Developing an Operational Framework for Security Relocations and Evacuations in High-Risk Humanitarian Environments

Michael Munyaradzi Makova (PhD)

2375 Bluffhill Westgate, Harare, Zimbabwe

Abstract:

Humanitarian organizations operating in high-risk environments face persistent challenges in ensuring the safety and security of their staff and sustaining operations amid insecurity and humanitarian crises. Relocation and evacuation procedures are vital components of contingency planning in humanitarian security risk management. Effective contingency planning requires robust relocation and evacuation protocols that prioritize staff safety and, where applicable, the protection of dependents. While relocations and evacuations are critical components of humanitarian security risk management, existing frameworks often lack clarity, consistency, and operational applicability. This study examines how humanitarian organizations can strengthen the design and implementation of relocation and evacuation plans in high-risk operational contexts. It analyses current practices, identifies gaps, and draws lessons from case studies and past emergencies to highlight the essential elements of effective planning, aligning policy with practice. Building on policy guidance, case studies and field experience, the research develops an operational framework tailored to navigate insecurity and sustain operations in high-risk environments. The proposed framework blends operational structure, practical field guidance, and policy and governance level recommendations. The framework enhances staff safety and security, organizational resilience and supports the continuity of life-saving humanitarian assistance while upholding humanitarian principles. By offering a structured and context-sensitive framework, this study contributes to strengthening humanitarian security risk management in high risk environments.

Key words: Contingency Planning, Evacuation, Humanitarian security risk management and Relocation

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1.   Introduction

Security risk management in humanitarian operations has undergone significant transformation since the early 2000s, driven by increasingly volatile and insecure high risk environments. High risk humanitarian settings are often marked by armed conflict, post conflict and political instability, and recurrent natural disasters pose severe threats to humanitarian staff, often resulting in risks such as injury or loss of life[1]. High-risk humanitarian environments demand rapid, coordinated, and context-specific emergency responses, frequently under extreme pressure and resource constraints. To ensure staff safety and security and operational continuity, humanitarian organizations must adopt robust security risk management strategies that integrate both proactive and reactive measures[2]. Central to this approach are comprehensive contingency plans (CPs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) designed specifically for high-risk environments, enabling organizations to anticipate crises and respond effectively when they arise [3].

In high risk humanitarian contexts, preparedness is not optional but essential. Crises can escalate quickly, requiring organizations to move staff to safer locations or withdraw them entirely. Effective contingency planning must therefore incorporate detailed relocation and evacuation protocols that prioritize staff safety and, where applicable, the protection of dependents [4]. These protocols should clearly identify triggers, destinations, define secure relocation or evacuation routes, assess their accessibility, and designate assembly points equipped for temporary staging [4, 5] By embedding these measures into security operational frameworks, humanitarian organizations strengthen their ability to respond to emergencies while maintaining the continuity of life-saving assistance. A well-structured security risk management ensures that humanitarian operations can withstand the pressures of high-risk environments without compromising staff safety or organizational resilience [2].

Many humanitarian organizations, particularly UN agencies and International NGOs have frameworks for security relocations and evacuations in high risk environments. Contemporary examples where humanitarian relocations and evacuations have been implemented under extreme siege include during crises in South Sudan (2013, 2016, 2018), Yemen (2018, 2022), Afghanistan (2021), Ethiopia's Tigray region (2020–2021), Ukraine (2022), Sudan (2023, 2024), Lebanon (2024) and Gaza (2023, 2024) [3]. In some of the countries relocations and evacuations were conducted under very dangerous situations where frontline movements and airstrikes necessitated rapid withdrawal requiring humanitarian actors to act decisively under pressure.

Frameworks for relocations and evacuations in these high-risk humanitarian contexts were observed to suffer from several critical gaps during periods of implementation. According to GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024), relocation and evacuation frameworks often lacked operational clarity and coordination mechanisms [6]. While policies provided broad definitions and procedural outlines, they frequently lacked context-specific operational detail, leaving field teams uncertain about triggers, thresholds, and decision-making authority during the volatile situations [6,7]. Coordination mechanisms between diverse humanitarian agencies, host governments, international security forces (e.g., UN /regional peacekeeping) and other security actors were observed to be weak, resulting in fragmented responses and delays during crises[4,6,7] Many relocations and evacuations frameworks also failed to adequately integrate logistical realities such as transport constraints, communication breakdowns, and the safeguarding of assets, which are essential for effective implementation[4,6,7].

This research aims to examine how humanitarian organizations can strengthen the design and implementation of relocation and evacuation plans to ensure staff safety in high-risk operational environments. It seeks to analyse current practices, identify gaps, and draw insights from case studies and lessons learned during past emergencies. Through this process, the study will highlight the essential components of effective relocation and evacuation planning, while also addressing the common challenges faced in insecure and resource-constrained contexts. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to practical recommendations that enhance staff safety, institutional preparedness and resilience. By integrating best practices with operational realities, the findings will provide humanitarian organizations with actionable guidance to safeguard staff, maintain continuity of operations, while upholding humanitarian principles in high risk humanitarian environments.

2. Conceptual Framework- Humanitarian Security Risk Management and Contingency Planning

Humanitarian security risk management frameworks have significantly evolved since the early 2000s, reflecting the growing complexity of operational environments marked by armed conflict, political and post conflict instability, terrorism, and climate-related disasters [4,6, 8]. In response to these threats, humanitarian organizations have invested substantial effort and resources into developing robust contingency planning frameworks that prioritize staff safety and operational continuity in high risk contexts. Contingency plans are no longer viewed as optional safeguards but as essential components of organizational security risk management strategies, organizational resilience and embedded within broader duty of care obligations [4,6,8].

Contingency plans typically integrate comprehensive security risk management measures for relocations and evacuations, recognizing these measures as critical and indispensable tools in high-risk operational contexts[4,6,8]. Such risk management protocols provide structured guidance for humanitarian organizations to ensure safety and security of their personnel and sustain critical operations when confronted with escalating threats. By embedding relocation and evacuation procedures into broader risk management frameworks, contingency plans ensure that responses are not improvised but are systematically aligned with organizational duty of care and humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence [3, 4,8].

Contemporary evolution of relocation and evacuation protocols also reflects lessons learned from past emergencies, where inadequate measures and critical gaps in implementation led to delays, exposing humanitarian staff to danger and disruption of humanitarian assistance. Contemporary examples include relocations and evacuations from South Sudan (2013, 2016, 2018), Yemen (2018, 2022), Afghanistan (2021), Ethiopia's Tigray region (2020–2021), Ukraine (2022), Sudan (2023), Lebanon (2024), (Gaza 2023, 2024) due to escalating violence, political instability, or targeted threats against humanitarian staff[3]. Modern contingency planning emphasizes preparedness, scenario testing, and coordination with host governments, local communities, and international partners[3,6, 8]. By integrating relocations and evacuations into comprehensive security risk management, humanitarian organizations strengthen their ability to respond swiftly to crises, safeguard staff, and maintain the delivery of life saving assistance in volatile environments.

The incorporation of relocation and evacuation protocols into contingency planning underscores the interdependence of preparedness and response in humanitarian operations. These measures not only mitigate risks to personnel but also preserve organizational credibility and capacity to re-engage once conditions stabilize[8,9,10]. In volatile environments, such as conflict zones or areas affected by political instability, contingency planning with embedded relocation and evacuation strategies remains a cornerstone of effective humanitarian security risk management [8,9,10]

The conceptual framework positions relocations and evacuations as the intersection of policy and practice because they embody both organizational principles and operational realities. At the policy level, relocation and evacuation protocols reflect an organization's duty of care, risk management strategies, and adherence to humanitarian principles. They codify decision-making authority, establish thresholds for action, and define responsibilities across leadership and field teams. These policies ensure that humanitarian organizations remain accountable to staff safety and welfare while balancing the imperative to deliver assistance in insecure environments [9, 11, 12]

At the practice level, relocations and evacuations translate these policies into concrete operational measures. They involve logistical arrangements such as transport, communication systems, safe assembly points, and coordination with local and international actors. Practice is shaped by the unpredictability of high-risk context where armed conflict, political instability, or natural disasters may unfold rapidly and require immediate execution of pre-established protocols to manage risk. Therefore, practice tests the feasibility of policy, revealing gaps and generating lessons that inform future revisions [9,11,12].

By situating relocations and evacuations at the intersection of policy and practice, the conceptual framework highlights their dual role of strategic commitments to staff safety and as tactical responses to volatile conditions. This positioning underscores that effective humanitarian security risk management requires both robust institutional policies and adaptable field-level practices. The interplay between the two ensures that organizations can uphold duty of care, maintain operational continuity, and preserve credibility while navigating complex emergencies [9,11,12]

3.   Defining Relocation and Evacuation

Relocation and Evacuation are risk avoidance measures designed to minimize or eliminate exposure to threats and risks by temporarily removing or restricting individuals from certain situations, places, events, or timings. According to the United Nations Security Policy on Security Risk Management, relocations and evacuations are risk avoidance measures for UN personnel and families [5]. Risk avoidance is defined as

" *a security risk management option meant to minimize or eliminate the exposure to threats by temporarily removing or restricting persons from a situation, place, event or timing (including through distance, changing location/timings, and/or non-participation) by using alternate work modalities, relocation or evacuation (or their combination). Until the situation improves or proper measures to control and lower security risks to acceptable levels are put in place, avoiding risk may be the only option" (p. 2).*

The European Interagency Security Forum, (2020) refers relocation as the movement of humanitarian staff or affected populations from areas of heightened insecurity to safer zones within the same country of operation [9]. It is generally considered a temporary protective measure designed to reduce exposure to immediate threats while maintaining proximity to affected communities. This measure allows organizations to sustain critical functions while prioritizing staff safety. The United Nations Security Policy on Security Risk Management [5] defines relocation as

"The official movement of any personnel or eligible family members from their normal place of residence, assignment or place of work to another location within their country of assignment for the purpose of avoiding risk. Relocation is a risk avoidance measure that can be applied to all personnel and eligible family members" p.4

Good Practice Review 8 (2025) defines Relocation as **"**withdrawing staff and assets from insecure locations to safer areas within the country, until the situation stabilises" [4. p.16]. Therefore, relocations enable staff, eligible dependents, and assets to be moved to safer areas within the country of assignment, allowing humanitarian operations to continue under lowered risk.

Evacuations, in contrast, involve the withdrawal of personnel across international borders when threats cannot be mitigated domestically. Unlike relocation, evacuation is typically a last-resort measure, pursued when security conditions make continued presence in the country for foreign staff and dependents untenable. Evacuation entails the complete withdrawal of humanitarian staff or eligible dependents from an operational area or country due to escalating threats that exceed manageable risk levels [13, 14]. The United Nations Security Policy on Security Risk Management defines evacuation as the

"Official movement of any personnel or eligible family member from their place of assignment to a location outside of their country of assignment (safe haven country, home country or third country) for the purpose of avoiding risk. evacuation is a risk avoidance measure that can be applied only to internationally recruited personnel and eligible family members of internationally recruited personnel" [p.4].

Good Practice Review 8 (2025) defines evacuation as "withdrawing staff for security reasons to a place of safety across the international borders of a country" [p.14]. Both relocation and evacuation measures are supported by clear decision-making structures, predefined triggers, and logistical arrangements such as secure routes, assembly points, and communication systems.

Both relocation and evacuation are integral components of humanitarian contingency planning and security risk management. They embody the intersection of policy through duty of care and organizational security framework and practice through logistical execution and coordination with local and international actors[3, 8]. Together, relocation and evacuation reinforce institutional resilience, enabling humanitarian organizations to adapt to volatile environments while upholding staff safety and humanitarian principles [3, 8].

Security relocations and evacuations are not mutually exclusive. They represent complementary measures within humanitarian security risk management that can be implemented concurrently depending on the severity and dynamics of a crisis. In complex emergencies, organizations may simultaneously relocate some staff to safer domestic locations while evacuating others whose roles, vulnerabilities, or circumstances require international withdrawal. This concurrent application ensures flexibility, enabling humanitarian organizations to tailor responses to diverse risk profiles, logistical realities, and operational priorities. By integrating both measures within contingency planning, humanitarian organizations enhance their capacity to safeguard personnel, protect assets, and sustain critical humanitarian assistance even under rapidly evolving insecurity.

4. Linking Humanitarian Security Risk Management, Contingency planning and Security Relocations and Evacuations

Humanitarian security risk management, contingency planning, and security relocations and evacuations are interdependent strategies that ensure the safety of humanitarian staff and operations and affected populations in volatile and fluid security environments. Together, they form a comprehensive framework that balances operational continuity with duty of care in high-risk contexts. Humanitarian security risk management (HSRM) provides the overarching security framework for organizations to assess threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities to manage them in insecure environments [3,4,8,15]. HSRM emphasizes a person-centred approach that integrates organizational policies, structures, processes, and responsibilities to reduce risks to humanitarian staff and operations while maintaining access to communities in need [3,4,8,15]. By systematically analysing risks, humanitarian organizations can anticipate potential crises and embed protective measures into their operations. This framework ensures that staff safety is prioritized without undermining humanitarian principles of humanity neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Contingency planning operationalizes HSRM by preparing humanitarian organizations for sudden changes in the threat environment. It involves scenario based planning, risk analysis, and predefined responses to emergencies such as armed conflict, political instability or natural disasters [3,4,8]. Effective contingency planning ensures that humanitarian organizations can adapt quickly, minimizing disruption to humanitarian assistance while ensuring the safety of humanitarian personnel. In high risk humanitarian contexts, the presence of pre-established contingency protocols is particularly significant. These protocols enable decision-makers and field level implementers to act with greater speed and confidence, thereby reducing uncertainty during crises [13, 14,16]. Particularly, managers and field teams benefit from clearly defined procedures that guide responses to complex emergencies, facilitating coherence and consistency across operational units. This fosters confidence, ensuring operational continuity and critical operations remain resilient under pressure [13,14,16]. In high-risk environments, such as armed conflict zones, critical contingency plans typically outline procedures for security relocation and evacuation depending on the severity of the threat, thus linking strategic foresight with tactical responses.

Security relocations and evacuations are the most visible and urgent components of contingency planning in high-risk contexts with armed conflict and post-conflict political instability. Relocation involves moving staff to safer areas within the same country, while evacuation entails withdrawing staff across borders [17,18, 19].These measures are considered exceptional, pursued only when other risk mitigation strategies fail. The relocation and evacuation protocols should outline triggers, decision-making procedures, clearly defined relocation or evacuation routes assessed for safety and accessibility and the designated secure assembly points equipped for temporary staging [14,17,18]. Also outlined are communication systems, detailed transportation logistics, including vehicle availability, fuel reserves, and coordination with national or contracted assets [14, 17, 18]. Effective relocation or evacuation planning also requires coordination and collaboration with other humanitarian actors on joint approaches. Significantly alignment with on-ground diverse security personnel, who facilitate

movement, provide situational updates and information and manage movements and in some instances, perimeter control during transit [14,19,20].

Ultimately, relocations and evacuations demonstrate the practical application of HSRM and contingency planning, translating risk assessments into life-saving actions that uphold humanitarian duty of care [12,17,20].Duty of care in humanitarian and field operations requires a comprehensive, layered approach to staff safety and well-being so that they continue to deliver while their rights, dignity, and safety are fully respected. This includes establishing redundant communication systems to ensure connectivity in volatile or disrupted environments, providing secure and appropriate accommodation that meets safety standards, and guaranteeing access to mental health and psychosocial support services [19,20,21].These measures are particularly critical during periods of heightened insecurity, when staff may be under siege, exposed to prolonged relocation, or operating in high-risk areas. [19,20,21].

Effective linkage between humanitarian security risk management and contingency planning ensures that relocation and evacuation protocols are not only well-designed but also context-specific, tested, and adaptable to rapidly changing conditions. This integration strengthens institutional resilience, enabling humanitarian organizations to safeguard their personnel, protect assets, and maintain continuity of life-saving operations even under extreme insecurity [16,22,23,24].

5.   Importance of Relocation and Evacuation Plans in High Risk Humanitarian Contexts

Relocation and evacuation protocols are critically important and indispensable for humanitarian organizations operating in high-risk environments. They provide structured, pre-planned mechanisms to ensure staff safety and sustain life saving operations when threats and risks escalate beyond manageable levels [3,4,7]. In volatile and fluid humanitarian contexts marked by armed conflict, political instability, terrorism, civil unrest, or natural disasters, crises can unfold with little warning, leaving minimal time for improvised responses. Well-defined relocation and evacuation protocols establish clear decision making authority, identify triggers for action, and outline safe routes, assembly points, and communication systems [3, 9,12]. This reduces confusion and delays during emergencies, ensuring that staff and eligible dependents are protected while minimizing disruption to humanitarian programs.

Beyond immediate safety, relocation and evacuation protocols are a critical expression of an organization's duty of care. They demonstrate a commitment to staff wellbeing, which is essential for maintaining morale, trust, and organizational credibility in insecure environments [3,4,7]. These protocols also help organizations navigate complex ethical and operational dilemmas, such as balancing staff safety with the imperative to deliver assistance to affected populations. By integrating risk assessments, contingency planning, and coordination with local and international actors, relocation and evacuation strategies reinforce institutional resilience [3,4,9]. They enable organizations to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, safeguarding their reputation, and maintaining operational continuity even under extreme insecurity.

Significantly, effective relocation and evacuation planning contributes to broader humanitarian security risk management by embedding preparedness and adaptability into organizational culture [3,4,7]. Protocols that are regularly tested, updated, and contextualized to local realities ensure that responses remain practical and relevant. They also foster collaboration with host communities, governments, and other humanitarian actors, strengthening collective security arrangements. Ultimately, well designed relocation and evacuation frameworks not only protect personnel but also uphold humanitarian principles, enabling organizations to continue delivering life-saving assistance in environments where insecurity threatens both staff and aid beneficiaries [7, 9, 12,19].

6. Security Policies and Frameworks for Relocation and Evacuation Planning in Humanitarian Organizations

Humanitarian organizations rely on established security policies and frameworks to guide relocation and evacuation contingency planning in high risk and other volatile environments. In these contexts, relocation and evacuation are not ad hoc measures but structured responses guided by organization security policies and frameworks. Operating in high-risk environments, such as armed conflict, requires humanitarian organizations to have policies and processes that cover security relocation and evacuation of their staff due to escalation in threats and risks. In some of the high risk environments, it is not "if it happens", but "when will it happen".

The UN Security Policy Manual (SPM), Chapter IV, Section D. Revised Policy on Risk Avoidance (Alternate work modalities, and personnel and family restrictions (relocation and evacuation) lay out the parameters of measures to avoid risk as part of UN security risk management [5]. This includes alternate work modalities, relocation and/or evacuation, and clarify roles and responsibilities of relevant United Nations Security Management System (UNSMS) actors at different levels in decisions regarding these measures [5]. The UN Security Risk Management(SRM) process requires UNSMS organizations to operate within acceptable risks thresholds. Risk avoidance measures such as relocations, evacuations and alternate work modalities or their combination may be conducted to avoid risk [5,25]. The decision to avoid risk must take into consideration the impact of the removal of personnel and/or eligible family members on programmes and activities of UNSMS organizations, including security and/or business continuity plan [5,25]. Significantly, the SRM framework supports inter-agency coherence, ensuring that contingency plans and standard operating procedures (SOPs) across UN agencies are interoperable during joint operations or clustered responses [5, 25]. This promotes standardization of security measures while allowing for localized adaptation through field-level consultations, simulations, and inter-agency coordination [5, 25].

United Nations agencies, both individually and collectively, develop contingency measures tailored to staff safety and security in high-risk operational environments. These measures are frequently aligned with the United Nations Security Risk Management (SRM) framework and complementary security guidelines, ensuring consistency across diverse contexts. Contingency planning within the UN system emphasizes proactive risk assessment, structured decision-making, and operational preparedness, thereby safeguarding personnel while enabling continuity of humanitarian and development activities in volatile settings [5,25].

The UN Inter-Agency Security Management Network (IASMN) plays a pivotal role in harmonizing security practices across UN entities [26,27]. Established to coordinate and standardize security risk management, IASMN ensures coherence with the United Nations Security Management System (UNSMS) and provides a platform for agencies to align their policies with common principles [26,27]. By reducing fragmentation and enhancing interoperability, IASMN strengthens collective security arrangements while promoting adaptability at the field level. This balance between compliance and flexibility allows UN agencies to respond effectively to rapidly changing threat environments without compromising organizational standards [26,27].

IASMN has also spearheaded the development and endorsement of standardized contingency plans and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for critical operational areas. These include protocols for relocation, hibernation, and evacuation procedures, security risk assessments (SRAs), critical incident management, residential security measures, travel and movement, and guidelines on risk avoidance [[1, 26,27]. These are all essential tools for managing staff safety during crises. Such standardized approaches not only facilitate coordinated responses across agencies but also reinforce institutional resilience by embedding preparedness into organizational culture [1, 26,27]. In doing so, IASMN ensures that UN agencies can uphold their duty of care, maintain operational continuity, and preserve credibility while operating in high-risk humanitarian and development contexts [1, 26,27].

UN agencies such as UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Organization of Migration (IOM) implement the United Nations Security Risk Management (SRM) framework to develop relocation and evacuation plans that reflect their specific mandates, operational footprints, and risk tolerance [3]. The plans are designed to safeguard staff while ensuring the continuity of humanitarian and development programs in volatile environments. For Example, UNHCR's Emergency Handbook provides detailed procedures for staff safety, including relocation and evacuation protocols, and stresses the importance of coordination with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), other UNSMS members, and host governments to maintain operational effectiveness during crises [28]. IOM integrates relocation and evacuation into its broader crisis management and emergency preparedness strategies, reinforcing organizational resilience in high-risk contexts [29].

Other UN agencies embed relocation and evacuation planning into their core preparedness and continuity frameworks. UNICEF requires country offices to establish contingency plans aligned with the SRM system, ensuring staff safety while sustaining child-focused programming [30]. World Food Program (WFP) incorporates relocation and evacuation into its emergency preparedness and response systems, enabling food distribution to continue even in emergencies [31,32]. UNDP, through its Business Continuity Management User Guide, integrates relocation and evacuation measures to protect staff while maintaining governance and development initiatives [33]. Collectively, the diverse approaches demonstrate how UN agencies balance duty of care with programmatic imperatives, ensuring that humanitarian and development operations remain viable despite security challenges.

International NGOs like Save the Children, OXFAM, CARE, World Vision, Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC), Plan International, Mercy Corps, International Rescue Committee (IRC), among many others have security management policies and frameworks that emphasize staff safety and continuity of operations. Relocations and Evacuation plans are key for international NGOs active in high risk environments throughout the world. International NGOs also follow inter-agency security protocols and often aligned with UN or International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) guidance for staff evacuation and relocation [34,35,36,37]. Instruments such as Good Practice Review 8 (all editions) and Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) guidelines provide humanitarian organizations particularly NGOs with the normative foundation, defining relocation and evacuation, setting activation thresholds, and clarifying lines of authority [34,35,36,37]. These policies articulate the duty of care owed to staff and eligible family members, while contingency frameworks translate them into operational procedures at the field level.

Independent humanitarian organizations such as, International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) and), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFCR) and Doctors
Without Borders (MSF have internal security frameworks that include staff evacuation protocols in response to armed conflict, natural disasters, or political instability. These are coordinated with host national societies and local authorities [38].

By embedding relocation and evacuation protocols into security risk management, humanitarian organizations ensure preparedness and operational continuity in volatile environments. Relocation and evacuation protocols provide clear guidance for staff movement during crises, minimize exposure to threats, and safeguard personnel under siege or in prolonged relocation scenarios. Integrating such measures into the broader security framework also strengthens interagency coordination, enhances trust among staff, and demonstrates a proactive duty of care. Ultimately, relocation and evacuation planning is not only a logistical necessity but also a critical component of maintaining staff morale, resilience, and the ability to deliver humanitarian assistance even in the most challenging circumstances.

While humanitarian organizations have established security policies and frameworks to guide relocation and evacuation, the actual implementation of these measures presents significant challenges due to the volatile nature of high-risk environments. Threat landscapes can shift rapidly, with armed conflict, political instability, or natural disasters escalating in unpredictable ways that demand immediate adaptation. Information flows are often unreliable, incomplete, or delayed, complicating decision-making and increasing the risk of misjudgement. At the same time, organizations must maintain operational flexibility to balance staff safety with the imperative of sustaining life-saving assistance, which requires contingency plans that are both standardized for coherence and adaptable to local realities.

7.   Contemporary Security Relocations and Evacuations: Challenges and Lessons Learned.

Various humanitarian organizations have relocated or evacuated staff from high-risk environments such as conflict or post conflict zones due to insecurity at one point. Some relocations and evacuations have been repeated. Contemporary examples of relocations and evacuations due to escalating violence, political instability, or targeted threats against humanitarian staff include from South Sudan (2013, 2016, 2018), Yemen (2018, 2022), Afghanistan (2021), Ethiopia's Tigray region (2020–2021), Ukraine (2022), Sudan (2023), Lebanon (2024), (Gaza 2023, 2024) [1,3,4]. Some of the relocations and evacuations were reported chaotic.

7.1 Challenges Across Contexts
Relocations and evacuations across conflict-affected countries have consistently been hindered by a range of cross cutting challenges. Access constraints were among the most pressing, with active hostilities, checkpoints, and bureaucratic impediments repeatedly blocking the safe movement of aid workers and convoys, as seen in Yemen, Tigray- Ethiopia, Sudan, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Gaza[39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44]. In addition, humanitarian staff were frequently exposed to direct threats, detentions, and fatalities, with Gaza standing out as the most severe case where hundreds of aid workers have been killed since October 2023[44]. The risks were compounded by information gaps and rapidly shifting frontlines in contexts such as Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Sudan, which undermined route planning, safe passage assurances, and contingency logistics [41,42,43].

Operational continuity was challenged by chronic shortages of fuel, medical supplies, and communications infrastructure, particularly in Yemen, Gaza, and Sudan, making safe movement and sustained operations difficult [39,41,44]. Complex coordination and permissions processes also slowed evacuations, as multi-actor negotiations for clearances and deconfliction often stalled, exemplified by Yemen's Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the Yemen crisis (IAHE) findings [39]. In Tigray- Ethiopia severe government and non-state armed groups convoy restrictions were imposed, and in Gaza's there were repeated access denials by the Israeli authorities [40,44]. Large-scale displacement of populations also placed additional strain on reception capacity and security arrangements for relocated staff, with South Sudan, Sudan, Lebanon, Gaza, and Ukraine all experiencing overwhelming pressures that complicated humanitarian relocations [41,45,46,47]. Together, these challenges highlight the need for flexible planning, stronger coordination and local partnerships, and robust duty of care measures to safeguard humanitarian personnel in volatile environments.

7.2 Lessons learned Across Contexts
Relocations and evacuations in diverse high-risk contexts have revealed both commonalities and divergences in lessons learned, shaped by country-specific dynamics, infrastructure conditions, and the role of government or non-state actor authorities. Across cases such as South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia's Tigray region, Ukraine, Sudan, South Sudan, Lebanon, and Gaza, recurring themes have been.
- **Pre-positioning Logistics and Adaptive Operations**: Pre-positioning flexible logistics has consistently emerged as a cornerstone of effective humanitarian relocations and evacuations in high risk armed conflict environments. Stockpiling fuel, communication equipment, and medical kits across multiple hubs ensures continuity of operations when primary supply chains collapse. Diversifying routes and transport modes whether through road, air, or maritime channels provides redundancy and

adaptability. This was demonstrated in Yemen, Tigray, and Gaza. These measures enhanced resilience by enabling humanitarian organizations to pivot rapidly in response to shifting conflict dynamics or sudden blockades, thereby safeguarding both personnel and critical service delivery [1,3,7,39,40,44,51].

- **Local Partnerships and Scenario-Based Security Planning:** Strengthening local partnerships is vital, as national actors and community networks often possess granular knowledge of terrain, social dynamics, and bureaucratic processes. Their leadership in last-mile movements and information flows proved critical in Ukraine's early months and in Tigray's access-constrained areas. Coupled with scenario-based security planning anchored in dynamic relocation and evacuation triggers tied to frontline advances, airstrikes, or administrative restrictions humanitarian teams can adapt quickly to evolving risks. This approach, observed in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Lebanon, underscores the importance of embedding flexible, context-specific security protocols into operational planning [51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60, 61,62]

- **Infrastructure resilience, governance structures, and logistical arrangements**. In contexts like Ukraine and Sudan, large-scale displacement and damaged infrastructure clogged relocation and or evacuation routes, requiring decentralized decision-making and real-time route monitoring. In Yemen, Tigray and Gaza, bureaucratic impediments, sieges, and fuel shortages highlighted the importance of pre-positioned logistics and multi-hub contingency planning. In Afghanistan, the speed of regime change underscored the need for diversified exit routes and flexible funding mechanisms, while in Tigray, convoy denials and arbitrary arrests emphasized the value of remote management and strong local networks [39,40,44,51,57]

- **Duty of Care, Documentation, and Governance:** Duty of care and systematic documentation underpin relocation and evacuation strategies. Layered communication systems (satphones, radios, mesh networks), safe accommodation, and mental health support are essential for staff under siege or prolonged relocation. Systematic notification, GPS tracking, and incident logging strengthen negotiation leverage and accountability when access is denied, as evidenced in Gaza and Yemen's Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations. Adaptive funding and governance mechanisms such as rapid, flexible financing and empowered field leadership enable timely relocations and continuity of essential services, as highlighted in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ukraine [39, 43, 51,55, 56]

Collectively, the lessons learned illustrate that effective relocations and evacuations demand a holistic approach integrating logistics, partnerships, foresight, and organizational resilience.

7.3 Country snapshots- Relocations and evacuations

South Sudan (2013, 2016, 2018)
- **Challenges**: Persistent insecurity mainly from armed conflict (civil war) and civil unrest complicated safe staff relocations and or evacuations from areas of elevated threats. Further, the massive displacements and disrupted livelihoods constrained humanitarian movements and operations with both humanitarian access and space greatly curtailed. large-scale needs complicated safe staff relocations [7, 40,51,52,53,54]
- **Lessons:** Strengthen coordination between the diverse humanitarian actors for integrated crisis response. Coordinate with state and non-state authorities for convoy windows. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation/evacuation protocols allowed agencies to respond to rapidly shifting threats. Continuous learning particularly after-action reviews and knowledge sharing strengthened institutional resilience and improved future responses [7, 40,51,52,53,54].

Afghanistan (2021)

- **Challenges:** Rapidly shifting threat landscapes- Rapid territorial shifts, escalating conflict, and abrupt funding suspensions created volatile evacuation environments and information gaps. Sudden escalations (frontline advances, regime change) left little time for planning [7,51,57,63].
- **Lessons:** Scenario planning with clear triggers, assets for evacuations, diversified exit routes, and flexible funding mechanisms are essential to protect staff and sustain operations. Flexibility and adaptability is critical in sudden escalations. Protocols must balance standardization with local realities to remain effective in volatile contexts [7,51,57,63].

Ethiopia—Tigray (2020–2021)

- **Challenges:** Severe access constraints, looting, convoy denials, arbitrary arrests and supplies depletions limited movement of humanitarian personnel and assistance. [7, 40,51,52,53,54]
- **Lessons**: Strengthen local networks, remote management, and convoy coordination, pre-position critical supplies and maintain redundant communications. Local partnerships are indispensable as community networks provided intelligence, negotiation leverage, and last-mile access. Flexibility and adaptability is critical in sudden escalations. Protocols must balance standardization with local realities to remain effective in volatile contexts[s[7,40,51,52,53,54].

Ukraine (2022)

- **Challenges:** Full-scale invasion caused rapid displacement, shifting frontlines, and complex deconfliction needs for staff movement. Destroyed bridges, roads, and landmines blocked safe relocation and evacuation routes. Massive local population movements clogged the roads constraining relocations to safe locations [7,51,64].
- **Lessons:** Develop effective early warning systems and triggers, decentralize decision-making, and maintain real-time route information to support relocations under armed attack from several sources. Redundant communication systems (satellite phones, local networks) are critical. Local community partnership and networks provided intelligence, negotiation leverage, and last-mile access. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation and evacuation processes allowed humanitarian organizations to respond to rapidly shifting threats [7,51,64].

Yemen (2018, 2022)

- **Challenges:** Government restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles delayed staff movements. Access restrictions, fuel shortages, explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination, and economic collapse hindered humanitarian evacuations and relocations. Airstrikes and general insecurity made relocation routes unsafe [39, 65,66].
- **Lessons:** Pre-positioned contingency planning (safe routes, assembly points, and transport options). Inter-agency coordination mechanisms strengthened to avoid duplication and confusion during mass movements. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation/evacuation protocols allowed agencies to respond to rapidly shifting threats. Invest in access negotiation capacity, fuel contingency, and multi-hub logistics; use independent monitoring to document denials and delays, Shared logistics platforms between UN and NGOs improved resilience [39, 65,66].

Gaza (2023, 2024)

- **Challenges:** Access and logistics constraints (sieges, damaged infrastructure, and contested routes) made safe passage extremely difficult. Extreme access denials, repeated evacuation orders, fuel collapse, and unprecedented aid worker fatalities severely constrained relocations. Repeated evacuation orders uprooted UN aid hubs and hospitals, disrupting operations [67,68,69,70,71].
- **Lessons:** Scenario-based contingency planning, pre-positioned logistics, and diversified routes proved critical. Duty of care must be layered and includes redundant communication systems, safe housing, and psychosocial support are essential for staff wellbeing. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation/evacuation protocols allowed agencies to respond to rapidly shifting threats. Advocacy for humanitarian corridors must be continuous. [67,68,69,70,71].

Sudan (2023)

- **Challenges:** Nationwide conflict, mass displacement, cholera outbreaks, and insecurity impeded relocations and evacuations. Intense fighting in Khartoum made movement to Port Sudan extremely dangerous, with roads blocked, airports closed, and access routes contested by armed groups. Darfur regions posed additional risks due to fragmented control, localized violence, and weak infrastructure, complicating safe passage. Coordination gaps between humanitarian agencies slowed response. [72,73,74,75].
- **Lessons**: Pre-positioned contingency planning (safe routes, assembly points, and transport options) is critical in volatile contexts. Inter-agency coordination mechanisms must be strengthened to avoid duplication and confusion during mass movements. Duty of care must be layered and includes redundant communication systems, safe housing, and psychosocial support are essential for staff wellbeing. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation/evacuation protocols allowed agencies to respond to rapidly shifting threats [72,73,74,75].

Lebanon (2024)

- **Challenges**: Escalating cross-border hostilities led to sudden, large-scale displacement and complex movement restrictions. Airstrikes and insecurity made relocation routes unsafe. Serious coordination difficulties among agencies during mass displacement [62,76,77,78].
- **Lessons:** Prepare for rapid scale-up of relocation support, cross-border options, and coordinated permissions amid regional spillover. Coordinated planning under UNSMS/IASMN reduced fragmentation and improved interoperability. Flexibility and adaptability in relocation/evacuation protocols allowed agencies to respond to rapidly shifting threats [62, 76,77,78].

8.   Core Elements in Relocation and Evacuation Plans

Drawing on challenges and lessons learned from relocations and evacuations in high-risk environments since the early 2000s, and in response to increasingly volatile humanitarian contexts, a well-designed security relocation and evacuation plan must be built on interconnected elements. The core components that ensures staff safety and sustain operations in unstable security environments include the following [3,4,5,7,9,10,18,19, 39, 51,79, 80, 81].

1. Risk Assessment & Triggers

- Establish clear criteria for relocation or evacuation, such as escalation of armed conflict, direct threats and risks to staff, or breakdown of humanitarian access.
- Conduct continuous monitoring of security indicators (conflict mapping, political signals, weather alerts) and integrate intelligence from local partners, UN and NGO security networks, and community sources.
- Use scenario-based triggers to avoid delays and ensure timely activation of plans.

2. Decision-Making & Command Structure

- Define a chain of command with explicit roles and responsibilities for initiating, authorizing, and coordinating evacuations.
- Ensure pre-delegated authority to field managers when communication with headquarters is disrupted.
- Integrate crisis management teams at both HQ and field levels to streamline decision-making under pressure.

3. Communication Protocols

- Maintain redundant communication systems (satphones, radios, secure messaging apps, mesh networks) to ensure connectivity during movement.
- Establish reporting lines, check-in schedules, and accountability mechanisms to track staff locations and wellbeing.
- Use coded communication protocols to protect sensitive information in contested environments.

4. Logistics & Movement Planning
- Identify safe routes, assembly points, and transport options (air, land, sea), with contingency routes if primary options are compromised.
- Maintain stockpiles of fuel, medical kits, food, and water to support staff during movement or prolonged relocation.
- Integrate global positioning system (GPS) tracking and convoy management systems to monitor staff movements in real time.

5. Coordination & Permissions
- Liaise with host governments, local authorities, and other armed actors to secure clearances and deconfliction.
- Align with UN security frameworks (UNSMS, IASMN) and NGO consortia for collective relocations and evacuations.
- Establish local and regional coordination hubs to synchronize multi-agency responses and reduce duplication.

6. Staff Safety & Duty of Care
- Include medical evacuation procedures, psychosocial support, and comprehensive insurance coverage
- Provide special provisions for vulnerable staff (national staff, dependents, or those with medical needs).
- Ensure gender-sensitive and inclusive planning, recognizing diverse staff needs during relocation and evacuation

7. Reception & Continuity of Operations
- Pre-arrange relocation sites or safe havens with secure accommodation, supplies, and communications.
- Develop remote management systems or handover protocols to local partners to sustain humanitarian delivery.
- Integrate business continuity planning to minimize disruption to critical programs.

8. Training & Drills
- Conduct regular simulations and scenario exercises to ensure staff understand procedures and roles.
- Ensure all staff have evacuation "quick run bags" with essential items (documents, cash, medical supplies, communication devices).
- Provide personal security guidelines and resilience training to strengthen staff preparedness.

In practice, the strength of a relocation and evacuation plan lies in its flexibility and adaptability and as such, plans must be living documents that evolve with the security environment. A robust relocation and evacuation plan must balance standardization with adaptability, ensuring clarity of procedures while remaining flexible to rapidly changing threat environments. Embedding preparedness, coordination, and duty of care into organizational culture transforms these plans from reactive measures into proactive instruments of resilience.

9. Template for a Relocation and Evacuation Plan

The proposed template incorporate operational best practices and lessons learned from diverse high risk humanitarian contexts: It is not exhaustive and represents a generic guideline.

1. Title/Header
- **Document Title: Relocation and Evacuation Contingency Plan**
- **Document Number:** XXXX
- **Version:** 1.0
- **Date of Issue:** [Insert Date]

2. Definitions
- **Relocation:** Movement of staff from high-risk areas to safer areas within the same country.
- **Evacuation:** Movement of staff out of the country due to extreme risk.

- **Safe Haven:** Pre-identified secure locations for temporary shelter. Name them
- **Triggers:** Specific indicators (e.g., armed clashes within 5 km, government evacuation orders, direct threats to staff).
- **Acronyms:** (Organizational names, technical terms, or operational procedures]
    - **UN-** United Nations
    - **INGO-** International Non- Governmental Organization
    - **INSO-** International Safety Organization
    - **UNDSS:** United Nations Department of Safety and Security
    - **MOSS:** Minimum Operating Security Standards
    - **IAHE:** Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation

3. Purpose

- To establish clear procedures for the safe relocation or evacuation of staff in response to escalating violence, political instability, natural disasters, or targeted threats.
- Objectives:
    - To ensure the safety and security of staff and well-being.
    - To ensure continuity of humanitarian operations.
    - To provide a structured decision-making framework for timely activation.

4. Scope

- **Personnel Covered:** International staff, national staff, dependents, contractors, and visitors.
- **Geographic Coverage:** Define operational areas (urban, rural, conflict zones, disaster-prone regions).
- **Operational Contexts:** Armed conflict, civil unrest, natural disasters, epidemics, or targeted threats against humanitarian staff.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

- **HQ-** HQ decisions approvals- Who, When, How
- **Country Director / Head of Mission:** Authorizes relocation/evacuation, liaises with HQ.
- **Security Officer/Focal point:** Conducts risk assessments, identifies triggers and coordinates movement
- **Head of Area/Team Leaders:** Ensure staff readiness, manage assembly points, and report status.
- **Admin/Logistics/Procurement:** Coordinates administrative issues including logistics- transport, shelters, fuel, fuel management
- **Human Resources**: staff safety, duty of care, rosters
- **Staff Members:** Follow instructions, maintain communication, and carry personal "quick run/ go-bags."

6. Procedure

Step-by-Step Instructions:

- **Activation Criteria:** Security officer/Focal point monitors indicators; Country Director/Manager/Head of Mission authorizes activation.
- **Notification:** Staff informed via multiple channels (SMS, WhatsApp, Signal, VHF radio, satphone etc).
- **Assembly Points:** Staff gather at designated safe locations.
- **Movement:** Transportation modalities (airlift, vehicles, buses, convoys) and capacities. Transportation routes and security escorts (risk-based routing) and alternative routes identified.
- **Transit security** - Security arrangements en route and at relocation sites.
- **Reception:** Staff relocated to safe havens or evacuated to host country.
- **Continuity:** Remote management or handover to local partners.
- **Post-Relocation or Evacuation:** Staff welfare checks, debriefing, and psychosocial support.

7. Quality Control

- **Drills:** Quarterly relocation/evacuation simulations.
- **Checklists:** Pre-departure and post-arrival inspections.
- **Audits:** Annual review of plan effectiveness and compliance with safety and security standards.

8. Approval/Signatures
- **Prepared by:** XXX
- **Date:** [Insert Date]
- **Approved by:** XXX-Country Director/Head of Mission
- **Date:** [Insert Date]

9. Revision History (A record of changes made over time).
- **Version**: XXX
- **Revision and date**

10. Appendices

    Appendix A: Staff Contact List
    Appendix B: Relocation and Evacuation Routes & Maps
    Appendix C: Assembly Point Locations
    Appendix D: Quick run/Grab-Bag Checklist (ID, cash, meds, water, comms)
    Appendix E: Incident Reporting Form
    Appendix F: Liaison Contacts (UNDSS, embassies, host government)

Note: Interagency Coordination: *In high risk humanitarian environments interagency coordination is very critical and complex. In this regard, humanitarian organizations relocation and evacuation plans must take into account the joint coordination frameworks available. It could be under the UN Security Management System for UN agencies, NGO coordination frameworks (e.g., INSO) or joint UN and NGOs under the Saving Lives Together framework. Interagency coordination typically addresses, unified security risk management; information sharing and early warning systems; access negotiation and humanitarian space; resource and capacity optimization; and community-centred and conflict sensitive approach.*

10.   Operational Framework for Security Relocations and Evacuations in High Risk Humanitarian Contexts

The framework is grounded in lessons learned from relocations and evacuations in high-risk environments since the early 2000s. This framework blends operational structure, practical field guidance, and policy and governance level recommendations.

10.1 Structured Model for Relocations and Evacuations
This model provides a comprehensive framework to ensure staff safety, sustain humanitarian operations, and continuity in high risk humanitarian environments. Emphasis is on proactive planning, clear decision-making, and strong coordination and partnerships to mitigate risks, and upholding duty of care.

1. Preparedness and Risk Analysis
- **Context-specific threat mapping:** Regularly update risk assessments to capture shifting conflict dynamics, bureaucratic restrictions, and natural hazards.
- **Scenario-based planning:** Identify triggers such as escalation of violence, targeted threats, or collapse of access. Develop flexible triggers tied to frontline movement, airstrikes, political instability, or natural disasters.
- **Pre-positioned logistics:** Stock fuel, medical kits, and communication equipment in multiple hubs; diversify transport modes (road, air, maritime).
- **Training:** Staff training and simulation exercises to strengthen readiness and reduce response time.
- **Contingency budgeting**: Preparedness must also include contingency budgeting and insurance coverage to ensure resources are available when rapid deployment is required.

2. Activation Phase

- **Decision making:** Clear decision-making chain with delegated authority in case of communication breakdown.
- **Communication systems:** Rapid communication protocols (redundant systems: satphones, radios, secure apps).
- **Assembly Points:** Confirmation and identification of assembly points, safe routes, and fallback options.
- **Activation Drills:** Early activation drills and "go/no-go" decision thresholds should be rehearsed to minimize hesitation during crises.

3. Operational Movement Phase

- **Relocation protocols:** Move staff to identified safer areas within-country while sustaining proximity to affected populations.
- **Evacuation protocols:** Withdraw staff and dependents completely outside the country when risks exceed manageable thresholds.
- **Deconfliction and documentation:** Use systematic notification, global positioning system (GPS) tracking, and incident logging to strengthen negotiation leverage and accountability.
- **Convoys:** Coordinated convoys or staggered relocations depending on risk level.
- **Liaison:** Engage host governments, local authorities, and armed actors for clearances.
- **Psychosocial support:** Medical evacuation readiness and psychosocial support for staff.
- **Gender Considerations:** Movement phases should integrate gender-sensitive considerations, ensuring vulnerable staff and dependents receive prioritized support.

4. Local Partnerships and Community Engagement

- **Empower national actors:** Leverage local networks for last-mile movement, intelligence, and cultural navigation.
- **Community-based security:** Build trust with host communities to facilitate safe passage and reduce risks of obstruction.
- **Transparent communication:** Transparent communication with communities about humanitarian neutrality can reduce suspicion and enhance cooperation.

5. Coordination and Partnerships

- **Inter-Agency Coordination:** Harmonize plans across UN agencies via IASMN and UNSMS and NGO coordination frameworks
- **Local Partnerships:** Leverage community networks for information and intelligence, last-mile movement, and negotiation.
- **Government Engagement:** Secure permissions and deconfliction with host authorities.
- **Armed Groups Engagement:** Secure permissions and deconfliction with armed group in areas under their control.
- **Coordination:** Coordinate with private sector actors (e.g., airlines, logistics providers) to expand relocation and evacuation options.

6. Duty of Care and Staff Wellbeing

- **Layered communication systems:** Ensure redundancy (satphones, radios, mesh networks) to maintain connectivity under siege.
- **Safe accommodation:** Provide secure housing with access to food, water, and medical support during prolonged relocations.
- **Mental health support:** Integrate psychosocial services, peer support, and resilience training.
- **Duty of care**: Duty of care must also include family liaison services to keep dependents informed and reassured.

7. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

- **After-action reviews:** Conduct systematic evaluations post-relocation/evacuation to capture lessons learned.

- **Knowledge-sharing platforms:** Disseminate best practices across humanitarian organizations to strengthen collective preparedness.
- **Continuous adaptation:** Update SOPs and contingency plans regularly to reflect evolving contexts.
- **Lessons learned:** Lessons learned should be integrated into training curricula to build institutional memory.

8. Reception & Continuity Phase
- **Safe relocation sites:** Ensure supplies, communications, and accommodation are available.
- **Remote management or handover:** Transition to local partners to sustain humanitarian delivery.
- **Duty-of-care measures:** Trauma support, insurance, and reintegration planning.
- **Reception Centres:** Reception sites should also include orientation briefings and reintegration workshops to help staff adapt to new operational realities.

10.2. Practical Guidance for Humanitarian Organizations – Relocations and Evacuations

This guidance translates strategy into concrete steps that can be executed under pressure in volatile environments. This action oriented practical guidance not only strengthens operational readiness but also embeds resilience, accountability, and collaboration into relocation and evacuation planning.

- **Integration with Security Risk Management:** Relocation and evacuation planning must be embedded within broader security risk management strategies, including hibernation (sheltering in place) and remote management options. This integration ensures that organizations can adapt fluidly between different modes of operation depending on the severity of the threat and risk
- **Contextual Adaptation:** Plans should reflect local realities such as geography, infrastructure, cultural sensitivities, armed actors and political dynamics. A one size fits all approach is ineffective and detrimental. Tailoring strategies to each operational environment ensures relevance and effectiveness.
- **Flexibility:** Relocation and evacuation plans must be treated as living documents that evolve with the operational environment. Regular reviews, scenario testing, and after-action evaluations ensure that protocols remain relevant and responsive to shifting threats, political dynamics, and logistical constraints.
- **Local partnerships:** National/local staff and community networks are often the first to detect emerging risks and can provide vital intelligence for decision-making. Empowering them to lead last-mile movement, negotiating safe passage, and identifying culturally appropriate solutions strengthens both operational effectiveness and local trust.
- **Redundancy in systems:** To avoid single points of failure, organizations should maintain multiple communication channels (satellite phones, radios, secure messaging apps), diverse transport options (air, land, maritime), and pre-positioned supply reserves. Redundancy ensures continuity even when one system is compromised.
- **Duty of care:** Beyond physical safety, organizations must prioritize holistic staff well-being. This includes psychosocial support before and after relocations, medical evacuation readiness, and clear communication to reduce anxiety. Duty of care also extends to dependents, ensuring family protection where applicable.
- **Documentation:** Recording incidents such as access denials, checkpoints, or negotiations with armed actors provides evidence for advocacy and accountability. Documentation also strengthens institutional memory, enabling organizations to refine future planning and contribute to collective learning across the humanitarian sector.
- **Collective action:** Coordinated approaches with UN security frameworks, NGO consortia, and humanitarian clusters allow for shared relocation and evacuation assets, harmonized decision-making, and reduced duplication. Collective action enhances efficiency and demonstrates solidarity, reinforcing humanitarian credibility in crisis settings.

- **Training and Preparedness:** Regular drills, tabletop exercises, and staff induction programs are essential to ensure that personnel understand protocols and can act decisively under pressure. Preparedness builds confidence and reduces panic during real emergencies.

10.3 Policy and Governance for Humanitarian Organizations – Relocations and Evacuations

This covers the strategic and regulatory dimension which includes high-level policies, duty-of-care standards, inter-agency coordination frameworks, and government engagement. It ensures that operations are aligned with international norms, organizational mandates, and host-country requirements.

- **Decision-Making Authority:** Clear leadership structures are essential to avoid delays and confusion during crises. Organizations should establish thresholds for relocation versus evacuation, designate decision-makers at both headquarters and field levels, and ensure that authority is delegated appropriately to allow rapid responses when communication lines are disrupted. Transparent criteria for triggering decisions build trust among staff and reduce uncertainty.

- **Standardize Relocation and Evacuation Protocols:** Inter-agency guidelines should harmonize triggers, roles, and responsibilities across humanitarian actors between the various humanitarian organizations. Standardization reduces fragmentation, ensures interoperability, and facilitates joint operations when multiple organizations are affected by the same crisis. Protocols should include minimum standards for safe transport, assembly points, and communication systems, while allowing contextual flexibility. This was a challenge and lesson learned in Gaza, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Ukraine and South Sudan.

- **Invest in Access Negotiation Capacity:** Dedicated teams for deconfliction, bureaucratic clearance, and negotiation with armed actors or authorities are critical in high-risk contexts such as Gaza, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Sudan or South Sudan. The teams should be trained in humanitarian diplomacy, international humanitarian law, and local cultural dynamics, enabling them to secure safe passage and minimize risks during relocations or evacuations.

- **Flexible Funding Mechanisms:** Rapid-release emergency funds are vital to support relocations and evacuations to cover unexpected costs (e.g., chartered flights, medical evacuations) and sustain continuity of operations. Governance structures should ensure that funding mechanisms are transparent, accountable, and adaptable to sudden shifts in operational needs.

- **Duty-of-Care Policies:** Institutionalizing duty of care means embedding psychosocial support, medical evacuation readiness, insurance coverage, and safe housing into organizational policies. These measures demonstrate commitment to staff welfare, strengthen morale, and reduce attrition in volatile environments.

- **Local Responder Enablement:** When international staff relocate, national staff and local partners often remain to sustain operations. Policies should channel resources, authority, and decision-making power to these actors, ensuring they are equipped with training, protective measures, and financial support. This strengthens continuity and reinforces localization commitments.

- **Accountability Frameworks:** Systematic incident reporting, documentation of access denials, and advocacy mechanisms are essential for accountability. These frameworks allow organizations to highlight violations of humanitarian access and staff safety, engage with donors and policymakers, and contribute to collective learning across the sector.

- **Alignment with Inter-Agency Frameworks:** UN agencies must ensure compliance with the UN Security Risk Management System (SRMS) and coordinate through structures such as the Inter-Agency Security Management Network (IASMN) and the UN Security Management System (UNSMS). NGOs should align with SPHERE standards and other NGO inter-agency frameworks (e.g.,INSO) to reduce fragmentation, improve interoperability, and uphold humanitarian principles.

- **Agency Specific Adaptation:** Protocols must be tailored to organizational mandates. For example, UNHCR requires relocation strategies that prioritize protection of staff and displaced populations, while WFP must ensure logistics continuity for food supply chains. Agency-specific adaptation ensures relevance and operational effectiveness.

- **Adaptive Funding:** In addition to rapid release mechanisms, organizations should establish flexible financing models that allow reallocation of resources during emergencies. Adaptive funding ensures that relocation and evacuation measures are not delayed by bureaucratic hurdles and that humanitarian operations can resume quickly after crises**.**

11. Benchmarking Success of a Relocation and Evacuation plan

To benchmark the success of a relocation and evacuation plan on the ground, measurable indicators that capture both operational effectiveness and duty of care outcomes are required. This benchmarking blends operational structure, field guidance, and policy/ governance, and as such, success should be assessed across all three dimensions. Included are also the practical measurement tools.

Operational Structure Benchmarks
- **Timeliness of activation:** How quickly decisions are made and protocols triggered once thresholds are met.
- **Coordination effectiveness:** Degree of alignment between UN agencies, NGOs, and government authorities (measured through joint exercises and after-action reviews).
- **Resource readiness:** Availability and accessibility of pre-positioned logistics (fuel, medical kits, communication equipment).

Practical Field Guidance Benchmarks
- **Safety outcomes:** Number of staff safely relocated/evacuated without incident.
- **Continuity of operations:** Ability to maintain humanitarian delivery (remote management, local partnerships) during and after relocation.
- **Training impact:** Staff confidence and competence demonstrated in drills and real field operations.
- **Incident documentation:** Quality and completeness of staff accountability, GPS tracking, logs, and deconfliction records.

Policy and Governance Benchmarks
- **Duty of care compliance:** Provision of psychosocial support, insurance, and reintegration planning for staff.
- **Government engagement:** Speed and clarity of permissions, deconfliction, and host authority cooperation.
- **Learning and adaptation:** Frequency of plan updates and integration of lessons learned into future planning.
- **Inter-agency harmonization:** Evidence of shared standards (UN, NGO) applied consistently across operations.

Practical Measurement Tools
- **After-action reviews (AARs):** Structured evaluations after each relocation/evacuation.
- **Staff surveys:** Anonymous feedback on safety, wellbeing, and confidence in procedures.
- **Operational metrics:** Time-to-evacuate, percentage of staff accounted for and logistics readiness scores.
- **Knowledge-sharing platforms:** Tracking uptake of lessons learned across agencies.

Ultimately, success is benchmarked by how safely and efficiently staff are moved, whether humanitarian operations continue despite disruption, and how well lessons are institutionalized for future crises.

12. Summary

Humanitarian organizations working in high-risk environments face persistent challenges in ensuring staff safety and sustaining operations amid insecurity and crises. Relocation and evacuation procedures are essential components of contingency planning, yet existing frameworks often lack clarity, consistency, and operational applicability. Effective planning requires relocation and evacuation protocols that prioritize staff safety, protect dependents where applicable, and reduce confusion during emergencies.

This study examined how organizations can strengthen relocation and evacuation planning by analysing current practices, identifying gaps, and drawing lessons from past emergencies. It highlights the importance of aligning policy with practice and emphasizes the need for relocation and evacuation frameworks that are both structured and adaptable to volatile humanitarian contexts. The research underscores that relocation and evacuation are not just logistical exercises but integral elements of humanitarian security risk management. Lessons from South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia (Tigray), Ukraine, Sudan, Lebanon, and Gaza demonstrate this.

Building on policy guidance, field experience and case studies, the study develops an operational framework tailored to high-risk humanitarian environments. This framework blends operational structure, practical field guidance, and policy-level recommendations, integrating emergency preparedness, risk analysis, and adaptive planning as core pillars. By doing so, it provides organizations with a predictable system that reduces uncertainty and enhances resilience during crises.

The framework also bridges the gap between headquarters directives and frontline realities. Practical measures such as redundancy in communication systems, local partnerships, and collective action with other agencies ensure operational continuity. Policy recommendations including flexible funding mechanisms, standardized protocols, and alignment with inter-agency frameworks provide governance support for rapid, coordinated responses. Together, these elements embed accountability, adaptability, and collaboration into relocation and evacuation planning.

13. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that effective relocation and evacuation planning is central to humanitarian security risk management. By transforming these measures from reactive responses into proactive strategies, the proposed framework enhances organizational resilience, safeguards personnel, and ensures the continuity of life-saving assistance in volatile environments. It reinforces the duty of care while upholding humanitarian principles, offering organizations a practical tool to navigate insecurity.

The framework contributes to a more coherent and context-sensitive approach to humanitarian security risk management. By integrating structure, field-level guidance, and governance recommendations, the framework strengthens preparedness and adaptability in the face of escalating insecurity and climate-related disasters. In doing so, it equips humanitarian organizations to sustain operations, protect staff, and maintain credibility in high-risk contexts**.**

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