



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

May, 2020

Protecting humanitarian workers against COVID-19:

Focusing on prevention by strengthening labour rights, occupational safety measures and health for all, including national staff

“Communities and people affected by crisis receive the assistance they require from competent and well-managed staff and volunteers.

Quality Criterion: Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably.”

[Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(CHS\)](#)

Protecting humanitarian workers is essential to guaranteeing principled and effective humanitarian action. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic protecting humanitarian workers is more important than ever. The drafting of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) includes consideration on how to extend the Medevac system to national staff.

In parallel to such considerations, ICVA calls for a renewed investment in preventive measures and equipment, available to all humanitarian workers. Evidence shows that investing in prevention brings more desirable and efficient gains than only a limited focus on response. In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, the emphasis in prevention is also needed to comply with the ‘do not harm’ principle and avoid virus transmission from the humanitarian workers to community members.

With this prevention focus in the mind, ICVA advocates for strengthening health, safety and security measures in humanitarian organisations, while also ensuring they apply in a more equitable manner to all humanitarian workers, regardless of whether they are national or international staff. National aid workers constitute the majority of aid staff on the ground, covering the bulk of the work in assisting affected populations. Because of their higher numbers and greater exposure in the frontline, they are also more likely to be at risk. Therefore, their safety, security and health should be in our top priorities, today and in the future.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, ICVA and others have been working in addressing existing inequalities in issues related to safety, security and health of the humanitarian workers. Mindsets have started to change and few international organisations have begun to make this shift, with human resources and safety and security policies starting to be developed with national staff, who represent also the majority of employees at the country level. Moreover, a major change has come as over the last years, the presence and role played by national and local organisations within the sector has substantially increased. They have usually fewer or no international staff and develop the safety, security and health policies based on national staff interests and concerns. Still, overall progress remains limited and renewed joint leadership is needed.

ICVA calls upon IASC to lead efforts in strengthening labour rights, occupational safety, security and health measures for all humanitarian workers, especially national staff.



With regard to risks faced due to COVID-19; we call for senior management of all humanitarian agencies to:

1. Ensure that all possible preventive and protective measures are taken to minimise occupational safety and health risks for all humanitarian workers, including national staff;
2. Conduct a participatory workplace risk assessment with the humanitarian workers to guide the development or update of an infectious disease preparedness and response plan as well as in developing other measures regarding occupational safety and health aspects of the work;
3. Guarantee that national staff is not unduly exposed to risks; and that they are aware at all times of the risks taken in the workplace and consent to it;
4. Provide information, guidance, and training on occupational safety and health, for both international and national staff, including in the national language of the staff;
5. Provide for free psychosocial and medical counselling on COVID-19 related issue to staff and their families, including in national languages;
6. Provide, free of charge, adequate Personal Protective Equipment (masks, gloves, goggles, gowns, hand sanitizer, soap and water, cleaning supplies) in sufficient quantity to those in contact with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients ¹;
7. Provide a blame-free environment;
8. Advise humanitarian workers on self-assessment, symptom reporting, staying home when ill, and self-quarantine measures, following also the guidance provided by the national authorities;
9. Rapidly expand testing and encourage antibody testing²;
10. Ensure access to health services in country for all staff either free of charge or at expense of employer/insurance coverage;
11. Maintain appropriate working hours and extend breaks for those staff working in hazardous situations;

¹ For more info see : <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-administration-inspection/resources-library/publications/guide-for-labour-inspectors/personal-protective-equipment/lang--en/index.htm>

² The ILO Technical and ethical guidelines for workers' health surveillance prescribes in detail the conditions how a medical/health test can be requested by the employers and the results of the test to be used: https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_PUBL_9221108287_EN/lang--en/index.htm



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12. Ensure access to complaints mechanisms for staff and community members, including on issues regarding occupational safety and security; allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation as well as sexual harassment at workplace;
13. Allow humanitarian workers to exercise the right to remove themselves from a work situation, when they can reasonably believe it presents an imminent and danger to their life or health; and protect humanitarian workers exercising this right from any undue consequences;
14. Honour the right to compensation, rehabilitation, and in country curative services for humanitarian workers infected with COVID-19 in the workplace and recognise the transferability of this right and its exercise by their family;