



LEADING WELL

AID LEADER PERSPECTIVES
ON STAFF WELL-BEING AND
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

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PARTICIPANTS

Many thanks to the leaders who participated in the project:

- Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), Director Lisa Piper*
- ActionAid International, Secretary General Julia Sánchez
- Amel Association International, President Dr Kamel Mohanna
- The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Director Christine Allen
- Christian Aid, CEO Amanda Khozi Mukwashi
- COAST Trust, Executive Director Reza Chowdhury*
- Community World Service Asia, Regional Director Marvin Parvez
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Secretary General Charlotte Slente
- Foundation for Relief and Development (FRD), CEO Azmat Khan*
- International Medical Corps (IMC), Vice President Mary Pack*
- Islamic Relief Worldwide, CEO Naser Haghamed
- Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Director Maria Immonen
- Medair, CEO David Verboom
- Oxfam GB, CEO Dr Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandarajah
- Save the Children International, CEO Inger Ashing

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* Also a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG)


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www.chsalliance.org info@chsalliance.org

Geneva Office

Maison Internationale de l'Environnement 2
Chemin de Balexert 7 (first floor, rooms 1-08)
CH – 1219 Châtelaine
Geneva, Switzerland

Design: Weaver Creative, visit weavercreative.co.nz



“The Duty of Care
is fundamental.
How do we expect
to care for affected
populations if we’re
not taking care
of our own?”

Reza Chowdhury, Executive Director, COAST Trust.

PREFACE

Over the past few years a growing number of people in the humanitarian sector have engaged in a dialogue on how to better manage risk. This dialogue has expanded beyond a basic discussion on the discipline of risk management to dive deeper into specific topics linked to risks faced by humanitarians in practice and how we should address them as a system.

While it is often difficult to identify clear solutions or to achieve consensus on what those solutions may be, it is clear that the humanitarian system needs to change.

The purpose of this paper is to add to the ongoing discussion on staff well-being in the humanitarian space, and hopefully provoke necessary discussion on how we can evolve – as individuals, organisations, and a system – trying to meet the needs of people in crisis.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and, where specified, the people interviewed. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of ICVA, the CHS Alliance or their members.



CAUTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Humanitarian staff often work long hours in risky and stressful conditions. According to the research carried out by Dr Liza Jachens, aid workers are subject to burnout, mental illness, and negative coping mechanisms in some cases at more than double or triple the rates of the general population.

Surprisingly, Jachens has found this phenomenon to be more linked to organisational stressors than to operational stressors.ⁱ

Some humanitarian organisational cultures have been described as unhealthy, dysfunctional, toxic, macho, hostile and subject to a “martyrdom” or a “white saviour” complex.

To adequately deliver on their mandate, humanitarian organisations have a duty of care to promote their national and international staff’s mental and physical well-being and avoid their long-term exhaustion, burnout, injury and illness. At the end of the tumultuous year of 2020, ICVA and the CHS Alliance invited 15 humanitarian leaders from among their shared members to participate in a project exploring the risks and opportunities associated with staff well-being and organisational culture.

In leader interviews the standard core risk categories were explored in relation to poor staff well-being: operational, reputational, safety and security, fiduciary, legal and compliance, and ethical.

Leaders found all these risk categories to be relevant to the issue, particularly as it relates to safety and security, staff retention and the ethical duty to care, not only to affected populations but also to employees.

However, many risks brought up by leaders could be better mapped against the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a psychological assessment tool that looks at six workplace risk categories: workload, sense of control, reward, workplace relationships, fairness and values alignment.ⁱⁱ

Leaders identified five key challenges to staff well-being and supportive organisational culture. First, professionalisation and bureaucratisation have turned us into what CWS Asia’s Marvin Parvez described as “paper tigers” drowning in a sea of compliance requirements. Second, our sense of control is naturally tested by the stressful contexts and situations in which we find ourselves, which can be traumatising. Third, the rewards offered by the work are sometimes not adequate enough to satisfy our perfectionist tendencies and willingness to sacrifice our well-being for the cause. Fourth, our workplace relationships and sense of fairness are negatively affected by the internalisation of oppressive systems – patriarchy, neo-colonialism, white supremacy and others. And fifth, our personal and organisational values can seem mismatched once we realise that competition is often the key driver in our sector, not compassion.

What can one person do to lead their people in such a challenging environment?

They can seek to play a role inside the organisation which can in turn, have an impact on the way the organisation works in the world. They can stand up for their beliefs loudly, clearly and often, recognising great work but also calling out inappropriate behaviour. They can accept support from experts, staff, their board, donors and others in the sector to take on the cross-sector challenges together. They can send a tremendously important signal by taking care of themselves and taking time to rest. They can tell their staff they do not have to be perfect and give them clear guidance on what to prioritise in their finite, precious time together.



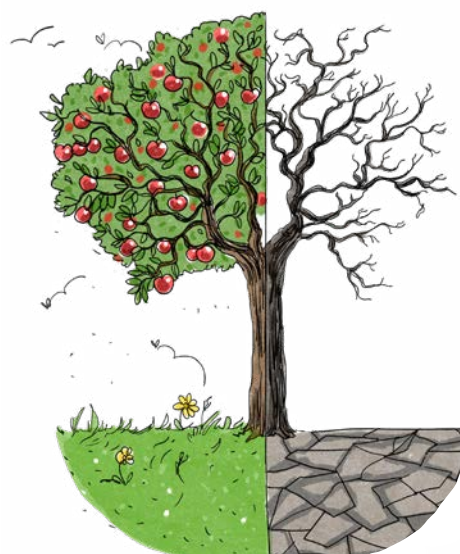
What can thousands of people do to bring compassion into our common experience of the work to protect and assist crisis-affected people?

They can share resources, contribute to long overdue conversations about equity, create opportunities to understand each other’s realities, build trust, learn from benchmarked data, organise and convene themselves, and commit to keep doing so, even after COVID is a faded memory.

If we would choose an image and a metaphor to summarise the learnings from this project about how we can support our people, it would be a fruit tree.

In this we are inspired by Hope Chigudu, a facilitator with the CHS Initiative to Cultivate Caring and Compassionate Aid Organisations. To thrive, fruit trees require adequate sun, water, air, nutrient-dense soil, warmth and space. With these inputs, they grow from a small seed into a vulnerable sapling and finally into a strong and tall tree with healthy roots, a trunk, branches and leaves to carry out photosynthesis. In the best case, a tree will bear fruit. When cultivated with care, an orchard of fruit trees can produce abundantly.

However, trees are vulnerable in environments that have been degraded, polluted, burned and overrun by other organisms. Thriving is a delicate balancing act that requires constant attention and care in full awareness of the interconnectedness and cycles involved.



INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to weave together perspectives of leaders in humanitarian aid on the topics of risk, staff well-being, and organisational culture at a time when aid workers are feeling intense fear, sadness, anger, frustration, guilt and exhaustion.

It aims to encourage, inspire and push individuals, organisations and the aid sector as a whole to practice awareness, compassion, equity and solidarity.

It was written as part of the ICVA series on risk management in the humanitarian space. It was developed in partnership with the CHS Alliance as the lead of the Initiative to [Cultivate Caring, Compassionate Aid Organisations \(CCCAO\)](#).

The learning presented here builds on two papers published in January 2020: “[Working well? Aid worker well-being and how to improve it](#)” from the CHS Alliance and “[Risk and humanitarian culture: An ICVA briefing paper](#).” Both papers make the case for engaged leadership. The first recalls CHS guidance that “managers can promote a duty of care through modelling good practice and personally complying with policy.”ⁱⁱⁱ The second lists as a key action “senior leaders must set a tone at the top of any organisation that clearly embraces formal risk management methods.”

The way forward articulated in the paper links to the “[IASC minimum standards of duty of care in the context of COVID-19](#),” published by the IASC Secretariat on 27 November 2020. These standards are based on ICVA’s May 2020 call to action:

“[Protecting humanitarian workers against COVID-19: Focusing on prevention by strengthening labour rights, occupational safety measures and health for all, including national staff](#).” The call to action opens by recalling the Core Humanitarian Standard’s Quality Criterion: “Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably.”^{iv}

METHODOLOGY

After mapping out the shared membership between the CHS Alliance and ICVA, the Executive Directors of ICVA and the CHS Alliance invited a select group of leaders to participate in the project. They aimed for a diverse group of participants, taking into consideration which leaders had recently re-affirmed their commitment to the Core Humanitarian Standard and which were actively involved in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (IASC OPAG).^v

Between 20 and 30 November 2020, 13 leaders were interviewed. Focus group discussions were held on 30 November with participants to present and reflect on the initial findings. Conversations with two additional CEOs were recorded in 3 December 2020 [webinar](#) jointly organised by ICVA, the CHS Alliance and PHAP called “Organisational culture matters: Leadership, staff well-being, and living our values.” Over 750 people registered and over 200 joined live.^{vi}



“Particularly the first months of the COVID response, we are probably asking people to work harder than they ever worked before. And at the same time, they are doing it in situations where it’s more challenging than it’s ever been. What is the right balance between making sure that we respond and are there for the people we’re here to serve, and that we take care of each other?”

Inger Ashing, CEO, Save the Children

PART I – PREMISE

HUMANITARIANS ARE UNDER STRESS

Humanitarian staff often work long hours in risky situations. They naturally experience stress, which in turn affects their well-being. For example, an independent review of workplace culture at Save the Children UK found stress, depression and exhaustion to be among the top reasons given by staff for taking sickness leave.^{vii}

According to the research carried out by Dr Liza Jachens, aid workers are subject to burnout, mental illness, and negative coping mechanisms in some cases at more than double or triple the rates of the general population. A survey of 2,431 UNHCR staff found the percentage of participants classified as at risk for generalised anxiety disorder to be 31% (vs. 3-8% for the general adult population worldwide), depression at 25% (vs. 12%), PTSD at 36% (vs. 8%), and hazardous alcohol use at 25% (vs. 10-20%).^{viii}

The COVID-19 pandemic is taking an additional toll, as shown in recent Devex surveys on aid workers' job security and well-being. It has impacted everyone in dramatic ways. Several interviewed leaders mentioned their staff and staff's families had contracted COVID. Employees feel anxiety, grief, isolation, overwhelmed and exhausted. Maybe they lost a job, or were assigned a new job, or maybe they fear being let go in the future. People with dependent children and parents have been doing double duty. Colleagues struggle to "recharge" when they cannot travel, rotate, or see their loved ones.

The impacts, according to Roger Parry from Agenda Consulting, are disproportionately being felt by women, people of colour and younger professionals.^{ix}

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE CONTRIBUTES TO THE STRESS

Jachens' research has found the high rates of negative mental health outcomes for aid workers to be more linked to *organisational* stressors (concerned with the design, management and organisation of work) than to *operational* stressors (exposure to danger or trauma as part of their occupation).^x

This is consistent with findings from reports like the one produced by the Konterra Group for Amnesty International, which found 39% of staff perceived they had developed mental or physical issues as a direct result of working at Amnesty – including burnout, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, headaches, insomnia, back problems, and panic attacks – more because of conflicts with managers, poor treatment, bullying, and the like rather than viewing distressing footage or other sorts of traumatic material.^{xi}

It is striking that humanitarian organisational cultures have been described as unhealthy, dysfunctional, toxic, macho, hostile and subject to a "martyrdom" or having a "white saviour" complex. Humanitarians have been observed behaving in ways characterised as bullying, mobbing, sexist and racist.

"The thing that we all have in common is the fact that we haven't, any of us, made peace with our background that we have been part of creating. We have structural racism within our sector and in our respective organisations. And we haven't been calling it out, we haven't been honest enough about that. So, I think that is also something that I've been talking about a lot, and that we need to continue to focus on. I think it's a positive thing that we are talking about it. It is also leading to some difficult discussions, which led to more discussions and the need for me to be very clear about what views I accept and what I don't accept and what we as an organisation stand for. Some of these things wouldn't have surfaced unless we've been where we are."

– Inger Ashing, CEO, Save the Children International

Recent investigations have drawn our attention to the signs of toxic culture that have emerged again and again in the context of misconduct. For example, the 2019 final report of Oxfam’s Independent Commission on Sexual Misconduct, Accountability and Culture concludes “Ultimately, the commission’s work so far has revealed that sexual misconduct is only one of the concerns floated by staff, and is seemingly symptomatic of larger systemic problems that must be addressed,” adding that “deep transformation around trust (between staff and with processes) and power (the space and ability to hold people to account) within Oxfam is required to enact real change.”^{xii}

The 2019 report prepared for UNICEF of the Independent Task Force on Workplace Gender Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority suggests, “Healing an unhealthy culture is the first step towards becoming a high-performing organisation characterised by openness, trust and collaboration... This change needs to start at the top, trickling down to management at all levels.”^{xiii}

THE RISKS ARE MANY

From a risk management perspective, protecting aid worker well-being is crucial. There is a significant likelihood well-being can be compromised on the job, and the potential impacts cover the full range of core risk areas with varying degrees of severity.

Table 2: Risks of staff burnout and mental illness

Core risk areas considered by risk managers	Potential impacts of staff burnout and mental illness on the organisation
Operational	Unwell staff are more likely to make poor decisions and less likely to achieve desired objectives. Productivity is compromised by absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover – potentially doing harm to people in need.
Safety, security	Unwell staff are more prone to accidents, illness and security incidents.
Fiduciary	Unwell staff may under perform as stewards of financial resources. Financial losses can result from absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.
Reputational	With impaired judgment, unwell staff may engage in toxic behaviours and misconduct, which could damage an organisation’s image and reputation.
Information	Unwell staff may mishandle or lose data, or leave an organisation with no handover.
Legal, compliance	If staff become unwell as a result of the work, this calls into question whether applicable laws and regulations are being followed.
Ethical	Failure to fulfil organisational obligations to protect staff; harm caused by inadequate Duty of Care and inequity in the protection and services provided to international staff vs. national staff.

DUTY OF CARE INVOLVES EVERYONE

“The Duty of Care is fundamental. How do we expect to care for affected populations if we’re not taking care of our own?”

– Reza Chowdhury, Executive Director, COAST Trust

According to the CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators (2018): “An agency’s duty of care to its national and international staff includes actions to promote mental and physical well-being and avoid long-term exhaustion, burnout, injury or illness. Managers can promote a duty of care through modelling good practice and personally complying with policy. Aid workers also need to take personal responsibility for managing their well-being. Psychological first aid should be immediately available to workers who have experienced or witnessed extremely distressing events.”^{xiv} What is important to note here is that individuals should of course be looking after themselves. However, their managers and agencies also have a responsibility when it comes to staff well-being.

Risk managers often talk about “tone at the top.” Tone at the top is about the qualitative atmosphere of the work environment. It is the message, attitude, and image that a leader conveys to the rest of the organisation.

It affects how people behave, communicate and work together. Ideally, it signals a clear, unwavering commitment to the principles and values of the organisation, to upholding the highest ethical standards. It spells out the expectations of employees and clearly indicates what happens when behaviour does not comport with the organisation’s values. The tone at the top lets employees know their colleagues, their manager and the leader of the organisation “have their back” if and when they report any concerns they might have. Employees feel like their organisation values their well-being. Behaviour must echo any commitments to principles and ethical standards to set an atmosphere in the organisation that supports staff care.

“For me it was incredibly important to come in and say that I want to lead an organisation where everyone feels respected and safe every day.”

– Inger Ashing, CEO, Save the Children International

A 2019 review carried out by the Konterra Group notes “It is not uncommon for organisations whose work exposes individuals to inherently stressful situations to operate with a sense of urgency. However, all humanitarian professionals who seek to care for others must also endeavour to create an internal culture of care, compassion, and respect.”^{xv} An organisation cannot be effective at caring for others if the well-being of its own staff is sacrificed.

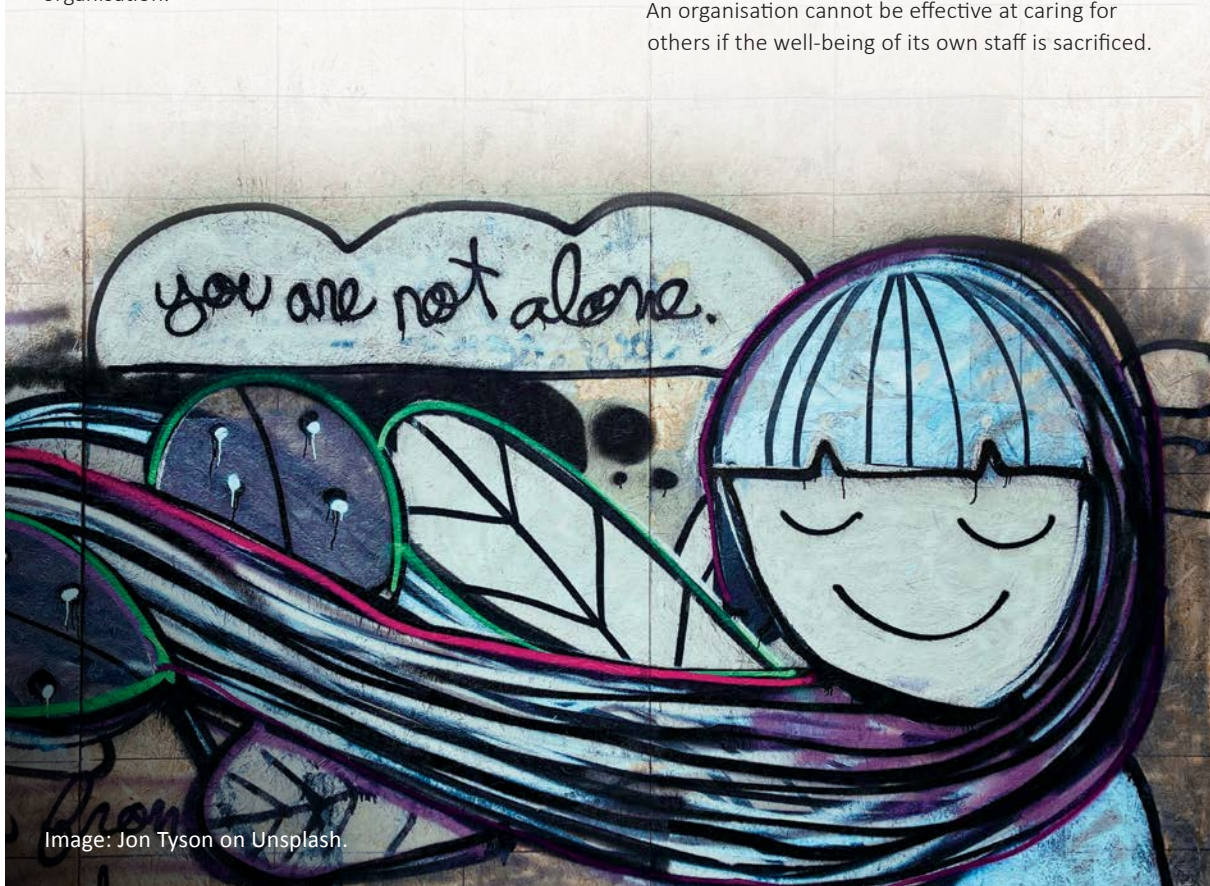


Image: Jon Tyson on Unsplash.

**"THIS IS NOT A JOB.
THIS IS MY INTEREST.
THIS IS MY COMMITMENT.
I LOVE TO DO THIS."**

Reza Chowdhury,
Executive Director,
COAST Trust

**WHAT
DREW YOU TO
YOUR CURRENT
LEADERSHIP
ROLE?**

**"IT WAS MY PASSION, AND IT STILL
IS MY PASSION. THIS IS ONE OF THE
FEW SECTORS WHERE YOU SEE THE
IMPACT OF YOUR WORK ON THE
HAPPINESS AND QUALITY OF LIFE
OF OTHER PEOPLE SO QUICKLY."**

Azmat Khan, CEO, FRD

**"THE MAJORITY OF US
ARE IN THIS BUSINESS
TO MAKE THE WORLD
A BETTER PLACE."**

Maria Immonen,
Director, LWF

**"FOR ME, WHY DO WE DO IT? BECAUSE
WE BELIEVE THAT WE'RE BROTHERS AND
SISTERS IN GOD, THAT WE'RE ALL CREATED
EQUALLY, WE ALL HAVE A WORTH, AND
EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO A LIFE
WHERE THEY CAN BE FLOURISHING."**

Christine Allen, Director, CAFOD

PART II – LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Fifteen leaders participated in this project in late November and early December 2020. They were located in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Canada (soon to move to South Africa), Denmark, Lebanon, Pakistan, Switzerland, the UK and the US. More than half are relatively new to the job, while others have been in place for some time, some for a couple of decades.

Many commented on going through an organisational restructuring process – either recently, currently, or in the near future. Many have been part of organisation-wide conversations on racism after the murder of George Floyd. One leader conducted part of the interview in the dark, due to local cuts in electricity. Another had interruptions in internet connection throughout the conversation.

All of the humanitarian leaders interviewed for this project were asked what drew them to their current role. Their answers, delivered with a spark of energy, centred around a passion for the work, a sense of purpose, and a deep connection to the people – both the people working in the organisation and the people in communities served.

Many started working for their organisation at a junior level in their formative years. For some, elevation to leadership was a natural progression, an evolution of a long career in service, and maybe the last big job before retirement.

Some sought out the role because they were looking for a new challenge and were ready to test themselves. Some did not actually seek the role, but were asked, encouraged or even “pushed” to apply.

Many were attracted by the kind of work carried out by their organisations, including its operational nature or the forging of partnerships and collaboration. One mentioned a high regard for the quality of the services carried out by his organisation. Several working in faith-based organisations pointed to their faith as an important factor in their decision to join the organisation.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS YOU ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO STAFF WELL-BEING?

In the leader interviews, all the standard core risk categories were explored in relation to poor staff well-being: operational, reputational, safety and security, fiduciary, legal and compliance, and ethical. Leaders found all these risk categories to be relevant to the issue, particularly, the ethical risk, which was seen to cut across all risks.

Several leaders emphasised safety and security. This is particularly worrisome in fragile conflict zones where staff are exposed to relatively precarious situations and firearms are rampant. When staff “snap” or “go off the rails,” they may break security protocols that put themselves and others at risk.

Related to operational risks, an issue that kept emerging was staff recruitment and retention. One leader pointed out that staff expectations regarding wellness and work culture are rising over time, so organisations with poor working conditions will increasingly be at a disadvantage in attracting and keeping qualified staff. Another leader suggested looking at the issue of staff retention jointly in the sector, given that staff who stay in place longer can develop a deeper expertise, competence and job satisfaction. One leader lamented the persistence of staff poaching, despite commitments made to the Charter for Change.

“This is fundamental. If we don’t take care of the staff, they will not take care of the affected populations.”

– Reza Chowdhury, Executive Director, COAST Trust



**LESS PAPER
MORE AID**

Reducing the burden of donor conditions to improve the efficiency of humanitarian action.

Beyond the categories considered in traditional risk management frameworks noted above, many comments made by interviewed leaders can be mapped against the six workplace risk categories of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI):^{xvi}

1. “Workloads” have become too heavy, as noted in leader comments about people always having too much on their plates, being stretched thin, working too many hours, having too much to do in a culture of excessive demands, overwork and unrelenting pressure, as well as extra work associated with organisational change.
2. A “sense of control” or autonomy is being threatened by a growing number of requirements, instructions and new systems, constant checking or excessive consultation and sign-offs with supervisors and colleagues, and too many overlapping or duplicative initiatives and platforms. Whilst some of this is internally generated much also has external drivers from donors and other stakeholders.
3. A feeling of “reward” or recognition is often lacking, with staff not getting enough positive feedback from managers or feeling valued enough for their role in the organisation, and lacking experiences that give them energy, like direct contact with affected populations.
4. The quality of workplace relationships or “community” suffers when we do not have time for personal contact, particularly in large organisations spread out geographically and culturally, and in organisational climates that feel more competitive than trusting. Covid has of course exacerbated this.
5. A sense of “fairness” can be compromised as a result of inequities in the sector, “normalised injustice.” Globally, the majority of humanitarian staff are people of colour while the majority of people in power (making decisions, carrying out assessments) are white, and less support is provided for the wellbeing of so called ‘national staff’ than for those employed internationally.
6. A lack of “values alignment” between the staff person and the organisation’s expressed values, particularly when non-profit organisations act more like what Dr Kamel Mohanna calls BONGOs (business-oriented NGOs), and when donors focus more on delivery at lowest cost (the what) without sufficient attention to the qualitative element of how we work to deliver effective aid.

How risks are experienced varies and they do not affect all humanitarian staff equally. Risks may be increased for people separated from their normal support structures through deployment or for those who have no or very weak external support structures. Various forms of oppression also impact staff experiences including racism, gender inequity, dominant use of non-native languages, and poor mental health provision for ‘national staff’ by some agencies.

WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES YOU FACE IN CULTIVATING A SUPPORTIVE WORK CULTURE?

Interviewed leaders’ responses can be grouped into five themes.

1. Disruption on the outside profoundly impact us on the inside.

Humanitarians often operate in contexts where generations have lived through war and catastrophic disasters, experiencing inter-generational trauma. Many worry what the future will bring with climate change, polarised politics and increasing income inequality and insecurity. Many are hampered in the present by cuts to electricity and clean water supplies, expensive education costs, banking restrictions, and harassment from local power brokers. In some places, hard-fought progress appears to be rolled back or wiped out in one case after another.

“I was injured twice in the war. We are waiting all the time for bad news.”

– Dr Kamel Mohanna, President, Amel Association International

2. Oppressive systems and power imbalances influence our behaviour.

We go about our day-to-day work in the shadows of oppressive systems – patriarchy, neo-colonialism, white supremacy and others – traits of which can be internalised. Injustice feels “normalised” and that impacts people profoundly. Imbalanced power dynamics in the relationships we have with each other can lead to inequitable, domineering interactions, whether we realise it or not. This comes up between donors, intermediaries and implementers; headquarters and regional and field offices; sister affiliates from the North and South; people with varying language abilities, and between colleagues and teams.

The fact that different safety nets and services are available depending upon a staff member's nationality, organisation, job status, etc. highlights inequity in the system. Meanwhile, in many contexts, unprofessional, abusive or harmful behaviour is tolerated as "part of the culture here."

"If we're talking about the cultures of organisations, and looking after people, it's not just about the work that they do. It's the stuff that they carry."

– Christine Allen, Director, CAFOD

As the movement for Black Lives Matter has gained more traction within the aid sector, more organisations have reflected about their treatment of people of colour and about the well-being of people of colour.

Many have not liked what they have seen. This has called into question previously tolerated inappropriate workplace humour, commentary and dismissive behaviours. It cast hiring practices and partnerships into a new light. For some, the work being done on other needed culture changes, like safeguarding, has stalled as people realise they had not properly included people of colour in the design of their interventions. It has sparked critical internal conversations, and prompted several leaders to take a stand seen as important and long overdue.

3. We are set up to compete, not collaborate.

Organisations often have to compete for scarce funds, and the competition is growing. The focus can easily become survival of the biggest. This can create tension with our original motivation for getting involved in humanitarian work. Low wages can result in losing valued staff, often to peer organisations who can afford to pay higher salaries (despite the Charter 4 Change).

We see not only competition between organisations, but also between staff members. Short-term, often project-focused funding leads to short-term contracts and insecure job prospects. This risks pitting colleagues against each other and can lead to hostile relations between staff. People implicitly know they are expendable and can be replaced, and this impacts their behaviour: working at all costs.

"Sometimes, the bigger donors have instrumentalised civil society. We are there just to get the job done. If you go down that path, you get into a really unhealthy race to the bottom to who can lower overheads, who can deliver more widgets."

"And I think that's unhealthy. I was involved in the UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing a few years ago and I was really struck by the single-minded focus on delivery (the what) without donors paying sufficient attention to the how."

– Dr Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandarajah, CEO, Oxfam GB

4. Bureaucracy is distancing us from the people we serve.

Public and donor trust in aid has been eroding, and with each new scandal it erodes further. This increased lack of trust has resulted in excessive compliance requirements for the sector. These efforts, designed to limit liability, create significant stress for aid workers. Their cumulative effects puts distance between aid workers and the communities they serve. Requirements vary per donor, despite the harmonisation and simplification agenda agreed to in the Grand Bargain. Internally, staff often cannot trust each other to complete specific tasks without several layers of clearance. In many challenging contexts, national governments have increased bureaucratic requirements on civil society.

"Sixty percent of our work is paperwork. We have become paper tigers."

– Marvin Parvez, Regional Director CWS

5. We feel compelled to sacrifice our own well-being.

Humanitarians can be deeply committed and carry a sense of responsibility on their shoulders to meet the endless needs of suffering people. Many will not stop, even when they have reached their capacity, and even when their efforts might be doing harm to themselves (e.g. burnout) or others (e.g. undermining local capacity). When self-worth is tied up in the doing, and when identity is wrapped up in activism, professionalism and perfectionism – it can be hard to let go. Suffering for the sake of suffering does not yield good humanitarian aid, let alone support changes in communities humanitarians are attempting to serve.

"The limitless devotion that many in our sector have for our work means we don't have a nine to five. This combination of activism and bureaucracy is such a toxic combination."

– Julia Sánchez, Secretary General, ActionAid International

HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR ROLE IN STAFF WELL-BEING AND SUPPORTIVE WORK CULTURE?

Interviewed leaders centred on ten behaviours.



01 MODELLING SELF-CARE

Actions speak louder than words. It is important for employees to see their organisation's leaders taking time out for themselves to rest. Many of the leaders interviewed struggle to do this, especially those dealing with multiple time zones. Several are seeking support from peers, coaches and board members.

"I feel that pressure. I need to 'walk the talk.' I can't tell people to take holidays, if I'm not taking my holidays. I can't tell people don't work on the weekends if I'm working on the weekends."

– Julia Sánchez, Secretary General, Action Aid International



02 OPENLY DISCUSSING MENTAL HEALTH WITH STAFF

Despite the high numbers of people in the sector struggling with mental illness, this is still seen as a taboo topic in many settings. People are reluctant to raise the issue for fear of repercussions (e.g. potentially losing their jobs). Some have participated in team discussions and sent messages to staff on mental health, noting this is not a "one and done" topic. Some have put staff well-being on their Board's agenda. Several have intervened with individual staff members who needed support and time off.

"I'm very open about talking about mental health issues. When our Geneva staff met face-to-face before we went into another round of working from home, that was the one thing we did in our staff day. 'How do we take care of our mental health, as we know that there's likely to be a lockdown? And what can we do to support each other through these next months?' I was in the office last week, and everyone else was home. So I took a picture of the wellness commitments we had mounted on the wall and posted it on our internal WhatsApp group to remind ourselves of what we had promised."

– Maria Immonen, Director, LWF

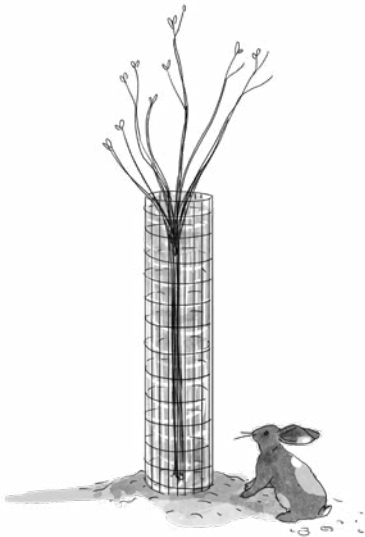


03 RECOGNISING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHERS

If employees feel unappreciated, this leads to a perception of deprivation and inequity. It helps to be noticed every now and then. CAFOD Director, Christine Allen, sends out “hero grams” every week to people in recognition for a job well done. Lisa Piper, Director of ACBAR, sits down with each of her team members to read and discuss the organisational plan together to ensure each person understands the organisation’s larger overall direction and their part in it.

“People have to know what their role is and that everybody has value. That really is not expressed often enough. If people don’t feel valued enough it will show in their work.”

– Lisa Piper, Director, ACBAR



04 CHALLENGING INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

While it is important to give people shout outs for a job well done, several leaders underscored the need to call out bad behaviour and leave no doubt as to behaviours they deem unacceptable. This has become particularly important as organisations navigate through changes required to ensure an equitable working culture for women and people of colour.

“It’s as a sector, I think for many, many years, we’ve been looking at ourselves in a very naive way. We’ve been thinking we do good, which means we are good. And we haven’t been calling out bad behaviours when we see them. So I think we do have a huge collective responsibility for putting us in the situation we are in, and we have particularly been an unsafe space for young women and people of colour. I think that is something we need to own as leaders. And we need to change.”

– Inger Ashing, CEO,
Save the Children International



05 USING THEIR POSITION RESPONSIBLY AND FAIRLY

A leading contributor to burnout is the sense of being treated unfairly, like when staff perceive decisions – especially those related to opportunities, recognition and rewards – to be inequitable or not taking into consideration the full range of circumstances.

“In respect of giving dignity and taking dignity, we are all equal. When I go to Chittagong with my driver, we stay in the same hotel. We take the same standard of food. Our daily allowance and travel rate are the same.”

– Reza Chowdhury, Executive Director,
COAST Trust



06 ACTIVELY LISTENING TO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

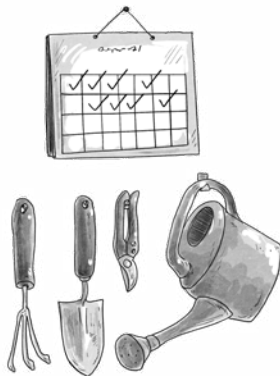
It is important for leaders to signal their interest in learning about the experiences and needs of employees beyond the regular staff engagement survey. A couple of interviewed CEOs regularly ask their managers, “How are your teams doing?”

Some CEOs will take time during a site visit for unplanned engagement with different staff members.

The CEO of Christian Aid describes her effort to hear from people of colour within her organisation in one of the organisational snapshots in the annex to this report.

“Make sure you’re asking people what they need and want, and getting input. People have to feel that they can ask, but also that their opinions are valued in the process.”

– Mary Pack, Vice President, IMC



07 COMMUNICATING CONSISTENTLY AND WITH AUTHENTICITY

Communication is crucial to improve the quality of personal interactions among people in an organisation. David Verboom, CEO of Medair, participates in virtual town hall meetings every Thursday. He attaches great importance to being present with his Executive Leadership Team and communicating messages honestly like “the situation is uncertain but we’re on the right track.” He has received positive feedback when showing his vulnerabilities, like his own struggles coping with COVID-19 with a son at home.

“You have to really take it upon yourself to lead in a calm way to set that tone. We are humanitarian organisations, we thrive on crisis, but life cannot be a crisis management operation.”

– Charlotte Slente, Secretary General, DRC

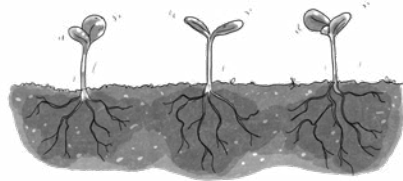


08 PRIORITISATION

Most organisations are experiencing an imbalance between work demands and the resources available to accomplish them (time, funding, tools, etc). During COVID-19 the workload has seemed to increase without adequate time and support to fully recover. It is important for leaders to guide employees in prioritising which activities to focus on.

“It’s also about creating a culture where it’s allowed to say, ‘Well great, boss, if you want me to do this, how do I prioritise the rest of my tasks?’”

– Charlotte Slente, Secretary General, DRC



09 GIVING PEOPLE SPACE

To the extent possible, it is important for people to have autonomy, choice and discretion in carrying out their jobs. Leaders can move from micro-management to trust by giving people the tools and space they need to work, by trusting while verifying.



10 CULTIVATING A CARING, COMPASSIONATE CULTURE

Culture is created and transformed in community, and it requires constant cultivation. Leaders play an important role in setting the tone from the top, but all the people in the organisation have a role to play in fostering ways of working in which people feel supported and thrive.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF ORGANISATIONAL EFFORTS UNDERWAY?

The leaders interviewed were clearly passionate about their organisational values and could name them off the tops of their heads, including: accountability, compassion, dignity, empathy, equity, fairness, faith, hope, inclusion, independence, integrity, non-discrimination, non-sectarianism, respect, teamwork, self-care and caring for others, power sharing, solidarity and transparency. Several leaders expressed concerns that the sector-wide pursuit of income, strategic positioning, and growth has overshadowed many organisations' focus on values.

Some organisations are further along at operationalising their values – turning values into behaviours and putting them into practice – than others. Mechanisms named for this include codes of conduct, orientation courses, town hall discussions, creating symbols, developing toolkits, converting values into recruitment criteria, translating them into performance evaluations, and creating values-focused working groups and committees. Values are repeatedly raised in internal discussions, for example as strategies and workplans are developed, but they require constant revisiting and translating them into action is not straightforward.

“So we have six values: compassion, faith, hope, dignity, accountability, and integrity. It’s not just on a piece of paper. It’s not just on our website. It’s something that we constantly talk about. We train on it. We see if people fit in the values and culture in the Relief Orientation Course. We talk about the values at the start of the week, then we have a weekly town hall meeting. We use symbols to remind people what the values stand for.”

– David Verboom, CEO, Medair

Concrete examples:

- ActionAid includes self and collective care among its organisational values.
- CAFOD uses a “well-being charter,” a list of potential commitments, as a basis for teams to choose their own commitments (e.g. no Zoom Fridays).
- Christian Aid sought external support to carry out a review on how race was handled internally.
- DRC is taking steps to bring equity to staff care service provision for international and national staff.
- LWF nudges staff to take up the services available to them by suggesting available time slots for group counselling sessions.
- Save the Children managers, in the beginning of COVID-19, made funny videos of their own struggles adapting to life in lockdown.
- Many organisations invest in regular staff satisfaction surveys. The DRC is currently working to engage all staff in their survey, not just international staff.
- Some organisations are arranging for days when all-staff shuts down, like over the holidays.

HOW CAN WE IN THE SECTOR BETTER MANAGE THESE RISKS TOGETHER?

“There’s so much cross-fertilisation when it comes to staff and the issues they carry with them from one organization to another. Maybe that’s the duty of care: we all have to work collectively on this.”

– Mary Pack, Vice President, IMC

Agencies, managers and individuals should certainly step up to fulfil their duty of care. However, a complementary collective approach also makes sense for many reasons. First, humanitarian staff circulate between organisations, carrying their issues with them along the way. Second, humanitarian donors are unlikely to invest in what they consider an “indirect” cost without a groundswell of encouragement and solid data making a strong “business case.” Third, everyone in the humanitarian ecosystem – and the world at large -- faces the risks and pressures identified in this project, including crisis-affected communities, taxpayers and boards. Humanitarians should apply their humanitarian values to themselves and their colleagues.

Here are ideas for collective action suggested by one or more leaders in this project:

1. Learn together

Collect sector-wide, benchmarked data about how staff are feeling. Reflect on the findings and learn over time.

2. Pool resources

Jointly explore ways to analyse issues like staff retention. Share training materials developed in-house and other resources. Co-organise events on well-being and culture that are open, including to donors.

3. Open up

Find ways to talk about equity, diversity, inclusion, white saviourism and racism. Consider together, and act on what is required to build cultures that are truly diverse, equitable, inclusive and anti-racist and truly localise our work.

4. Understand and empathise

Create opportunities to live in each other's shoes. Expose people in positions of power to the realities of working in difficult circumstances.

5. Build trust

Give colleagues the space to do their jobs, to make mistakes and learn. Instead of reporting to donors, collaborate with them.

6. Imagine

Visualise what a humanitarian system based on solidarity, not destructive competition, would look like and what it would take to get there.

7. Organise

Convene people on these topics, including through conferences. Perhaps through the IASC, on the heels of its recent endorsement of minimum standards of duty of care during COVID, co-create possible solutions and approach donors together.

8. Lock it in

Design a sustainable and maintainable way forward that will continue to be relevant after COVID.

WHAT SUPPORT DO YOU NEED?

Interviewees signalled an openness to support from:

- A comprehensive understanding of what is happening, what is needed (beyond health benefits and security protocols) and how to change
- Trusted people with whom to share my struggles (a board member, a peer leader, a peer group, a religious leader, a coach), regularly and informally
- Staff who alert me when I need to know and do something, like to check in on someone who might be struggling, and who I can trust to share my load
- Boards that show they care about the people in the organisation (in agendas, in working groups and offline check-ins)
- Donors who provide the necessary resources to support not only international staff, but also national staff and partners, and who focus not only on cost savings but also on the “how”
- Others in the sector to take the leap with us, so we are not the only ones

“I find that I’m at my best when I have the support that I need. My chair of the board is the Archbishop of Canterbury who is an amazing individual, and I speak to him every week. And he asks me how am doing. So I have a great board. But beyond that, I’m part of the women’s CEO support group, we are eight women who come together on a regular basis and we laugh and talk and share ideas. And I’m part of the Black, Asian, and minority group. We do the same. It helps to check yourself as well. Am I doing the right thing? What am I missing? What else can I do? And do you think I’m reading too much into it?”

– Amanda Mukwashi, CEO Christian Aid

“I hope collective bodies, or other collective groups as well as individual organisations, can push back as effectively as we can to say, ‘Hold on a minute. You have to enable us to do things properly. You need to invest in the how, if you want results, both in the short- and long-term.’”

– Dr Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandarajah, CEO, Oxfam GB



PROMOTE REST.

INVEST IN INTERNAL PROCESSES FOR DISCUSSING, OPERATIONALISING AND REVISITING VALUES, INCLUDING SELF-CARE AND COLLECTIVE CARE AND POWER SHARING.

FACILITATE DISCUSSIONS AND COMMITMENTS ON WELL-BEING AND SAFE, INCLUSIVE CULTURE.

ORGANISATIONS SHOULD REFLECT, "WHAT DO WE NEED TO FULFIL OUR DUTY OF CARE?"

OFFER STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES, ENCOURAGE THEIR USE, AND MAKE THEM ACCESSIBLE TO ALL STAFF.

MONITOR STAFF WELL-BEING THROUGH SURVEYS AND OUTREACH.



EMBARK ON INTERNAL REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE, INCLUDING ON ISSUES OF POWER, EQUITY, INCLUSIVITY, SAFETY.

CULTIVATE TRUST BETWEEN STAFF AND WITH PROCESSES.



PART III – CONCLUSION

The fact that 15 leaders in our sector agreed to participate in this project on well-being and culture at the end of a busy year speaks volumes and gives us reason to hope. These topics resonate more than ever in the humanitarian sector as a result of COVID-19, a steady drumbeat of disturbing reminders of misconduct and marginalisation, budget cuts and Zoom fatigue. To recall an observation from Christine Allen, Director CAFOD:

Staff who normally would not seek help are reaching out, feeling they now have permission to be vulnerable and ask for support. Organisations are trying new ways of working and embarking on difficult conversations that normally would have taken years, not weeks, to initiate. Judging from the interviews and feedback received to date on this project, there is a clear appetite to continue and expand the dialogue and connect in ways that cultivate compassion, care, equity, inclusion and solidarity in our community.

If we would choose an image and a metaphor to summarise the learnings from this project about how we can support our people, it would be a fruit tree. In this we are inspired by Hope Chigudu, a facilitator with the CHS Initiative to Cultivate Caring and Compassionate Aid Organisations. To thrive, fruit trees require adequate sun, water, air, nutrient-dense soil, warmth and space. With these inputs, they grow from a small seed into a vulnerable sapling and finally into a strong and tall tree with healthy roots, a trunk, branches and leaves to carry out photosynthesis. In the best case, a tree will bear fruit. When cultivated with care, an orchard of fruit trees can produce abundantly. However, trees are vulnerable in environments that have been degraded, polluted, burned and overrun by other organisms. Thriving is a delicate balancing act that requires constant attention and care in full awareness of the interconnectedness and cycles involved.

“It feels like we’re in a perfect storm, and this is a really great opportunity to do something.”

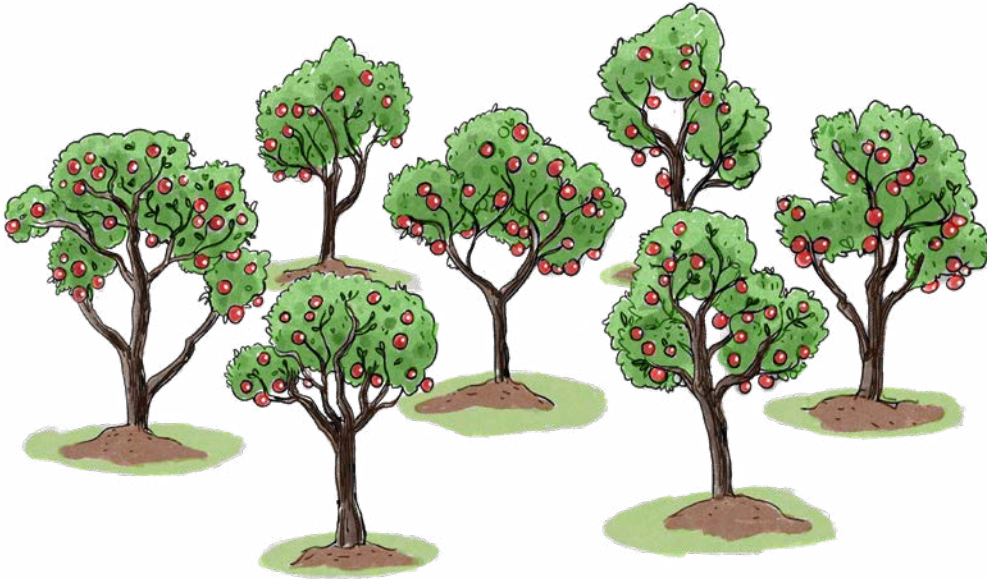
To thrive at work, employees need values alignment, manageable workloads, a sense of control and autonomy, recognition for work well done, healthy workplace relationships and a sense of fairness.

Otherwise, we face ethical, operational, security, reputational, legal and fiduciary risks. Employees should ask themselves, “What support do I need to work effectively?”

Leaders can cultivate staff well-being and supportive work culture by modelling self-care, openly discussing mental health, recognising the contributions of others, challenging inappropriate behaviour, using their position responsibly and fairly, actively listening to different perspectives, communicating consistently and with authenticity, prioritising the workload, giving people space and trust, and setting the tone for a safe, inclusive and compassionate culture.

They can mentor young people and advocate for staff with their Boards and donors. Leaders can ask themselves, “What support do I need to support my people?”

Organisations should: invest in internal processes for discussing, operationalising and revisiting values, including self-care and collective care and power sharing; monitor staff well-being through surveys and outreach; offer staff support services, encourage their use, and make them accessible to all staff; facilitate discussions and commitments on well-being and safe, inclusive culture; promote rest; embark on internal reflections on culture, including on issues of power, equity, inclusivity, safety; and cultivate trust between staff and with processes. Organisations should reflect, “What do we need to fulfil our duty of care?”



The humanitarian sector as a whole can cultivate awareness through: the collection of benchmarked data on well-being and culture; understanding through collective reflection, learning and pooling of resources; true partnerships with donors and Boards; and conversations about equity, diversity, inclusion, racial injustice. It can visualise what a humanitarian system based on solidarity, rather than destructive competition, would look like and what it would take to get there. It can convene people on these topics, including through the IASC on the heels of its recent endorsement of minimum standards of duty of care during COVID, to co-create possible solutions and approach donors together.

The sector could ask itself, “What do we need to trust each other and truly localise?”

Donors should provide the resources to all these pieces to come together.

Now is the time for self-reflection and difficult conversations about how our context affects us as people, as leaders, as organisations, as a sector, and as a world. Disruptions, oppressive systems, destructive competition, bureaucracy and self-sacrifice are not unique to us, but we must confront them to alleviate human suffering and save lives. Unprecedented times call for unprecedented care and compassion.

ANNEX: ORGANISATIONAL SNAPSHOTS

OXFAM GB: CHANGING CULTURE ON THE HEELS OF HAITI

An excerpt from the 3 December 2020 ICVA-CHS Alliance-PHAP webinar, lightly edited for length.

Question: You were appointed with a mandate to transform your organisation. Can you share some reflections about how that's going?

You started around the mandate for change. In some ways I feel lucky when I joined, it was on an agenda for change. Oxfam was going through a difficult period when we learned from our lessons of the failures in Haiti. And I remember applying thinking I wouldn't get an interview. I said this wasn't just a moment for Oxfam to learn and implement lessons on safeguarding, it was a moment for Oxfam to reimagine what a development organisation is for in the 21st century. I quoted the quote that

"If you want to change things, don't fight existing reality. Build a new model that makes the current model obsolete."

And in some ways, I hope it has been my mandate. At Oxfam, within GB but within the organisation, we want to be at the vanguard of change, trying to build and reimagine what an INGO should be for in the 21st century.

There were difficult positions to take. A lot of amazing colleagues had to leave us in recent months and years. But I feel this commitment, this energy, this focus on becoming better, on transforming. And I hope that helps everyone in the organisation and people we serve. Because that's a motivator of this journey. So motivation and mandate are the things I've taken away from the two years.



Dr Dhananjayan (Danny)
Sriskandarajah, CEO Oxfam GB

The second is the relationship between the "what" and the "how." For many of us, in civil society generally, it has been largely about the what. How do we deliver things? How do we make interventions? How do we get the job done?

And I think we have at our peril not focused enough on the how. And one lesson for Oxfam has been that the how matters as much as the what.

We have been through a huge strategic review process. This slide in front of you is the Oxfam GB strategy. It's hot off the press. I wanted to show it as an example of how we try to bring the how to the forefront of what we do.

So you might see at the top there, the two green boxes on tackling vulnerability and challenging inequalities, which is in some ways the what. I've been surprised that in our conversations as Oxfam GB, you'll see that two-thirds of the page refers to the how. How will we do it?

***Through building better local partnerships.
Trying to modernise our global network.
Trying to be safe, feminist and antiracist.***

So those things are I think the how. I hope through this strategy process it is going to be more deeply engrained in what we do.

And for me, my two favourite words on that page are right in the middle: we believe in a kinder and radically better world.

We thought long and hard about what are the words that we want to use to express our ambition or express our motivation for why we do this? And those words were important. I hope this reflects the need for us to treat each other more kindly, to treat ourselves more kindly, based on that aspiration for radical change.

And let me just conclude with the third reflection. I've been knocking about civil society for almost all of my career. At this moment in world history it feels like markets are failing us, states are failing us, and people and nations are retreating from internationalism. Those of us in civil society, of whatever shape or size, have the responsibility and a power that we underestimate sometimes.

Key to our well-being is to tap into that collective power. As people who can come together and form these amazing institutions, form these amazing movements, there is great power. And I think we have to have that confidence. We have to have get our groove back, our mojo back, because the world needs us, in some ways more than ever before. And that's going to be important.

For me, that mandate for change being explicit is important. Calling it out and reaffirming that mandate is really important. Secondly, the notion of the how. Whether that's how we do things internally, how we work with others, how we set foot on the earth, how we show up, all of those things are really important.

<p>WHAT WE DO: TAKING ACTION</p>	<p>TACKLING EXTREME VULNERABILITY</p> <p>In the toughest and most fragile places on Earth, we'll tackle the life-threatening vulnerability caused by conflict and the climate crisis.</p> <p>This means supporting communities to prepare for and survive the immediate threat of disaster. But it also means helping people stand up for their rights, and rebuild with strength and security – so they can ultimately thrive in the future.</p>	<p>CHALLENGING GLOBAL INEQUALITIES</p> <p>We'll focus on the global threats to people facing poverty, where we believe we can make the biggest difference.</p> <p>Right now, it's the impact of Covid-19 on lives and livelihoods around the world – worsening inequalities and pushing people further into poverty. It's also the climate emergency hitting the world's poorest communities the hardest, and discrimination that stops women's work from being safe, secure and fairly valued.</p>		
<p>HOW WE DO IT: STANDING TOGETHER</p>	<p>Oxfam GB on a page</p> <p>WHY WE DO IT: We believe in a kinder and radically better world where everyone has the power to thrive, not just survive.</p>		<p>HOW WE DO IT: SPEAKING OUT</p>	
<p>LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS</p> <p>We'll work in partnership with communities and organisations around the world who are driving change, supporting them with the resources they need.</p>			<p>We'll always challenge the underlying causes of poverty – from social attitudes to government policies.</p> <p>Time and again, we've seen what we can achieve when we stand together with others, and speak out against the injustices that cause poverty.</p>	
<p>INTERNATIONALISM IN BRITAIN</p> <p>We'll bring together people and groups in Britain who share a sense of international solidarity – exploring new ways to fight poverty, speak out, and raise funds for a fairer world.</p>				
<p>GLOBAL NETWORK</p> <p>We'll connect people and organisations together worldwide, actively shifting power – money, decision-making, influence – to the global South.</p>			<p>WE WILL BE:</p>	<p>AGILE AND INNOVATIVE</p> <p>We'll always adapt, learn and try new things – embracing the knowledge and experience of the people and partners within our global community.</p>

ACTION AID: TESTING THE FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN A PANDEMIC

Excerpt from an interview on 24 November 2020

I've been in ActionAid, since March this year, 2020. And the Feminist Leadership Principles, as far as I can tell, are really there for real.

People talk about them all the time, which is great. So in internal conversations – when we're talking about our new plans for next year, for the next three years, and we're talking about reimagining the kind of restructuring process that we're planning, anything that we're talking about – this will come up, somebody will bring it up. Everybody will nod. And at the governance level, we had an AGM, which we split in two parts this year because it was virtual in June and October – for our governance, our delegates from the different members across Federation, this was a real live topic of conversation. So it's obviously done what it wanted to do, which is it's provided a frame for people to think about all kinds of different aspects of the organisation.

Because I'm the Secretary General one of my important roles is to oversee that global Secretariat for the Federation. The issue of self-care comes up a lot. People are mindful, they're aware that this is there, that it's a commitment that we've made to each other. Other principles that have to do with how we treat each other, how we work – not only in the self-care aspect, but the inclusion, the sharing power, transparency. These are things that create an environment and a culture, which hopefully would lift some of those stresses that exist in very intense, high energy workplaces where we feel like we're always battling the big battles of our world.

So it's not just some policy that's shelved somewhere. But it is work in progress. It's constant, constant work.

For example, one of the principles is sharing power. ActionAid has been successful in nailing the issue, in pointing to the issue and exposing the fact that in a federation, like ActionAid, there are power imbalances that are built in, by definition, given the nature of the members, where they come from, who they are, etc.



Julia Sánchez, Secretary General of ActionAid International

So naming the problem, pointing at it is super important. If you don't get there, then you're nowhere. So that's great. But then there's the difficulty of actually doing something about it. So we acknowledged that there were these power differences between the funding affiliates and the implementing affiliates, between the Northern-based affiliates and the Southern-based affiliates, between the naturally English speaking affiliates and those whose English is a second or third language. So you can find all these different elements that create these imbalances. But then what do you do about them? And how do we address them? That's where things become a little more difficult. There it's work in progress.

The responsibility starts with me, but there is still a culture of what I've been able to observe of excessive demands, and people always having too much on their plates, being stretched thin, working too many hours. There's just that sense we can't stop because there's just so much that we need to do.

Now, mind you, I have come in with COVID. I started this job when COVID really blew up in March, so I haven't known ActionAid other than dealing with the most unprecedented, massive humanitarian emergency it's ever had to deal with in its history. So maybe if we weren't in COVID times, I would be observing a different engagement with that self-care principle, but the truth is that we are on Red Alert, so the whole organisation has had to step up.

We've had to respond to the biggest humanitarian crisis of our history. And we've had to do that with our hands tied behind our backs, because we're all working from home, we're all working remotely.

This was the time when we wouldn't have wanted to have all these restrictions when we had the biggest job to do. And, importantly, one of those many hampering conditions is that our funding affiliates were the ones that were hit first, and they were hit the hardest?

Almost all the conditions that you would want to have to respond to your biggest humanitarian crisis in your history were not there because of the nature of this global, all-encompassing crisis affecting everybody. So the fact that we actually managed to respond in 40 of the 47 countries that we work in, that we have clients that we did fundraising that we implemented supportive response initiatives, is a miracle. So imagine what this organisation can do in normal times, when it's a crisis in X, Y, Z countries, but all the other countries can mobilise and provide support.

It's been a difficult time to get to know the organisation for me as a leader. But I suspect that this culture has always been in crisis response mode, it's just been heightened, like COVID has heightened so many other things.

What is very worrying is that meeting seems easier, so we seem to be spending more than nine hours a day on

Zoom calls. And people are either behind or stressed or working in the evenings to catch-up with non-call work. People are not easily taking their holiday; their vacation would be staying at home taking care of kids. So we are closing down the office over Christmas and New Years and encouraging everybody to unplug. The entire system shuts down, so you won't have 300 emails waiting for you when you get back.

It's really hard to imagine when that will stop, when we'll be able to go back to our non-crisis lives. This has changed everything. I think dealing with COVID, has taught us so many things about how we do and do not deal with climate change. And so, if ever we can turn our backs on COVID and say, done, several vaccines have been invented, the world's population has been freely vaccination, we're all good, then we'll have to shift our attention again, fully to the climate crisis, and what we've learned from this crisis and how we continue managing that one. So I'm not sure we'll be de-escalating anytime soon. And that does worry me.

So how do we address this? And how does a commitment to self-care and caring for others help us in doing that better? Is a good question. Because we're going to need that.



CHRISTIAN AID: ADDRESSING RACE IN HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

An excerpt from the presentation of Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, CEO of Christian Aid, in the 3 December 2020 ICVA-CHS Alliance-PHAP webinar, lightly edited for length.



Amanda Khozi Mukwashi,
CEO of Christian Aid.

Question: You've written and spoken publicly about the issue of race and identity. Can you tell us how you are engaging the staff in your organisation on this topic to shift the internal culture?

Walking into Christian Aid in 2018 as a black African woman, it was an interesting journey. It has been very empowering, and it has also been an eye opener. Yes, I have written about the issue of identity. I've written a book. In writing a book on identity I wanted to talk about my personhood. I wanted to talk about the fact that people like me, working in the sector like ours – in development and humanitarian – walk through life experiencing what I call “normalised injustice.”

The injustice that we face on a day-to-day basis has been so normalized that even in our sector we don't see it for what it is. And we definitely don't call it out and try to change it.

Christian Aid went through a major change from 2018. We, together with other trustees and staff, decided that we wanted to look again at chasing after growth. And we researched, we really asked the question: “Were we losing ourselves? Were we being true to who we were? Who are we?” And then we came up with our global strategy called “Standing Together.” What was quite radical in that new strategy is that we said we're not going to chase after funding for the sake of funding.

What we wanted to do is really bring out our focus on strengthening local access and local partners and the communities that we were standing side by side with.

And so we looked at what must be done, and we wanted to live within our means, which was quite a big statement in terms of living within our values. So because of that, we then went to restructure the organization in 2019.

We wanted to deepen our impact where we worked, so we reduced our overall footprint and exited just over ten countries and reduced our staff base across the organisation.

The reason I'm giving this background is because the actual changes led to a reduction in offices, closure of programmes and loss of jobs. By the time the Black Lives Matter protests came on, we were already vulnerable as an organisation because we had gone through a lot of change. I think while we had the support of a lot of our staff that the changes were the right things to do, nevertheless people were impacted.

That context is really important to understand, knowing where your staff are personally, as you go into the space to address race and diversity.

During the last phase of the change process, staff pointed out that the changes could be disproportionately impacting black, Asian and ethnic minorities. The searching questions came from young articulate women across black and brown ethnicities We wanted to know the answers and to test if those sentiments were founded. And this was the beginning of a significant shift and change within the organisation, because when the questions were asked we were unable provide the data and the statistics to answer them. This situation inside was unfolding with the emergence of a global pandemic which exposed ways of systemic racism with Black people being disproportionately impacted.

So point number one. We had to create an environment where members of staff were not afraid to ask the right questions. I believe junior postholders found, at that time, the courage to ask uncomfortable questions despite a culture of silence. As a leader I have to take that on board and learn.

The second thing was that we had no data. It wasn't there to help us understand the reality of our Black, Asian and other minority staff. We weren't naming or tracking the issues. I invited members of staff to have safe spaces where they could talk if they wanted to. And if they didn't want to talk to me, we encouraged them to find ways in which they could talk to others. Fortunately, they were able to talk to me in confidence. And what I heard from 20 members of staff affected me personally quite a lot.

So I called the leadership team and I said we needed to do something. I knew we couldn't do it by ourselves and therefore we asked for help. So we brought in six consultants and we asked them to be clear about our antiracist vision. There was a push that we should explore race alongside all other areas of inclusion. I said no.

That is the third lesson for me. Sometimes you have to be willing to be unpopular for the right reasons. The issue of race always comes to the bottom of the list, whenever you're talking about diversity and inclusion. So I wanted a focus on race. I am clear, that we have to focus on race in the first instance. So I wanted the vision. I wanted reality. Because data only tells you half the story. The other part of the story is to understand the lived experiences of your staff, so that you can see what falls between the cracks of systems and policies. Life experiences point points you to the need for behaviour change.

The consultants produced a report. The report was submitted to the board of trustees, because governance is really important and is part of the solution. For our trustees, it was quite an eye opener. Essentially, the message that we were getting from our members of staff, especially the Black, Asian, and other minorities, is that there was a challenge of colour blindness in the organization.

That's not a very easy thing to digest, accept or to understand. Our values as an organisation are dignity, justice, equality and love. We agreed to further align our practices to our values. Board, executive leadership and all our staff are committed to creating the environment that we aspire to so that all our staff, regardless of the colour of their skin, can have a lived experience of our values. It's a long journey, which will not be smooth, but Christian Aid has never run away from fighting for justice, dignity and equality. We do that in our work with partners, it is important that we do this internally for ourselves too.

"I find that I'm at my best when I have the support that I need. My chair of the board is an amazing, caring and supportive individual who speaks to me regularly. He cares about how I am doing as a person as well as a leader. I have a great board. But beyond that, I'm part of a women's CEO support group, who come together on a regular basis and we laugh and talk and share ideas. It matters in life and leadership. I am also part of a Black, Asian, and minority CEO group. It helps to reflect on different leadership experiences, share learning and checking oneself as well. Am I doing the right thing? What am I missing? What else can I do?"

– Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, CEO of Christian Aid

END NOTES

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- xi Amnesty International Staff Wellbeing Review,” by the Konterra Group, 2019. Page 17. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ORG6097632019ENGLISH.PDF>
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CHS Alliance – Geneva Office

Maison Internationale de l'Environnement 2
Chemin de Balexert 7 (first floor, rooms 1-08)
CH – 1219 Châtelaine, Geneva, Switzerland

T: +41 (0) 22 788 16 41

Email: info@chsalliance.org
www.chsalliance.org

 [CHS_Alliance](https://twitter.com/CHS_Alliance)



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

International Council of Voluntary Agencies

26-28 Avenue Giuseppe Motta 1202
Geneva, Switzerland

T: +41 (0) 22 950 9600

Email: secretariat@icvanetwork.org
www.icvanetwork.org

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