

Exploring factors influencing the decisions of professional aid workers to leave or stay in the humanitarian and development NGOs operating in War-torn societies: A Lesson from South Sudan

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Abstract

South Sudan is the world's newest country and is an extremely challenging environment to operate in for humanitarian and development NGOs and their staff. The objective of this study is to explore factors contributing to staff turnover and management strategies for recruiting and retaining professional aid workers within humanitarian and development NGOs in a conflict environment in South Sudan. While a number of studies have been conducted, there is no explicit consensus among academic researchers around the globe on appropriate management strategies for recruiting and retaining talented aid workers employed in organizations operating in war and conflict zones of developing countries. To address this research gap, this study explores this issue further by adopting a qualitative study research. Results of interviews with employees, organizational managers and sectoral expert practitioners identified health and safety, rampant insecurity, poor living and poor working conditions, especially poor housing and absence of basic social amenities such as electricity and running water, short-term employment contracts, tensions between local workers, regional workers and expatriates, as the major factors leading to the decisions of talented aid workers to leave the humanitarian and development sectors in South Sudan. However, on the positive note, the findings revealed that some staff, especially local staff, may be influenced to continue working in these sectors as opportunities for both financial and non-financial incentives, are increasingly available. Therefore, this study provides empirical evidence and contributes to a better understanding of factors influencing staff retention in a conflict environment, while contributing to management literature and debate.

Keywords: staff turnover, staff retention, aid workers, retention strategies in conflict zones

Introduction

Decision of aid workers to leave or stay in the humanitarian and development NGOs operating in War-torn societies is an extensively studied issue by academic researchers. There have been several studies carried on staff turnover and staff retention in the humanitarian and development NGOs in African countries (Mukasa 1999; Loquercio et al. 2006; Debebe 2007). With regards to findings from other previous studies in Africa, a study conducted in South Africa found that better remuneration was the reason for professional aid workers attraction and staying in an organization (Lehmann et al. 2008). A study in the Horn of Africa region found that factors that cause professional aid workers to leave INGOs include dissatisfaction with working conditions, while factors that make them stay include higher salary and better benefits (Loquercio et al.

2006). A study conducted in Uganda found that division between locals and expatriates contribute to the many reasons why aid workers leave INGOs (Mukasa 1999). A study conducted in Zimbabwe found that staff turnover occurs because of political instability, due to lack of facilities, and because of despair about the future of the country (Chiboiwa et al. 2011).

South Sudan; despite being a developing country with over 100 classified ‘humanitarian and development’ NGOs and a new country with tough working conditions for aid organizations and their staff, no studies have focused on turnover among humanitarian and development NGOs operating in South Sudan despite the dynamic nature of these sectors. Current literature focuses on INGOs operating in other developing countries in the region (Mukasa 1999; Loquercio et al 2006; Debebe 2007; Lehmann et al. 2008) and none on humanitarian and development NGOs operating in South Sudan). Personal experience and anecdotal evidence suggested that staff turnover is present and presents significant challenges for humanitarian and development NGOs working in South Sudan. Very little is known about management strategies of humanitarian and development NGOs working in conflict zones. Little is known about the difficulty facing people working in the sector. Little is also known about the difficulty facing people managing the sector. This is the most innovative aspects of this research. Retaining and attracting professional aid workers in a conflict setting is such a gigantic challenge for INGOs in South Sudan. As such, this research aims to discover what these organizations are doing to mitigate these challenges.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objectives for this study are to (i) identify challenges contributing to staff turnover; (ii) identify the management strategies for retaining talented aid workers within the humanitarian and development NGOs in South Sudan and consider the practical implications. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What factors lead to departure of talented aid workers for humanitarian and development NGOs working in South Sudan; and what are the implications of these factors for management’s staff retention strategies?
- What strategies have managers of humanitarian and development NGOs working in South Sudan taken to address problems associated with retention of talented aid workers; and how are these strategies perceived by talented aid workers?

Methodology

Participants

Qualitative research findings derives from 18 in-depth and small group interviews with aid workers, (majority of whom were local workers from various parts of South Sudan and regional workers from neighboring African countries), 8 semi-structured interviews with humanitarian and development NGOs managers (most of whom were expatriates from Western countries), and 6 in-depth interviews with the sectoral expert practitioners (most of whom were from the variety of local-based NGOs, academia and government in South Sudan).

Research Approach

Interviews, based on pre-arrangement, networking and local connections, were organized that focused on understanding issues leading to decisions of professional aid workers to leave and management strategies for retaining professional workers in a difficult and conflict environment

in South Sudan. The challenges contributing to staff turnover and strategies for retaining staff in a conflict context provided the basis of the interviews procedure and related indicative interview questions. The interview protocol was developed in response to research question 1 and 2.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows the conventions set by researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Denzin et al. (2008). In this research, data analysis involves coding of the raw data into themes, which assist in analyzing the data collected and assists in the identification of and interpretation of patterns and trends. Coding analysis was used to summarize, synthesize, and sort many observations made of the data. Coding has become the fundamental means of developing the analysis in qualitative inquiry (Minichiello et al. 2008), and researchers use coding analysis to pull together and categorize a series of otherwise discrete events, statements, and observations which they identify in the data (Patton 2002).

Findings

Broader Research Context

The environment in which humanitarian and development NGOs operate in South Sudan is context-sensitive. Over twenty years of civil war and decades of political and social instability contributed to underdevelopment and high unemployment. One of the most disheartening results of the conflict can be found in the country's extremely poor living and working conditions and extreme insecurity exacerbated by the presence of armed militias. The impact of conflict varies across setting but often impinged on many areas of the humanitarian and development NGOs workforce. Conflict environment staff retention strategies may need to deal with the consequences of human and capital flight, death of aid workers during conflict (Tulloch et al. 2011), a lack of senior management, poor productivity, inconsistent or poor availability of some categories of aid workers, for example, expatriates (Ehrenreicj & Elliot 2004; Debebe 2007).

In some politically and economically unstable environments, for example, Darfur, Cambodia, Mozambique, Congo, Iraq and Afghanistan, humanitarian and development NGOs and their staff have become targets of violence (Cliff et al. 2004; Sheehan 2008; Hassin 2009). Staff turnover occurs both during conflict, and in some circumstances continues after the conflict on political grounds (Pavignani 2003; Lewis 2005). In the conflict environment, difficulties can emerge in recruitment and people's willingness to work in some locations or professions (Tulloch et al. 2011; Analoui & Samour 2012; Akingbola 2013). Donors also recognize this problem and find this can lower the standards of expatriates recruited, humanitarian and development NGOs under pressure to recruit personnel rapidly may make comprise and lower their retention criteria (Mukasa 1999; Merlot et al. 2006, Debebe 2007). All this has an impact on the situation of the humanitarian and development NGOs and professional aid workers in war-torn societies. Conflict also creates contraction of resources as they are redirected towards security and logistics concerns (Ferrinho & Dal 2003; Hassin 2009), while a dependence on external sources of funding increases (Ehrenreicj & Elliot 2004).

Decision to continue to work by humanitarian and development NGOs and to stay by professional aid workers is usually contingent of affective retention strategies being in place to ensure adequate levels of pay, equipment and tools and a good managerial structures, some or all of these factors will be absent in war and conflict environment (Ferrinho & Dal 2003; Macrae & Gilson 2006; Samuel & Chipunza 2009). The conditions required to ensure an adequate level of

staff retention are often lacking in conflict and unstable environments and staff turnover and poor performance may exist (Newbrander et al. 2007; Devkota & Teijlingen 2010; Chiboiwa et al. 2011). An important reason for this is that management or HR systems are likely to have broken down and the basis on which these strategies works will be redundant, e.g. job descriptions, and traditional performance measures may become irrelevant in difficult or dangerous situations (Ferrinho & Dal 2003; Teegen et al. 2004; Hassin 2009; Tulloch et al. 2011).

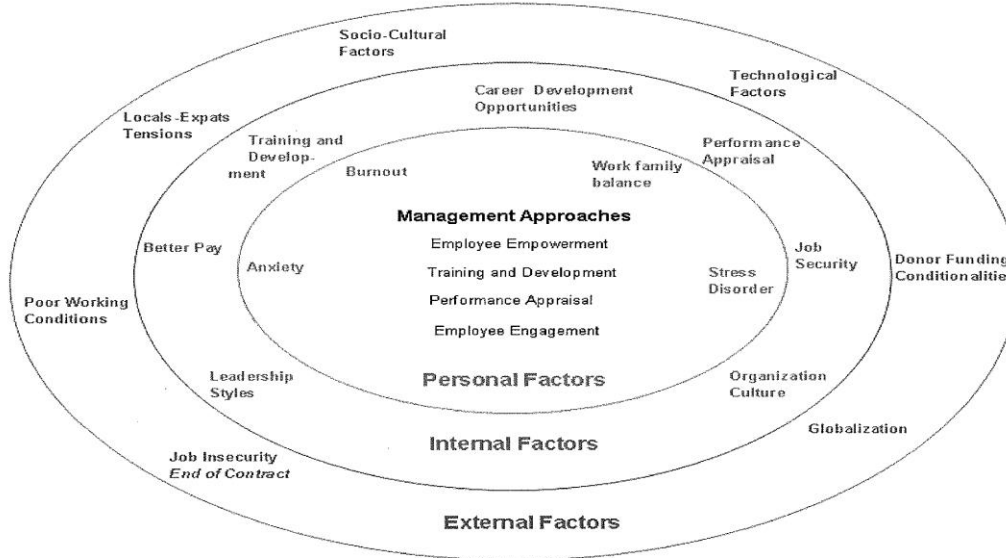
Humanitarian and development NGOs working in conflict ridden areas may influence staff retention by drafting new job descriptions to reflect immediate needs, however, if these are not coordinated properly, staff retention is difficult to be realized (Fowler 2001; Edwards et al. 2002; Barnett & Weiss 2008; Chiboiwa et al. 2010). Staff motivation is also an important component of effective retention in all settings (Tulloch et al. 2011). However, conflict environments are likely to undermine the professional conscience and 'intrinsic' influence to do their jobs well (Mathauer & Imhoff 2006). Poor motivation influences staff productivity and practices in all settings. In some settings humanitarian and development NGOs influence staff retention through performance-based pay initiatives, including in post-conflicts such as Rwanda, Eritrea, and Sierra Leone (Muhumuza 2014). International NGOs are however dependent on having appropriate and effective management strategies in place which are to influence the decisions of professional aid workers to remain (Loquercio et al. 2006). This was observed in East Timor where despite difficult circumstances, locals and expatriates were reportedly influenced not only by their religious ethos and beliefs to help those in need, but effective management strategies employed by their organizations to retain them in such a context (Chiboiwa et al. 2010).

Theoretical Frameworks Utilized

There are various models of retention that have been developed by different scholars of organizational studies in both developed and developing countries (Teegen et al. 2004; Merlot et al. 2006, Samuel & Chipunza 2009; Eisenhardt 2009; Guest 2011; Onyango 2014). As seen in figure 1.1 below, conventional management or HR literature seems to suggest that factors influencing retention are related to personal factors, organizational factors, and external factors, which interact and influence each other. However, the current model from the research findings (figure 1.2) points out some of the factors that are influencing staff retention in South Sudan context. In South Sudan, the most important factors are that professional aid workers leave due to political instability, poor living and working conditions, and unfavorable government policies towards foreign workers.

Figure 1.1 is the general framework drawn from the literature used to understand retention in non-conflict environments. The question is do these factors apply to retention challenges in conflict environments?

Figure 1.1 Management Planning Action Framework (based on literature review)



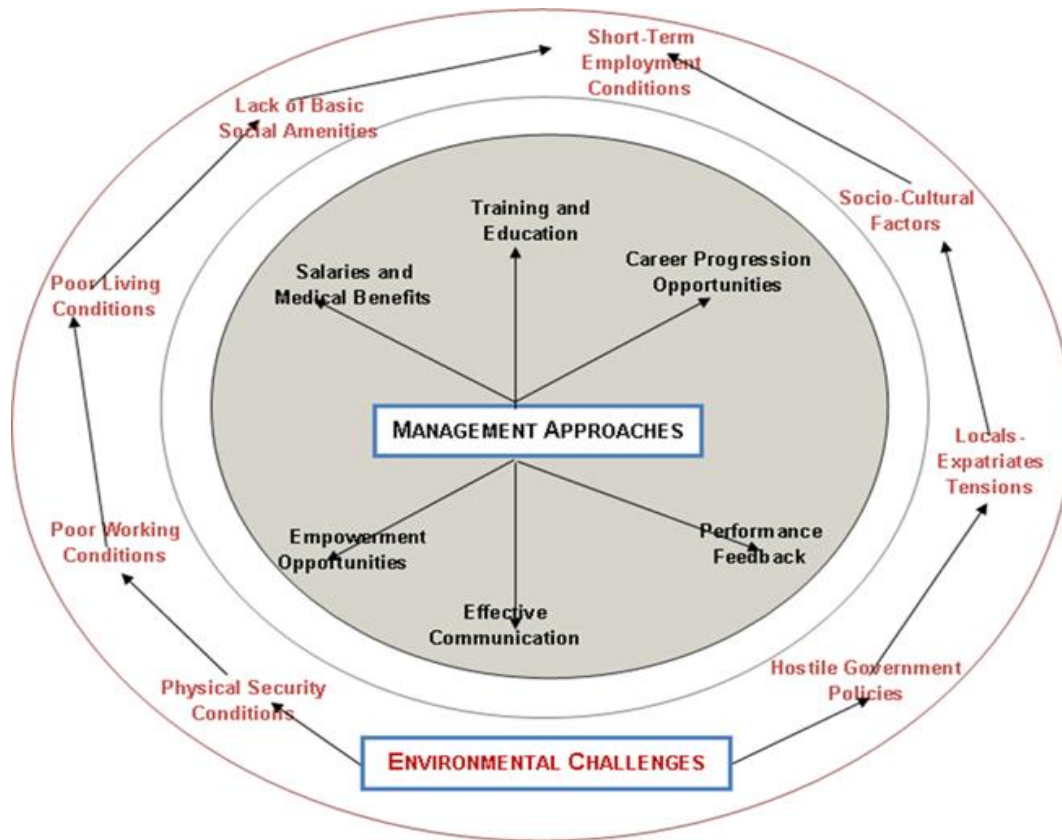
Adapted from Lehmann et al. (2008: 66) and Chong et al. (2012: 64)

Findings in Relations to Existing Theories Involved

Figure 1.2 below explains that the extent to which professional aid workers can be attracted and retained in a conflict environment depends on two interrelated aspects: the challenges which contribute to aid workers' decisions to leave an organization; and the management strategies employed by organizational managers to respond to such challenges. Both challenges contribute to aid workers' decisions to leave the humanitarian and development sectors. As Merlot et al. (2006) suggested, any decision by an individual to leave or stay in an organization will be the result of a complex interplay between the influencing factors.

The research identified a number of factors influencing the recruitment and retention of professional aid workers working for humanitarian and development NGOs in politically and economically unstable environments. Findings indicated that, overall, aid workers' decisions to leave was influenced by factors such as health, safety and security concerns in South Sudan, poor living and working conditions, especially poor housing and lack of basic social amenities such as electricity and running water, short-term employment contracts due to stringent donor funding requirements, socio-cultural factors, hostile government policies towards foreign aid workers, and tensions between locals, regional workers, and expatriates. The findings of this study are largely consistent with prior findings in other conflict-ridden regions (Loquercio et al. 2006; Debebe 2007; Malunga 2009; Onyango 2014) and provide evidence that environmental factors need to be well managed before an organization can expect aid workers to reciprocate with higher levels of commitment and intention to stay in an unstable work environment.

Figure 1.2 Research Framework (Based on Research Findings)



The following quotes represent some of the research participants' views in regard to retention challenges in South Sudan:

I believe issues related to security conditions in this country trigger the decision to leave for many of our staff. It's really difficult for staff to work in unsafe environment. When they do to the country side to provide assistance they will do it in a hurry because they want to get back to the base as soon as they can. Sometimes at night in the field, when staff are sleeping, they are threatened. Some of our staff have lost their lives. Others have been threatened and injured (Manager 09).

The risk as national staff from South Sudan; when it's a kind of tribal conflict, even if you are part of the problem or not, you will be affected... These are the fears we often suffer here in South Sudan... If my tribe gets into conflict, I will be subject to persecution (Employee 04).

Security is a measure concern for everyone here. Workers of all categories are in constant fear of being attacked on duty and on their way to the base or home or accommodation [compound] (Expert 06).

The steps and strategies managers of humanitarian and development NGOs in politically unstable environments have taken to address retention of professional aid workers is that while those challenges discussed earlier (figure 2.1) may have compelled some professional aid

workers to leave, especially expatriates, some aid workers, mainly local workers, may be influenced to continue working in the humanitarian and development sectors as opportunities for competitive salaries and benefits such as medical insurance and paid time off, training and education opportunities, career progression, performance feedback, effective communication, and staff empowerment opportunities, are increasingly available in these sectors.

With regards to how the management strategies are perceived by aid workers in South Sudan, there were mixed feelings, with some aid workers being in favour of retention strategies employed in the sector, while others felt they are not effective and adequate as they would like them to be. This is in line with the findings of prior studies in both developed and developing countries (Teegen et al. 2004; Delaney & Huselid 2006; Becker et al. 2008; Samuel & Chipunza 2009; Malunga 2009; Chiboiwa et al. 2011), which found that concentrating on developing staffs' skills and providing competitive financial rewards and benefits significantly influences motivation, productivity, and intention to remain longer.

The following quotes from research participants show similarities and differences in perceptions in regard to steps and strategies managers of humanitarian and development NGOs in politically unstable environments have taken to address retention of aid workers in South Sudan:

I think most of the people that we have employed over time in various positions across the organization have been moving on and up. Promotion and salary structure of our staff are constantly reviewed. We have done everything in our capacity to improve staff salaries in order to keep them (Manager 01).

It's really difficult to survive with this salary especially with our society whereby people depend on each other very much. Suppose I am the only person working in the family that means the extended family relies on my income and support (Employee 03).

I think by South Sudan's standard, more and more aid workers working with INGOs, whether humanitarian or development NGOs, are satisfied with their pay. I believe it is better pay and medical benefits that any employee would be critical of, so a better pay leads to a longer stay in the organization (Expert 02).

There exist few opportunities for personal advancement and the salary is not relevant compared to the pressure of work their workers do. I think these [humanitarian and development] NGOs need to focus on salary reviews to ensure that there is wage equity among comparable jobs and qualifications (Expert 05).

Discussion and Implications

There were four main reasons for undertaking this research. First, it aims to address research gaps and deficiencies in the literature on retention challenges and management strategies for retaining talented aid workers in the humanitarian and development NGOs in South Sudan, while evaluating the organizational capabilities to respond to challenges presented by the external environment (De Cieri & Dowling 2006). Secondly, in respect to practical outcomes, the focus on understanding retention challenges and management strategies for retaining talented aid workers in difficult environments, South Sudan in particular. Practically, humanitarian and development organizations, managers, employees, expert practitioners and other stakeholders

may all benefit from the outcomes of this research. Previous researchers (Teegen et al. 2004; Samuel & Chipunza 2009; Kagunyi 2009; Chiboiwa et al. 2011; Bakuwa et al. 2013) in staff turnover and retention strategies in private sector organizations in developing countries have emphasized the urgent need for empirical studies in humanitarian and development NGOs. As suggested by Datta et al. (2005), organizations are looking for effective strategies to improve staff retention and productivity in the workplaces.

Reviewing the current literature, there is no empirical studies which explore management strategies and policies and their influences on staff retention within the humanitarian and development sectors. The findings of this study could provide important insights for policy-makers and managers for organizing and managing humanitarian and development organizations in South Sudan, as well as for scholars and practitioners interested to in developing sustainable humanitarian and development NGOs. In a developing country such as South Sudan, the management strategies to retaining talented workers may be less understood than that in Western settings. Therefore, this study will enhance the understanding of the causes of high staff turnover in the humanitarian and development sectors in South Sudan and Sub-Saharan Africa in general from the perspectives of employees, organizational managers and sectoral expert practitioners. In addition, this study will be used as a baseline studies for further studies in the humanitarian and development sectors.

In relation to research originality and new knowledge produced, the findings of this research come from a multiple sources of data. It is envisaged that this model (figure 1.2) will be useful to humanitarian and development NGOs and other stakeholders in developing a workplace behavior and human relations-based approach towards staff retention in a conflict context, South Sudan in particular. This research raises issues for investigators interested in staff retention strategies, apart from serving as a practical guide for humanitarian and development NGOs operating a war and conflict context. Three major implications emerged from this research. First, as long as the perception about working environment in South Sudan continue to be negative, aid workers, expatriates in particular, will leave and humanitarian and development NGOs will not be able to continue pursuing activities to relive suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development. Second, because of ongoing political and ethnic conflicts, and lack of financial funding from donors which are obstacles to retention of staff in South Sudan, humanitarian and development NGOs managers should not rely only on intrinsic rewards to influence staff retention; rather, a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards should be considered as an effective staff attractions and retention strategy in the humanitarian and development sectors.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the factors leading to the decisions of professional aid workers to leave or stay in the humanitarian and development sectors in South Sudan. The study focuses on retention and turnover within the humanitarian and development NGOs in South Sudan, an area lacking in empirical data and could therefore be helpful in helping us understand how management practices and policies manifest in humanitarian and development sectors, South Sudan, and Sub-Saharan Africa in general. Retention of professional staff is taken in this context to mean a HRM or management tool that can be used to address problem of staff turnover. Decision to leave is common practice among talented aid workers working in a conflict and unstable context. The time spent within the sector range from three months to three years,

often less for expatriates. This demonstrates that staff turnover is a problem among humanitarian and development NGOs operating in war-torn societies, South Sudan in particular. Many factors contribute to decision to leave for talented aid workers. However, decisions to stay for talented aid workers are still influenced by managers in different ways, e.g. monetary incentives and benefits packages and opportunities for professional advancement. These benefits are highly valued by local staffs with extended families. However, in spite of these propositions, still it doesn't matter how much money or benefits INGOs can provide to their staff, the solution to retention challenges in South Sudan is political solution. This means that what is needed the most in order to retain workers in South Sudan is political stability. In conclusion, the theoretical propositions discussed in this research provide further analytical scope to support the application of management strategies for recruiting and retaining professional aid workers in a politically and financially unstable environment.

Recommendations for Managers and Policymakers

Based on the findings, the followings are recommended in regard to staff retention in a politically and economically unstable environment, South Sudan in particular. Recruitment and retention of professional aid workers in South Sudan is still necessary for humanitarian and development NGOs to deliver basic services to the poor communities. Although management strategies provide a better pathway in the retention of professional aid workers, the influence of power-plays between local staff and expatriates also exacerbates aid workers' intention to leave. Majority of turnover is due to external factors in South Sudan. Thus, humanitarian and development NGOs can do the following to reduce the staff turnover and improve intention to remain longer:

- Provide the new employees with realistic information about the security situations in South Sudan.
- Improve living and working conditions of the beneficiaries
- Address the issue of short-term contract practices
- Narrow the gaps between local staff and expatriates. This also needs the intervention of the South Sudanese Government, especially the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, by creating a department or unit within the Ministry to monitor recruitment, promotion and compensation practices within the humanitarian and development NGOs—at the national and states levels.

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