



Aid Worker Security Report 2023

Security training in the humanitarian sector:
Issues of equity and effectiveness

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- ▶ In 2022, 444 humanitarian aid workers were affected by violence in 235 major attacks, resulting in 116 fatalities.
- ▶ Globally, the total number of casualties was marginally lower compared to the previous year. However, there was a significant increase in aid worker kidnappings, rising to 185 from 117 in 2021.
- ▶ South Sudan experienced the most attacks in 2022, followed by Mali, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria.
- ▶ With newly surging violence in Sudan, and continued high numbers of incidents in South Sudan and elsewhere, 2023 is already projected to be another high casualty year.
- ▶ In such high-risk contexts, security awareness and skills training has become a staple of humanitarian risk management and duty of care for personnel – yet significant gaps and disparities remain across the sector. Training resources are disproportionately allocated toward international staff in less risky roles. A paucity of language-appropriate and financially and logistically accessible courses in many of these contexts further excludes local aid workers – who face the highest risks – from comparable training.
- ▶ To improve effectiveness and equitability in security training, organisations should define outcome metrics for more rigorous assessment of effectiveness and ensure training is made relevant and available to those who need it most.



The AWSD records major incidents of deliberate violence affecting humanitarian personnel. These include:

- killings
- kidnappings (where the victim is held over 24 hours)
- serious injuries
- rape and sexual assault.

For this report, the research team drew upon quantitative data from the Aid Worker Security Database, results of an online survey of 358 aid practitioners, and qualitative evidence from 119 key informant interviews with representatives from national and international NGOs, UN agencies, and donor government agencies, and security training specialists from the humanitarian and private sectors.

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics, 2013–2022

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of incidents	265	193	150	164	160	229	276	283	268	235
Total aid worker victims	474	333	290	296	315	409	481	484	461	444
Total killed	159	123	111	109	140	131	125	117	141	116
Total injured	179	89	110	99	103	147	234	242	203	143
Total kidnapped*	136	121	69	88	72	131	122	125	117	185
International victims	60	33	30	43	28	29	27	25	23	23
National victims	414	300	260	253	287	380	454	459	438	421
UN staff	115	64	44	71	48	70	37	58	55	76
International NGO staff	142	152	173	162	109	186	260	228	198	162
NNGO staff	145	71	39	40	84	128	154	168	187	184
ICRC staff	14	16	3	10	14	5	2	8	5	0
NRCS and IFRC staff	44	27	28	11	60	20	14	20	6	9
Red Cross/Crescent Movement**	58	43	31	21	74	25	16	28	11	9

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* Survivors, or whereabouts unknown

** Includes International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and national societies

Twenty years have passed since the bombing of the UN humanitarian headquarters in the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, which took the lives of 22 people. That unprecedented act of violence, now commemorated each year as World Humanitarian Day, further spurred the development of security risk management systems for humanitarian organisations that had begun a few years prior. Today, the UN humanitarian agencies and most internationally operating NGOs have dedicated security staff and standard procedures to enable operations amid conflicts and insecure environments. Nonetheless, casualties have risen over the past two decades due to the persistence and proliferation of conflict-driven humanitarian crises, and the growing number of aid workers responding to them.

The toll has not been borne equally, however. A long-term look at the data shows that as international organisations have grown larger, so their incident rates have decreased, while more and more of the attacks have affected their national NGO counterparts instead.

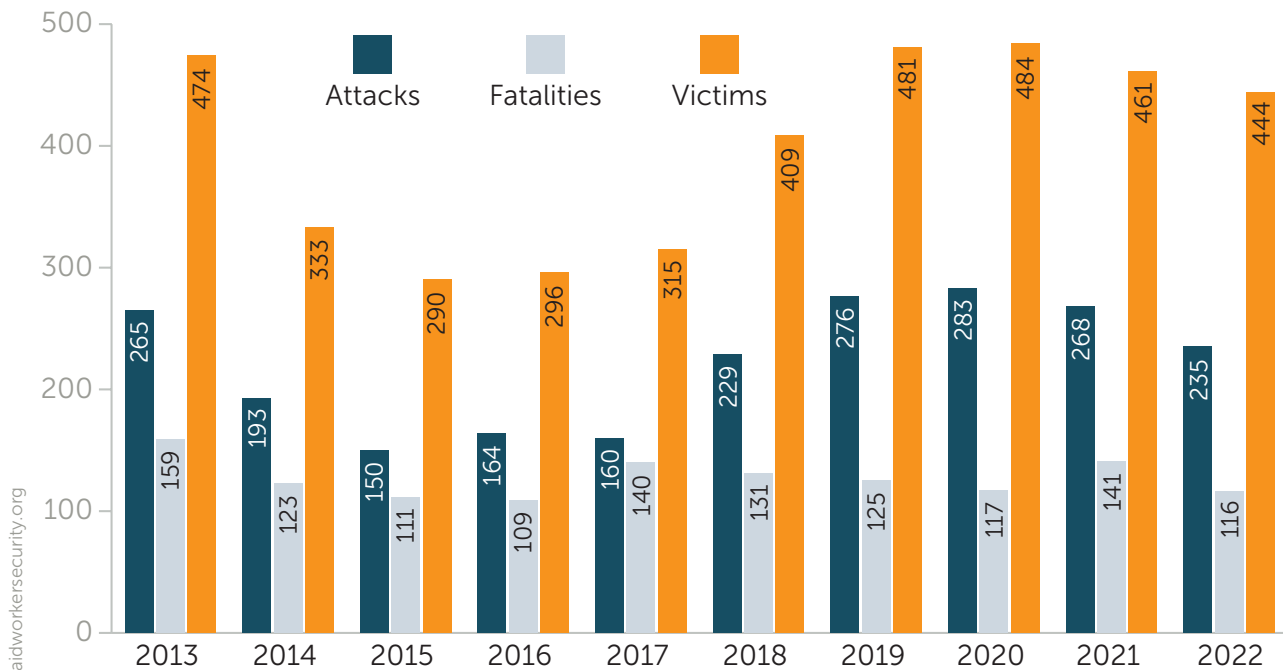
This year's Aid Worker Security Report discusses the trend of localised security risk reflected in the latest verified data, and examines an area of security risk management that exemplifies the disparities in the sector: security training.

Training for aid workers operating in high-risk environments – particularly the in-person, experiential courses that simulate incident scenarios and those that teach critical first aid skills – are costly. Despite a dearth of hard evidence proving their effectiveness, the consensus among humanitarian security professionals seems to be that these courses, if well-designed and context-specific, are worth the investment. After a presentation of the latest aid worker security statistics, this report will delve into the questions and ethical implications around security training: who gets it, what should it consist of, and how do we know it works?

1.1 Global totals

2022 saw a continued modest decline of major incidents of violence impacting aid workers, and with slightly fewer lethal outcomes than in 2021. A total of 235 separate attacks occurred in 35 countries hosting a humanitarian response, resulting in 444 humanitarian workers harmed. The victims included 116 killed, 143 seriously wounded, and 185 kidnapped. The number of fatalities decreased by 18% from 2021 – a year that had seen the highest number of fatalities since 2013 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Major attacks, victims, and fatalities, 2013–2022

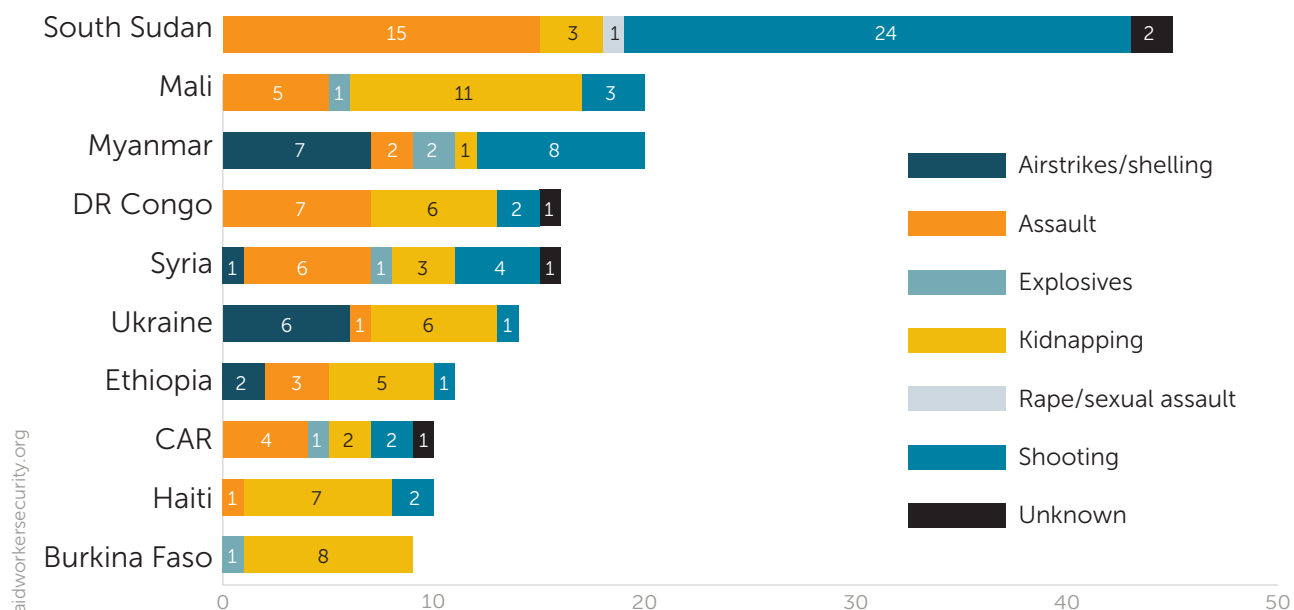


1.2 Most violent contexts

In 2022, as in most years, violence against aid workers was concentrated in a small subset of humanitarian contexts. Most major incidents (56%) occurred in six countries: South Sudan, Myanmar, Mali, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Ukraine. Of these, South Sudan experienced by far the highest number of attacks. The other of the top ten highest incident countries in 2022 were Ethiopia, Haiti, Central African Republic (CAR), and Burkina Faso (Figure 2).

Civil violence persisted in South Sudan, making it the country with the highest aid worker casualty numbers for the third year running. Intercommunal/ethno-political fighting, banditry on the roads, and attacks by ethnic youth groups, all facilitated by ubiquitous supplies of small arms, contributed to the toll: 62 aid workers attacked in 45 separate incidents, 23 of them fatally. National aid workers still endured the brunt of attacks, comprising all but two of the victims. The South Sudanese states of Unity (14), Eastern Equatoria (9) and Jonglei (8) had the highest concentration of incidents.

Figure 2: Top 10 most violent contexts and means of attack, 2022



In Mali, kidnapping by armed groups, including the Islamic State and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), continued to affect aid workers (34 were kidnapped) in areas of growing insurgency in the northwest – Gao, Mopti, Tombouctou – but incidents were more widespread than in 2021. Ambushes on the road were the most common kidnapping location.

The expanded military crackdown in Myanmar affected aid workers across 10 regions, up from 7 in 2021, and with a significant increase in incidents in Mon (5) and Kayah (5) States. 2022 was marked by tragic 'firsts' for aid workers, including being affected in aerial attacks (3), landmine incidents (2), and shelling (4). The armed forces of the ruling junta were responsible for most of the incidents.

Total incident numbers for DRC remained the same between 2021 and 2022, with the vast majority of attacks occurring in the conflict-affected eastern regions of North and South Kivu and Ituri, where numerous militias remain active. Incidents in Syria have been on the decline since 2020, with assault taking over as the most common means, replacing shelling in 2022. Also on the decline, attacks in CAR saw more assaults and less shootings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The changing means of attack in these contexts could point to conflict transition and a changing risk environment for aid workers.

Following the Russian invasion, aid workers in Ukraine experienced the second highest number of casualties of any single country (61 individual victims, second only to South Sudan), with the highest number of individuals kidnapped globally (39).

Despite a decline in overall incidents in Ethiopia, more aid workers were kidnapped in 2022 (13 people in 5 separate incidents) than ever recorded for that country in the AWSD. One carjacking of an aid convoy in which eight aid workers were kidnapped (and some of the trucks looted) was responsible for that increase. Most of the kidnapping incidents occurred in Oromiya (4).

The worsening violence in Haiti, initiated by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, resulted in a 150% increase in attacks on humanitarian workers compared to the previous year. Haiti, suffering from a confluence of factors – natural disasters, weak institutions and governance, gang violence, and economic recession – was one of the 10 most violent humanitarian contexts in 2022, with violence against aid workers, mostly kidnappings (7 out of 10 incidents), being concentrated around Port-au-Prince.¹

¹ For more analysis on Haiti see: Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Duque-Diez, M., Czwarno, M., and Breckenridge, M-J. (2023). *Humanitarian access SCORE report: Haiti*. <https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/score-report-haiti-2023>

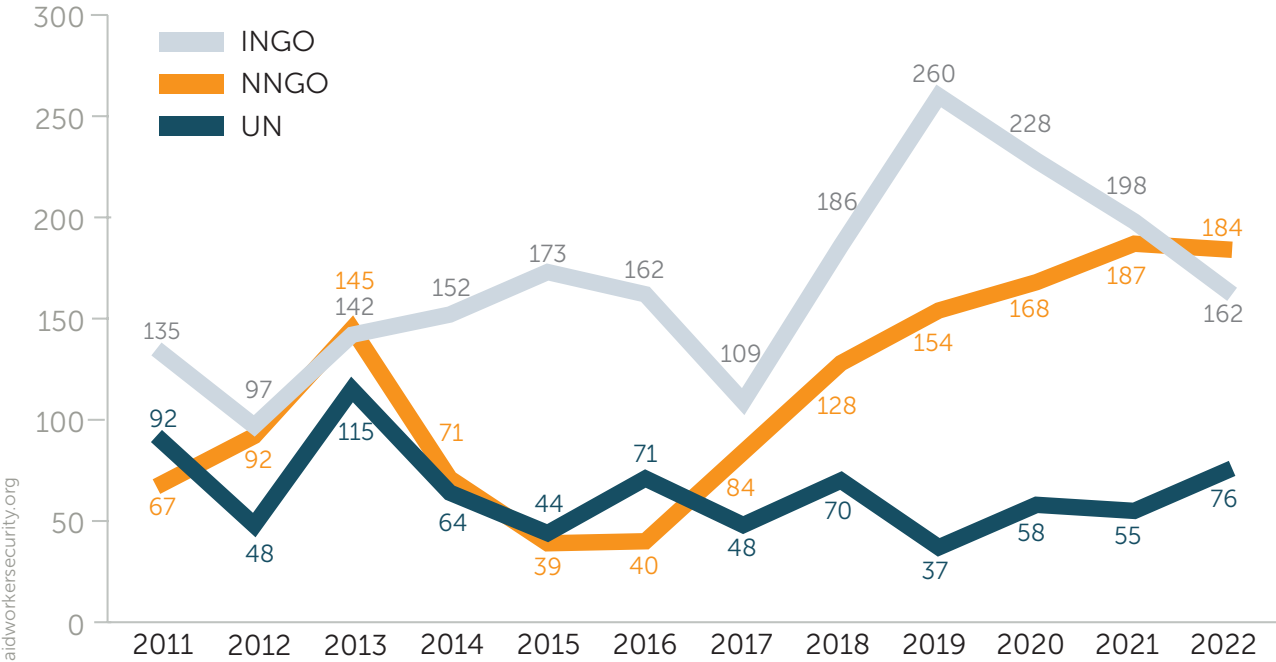
Burkina Faso also experienced a steep increase in incidents (80%) following the military coup in September 2022. These were mostly kidnappings, which accounted for eight of the nine total incidents.

In Afghanistan, a high-insecurity context for decades, violence against aid workers decreased significantly in 2022 – the Taliban’s first full year in control since regaining power in August 2021. While aid workers face increasingly difficult ethical and operational challenges because of the oppressive human rights climate, and in particular the ban on women’s employment, they are less likely to be affected by violent incidents. Attacks affecting aid workers fell by 72%, reflecting the end of the country-wide armed insurgency.²

1.3 Types of organisations and staff most affected

Notably, the number of casualties experienced by national NGOs has surpassed that of international NGOs for the first time since 2013 (Figure 3). Over the past decade, as the humanitarian sector has responded to extremely high-risk conflict settings like Syria, Yemen, and more recently Myanmar and Ukraine, international organisations have relied increasingly on national partner organisations to operate in locations where they are unable or unwilling to send their own staff.

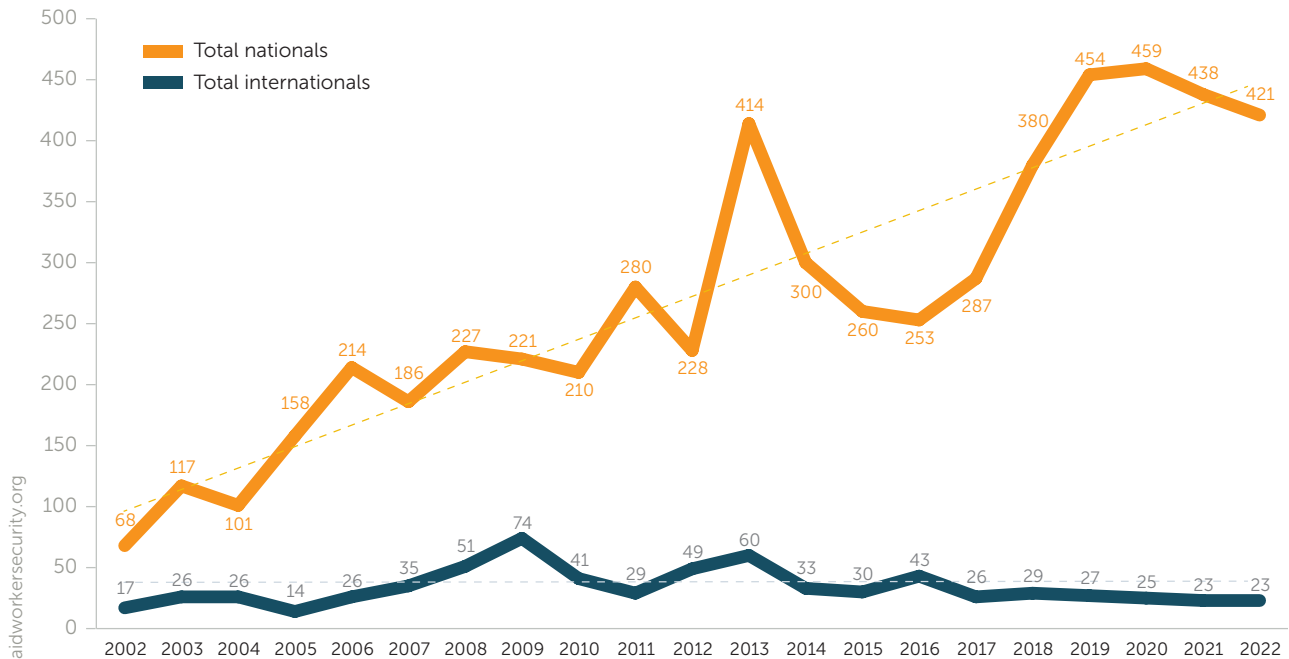
Figure 3: Aid worker victims by type of organisation, 2013–2022



The use of these implementation partnerships by international organisations as a security adaption (or in good faith efforts toward localisation) has resulted in national aid workers generally (both national staff of international organisations and staff of local organisations) increasingly facing greater exposure to risk, and higher casualties. This is reflected in Figure 4, which shows that the number of international staff affected by violence has remained relatively constant over the last 20 years. However, the trend for national staff shows a striking upward trajectory that cannot be explained solely by better reporting of these incidents.

² Bowden, M., Hakimi H., Harvey, P., Nemat, O., Moosakhel, G-R., Stoddard, A., Thomas, M., Timmins, N., and Voight, T. (2023). *Navigating ethical dilemmas for humanitarian action in Afghanistan*. Humanitarian Outcomes. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ho-ukhih_afghanistan_final_6_21_23.pdf

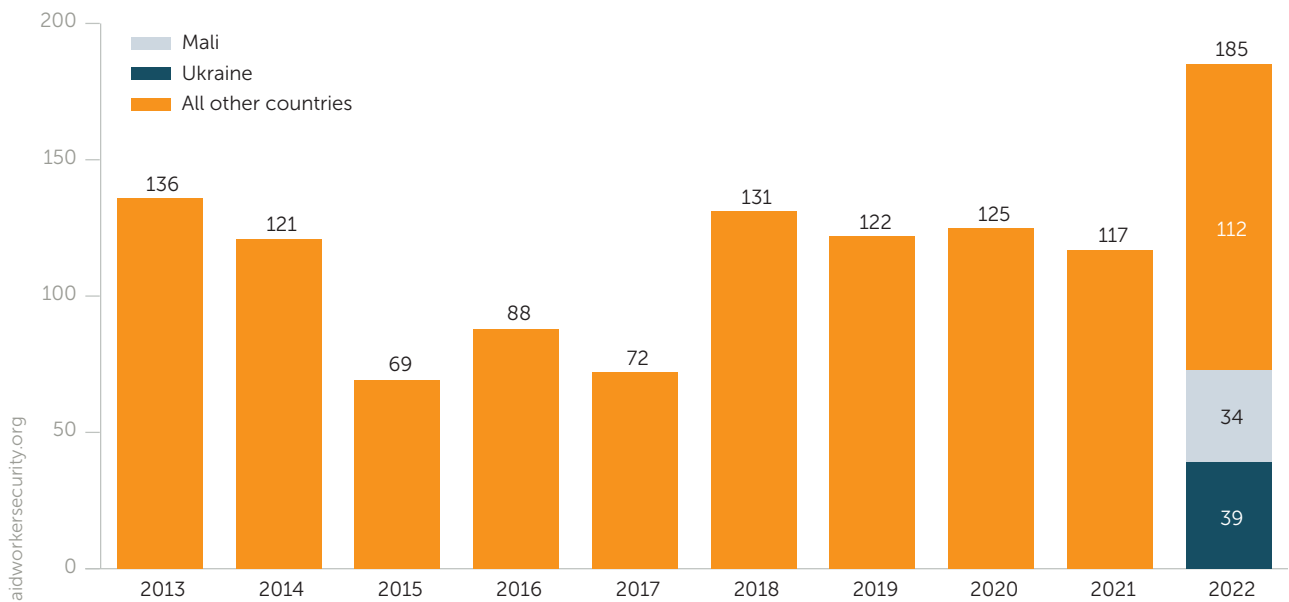
Figure 4: National vs. international aid worker victims, 2013–2022



1.4 An increase in kidnappings and illegal detentions

Although the number of overall incidents was lower in 2022 than in the previous three years, the abduction of aid workers increased by 58% from 2021.³ This spike was driven by two contexts, Mali and Ukraine, which together accounted for 39% of the 185 kidnapping incidents in 2022 (Figure 5). Russian forces illegally detained 39 aid workers, in six major incidents, during the first few months (February to July) of the war. Detentions decreased as the front lines of the conflict stabilised in the latter part of 2022. Aid organisations in Ukraine do not consider kidnapping as a major risk to their staff at present.⁴

Figure 5: Number of aid workers kidnapped, 2013-2022



³ AWSO defines kidnapping as any abduction or detention by a non-state group or foreign military for more than 24 hours, regardless of whether ransom was requested. AWSO does not monitor or include detentions by the host country or by police due to the challenge in verifying the reason for detention.

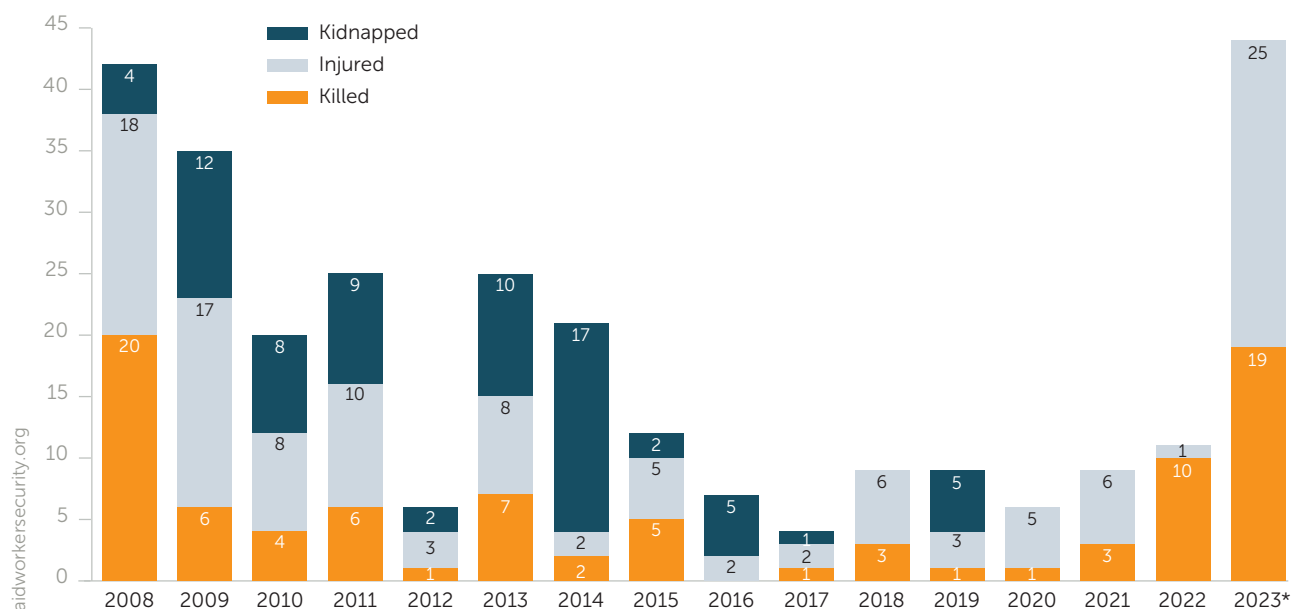
⁴ Based on staff interviews in the first half of 2023 for a forthcoming security risk management report.

Unlike in Ukraine, kidnapping is a common means used by the many armed groups active in Mali to disrupt aid, with over 20 aid workers abducted per year since 2019. Mali has endured years of conflict and military coups, contributing to the increasingly fragile environment and proliferation of non-state armed groups. Kidnapping aid workers for ransom in Mali is uncommon; the bulk of recorded incidents are detentions of aid workers by armed groups displeased with programming or access disputes.⁵ The rise of international extremist groups across the Sahel continues to destabilise the region, increasing aid access issues and further complicating negotiations for aid organisations. The departure of MINUSMA, present in the country since 2013, and the coup in Niger may also bring further destabilisation and in turn more risk to those operating humanitarian programmes.

1.5 Recent violence in Sudan

The current internal conflict in Sudan has led to a large new wave of aid worker fatalities, with incident numbers similar to those during the later years of the Darfur conflict. So far in 2023 there have been at least 19 fatalities and 25 injuries – an increase of almost 100% since 2022 in just the first seven months of the year.

Figure 6: Aid worker victims in Sudan, 2008-2023*



*2023 data partial (January-July) and provisional until verified

This spike in violence affecting aid workers after eight years of relatively low incident numbers is troubling, considering a peace deal is yet to be negotiated. Destabilisation in Sudan in 2023 also threatens to exacerbate regional tensions, causing further strife in surrounding South Sudan, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

Of the 44 aid worker victims reported in Sudan so far this year, all except one are Sudanese national staff. Rapid evacuations of international staff at the onset of the crisis ensured the safety of many, but now Sudan has become a 'test-case' for localisation with extremely high stakes.⁶ Some of the largest international NGOs have suspended programmes and let go many national staff due to security risks, leaving national NGOs and community groups without support or funding.⁷

The unfolding crisis in Sudan, coupled with the experience of national organisations in Myanmar and Ukraine, should serve as an opportune moment for the international humanitarian community to reflect on how the security of national staff and partners is prioritised, who is provided security resources and training, and what could be done to address the current imbalance.

⁵ Humanitarian Outcomes. (2023, 2 March). *Signal Alert*. Aid Worker Security Database. https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Mali_SA_2023_Final.pdf

⁶ Kleinfeld, P. and Amin, M. (2023, 29 June). *Obstacles to aid pile up as Sudan's conflict rages on*. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/06/29/obstacles-aid-pile-sudans-conflict-rages>

⁷ Goldberg, J. and Abdelkarim Ibrahim, H. (2023, 21 June). *Sudanese aid workers face hundreds of job losses*. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2023/08/01/exclusive-sudanese-aid-workers-face-hundreds-job-losses>

Security training is premised on the notion that risk can be managed and mitigated through awareness, behaviours, and standard operating procedures – much of which can be taught. The field of NGO humanitarian security risk management largely originated from a collaborative training course in the late 1990s that standardised certain principles of humanitarian operational security. Since that time, training – in various formats and modalities – has played an important role in aid organisations' SRM systems in insecure locations.

2.1 Early initiatives

In the early 1990s, few aid organisations had any formal security measures. NGO staff in remote and high-risk areas often had no means of communication, no standard travel protocols, and no security procedures. A few pivotal events, including the murder of ICRC workers in Chechnya in 1996 and a landmine incident affecting an NGO staffer in Somalia in 1993, began to expose the gaps in security, especially when it was discovered that standard insurance would not cover "acts of war". The UN system had by that time already established the UN Security Coordinator office (UNSECOORD) in 1982, but even among UN humanitarian agencies, security awareness and training were still rudimentary. The growing realisation that their neutral status under international humanitarian law afforded little real protection against attack awakened aid organisations to the need to better prepare their staff for working in dangerous places.

In 1998, with funding from USAID and coordinated by InterAction and RedR, humanitarian practitioners from NGOs and the ICRC collaborated to create the first global interagency security training. These sessions covered basic principles of security risk assessment and practical measures such as facilities protection, convoy management, and proper radio usage. The training, distilled into ODI's [*Good Practice Review 8: Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*](#), eventually became foundational to the development of many organisations' SRM systems. Meanwhile, during the same decade, the UN initiated training programmes for staff participating in Operation Lifeline Sudan to avoid hazards and mitigate security and safety risks entailed with that mission. This training also proved seminal in informing the UN's broader risk assessment and management model.

Importantly, these early security training initiatives grew directly out of the needs and contingencies of the humanitarian operational sphere and borrowed little from traditional security domains like military and law enforcement. The foundational principles were by and for entities whose mission was to move and work amid potentially threatening armed actors without posing their own deterrent counterthreat. This is where the concept of cultivating "acceptance" as one approach to security risk mitigation first took shape as a deliberate and actionable set of strategies. As the sector continued to grow and professionalise its SRM, training courses also developed and proliferated, internally and externally, with some elements increasingly resembling those of other sectors.

In 2014, a joint initiative by the European Interagency Security Forum and InterAction undertook a major research study of training practices and needs in the humanitarian sector in order to create practical guidance and benchmarks. Many of the gaps and issues identified in detail in the 2014 research remain and are echoed in more recent research findings from this report.⁸

⁸ Persaud, C. (2014). How to Create Effective Security Training for NGOs. NGO Safety and Security Training Project. EISF.

2.2 Types of training

Currently, within the humanitarian sector, the provision of security training has branched into different thematic areas, modalities, and types of providers, both in-house and externally sourced.⁹ Broadly, security training falls into two main areas: personal training for individual security awareness and critical safety skills, and organisation-level security risk management training. The table and discussion below provide an overview.

Table 2: A taxonomy of security training

Types of training	Modalities	Types of providers	Formats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal safety and security <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Induction briefings – Online training/ certificates – Hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) • Personal security related: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Physical first aid, usually trauma-focused first aid (IFAK) – Mental health and psychological first aid – Stress management – Humanitarian negotiation and conflict management – Mine awareness – Combat awareness – Personal protective equipment (PPE) • Security risk management (SRM) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online toolkits/resources – Online free training/ certificates – Online paid certificates – In-person training • SRM sub-areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crisis management – Incident reporting – Sexual violence – Digital security – Driving (defensive, safe, and armoured vehicle) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person • E-learning/online • Online remotely facilitated • Open courses • Closed courses • Blended (online and in-person) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-house • Private specialist external training providers with humanitarian links • Individual trainers/semi in-house • Online e-learning platforms • Sector associations • Private sector security companies • UN or other organisations (NGOs and Red Cross/ Red Crescent Movement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom learning • Hands-on practice • Simulation-based • Desk-based scenarios • Gamification • Completion certificates • Assessment-based certificates • Certification programmes (self-learning assessed through an exam) • Quick mobile guides • Modular-based learning • Mentorship schemes • Training of trainers

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By and large, organisations link their security training expectations to contextual risks and the profiles and roles of each staff member. Unfortunately, within many organisations, this approach in practice still favours international staff members and does not always result in the individuals who take on the greatest risk (usually local aid workers) receiving the most training.

Personal safety and security training

The greatest emphasis remains on the provision of personal safety and security training, which by-and-large focuses on providing non-specialists with an understanding of the risks they face, and an overview of safety and security practices. The provision of this type of security training is widely acknowledged as a duty of care obligation.

Organisations often provide a basic safety and security briefing as part of the onboarding process and, upon arrival at a new duty station. This can be complemented by a more detailed online safety and security training that in some organisations is made mandatory for all staff. Some organisations have developed their own online training, while others use existing training, available from external providers. Unsurprisingly, larger international NGOs have more established security training protocols, although compliance may still be challenging, while smaller, often national actors, adopt a more ad hoc and opportunistic approach to training.

The UN's BSAFE and IFRC's Stay Safe – both of which are publicly available – are among the best-known online security training resources. BSAFE is mandatory for all UN personnel. Specialised courses relating

⁹ The Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) website includes a page that lists upcoming security-related courses: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/training-events/>

to personal security are also growing in number on e-learning platforms, such as DisasterReady and Kaya. DisasterReady hosts several free security-related courses, including training on travel safety, kidnapping and hostage survival, LGBTQIA safety and security awareness, and road traffic safety. Additionally, it offers a personal safety and security certificate programme developed in collaboration with Save the Children. Kaya hosts the IRC's personal safety and security course. These online resources are available in multiple languages. Early versions of online training courses tended to be focused on the experience of international staff in unfamiliar locations. Recent versions are more inclusive, both of local actors and staff diversity.

Hostile environment awareness training courses

Organisations often provide hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) for international staff who travel to high-risk locations. HEAT is traditionally conducted in small groups and in-person at a training site over the course of 3–5 days. HEAT has its roots in military training, where soldiers would be stress-tested and taught survival skills in hostage situations and other intense scenarios in training programmes such as the US military's survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE). Among humanitarian security experts, HEAT is often described as the industry standard for international staff deployed to locations considered to be high risk, although there is no consensus on what a HEAT course's content, format or modality should be, or how often trainees should refresh these skills.

Some organisations have developed in-house HEAT (or variations thereof) for their staff, although these tend to be larger, well-resourced international organisations, such as the UN and the larger international NGOs. Nevertheless, the provision of HEAT has largely fallen to specialised external training providers that offer open courses that organisations can send their staff to on an as-needed basis. While many of the training hubs are based in a small number of locations (primarily the US and Europe), certain training providers have aimed to expand their international footprint, although this has proven logistically challenging in practice for many. In some contexts, country-level entities offer open HEAT courses, such as the UN Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (SSAFE) and others. Some international training providers have developed online HEAT courses following the travel restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online HEAT courses usually cover all aspects of a normal HEAT minus the simulation and first aid components.

The content and format of a HEAT varies depending on the provider, but many HEAT courses involve a teaching component that is classroom-based and covers the theory along with an opportunity to practise what has been taught (e.g. through desk-based scenarios or hands-on first aid exercises). This is then complemented by a life-like simulation with actors and props where participants are placed in stressful situations, such as crossfire, checkpoints, and hostage situations. The simulation is followed by an opportunity for participants to debrief and reflect on their learning and mental and physiological responses to the stressors they encountered.

Some providers and organisations have sought to distance themselves from the moniker 'HEAT', either because their training does not include a simulation component (which some consider the key difference between HEAT and other types of personal security training), or because of its association with high-risk and violent contexts. The military antecedents of HEAT are also a cause of contention among humanitarian professionals.

Several organisations have chosen to develop in-house security training, often simplified versions of HEAT, and rely on their security personnel to travel regularly to provide this type of security training to country teams. External individual trainers are also sometimes contracted to provide more bespoke security training. Other organisations have opted for a training-of-trainers approach. One international NGO internalised its security training by introducing a training-of-trainers methodology along with a certification process, allowing them to train hundreds of staff each month and building SRM capacity internally.

In 2008, the UN developed a women's security awareness training (WSAT), delivered by women, and offered regularly in several contexts. While the WSAT has mixed reviews, it is unique in that it offers a separate space for women to discuss security concerns, which can be especially important in

male-dominated cultures. The WSAT helped draw attention to how identity can affect personal risk, laying the groundwork for more security training to consider identity-based risks.

There are several knowledge areas that are related to personal safety and security, and often offered in conjunction or alongside personal security training. Physical first aid, especially trauma-focused, is largely included as a fundamental component of in-person HEAT courses and provided separately by Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies in some humanitarian contexts. Mental health and stress management have also received increased attention in recent years within the security training space. One specialised training provider has deliberately interwoven psychological risk management into its security training, making it a recurring aspect that is raised throughout the training, rather than treating it as a standalone taught module. Additional knowledge areas – such as mine awareness, humanitarian negotiation, and conflict management – are added to personal security training in certain locations.

Security risk management training

For individuals with security responsibilities, specialised SRM training is less standardised, even in large and well-established organisations. There is no clear industry standard or popularly recognised course on security risk management. Each organisation approaches training for its security focal points in its own way – but there is evident growing demand for external specialised training support, which has been met with a greater number of courses, particularly online, that aim to strengthen SRM. Specialised training providers such as International Location Safety (ILS), Safer Edge, and RedR all offer training for security focal points in security risk management. More specialised courses, such as crisis management training, safe driving, and digital security, are also increasingly common – provided in-house in some organisations, and offered by several external training providers.

DisasterReady has developed a security risk management essentials certificate programme in partnership with Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and Insecurity Insight, which can serve as an initial entry point for non-specialists to learn more about security risk management. This programme complements the security risk management professional certification, also hosted on the DisasterReady platform, which was developed by the International NGO Safety & Security Association (INSSA) for country and regionally-based SRM professionals to assess their competencies across several topic areas. Some organisations, including the UN, are encouraging security staff to complete this certification by way of demonstrating their SRM competency.

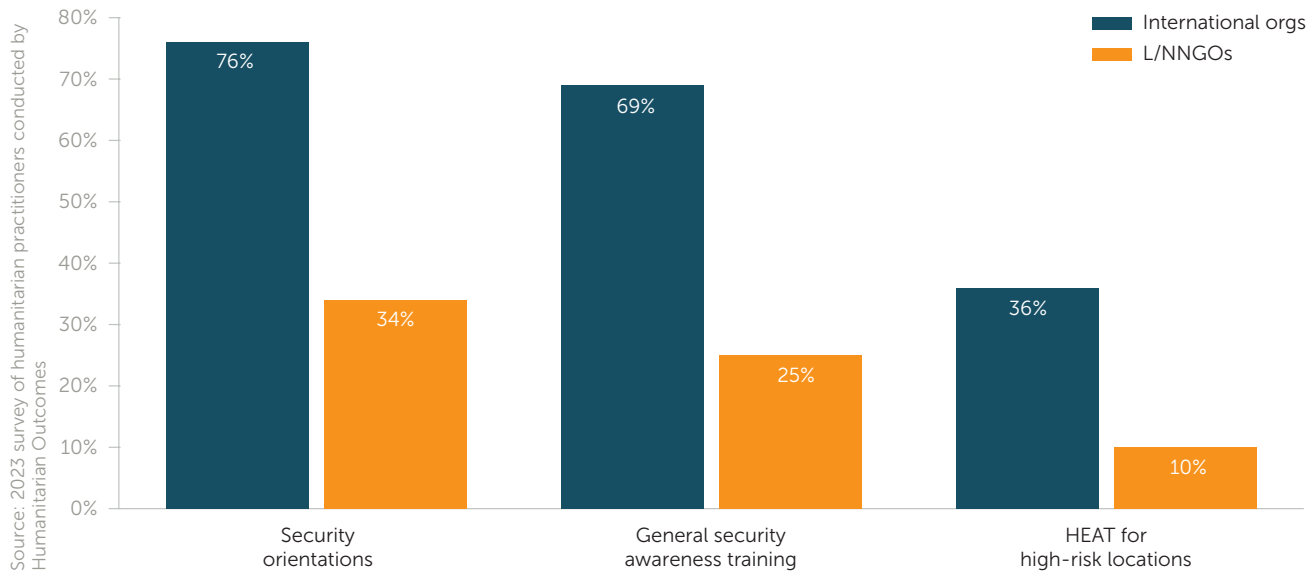
GISF has led the sector in developing resources such as papers, guides, and toolkits to support learning and implementation of humanitarian SRM good practice. While not training per se, interviewees have stated that the resources shared often serve as a basis for the SRM training they develop. GISF has also developed a security and safety training pack to support security staff in the delivery of security training.¹⁰

2.3 Recent trends

Almost all international aid workers interviewed for this report described receiving some form of security training (which tends to include some safety aspects as well), though the modality and content varied, as well as organisational expectations around when and who should receive it. In contrast, most national NGO staff reported not having access to security training unless it was provided through their international partners, and then only for small numbers of colleagues. This finding was borne out in a survey of 358 aid workers across 46 countries, where local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) staff were much less likely than international NGO (INGO) staff to report having security training (Figure 7).

¹⁰ The security and safety training pack is available from: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/long-read/security-safety-training-pack/>

Figure 7: Disparity of training resources provided to L/NNGO and INGO staff



Training content has been reassessed in recent years, allowing for a diversity and inclusion lens to guide the updated content, in line with broader discussions in the humanitarian security sector around person-centred approaches to security.¹¹ This has also spurred trainers to integrate greater representation within security courses, introducing trainers and actors with different identity profiles and from different backgrounds. The content of security training has also shifted recently, with a greater focus on trauma-sensitive training, psychological wellbeing and stress management, and modules on increasingly relevant topics, such as digital security.

However, the most profound shift in security training in the humanitarian sector in recent years has come since the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced organisations and training providers to rethink the way security training was being provided. Unsurprisingly, many shifted their attention to producing online training or creating courses that could be taught remotely. One large international NGO reported having no online security courses available for staff prior to the pandemic, but now offers 20 separate courses related to security. Online training has allowed organisations to reach thousands more people, including national staff, such as drivers and cooks, and staff within partner organisations, who may not have received training otherwise.

The shift to online learning has also allowed for greater creativity in what is being provided, with more engaging content such as videos, puzzles, and exercises. The online format has also allowed providers to more easily tailor content to particular organisations, contexts, languages, and programmes. Interviewees expressed surprise at how effective online training provision could be. Crisis management training could now be carried out remotely, and involve multiple offices across different countries at once, which more accurately simulated a real-life crisis management scenario.

However, emerging tensions were noted between in-person training and online content (whether e-learning or remotely facilitated). This is particularly the case for HEAT courses; for some, an 'online HEAT' is a contradiction, and there seems to be widespread support for the idea that an online course cannot mimic the simulation and stress responses of an in-person HEAT. While there is little dispute over the value of experiential learning, some security staff are questioning whether the old model of HEAT is obsolete, particularly when online courses are not only more accessible to frontline aid workers who are most in need of training – often nationals – but also more logistically flexible, financially viable, and adaptable. For some security staff, this has meant adopting a blended approach to security training, where theoretical components are taught online which are then, whenever possible, followed by in-person training that covers the simulation component.

¹¹ GISF. (2019, 16 December). Beyond the tick-box: developing a person-centred approach to security risk management. <https://www.gisf.ngo/blogs/beyond-the-tick-box-developing-a-person-centred-and-inclusive-approach-to-security-risk-management/>

Despite the greater supply, demand, and adoption of security-related training in humanitarian action, concerns and uncertainties persist about its effectiveness and accessibility. In short, it is hard to say with certainty if security training, particularly costly HEAT courses, leads to better security outcomes for aid workers – and if it does, it is hard to justify the way training resources are currently allocated in the sector.

3.1 Measuring the effectiveness of training

Apart from a few dissenting voices,¹² practitioners in the humanitarian sector overwhelmingly endorse the premise that personal and organisational SRM comprises knowledge and skills that can and should be taught – though they may disagree on what those are, and the most effective means of teaching them. The objectives of security-related training include:

- imparting key ideas and concepts, including the need for contextual understanding for threat and risk analysis
- communicating and helping staff understand procedures and rules
- promoting awareness, sensitivity, and vigilance as individuals and as members of a team
- inculcating personal behaviours and habits and forging organisational cultures of security and safety
- empowering individuals to make informed security-related decisions.

When it comes to HEAT-type courses that employ scenario-based training, there are other objectives as well. By subjecting trainees to simulations of stressful events, the aim is to:

- familiarise the trainee with their individual stress response (including whether they reflexively tend toward “fight,” “flight”, or “freeze”)
- teach and practice specific skills that will be needed in contexts of high stress.

Leaving aside some points of contention about the efficacy of learning under stress (to be discussed in the next section), these are all intermediate objectives – means to the end of contributing to staff security and mitigating risk. And the widespread assumption among aid practitioners we interviewed appears to be that training does just that. The most common sentiment expressed among SRM staff was that they believed strongly in the value of training and wished they had the resources to do more of it and cover more staff. As one said of HEAT specifically, “We are big believers in this investment”, adding that although it was costly, it was “more costly to have an incident.”

A globally recognised framework for evaluating training programmes is the Kirkpatrick Model, which measures the effectiveness of training along four criteria, or “levels”: reaction (the trainee’s engagement and personal perception of the value and impact of the training), learning (whether the knowledge and skills were absorbed/retained), behaviour (the impact of training in the trainee’s actions going forward) and results (whether the training resulted in the intended outcomes of the training). To the extent that security training has been evaluated in a rigorous way, it has been limited to the first two levels of this model – individual feedback and testing.

¹² See: Neuman, M. and Weissman, F. (eds.). (2016). *Saving lives and staying alive: Humanitarian security in the age of risk management*. Hurst Publishing.

Some organisations and external training providers did not use any formal metrics to assess the results of the training they conducted. Some but not all courses required the trainee to pass a test upon completion of the course. Many relied on trainee feedback, collected in surveys immediately after the course and sometimes again at a later date, 6–12 months post-training. For those that checked in with trainees later, they sometimes received anecdotal evidence of where training was applied and proved useful.

None of the individuals and organisations consulted, however, could point to any hard evidence (such as peer-reviewed studies in the humanitarian sector or any other field) showing that security training caused or was correlated with improved security outcomes, as this research has not been done. A search of peer-reviewed literature turned up very few formal evaluations or studies on security-related training, and what there is seems mostly limited to digital/online security, such as training staff to be aware of phishing attempts. A 2021 published dissertation¹³ documented the results of a formal evaluation of HEAT provided by the Headington Institute, but the evaluation criteria were also of the Kirpatrick Model first-level type and did not attempt to measure objective security outcomes. More broadly, we found studies supporting simulation-style training (such as employed in HEAT courses) as being “among the most effective means to facilitate learning of complex skills across domains”¹⁴ but the studies did not include security training and were rather focused on fields of higher learning such as medical and teacher education.

Certainly, outcome-level effectiveness assessments of security training are an inherently difficult proposition, as in some respects it would require ‘proving the negative’ – who can say for certain what incidents did not occur as a result of good training). Nevertheless, it is possible to envision how a study might be formulated by one or more large organisations, for instance by comparing such measures as incident rates or incident-type prevalence across before and after training programmes were implemented. With large numbers of staff working across many insecure operational contexts, the data is, sadly, not hard to find.

3.2 Costs and incentives

While low-cost and remote options are increasingly available, the typical price point for on-site specialised training, such as HEAT, is quite high. Costs per trainee for one course range from around US\$1,000 to US\$7,000 or more. For smaller organisations, especially national NGOs, with limited resources, this is an impossible investment. Even for larger international organisations with hundreds of staff members working in a high-risk context, multiplied by four or five such contexts in any given year, this is a daunting expense. Given such a high cost, for which the return on investment is unproven (or at least unmeasured to date), it is reasonable to question the organisational incentives behind the investment, and how it is allocated.

It is overly simplistic and not entirely fair or accurate to say, as some interviewees did, that training patterns are “driven by insurance” and management concerns about potential litigation from staff members or their families should a violent incident occur. What is true is that organisations view training as an important part of their duty of care obligation to staff, to give them all possible means of mitigating risk. But the duty of care principle would also seem to require that, since costs generally prohibit the organisation from providing the presumed gold-standard security training to all staff members, that such training would be focused on the local staff members (or implementing partner staff members) most at risk, which is not the case.

Some organisations have responded to this by investing in internal, localised training initiatives – from HEAT-like workshops to training of trainer methodologies. The quality may not be the same as an externally-provided training, but such approaches can be more cost-effective and accessible. They can also provide organisations with more flexibility in terms of being able to adapt the content to suit

¹³ Roberts, N. T. (2021). *Hostile environment awareness training for humanitarian aid workers: An outcome evaluation*. Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Psychology. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. (Publication No. 28771119).

¹⁴ Chernikova, O., Heitzmann, N., Stadler, M., Holzberger, D., Seidel, T., and Fischer, F. (2020). *Simulation-based learning in higher education: A meta-analysis*. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(4), pp. 499–541. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320933544>

the context, organisation, and staff. However, to meet the training needs in large and highly dangerous contexts, these individual efforts are still too small and piecemeal. For those organisations with limited in-house capacity, existing online resources can be helpful alternatives.

3.3 Training gaps and inequities

Interviewees noted significant gaps and inequities relating to personal safety and security training, particularly HEAT courses, and these are explored in more detail in the section below.

Who gets trained

The provision of personal safety and security training in the humanitarian sector is biased towards internationally deployed staff members, often neglecting local aid workers who are arguably at higher risk. In-person HEAT courses are usually provided in limited locations and languages, with local staff facing additional logistical and financial challenges to attend. This is compounded by a lack of information about the availability of courses and there are reports of limited availability to local/national NGO staff. Training providers and security staff interviewed acknowledge that this inequity is discriminatory and a failure to meet duty of care. In the words of one international NGO interviewee in Ukraine, "We are a frontline delivery organisation that also wants our local partner organisations to eventually replace us, but it's hard enough to train our own staff, let alone our partners."

Efforts have been made to address this inequity in several ways, such as by developing in-house HEAT-like training that is more easily provided in different locations, increasing access and availability of online training in a wider variety of languages, offering discounted rates to national aid workers, and collaborating with training providers to deliver courses in more logistically accessible locations. However, the question remains as to why so much organisational security and training budget is devoted to placing a handful of international staff members on HEAT courses, while neglecting the security training needs of more at-risk staff.

Despite the fact that NGOs are meant to have access to training resources under the UN's Saving Lives Together framework, as well as through donor government-supported security consortia initiatives such as INSO, most local NGOs consulted across several contexts reported being unable to access these courses or facing language barriers (to the extent they even knew they existed). Some organisations have already concluded that the current investment and approach is not fit-for-purpose, choosing to re-examine the type of training that is provided, and to whom.

Who does the training

Security training, especially HEAT courses, tends to be rooted in white, Western, male, and ex-military perspectives, which do not always reflect the diversity of aid workers, the type of work they do, or the most common risks they face. Additionally, the absence of a teaching background, or technical expertise in particular topics (e.g. sexual violence and psychological trauma), has raised concerns about the adequacy of some of the training provided.

Some organisations and training providers have made efforts to address this by introducing a greater diversity of trainers and more inclusive content. The WSAT is an early effort in this space. Courses are increasingly diverse, ranging from audio recordings from non-native English speakers to transgender trainers. Despite this progress, interviewees agree that much more work remains to be done in this space, especially with regards to disability.

The absence of a standard or independent oversight body for security training means that the onus remains on organisations to ensure that their trainers and training content are appropriate for their staff and the work they do.¹⁵ This is an easier task for organisations with well-informed security professionals to evaluate training, but a challenge for organisations newly entering the space.

¹⁵ In the absence of benchmarks, EISF and InterAction developed the NGO Safety and Security Training Project: How to Create Effective Security Training for NGOs, which offers guidance to trainers. Available here: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/blogs/ngo-safety-and-security-training-project-how-to-create-effective-security-training-for-ngos/>

What training covers

A significant critique of security training is its tendency towards 'cookie-cutter' course design, lacking tailoring towards specific contexts, programmes, organisations, and individuals. This can be particularly pronounced in online training, where global recommendations may contradict those made in specific locations.

Another issue is that the content of some security training is outdated and fails to reflect the current environments and risks aid workers are likely to face. Reports indicate that HEAT courses today cover the same content as in previous years, despite evolving risks. For example, there is a greater demand for training on stress management in contexts like Ukraine and Iraq, but many HEAT courses still focus on higher-impact and lower-likelihood risks like compound raids, hostage-taking, and terrorist attacks.

Some providers remark that organisations expect their trainings to cover extreme events, with lots of 'bells and whistles', when internally they feel that training should focus more on lower risk but greater likelihood threats, particularly as the more impactful or violent an event is, the more difficult it is for one individual alone to mitigate against it.

Some security providers have recognised the need for a shift and have started incorporating 'soft skills' like negotiation and community engagement into their security training. The importance of addressing psychological risks is also increasingly recognised and incorporated.

In terms of security risk management, while there is an increasing amount of content available for security focal points to strengthen their competencies, much of the training remains entry-level. Efforts like mentorship schemes and training of trainers have been developed to address this gap and provide more creative forms of skills development.

Overall, there is a need for security training to be more tailored to specific contexts, evolving risks, and individual profiles, rather than following a one-size-fits-all approach. This can help ensure that staff are adequately prepared for the risks they are most likely to face in today's humanitarian settings.

When training causes harm

Many interviewees reported that HEAT courses, particularly in the past, could be overly intense, involving 'abductions' in the middle of the night, verbal sexual harassment, and interrogation scenarios. One provider has received feedback from individuals so negatively affected by past training that they refuse to attend any future HEAT courses.

While there has been a shift away from these overly stressful (and arguably unproductive) teaching methods, there remains an undeniable risk of traumatisation or re-traumatisation with security training. Some trainers aim to reduce this risk by adopting a trauma-informed approach, asking participants to complete trauma history forms prior to their courses, and putting in place protocols and safeguarding focal points to deal with any potential adverse reactions during the course. The presence of trainers with experience in how to deal with trauma can also reduce the risk. Unfortunately, these safeguards do not remove the risk completely.

Stressful scenarios can be a useful learning tool, but too much stress can have the opposite effect. Research in this area indicates that stress can help with memory formation, but can also impair memory recall.¹⁶ Therefore, a moderately stressful simulation will likely stay in participants' minds long after the training has concluded, but during the simulation itself, the participants may be unable to accurately recall and apply the learning they have received. Simulations, therefore, offer participants a unique opportunity to evaluate their responses to stress, perhaps more than the application of what they have learned on the course. The trainers we interviewed called for simulations to aim for moderate levels of stress, to ensure that scenarios are clearly linked to specific learning objectives, and to encourage participants to focus on how they react to stressors to learn more about their own responses to stress.

¹⁶ Vogel, S. and Schwabe, L. (2016). Learning and memory under stress: Implications for the classroom. *npj Science of Learning*, 1, 16011. <https://doi.org/10.1038/npjscilearn.2016.11>

3.4 Innovations and the future of security training in the aid sector

Innovation in the humanitarian security training space remains modest. The most fundamental developments are the shift from in-person courses to online training and creative means to make online training more effective and engaging. Online platforms like DisasterReady and Kaya have increased their security-related content, and organisations and training providers have developed more online courses, giving security staff more flexibility and options for training their staff. Virtual reality and artificial intelligence are future possibilities, but not yet concrete projects for most organisations.

Current trends suggest that in the future, security training will become shorter, more adaptable, accessible, interactive, and inclusive of diverse identity profiles. Many courses are becoming modular, allowing participants to consume shorter training modules in line with their existing experience and timetable. The proliferation of mobile phones also means that providing online training that is mobile-friendly is likely to be a key way to reach greater numbers of aid workers in the future. A trend towards in-house security training targeted at field level is also emerging as a response to the growing recognition that national staff require more relevant and appropriate security training.

Conclusions and possible steps toward better evaluation and fairer delivery of training

With attacks on humanitarian workers in triple digits year after year, the need for security awareness and skills in risk assessment, avoidance, and mitigation has never been more salient. Currently, however, the sector relies on a patchwork assortment of providers and uneven, unequal coverage of staff as budgets allow, with little understanding of if and how much it helps. For instance, while HEAT has become the expected standard, evidence is lacking to support the claim that it is the best or most impactful form of training for all settings. Humanitarian actors would do well to take a moment to re-evaluate why, how, and to whom training is provided.

Extensive consultations with humanitarian practitioners in operational locations and headquarters positions under Humanitarian Outcomes' ongoing research programme has pointed in a few promising directions regarding security training.

Be clear on what training is meant to achieve

Training is a tool, not the solution, with the end goal that staff members are more secure, not simply that they are trained. Similarly, duty of care (or the more bloodless term 'compliance') can be a driver for training, but organisations must not confuse it with the ultimate desired outcome. Being clear on outcomes assists in the proper design and delivery of training, to answer questions such as:

- What are you training for? What are the risks to your staff – in the context and related to your programming – that need mitigating?
- What are the competencies needed for field staff to successfully manage risk?
- Is HEAT what you need, or is some other form of training more appropriate and efficient?
- Who among your staff and partners needs the training and how is it best to train them?

Measure the outcomes, not just the inputs

There is no global oversight body for security training – donors and agencies could consider whether this represents a gap that needs filling. In any event, the sector could usefully explore ways to more rigorously evaluate training interventions using metrics that are more objective and outcome-focused than trainee feedback. Many organisations now carefully monitor and track their security incidents and debriefs, which would seem an obvious place to draw from. This is not to say that trainee feedback is not also valuable, however; one organisation has developed a data pool of hundreds of past trainees that can be revisited and surveyed with different queries, yielding helpful information and illustrative case examples.

Pool international resources for greater access to training for local actors

Donors and international organisations with strong incentives to increase training opportunities for NGO staff and local and community-based organisations could more efficiently pool resources to establish continuous training facilities and training of trainers programmes that could reach far larger numbers than are currently served by being given seats on courses as the opportunity arises.

Among humanitarian security professionals at present there is frank acknowledgement of the challenges and signs of momentum for change, which hopefully will spur greater innovation in this space to make security training more equitable, accessible, and appropriate to aid workers' realities and needs.

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RELATED RESOURCES

DisasterReady

<https://ready.csod.com/>

European Interagency Security Forum (EISF) and InterAction

Guidance for trainers on creating effective security training for NGOs: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/blogs/ngo-safety-and-security-training-project-how-to-create-effective-security-training-for-ngos/>

Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF)

Upcoming security-related courses: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/training-events/>

Security and safety training pack: <https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/long-read/security-safety-training-pack/>

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

Stay Safe: <https://ifrcstaysafe.org/stay-safe-e-course>

Kaya

<https://kayaconnect.org/>

UN

BSAFE: <https://training.dss.un.org/thematicarea/category?id=6>

Locations of serious attacks against aid workers in 2022



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