



### PREPAREDNESS & Humanitarian Aid

*This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.*

*Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.*

*The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.*

*Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.*

1. It is not “too late” to help bolster local preparedness by the time humanitarian aid is upon the scene. Quite the opposite, relief agencies increasingly work in settings of protracted instability and cyclic violence—as the global levels of program suspensions, closures, and withdraws attest. There are quite often more shocks ahead to brace for. Being on the scene sometimes for years, a relief agency typically would have ample opportunity to undertake preparedness support.

#### **Strengthen the security of local counterparts amid violence.**

2. Studies repeatedly indicate that agencies’ support for the security of their counterparts (local staff and partners) remains largely ad-hoc and belated. As the threat of losing access to violence closes in, we are best at readying our programs, properties, and expatriate personnel for violence. But then too often, we leave our counterparts behind as first-tier targets with second-class security. Their subsequent deaths alone amid violence has been a searing experience for many aid agencies.
3. Bolstering local counterpart security has to be a matter of proactive commitment. Without policy to motivate and guide, it is hard to see how there will be a trigger for robust preparedness. A clear statement of intention is needed. For example: “It is the policy of this agency to help, when and as appropriate, our local staff (and partners?) to safely serve, and our client communities to more ably survive, *alone amid violence*. This policy is rooted in our...” This would entail a description of what “when” means. And it requires the agency to define its trigger—the red line concerns which shall obligate it to systematically consult with local counterparts to jointly assess and address their future security.

4. Knowledge about working under the gun exists. It is held by those who have provided aid on the run before, or who have hard-won experience in surviving past periods of conflict, or even those with soldiering backgrounds. People with this knowledge, both expatriate and local, exist and it is our job to find them. We cannot afford, as too often happens, to overlook the many ways in which local providers cope with violence. <sup>1</sup>
5. Preparedness support is premised on the possibility that international partners may have to withdraw. Local counterparts who are going to face violence alone must be safe before they can serve. They first prepare, then turn their attention to the preparedness of the populace they serve. They will be safer if certain adjustments in the “architecture” and “field craft” of aid delivery have been made. Such retrofitting is described in the Center’s report, “Why Help Locals Brace for Violence?”
6. In regard to the profile or *architecture* of the aid vehicle, preparedness discussion or “modules” could broach tactics like how to downgrade identity; downsize infrastructure; disperse, monetize, or outsource supplies; disperse staff; disperse beneficiaries; and delegate work. These steps “deconstruct” aid institutions so they are less of a target. It may entail flattening hierarchies and moving from static platforms to mobile networks. In place of echeloned organization flowcharts and office trappings might be more rudimentary and devolved structures with decision-making pushed to the ground. Some describe it as work while “dissolving” into society. Working while “cut off” is natural under this architecture.
7. In regard to *field craft*, the modules could cover skill sets such as humanitarian intelligence, communications, safe movement, and threat response. More than the skill sets so-named today, the preparations envisioned here would pertain to more asymmetric, less permissive conditions. (As but one example: beyond today’s road security courses in route planning, pairing up, defensive driving, and radio checks—preparedness support could also broach off-road, nighttime, non-motorized transport, and nonlethal tactics to decoy, divert or delay hostile pursuit.)
8. Most UN and NGO relief agencies have found it necessary at times to adopt discreet profiles, defensive deception, selective transparency and case-by-case consent. Yet these compromises chafe against our self-image of doing obvious good that need not be done discreetly. We tend to rigidly view them as “exceptions to the rule” and do not easily internalize or share them. These exceptions were driven by crises, *not* by doctrine or tactical skill—and that is the recipe for continued ad-hoc and amateur efforts.
9. With expatriates considering the possibility of withdrawal, physical safety for local counterparts will turn on more than just “equity”—locals getting the *same* training and equipment that expatriates did. After all, these did not keep expatriates feeling safe enough to stay. Instead, they need field craft for a “workplace” that is fluid and discreet when necessary.

### **Strengthen the quality of humanitarian aid amid violence.**

10. These upgraded abilities benefit not only security, but aid’s freedom of movement as well. That, in turn, enhances the quality and effectiveness of the aid. This too is discussed in the report, “Why Help Locals Brace for Violence?”
11. With a strengthened ability to communicate and move with more discretion and less hindrance, local counterparts will establish and sustain better community relationships. This improves the acceptance and targeting of aid. That is to say, agencies do not need overt visibility in order to establish an effective presence among the population.
12. This same operational freedom helps local providers navigate the powers that be. Selectively they deal with trustable actors—but avoid criminal or violent spoilers who have forfeited any claim to be dealt with as a legitimate authority. <sup>2</sup> “Active presence does not necessarily mean a large footprint or presenting an attractive target... [Moreover,] presence without armed protection is possible... for organizations that have a small footprint.” <sup>3</sup>

13. Revamped local providers will find they can better assess security; discreetly reach and win acceptance from communities; navigate friends and foes; deliver aid based on need rather than extortion; monitor and evaluate goods or services with less interference; and more. In doing this they will stand even more accountable to beneficiaries, parent agencies, and donors.
14. And with this improved ability to deliver on commitments comes a virtuous circle: operational freedom that nurtures ties of acceptance *improves delivery*—and improved delivery further strengthens acceptance. <sup>4</sup>
15. “Agencies and donors generally accept that standards and the level of sophistication and quality of programme activities will slip, often dramatically, when an operation ‘goes remote’. [But] lack of planning and guidance... exacerbates the problem.” <sup>5</sup> That is, lacking the courage to admit and plan for the possibility of getting forced out, we needlessly hinder the effectiveness of remotely-run service provision.
16. But it does not need to be this way. Strategic foresight—anchored in unambiguous policy and a resolve to lay the foundation for strong remote management—is the key to all of this.

### **Strengthen remote management practices.**

17. Remote management—the practice of removing expatriate workers to safer locations and having local actors bear the full responsibility and risk of aid delivery—has been experimented with for years and likely saved a great many lives. Nevertheless, numerous reports continue to find that our planning for “post-access” strategies like this still is too often thin or even absent. This is one of the most obvious potential benefits of preparedness support.
18. Well before reaching a threshold of violence forcing expatriates to withdraw, an ever-increasing amount of daily operational control can be devolved to local counterparts. And preparedness modules can focus on future aspects of the remote interface, should they become necessary. They could include plans for distance consultation, distance resourcing, distance monitoring and evaluation, distance humanitarian intelligence, and more.
19. With the distance mechanisms tested and with more conflict-resistant architecture and field craft ready, local counterparts will be better prepared for an expatriate withdrawal. With us gone, local counterparts then pivot and work with local communities on their own safety preparedness.
20. This “pivot” will likely entail some adjustment of whatever their given mission is—reflecting the new realities and priorities wrought by violence. As the mantra of well-fed dead from the 1990s reminds us, a humanitarian *relief* mission may be empty solace in the absence of *protection* as well. An aid mission needs to stay relevant to the people in harm’s way.
21. The stronger these distance mechanisms are during the months or even years of separation ahead, then the better will expatriates someday be able to hit the ground running upon rejoining the local counterparts they once had to leave behind. This represents a continuity of mission such as agencies have never achieved before.
22. Preparedness support can help humanitarian agencies strengthen the security of their counterparts, the quality of their aid, and the readiness of their remote management practices.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Smillie, Ed., *Patronage or Partnership: Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises*, Humanitarianism and War Project, Tufts University, Kumarian Press, 2001. The book states that we have given “[scant] thought to the coping strategies of local organizations.” **See also:** Lisa Schreter and Adele Harmer, *Delivering Aid in Highly Insecure Environments: A Critical Review of the Literature, 2007–2012*, Humanitarian Outcomes, London, 18 February 2013; pp. 6, 31 and 34. The authors find remarkably little research into how local groups deal with the threats they face so they can help others.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action*, Polity Press, Cambridge MA, 2007; pp. 110-11. The author did considerable work for the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. He states here that one of the Commission’s “essential results” was that “if a state is unwilling or unable to exercise its protective responsibilities for the rights of its own citizens, it forfeits the moral claim to be treated as legitimate.”

<sup>3</sup> Greg Hansen, *Briefing Paper # 1: Adapting to Insecurity in Iraq*, one of a series of briefing papers on NGOs’ and others’ humanitarian operational modalities in Iraq, NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, January 2008: p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer and Abby Stoddard, *To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments*, commissioned by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Policy and Studies Series, 2011; p. 19. The authors conclude that, “the basic prerequisite to acceptance is competence in humanitarian delivery and capacity to fulfil commitments and demonstrate results for beneficiaries.”

<sup>5</sup> Abby Stoddard, et. al, *Once Removed: Lessons and Challenges in Remote Management of Humanitarian Operations for Insecure Areas*, Humanitarian Outcomes, London, 25 February 2010; p. 8.