



## Does Aid Work Come at a Cost?

### POST-FORUM SUMMARY

This document is a summary of outcomes of the Antares Foundation Forum: 'Does Aid Work Come at a Cost?' conducted at the Sidney Myer Asia Centre, University of Melbourne on the 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007.

The Forum was made possible with the support of the Australian Government, AusAID and with the assistance also of colleagues from Oxfam Australia and the Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne.

The aim of the forum was to:

- (i) consider how the psychosocial impact of aid work on overseas aid workers can be minimized in settings of conflict, disaster and injustice;
- (ii) support managers in identifying some of the organizational management policies that need to be implemented to minimize the psychosocial impact of aid work on national & international staff and
- (iii) assist researchers to identify implications for research and training to support staff working on projects in the field.

Four speakers with a diversity of overseas experiences were invited to present a personal narrative of their time working in settings of conflict, disaster and injustice. After each presentation, Forum participants joined one of three break-out discussion groups to consider the issues arising in the presentations.

Discussions focused on implications for organizational management and policy; personal & psychological wellbeing and research and training.

An overall view was shared that stress and trauma are 'givens' of the work and that proactive measures to increase the resiliency of staff; to mitigate the inherent contextual and wellbeing risks for ALL staff and to continuously support staff across all aspects of projects and deployments in a routine and integrated manner should be considered as normal rather than exceptional practice.

The wellbeing of national staff was identified as needing closer attention by members of the Forum. Also, the wellbeing of younger volunteers who are often obliged to gain independent aid experience overseas before being enrolled by larger organizations despite the risk of placing novices and communities in vulnerable positions. Forum participants also felt that research into supporting the health and wellbeing of international staff needed to be more applied and take on board the complexities, contexts and limitations of resources of the sector.

The Forum concluded that aid work does come at a cost and not just to individual expatriate aid workers but also to the system of the delivery of aid including the wellbeing of national staff; the quality of delivery of the projects; the cohesiveness of international staff teams; the communities being served as well as management systems of organizations. However, it was felt that the rewards and benefits of aid work overwhelmingly outweigh the costs at both personal and humanitarian levels.

## Presentations by Guest Speakers

Each of the invited guest presenters shared their experiences using a narrative approach to their presentation.

Inga Mepham (Oxfam Australia) shared anecdotes from her experience of working in conflict settings drawing on more than thirteen years of experience working in a variety of contexts overseas. Inga highlighted some of the lessons she has learnt over the years regarding the management of both her own well-being, and that of others, during times of conflict and in threatening situations. A common observation through-out her presentation was that the needs of national staff are often over-looked by international humanitarian organizations.

Leigh Mitchell, (World Vision Australia), and Julian Waters-Lynch, (Education Foundation Australia), in informal conversational style, recounted some of their experiences of working in Thailand for the Amana Media Initiative just after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. Their discussion highlighted many of the ethical tensions and paradoxes that young volunteers can encounter while working in the field and also the risks involved in securing volunteer work directly via the internet.

Dr Ayesha Leghari Saeed, (Founder and President of the Ammaji Development Organization, Pakistan), recounted her own personal experiences of growing up in Pakistan and her personal journey to establish a humanitarian and development medical and educational assistance program in her regional community Dr Saeed highlighted how extreme social injustice can impact an aid worker on a personal level - and how such experience can be channeled into positive action.

## Synopsis of Group Discussions

The following section will highlight some of the main points raised in each of the three break-out groups over the course of the day.

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Participants discussing the *implications for international humanitarian organizations* stressed the need for:

- Managers and field staff (both national and international) to be trained, prepared and have the capacity to respond appropriately to potential crises in field;
- Organizations to thoroughly prepare staff before deployment through education and simulated training/ role plays in the areas of cross cultural communication, conflict resolution and stress management;
- Organizations to have policies in place for worse case scenarios;
- Policies to be developed in participation with national and international staff;
- Organizations to intentionally develop supportive networks for both national and international staff;
- Organizations to strengthen relationships between human resource staff, management, and field workers.

Many of these points were also highlighted in the break-out groups examining the *implications for personal psychological well-being*. Participants for instance noted the importance of:

- Security training, and exposure to simulated worse case scenarios for volunteers being deployed to conflict affected settings;
- Cross cultural preparedness (which is often assumed to be a strength of the recruit or experienced staff member);
- Organizations having effective protocols and policies to support individual staff members;
- Organizations recruiting and selecting a currently effective combination of staff;
- Volunteers being trained in risk assessment;
- Supportive relationships being nurtured intentionally by individuals and organizations to help individuals to cope with chronic stress;
- Formalized post deployment operational and personal debriefing processes and

- Codes of conduct being developed by all organizations.

In terms of *implications for research and training*, the following observations were made:

- Research could be more conceptualized as a process to enable sharing, reflection and conjoint identification of the needs of individuals, organizations and communities;
- Research needs to be applied, relevant and useful;
- Experiences of national staff could be more examined and integrated with the experiences of international staff;
- A case study approach should be considered as a useful means for gaining insight into the area of psychosocial support and protocols need to be developed for a diverse range of contexts and situations;
- Local capacity should be built where-ever possible including in the processes of research and training and staff support and
- Training needs to be ongoing.

### **Panel Summary and Forum Feed-back**

The day concluded with participants summarizing their thoughts and intention for action as inspired by the Forum discussion.

Most participants acknowledged that in their experience, aid work often *does* come at a personal and interpersonal cost and believed that their organizations could realistically do more to support their staff. The need for more pre- and post- deployment support; the development of sound policies and procedures and the importance of ongoing training was recognized unanimously.

Some excerpts from reflections contributed at the end of the Forum included:

*"... I think this is one of the most important conversations that need to take place in our sector. Hopefully these discussions will be able to effect some transformations in the industry..."*

*"...it is essential that we develop support systems for national staff based on what they say they need not what we think they need..."*

*"...I will encourage colleagues to be open and supportive about issues related to the stress of humanitarian work, and, as an employee of an NGO to ensure that staff wellbeing is taken seriously and not just in rhetoric but put into practice by voicing needs as a staff member."*

*"...From today's learning I will begin analyzing how my organization can better prevent and manage staff stress and psychological well being. This will mean looking at our policies and procedures and realizing training opportunities in this area, especially for Managers. I have also made some valuable contacts in this area, who I may call upon in the future for guidance in this area."*

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### **Featured Photographic Exhibition**

The Forum hosted the Australian Government, AusAID exhibition, *Relief in Sight* which is touring Australia. The exhibition is designed to raise awareness and understanding of the work carried out on behalf of all Australians to assist with the humanitarian crises in our region. Consisting of 68 compelling photographs, the exhibition reflects the impact of natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies. The exhibition was developed with the help of AusAID's relief partners and professional photographers, Stephen Dupont and Rob Maccoll.

*The Antares Forum was moderated by Winnifred Simon (Operational Director of Antares Foundation, Holland); John Fawcett (Director of Staff Wellness at Save the Children USA) and Amanda Allan (Operational Director, Antares Foundation, Australia) and facilitated by Virginia Gough (Oxfam Australia); Tania Miletic (Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne) and Jedrek Pawlikowski (Antares Foundation, Australia). Volunteer assistance: Marie H  l  ne Menara-Lafage and Mev Bardiqi. Forum report compiled by Jedrek Pawlikowski.*

## ADDENDUM

*A story to contemplate..... inspired by L Eiseley's "The Star Thrower" and kitten rescuers!*

A traveller was walking along a beach when he saw a woman scooping up starfish off the sand and tossing them into the waves. Curious, he asked her what she was doing. The woman replied "When the tide goes out it leaves these starfish stranded on the beach. They will dry up and die before the tide comes back in, so I am throwing them back into the sea where they can live."

The traveller then asked her "But this beach is miles long and there are hundreds of stranded starfish, many will die before you reach them - do you really think throwing back a few starfish is really going to make a difference?"

The woman picked up a starfish and looked at it, then she threw it into the waves. "It makes a difference to this one" she said.

Considering this, the traveller continued his walk along the beach. After a while he arrived at a place where a river ran into the sea and he turned back inland, walking alongside the river. He was still pondering the words of the starfish woman when he noticed a group of people wading about in the river trying to catch floating objects and throwing them safely onto the river bank. When he got closer he saw that the people were rescuing kittens which were struggling in the water and floating downstream towards the sea. Though many of the kittens were thrown to safety, many others were washed out to sea, never to be seen again.

The traveller thought about this and thought about what starfish-woman had told him. He knew that it made a difference to every kitten saved. He also knew that he could not stop the sea from washing up starfish, but he knew that there was a way to make a bigger difference to all the kittens being washed away in the river so he called out to the people who were fishing out the kittens. "Why don't some of you go upstream and stop people tossing them into the river in the first place?".

The traveller had learned an important lesson from starfish woman. When you face impossible odds you do the best you can and helping just one or two creatures. But he also had the wisdom to know that sometimes you can make a bigger difference. And this is the moral of the starfish woman story: sometimes you have to do whatever you can, however little it seems; but sometimes you have the chance to make a bigger difference. You just need a little wisdom to see when you have a chance to make that bigger difference.