workers showed respect to the people they serve.

### *14.6.2 The Satisfiers: Achievements, the Work, Responsibilities and Advancement, and Recognition*

The inexperienced doctors and nurses interviewed wanted and expected that future jobs would make a difference and give them a sense of achievement. At the same time, they wanted to develop professionally, but were worried their knowledge would be insufficient and they would not manage difficult patient cases. However, within the group of inexperienced aid workers, they comforted each other and concluded that what was most important was "to do as well as you can".

The authors of the letters described many difficult cases and challenges, but in most situations, they managed to treat the patients or even save their lives. Lack of resources was one of the main obstacles to doing a good professional job. The new professional role was underlined through reflections on the differences between working in humanitarian action and working in their home country. The authors considered the responsibilities as managers, trainers and supervisors as difficult to handle.

The experienced health workers talked about the sense of satisfaction arising from the work. However, they considered it irresponsible to send inexperienced people into the field, as they felt inadequately prepared for the demanding positions they would experience.

Difficult patient cases were only part of their frustrations, more dominating was the challenge as a leader and trainer, something they felt insufficiently prepared for. However, the authors of the letters and the returning health professionals expressed satisfaction with the work they were able to perform.

New volunteers were intensely interested in the work itself and expected it to be challenging and stimulating, in contrast to their jobs in Swedish health care, which they perceived as boring. They hoped that the overseas assignments would provide increased opportunities for taking more responsibility. The authors considered the responsibilities as managers, trainers and supervisors difficult to handle and, as with the returned aid workers, described the work as a mixture of different duties. Some tasks had to be learned, for example how to organise a vaccination campaign. In addition, being responsible for a hospital or a big group of staff was challenging, and it was difficult to mediate in a conflict situation.

The inexperienced personnel did not expect the new work situation to be boring, and the authors did not often write that they were disappointed with their duties in

the field. However, returned aid workers talked about poorly planned, meaningless, and overwhelming tasks. The returned aid workers also considered they experienced many unexpected responsibilities such as leader, manager, and trainer, which they were unprepared for, and requested more knowledge in different areas linked to medicine, for example pedagogy and management. They thought further knowledge in development studies in general would provide a greater understanding of the reality around of the situation and enable them to work more effectively.

New volunteers planning to continue working abroad after one or two humanitarian missions thought more in terms of long-term development assignments. The volunteers, even those who had been out on multiple missions, did not view humanitarian work as an area for career advancement. In these studies, no one discussed the possibilities of advancing in the hierarchy of the organisation or possibilities of working at the headquarters as something positive or as recognition.

The new volunteers discussed how they wanted the recruiting organisations to acknowledge their capabilities as professionals, even if they did not have earlier experiences of fieldwork. The authors wrote about recognition from another perspective. They recognised the organisations as the best option for working in disaster situations. The returned aid workers were sometimes disappointed by the organisations that did not use their fieldwork experiences during the recruitment process.

### *14.6.3 The Dissatisfiers: Supervision, Interpersonal Relations, Working Conditions, Salary, and Policy*

The inexperienced aid workers expected not to be left alone in difficult work situations; however, lack of supervision, or support in the field was considered a problem by the returning aid workers. The authors of the letters did not discuss this, possibly because they did not want to risk the reputation of their organisation. Only one recruitment officer mentioned that the organisation arranged regional meetings for expatriates, which constituted a possibility for colleagues to exchange experiences and to meet representatives from the headquarters. MSF has established links to a research institute (Epicentre) that in collaboration with a helpdesk at the headquarters answers medical questions directly from the field via satellite telephones [personal communication with MSF Sweden].

The expectation, expressed by the presumptive aid workers, that they would be taken care of by the organisation was not confirmed by the experienced aid worker. Instead, they were often disappointed in the organisation and emphasised the importance of being properly briefed before missions, to be supported by the headquarters during difficult missions, and to receive professional debriefing after the field work was completed.

Interpersonal relations were discussed by all groups. Incoming volunteers expressed a desire to develop interpersonal relations as members of a team, as well as maintaining relations with friends and family at home. They wished to “understand

other people", referring to the locals. The authors of the letters and the experienced aid workers expressed admiration of the beneficiaries, especially women who took on huge responsibilities in the hard living conditions. The authors also wrote about the local staff in two respects. One group identified a need for updating the local staff's knowledge and motivating them to do a better job. Others admired the skills and attitudes among the local personnel who in most cases were also victims of the disaster. The recruitment officers emphasised the importance of being able to lead others and to have good communication skills as necessary for successful job performance.

Working conditions are naturally important for aid workers. The inexperienced did not know what to expect, but wanted to have secure working conditions in the field. The authors wrote about many patients, long working days, and lack of resources as the main problems and source of stress during their missions. However, they perceived it as something they could manage as they were in this situation just for a short period, compared to the local staff that both lived and worked under these difficult circumstances. The returned aid workers confirmed the high demands of the work and the hard working conditions in the field. New aid workers wanted to receive sufficient salary to maintain their independent life-styles when they returned. However, this aspect did not appear to worry those with experience.

The organisations' policies for professional development, expressed through the recruitment officers, were diverse; some expected applicants to take responsibility for their own professional preparedness, an important prerequisite for professional development. They did not recommend or support newcomers during special preparatory courses in Public Health for humanitarian action. Other organisations required newcomers to take a special course in this field before their first assignment. To succeed as an aid worker, experienced health professionals considered it important to feel secure in their professional role, to know what to do in a crisis, to have a stable personality, and a capacity to work in teams.

The trend identified by the recruitment officers was escalating demand for specialised staff, most often a person with broad expertise in public health in combination with increased time constraints. Most difficult was to find people who could take responsibility as leaders and trainers. In order to socialise newcomers into the organisation, short courses and briefing sessions were mainly used. Some recruitment officers discussed problems with people who stayed too long in the field of humanitarian action and sometimes become cynical about the difficult situations they worked in.

## 14.7 Discussion

### *14.7.1 Perspectives of Humanitarian Work*

Although the groups interviewed represented different perspectives of work in humanitarian action, common themes emerged when the four studies were

considered together. The common themes identified were: personal and professional development; preparation and support; teamwork and relationships; security and stress; gender; the image of the perfect aid worker; and retention. Inspired by discourse analysis, expectations and frustrations at three stages of the mission, before, during, and after, were compared in three different groups, the aid workers, the recruitment officers, and the public. The statements about public opinions and frustrations are based on the reflection in the western societies', presented in the background, common knowledge, and personal experiences.

### *14.7.2 Personal and Professional Development*

The inexperienced health professionals wanted to develop themselves professionally. The aid workers writing from the field, as well as those who had returned, confirmed that it was possible. Recruitment officers did not discuss professional development as a motive for doing humanitarian work. However, they should be familiar with Maslow's theory and design their interviews on the assumption that many volunteers for humanitarian work are doing so because of a drive toward self-actualisation, although they may not express this. Both recruiters and field managers should realise that many volunteers want to test themselves and find their own limits, which can lead to security risks.

The findings indicated that aid workers were motivated before they went into the field. However, the image presented to them through mass media and the internet appears simple and excludes the demands expected of them. Alternatively, it is possible the presumptive aid workers' strong conviction they will manage prevents them from understanding the upcoming challenges. However, it is difficult for inexperienced people to realise complex realities without earlier comparative experiences.

According to Herzberg et al. (1993), the 'satisfiers' associated with particular work (achievement, the work itself, responsibility and advancement, and recognition) motivate people to do good work. The findings confirmed the importance of achievement. Although the aid workers described the large demands and frustrations, the majority were motivated to work in the field. The achievements, represented here by surviving patients, probably played an essential role.

The possibility of 'advancement' was identified as an important factor for job satisfaction, but was not the focus for the aid workers. It is possible they are 'doers' and not interested in bureaucracy. Another reason could be that the hierarchy of the organisation does not attract them. If this is the case, the organisations should consider the option of people working in headquarters between missions and making this more attractive. Practical tasks are probably more attractive than policy writing or other kinds of administrative work.

Part of the process towards self-actualisation is a desire for the recognition of professional achievements or for being a good person. Aid workers in the different stages of aid confirmed this. However, it is the responsibility of the organisations to

balance the high expectations on the missions with reality and provide presumptive aid workers additional information and sufficient time for reflections before they decide their future.

### *14.7.3 Preparation and Support*

The gap between the expectations of the applicants, the stories in the letters, and from experienced aid workers raises questions about organisations' preparation of their field workers.

The expectations of the work appear in discordant with reality.

The experienced aid workers requested more multidisciplinary preparatory training. The organisations must either provide relevant preparatory courses themselves or encourage the aid workers to attend courses arranged through other providers, such as university departments. The curriculum of these courses should not only include medical topics, but also psychosocial and cultural aspects of the reality in which they will be functioning.

These findings supported earlier requests for more resources to HRM, especially targeted towards standardised training and agreed with earlier research (McCall and Salama 1999; Richardson 2006; Mowafi et al. 2007), in that there is a need for a coordinated and cooperative approach to training. The universities could play a greater role in this regard.

If recruitment has long-term perspectives, the presumptive aid workers should be encouraged to study at least some of the disciplines included in humanitarian action. The universities could help support the aid workers between the missions. Master's level courses can teach how to systematise experiences, update knowledge, and introduce tools for planning. In addition, increased efforts in public health training during basic medical education could help in the process to convince presumptive aid workers of the importance of the public health perspective in the humanitarian field.

Questions about psychological support in the field were not mentioned in the four studies and earlier studies have identified a lack of support for psychologically distressed relief workers (Hearns and Deeny 2007; McCall and Salama 1999; Salama 1999; Salama et al. 2004). The request for more support can be linked to Herzberg's 'dissatisfiers' (policy, supervision, interpersonal relations, working conditions, and salary), which do not motivate, but lead to dissatisfaction when they are lacking or inadequate. Volunteers returning from the field mentioned the importance of coherent organisational policy and this was in accordance with a study in which aid workers felt disappointment with their employer organisations, as they felt they did not follow the promises in their policies (Hearns and Deeny 2007).

Vast sums of money are spent on humanitarian aid, but small amounts are used for recruiting and training. Lack of training resources is a major problem for organisations, especially the smaller ones (Potter et al. 2002). Donors should

support efforts to increase the quality of the HR system, including training activities. Initial briefing sessions should be scheduled well in advance to allow volunteers an opportunity to acquire the skills they still lack. Briefings should cover practical matters and prepare volunteers psychologically for the extremely stressful work, and for disillusionment and frustration. Some stress factors can be alleviated by the organisations, for example, by making sure that missions are well organised and by providing clear procedural guidelines.

### *14.7.4 Teamwork and Relationships*

One of the key questions in all four studies concerned teams, which were described differently depending on the perspective of the respondents. To be a team player and to build teams is identified as important for expatriates in humanitarian action (Kealey 1990; McCall and Salama 1999). Assessment centres for identifying good team players were mentioned by recruitment officers as a method of selecting people with these skills.

A sense of belonging and recognition of one's worth are among the human needs within Maslow's theory of basic needs. It is therefore important that organisations provide a sense of community and coherence for their volunteers. Some organisations already encouraged their volunteers to maintain ties with friends and family at home while they were on missions. It would be advisable that efforts along these lines are increased, as it would encourage personnel to maintain their sense of community, even under isolated field conditions. A sense of coherence is closely related to well-being (Antonovsky 1987), and organisational theories (Flanagin and Waldeck 2004) also stress the importance of familiarising newcomers with the structure and values of the organisation. For 'learning organisations' team learning is considered important (Senge 1990) both for the individuals and for the organisations to maintain high retention rates.

More attention to the difficult questions of how to cope with these difficult situations and how to help the helpers is needed. Theories in occupational health might be useful, but more discussions on teamwork are also needed during the preparatory phase. Support mechanisms during fieldwork need to be developed, as this would prevent the image that aid workers are always supposed to take care of themselves, even in extraordinary situations, an image close to heroism.

### *14.7.5 Security and Stress*

In aid workers similar symptoms close to those often labelled as 'burned out syndrome' have been identified. These symptoms can be divided into five groups: physical, emotional, behavioural, work related, and interpersonal symptoms (Salama 1999).

Few studies have discussed the mental health of aid workers after traumatic events in the field. Those that exist report the most difficult parts of the work as dealing with many dead bodies, seeing children dying, and handling the bodies of dead children. Common reactions include confusion, sadness, irritability, and intrusive thoughts of the trauma (Robbins 1999; Talbot et al. 1992). Kealey (1990) identified stress tolerance as one of the important characteristics for 'adaptation skills', important for cross-cultural work. Earlier research has tried to alert the organisations about the increasing problem among aid workers in different settings (McCall and Salama 1999; Eriksson et al. 2001; Salama 1999), but only limited research on the long-term psychological effects of aid workers has been done (Eriksson et al. 2001).

Working conditions are among the factors that Hertzberg identifies as 'dissatisfiers', if they are inadequate. Maslow includes security and freedom from fear among the most basic human needs, with only physiological requirements being more fundamental. Thus, humanitarian organisations should be more attentive to working conditions, if they want their volunteers to be satisfied, particularly regarding security.

Recruiters should also understand that potential volunteers need reassurance regarding their safety, but may be inhibited about asking questions about dangers in the field. NGO officials should explain the field security system to all potential volunteers during information sessions and during the interviews. In addition, the administrators determining personnel policies and practices within humanitarian NGOs should recognise that debriefings after missions are an important measure for helping all kinds of aid workers to handle their stress reactions, even if they are supposed to be experts in their medical field including psycho-social care.

This is part of role modelling and can ensure that newcomers are comfortable within the organisation.

### *14.7.6 Gender*

For decades, missionaries, explorers, and researchers have sent letters or reports of their experiences around the world. This material constitutes the background material to books and films and the majority of the authors of these documents have been men, as traditionally women have not been expected to have adventures like these.

Today, it is acceptable from the Western point of view that single women go for missions, even in disasters situations. Most of the letters from the field in this study were written by women. The authors of the field letters reacted strongly against the brutalities against women in DRC, with histories of rape and sexual assaults. Although rape and sexual violence exist in western countries, the extent of the problem is so great in DRC and other countries in conflict that it is overwhelming. Therefore, there is an urgent need for thorough preparation for these situations before departure into the field.

### *14.7.7 The Image of the Perfect Aid Worker*

The letters gave a positive image of what will happen to the volunteers in the field. In the book "Another day in paradise" (Bergman 2003), a volunteer reflects over mass media's reporting:

> The report describes aid workers as tireless, and as always, I groan and wish that they would leave out the heroic description and just call us exhausted.

Not all volunteers are tired all the time, but reflections such as this provide another image about reality. The authors of the letters did not describe themselves as heroes. Instead, they emphasised how much they had learned about themselves, professionally, and about the world. The experienced people thought they had learned more than they had been able to contribute.

Photographs strengthen the image of the fieldwork. The majority of the illustrations in the letters analysed showed a western medical person bending over a patient. However, the majority of aid workers who contributed to the four studies described work where they were mainly trainers and supervisors. Few photographs illustrated active local staff and active beneficiaries. The overwhelming passive image conflicts with the ethical standards relating to respect for beneficiaries.

The recruitment officers were critical of so-called 'Cowboys' or 'Rambos', meaning people who 'want to take risks or like wars'. These descriptions have similarities to the image of heroes. According to historical mythology, a hero was even prepared to risk their lives. Today, the use of the word 'hero' has expanded, anyone doing his/her daily job can be labelled 'hero', for example people working in the health care system (WHO 2008). The different kinds of heroes have the desire to be somebody special or to be recognised in common.

The main problem with the hero concept is that it needs victims to save. In the humanitarian context, beneficiaries become passive and do not participate in planning and implementation of programmes. This conflicts with the Code of Conduct (IFRC 1994) and the philosophy behind humanitarian action and its values of active participation. Hero worship implies that only heroes are recognised as good aid workers. As aid workers try to be self-actualised, reach to the top of Maslow's pyramid, they want to be recognised by their employer, colleagues, friends, and relatives. To be appointed a hero makes it easier.

Although recruitment officers feel that there are a series of questions that can identify the 'right people' for their organisation, the assessments of the candidates is often subjective. For example, it is possible to discuss how to identify flexibility and realism, which both the experienced aid workers and the recruitment officers mentioned as important.

Kealey (1990) described "cross-cultural skills", consisting of realism, tolerance, involvement in culture, political astuteness and cultural sensitivity, and he/she is expected to have less frustration and are 'attuned to power and are not alarmed at it' (Slim 2005). Recruitment officers need to look for such people instead of heroes.

Society has a tendency to request swift solutions to complicated problems. This opinion is supported by the mass media's reporting of disasters. Boring weekdays do not photograph well in the news or in films. The media rarely discusses what kind of education and earlier experiences people have in order to make courageous missions. The basic medical knowledge, irrespective of length, kind, and pedagogic approach, becomes a magic solution appropriate in both western health care and in disasters all over the world.

An important part of the recruitment procedure is to provide applicants the opportunity to discuss expectations and motives for their future work together with experienced personnel. However, the organisations face a dilemma as they need to attract newcomers to their organisations and therefore they present a positive image of the fieldwork. At the same time, they do not want to attract too naive or inexperienced people to this kind of work. The organisations also need role models as an image of the work in order to attract and motivate donors and the public for providing financial support for the work.

### *14.7.8 Retention*

Inexperienced aid workers did not want to lose their roots or spend their whole lives outside their home country. Another fear revealed during the interviews was that they could feel alienated and isolated from society when they returned home. Connections to what Maslow called social needs emerged with fears about becoming restless wanderers, or being alienated or rootless.

Presumptive aid workers wished to be welcomed by the organisation and have their skills, knowledge, and willingness to volunteer valued. Measures should be taken to assure that new aid workers perceive themselves as members of the organisational community. Preparation for the field should include an introduction to the organisation's philosophy, programmes, and structure, so that the volunteers are familiar with the system. Preparation should also include in-depth education about humanitarian aid work, not just as a practical foundation, but also to help the volunteers understand the immense importance and value of aid work for millions of human beings around the world.

The inexperienced volunteers had many questions and worries about the fieldwork.

Therefore, more time should be invested in briefing and social contacts: this is an important part of the socialisation process. Increased communication between newcomers and experienced staff would create a deeper feeling of coherence within the group of staff, while improving the learning within the organisations. Recruiters and those responsible for contacts with aid workers during their missions should remember their need for recognition from the organisations.

The problem with people staying too long in the field and sometimes becoming cynical to the difficult situation they work in contradicts the otherwise frequently

discussed question about the high turnover of personnel in humanitarian action (Loquericio et al. 2006).

However, literature written by experienced aid workers describes old friends are only interested in hearing small parts of the aid workers experiences, before they start talking about something closer to them (Bortolotti 2004).

Humanitarian aid work is too serious to be solved with quick magic solutions. It must be recognised that HRM, including preparation of aid workers, takes time. Recruitment officers must also be given enough working time for the recruitment process, including support to people in the field. When expatriates have invested time in preparation, they probably want to use it for a long time, which motivates to stay in the sector.

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