

Pre-deployment security training in humanitarian aid: a commentary

Alexander Nikolaus Hasenstab & Tom Smith

Introduction

Man-made threats such as crime and armed conflict as well as natural, health and safety hazards are repeatedly a concern for aid workers. While helping others who are in need of humanitarian assistance, aid workers sometimes risk their lives. Major events untowardly affecting aid workers are regularly reported in the media (Guidero, 2020, p. 1). Yet, many less severe incidents or accidents often go unnoticed by the aid community as well as public.

To reduce security and safety risks, aid agencies have taken steps to advance their security risk management (SRM). From the authors perspective, the efforts made by the humanitarian aid community in relation to advancing SRM may surpass those by the for-profit sector, but contemporary approaches to SRM are not only commended but also challenged. For example, Neuman, Espada, & Read (2019, p. 1) are concerned that humanitarian SRM is being tackled as ‘an isolated and distinct issue’ and not addressed in conjunction with the broader facets of humanitarian assistance, including the underlying social relationships developing from working in the field. Other concerns include international aid workers' physical and emotional seclusion from the populations they serve and their sheltering in highly protected facilities (Duffield, 2012, p. 478), and disparate security and safety measures (e.g. security training) between international and local/national aid workers (GISF, 2020, p. 21). And while some question the concept of mainstream aid worker security training (e.g. Duffield, 2012), others such as the United Nations view it positively (UNDSS, 2018, p. 22).

A prima facie look at humanitarian SRM suggests that most SRM activities, including security training, take place in the field while aid workers are already on assignment, and that

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the extent of and approach to especially pre-deployment security training (PDST) are unclear. PDST is training undertaken prior to the commencement of a humanitarian aid assignment to enhance aid workers' security and safety skills and knowledge to maintain their wellbeing. Enhancing the resilience of all aid workers - international and local/national - towards adverse security and safety conditions contributes to sustainable and continued humanitarian aid operations. In contrast to so-called hostile environment awareness training (HEAT), PDST does not specifically focus on aid workers working and living in highly volatile and insecure environments. PDST should provide essential skills and knowledge needed in nearly any environment and assignment.

While the literature on aid worker security management is relatively abundant (Beerli, 2018; M Neuman & Weissman, 2016; Roth, 2015; Schneiker, 2018; Stoddard, 2020) and - according to Guidero – ‘takes a variety of angles’ (2020, p. 4), only modest systematic information on aid worker PDST is available. Hence, our theoretical understanding of PDST is limited and insufficient to assess its utility. Without evidence on what works regarding preparing aid workers for security and safety challenges, we cannot make methodical recommendations or set sector wide standards of best practice aiming to reduce aid workers' vulnerabilities towards security and safety threats.

Contextualizing pre-deployment security training

Violence, instability, and insecurity in all their forms present a complex and difficult challenge to manage for aid programs. Aid agencies respond to this challenge in diverse ways, designing SRM approaches based on various factors and interpretations. According to Beerli, humanitarian SRM has since the first dedicated security practitioners were employed been ‘institutionalized’ in international aid agencies (2018, p. 72). She argued that by way of engaging humanitarian security practitioners ‘security considerations have become integral to

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the planning of international humanitarian operations’ (Beerli, 2018, p. 70). But as others have recognized and referenced, this presents a number of questions about the outcomes and support offered to aid workers in the field now that ‘security considerations’ have been recognized (Billaud, 2020; Bradley, 2019; Sutton, 2018, 2019; Verlin, 2018).

A sector wide systematic appraisal of humanitarian SRM is lacking and is only irregularly found in micro accounts relating to certain practices, threats and risks, and agencies, and only rarely discussed at the macro level. Also missing is a sector wide systematic appraisal of aid worker security training, in particular PDST.

Evolution of humanitarian security training

Van Brabant, a pioneer thinker and key influencer of humanitarian SRM, stressed that ‘There are thousands of aid workers in violent environments who have hardly any security training’ (1999a, p. 8). Then and now, security training appears to be largely seen as a means of affording aid workers with better protection in response to outwardly intensifying security risks, greater media focus on untoward events involving aid workers, and potential reputational losses as well as conceivable legal conflicts resulting from security incidents affecting aid workers (Van Brabant, 1999a, p. 7). By and large, the notion that training is a good thing to equip aid workers for the security challenges in the field remains (e.g., UNDSS, 2018; Blyth et al., 2021; Turner, 2021). The absence of sector-wide accounting and systematic research on security training in humanitarian aid leaves plenty of room for individual interpretations of its utility.

Pre-deployment (security) training

Pre-deployment training is not uncommon, if not always focused on security. National and international military forces, national and international police agencies, and international organizations (e.g. United Nations and European Union) as well as international non-

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governmental organizations employ these to prepare their personnel for work assignments, especially deployments overseas. Yet, pre-deployment training for locally recruited personnel appears less common. In numerous United Nations system organizations and other humanitarian aid agencies employees must complete e-learning security training prior to commencing a contract of employment. Similarly in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, some ask their personnel and volunteers to complete e-learning security training prior to employment or before undertaking business travel. Despite the advances made in relation to pre-deployment (security) training, little is known from a theoretical perspective about the utility of PDST in humanitarian aid.

Summary of evolution of pre-deployment security training

There have been repeated calls for better PDST. By 2004, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) called on aid agencies to 'ensure that all field staff receive adequate security training before first starting work in an insecure location' (2004, p. 5). Two years later, Rogers criticized the 'absence of security preparation and training for new employees in a large number of organizations' (2006, p. 26). He was particularly concerned that new employees in aid agencies were being deployed to the field without adequate prior training in security, and questioned whether other industries would deploy employees to insecure environments without passable PDST (Rogers, 2006, p. 26). In 2013, Blake, Claudio, and Taylor still found a 'lack of adequate preparation for specific deployments, including situational and contextual information related to effective delivery of service and personal security' (2013, p. 15). Little appears to have changed in these years in relation to PDST despite a growing number of security incidents involving aid workers. To improve the safety and security of global health workers, Mishori, Eastman, and Evert recommended that organizations 'Provide pre-departure travel safety and security training to

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all staff (whether they travel or not) involved, in classroom, hands-on workshops, or online' (2016, p. 525). Blake et al. had already described the negative effects of not receiving PDST (2013, p. 14). These works present a firm argument for PDST; however, research is missing against a growing aid worker population and increasingly complex aid threat environment.

Appraisal of research on pre-deployment security training

The available literature casts a cursory glance at PDST without providing much detail about how it is understood or the utility thereof. We were somewhat surprised by that considering the importance aid agencies place on security training as a SRM tool.

Van Brabant argued that the sector requires 'agreed sector-wide standards that clarify the minimum requirements in terms of awareness, knowledge and skill with regards to security issues for aid workers, and similar minimum requirements for organizations sending personnel to dangerous environments' (1999a, p. 7). Around the same time, McCall and Salama found that the pre-deployment training for novice field workers was not uniform (1999, p. 114). Which is not surprising, as then aid agencies' approaches to security training and training design appeared rather random. Not long after Van Brabant's remarks, more support for PDST arrived from Sheikh, Gutierrez, Bolton, Spiegel, Thieren, & Gilbert, who examined the issue of casualties among humanitarian workers:

Nearly a third of all deaths in humanitarian workers were in the first three months of duty, with one of every six deaths occurring in the first month.

This was unrelated to extent of previous field experience. Even allowing for the short term contracts common during emergencies, new arrivals may not be prepared for the dangers present, including driving risks. Adequate training in security before arrival and adequate guidelines could reduce this risk. (Sheik et al., 2000, p. 168)

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Also, Burkle called for PDST, especially for humanitarian aid workers deploying to conflict areas:

Before deployment to conflict areas, especially those characterised by insurgent activity, humanitarian providers must realistically assess the threats to life and to the mission. They must obtain pre-deployment situational awareness education, security training and optimal protective equipment and vehicles. (Burkle, 2005, p. 26)

Yet, despite reminders of how dangerous aid work can be and despite calls for PDST (e.g., Sheik et al. [2000], Burkle [2005], and Buchanan and Muggah [2005, p. 9]), little is known from an academic perspective about the utility of PDST. With reference to the above-mentioned findings of Sheikh et al. (2000), Rogers argues:

the first 3 months of an employee's deployment... This time frame is a familiarisation phase for new employees when they are still not completely aware of the context and the associated threats. This further strengthens the need for humanitarian agencies to do more to prepare their employees prior to deployment to a new country. Trainings for humanitarian employees only start once they have been deployed and have been in the situation for some time which will not help deal with the above situation, and even when trainings are provided by no means do all employees receive them. (Rogers, 2006, pp. 26–27)

Rogers provides a solid argument why PDST should receive greater attention. But, based on available information, it appears that PDST is secondary to security training that takes place while aid workers are on assignment.

In 2010, Eckroth provided a more detailed appraisal of aid worker PDST, and suggested that only a few aid workers receive PDST before starting an assignment (2010, p. 29). PDST also finds support outside the humanitarian aid sector (see Ast, 2010, p. 155). On

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the positive side, Fee & McGrath-Champ investigated the security practices of 10 international NGOs and found that - in the bulk of the agencies under examination - orientation trainings and pre-deployment trainings are the key tools to empower and raise awareness of staff, and that ‘safety and security awareness training was typically compulsory for all staff (and expatriates’ family members), not just field staff’ (2017, pp. 1973–1974). Beerli states: ‘Basic security and safety awareness training is increasingly mandatory for all staff, Prior to departure, staff receive generic training which speaks to the global security situation’ (2017, p. 794). And Schneiker found that ‘security literally is an every job responsibility, and it’s written into their job description, and it’s written into their performance evaluation, and it’s part of their pre-deployment and training cycle’ (2018, p. 123). Like Beerli (2018), Schneiker too argues that security training has become ‘institutionalized’ in aid agencies (2018, paras. 108–109). But, the literature suggests that PDST may not be as widespread as suggested by the authors. And international aid workers are more likely to receive PDST than their local/national counterparts. Nonetheless, we can say that a systematic outline of the utility of PDST is lacking.

Conclusion

PDST seems in theory a useful SRM tool, but it is under-researched. While humanitarian SRM has attracted the consideration of scholars and researching practitioners and despite repeated calls for better PDST, relatively little systematic research attention has been directed towards this type of training. Nonetheless, aid agencies employ PDST to train aid workers for the challenges they may encounter in the field. But, on what basis, if not evidence-based research, do we decide what works in relation to preparing aid workers for the security and safety challenges in the field? McCall’s and Salama’s point that ‘It is

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important that these policies are based on evidence that is both qualitative and quantitative' is still valid today (1999, p. 116).

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