

CARING FOR THE HELPERS



As conflicts spread and climate change drives natural disasters, those who come to the aid of the victims of violence and disruption are also suffering a heavy toll. But who looks after these humanitarians, who face not only physical risks - death, injury, or imprisonment - but also risk their mental health? A new initiative supported by KBF aims to offer some answers.

Protect Humanitarians is the brainchild of Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele, who first had the idea while being held hostage in Iran. Released in 2023 after 15 grim months in arbitrary detention, the former field director for leading charities launched the Protect Humanitarians NGO at the King Baudouin Foundation. The aim is to help, especially, those who lack the support of big, international organisations. KBF provided the initial funding via the Protect Humanitarians Fund, which is now open to public and corporate donations.

The physical dangers of the profession are clear; even before

2024 was out, the previous year's record of 280 aid workers killed had been surpassed. But Protect Humanitarians also sees a role in improving care for the mental wellbeing of the hundreds of thousands employed around the world's disaster and conflict zones in looking after those in need.

Among the NGO's first actions was to hold a two-day workshop in October at KBF's premises in Brussels, bringing together international experts from the field, mental health practitioners, and academics to discuss how best to contribute to better mental health care for humanitarian workers.

“The idea is to create a safe space for practitioners, national and international, to share best practices and to have a positive ripple effect on those organisations with fewer resources,” says Olivier Vandecasteele.

Dangers not just physical

People working amid danger and human misery are vulnerable to secondary trauma, potentially leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that can blight their lives and the lives of those around them for years afterward if left untreated. Anxiety, stress, and burnout not only cause immediate harm but create costs and disruption for organisations, which see experienced personnel forced to take absence leave or even quit the sector altogether.

Adding to the mental strain for many humanitarians is a widespread tendency to minimise their own difficulties by comparing themselves to those whom they are seeking to help, as well as a sense of being driven by the suffering they see around them to make sacrifices that can, in the end, become too great to bear.

Ukrainian experience

Among those attending and sharing her experiences at the workshop was Mila Leonova, Director of the Alliance of Ukrainian Civil Society Organizations: “As a humanitarian worker, it’s like you’re not allowed to be a victim,” she says. “You have to be strong all the time.”

After nearly three years of war following the Russian invasion of her country, Leonova says many of those engaged in helping Ukrainian civilians in distress are worn out but reluctant to seek help: “Nearly three years in,

we’re completely burned out,” she adds. “But in our culture, admitting to this weakness feels shameful.”

It’s vital, she says, that humanitarians themselves get the help they need to keep serving over the long term: “The recovery of Ukraine will require a lot of effort, so those who support people must also pay attention to their own health, both mental and physical, in order to run this long marathon.”

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**Mila Leonova, Director of
the Alliance of Ukrainian Civil
Society Organizations**

For Olivier Vandecasteele, many solutions already exist, such as providing free and confidential counselling for colleagues – at least among larger, better funded organisations. But, equally, many smart responses to common problems are not widely known across the sector. That’s where Protect Humanitarians will make a difference.

“We’re documenting how organisations deal with these problems. Some are big, some are quite small and local. We are convinced that we can enhance support and care for humanitarians by promoting best practices and making them available free of charge to national and local NGOs. We also look at other sectoral responses, such as how media organisations help journalists,” he says. “We are looking at helping people exchange best practices.

“We need to break down the silos. It’s not that we lack solutions, but they are not being shared and implemented at scale. Protect Humanitarians can help.”

Mission launched

The workshop fostered a strong sense of collaboration among NGOs, as well as the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and the United Nations. It ended with participants giving Protect Humanitarians a mandate to establish and coordinate a community of practice on staff care, mental health, and psychosocial support.

The effort aims to help organisations set up or strengthen care and mental health service provision for employees and volunteers, with a focus on national outfits in countries affected by violence.

“Better care for the helpers is not only about supporting humanitarians through hardship,” says Olivier Vandecasteele. “It also directly contributes to more efficient and sustainable humanitarian action for people in need.”

protecthumanitarians.org

