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Humanitarian response in insecure contexts: remote programming and duty of care - the ethical responsibility of humanitarian organizations towards frontline responders

Submitted by
M. Mercedes Collazo Alós

Examining Board:
Supervisor: Mr André Picot
Expert: Mrs Cecilia Mornata

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, humanitarian organisations are facing a wide range of challenges to their operations in highly insecure environments. Attacks on aid workers are a major concern for such organisations as they seek to maintain their presence and commitment to delivering humanitarian aid to the people most in need.

With the aim of continuing to provide humanitarian assistance in high-risk environments, international aid organisations are increasingly adopting remote programming strategies, withdrawing international or senior national staff managers and transferring programme responsibilities to local staff.

Leaving local actors on the front line creates additional ethical challenges in terms of the employer’s responsibility to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of local staff.

This paper explores the challenges involved in fulfilling the duty of care to local staff whilst working remotely, examining gaps in security risk management and in providing adequate resources for psychological support and stress management.

Based on a literature review of secondary sources and interviews, this research also suggests a number of measures and mechanisms to address the challenges identified in the study, with a particular focus on risk mitigation measures and capacity building programmes for local staff before and during the shift to remote programming.

Key words: humanitarian aid, humanitarian action, remote, remote management, remote programming, local staff, national staff, security risk, duty of care, staff care, wellbeing.
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1. **INTRODUCTION**

“In a small number of crisis-affected countries, humanitarian organisations work amid active conflict and under direct threat of violence” (Stoddard et al., 2017, p.1).

In these contexts, attacks on aid workers are part of an ongoing pattern. The latest figures from the 2018 Aid Worker Security Report reflect this pattern, outlining that in 2017, 158 major incidents of violence against humanitarian operations occurred in 22 countries, affecting 313 aid workers (Aid Worker Security Database, 2018).

In order to continue to deliver humanitarian assistance in such insecure environments, international humanitarian organisations are faced with the ethical dilemma of *Leaving or Staying* (Stoddard, Harmer, & Renouf, 2010), opting instead to operate remotely. Remote programming involves the “management and oversight of aid activities in an insecure or inaccessible context from a relatively safer location, such a national capital or neighbouring country” (Zyck, 2012, p.1) whilst relying on national staff to remain on the front line to facilitate the delivery of life-saving assistance.

A variety of remote practices may be employed to deliver humanitarian assistance in challenging environments. The choice of programming approach will depend on the characteristics of the project and the capacity of the organisation. No Longer a Last Resort: A Review of the Remote Programming Landscape (2015) proposes four different modalities of remote programming practices which outline the various classifications found in the literature. Remote control, remote management, remote support and remote partnership are the different types of remote programming practices which will be briefly described in the conceptual framework chapter of this dissertation.

“A transfer of responsibility and risk to national, local or other stakeholders is a characteristic common to all modalities of remote programming” (Rivas, A-Maria and Martins, 2014, p.8). While “remote management programming has the important benefit of allowing operations to continue” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.2), it simultaneously creates many challenges for effective and accountable programming (Stoddard et al., 2010). In addition, remote management “raises serious ethical questions regarding the transfer of security risk from international to national personnel” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.10).

**Research questions and sub-questions:**

Consequently, this study attempts to address the following main question:

- How can the duty of care to local staff be implemented in remote programmes in order to allow organisations to continue to respond in the most responsible way possible?
In order to answer this question, it is important to have an overall understanding of the disadvantages and challenges involved in remote programming. For this reason, this study will first address the sub-question:

- What are the main ethical challenges faced by humanitarian organisations when operating through remote programmes in conflict settings?

Given that a transfer of risk to local staff is a common characteristic of remote programming, a specific analysis of the ethics and duty of care incurred by the transfer of responsibilities and risk implicit in the new modus operandi is required. For this reason, two other sub-questions will be addressed in this study with regard to staff security and welfare:

- What are the critical challenges affecting fulfilment of the duty of care when transferring risk to local staff?
- How are organisations managing the challenges and complexity of fulfilling their duty of care to local staff?

The literature identifies the most common and significant challenges for international organisations in fulfilling their responsibilities in terms of duty of care when handing over responsibilities to local staff, including:

- Decisions made on the false assumption that local staff are at less risk and have greater acceptance among the community
- Difficulties in properly assessing risks to local staff
- Poorer preparation of local staff, typically under-represented in security trainings
- Gaps in resource provision for psychological support and stress management – staff wellbeing

- Thesis statement:

Considering the aforementioned points, the thesis statement of my research is based on the following hypothesis:

Implementing remote programming in insecure contexts by transferring responsibilities to local staff presents humanitarian organisations with constant ethical challenges regarding the fulfilment of their duty of care to these staff members. The main challenges are linked to ongoing shortcomings in risk assessment and mitigation measures when transferring risk to local staff, as well as to insufficient consideration of the other dimensions of duty of care. The institutionalisation of a duty of care framework for remote operational strategy which reinforces mechanisms for risk assessment and capacity building measures for local staff is required to enable organisations to ethically comply with their responsibilities in terms of duty of care to their local staff.
- **Research objectives:**
Consequently, this research will argue the importance of considering the ethical responsibility of humanitarian organisations when making the decision to stay in insecure contexts via remote programming, raising awareness of the significance of all dimensions of duty of care in enabling organisations to continue working in these contexts.

Accordingly, the research will focus on:
- raising awareness of the ongoing ethical challenges faced by humanitarian organisations when attempting to stay in insecure contexts where local aid workers are exposed to risk
- enhancing understanding of the challenges relating to duty of care when operating remotely
- exploring ways to adapt the duty of care when operating remote programmes in order to fulfil the employer’s ethical responsibility toward local staff in the most responsible way possible.

- **Methodology:**
The methodology used in this research will be qualitative and exploratory. Document analysis will be conducted in the form of a literature review of secondary sources, prioritising previous research on the themes of aid assistance in insecure contexts, remote management and ethics and analysing the most recent research in these areas. The study focuses particularly on reports produced by the OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – United Nations) and by independent global forums where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information.

The primary sources of information used will be semi-structured interviews with senior staff with extensive understanding or experience in remote programming from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). These two aid organisations were selected due their shared humanitarian mandate and the ease of accessibility to key informants.

- **Limitations:**
This research paper presents some limitations. One of them is the limited academic literature regarding duty of care with regard to remote programming in conflict settings. Another limitation of the research is that it was conducted from Geneva and Barcelona and not from the field, with interviews conducted via Skype and WhatsApp. Moreover, one of the most important limitations to the research was the restricted time frame for its development, which prevented the inclusion of interviews with local staff working in remote programmes.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW
This research paper takes an ethical approach to exploring the challenges relating to the management of remote programmes in humanitarian aid. Therefore, the literature review will contain two chapters: Chapter One will present a conceptual framework containing the general terms required for a common understanding of ethical responsibilities towards local staff remaining as frontline responders, while Chapter Two will examine the complexity and challenges involved in an ethical response with a particular focus on the transfer of risk to local staff.

2.1 Chapter One: Conceptual framework
In order to understand the challenges and ethical questions involved when operating remotely in conflict areas, the literature review will begin by exploring the concepts of humanity and security risk, which are inherent to humanitarian action. Humanitarian ethics will then be explored with a view to understanding the challenge faced by humanitarian organisations in their decision-making when these two concepts come into conflict with one another. A definition of remote programming as a response to insecurity is presented, including a definition of local staff to whom operations are transferred when operating remotely. Ethical aspects of the duty of care to local staff are also described.

- **Humanitarian action: the principle of humanity:**
  “Humanitarian action is rooted in the moral principle of humanity” (Buth, 2017, p.8).
  This principle implies a moral imperative to provide aid to the most vulnerable populations in conflict settings, because “it expresses the fundamental goal of all humanitarian action: helping and protecting others in wars and disasters” (Haver, 2016, p.4). In other words, “the humanitarian imperative declares that there is an obligation to provide humanitarian assistance wherever it is needed, and is predicated on the right to receive, and to offer, humanitarian aid” (Terry, 2002, p.3).
  In conflict settings, humanitarian assistance becomes crucial and relevant, and it is this humanitarian imperative that drives humanitarian agencies to work in insecure contexts. However, the level of insecurity in these contexts has significant repercussions for the security of humanitarian aid workers and it is when “every individual and organisation needs to determine what level of risk is acceptable for him/herself and for the organisation” (Buth, 2017, p.9).
Risk:
The concept of risk refers to “the likelihood and potential impact of encountering a threat” (Jackson & Zyck, 2017, p.81). Security risk management is a key element in fulfilling obligations under the duty of care. The humanitarian imperative implies acceptance of risk. While operating in high-risk contexts, “the question is not whether the context is safe or not, but whether organisations can mitigate risks and whether they are able to deal with residual risks, as there will always be risks remaining even when the best mitigation practices have been instituted” (Cunningham, 2016, p.5).
Risk management becomes crucial in enabling humanitarian organisations to assess the risk, to mitigate it and then to decide whether the remaining risk is acceptable or not. But what is the acceptable level of risk for an organisation to continue to operate in an insecure context?
Buth, P (2017) contends that “the level of risk deemed acceptable by an organisation is often determined by a set of different factors including, among others, the mandate and risk-appetite of the organisation, the strategic value of presence in a particular context, (...) the strength of the organisation’s security management capacity and (...) the impact of the intervention on the target population” (p.9).
Within this balance between humanitarian impact and acceptance of exposure to risk, Buth, P. (2017) outlines that “the higher the needs, the more risk is justifiable” (p.8). However, he points out another important question regarding the correlation between risk and the humanitarian imperative of responding to the most vulnerable population’s needs: “Where is the reasonable balance between the moral responsibility to act and the responsibility to keep the organisation’s staff safe?” (Buth, 2017, p.8)
In order to understand the roots of this question and the challenges involved in answering it, we must to refer to ethics.

Humanitarian ethics:
The term ‘ethics’ refers to “moral principles that govern a person’s or a group’s behaviour” (Haver, 2016, p.2). “Ethical issues are inherent in humanitarian action” (Clarinval, 2014, p.12). The presence of aid organisations in high-risk contexts responds to the ethical principle of humanity in terms of alleviating suffering for the most vulnerable people. At the same time, this principle comes into conflict with the organisation’s responsibility to determine the acceptable level of residual risk to justify the exposure of its staff.
Decision-making is complex when these two ethical elements come into conflict because higher need and higher risk (Buth & MSF, 2017) is the main ethical challenge for organisations operating in the most challenging risk environments. According to Buth, P. (2017) “the risk-benefit analysis, determining at which point the risk becomes so high that they justify and warrant limiting or withholding urgent, life-saving assistance, is one of the defining ethical challenges of humanitarian action”. Indeed, “in the field of humanitarian action, making ethically justified decisions is challenging” (Clarinval, 2014, p.2).

In conflict contexts, in which both factors are at their most extreme, acting in an ethical manner means constantly evaluating and “determining whether making compromises might be necessary and which types of compromise are likely to lead to the best outcome” (Haver, 2016, p.8). It is in these contexts that organisations face their main ethical dilemma, attempting to choose between the options of Leaving or Staying (Stoddard et al., 2010).

For some organisations, which have been forced to develop new strategies to deliver life-saving assistance where conflict has resulted in an increased risk to humanitarian actors, “remote programming provides an alternative method to continue programmes and services while reducing the risk faced by programme staff” (Chaudhri, Cordes, & Miller, 2017, p.5).

- **Definition of remote management programming and modalities**

A variety of terms exist to discuss remote programming within the humanitarian sector. Organisations employ diverse definitions to refer to management of programmes at a distance. Some humanitarian agencies use the term ‘remote management’ when referring to the decentralisation of management, “a practice that might be used in situations where the agency did have access but chose to work through partners on the ground” (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, p.386).

Remote management is also referred to when INGOs set up multi-country regional and national structures and diversify decision-making to different places. To other agencies, remote programming is an operational modality due to a lack of physical presence as a response to security risk.

“In the literature, remote programming (or remote programme management) has predominantly been described as a response to insecurity and risk that involves a temporary shift in operational modalities, for instance a relocation of staff members from insecure environments to a more stable operational base” (Rivas, A-Maria and Martins, 2014, p.3).

In this sense, for the purpose of this study the term ‘remote management’ will not refer to “the decentralisation of decision-making in a stable environment or capacity-building” (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, p.387). Instead, it will refer to a modus operandi used to adapt to insecurity,
involving the withdrawal of international staff or senior managers from the programme location and the transfer of responsibilities to local staff.

Other modalities for implementing remote delivery of humanitarian aid in conflict areas also exist, with the result that there is no standard definition or terminology for a general discussion on programming.

The choice of specific programming approach frequently varies according to the mandate of the organisation; the implementation of remote operations will differ with regard to the target of the shifting responsibilities, depending on whether the transfer of activities is to national staff, local partner organisations, authorities or private contractors.

A framework of different types of remote programming practices is outlined in the table below for a better understanding and comprehensive definition of levels of transfer of programme activities (Rivas, A-Maria and Martins, 2014):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>Decision-Making Implementation</th>
<th>Method/Actors</th>
<th>Site Access</th>
<th>Risk transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remote Control</td>
<td>Majority of decisions made by relocated international managers. Delegation of responsibility for implementation not decision-making.</td>
<td>National/Local staff</td>
<td>No access</td>
<td>Complete risk transfer to national / local staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote Management</td>
<td>Temporary and partial delegation of authority and responsibility to national staff, implementing partners or other stakeholders. Development of communications, accountability and effectiveness, procedures and protocols</td>
<td>National/local partner organisations or local contractors. Moderate investment in skills transfer and capacity building for national staff.</td>
<td>Limited Access</td>
<td>Transfer to other stakeholders and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote Support</td>
<td>Goal to hand over decision making and authority to national/local actors, while financial and strategic oversight is retained remotely to ensure a high level of due diligence and accountability.</td>
<td>National/local staff, local authorities and communities. High level of investment in mentoring, skills transfer and capacity building.</td>
<td>Limited/ Some access</td>
<td>Complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote Partnership</td>
<td>Equal partnership and near-complete handover of responsibility to other actors. Difficulties encountered in partnerships: equality, accountability, communication and monitoring.</td>
<td>National/local partner organisations or contractors.</td>
<td>Limited/ Some access</td>
<td>Complete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although a diverse typology of remote programming exists, a key feature of the different approaches is that remote programming is an operational response to insecurity where the “organisation will withdraw or reduce its international or senior management staff in its area of operations and shift responsibility for aid delivery to more junior national staff, local partner organisations or contractors” (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, p.385).

This study focuses on the employer’s duty of care to their employees. Therefore, this paper will not include the modality of remote partnership, which involves a complete transfer of the
programme to local partner organisations or contractors, in its definition of remote programming (or remote management).

- **Local staff (also described as local frontline providers):**
The concept of local staff refers to aid providers working on the front line to meet the needs of the population, who have been hired directly from the area of operation by the organisation with whom they sign an employment contract.

For the purpose of this study, the term ‘local staff’ will not refer to the concept of local partners as aid workers working under employment contracts signed with local NGOs or government organisations.

- **Duty of care:**
The concept of duty of care refers to “an ethical and/or legal obligation imposed on an individual or organisation to avoid acts or omissions that can be reasonably foreseen to be likely to cause harm to others” (Jackson & Zyck, 2017, p.81).

There are two types of duty of care: legal and ethical.

The legal duty of care is defined as the “obligation imposed on an individual or organisation by law requiring that they adhere to a standard of reasonable care while performing acts (or omissions) that present a reasonably foreseen risk of harm to others. This definition can vary depending on the legal framework considered” (Fairbanks, 2018, p.11).

Meanwhile, the ethical duty of care “is every action (or omission) that goes beyond an organisation’s legal obligations that aims to ensure the well-being of the individual(s) affected by the organisation’s activities. Also described as duty of caring” (Fairbanks, 2018, p.13).

- Staff-care: “regulations and procedures intended to ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of staff” (Fairbanks, 2018, P.6).
- Wellbeing (also described as welfare): “the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy. Relates to an individual’s mental ability to cope with day-to-day activities and resilience in the event of crisis” (Fairbanks, 2018, P.9).

Considering that the legal duty of care to local staff refers to multiple different legal frameworks depending on the countries in which international organisations operate, it is important to emphasise that this study will focus solely on the ethical duty of care to staff security and wellbeing.

**2.2 Chapter Two: Challenges and ethical considerations in remote programming**

One of the most evident benefits of implementing remote programming is the possibility to continue with the organisation’s activities, thereby avoiding the closure of the programme.
However, this shift to continuing to respond remotely also gives rise to several disadvantages which pose challenges to an ethical response.

Some of these challenges are briefly explained below, with a particular focus on those associated with the transfer of responsibilities to local staff.

### 2.2.1 Challenges in remote programming:

#### i. Maintaining humanitarian principles:

One of the main concerns of agencies operating via remote management is the ability to maintain the perception of neutrality and impartiality (Stoddard et al., 2010) (Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Principle of Impartiality</strong></th>
<th>implies that humanitarian action is provided on the basis of need, regardless of who the victim is.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principle of Neutrality</strong></td>
<td>implies that an agency will not take sides in a conflict, and this enables humanitarian agencies to gain access to civilians in need on both sides.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The principle of impartiality emerges as a frequent challenge in remote management. “Local staff (...) in charge of delivering assistance may have a bias for or against a particular population group that may be hard to avoid” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.27).

Similar challenges in maintaining the principle of neutrality by “people culturally embedded in a context and personally affected by an active war” are outlined in the literature (Cunningham, 2016, p.14). In this case, challenges not only relate to ensuring that the organisation’s staff act in a neutral manner, but also to the increasing risk of harm to perceptions of the organisation's neutrality.

Breaches in these humanitarian principles may impact acceptance among the population and hinder access to beneficiaries, as well as affecting staff security. Stoddard et al. (2006) state: “examples abound in which perceived or actual breaches of neutrality seem to have played a role in prompting attacks” (p.45).

- Mitigation measures:

The literature highlights the importance of ensuring that national and local staff have a sound understanding of humanitarian principles in relation to the programmes to be delivered in keeping with global standards without compromising the organisation (Egeland et al., 2011) (Stoddard et al., 2010). Therefore, training and capacity building in humanitarian principles among local staff is important in remote management programmes.

Another element reinforcing both principles is the adoption of a code of conduct, in which organisations clarify their position on delivering assistance without discrimination and without promoting political or religious opinions in this delivery (Harroff-Tavel, 2003).
ii. Programme quality and efficient service delivery:

“Shifting to remote programming meant accepting an unavoidable lowering of technical sophistication and versatility, as well as for programme monitoring and evaluating standards” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.29).

In insecure and volatile environments, a lack of technical capacity within the local community allowing them to continue aid programmes is a particular constraint. From my experience working in the field, one of the biggest challenges to quality aid assistance is the lack of qualified staff at programme site level, requiring the recruitment of international staff or senior national staff from outside the programme location. Therefore, the challenge when shifting to remote management is that the withdrawal of technically experienced staff from the field can undermine the technical quality of projects, “since the local pool of potential hires often lacks the technical skills needed for certain activities” (Stoddard et al., 2017, p.13).

It is thus important to consider that “the lack of planning and guidance on how to provide technical support, advice and training to local staff (…) in remote arrangements exacerbates the problem” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.8) of programme quality and effectiveness when shifting to remote programming.

In relation to remote management and programme quality, the literature also highlights that the failure to implement quality programming corresponds directly to the level of monitoring possible (Norman, 2012). On this basis, the challenge in remote programming is linked to the difficulty of cross-checking and triangulating data and the long-distance nature of supervision (Norman, 2012).

✓ Mitigation measures:

The literature identifies a variety of methods to mitigate inefficient quality programming, which mainly refer to reinforcing monitoring and reporting activities combined with boosting communication mechanisms between field staff and external managers.

The Once Removed report (2010) and the To Stay and Deliver study (2011), as well as the Remote Monitoring and Accountability Practices for Remote Programming research (2012), are three of the documents which outline the methods used by agencies to mitigate quality deficits. They refer to the use of third party, triangulated local partners and web-based remote monitoring strategies; enhanced beneficiary feedback mechanisms; taking local personnel out of the area on a regular basis for management, technical discussions and planning; and maintaining regular communication between field staff and external managers.
Project monitoring is essential to ensure high programme quality, as well as to reduce the risks of fraud or corruption (Norman, 2012).

iii. Risk of corruption
Remote management approaches offer “greater opportunities for fraud and corruption, due to the assumption that limited project supervision by senior management personnel is in place” (Norman, 2012, P.24).
Corruption can be financial (cash-based or focused on resources and other items) as well “as non-financial, such as the manipulation or diversion of humanitarian assistance to benefit non-target groups, preferential treatment in assistance or hiring processes for family members or friends” (Haver, 2016, p.11). Norman (2012) outlines the link between corruption and social and political pressure, and the way in which social, economic and political factors lead to increased likelihood of corruption due to fear among local staff who continue to experience chronic poverty and worry about losing the support of humanitarian agencies due to security constraints.

✓ Measures to mitigate the risk of corruption:
The literature mainly refers to mechanisms to ensure adequate monitoring processes and to boost an organisational culture focused on tackling corruption.
The Tearfund study (2012) describes a practice in an INGO which demonstrably contributed to reducing the potential for corruption, based on a controls-based approach to project management and supervision. Norman (2012) explains that “the approach has been supported by regular training on organisational processes and by developing a whistle-blowing policy which highlights and addresses instances of fraud and corruption in the organisation” (p.25). Haver (2016) also mentions that donors and agencies have been encouraged to adopt zero tolerance policies, which “stress the requirement not to tolerate corruption, for example, by insisting on accountability when corruption happens” (p.11). The importance of protecting those who report corruption is also noted, as in certain contexts it can be very dangerous for staff and community members to be involved in monitoring mechanisms.

iv. Accountability concerns (regarding donors and beneficiaries)
Accountability in remote programming is compromised by difficulty monitoring activities. Indeed, the lack of direct supervision and oversight of the activities and a certain acceptance of a lower quality of aid delivered and assumption of some level of corruption challenge organisations to respond to both upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to beneficiaries. In this sense, the No Longer a Last Resort: A Review of the Remote Programming Landscape (2014) report outlines that lack of information, difficulty in accessing
project sites, challenging data collection and poor data quality contribute to the perception that accountability is elusive.

Stoddard et al. (2010) also raise this issue, contending that “finding a reasonable way to ensure accountability while accepting that quality and programme standards may drop has been paramount in programme decision-making for remote management” (p.31-31).

✓ General methods to enable accountability:
Accountability mechanisms in remote operations require more intensive methods and practices for internal and external monitoring initiatives. Investing in strong relationships with key stakeholders on the ground to enable remote verification (Rivas, A-Maria and Martins, 2014) and other internal monitoring initiatives such as clear monitoring and reporting procedures, instructions and advanced planning, daily or weekly debriefings, regular written reports and encrypted photographs of project/site activities (Stoddard et al., 2010) are some of the methods outlined in the literature as methods of responding to accountability concerns.

2.2.2 The ethics of the transfer of risk:
The high level of risk involved when working in conflict areas often prompts international organisations to shift to remote programming, with the aim “to ensure that aid continues to reach the beneficiary population despite security or access constrains” (Stoddard et al., 2006, p.38).

When the modality of remote programming is adopted, the organisation reduces the number of staff exposed to the high-risk context, with the withdrawal or reduction of its international or senior staff in the area and a “shift of responsibility for aid delivery to its national staff” (Stoddard et al., 2010, P.10).

Quantitative evidence from the AWSD report (2018) reflects the “near universal reliance on national staff to take the riskiest of operational roles in the most insecure areas with a steep rise in the number of victims belonging to national and local NGOs”. For instance, according to the graph below (Aid Worker Security Database, 2018), in 2017 the proportion of attacks on national aid workers rose up by 113% compared to 2016, while for international staff it fell by 65%, demonstrating the emphasis on local solutions in conflict countries.
Consequently, the decision to shift to remote programming should involve a conscious transfer of risk and careful consideration of how to manage staff at distance. However, humanitarian organisations have largely failed to fully consider the ethics of transferring security risk from expatriate staff to national staff (Stoddard et al., 2006).

Ethics comes to challenge international organisations by giving rise to the question: “is it legitimate for the international leadership of an aid organisation to ask local entities or personnel to expose themselves to threats that they are unwilling to face themselves?” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44). The literature identifies common significant challenges for international organisations when attempting to provide an ethical response to this question:

i. **False assumption that local staff are at less risk**

“One of the core assumptions of remote management is that national staff are at less risk than international staff” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Didomenico, 2006, p.2). However, the arguments supporting the assumption that they are at less risk because they are more familiar with the local context and because they have a higher level of acceptance than their international counterparts are open to challenge (Stoddard et al., 2009b) (Stoddard, Harmer, & Didomenico, 2009a) (Chaudhri et al., 2017).

For instance, a shift to remote management assumes that local staff may be more exposed to risk because the withdrawal of international staff means that they will be directly responsible for responding to social and political pressures (Norman, 2012). Moreover, violence, the presence of militia and non-state combatants and the collapse of fragile states failing to offer minimum services for their populations are common features in the environments where humanitarian organisations operate remotely. In these contexts, by carrying out their duties, local staff continue to visit places which they might otherwise avoid without international and
senior staff, exposing them to a risk that they would be unlikely to face otherwise. In particular, without the presence of international staff, local staff can easily be threatened by local authorities (Norman, 2012). In many cases, these threats might also be targeted at their families, placing local staff in an ethical dilemma as they attempt to balance their response to the social and political pressures and their responsibility to perform their duties in accordance with the principles of the humanitarian organisation regarding neutrality and impartiality. From my personal experience supporting a remote project, I witnessed several practical examples of pressure and threats to local staff in remote programming. In particular, I will explain the concerns shared with me by a local staff member with regard to social pressure during a recruitment process for the project. Although no responsibility for recruitment processes had been transferred at project level, the local staff member was still perceived by the community as a manager with the authority to make a final decision on the recruitment process, with the result that the local authority visited his home to place pressure on him to choose a candidate with political affiliation to the armed group.

This anecdote demonstrates the extent to which social and political pressures at project level may push national and local personnel “in ways that they cannot resist” (Norman, 2012, p.23). In particular, the literature highlights that “due to reliance on such assumptions, the ethics of transferring security risks away from expatriate staff towards national or local staff have not been fully considered” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44).

The reason for this is that “such assumptions are often the result of insufficient threat and risk assessment and lead to what amounts to a lesser duty of care by international organisations for their national staff” (Egeland et al., 2011, p.40).

Therefore, the conclusion that local staff are able to continue to respond to population needs with less risk than international staff must be supported by a proper risk assessment rather than by assumptions. However, are international organisations able to properly assess the risks faced by local staff when managing programmes at distance?

ii. Difficulties in properly assessing risks to local staff

The literature points out important concerns with regard to challenges to risk assessment. Donini & Maxwell (2013) raise this issue, saying that “with remote management it is almost impossible to know exactly what pressures staff are dealing with (...) and that without being present, it is difficult to detect if staff find solutions that would be acceptable to the agency” (p.403).

The challenge relates not only to how to determine the level of risk local staff might face while continuing operations, but also to the ability to identify the types of risks they might face
For instance, the assessment must take into account that working for an international organisation in such environments represents a direct risk to local staff for having a regular salary with higher benefits than the average incomes for other members of the community, and for being in possession of valuable communication equipment or vehicles after international staff leave the project. Therefore, the absence of international staff may potentially increase the risk to them, as “pressures and threats might be made against local and/or national staff by their family, community, mosque, or governor” (Norman, 2012, p.24).

The responsibility to determine the level of risk faced by local staff from outside the programme location challenges senior security managers to establish whether or not the use of local staff outweighs the risks. First of all, the international staff in charge of the assessments must consult local aid workers and coordination partners when providing risk information. The challenge lies in the fact that, while they will provide “more detailed situational awareness, it is also true that familiarity can breed over-confidence and individuals who have lived in a place the longest often find it most difficult to recognise new or growing threats” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44). Secondly, one of the responsibilities of decision-makers in terms of security management is to identify potential bias from local staff when assessing the risks due to their different perception of risk, but also taking into account “the unique threats, incentives and circumstances faced by national staff” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44) who may fail to share concerns about security out of fear of losing their jobs if the organisation considers the situation to have worsened.

Therefore, the presence of experienced security managers far from the operational areas plays an important role in the challenge of protecting staff, which must be taken into account not only to avoid neglecting the duty of care, but also to continue to justify the ethical decision to operate remotely. In addition to the difficulties involved in assessing the risks to local staff, another challenge present in this ethical decision is the level of training of local staff in the area of security management.

iii. **Lower qualification of local staff, typically under-represented in security training**

The literature states that “national staff are typically underrepresented in security training and in the disbursement of assets” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44). Controversy has arisen between different agencies when considering whether to hand over security assets (radios, vehicles) once senior or international staff leave the project and transfer activities to local staff members. All of these factors should be considered when transferring risk to avoid neglecting the organisation’s responsibility to protect its staff.
iv. Gaps in resource provision for psychological support and stress management – staff wellbeing

The OCHA report Presence & Proximity: To Stay and Deliver Five Years On (2017) explains that their field research “identified little progress on improving support to staff members in high-risk environments, including limited opportunities for psychosocial care, aftercare following security incidents or traumatic experiences (…) with particular gaps on national staff members” (p.55). This is a very important element to consider when analysing the duty of care to local staff in remote management due to the greater levels of stress they may experience when responsibility for project management is transferred to them (Norman, 2012).

3. ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL CHALLENGES CONCERNING THE DUTY OF CARE TO LOCAL STAFF IN THE CONTEXT OF REMOTE MANAGEMENT

Duty of care refers to the obligation to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of staff.

In order to understand the ethical dimensions of the duty of care in remote programming, it is important to analyse the different aspects and challenges involved in the responsibility to protect and care for local staff when working remotely in insecure contexts.

Based on evidence from the literature review and from the interviews conducted, there are specific challenges which impact upon fulfilment of the duty of care to local staff. The different aspects of these challenges and potential ways to address them are discussed below in two separate categories: duty of care in relation to security management and duty of care in relation to staff wellbeing.

3.1 Duty of care in relation to security risk management: the ethics of local staff security

“There is a degree of convergence between duty of care and security risk management, the latter being a key element in fulfilling obligations under the duty of care” (Merkelbach, 2017, p.28).

Based on broad assumptions that national staff face a lower level of risk than international staff, aid agencies do not pay adequate attention to their security needs, with a particular gap in terms of adequate assessment of the unique threats they face and the provision of fewer security resources and less training than their international counterparts (Stoddard et al., 2006) (Stoddard et al., 2009b) (Stoddard & Harmer, 2010) (Haver, 2016).

Consequently, “international organisations’ increasing reliance on national staff (…) raises the ethical problem of inappropriately transferring security risks to national staff” (Haver, 2016, p.12).

The challenges relating to ethical transfer of risk are explained in greater depth below:
3.1.1 Inadequate attention to local staff security needs:

i. Transfer of risk based on broad assumptions that local staff face lower security risk

“Inadequate attention to security needs of local staff is often based on broad assumptions that they face lower security risks than international staff” (Haver, 2016, p.13).

The assumption that local staff are at less risk than international staff is in most cases false. For instance, remote management by definition reduces expatriate exposure and generally increases national exposure, as “the risks and pressures that would otherwise be shared by senior project staff are transferred solely to local project staff” (Norman, 2012, p.5).

Moreover, these pressures do not have the same impact on expatriates as they do on local staff, who often come under significant pressure from local actors, “especially if they are perceived to have decision-making authority over the project’s resources and assets” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.34). Similar concerns are outlined in other reports, highlighting several cases from an NGO explaining that “after a year of remote management in Somalia, threats against the agency’s national staff had increased as they became identified as decision-makers and resource handlers” (Stoddard et al., 2009, p.9). Additionally, it is important to consider that “a sense of economic privilege from being employed by an international aid agency can also put local staff at additional risk” (Haver, 2016, p.13).

✓ Ways to address these challenges

The literature emphasises that “the threat posed to national staff members must be carefully considered and mitigated, if feasible before such arrangements are put in place (Zyck, 2012, p.3). Donini (2013) identifies a number of strategies and approaches to be implemented by humanitarian organisations to mitigate risk when managing remote programs. One of the strategies mentioned in this article refers to the delegation of decision-making in remote locations: “some levels of decision-making were delegated to the field staff while other levels remained with senior management in remote locations” (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, p.405). The MSF Head of Mission explained his experience in Syria as an example of this strategy: “in Al-Salahama project, based on an exhaustive risk analysis, a transfer of limited responsibility was made, focused on the ethical issue of limiting the risk of local staff. The transfer of responsibilities was regulated under a ‘Shared Management Policy’, delimiting the decision-making in operations, recruitment and disciplinary measures to senior managers located outside of the country” (Montiel, interview April 2019).

When a careful analysis is performed and threat levels to local staff are better understood (rather than assumed), the literature suggests that it may be ethically possible for national staff to take on greater risks, as long as they consent to this exception (Haver, 2016). The term ‘informed
consent’ is defined as “the employee understanding the context they are working in, and the risks they will be exposed to, and consent to work in the country with this understanding” (Fairbanks, 2018, p.18).

However, to fully consider the ethical issues in this regard, a wide-ranging debate should be initiated focusing on how ethical this practice can be considered to be when working with the international aid agency might be the only potential income for local staff members and their families. However, with regard to this concern, Montiel (interview, April 2019) stated that from his experience managing a remote project in Syria, when shifting to remote management, local staff were requested to freely sign a consent form in which they agreed to continue working in Aleppo. Some of the staff did not sign the consent form, refusing to continue working on the project due to security concerns (Montiel, interview April 2019).

Wyss (interview, March 2019) confirms the importance of ensuring that local staff are able to share their concerns about working in conflict areas and the possibility of refusing to work due to security concerns: “they need to feel comfortable; managers have to ensure no one is forced to do their job if they don’t feel comfortable doing it”.

ii. Transfer of risk based on the assumption that local staff have a higher level of acceptance

“Another assumption that drives a shift towards remote management is the belief that local staff are perceived more favourably and have greater ‘acceptance’ among the host and beneficiary communities simply by virtue of their being ‘of the place” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.45).

“Whether a failure to achieve acceptance is rooted in the failure to adhere to the humanitarian principle of neutrality” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.45), it is important to consider, as discussed in the literature review, that “one of the biggest concerns of agencies operating by remote management is the impact it has on their acceptance strategies, as well as their ability to maintain the perception of neutrality and impartiality” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.34).

Moreover, corruption and the challenge of providing accountability to beneficiaries can also damage the reputation of the organisation (Haver, 2016) and “erode trust and acceptance in local communities, further exacerbating issues with access and security” (Kim & Leidecker, 2018, p.5).

While acceptance has been recognised as a key element in enhancing security (Stoddard et al., 2009b), rather than assuming greater acceptance of local staff, remote management requires special attention to these challenges by “maintaining a focus on balancing all types of risk, including corruption with programme impact and criticality” (Haver, 2016, p.12).
According to Wyss (interview, March 2019), the challenge of monitoring activities without the presence of international staff on the ground to ensure that beneficiaries receive aid, and cases of corruption, such as the diversion of large quantities of aid for food distribution activities, were the main concerns in remote programmes in Somalia and Pakistan. He highlighted that “those challenges gave rise to important questions on the neutrality and acceptance of ICRC’s work within the population”.

According to Montiel (interview, April 2019), challenges relating to corruption are minimal in medical activities due to the possibility of more adequate monitoring of the activity through medical standards on medical consumption. However, he states that “financial corruption in creating false recruitments of personnel in health centres subsidised by the organization was some of the corruption cases the mission faced, which required the adoption of additional administrative procedures to ensure an adequate monitoring of the activity”.

Since “community acceptance-building measures and accountability practices can be used to reduce security risks and threats” (Norman, 2012, p.23), the implementation of strategies to mitigate corruption within aid organisations should be considered an important element in risk mitigation.

Ways to address these challenges

The literature highlights the importance of reinforcing training and capacity building on humanitarian principles for all national staff and partners in order to ensure the programme is delivered safely and as intended.

To tackle the challenge of corruption, the ICRC reinforced its “zero tolerance position” within the “guiding framework on fraud” in 2010. The fraud guidance framework was designed “in order to preserve both the internal as well as external reputation and integrity of the organisation” (ICRC, 2010, p.1-2). Wyss (interview March 2019) explains that “every year, there is a reminder from the top (HQ) about this policy, raising awareness of real cases of both nationals and expatriates who have lost their jobs because of fraud, reminding us of the obligation to denounce the acknowledgement of fraud or corruption within the organisation”.

However, it is important to consider that “in certain contexts, tackling corruption can be extremely dangerous” (Haver, 2016, p.12). The manager of the ICRC confirmed that “it is important to ensure protection for those who report corruption, ensuring that his/her name remains confidential and finding ways to explain the information anonymously” (Wyss, interview March 2019).
Wyss (interview, March 2019) also shared the “Code of Conduct for Employees of the ICRC” (ICRC, 2014), a document signed by all employees with clear rules and definitions of corruption, among other terms. Therefore, “promoting an organisational culture where compromises, corruption and ethical risks can be openly discussed is an essential first step towards responsible humanitarian action” (Haver, 2016, p.12). In this sense, Wyss (interview, March 2019) states that corruption mitigation measures create an organisational culture in which people feel treated fairly and policies are implemented at all levels of the organisation, ensuring that everyone has competitive salaries and proper mechanisms to talk openly about corruption.

3.1.2 Gaps in adequate assessment of the unique threats faced by local staff

“As duty of care is underpinned by the notion of ‘foreseeability’ and safety, and security risk assessments are therefore paramount to know what ‘foreseeable’ risks the organisation should inform its staff of and mitigate against” (Fairbanks, 2018, p.21).

However, as discussed in the literature review, humanitarian organisations face challenges in properly assessing the risks experienced by local staff from outside the programme location when they must rely on local staff to provide risk information. One of the common elements identified by the literature in this regard is qualitative evidence that “local aid workers may underestimate the risk to themselves” as their familiarity with the context breeds over-confidence (Stoddard et al., 2006, p.44). The MSF Head of Mission (Montiel, interview April 2019) states that “one of the major challenges in assessing security remotely was that the staff was used to the context with a high level of risk, which in many cases led to an inadequate risk analysis with regard to the risk limits established by the organisation. In one of the projects for the Syria mission, one of the challenges in this regard was to obtain objective information about the security context and to have evidence to ‘stop them’ from carrying out some of the project activities in order to avoid exposing them to an unacceptable level of risk”.

Another challenge faced by aid organisations in properly assessing risks to local staff is the need to consider not only the level of risk but also the different kinds of risks they may experience, for instance, the potential loss of income for themselves and their families should a programme be terminated, which may lead them to avoid sharing security concerns for fear of losing their jobs (Stoddard et al., 2006) (Stoddard et al., 2010).

✓ Ways to address these challenges
In high-risk environments, a careful risk analysis is required and decisions to shift to remote programming must be carried out following a proper risk assessment in order to accurately identify the level of risk to local staff and adequate measures to mitigate this risk (Haver, 2016). “Diversifying sources of information, both about the situation on the ground and the impact of intervention and the sharing of information between key actors is critical to managing risk” (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, 404). Montiel (interview, April 2019) confirms the use of this strategy to mitigate gaps in risk analysis: “having different sources of information and good networking ‘inside’ is essential; the triangulation of security information is vital. You must have different sources of information: first your staff, then an external source such as OCHA, and third, ‘internal informants’. This strategy is important to ensure that you have the most objective security information, eliminating biases due to familiarity with the context, but this requires strong networking which is not always guaranteed”.

Therefore, in remote management, assessments should be carried out more rigorously and “a substantial vulnerability analysis must underpin any decision about remote management with the same threshold of unacceptable risk applied to all staff, regardless of national or gender” (Norman, 2012, p.22). This criterion was shared by the Head of Mission at MSF OCBA (Montiel, interview April 2019) who stated that the ethics of remote management begin with clear and objective justification of the threat used as a basis for shifting to remote programmes. Therefore, any decision on remote management requires a substantial vulnerability analysis of national staff (Norman, 2012) with rigorous prior understanding of the unique threats to national and local staff. On the contrary, when risks to national and local staff are underestimated, the result is a transfer of risk from international to national staff raising ethical issues (Stoddard et al., 2010). The MSF Head of Mission stated that “comprehensive risk analysis on existing and potential threats together with vulnerability analysis is crucial to define the ‘ethical risk’ in remote management” (Montiel, interview April 2019).

### 3.1.3 Less training and fewer security resources:

Related to the duty of care, training plays a significant role in relation to safety and security risk (Fairbanks, 2018).

In this regard, concerns raised in the literature on the ethical transfer of risk relate to the underrepresentation of local staff in security training and the lack of provision of security-related equipment when the security situation deteriorates and international staff are obliged to leave (Stoddard et al., 2006) (Stoddard et al., 2010).

False assumptions about their inherent security, an organisational culture giving lower priority to national staff and language barriers are the common reasons noted in the literature for the
lack of security training for national staff (Stoddard et al., 2006). Distrust of openly sharing security resources and information with nationals, either for fear of their safety or because of concerns that they will pass the information on to local belligerents, placing the agency at risk, are other problems outlined in the literature (Stoddard et al., 2006) (Stoddard et al., 2010). “This general dearth of security inputs is a grave concern considering not only their increasing vulnerability, but also the fact that a significant source of security information comes from local staff” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.44-45).

The recent independent follow-up study, Presence and Proximity – To Stay and Deliver Five Years On (2017), states that organisations are currently “paying more attention to minimising the gaps in security provision” (…) with greater satisfaction with the levels of security support received by national staff in terms of training. However, despite these improvements, the majority of the reports emphasise the ongoing need to improve remote management in this regard (Haver, 2016) (Chaudhri et al., 2017) (Jackson & Zyck, 2017).

✓ Ways to address these challenges

The Tearfund Study (2012) highlights the importance of ensuring that all categories of staff receive appropriate support and skills development to handle crises and security risks, suggesting training packages tailored to particular risks and contexts and to individual roles and responsibilities, rather than simply requesting access for local staff to standardised security training.

The MSF Head of Mission (Montiel, interview April 2019) contends that security training for local staff before shifting to remote programming and support in its implementation is essential to ensure an ethical transfer of risk; “online trainings in security management were implemented for some of our managers inside Syria, but the most important support was the mentoring from their senior supervisors based in the safer location as part of the elements of the Shared Management Strategy”.

3.2 Duty of care in relation to staff wellbeing - the ethics of stress management and psychological support

Remote programming has significant implications for the wellbeing of local staff. While remote programming implies the transfer of responsibilities from international staff to local staff, “it is assumed that by placing the responsibility for project management on these staff, organisations increase the levels of stress and anxiety they experience” (Norman, 2012, p.23).
These challenges refer not only to the different levels and types of risks they may face and the new roles and responsibilities they assume once remote programming is implemented, but also to the challenges of working effectively at distance.

These challenges to an ethical transfer of responsibilities are explained in greater depth below:

### 3.2.1 Challenges involved in assuming different levels and types of risk

Pressures and threats made against local and/or national staff by their families or communities, without the support of expatriate staff, may increase the potential for burnout and security incidents targeting local staff (Norman, 2012).

As a result of their job functions and local relationships, national staff require specific security measures which are proportionate to international staff (Stoddard et al., 2009b), as well as different support and staff care practices.

However, the literature identifies several challenges in this regard.

For instance, the UN OCHA backed paper, To Stay and Deliver (2010), explains that in remote management “another misconception is that national workers don’t need the additional security and psychological or moral supports because they have their communities and families to protect and support them (…), leading to a lesser duty of care by international organisations for their national staff” (p.40).

Another challenge is the difficulty of ensuring that local staff feel able to share their feelings about these social and political pressures despite their fear of being at greater risk of scrutiny by senior managers (Norman, 2012), as well as their “fear of the project being closed down and losing their jobs” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.28).

Additionally, the Presence & Proximity: To Stay and Deliver, Five Years On (2017) study highlights particular gaps in support for national staff members for psychosocial care such as the need to “review and improve ‘aftercare’ following security incidents” (p. 68).

✓ Ways to address these challenges

“Sensitivity to the issues related to social and political pressures must be a consideration for any organisation, especially those managing projects remotely, as part of their duty of care to local staff” (Norman, 2012, p.24), with policies and mechanisms for stress management and psychological support adapted to local staff.

Luis-Matias Montiel (interview, April 2019) stated that MSF has specific programmes for psychological support for local staff. However, for the remote Syria mission, he explained that there were difficulties in implementing the programme: “at the beginning, staff showed some resistance to this support with a ‘European approach’ by showing their preference for going to the Mosque and sharing their worries with the Iman, but also because of language issues, a
translator is needed and issues of confidentiality, stigmatisation and even protection of local staff cannot be guaranteed” (Montiel, interview April 2019).

Regardless of the fact that both organisations had adapted programmes to local staff, a common challenge outlined by the two interviewees (Wyss, March 2019) (Montiel, April 2019) is that these psychological support services still tend to be more reactive than preventive, such as programmes following security incidents.

3.2.2 Challenges involved in assuming different roles and responsibilities

“Although on average international aid agencies tend to be over 95 percent staffed by nationals, in some agencies, (...) the most senior field management positions are held by international staff” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.23).

The fact that remote management involves the withdrawal of international staff from the project location and the transfer of responsibilities to local staff highlights the importance of training and preparation for local staff as an important element of stress reduction and burnout mitigation as they take on new roles and responsibilities.

However, “the absence of strategic planning and long-term objectives for remote management settings” pose a difficulty to aid agencies in properly planning how to provide technical support, advice and training to local staff in remote arrangements (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.35).

✓ Ways to address these challenges

“Capacity building for local staff (...) is essential in remotely managed projects” (Norman, 2012, p.31). The MSF Head of Mission (Montiel, interview April 2019) explained that in the Syria mission, the Shared Management Strategy based on sharing the responsibility for the management of certain activities between local staff and international staff outside the project location was implemented to limit threats to local staff but also to provide mentoring, coaching and technical support to local staff assuming new responsibilities. He also explained the need to implement training programmes and the importance of local staff participation at periodic meetings where they were able to access the ‘safe-zone’ as part of their capacity building programme.

Another important element relating to the importance of capacity building for an ethical transfer of responsibilities is to identify local staff who are prepared to take on greater responsibility before shifting to remote programming.

Some interesting experiences in this regard were revealed during the interviews. Wyss (interview, March 2019) explains that the ICRC, whose motto is One Global Workforce, focuses particularly on identifying national staff with the potential to take on higher positions and on implementing a plan to develop them so that they can fill managerial positions.
However, in some contexts, it is difficult to find qualified staff due the lack of education systems in place.

According to Montiel (interview, April 2019), while placing national staff in managerial positions is not always possible due to the lack of skilled staff in the project area, in the context of the Syria mission, the objective of having a national programme manager was successfully implemented; however, he explained that “regardless of the fact that their knowledge of the context, language skills and educational background were highly praised, there was a need to support them in areas of project management, strategic vision and planning and team management” (Montiel, interview April 2019).

Moreover, the Tearfund Study (2012) states that capacity building structures require adaptation in remotely managed settings and that it is important to develop training initiatives in consultation with local staff to address prominent training needs.

### 3.2.3 Challenges involved in working effectively at distance

“Working effectively at distance is as much about effective relationship building as any other form of working; (...) the key to relationship building is the ability to develop trust” (Hill, Dennison, & Decher, 2009, p.4).

However, the literature raises several challenges with regard to communication and trust in remote programming.

Since remote management “by its nature, reduces the frequency of face-to-face interaction between the local staff and the programme management staff” (Norman, 2012, p.23), “mutual distrust can potentially grow, particularly when there is a high turnover of the international managing staff” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.24).

Additionally, the literature highlights that “in cases where international staff are young and inexperienced, based in a different country and working with local staff they have never met, establishing the trust required for successful remote management will be very difficult” (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006, p.42).

**Ways to address these challenges**

In remote management, limited face-to-face interactions between international staff managers and national staff due to insecurity is an important element in demonstrating the “inherent difficulties of building organisational cohesion” (Stoddard et al., 2010, p.23). In this regard, the Tearfund Study (2012) highlights the imperative need for senior management staff to possess a passion for and proven experience in capacity building and professional development training and an ability to think creatively about methods for building staff capacity remotely (Norman, 2012).
Wyss (interview, March 2019) highlights the importance of ensuring the capacity of managers to lead a team remotely: “listen to them, create an environment which allows them to say how they feel, with the capacity to understand different cultures… these points are essential to build trust within the teams”. He also explained that for several years, the ICRC has been attempting to implement mechanisms to ensure employees can talk, inquire and complain about any issue. He referred to the implementation of ‘ombuds services’ within the ICRC, which offer a protected space for “individuals facing difficult relationships at work to share their observations and feelings in a confidential setting” (ICRC, 2012).

Additional methods and tools for addressing the challenges involved in working at distance can be found in the People in Aid Successful Distance Management Manual (2007) which mainly refers to the role of the leader of a distance team and the role of the organisations supporting such teams. More fundamentally, it examines the way in which these roles can create an environment which is conducive to creating effective distance relationships with good levels of trust.

Creating such an environment requires leaders with the ability to manage expectations and to adapt their communication and leadership approaches.

An interesting exercise and tool is provided in the aforementioned manual, and is useful for “developing open relationships and facilitating giving and receiving feedback and generating trust” (Hill, Dennison, & Decher, 2009, p.8). The ‘Expectations Map’1 is a tool which helps “to avoid making assumptions by explicitly articulating what is needed and expected from one another” (Hill et al., 2009, p.8).

Managing a team at distance requires the ability to listen and to know when to prioritise one-to-one to group communication, as well as the capacity to “communicate regularly with the managers to other teams (...) to keep aware of wider organisational demands that will impact their people and project” (Hill et al., 2009, p.13).

Adapting the leadership approach taken is another essential element in addressing the challenges of working at distance. “Successful distance managers share leadership” (Hill et al., 2009, p.13) by being open to receiving ideas and, despite taking on accountability for the work, to sharing decisions on what, when and how things are to be done (Hill et al., 2009). From my experience working on a remote project, I share the view that remote management requires the

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1 This tool can be found in Annex I.
manager to be able to support and coach the team and to create tools to ensure proper follow up of the objectives agreed avoiding any constant control and micro-management of their staff.\textsuperscript{2} Regarding the role of organisations in supporting these teams, it is important to stress the need for the organisation to “invest in technology and enable their staff to use it to best effect” (Hill et al., 2009, p.14).

4. CONCLUSIONS
This study has confirmed that the trend among humanitarian action organisations of remaining in insecure environments by means of a shift to remote programming gives rise to ethical concerns with regard to the employer’s duty of care to local staff. A major implication of this is that, in order to continue to provide humanitarian assistance through local aid workers in a responsible manner, humanitarian organisations must strengthen and adapt their security risk management strategies and staff wellbeing programmes according to the unique needs of local staff in the context of remote programming.

By analysing the challenges involved in guaranteeing the safety and wellbeing of staff as a result of the withdrawal of international staff and transfer of responsibilities to local staff, this study has identified challenges relating to gaps in security risk management and in ensuring the provision of resources for psychological support and stress management.

Regarding risk management challenges, this paper has shown that upholding the organisation’s duty of care to local staff in remote programming contexts remains complex.

For instance, the study acknowledges that one of the major ethical concerns in the transfer of risk in the shift to remote programming is the assumption that local staff face less risk and have greater acceptance than international staff. In response, the study showed that based on these potentially false assumptions, international organisations may be paying inadequate attention to the security needs of local staff and providing inadequate support for security mitigation measures.

Significant exposure to social and political pressures among local staff and higher risk of corruption appeared as recurring elements in the analysis, demonstrating that these assumptions are largely false. Using the information provided by the two interviewees, the paper presented several risk mitigation strategies. A ‘shared management strategy’ aimed at reducing vulnerability among local staff (Montiel, interview April 2019) and a ‘zero tolerance position’ aimed at tackling corruption (Wyss, interview March 2019) are the examples explained in this paper.

\textsuperscript{2} A tool developed as part of my work on a remote management project can be found in Annex II.
This research aims to emphasise that ethical concerns in remote management require the completion of a substantial vulnerability analysis of local staff risks, not only when the decision to shift to remote programming is taken (avoiding the criterion of a mere transfer of risk from international to local staff), but also in terms of the risk monitoring process for local staff once the remote programme is implemented.

However, the study revealed that international organisations experience difficulties in properly assessing the risk from outside the project location when relying on local staff for security information. Local staff might underestimate the level of risk due to their familiarity with the high-risk context, but they can also avoid sharing information on security risks for fear of the project being closed down. This research explored these challenges to risk assessment and showed that one of the organisations interviewed is addressing them by triangulating security information and diversifying sources of information, while attempting to build strong networks to facilitate this approach.

Regarding the challenges to ensuring adequate resources for psychological support and stress management, this study identified an increase in security incidents targeting local staff and potential burnout (Norman, 2012) as the main challenges to the fulfilment of the duty of care in remote programming.

The research also found that local staff wellbeing encompasses a wide range of challenges in remote management contexts, including acute stress faced by the staff who must handle security incidents and threats without the presence of international staff, as well as increased levels of stress and anxiety due to the transfer of responsibilities and taking up managerial positions for the first time.

Identifying suitable local staff who are willing to take on greater responsibilities before shifting to remote programming, developing training initiatives in consultation with local staff to address their most pressing needs and implementing capacity building programmes and strategies to provide mentoring, coaching and technical support to local staff as they take on their new responsibilities were some of the suggestions for addressing these challenges raised in the literature and interviews.

However, the study also showed that there is still a long way to go in terms of capacity building structures and effective psychological support services in remote management.

Therefore, considering the aforementioned points, the main hypothesis of this research is proved.

Lastly, the study also highlighted challenges with regard to communication and trust in order to work effectively at distance. Through the information provided by the interviewees, the
research shared several examples of methods for addressing these challenges by ensuring the managerial staff’s ability to lead a team and to build staff capacity remotely (Wyss, interview March 2019). Furthermore, a number of elements and tools to develop trust and effective relationships at distance were also suggested. Working environments in which people feel free to share, inquire and complain about any issue in confidence and managers with the ability to manage expectations and adapt their communication and leadership approaches are key to providing environments which promote staff wellbeing.

This research has contributed to greater awareness of the ongoing ethical challenges faced by humanitarian organisations when working remotely in insecure contexts and better understanding of the specific challenges relating to the duty of care. The study explored ways to address these challenges and provided an overview of the ways in which organisations adapt their duty of care strategies.

Although the study demonstrated high awareness and some progress in adapting strategies with regard to the duty of care in relation to security management within organisations, less improvement was observed in terms of strategies for wellbeing and psychosocial care support for local staff. Therefore, further study exploring comprehensive solutions and ways to address the challenges of providing resources for local staff wellbeing is needed to allow organisations to continue to provide aid through remote programming in the most responsible manner possible. Additionally, it will be important to explore mechanisms to ensure the consultation and participation of local staff in the process in order to contextualise and adapt policies for their safety and wellbeing in remote programmes.

In conclusion, this research has sought to emphasise that despite there being no concrete answer or solution for guaranteeing the safety and wellbeing of local staff in remote programmes, international organisations could fulfil their ethical responsibility by upholding their duty of care to local staff by adapting duty of care frameworks to their specific needs. This implies the institutionalisation of duty of care frameworks in remote management by ensuring proper risk assessment processes, developing strong capacity building structures in security risk management and professional development and psychological service support, with the participation of local staff in adapting these policies.
5. **BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Berlin, Germany.

Norman, B. (2012). Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments: A research study detailing the key issues and responding good practices. Tearfund.


6. **ANNEXES**

6.1 **Annex I – Expectations Map**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations Map</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations between and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What does he/she expect of me?</th>
<th>What do I expect of her/him?</th>
<th>What might be easy?</th>
<th>What might be difficult?</th>
<th>How might we overcome any difficulties?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Exercise**

**Step 1:** Complete the first four columns of the Expectations Map individually.

Do this without talking to each other, first thinking about what you think they might expect from you then what you expect from the other person. Highlight what might be easy and then consider any potential difficulties you foresee, perhaps based on your previous experiences!

Hint: avoid regurgitating your job description accountabilities or project terms of reference here. It is more helpful to identify your expectations in terms of how you want to work with the other person e.g. Do you prefer email or telephone? For which types of discussions? Can you commit to responding within certain timescales? How will you work together to manage the expectations of other people in this relationship e.g. the ‘other boss’ in a matrix? What are the things over and above the job description that have made previous distance relationships successful/unsuccessful for you?

**Step 2:** Discuss and agree how to work together

Discuss what you have written and compare expectations. Agree what might get in the way and work together to agree how you will overcome these difficulties. At the end of the discussion you will have agreed ways of working together that suit the situation and take into account the preferred ways of working for both of you.

This approach may seem deceptively straightforward, but it is surprising how many people get so focused on the task in hand they end up wasting precious time and energy through misunderstandings because they did not take time to agree expectations and ways of working up front.
6.2 Annex II - Tool for bilateral meetings & follow up of activities

This simple Excel tool was created and used to ensure proper follow up of the objectives agreed in each bilateral meeting with the staff managed remotely. Focusing on the outputs, it facilitates supervision avoiding any constant control and micro-management of the staff. The use of the tool was highly appreciated by the local staff in terms of the guidance it offered and the way it facilitated effective meetings, but also because it provided a proper record of the decision-making process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>POINTS raised at the meeting</th>
<th>PROPOSED ACTIONS</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Responsible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review POINTS of the last meeting in progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>xx</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POINTS for current meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Meeting:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy at 00h:00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>