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Somalia: Working in High-risk Environments and Fragile States

As the security situation continues to deteriorate in Somalia, humanitarian organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to achieve their desired results. Working conditions for these organizations in Somalia are particularly harsh when compared to those in other developing countries. Humanitarian aid workers must accept these risks as a fundamental requirement of their involvement, and donors must be prepared to take on more challenges in these environments as well.

by Ann Mary Olsen [Danish Refugee Council]

Somalia’s humanitarian context is one of the worst in the world. It is a place of extremes for intended beneficiaries and for aid workers. Those who survive the conflict, suffering, vulnerability and indignity have reached their limit. For those seeking to assist, much of Somalia remains difficult to access, a dangerous place to operate and full of dilemmas which challenge humanitarian principles.

The humanitarian community must find a careful balance between the imperative to address humanitarian needs and the perils encountered in Somalia, such as costs and risks in terms of financial resources, the possibility of corruption, security concerns and the threats to humanitarian principles.

Taking well-accounted risks and achieving results are intertwined in Somalia. Humanitarian agencies can and should work in Somalia, and indeed they have delivered assistance and results in a manner consistent with humanitarian principles. However, a number of critical areas are crucial to consider in order to mitigate risks. Risk management is a prerequisite for operation and achieving the results necessary to assist the people.

Negotiating Access

The international community needs to constantly reaffirm independence and impartiality, meaning that in negotiating access to beneficiaries, ideally humanitarian organizations should not tolerate interference from the various insurgent groups seeking to influence their operations.

At the same time, humanitarian organizations need to engage with the different groups on the opposing sides of the conflict (local leaders, armed groups, state and non-state actors, and groups perceived as illegitimate) in order to negotiate and achieve unhindered access to those they wish to assist. Humanitarian aid workers cannot refrain from discussing and negotiating access for those in need with local leaders or armed groups, even if organizations or their donors do not appreciate their politics, standpoints or actions. If organizations did so, they would violate all fundamental, humanitarian-work principles, as organizations would compromise their impartiality and their obligation to assist on the basis of need alone. Furthermore, they might be seen as driven by a political agenda, thus compromising their independence and possibly, security.

Staying Onboard

Violence, insecurity and the near impunity of many armed groups and de facto authorities have led to great difficulties for aid workers to move around safely and monitor the results that humanitarian organizations set out to achieve.

In most locations in Somalia it is possible to have a wide outreach with just national staff or with expatriate manage-