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World Humanitarian Day: maintaining hope, in times of crisis

Talk about the mental health of aid workers, LWF World Service director says



The LWF team in Northern Iraq distributed food aid to vulnerable families in Summel District in Dohuk Governorate. To respond to COVID-19, the government has issued movement restrictions and other measures which impact on the livelihood of many families. Photo: LWF Iraq

“In the past months, we have seen cases of stress, anxiety and burn-out among our staff.” Maria Immonen, director of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) humanitarian agency, World Service, is very open about the effects COVID-19 had on the almost 9,000 LWF aid workers, in some of the biggest humanitarian operations worldwide.

Confinement, movement restrictions, and the additional danger posed by the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) under often challenging hygienic conditions have made the work of humanitarian staff very difficult. In some LWF project countries, the media promotes narratives that humanitarian staff are considered to be the source and active spreaders of COVID-19. They face distrust and hostility from the communities they are working in.

Stay, and deliver

The majority of LWF employees are national and local staff. Only 50 of the + 9,000 aid workers come from different countries than the ones they work in. Everyone else is from the region, country, often even the community LWF serves. While international aid workers had the possibility to be relocated, this was not an option for national and refugee staff.

“Almost all of our colleagues, including the international staff, stayed” Immonen says. “Only about five went home, mainly because of medical vulnerabilities.” This commitment comes often at great personal cost: because of closed borders, many colleagues are not able to take much-needed breaks and vacation (Rest & Rehabilitation, R&R) which are usual for humanitarian staff in hardship locations. “Some have been in the field for six months or longer”, Immonen says. In addition, counselling and supervision are rarely set up for local implementing partners and incentive staff, who are also at high risk of being infected, stressed and traumatized.

How to keep the faith

Immonen is worried about the long-term impact of the crisis on the resilience of communities and colleagues. For refugees, internally displaced people and vulnerable communities, their lives were already challenged and difficult for many reasons. And now, the virus has already had a massive impact beyond the immediate threat to health. Vulnerable communities face the loss of livelihoods and increasing food insecurity – for years to come: “This crisis will be with us for three or four years, at least,” Immonen says.

With the usual support mechanisms challenged, the situation is also increasingly affecting the resilience and mental well-being of humanitarian staff. “We are glad to see that our colleagues are using the additional offers of counselling and support we are making”, Immonen says. While unable to travel to the project countries, staff at Geneva headquarters are working hard to support those in the field, and give whatever help they can.

Talk about mental health

“So many of the communities we work with are traumatized people. All our staff are in frequent contact with them, many come from these communities. What does it take to maintain hope under these circumstances?”

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– Maria IMMONEN, LWF World Service director

Faith for many colleagues has been a support, and a motivation to keep going. “We see that people rooted in faith sometimes find it easier to deal with the extremes of human life: loss, trauma, and death. Faith provides perspective, and words for the unspeakable. This can help people to share the pain, provide comfort, or seek help,” Immonen says. “Faith also gives a deep perspective of hope in the face of hopelessness, that helps us to carry on.”

The LWF World Service director calls upon donors and partners to provide the resources for staff safety and mental well-being, also for local and incentive staff. “We are very locally based, this is who we are and a great advantage,” she says. “In difficult times like these, we need to make sure we support all our field colleagues in the best way possible.”

By LWF Communications

LWF humanitarian work

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/world-service>

Online press kit - “LWF resources for World Humanitarian Day”

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/world-refugee-day-2020-online-press-kit>