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Published in:
Disasters

DOI:
[10.1111/disa.12119](https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12119)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Korff, V. P., Balbo, N., Mills, M., Heyse, L., & Wittek, R. (2015). The impact of humanitarian context conditions and individual characteristics on aid worker retention. *Disasters*, 39(3), 522-545. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12119>

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The impact of humanitarian context conditions and individual characteristics on aid worker retention

Valeska P. Korff, Nicoletta Balbo, Melinda Mills, Liesbet Heyse, and Rafael Wittek¹

High employee turnover rates constitute a major challenge to effective aid provision. This study examines how features of humanitarian work and aid workers' individual characteristics affect retention within one humanitarian organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Holland. The study extends existing research by providing new theoretical explanations of employment opportunities and constraints and by engaging in the first large-scale quantitative analysis of aid worker retention. Using a database of field staff (N=1,955), a logistic regression is performed of the likelihood of reenlistment after a first mission. The findings demonstrate that only 40 per cent of employees reenlist for a second mission with MSF Holland, and that workplace location and security situation, age, and gender have no significant effect. Individuals are less likely to reenlist if they returned early from the first mission for a personal reason, are in a relationship, are medical doctors, or if they come from highly developed countries. The paper reflects on the findings in the light of policy.

Keywords: aid worker, humanitarian organisations, personnel policy, retention, staff turnover

Introduction

Employee turnover has detrimental effects on organisational performance and continuity, making the retention of skilled and experienced staff a key issue for humanitarian organisations (Staw, 1980). Evaluations of operations have emphasised the crucial relevance of qualified personnel in the efficient and effective provision of emergency relief to populations affected by natural and man-made disasters (see, for example, Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). However, retaining experienced personnel within humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) presents substantial challenges (Loquercio, Hammersley, and Emmens, 2006). Owing to demanding working conditions in disaster and conflict zones, long separation from family and friends, a common notion of aid work as a 'volunteering' endeavour, and, relatedly, limited career prospects and employment security in the sector, many aid workers treat humanitarian employment as a one-time activity, resulting in a high number of employee-initiated job exits (Henry, 2004). In an effort to address excessive and potentially damaging voluntary turnover rates, humanitarian INGOs are keen to identify influencing factors as a basis for developing retention strategies (Emmens and Parry, 2006).

Whether an employee opts to leave an organisation voluntarily is dependent on the desirability of movement (employee's perception of the attractiveness of a job) and the ease of movement (employment alternatives) (March and Simon, 1958). There is, though, considerable heterogeneity among types of organisation, among the contexts in which they operate, and among employees (Lee and Mitchell, 1994).

Humanitarian INGOs differ from profit-driven and public organisations, which have been the primary focus of turnover research, in three key ways:

- First, they operate according to altruistic values, which guide both organisational and individual behaviour (Vaux, 2001). Aid workers face the challenge of reconciling altruistic motives with career objectives and personal relations (Hindman and Fechter, 2011).
- Second, the need to react rapidly to sudden crises demands a high degree of flexibility by organisations and employees.
- Third, humanitarian operations often take place in dangerous locations (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico, 2009).

Since the generalisability of findings from for-profit to non-profit organisations has been called into question (DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990; Lewis, 2003), it is essential to consider the distinct context of the humanitarian sector when examining retention. This study seeks to explain how the unique features of humanitarian work and the individual characteristics of aid workers affect retention within a humanitarian organisation. It uses the comprehensive personnel database of the Dutch section of the humanitarian INGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to trace potential causes and antecedents of the phenomenon. The focus on one organisation has several implications: rather than tracing aid workers' complete career paths it is only possible to ascertain whether or not they remain with the case study agency. Furthermore, with regard to transferability of results, the particularities of the organisation under review need to be taken into account. MSF has a distinct identity, which reflects on its staff (Redfield, 2012). In addition, it is highly professionalised and has comprehensive personnel policies. Since these differ in other humanitarian INGOs, centring on one organisation becomes advantageous as it controls innately for differences in human resource management. Moreover, turnover manifests in and is addressed by the concerned organisations, wherefore an organisational focus, despite its limitations, is in fact an expedient approach.

This research extends current knowledge in three ways:

- First, existing studies on working in humanitarian aid tend to be exclusively qualitative (see, for example, Dauvin and Siméant, 2002; Hindman and Fechter, 2011). Likewise, analyses of aid worker turnover and retention have yielded valuable findings, yet so far they remain predominately explorative, relying on self-reported material, and are based on qualitative interviews and relatively small samples (Emmens and Parry, 2006; Loquercio, Hammersley, and Emmens, 2006). This study builds on previous work by adopting a rigorous empirical approach composed

of a large-scale quantitative analysis of individual employees in this sector. A unique database was created for this research, containing all staff records of fieldworkers, including their personal characteristics and information on contracts over the 2003–09 time period. Such comprehensive data are rare in turnover research generally and exceptional within the humanitarian context.

- Second, the theoretical and empirical focus on the importance of both individual characteristics and the context of employment permits isolation of which turnover antecedents are universal or specific to different contexts, organisations, or types of individuals (Saporta and Farjoun, 2003).
- Third, insights into the retention of aid workers are applicable to a range of occupations and sectors, particularly those featuring altruistic values such as social work or non-profit activities (Tziner and Vardi, 1984; Mesch et al., 1998), and which involve deployment to foreign and potentially insecure environments, as is the case for expatriates (Grazonik, Brockner, and Siegel, 2000) or the military (Steel, 1996).

The paper provides initially a theoretical framework that outlines the central concepts and mechanisms of employee retention in the humanitarian sector. It goes on to present a detailed discussion of how the context of humanitarian work and individual characteristics might influence an aid worker's decision to stay or leave the organisation. This is followed by a description of the data and the logistic regression model used in the analysis. After presenting the results, the paper concludes with some reflections on the implications of the findings.

Retaining aid workers

Humanitarian INGOs have the primary aim of saving lives and reducing human suffering (Barnett and Weiss, 2008). The rationale of these organisations is normative instead of profit-driven, as reflected by their responsiveness to need (Benini et al., 2009) and the altruistic orientation of their employees (Hilhorst and Schmiemann, 2002; Fechter, 2012). The following subsections elaborate on why these features are relevant for developing a model to understand retention and to identify the antecedents of turnover in the humanitarian sector.

Conceptualising retention as reenlistment

Budgetary constraints arising from donor dependency and an ambiguous financial situation are the reality for many humanitarian INGOs (Smillie and Minear, 2003). Short funding cycles circumvent long-term planning, making it difficult for some organisations to offer reliable career prospects. Moreover, humanitarian INGOs need to maintain a high degree of flexibility and control, which many argue is facilitated by both the regular influx of new staff members and the possibility to discharge straightforwardly dysfunctional or redundant employees (Loquercio, Hammersley, and Emmens, 2006). Such involuntary turnover, initiated by the employer rather than

by the employee, is in fact beneficial for an organisation. As a consequence, even financially independent humanitarian INGOs tend to issue short-term contracts, usually of between six months and two years duration, and even shorter in situations of spontaneous, large-scale emergencies (Brooke and McConnan, 1997). The prevalence of short-term contracts corresponds to the perception of aid work as a temporary volunteering activity rather than as a permanent occupation (Dauvin and Siméant, 2002). Professionalisation trends, such as the establishment of humanitarian Master's degree programmes, and the effort to provide better training, credentialing, and overall career prospects, especially for national staff, counter such sentiment and have reduced the positions available for inexperienced volunteers (Walker and Russ, 2010). Nonetheless, many humanitarian INGOs still actively support this notion. Despite paying a stipend, MSF Holland refers to its employees as 'volunteers' to signal the altruistic nature of the work. This presents challenges for retention, as volunteering, particularly in high-risk settings, has been shown to be a matter of 'biographical availability' in so far as it is influenced by the extent to which a volunteer is constrained by factors such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities (McAdam, 1986).

Humanitarian INGOs, while reluctant to offer permanent contracts and while maintaining a conceptualisation of aid work as a form of volunteering, are aware nevertheless of the crucial relevance of experienced staff for operational effectiveness and efficiency (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). To deal with these often opposing forces, they aspire to retain capable employees not only in one appointment, but for a succession of contracts in the same organisation. They operate in a similar manner to a military deployment (Steel, 1996), subcontracted employment in a high-technology field (Carnoy, Castells, and Brenner, 1997), and other forms of non-standard work (Ashford et al., 2007).

Regarding the aspired number of contracts, MSF Holland identifies two assignments as the minimum retention goal. Accordingly, this study conceptualises retention in the humanitarian field as reenlistment for a second posting or 'mission'.

Attitudinal models of turnover

The humanitarian sector presents a theoretical puzzle that challenges existing models and the findings of turnover research conducted within for-profit organisations (Steel and Lounsbury, 2009). Attitudinal models of turnover demonstrate that retention is associated with factors such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and behavioural intentions (Jaros, 1997; Hom and Kinicki, 2001). Aid workers tend to be satisfied with their job and exhibit a strong affective attachment to their organisation, with relatively few expressing exit intentions (Emmens and Parry, 2006). Yet, despite having a strong level of commitment and the intention to stay, many aid workers leave their organisation. The research of Tziner and Vardi (1984) on the relation between social workers' job satisfaction and retention shows that this disparity is common in professions characterised by altruistic values. Similar observations have been made for military personnel, who also tend to have a pronounced normative

motivation (Mehay, 1990). Thus, it appears that attitudinal models of turnover have limited predictive strength in explaining the reenlistment of aid workers. A report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (cited in Loquercio, Hammersley, and Emmens, 2006) revealed that, in line with arguments concerning biographical availability, difficulties in balancing private and professional life, and a lack of career opportunities are the primary factors determining an aid worker's decision to quit. Negative attitudes such as disillusionment, frustration, or boredom, in contrast, are only accountable for a small minority of job exits (People in Aid, 2006).

Together, these records indicate that, instead of depending on aid workers' job attitudes, retention in the humanitarian sector is influenced principally by employment opportunities and constraints contingent on the particularities of aid work.

Opportunities and constraints facing aid workers

Employees evaluate their employment situation based on the extent to which it allows for the realisation of preferences (Rosenfeld, 1992). If there are substantial constraints to this, or if more attractive employment alternatives are available elsewhere, employees are unlikely to remain with an organisation. The decision is not necessarily based on immediate employment opportunities, such as other job offers, and objectively existing constraints. In fact, precise and reliable information on these dimensions is not always readily available. Under such conditions, general employment prospects, as well as anticipation based on previous experience, play an important role in employees' retention decisions (March, 1994). Accordingly, prospective employment opportunities and experienced as well as anticipated constraints contingent on humanitarian work emerge as important influencing factors in the decision of aid workers to enlist for a second mission. The variables shaping the specific realisation of an aid worker's employment opportunities and constraints can be subsumed under the two areas of the humanitarian context and individual characteristics.

The humanitarian context

Humanitarian operations are concentrated in the less developed regions of the world, where local capacity to respond to a disaster is low. Relatively high levels of ambiguity, political instability, and urgency are characteristic of many aid operations (Heyse, 2007). Working in such circumstances entails challenges for aid workers, arising from insufficient infrastructure and resources, the necessity to navigate different cultural assumptions in relation with the local population and in international teams, long working hours, and limited guidance, as well as from separation from friends and family. These stressors typically are not considered in turnover research. The literature on the psychological impact of working in emergencies (Eriksson et al., 2001; Cardozo et al., 2005), however, indicates that traumatic experiences are a common occurrence and that they can impact negatively on the well-being of aid workers. Negative experiences in turn influence reenlistment decisions by reducing motivation and shaping anticipations concerning future mission constraints.

The security situation of humanitarian projects often constitutes a major stressor for employees (Danieli, 2002). In 2008, 260 aid workers were killed, abducted, or seriously injured in the field (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico, 2009). The main threats to the safety of aid workers pertain to politically motivated violence, crime, and unsafe physical conditions in terms of hygiene, landmines, medical facilities, and transportation. Considerable differences exist between locations: the majority of incidents occurred in Afghanistan, Darfur (Sudan), and Somalia, where aid workers increasingly were deliberately selected targets (Stoddard and Harmer, 2010). Other high-risk settings include Chad, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. These countries accounted for three-quarters of all attacks on aid workers between 2006 and 2008, indicating that numerous other settings are considerably less dangerous (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico, 2009). If the safety of aid workers cannot be guaranteed, many INGOs require that employees remain within the confines of the project compound, diminishing personal freedom and opportunities to socialise (Curling and Simmons, 2010). In effect, working in a high-risk setting involves constraints vis-à-vis physical safety and mental well-being, as well as concerning the realisation of personal preferences, such as leisure-time activities or interaction with the local population. These security constraints probably affect reenlistment decisions. In sum:

Hypothesis 1 (security): relative to aid workers deployed in a high-risk setting, aid workers who are dispatched to low- or medium-risk environments are more likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Aid workers do not always remain on a humanitarian mission until the scheduled end of contract. Sometimes organisational policies such as downscaling, evacuation, or project closure result in the premature termination of a humanitarian assignment. In other instances, personal stressors owing to difficulties with cultural adjustment, conflicts within project teams or with management, health problems, separation from family, or a constant sense of threat can cumulate to the extent that they compel a return to the home country prior to the scheduled end of contract (Blanchetière, 2006; Curling and Simons, 2010). A premature departure for personal reasons, such as incompatibility with the security situation or the working conditions and requirements, health issues, or obligations in the home country, can be interpreted as indicative of an employee experiencing severe constraints to working in aid provision. Such negative experiences are likely to induce apprehension about future missions. In sum:

Hypothesis 2 (early return): relative to aid workers who stayed for the full length of their contract or left early for organisational reasons, aid workers who ended their first assignment prematurely for personal reasons are less likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Even though humanitarian missions can take place all over the world, there is little reason to assume that working in any one particular geographic location is more or less conducive to reenlistment. Hence, the study controls for setting, but does not

formulate respective hypotheses. Salary, in contrast, is commonly assumed to affect retention (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000), yet it is not applicable in the context under analysis. All first-time MSF Holland field personnel receive a basic stipend, irrespective of mission features or function. This given, no hypothesis is formulated, nor is salary included in the evaluation.

Individual characteristics

The individual characteristics of aid workers also are likely to influence employment opportunities and constraints, thereby affecting reenlistment. Turnover research has shown that factors such as age, gender, marital status, and access to different labour markets depending on occupation and nationality are important antecedents of job exit (Muchinsky and Morrow, 1980).

Older employees demonstrate a stronger attachment to their employer and generally exhibit lower rates of job mobility (Ng and Feldman, 2009). Potential reasons are the limited availability of better employment alternatives and the reduced focus on career advancement. Younger employees are not only more driven to pursue a career, but also face more attractive employment opportunities (Krecker, 1994). This situation is particularly pronounced in the humanitarian sector. Many younger aid workers enter the field to gain experience that is advantageous for a later career outside of the sector, such as with the United Nations or as an expert in public health (Hudson and Inkson, 2006). In contrast, older employees often take up humanitarian work after having successfully pursued a career in another field, such as in medicine, thus being less prone to leave an employer for the prospect of career advancement elsewhere. Differences in career stage and the motivation of workers of different ages presumably affect retention. In sum:

Hypothesis 3 (age): relative to younger aid workers, those who are older are more likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Another key predictor of job turnover is gender, with women more prone to exit jobs than men (Royalty, 1998). Structural constraints in the realm of employment opportunities for women are considered to be a main cause of gender differences in employment patterns (Stroh, Brett, and Reilly, 1996; Crompton and Harris, 1998). Although gender wage differences are lower in the non-profit sector, as compared to for-profit organisations, and female involvement overall is relatively high (Leete, 2006), a 'glass ceiling' nevertheless remains in effect. Gibelman (2000) observes that women's overrepresentation in direct service provision contrasts with striking underrepresentation in management positions, indicating that, even in the relatively egalitarian non-profit sector, women have fewer opportunities to advance than do men. Humanitarian INGOs are no exception. Men mostly hold leadership positions and gender awareness pertains mainly to the operational, rather than the organisational, domain (Wallace, 1998; Lewis, 2003). Given such realities within the employing organisations, female aid workers may have fewer incentives to remain.

Additional reasons for gender-specific job exits are the higher likelihood of women withdrawing from the labour market because of parenthood and family obligations and the extreme work–family reconciliation difficulties of humanitarian aid work. Previous research has identified various characteristics of ‘good’ jobs, which allow paid employment to become more compatible with family responsibilities, such as flexibility in timing and the organisation of work and a higher degree of autonomy (Allen et al., 2000; Eby et al., 2005; Begall and Mills, 2011). Although work in humanitarian organisations often offers relatively high autonomy and flexibility, the distant location of the workplace and security concerns probably influence women’s decisions to reenlist, particularly if they are thinking about starting a family. Young fathers or males who are considering children may also be influenced, but previous research shows that women frequently are the primary caregivers of children and are more likely to withdraw from the labour force for family-related reasons in comparison to men (Mennino and Brayfield, 2002; Adema and Whiteford, 2007). In sum:

Hypothesis 4 (gender): relative to male aid workers, female aid workers are less likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Being in a permanent relationship has been found to affect retention positively (Huang, Lin, and Chuang, 2006). Previous research has demonstrated that married or cohabiting individuals are more likely to remain employed and avoid unemployment, particularly in the case of men (Mills and Blossfeld, 2006). Often this is attributed to their need to support a partner or a family and the higher likelihood of homeownership, which in turn fosters stability (Mulder and Wagner, 2001). However, this study anticipates that this standard relationship is challenged in the context of humanitarian work. Aid workers’ deployments constitute extended sojourns abroad and only very few (often higher) positions allow individuals to bring a partner or children. Passy and Giugni (2000) show that, among political activists, such a disconnection between work and family life negatively affects motivation and commitment to a cause. Potentially eroding normative and intrinsic motives, the extended separation from a partner and family thus may comprise a hazard to aid workers’ interest in continued involvement in humanitarian work, and is, in fact, listed among the primary reasons for a job exit (Emmens and Parry, 2006). In sum:

Hypothesis 5 (partnership): relative to aid workers who are single or separated, those in a permanent relationship are less likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Humanitarian INGOs employ individuals from a range of occupations, making the term ‘aid worker’ a broad concept that can be applied to administrative personnel, humanitarian affairs officers, medics, and technicians (Brooke and McConnan, 1997). Since MSF Holland focuses on the provision of medical aid, it is logical to distinguish between medical employees (doctors and surgeons), paramedical personnel (laboratory technicians, midwives, and nurses), non-medical staff (administrators and logisticians), and coordinators (heads of missions and project coordinators).

Employment opportunities, labour markets, and professional requirements differ between these occupations (Smith, 1983; McBrier, 2003). In most countries, medical doctors need to obtain formal verification of their qualification before officially being able to practice medicine. This accreditation usually is temporary, with revalidation requiring proof of continuous practice, such as the minimum number of hours that a medical doctor needs to have spent doing professional work. Humanitarian work, even in a medical position, does not satisfy the eligibility criteria for accreditation in all circumstances. For this reason, medical doctors risk losing their practitioners' licence as a consequence of extended aid work (Crawford, 2009). Such fundamental constraints in combining humanitarian work with a career in their home country's health system probably deter medical employees from reenlisting for a second mission. Other occupational groups do not face such severe constraints. In sum:

Hypothesis 6 (occupation): relative to their colleagues in nonmedical, paramedical, and coordinating positions, medical aid workers are least likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Humanitarian INGOs are international organisations, typically with a multinational workforce (Brooke and McConnan, 1997). Over the past decade, INGOs, including MSF, have sought to integrate personnel from the countries where they are active—so-called national staff—into international operations, diversifying further their personnel in terms of nationality (Redfield, 2012). In relation to employment opportunities and constraints, nationality frequently defines access to different labour markets, which vary in terms of structure of employment, labour market participation, unemployment rates, working conditions, and pay levels (Betcherman, 2002). Such differences affect the 'decency of work' in a given country, that is, the extent to which productive, secure, and dignified employment opportunities are available (ILO, 1999; Osberg and Sharpe, 2004). The working conditions and employment opportunities in the home country in turn will influence an employee's perception of the attractiveness of the current job. In general, employment opportunities, conditions, and protection legislation tend to be more favourable in developed countries, as compared to countries with medium or low levels of development (Gregory, 1980; Bescond, Châtaignier, and Mehran, 2003). Decency of working conditions often is closely associated with human development, more so than with economic development, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) (Ahmed, 2003). Taken together, the working conditions for aid workers from countries with a low human development level, including the training and career development opportunities offered by humanitarian INGOs, are relatively attractive in comparison to national employment alternatives (Roth, 2012). In contrast, for nationals from highly developed countries, more attractive employment opportunities are available in their home country, making the option to reenlist less appealing. In sum:

Hypothesis 7 (nationality): relative to aid workers from highly developed countries, aid workers whose home countries have a medium or low level of human development are more likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

The explanatory potential of individual characteristics can be enhanced by considering them in configuration, as indicative of the overall social situation of a person (Fillieule, 2010). Specifically, the aforementioned factors might be mutually reinforcing (such as being in a partnership could enhance risk aversion) or attenuating (such as certification constraints might be less relevant for older medical doctors). While this study does not formulate specific hypotheses, interaction analyses will be conducted and included in the model where meaningful.

Data and methodology

Data were taken from the personnel database of the Dutch section of MSF. MSF Holland focuses on the provision of medical aid and currently operates in 24 countries worldwide. Its core activities include basic health care, treatment for HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome), tuberculosis, and malaria, as well as maternal, paediatric, nutritional, and mental health care. In addition, MSF Holland conducts epidemic surveillance and control, sets up water and sanitation systems, and provides training to local health workers. Its expatriate personnel are drawn from a variety of professions and nationalities, making for a diverse workforce. Prospective employees are conditionally recruited for their general skills, yet they will receive a contract only when a suitable mission has been identified. This is also the case for subsequent missions as employment is based on the organisation's operational demands. The typical mission averages nine months in duration and employees are expected to commit for the full term. As such, employment with MSF differs from short-term volunteering appointments with organisations such as 'Operation Smile' or 'United for Sight', which hire medical volunteers to supply direct surgical services for no longer than a week or two at a time. MSF Holland does not offer such extremely short-term engagements; rather, it aims for long-term involvement and, as stated in its Strategic Plan 2007–10, considers staff retention to be a crucial organisational challenge.

Data

MSF Holland records basic demographic and employment information on its entire expatriate field staff in a comprehensive personnel database. The personnel database provides information on every mission attended by an employee, including start and end dates, and hence enables the determination of the number and sequence of missions. This given, it is highly amenable to retention research, yet, as it was established for administrative purposes, extensive restructuring and matching were required first to enable statistical data analysis.

The personnel database contains the employment histories of 2,985 expatriate fieldworkers employed by MSF Holland between January 2003 and December 2009. This sample was reduced for the purposes of this analysis for several reasons. First, all employees who started working for the organisation prior to the establishment of the digital database in 2003 were omitted because there was no detailed information

available on their early missions (reduction of $N=701$). Second, individuals who completed their first mission in 2009, but might not have been able to start a second mission within the observation period (which ended in December 2009), were excluded. MSF encourages aid workers to have a break of several months between missions, which implies that employees finishing their first mission in 2009 may still return for a second mission but are right-censored by the observation window. To allow for a realistic buffer, December 2008 was chosen as the cut-off date for first mission completion (reduction of $N=163$). Third, a small number of consultants was excluded from the sample since typically they are hired on a one-time basis and have a different function to regular employees (reduction of $N=14$). Finally, all cases for which no data were available on the examined variables were excluded (reduction of $N=152$ cases), resulting in a final sample of 1,955 aid workers for analysis.

Measurement of variables

- Reenlistment for a second mission: the dependent variable has a dichotomous outcome indicating whether or not an employee reenlisted for a second mission after the first humanitarian assignment with MSF Holland.
- Security: this variable is measured by recording the number of deliberate violent incidents (killing, injury, abduction) involving aid workers, for a country, in the time frame of 2003–08 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2011). As such, it reflects the distinct security situation of aid workers rather than the general risks faced by the local population, which may be substantially greater. Specifically, the study computed a categorical variable that identifies: (i) low-risk settings, with less than 10 violent incidents (reference category); (ii) medium-risk settings, with 10–50 violent incidents; and (iii) high-risk settings, with more than 50 violent incidents.
- Early return: this variable measures whether or not an employee left the first assignment prior to the anticipated end of contract. The study differentiates between employees who returned at the regular end of contract (reference category), those who ended their contract prematurely owing to organisational decisions such as downscaling, evacuation, or project closure, and those who returned for personal reasons. Under personal reasons, the study subsumes health problems, private or professional commitments at home, and incompatibility with the conditions and requirements of the job, including project management and security standards.
- Age: this is a continuous variable measuring the age of employees at the moment of entering the organisation for their first mission.
- Gender: for this variable, men are the reference group.
- Partnership status: this measures the relationship status of an employee at the time when the respondent first entered the organisation, categorised as: single (reference group); in a partnership (cohabitation, legal marriage, registered partnership, or long-term committed non-residential union); or separated (divorced, legally separated, or widowed). The data only contained partnership status at the start of the first mission, not enabling, therefore, an examination of any changes in relationship status during the assignment. Different specifications and separate groups (such as separating cohabiters from the legally married) were tried, but they were not statistically different.

- Nationality: this provides information on an employee's access to national labour markets, which differ in terms of attractiveness, particularly between highly developed and under-developed countries. Accordingly, nationalities are grouped by the Human Development Index (HDI) categorisation of the home country (UNDP, 2011). The HDI is a composite index that measures a country's development level based on a combination of indicators concerning life expectancy, educational attainment, and income. The final index classifies countries by level of development, resulting in a categorical variable containing three groupings: high development level of home country (reference category); medium development level of home country; and low development level of home country.
- Occupation: this is measured by a categorical variable, composed of four groupings: (i) non-medical (administration, finance, humanitarian affairs, logistics, water and sanitation); (ii) paramedical (laboratory technicians, midwives, nurses); (iii) medical (medical doctors, psychiatrists, surgeons (reference category)); and (iv) coordination (higher and lower coordinating positions such as project coordinators and country managers).
- Location of mission: the setting is included as a control and is measured by a categorical variable that groups geographical areas into Africa (reference category), Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia, Middle East, and South America.

Methodology

Since the dependent variable has a dichotomous outcome, the study estimated a logistic regression analysis, permitting an examination of which factors affect an aid worker's probability to reenlist for a second mission. To assess effect size, odds ratios (OR) were computed and reported. The model includes two sets of variables: (i) factors relating to the specific context of humanitarian missions (security, early return, plus mission location as a control); and (ii) individual characteristics of the employee (age, gender, nationality, occupation, and partnership status). To test the model fit, a log-likelihood ratio test was applied first to ensure that the model developed was a significant improvement on the null model. Second, the model was classified by checking predicted values in relation to actual values, thus identifying model specificity and sensitivity. Moreover, in preliminary analyses, a stepwise approach was adopted, with each variable inserted separately to test whether or not it enhanced the model fit significantly. Hence, some variables were left out. For example, the study checked for a possible curvilinear effect of age, by squaring the age variable and including it in preliminary analyses. Since no effect could be found, the age squared term was excluded from the model. In addition, interaction terms were inserted for all variables, yet, in the absence of statistically significant results, these terms were dropped from the model. The final selection of variables is the result of both theoretical and empirical reasoning. Indeed, included in the analysis is every variable that, according to the theory of the authors, might affect aid workers' reenlistment for a second humanitarian mission. However, the preliminary stepwise procedure helped in identifying a parsimonious and efficient model.

Table 1. Aid worker reenlistment: descriptive statistics used in the analysis

N = 1,995	N		Percentage
Retention (dependent variable)			
Reenlisted for a second mission	785	40.2	
Exit after first mission	1,170	59.8	
Security			
Low-risk setting	1,015	51.9	
Medium-risk setting	613	31.4	
High-risk setting	327	16.7	
Early return?			
Regular end of contract	1,607	82.2	
Early return—personal reasons	268	13.7	
Early return—organisational reasons	80	4.1	
Location			
Africa	1,437	73.5	
Eastern Europe and Russia	23	1.2	
Asia	428	21.9	
South America	62	3.2	
Middle East	5	0.3	
Gender			
Women	847	43.3	
Men	1,108	56.7	
Partnership status			
Single	1,462	74.8	
In relationship	388	19.9	
Separated	105	5.4	
Occupation			
Non-medical	577	29.5	
Para-medical	670	34.3	
Medical	523	26.8	
Coordination	185	9.5	
Nationality by home country's HDI			
High development level	1,763	90.2	
Medium development level	135	6.9	
Low development level	57	2.9	
Age	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum
	36.37	8.94	21.79

Source: authors.

Results

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 show that turnover rates are indeed high, with only 40 per cent of aid workers reenlisting for a second mission. This indicates that, for the majority of employees, humanitarian engagement is a one-time activity. Table 2 shows the results of the logistic regression.

With regard to the specific context of the humanitarian mission, the following observations were made (detailed in Table 2):

- No support was found for hypothesis 1: aid workers who are posted to low-risk settings are not more likely to reenlist for a second mission. It appears that, irrespective of the risk level, the security situation experienced by an aid worker during the first mission has no palpable effect on the likelihood of reenlistment.
- Hypothesis 2 in turn was supported: aid workers who left prematurely for personal reasons are four times less likely to return for a second mission than their colleagues who stayed until the scheduled end of their assignment ($OR=0.26$). In comparison to this reference group, aid workers who returned early because MSF terminated the assignment or the project also appear somewhat less likely to reenlist ($OR=0.74$), yet the effect is not significant.

The analysis also accounted for the effect of individual features on retention:

- No support was found for hypotheses 3 and 4: neither are older workers more likely to reenlist for a second mission than younger ones, nor are men more likely to reenlist than women. Furthermore, the study tested for categorical interpretations and higher-order polynomials of age in additional analyses, which were also insignificant. Interactions of age and gender to assess possible gender bias in terms of biographical availability did not produce significant results either, nor were significant interactions observed between any of the other variables under review.
- However, support was found for hypothesis 5: relative to their single and separated colleagues, aid workers in a relationship have the lowest propensity to reenlist. While significant, the difference is not markedly pronounced, however, with those in a relationship about one-third less likely to reenlist than single aid workers ($OR=0.7$). A possible reason for the moderate effect is that relationship status is determined on registration in the personnel database and is not updated regularly. Thus, these results do not reveal the effect of relationships broken or newly formed in the field.
- In support of hypothesis 6, the study discovered that medical doctors are significantly less likely to return for a second mission than all other occupational groups. Specifically, it was observed that, in comparison to medical doctors, non-medical employees have the highest propensity to reenlist ($OR=2.53$), exceeding that of coordinators ($OR=2.07$) and paramedical staff ($OR=1.7$). Given MSF's emphasis on medical aid and the prominent role of doctors and nurses in its self-presentation, this finding is particularly noteworthy, indicating the relevance of non-medical and coordinating personnel for workforce continuity.

Table 2. Logistic regression estimates of aid workers' reenlistments

Variable	β coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio
Security (low-risk setting)			
Medium-risk setting	-0.07	0.11	0.93
High-risk setting	-0.00	0.14	1.00
Early return (regular end of contract)			
Early return—personal reasons	-1.34***	0.17	0.26
Early return—organisational reasons	-0.31	0.24	0.74
Location (Africa)			
Eastern Europe and Russia	-0.09	0.44	0.91
Asia	-0.06	0.12	0.94
South America	-0.20	0.28	0.82
Middle East	0.11	0.93	1.12
Age	0.00	0.01	1.00
Gender (men)	-0.07	0.11	0.93
Partnership status (single)			
In relationship	-0.36**	0.14	0.70
Separated	-0.06	0.23	0.94
Occupation (medical)			
Non-medical	0.93***	0.14	2.53
Para-medical	0.53***	0.13	1.70
Coordination	0.73***	0.19	2.07
Nationality by home country's HDI (highly developed)			
Medium development level	0.70***	0.20	2.01
Low development level	1.37***	0.31	3.96
N	1,955		
Log likelihood	-1,236.53***		
Log likelihood null model	-1,316.94		

Notes: reference group in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: authors.

- Finally, the analysis supports hypothesis 7: nationals of highly developed countries are least likely to reenlist, whereas nationals of countries with a low human development level are by far the most likely to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission. The variable nationality exhibits the strongest effect, with aid workers who are citizens of countries with a low development level being almost four times more likely to reenlist (OR=3.96), and nationals of medium developed countries twice

Table 3. Truth table for logistic regression of aid workers' reenlistments

Classified	Second mission—actual	No second mission—actual	Total
Second mission—predicted	301	210	511
No second mission—predicted	484	960	1,444
Total	785	1,170	1,955
Sensitivity	38.34%	Specificity	82.05%

Note: classified second mission-predicted if predicted probability (second mission-actual) \geq 0.5.

Source: authors.

as likely to reenlist (OR=2.01), than aid workers from highly developed nations. Although staff from developing countries constituted merely 9.8 per cent of MSF's first-time expatriate field personnel in the period 2003–08, their significantly and substantially higher reenlistment rates make them a relevant demographic for retention within humanitarian INGOs.

To conclude, the model appears suitably classified, as the truth table (see Table 3) indicates. However, it becomes obvious that it is better suited to predicting job exit (specificity) than correctly anticipating retention (sensitivity). Nonetheless, the analysis clearly identifies four factors influencing the likelihood of aid workers' reenlistment for a second humanitarian mission: early return; partnership status; occupation; and nationality.

Discussion: the role of employment opportunities and constraints

A first general result of this study is that employment opportunities and constraints play an important role in influencing aid workers' decision to reenlist. The extent to which attractive employment alternatives are available appears to be of especial importance. In this respect, nationality is a key factor. For employees from countries with a low level of human development, the working conditions in a humanitarian INGO are relatively attractive as compared to the employment opportunities available in their national labour markets. Accordingly, they are considerably more likely to remain with the employing organisation than are aid workers whose home countries' labour markets offer attractive employment alternatives. In addition, constraints to access to labour market also appear to be relevant. Differences manifest themselves particularly along occupational lines. For medical doctors, a prolonged stay in the humanitarian field reduces the chances of employment elsewhere, owing to the need for regular accreditation. In contrast, coordinators and non-medical employees who do not face such risks are considerably more likely to reenlist. In summary, both constraints related to a professional career path as well as the relative attractiveness of employment within the humanitarian field influence aid workers' reenlistment.

Constraints also relate to the personal situation of an aid worker and the extent to which it is compatible with working in aid provision. Aid workers in a permanent relationship are less likely to reenlist than are those who are single, indicating that extended separation from a partner is a major obstacle to retention in the humanitarian field. Although there is no direct gender effect, and this study was unable to test whether or not having children or a work–family conflict influences individuals' decisions, the presence of a partner might suggest to a degree such frictions.

To what extent, though, is reenlistment shaped by an aid worker's experience of constraints during a first humanitarian mission? The analysis of mission characteristics as potential turnover antecedents revealed that a central stressor in humanitarian aid, namely security threat, is less influential than anticipated. In fact, it appears that only in extreme circumstances, when personal reasons make a premature termination of the mission necessary, is the negative experience severe enough to affect reenlistment. The experience of working in a high-risk setting in itself, however, does not reduce aid workers' chances of returning for another mission. Aid workers possibly anticipate the risks and challenges involved in the work and do not perceive them as particularly negative and constraining. This is in line with the observation of Fawcett (2003, p. 6): 'aid workers have a pretty shrewd idea of what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gunshots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them'. In fact, as Roth (2011, 2012) notes, aid workers tend to downplay risks and take pride in portraying themselves as professionals for whom the ability to deal with dangerous situations is an integral, yet standard, component of the occupational skill set.

While realistic expectations might be an explanation, the limited extent to which the features of humanitarian missions shape aid workers' retention nevertheless remains striking. Given the extraordinary conditions of aid work, one would expect to find factors such as security more potently reflected in aid workers' retention. Rather than being influenced by constraints experienced during a mission, though, aid workers appear to evaluate their job primarily relative to available employment alternatives, then choose the most favourable option. This option, particularly for those aid workers who have access to attractive occupational and national labour markets, often appears to be outside of the employing humanitarian INGO, thus inducing job exit.

Limitations and future research

Drawing on unique and comprehensive quantitative data, this study offers an original analysis of retention patterns in a humanitarian INGO. Nonetheless, one needs to note several limitations. First, an alternative explanation for the lack of significant findings in relation to security risk is that it constitutes in fact a measurement issue and methodological artefact. Although this research was able to match security level by year and country, future research would benefit from pinpointing risk more precisely. Certain locations may be secure, while other regions in the same country could be 'no-go' zones. Furthermore, risks may differ between groups of aid workers: national

staff members are more often the target of attacks and expatriate aid workers who are originally from the region might be more at risk of targeting. Similarly, certain functions might be more risk-prone than others: coordinators who principally work in an office likely experience fewer threatening situations than their colleagues involved in direct aid provision. Although integrating respective interaction terms in the model did not produce significant results, data on actual threats experienced would amend future research. Measurement also could be improved with regard to labour market access. Nationality does not automatically reflect employment authorisation, wherefore residence status would provide a more robust indicator.

Second, sample characteristics might have affected the findings. For example, age is relatively centred between the late twenties and early forties. The majority of aid workers in the sample have a similar timing with regard to their humanitarian engagement, which in turn reduces the potential effects of age. The absence of an age effect thus is probably related to the constitution of the sample, rather than of substantial theoretical implication. The same explanation probably applies to the lack of significant interactions between the characteristics of an individual and of a mission. A more detailed analysis of how the combination of factors affects retention might offer new, relevant insights. A promising approach for future research with an extended and less skewed sample would be multiple correspondence analysis, which is an extension of correspondence analysis that allows for an evaluation of patterns of relationships among several categorical variables. By identifying and representing underlying structures in the population, this technique has the potential to define and map unobserved typologies of aid workers who might be more or less likely to go on further missions.

Third, the personnel database does not enable the tracing of employees who left the organisation. Consequently, the study was unable to differentiate between aid workers who leave MSF Holland but seek employment with another humanitarian INGO, and staff members who depart the sector altogether. To understand better the mechanisms underlying job exit, future research would benefit from a more comprehensive account of aid workers' employment histories.

Fourth, although the included turnover antecedents accurately predict 82 per cent of all job exits, only 38 per cent of all reenlistments are anticipated correctly (see Table 3). A possible explanation lies in the omission of attitudinal factors such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment, the desire to have children, the perception of aid work as a one-time volunteering activity, or other unmeasured personality characteristics. The findings support previous qualitative studies (Emmens and Parry, 2006; Loquercio, Hammersley, and Emmens, 2006), which indicate that attractive employment alternatives and constraints contingent on the job constitute important reasons for aid workers' job exits, yet high satisfaction and a strong affective bond to the organisation possibly reduce the impact of these turnover-inducing factors. Aid workers who have strong positive attitudes towards the job and the organisation are potentially more likely to accept constraints and forfeit attractive employment alternatives for the sake of remaining with their organisation. Unfortunately, the personnel database used for the analysis does not contain attitudinal measures or indicators of motivation; hence, testing this assumption is not possible. Future research

would benefit from extending the theoretical and methodological approach, by including both antecedents relating to employment opportunities and constraints and attitudinal factors as determinants of aid workers' retention.

Finally, while the study contributes new quantitative insights to previous qualitative work on aid worker retention, an approach that systematically combines both methodologies and data would result in the most comprehensive perspective.

Policy reflections

The central aim of this study was both to assess and understand retention patterns in humanitarian INGOs. Knowledge of the factors influencing the decision of aid workers to reenlist also constitutes a potentially relevant input for policymakers.

More than any other stressor, including security risks, aid workers perceive the separation from a partner as a substantial constraint. However, given the conditions and the operational needs of aid work, general accompaniment of partners to project sites is not a viable solution. Alternatively, an approach to address the notorious work–life imbalance of aid work could be to enable employees to alternate field postings with headquarter assignments. This might be an attractive compromise for aid workers who seek to combine a professional career in relief work with a life with a partner and family.

That pronounced differences exist in reenlistment chances between medical and non-medical staff is interesting from a policy standpoint. As humanitarian INGOs cannot resolve the constraints faced by medical doctors, notably in terms of accreditation requirements, it might be sensible to accept higher turnover rates among medical personnel and focus retention strategies on non-medical staff, including favouring them for promotion to coordination positions, thus improving advancement opportunities within the organisation.

The study's observations on the influence of staff nationality on retention connect with a relatively recent development in the humanitarian sector: the internationalisation of the workforce (Walker, 2008). Triggered by ethical concerns relating to issues of self-determination and principles of capacity-building, humanitarian INGOs, including MSF Holland, have begun to recruit highly qualified staff locally in the countries where they are active, and eventually deploy them worldwide as expatriate aid workers. The finding that employees from developing countries, while so far still constituting a minority among expatriate aid workers, are substantially more likely to reenlist than their colleagues from highly developed nations, lends further support to such diversification efforts. Initiatives that promote the increased involvement of staff from developing countries in humanitarian relief efforts are not only commendable from an ethical perspective, but also may facilitate a reduction in turnover rates.

To conclude, analysing retention patterns provides an empirical foundation for the formulation of organisational policies. Such analysis, however, requires willingness on the part of organisations to share information and data. Enhanced transparency and cooperation among humanitarian INGOs vis-à-vis their efforts to assess and

address turnover would allow for broader examination and refinement of strategies to tackle an issue that, although manifesting at the organisational level, is of concern to the entire sector.

Conclusion

Employee turnover is a topic studied extensively in organisational research (see, for example, Maertz and Campion, 2004). Analyses have been conducted in diverse organisational settings as well as among various occupational groups (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000). Humanitarian INGOs stand out as experiencing turnover rates far exceeding those of other organisations, for-profit and non-profit. In fact, with less than one-half of the workforce returning after the first mission, turnover is even more prevalent within MSF Holland than it is in the hospitality industry, a sector with notoriously high turnover rates (Bares, 2011). This study, concentrating on the humanitarian sector, used the personnel database of MSF Holland to analyse how the context of humanitarian work and individual characteristics affect aid workers' decision to stay with or leave the organisation. The results of this analysis challenged some theoretical assumptions and demonstrated the importance of employment opportunities and constraints in the retention of humanitarian personnel.

An unexpected finding was that, apparently, aid workers actually are quite similar to employees in other, less extreme, fields, at least in terms of retention. Given this realisation, the comparably high turnover rates in the hospitality industry point up other similarities between these sectors: low pay, limited job security, and frequently physically and mentally exhausting working conditions are common within both fields, with many employees—hospitality staff and aid workers alike—perceiving their work as an intermittent activity, rather than as a permanent career. Addressing turnover under such conditions entails the increased challenge of tackling what has become a 'turnover culture', that is, a situation in which turnover has become the norm rather than the exception (Iverson and Deery, 2007).

A better understanding of the factors inducing aid workers' job exits might provide inputs into the formulation of retention strategies. These strategies could result in better qualified and consistent staff, which in turn may foster more effective and efficient humanitarian assistance.

However, while the development of strategies to address and reduce turnover in the humanitarian field is a relevant undertaking, some scepticism remains warranted. A crucial aspect of humanitarian work is its normative and voluntary nature; some in the sector spurn the idea of engaging in it for the sake of a career (Hopgood, 2008). While policy changes geared toward making aid work a more attractive employment option could help in retaining some aid workers, such initiatives might also trigger resistance. Addressing the problem of staff turnover in humanitarian INGOs, therefore, is not only a matter of designing effective policies, but also involves a careful balancing of different perspectives on the nature and the purpose of humanitarian work.

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