

## **The Shocking Inequity In Foreign Aid Nobody Talks About**

By Elettra Pauletto.

Sally Mohsen was headed to Cairo from Alexandria, on a trip with Save the Children to provide healthcare to refugees and low-income kids, when protestors stormed the tracks in front of her train.

It was 2013, and Egypt had been roiling with political uncertainty since 2010's Arab Spring, a wave of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa. Mohsen spent eight hours anxiously waiting for protestors to disperse so the train could move. With growing police brutality against dissenters and mass sexual assaults during protests, she knew this was not a good place to be stuck for long.

Protests and violence are among the perils of Mohsen's job as an aid worker—she had previously worked in Syria and Iraq. But in those cases, her organizations went to great lengths to keep her safe, including requiring her to follow a long chain of managerial approvals before traveling, and imposing high-level security trainings. Now, Mohsen was working in her home country, which left her surprisingly vulnerable.

"We were literally in danger simply because they did not want to give us a car because that's too costly," Mohsen says. According to her, Save the Children's policy at the time, which has since been changed, was to make national staff take public transportation instead of NGO-owned vehicles. "But when one of the international staff would travel they would definitely assign a car."

Mohsen's experience isn't unique. On average, national staff are paid four times less than their expat counterparts, despite similar levels of experience and education. A growing number of studies document how local aid workers are more at risk than their international counterparts. A 2017 UNOCHA study found that international staff receive greater psychosocial support, training, and security provisions than their national counterparts.

It's a problem I first noticed when I was an aid worker myself, working in Goma, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. I worked for a local branch of Caritas Internationalis, a Catholic humanitarian organization, and lived in a compound run by Goma's Catholic religious authority in an area of the city off-limits to most international aid workers after nightfall.

My situation was unusual because my association with a local NGO meant that when it came to security, I was treated like a local staff member. I was lucky to have access to the heart of the city at night—it meant not having to turn down dinner invitations from Congolese friends and being able to eat at some of the city's most vibrant restaurants—while other expat aid workers stayed mostly in their fortified lakefront mansions.

But I was also lucky that I was not robbed or assaulted in a city where both happen frequently. A Congolese colleague once told me his home was broken into by Congolese soldiers posing as Rwandan rebels, forcing him to hand over all his cash at gun point.

“When you are local, you’re not paid equally to international employees, and that determines where you will live, what type of car you use, how you are able to enhance your own security,” says Salome Nduta, a protection officer with the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders of Kenya.

International NGOs are usually composed of a combination of national and international staff, and the former usually outnumber the latter. “Many perceive aid work as these Westerners swashbuckling around the world, but the real aid work is being done by Bangladeshis in Bangladesh, Jordanians in Jordan, and so on,” says Thomas Arcaro, professor of sociology at Elon University. A recent survey conducted by Arcaro in Zambia showed that national staff in that country outnumbered expats 10 to 1.

Jesse Kinyua is a safety and security coordinator for the Danish Refugee Council in Kenya. He told me that when international staff travel to Mandera, in northern Kenya, they are required to do so by air, but that Kenyans generally go by road. Mandera is in an area of high insecurity: backed into a corner between the Ethiopian and Somali borders, it plays host to roadside banditry by local herders as well as the occasional terrorist attack by al-Shabab, a Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate.

“We only have one flight a week, so these [national staff members] have to crisscross the area,” says Kinyua. “And of course there will always be a risk. Al-Shabab has carried out a lot of attacks using IEDs [improvised explosive devices], and those cannot differentiate between a local and non-local staff member.”

Nduta says that international staff come to Kenya having researched areas of insecurity that they won’t be traveling to. When international staff refuse, national staff end up filling the gaps. They’re aware of the risks, but familiarity often means they have a higher tolerance—and limited job prospects mean they don’t always have much of a choice.

“At some point, it’s unethical because of the cascading risk,” says Mohsen. “When I was working in Syria, international staff were not allowed to go to the field until there was a very secure situation, which is not usually the case. So the risk was being transferred to the national staff, who are not usually very well trained—they are not given the tools to protect themselves.”

When security situations really spiral, some local aid workers have learned the hard way that international NGOs have a policy of evacuating expatriate, but not national, staff.

When Jeremiah Kariuki, who is Kenyan and did not want to mention the organization he worked for, was working in Sri Lanka, his contract provided for evacuation in case of an emergency. But then he found himself home for the holidays when electoral violence hit

Kenya in 2007–08, resulting in widespread riots and more than 1,000 deaths. “The country was burning,” he says. “I started receiving calls from my employer, who said, ‘We want you to get in touch with the head office in Kenya and we want them to arrange an evacuation for you.’ When I contacted the office here, they told me they are not doing anything for Kenyans.”

Mina, who withheld her real name for fear of affecting her work prospects, is a Congolese aid worker in the Democratic Republic of Congo who has had to refuse to do her job more than once because of this disparity—including when the M23, a Rwanda-backed rebel group, prepared an assault on Goma in 2012. “When you’re appointed as a national staff, you know that if anything happens, if there’s war, the organization will evacuate the Western staff and leave you behind,” she says.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increased exposure to risk, paired with poorer pay, has resulted in serious mental health problems for many local aid workers.

A 2012 joint survey conducted by the Center for Disease Control and the Antares Foundation found that up to 65 percent of national staff in Jordan, Uganda, and Sri Lanka suffered from clinically significant levels of depression, compared to 20 percent of American and European aid workers post-deployment.

National staff also reported the additional burden of financial stress, with 86 percent of national aid workers in Uganda experiencing chronic stress as a result of financial or economic matters. National staff in Uganda and Sri Lanka also indicated vastly unequal treatment of expat and national staff as a significant source of tension in the workplace.

In addition to limited security and low pay, the contributions of local staff are often undervalued (or in some cases, overvalued). International staff are far more likely to move frequently between countries, given that a large portion of aid positions are short-term contracts, putting an additional burden on local staff. “Expatriates are constantly leaving and coming back,” says a Nigerian aid worker who did not want to be identified for fear of affecting her future work. “In a year and a half, a new person is coming.”

International staff benefit from the consistency of the local staff. They know the organization’s rules and norms, and often have to teach them to international staff. Local staff also often have connections and knowledge that the entire organization benefits from.

“It’s mostly the knowledge of the resident staff that the department thrives on,” adds the Nigerian aid worker. “So there are times where... the local staff end up doing the bulk of the work.”

In other cases, though, international staff may assume too much of a national colleague. “What is sometimes really difficult in a country like DRC is that it’s really big,” says Mina. “So you can be appointed to a job in Kinshasa, which is the capital, and then travel to a

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city like Goma, in the east of the country, but in terms of distance it's like going from Spain to Russia."

The result is that national staff who work far from home may lack both the protection of local knowledge, and that of their organization.

While opportunities for national staff to catch up to expatriates on security training are increasing—the UNOCHA study found that 47 percent of national staff received training in 2016, up from 26 percent in 2011—change is sluggish in other domains.

According to Arcaro, "Since Turkey 2016 [the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul that gathered nearly 9,000 aid workers, government figures, and civil society actors], there's been an increasing recognition of the need to amplify the voices of national aid workers."

Yet the large NGOs I spoke to remain tight-lipped about disparities and any intentions to address them, preferring instead to highlight how national staff can move up the ladder by eventually becoming expats themselves. "I have known international staff from Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, and more, and they began their NGO careers working as national staff first, before eventually being promoted to higher management jobs in other African countries, or even to other distant places like Afghanistan," says Geno Teofilo, a regional head of communications and advocacy for the Norwegian Refugee Council. "They are professionals, and they get the same salaries and benefits as all international staff."

One of the problems is that local aid workers usually haven't worked abroad so they aren't aware of the discrepancies, making it hard to advocate for themselves. It usually isn't until a local aid worker is deployed abroad, like Mohsen was, that their perspective changes. "The same exact person being treated in a totally different way just because you change locations or just because you have a different passport...it's not understandable," says Mohsen, who no longer works for Save the Children.

There's also an assumption that local staff can draw upon the resilience of their communities if something goes wrong; that they know their country, and should understand how to navigate it. To some extent, Kariuki believes this is reasonable. "You are within an embraced community where, if you have to take an action, you take it together."

Indeed, as Teofilo says, "Many international staff are very concerned about their security, more than national staff, because foreigners are outside their comfort zones." Nevertheless, the discrepancies remain controversial, and Teofilo says he is not at liberty to comment on them or whether NRC is taking steps to address them. Save the Children also declined to address the subject.

Many of the local aid workers I spoke to say they understand why expatriate staff should receive some degree of special treatment: They are far from home and they can be valuable targets because of their perceived wealth or political clout. One difference I noticed between national and international staff in Congo was that, at the end of a hard

day, local staff can go home and have dinner with their families. It's impossible to quantify just how helpful this can be to a person's mental health.

Still, there are risks that national and international staff experience in exactly the same way, despite receiving varying levels of support — such as IEDs. Particularly because, as expatriates come and go, national staff are the ones who keep the work going year after year. Mina has been working for her organization for 12 years.

"This is a key part of our job in development," explains Mina. "You want to go there, you want to meet people, you want to see how your work is making a difference. So it's really frustrating when processes and procedures do not value local staff."

Perhaps the most striking consequence is that the situation is not lost on the communities where aid work happens. In 2007, I was in a small town in eastern Congo called Rutshuru working with Caritas. The government had been fighting rebels on various fronts, and only barely had control of the town. Internally displaced people were seeking refuge in nearby camps set up by UNHCR, the United Nation's refugee branch, or in abandoned schoolhouses. I watched a boy sit alone on a fallen tree trunk across the street from one of them. He was wearing a green T-shirt and tattered black shorts and he was crying — loud, wet, bold — in a country where I'd never seen anyone shed a single tear.

A man approached me, I think because I was in the unique position of being an expat working for a local organization. Perhaps to him I represented the gap between the two worlds. I didn't have stringent security measures to follow (which is why I was in Rutshuru after many organizations had pulled their international staff out) and I was white, like most of them. But unlike them, I and the local Caritas staff were present, visible, and handing out food rations: maize, dried peas, salt.

"I don't like these international NGOs," the man said to me. "Save the Children, Oxfam. They leave. They are here when there is peace. They are gone when there is fighting. But that is when we need them the most."