

The Hidden Toll of Aid Cuts: A Humanitarian Worker's Testimony

—The Real Story of Humanitarian Workers Surviving in a Shifting Aid System

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Abstract

The Hidden Toll of Aid Cuts: A Humanitarian Worker's Testimony explores the human and institutional consequences of declining humanitarian funding, with South Sudan serving as the primary case study. The study combines personal testimony with analytical reflection to uncover how abrupt funding cuts, organizational restructuring, and job losses have deeply affected humanitarian workers particularly national staff who form the foundation of aid delivery systems. These disruptions have not only jeopardized livelihoods but also undermined community trust, weakened program continuity, and eroded the social fabric within humanitarian settings. The findings reveal that the sudden loss of employment often leaves staff unprepared to navigate new realities such as unpaid bank loans, economic instability, and family disruptions. Beyond financial hardship, many workers face emotional exhaustion and social isolation as they attempt to reintegrate into communities after years of continuous professional engagement. Despite these difficulties, the study highlights strong adaptive capacities among humanitarian workers. Many respond to uncertainty with remarkable resilience pursuing small-scale consultancies, entrepreneurship, agriculture, or other income-generating activities to sustain their families and preserve their dignity. Adaptation, is not only an economic process but also a cognitive and emotional one. Effective coping is strengthened by peer networks, transparent communication, fair labor practices, and organizational attention to staff well-being. Both national and international staff experience similar vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for solidarity, inclusion, and ethical leadership within humanitarian institutions. In its final reflection, *Silent Heroes*, the book calls for renewed recognition of humanitarian workers as essential actors in crisis response and recovery. Building resilience at both individual and in-

stitutional levels is vital to sustaining ethical, accountable, and durable humanitarian systems. The study concludes that strengthening peer-support structures, enhancing financial literacy, and investing in resilience-building initiatives can significantly improve coping capacity and well-being among humanitarian personnel in fragile contexts like South Sudan.

Keywords

Humanitarian Workforce, National Staff, Resilience, Aid Cuts, Psychosocial Well-Being, Organizational Change, South Sudan

1. Introduction

Humanitarian operations are inherently complex, dynamic, and often conducted under conditions of extreme uncertainty. Within these systems, humanitarian workers play a pivotal role in the delivery of aid implementing programs, coordinating logistics, liaising with local authorities, and building trust with affected communities. Despite their central contribution, their experiences, challenges, and sacrifices often remain underrepresented in both academic literature and operational narratives (Barbelet, 2018a).

When humanitarian priorities shift or funding declines, humanitarian workers are typically the first and most severely affected. They bear the immediate brunt of organizational restructuring, contract terminations, and resource constraints, while others in higher or international positions may experience delayed redeployment or reassignment (ALNAP, 2022a; *The New Humanitarian*, 2025). These disruptions not only affect individual livelihoods but also undermine program continuity and community trust key elements in maintaining effective humanitarian responses.

This book, *The Hidden Toll of Aid Cuts: A Humanitarian Worker's Testimony*, seeks to illuminate these often-unseen realities through the lens of South Sudan a country marked by protracted conflict, recurrent displacement, and chronic resource scarcity. Drawing on personal experience as a South Sudanese humanitarian worker, the study explores the multifaceted impacts of abrupt funding reductions, program downsizing, and organizational shifts on staff well-being, professional identity, and operational effectiveness (Oxfam America, 2025). These phenomena extend beyond the economic realm, encompassing psychological distress, ethical dilemmas, and financial insecurity that affect both individuals and the households dependent on their income.

Humanitarian workers occupy a unique and paradoxical position within aid systems. Their proximity to affected populations, cultural fluency, and contextual understanding make them indispensable for effective and ethical operations (Bradbury et al., 2018a). Yet these same strengths often expose them to greater vulnerability during periods of institutional instability. Sudden layoffs, delayed salaries, and abrupt changes in responsibilities can result in emotional fatigue, reduced

professional confidence, and erosion of trust with the communities they serve (AL-NAP, 2022b). Thus, the human cost of instability is both operational and personal affecting the continuity of programs, staff morale, and the economic stability of families and communities.

Adaptation in such volatile contexts requires multi-layered strategies that encompass cognitive, operational, and emotional dimensions. Humanitarian workers often reorganize their lives by seeking alternative employment, retraining, or initiating small-scale businesses to survive economically. At the same time, they rely on peer support, family networks, and community solidarity to manage the psychosocial strain that accompanies uncertainty and job loss (Mollica et al., 2014a; Hobfoll et al., 2015; Tol et al., 2014).

Institutional practices significantly influence how individuals cope and adapt. Transparent communication, fair labor conditions, and consistent investment in staff well-being are essential components of organizational resilience (IASC, 2020a). The interaction between individual agency, social support, and institutional structures underscores the complex pathways through which humanitarian workers navigate systemic instability.

The repercussions of aid cuts extend well beyond individual staff. In fragile settings like South Sudan, humanitarian workers' incomes often sustain extended families, supporting education, healthcare, and essential living costs (World Bank, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2021). Sudden loss of employment therefore has ripple effects triggering economic insecurity, school dropouts, and increased vulnerability. Communities also experience service disruptions and the loss of trusted intermediaries who facilitate access to humanitarian assistance (Ager et al., 2012a; O'Donnell, 2022). Yet, amid these challenges, resilience emerges. Through community cooperation, volunteerism, and informal leadership, former staff continue to contribute to local recovery and maintain social cohesion.

Ultimately, this work argues that humanitarian effectiveness is not solely determined by funding volumes, technical capacity, or institutional mandates. It is deeply shaped by the people who deliver assistance under the most challenging circumstances. Recognition, protection, and investment in humanitarian workers are therefore vital to ensuring ethical, accountable, and resilient aid systems.

Finally, this book stands as a tribute to the silent heroes of humanitarian response the field workers whose dedication sustains life-saving operations despite uncertainty and personal sacrifice. By amplifying their voices and lived experiences, this work provides evidence-based insights and recommendations aimed at strengthening workforce resilience, improving organizational practice, and ensuring that those who deliver aid are supported, valued, and empowered to continue their essential mission.

Methods and Materials

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of humanitarian staff affected by abrupt aid cuts in South Sudan. Data were collected from 12 semi-structured interviews with both national and international human-

itarian workers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of staff with varied roles, contract types, and years of experience, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

In addition to interviews, a document review of organizational reports, policy briefs, and relevant academic literature was conducted to contextualize participants' experiences within broader debates on humanitarian labor practices, funding fluctuations, and workforce resilience. The study also integrates personal reflections from the author's professional experience in the humanitarian sector.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, whereby interview transcripts and reflective notes were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and coping strategies. This process enabled the triangulation of individual testimonies with organizational and literature-based evidence, enhancing both the credibility and depth of the findings.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from interviews, document reviews, and personal reflections were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved several stages:

Data Familiarization: All interview transcripts and reflective notes were read multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Initial Coding: Key phrases, statements, and observations were highlighted and assigned preliminary codes. These codes captured recurring concepts such as financial strain, psychosocial impact, lifestyle adjustments, and coping strategies.

Theme Development: Related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting the main areas of interest, including financial planning, psychosocial effects of abrupt job loss, lifestyle disruptions, and resilience mechanisms.

Review and Refinement: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were internally coherent. Contradictory or unique perspectives were retained to preserve the richness of the narratives.

Triangulation: Findings from interviews were cross-referenced with document reviews and personal reflections to validate the themes and contextualize individual experiences within organizational and sectoral realities.

2. Chapter One: Driving Forces behind Humanitarian Service

Allah is the One who guides us to make the right decisions, so we should trust His plan and not turn back from it especially when it comes to post-retirement decisions. As He says in the Qur'an: "But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not." (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:216)

In these challenging times, we find solace and strength in the words of our High Commissioner, who reminded us to "stay together, stay with us, stay united" (UNHCR, 2022). He further emphasized that many will not just lose a job, but a way of life. These sentiments resonate deeply with our situation in South Sudan, where

aid cuts and organizational shifts have become daily realities (Smith & Darcy, 2017a). The uncertainty is daunting. Programs are scaled back, offices are downsized, and staff often face the first and most immediate consequences. Emails are deactivated, contracts are not renewed, and long-standing professional identities are suddenly disrupted. Yet, amid these upheavals, maintaining mental well-being, optimism, and solidarity becomes essential (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC, 2020a).

During this period of organizational uncertainty, a counseling initiative was introduced to support staff members affected by restructuring and potential job losses. Field personnel, many of whom had dedicated several years to humanitarian service, exhibited elevated levels of anxiety, fear, and emotional distress associated with employment insecurity (Gupta & Kaur, 2019a). In one counseling session, a logistics officer with over five years of service expressed deep concern about the prospect of unemployment, stating that the loss of work would also represent the loss of a sense of purpose that had long guided professional motivation.

Sessions like this were frequent. Staff described sleepless nights, constant worry about families, and guilt over what they perceived as failing the communities we served (Ager et al., 2015). Some confided that they felt abandoned by a system they had devoted their careers to. Others admitted to questioning their own capacity to continue, wondering if they had the emotional resources to withstand yet another cycle of cuts and layoffs.

During counseling sessions, staff were encouraged to focus on controllable factors, such as engaging in self-care, maintaining professional standards, and fostering peer support (IASC, 2020b). As part of a volunteer initiative coordinated through the Global Staff Council, these sessions aimed to support personnel navigating organizational uncertainty and operational stress. One case involved a young program officer responsible for coordinating food distribution in a remote location, who expressed concern about potential service disruptions resulting from funding reductions. Through guided reflection, the officer was able to recognize that, despite operational challenges, her work contributed positively to community outcomes. This process facilitated the development of coping strategies and reinforced the perceived value and impact of her role (Gupta & Kaur, 2019a).

Humanitarian work is more than a career; it is a calling. For many field staff, motivation is deeply personal a desire to alleviate suffering in one's own country, often rooted in lived experiences of crisis (Bradbury et al., 2018b). Stories begin with a spark: witnessing communities in distress, experiencing personal loss, or being inspired by mentors who dedicated themselves to service. In South Sudan, the realities of displacement, on-and-off insecurity, famine, and health crises are part of everyday life. Those who enter the humanitarian field do so not out of convenience, but out of conviction a commitment to bear witness, act, and advocate for the vulnerable.

On the frontlines, field staff become the lifeline for communities facing multiple vulnerabilities (Slim, 2015). We organize distributions of food, water, and medi-

cines, often under extremely challenging conditions. Roads are impassable during the rainy season, security risks are high, and resources are perpetually limited. International staff may provide guidance or funding, but the operational knowledge, local understanding, and trust-building rest heavily on national teams. We are translators, negotiators, planners, and caregivers all at once.

The work is demanding in every sense. Long hours, emotional fatigue, and repeated exposure to human suffering are constants (Mollica et al., 2014a). We have witnessed staff experiencing depression and burnout due to sad stories they hear from the vulnerable refugees and IDPs. One of the most complex counseling cases involved a father who had lost his children during a flooding incident. The individual exhibited profound grief and initially resisted all engagement or discussion related to his loss. Over several weeks, the application of patient listening and structured counseling techniques facilitated gradual emotional expression and the beginning of the grieving process. This case illustrates that national humanitarian staff frequently support affected populations through severe trauma while concurrently managing their own emotional burdens associated with crisis response.

Motivations vary, but they converge on shared principles. For some, it is personal history with conflict or displacement that fuels empathy. For others, it is the influence of mentors who embodied courage, compassion, and dedication. In every case, the motivation intertwines with resilience the ability to endure uncertainty, adapt to rapid change, and continue serving despite systemic limitations (Bradbury et al., 2018b). This resilience is often invisible in donor reports or evaluations, yet it is central to the functioning of humanitarian systems. Field staff are the glue that holds programs together when international funding fluctuates or when crises escalate unexpectedly (Slim, 2015).

The presentation of these narratives seeks to highlight the lived experiences of field staff, recognizing both the challenges encountered and the successes achieved. These accounts underscore the depth of professional commitment, the ethical dilemmas faced, and the human costs associated with reductions in humanitarian funding. They demonstrate that humanitarian action extends beyond programmatic implementation and measurable outputs; it encompasses the efforts of personnel who operate in demanding environments, often without recognition, yet whose roles are essential to the survival, resilience, and dignity of affected populations.

A volunteer counseling initiative for UNHCR personnel worldwide was established to provide psychosocial support during periods of operational and employment uncertainty. Observations from this engagement revealed the considerable emotional strain experienced by staff, the persistence of those who continued essential service delivery amid instability, and the resilience displayed across diverse operational contexts. The findings presented in this chapter reflect and document that resilience, serves as an acknowledgment of the dedication and professionalism demonstrated by humanitarian field workers globally.

3. Chapter Two: Adapting to Rapid Changes within a Shifting Humanitarian Aid System

“The Liquidity Crisis Is Primarily Due to Arrears, As Some Member States Fail To Pay Their Contributions On Time, Rather Than Structural Issues.” (United Nations UN, 2019) UN Secretary-General António

The humanitarian aid landscape is inherently dynamic, characterized by fluctuating funding streams, shifting priorities, and evolving crises (Harvey, 2018). In South Sudan and similar contexts, these fluctuations are particularly pronounced, with recurring conflicts, natural disasters, and displacement compounding the challenges faced by aid organizations. Humanitarian staff are often at the frontline of responding to these crises, yet they face operational and psychological strain when sudden organizational changes occur (Bradbury et al., 2018b).

Abrupt changes such as funding cuts, sudden program suspensions, and adjustments to operational mandates frequently disrupt the delivery of essential services. Staff must rapidly adapt to maintain program continuity while navigating uncertainty regarding resources, timelines, and institutional directives (Smith & Darcy, 2017a). Such volatility increases stress levels, reduces productivity, and can negatively impact both individual and organizational resilience (Ager et al., 2015).

Many staff members were caught by surprise when contracts were terminated abruptly. However, agencies ensured that end-of-service benefits and pension payments were processed on time, which provided short-term relief and stability. For several staff, this marked an unplanned transition into early retirement. Interestingly, some participants adopted structured financial planning approaches for their pension utilization dividing the total package into portions such as 50% for investment, 20% for basic needs, and 30% for savings to manage future uncertainties. Access to financial literacy resources, either from organizational briefings or peer advice, proved valuable for many in mitigating financial shock. This observation aligns with literature emphasizing that retirement preparedness and structured pension allocation can enhance post-employment well-being (Hershey & Mowen, 2000; Kim & Moen, 2002).

Adaptation in this context relies on a combination of cognitive, operational, and emotional strategies. Problem-focused coping includes reorganizing workflows, prioritizing critical tasks, and leveraging inter-agency networks to sustain service delivery (Mollica et al., 2014a). Organizational support structures, such as clear communication channels, contingency planning, and staff capacity-building initiatives, also enhance resilience and mitigate operational disruption (IASC, 2020b).

National staff play a particularly critical role in navigating humanitarian challenges. Their local knowledge, cultural competence, and strong community ties often allow them to implement solutions more effectively than international staff during periods of instability (Bradbury et al., 2018b). However, these same staff are highly vulnerable to organizational stressors, particularly in environments with unpredictable funding or shifting priorities (Slim, 2015). Addressing their well-

being is therefore both an ethical and operational imperative.

Empirical studies demonstrate that staff adaptability is central to sustaining humanitarian interventions. For example, during emergency water distribution in displacement camps, teams often employ resource reallocation, temporary local partnerships, and flexible program planning to maintain services despite funding or logistical disruptions (Slim, 2015; Gupta & Kaur, 2019b). These adaptive strategies underscore the importance of resilience, collaboration, and proactive planning in rapidly changing operational environments.

Coping and adaptation strategies, as suggested by the respondent, point to the importance of resilience at multiple levels. Encouraging families and communities to diversify income sources and plan for funding fluctuations reflects a shift from reliance on aid to shared responsibility for survival strategies. This aligns with resilience-building frameworks that emphasize local capacity, adaptability, and resource mobilization in the face of humanitarian uncertainty (Béné et al., 2012).

With the growing diversity of skills among humanitarian and development staff, there is increasing potential for professional growth and investment in various sectors. As highlighted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022), empowering professionals to diversify into local enterprise, agriculture, and service delivery contributes significantly to sustainable development and economic resilience. In this context, staff with professional experience can tap into emerging opportunities in farming and agri-animal projects, education and health initiatives, and fixed assets such as plots, housing, and apartment ventures. These fields are not only vital for community empowerment but also for enhancing self-reliance and long-term stability (FAO, 2021).

Moreover, learning from retired professionals and experienced international or national staff remains a valuable strategy for capacity building. Knowledge transfer through mentorship and intergenerational learning has been shown to strengthen leadership, innovation, and adaptability in professional environments (World Bank, 2023). Experienced individuals often possess deep insights into national policies, labor laws, project management, and business strategies, which are critical elements for sustainable success in dynamic work environments.

The establishment of SACCOs (Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations) and staff clubs also plays a central role in promoting collective economic empowerment. According to the International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization, 2020), cooperative financial models enhance savings culture, provide access to affordable credit, and build social solidarity among members. Such mechanisms help employees bridge financial gaps, invest in future ventures, and strengthen their social welfare systems. Our collective lifestyle choices, work ethics, and mutual support will, therefore, shape the future of our families and communities while inspiring those who will follow in our footsteps.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that global climate change will continue to challenge livelihoods across Africa and beyond, regardless of political transitions in global powers such as the United States (IPCC, 2023). However, with resilience,

innovation, and collaboration, local professionals can adapt, lead change, and create sustainable economic pathways. By focusing on resource management, green investments, and community-driven solutions, we can not only improve our societies but also become successful entrepreneurs or even millionaires within our own countries or across the East African region.

As clearly stated by one key informant:

“With our local resilience, let’s improve few areas and become Millioniers in our own country or within EA countries.”

In conclusion, adapting to rapid changes within the humanitarian aid system requires a structured, multi-level approach that combines operational flexibility with organizational support mechanisms. National staff are pivotal to sustaining effective aid delivery, and institutional recognition of their role, alongside robust contingency and support frameworks, strengthens both staff resilience and program continuity. Effective adaptation in humanitarian contexts is therefore as much about managing people and organizational structures as it is about managing resources or logistics.

4. Chapter Three: From Neglect to Recognition: Lessons for Sustainable Humanitarian Systems

“People In South Sudan Have an Extraordinary Ability to Adapt, Survive, And Continue Moving Forward and NGOs Are Just Supplements.” Mr. Tom Lokere

Humanitarian systems are often praised for their life-saving interventions, yet beneath these successes lie structural inequities that affect both national and international staff, particularly during abrupt position cuts. In South Sudan, where humanitarian operations are continuous and high-stakes, national staff often face job insecurity and emotional strain as they bear the operational and community-facing burden of crises. For instance, a local health officer working in a refugee settlement may suddenly be informed that funding for her program has ended, leaving her without a contract while the refugees she serves continue to rely on essential services. International staff, on the other hand, may face sudden redeployments or contract terminations due to shifting donor priorities, leaving them with little time to complete critical programs or hand over responsibilities, exacerbating operational gaps.

A painful reality was clearly stated by one of former humanitarian workers who reflected:

“When you are working you don’t have time with your own people, someone is always busy with working class but now since there is no work, those who are still working don’t have time even to pick your calls?”

This statement captures the emotional and social disconnect experienced by many affected staff. It reflects how job loss not only leads to financial strain but also disrupts social networks and a sense of belonging within professional and community circles.

These abrupt disruptions highlight systemic challenges such as short-term contracts, unequal pay, and limited career progression, which collectively undermine staff well-being and organizational effectiveness (Bradbury et al., 2018a; Gupta & Kaur, 2019b; Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC, 2020b)). National staff, who often live in the communities they serve, risk losing income, social stability, and professional identity when programs end suddenly. Similarly, international staff may experience professional uncertainty and logistical challenges, including relocating families or facing unpaid leave. Both groups are indispensable to humanitarian operations, yet their contributions are frequently undervalued during workforce reductions, leading to decreased morale, burnout, and diminished program quality (Mollica et al., 2014a).

Recognition and protection of staff during abrupt workforce changes require deliberate ethical and operational strategies. Transparent communication regarding organizational restructuring, funding realities, and potential layoffs fosters trust and reduces uncertainty for both national and international staff (IASC, 2020b). For example, in a South Sudanese NGO responding to a flooding crisis, the management began weekly briefings with staff to explain funding uncertainties and potential role adjustments. This small step helped staff feel included in decision-making, reducing anxiety and encouraging collaborative problem-solving. Equitable labor practices—including standardized contracts, fair pay scales, and inclusive decision-making—help ensure that all staff are treated as essential partners rather than expendable resources (Bradbury et al., 2018b). During the COVID-19 response, several South Sudanese aid workers who were initially at risk of losing their contracts received temporary extensions due to advocacy efforts by international colleagues and local networks, demonstrating the power of coordinated recognition.

Sustainable funding models, such as multi-year donor commitments and contingency planning, protect employees from abrupt disruptions and maintain program continuity (Smith & Darcy, 2017b). Investment in psychosocial support, mentorship, and professional development strengthens resilience and capacity across the workforce (Gupta & Kaur, 2019b; Mollica et al., 2014b). Field reports indicate that national staff facing repeated displacement and insecurity often rely on peer networks and counseling services to maintain performance and emotional well-being. Practical lessons from field operations demonstrate that engaging all staff in program planning and evaluation promotes ownership, accountability, and innovation, while documenting their contributions ensures recognition in organizational and donor communications (Slim, 2015). Collective advocacy by both national and international staff in South Sudan has led to improved safety protocols and equitable pay adjustments in some agencies, highlighting the potential impact of unified action.

Sustainable humanitarian systems balance operational efficiency with ethical labor practices and staff welfare. Policies that institutionalize recognition—through awards, career pathways, and support mechanisms—combined with monitoring and accountability structures, reinforce commitment to staff well-being. Acknowl-

edging the critical roles of both national and international employees during abrupt staff reductions is not only a moral imperative but also essential for operational sustainability. By investing in staff resilience, maintaining transparent communication, and institutionalizing equitable practices, humanitarian agencies can ensure that all employees are valued as indispensable partners, ultimately strengthening the effectiveness, ethics, and durability of humanitarian responses.

5. Chapter Four (4): The Human Cost of Humanitarian Downsizing: Adaptation Strategies for Workers and Their Support Networks

“Going through with these cuts will make the world less healthy, less safe, and less prosperous.” António Guterres (UN Secretary-General)

While the operational and financial impacts of funding cuts are well documented, less is known about community responses and how humanitarian staff emotionally, socially, or spiritually cope with uncertainty or the loss of their roles. The psychological toll such as demotivation, anxiety, and reduced morale remains insufficiently explored, despite evidence that staff well-being directly influences aid effectiveness (Ager et al., 2012b; Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). Similarly, the social and spiritual dimensions of coping—through kinship ties, religious faith, or community solidarity—are often overlooked in humanitarian research, even though these mechanisms play a crucial role in resilience and recovery (McKay, 2011).

There are also significant gaps in identifying best practices for adaptation. While strategies such as workload redistribution, diversification of income sources, and volunteer engagement have been reported in certain settings (ACAPS, 2025; UNAIDS, 2025), there is little comparative evidence on which approaches are most effective, under what contexts, and with what trade-offs. For instance, reliance on unpaid volunteer labor may sustain basic service delivery but risks exacerbating exploitation and burnout among already vulnerable staff (Fechter, 2016). Likewise, reducing staff numbers may ensure short-term financial sustainability but undermines continuity of care, trust, and institutional knowledge (ALNAP, 2018).

Addressing these knowledge gaps is essential. Future research must not only document the operational consequences of aid cuts but also investigate the human dimensions of adaptation the lived experiences of staff, families, and communities who bear the weight of global funding decisions. Such insights can inform more resilient humanitarian systems that protect both the dignity of workers and the effectiveness of aid delivery in volatile funding environments.

The humanitarian aid sector is, by nature, a rapidly evolving and unpredictable environment. Funding streams fluctuate, priorities shift, and new emergencies often redirect resources from one program to another. While these changes are part of the operational reality, they frequently translate into abrupt separations for staff either through position cuts, early contract terminations, or organizational restruc-

turing. In contexts like South Sudan, where humanitarian needs are vast and job opportunities are limited, such sudden changes do not merely affect professional careers but also disrupt family livelihoods and community stability. These events can be deeply destabilizing, creating a cascade of personal, social, and economic consequences that require rapid adaptation on multiple fronts (Harvey, 2018; O'Donnell, 2022).

For humanitarian workers, an unexpected loss of employment can lead to immediate uncertainty. The sudden severance from a role—often one tied to a strong sense of mission—can trigger feelings of loss, disorientation, and identity displacement (Ager et al., 2012b). Many aid workers invest years in developing specialized skills, building relationships with communities, and internalizing the humanitarian ethos. When these roles vanish overnight due to funding cuts or strategic shifts, the shock is both professional and personal. Without adequate preparation or transitional support, workers can face a combination of economic strain, psychological distress, and diminished self-worth (Bradbury et al., 2018b). This stress often extends into the household, affecting spouses, children, and extended family members who depend on the stability provided by humanitarian employment (Mollica et al., 2014b).

In adapting to these abrupt changes, humanitarian workers frequently draw upon a mix of cognitive, operational, and emotional strategies. On a practical level, many begin seeking new opportunities within the sector by leveraging their professional networks, updating their résumés, or applying for short-term consultancies. Some pivot towards related fields, such as development projects, community-based organizations, or government programs that value their skill sets. Others engage in capacity-building activities, enrolling in short courses or professional training programs to remain competitive in an increasingly crowded job market (Dara et al., 2021). The use of problem-focused coping strategies—such as reorganizing job search activities, establishing a clear plan for financial management, and diversifying income sources—has been identified as an effective way to reduce the uncertainty that comes with sudden unemployment (Mollica et al., 2014b; Hobfoll et al., 2015).

At the emotional level, workers often need to address the psychological toll of separation. This may involve seeking peer support from former colleagues, joining humanitarian worker associations, or participating in mental health services. In contexts where access to professional counseling is limited, informal support networks become crucial. Friends, faith-based groups, and community elders can provide guidance, moral encouragement, and a sense of belonging during the transition period (Tol et al., 2014). These informal systems not only help maintain emotional stability but also reinforce professional identity until new employment opportunities arise.

The impact of abrupt position cuts extends deeply into family life. For many humanitarian workers in fragile states, their income supports not only the nuclear household but also extended family members covering school fees, medical costs,

and essential living expenses (International Labour Organization, 2021). When a salary stops suddenly, families may face immediate budgetary constraints, forcing them to make difficult decisions such as withdrawing children from private schools, delaying healthcare treatments, or cutting back on nutrition. Adaptive families often respond by pooling resources with relatives, starting small-scale businesses, or engaging in subsistence farming to fill income gaps (World Bank, 2020). In rural or peri-urban settings, these activities can sustain basic needs until formal employment is regained.

Emotional adaptation within families is equally important. Open communication about the situation can help reduce anxiety, particularly for children who may not fully understand the reasons behind lifestyle changes (American Psychological Association, 2022). Families that engage in collective problem-solving planning budgets together, brainstorming income opportunities, or adjusting household roles tend to weather the transition with greater resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2015). In some cases, humanitarian workers' spouses or older children take on additional income-generating activities, temporarily shifting the household's economic structure.

The wider community also feels the ripple effects of humanitarian staff separations. In many areas, local aid workers are more than just employees of an organization; they are trusted intermediaries who connect communities with services, advocate for needs, and mobilize local resources during crises (Ager et al., 2012b). When these individuals suddenly lose their positions, service continuity can be disrupted, eroding community trust in aid organizations (O'Donnell, 2022). This is especially true in remote or conflict-affected areas where field staff form the backbone of operational delivery. Communities may experience frustration, uncertainty, or a sense of abandonment when familiar aid personnel are replaced or withdrawn altogether.

However, communities often demonstrate remarkable resilience in responding to such disruptions. Some rally around the displaced humanitarian worker, offering temporary employment, food support, or small loans to help them through the transition (World Bank, 2020). In other cases, the former staff member remains engaged in volunteer work or informal community leadership roles, continuing to contribute their expertise even without formal pay. This ongoing engagement helps maintain relationships with the community and keeps the worker connected to the humanitarian network, increasing the chances of reemployment when funding returns.

The adaptation process is not the sole responsibility of individuals, families, and communities. Humanitarian organizations play a critical role in ensuring that staff transitions are handled ethically and with foresight. Providing advance notice of position cuts, offering severance packages where possible, and facilitating professional development opportunities can make the difference between a destabilizing job loss and a manageable career transition (International Labour Organization, 2021; Dara et al., 2021). Organizations can also maintain a roster of separated staff, enabling rapid rehiring when new funding becomes available. Such measures not

only support former employees but also preserve community trust and operational continuity.

Progressive agencies are increasingly recognizing the need for structured “off-boarding” processes. These can include mental health support, skills certification programs, career counseling, and networking opportunities (American Psychological Association, 2022). Some organizations partner with local training institutions to offer courses that prepare departing staff for alternative livelihoods. Others maintain alumni networks, allowing former employees to stay connected to agency activities and receive updates about future job openings. These organizational practices strengthen the humanitarian ecosystem by ensuring that experienced staff remain within the broader operational community, ready to return when needed.

In conclusion, adapting to abrupt separations and position cuts in the humanitarian aid system requires a multilayered approach that extends far beyond the individual worker. Successful adaptation involves a synergy between personal resilience, family resourcefulness, and community solidarity, supported by responsive and ethical organizational practices. Humanitarian workers who can navigate these changes without losing their professional identity, families who can mobilize internal and external resources, and communities that remain engaged and supportive all contribute to sustaining the humanitarian mission in the face of instability. In a sector defined by uncertainty, the capacity to adapt is not just a survival skill it is an essential component of humanitarian effectiveness. Building systems that anticipate and prepare for workforce transitions can ensure that both aid workers and the communities they serve remain resilient, connected, and ready to face the next challenge (Harvey, 2018; O’Donnell, 2022).

6. Resilience in Action: Lessons for the Future of Humanitarian Work

“Funding cuts are already significantly constraining the humanitarian community’s efforts to provide assistance to those most in need... many will die because aid is drying up.” Tom Fletcher (UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs & Emergency Relief Coordinator)

This chapter integrates empirical observations, reflective narratives, and practical guidance, presenting an analysis of the multifaceted challenges and adaptive strategies of humanitarian staff in volatile contexts, with a focus on South Sudan. Field personnel operate under conditions of resource scarcity, operational constraints, high-security risks, and abrupt organizational changes, yet remain committed to service delivery and community well-being (Barbelet, 2018; Ager et al., 2015). These experiences highlight the substantial personal and professional costs of humanitarian engagement while demonstrating the resilience, ethical commitment, and innovative capacity necessary to maintain effective interventions in dynamic environments (Bradbury et al., 2018b).

The findings indicate that the effects of job loss among humanitarian workers

are multifaceted, affecting their social, economic, and psychological well-being. Many affected staff reported difficulties in reconnecting with their communities after years of continuous employment, as their busy work schedules had previously limited local engagement. Following job loss, they found that colleagues who remained employed were often too busy to maintain contact, leading to social isolation and detachment. Similar findings were reported by Paul and Moser (2009), who demonstrated that unemployment is significantly associated with social withdrawal and loss of support networks, while Brooks et al. (2015) also linked reduced collegial contact with psychological distress among humanitarian staff.

Financial challenges were another major impact, as most workers were accustomed to the stability of monthly salaries and had little experience managing business risks. The sudden aid cuts exacerbated financial strain, leaving some staff with unpaid bank loans and insufficient time to prepare for income loss. Newer staff, who were economically less stable, experienced severe disruptions to family life, consistent with evidence showing that job insecurity and sudden income loss increase psychological stress and financial vulnerability (Rahman et al., 2022; Ferrie et al., 2015). In response, some individuals sought alternative livelihoods through small consultancies, career shifts, or by taking loans to start small businesses, agricultural projects, or other commercial ventures.

Adjusting to unemployment also emerged as a significant challenge, as the abrupt transition from structured routines to joblessness disrupted individuals' sense of identity and purpose an observation consistent with Brooks et al. (2019), who found that humanitarian workers often struggle with post-deployment adjustment and loss of professional identity. Hobfoll et al. (2018) similarly argued that such transitions can erode self-efficacy and increase vulnerability to stress, especially in contexts lacking structured psychosocial support.

Despite these adversities, many respondents demonstrated resilience by drawing strength from community networks, faith, and shared hardship. Resilience the capacity to adapt positively to adversity has been identified as a critical protective factor in post-crisis settings (Bonanno, 2004). In South Sudan, coping mechanisms included small-scale consultancies, agricultural initiatives, and microbusinesses, reflecting adaptability and proactive problem-solving strategies (Hammond et al., 2023). These coping behaviors, rooted in strong community solidarity, helped affected humanitarian staff maintain hope and gradually rebuild livelihoods in the face of abrupt aid disruptions.

Reflective accounts emphasize the critical role of leadership, ethical decision-making, and self-care in sustaining humanitarian performance. Maintaining professional integrity under high-pressure conditions is depicted as a central component of effective practice rather than a discretionary behavior (Mollica et al., 2014b). Staff consistently highlight the importance of cultivating extensive support networks—including colleagues, mentors, and community stakeholders—which provide guidance, emotional reinforcement, and practical assistance during both anticipated and unforeseen operational challenges (Gupta & Kaur, 2019b). Evidence

from field narratives demonstrates that even minor recognition—being included in planning, acknowledged for contributions, or consulted in decision-making—can significantly bolster morale and maintain motivation in environments characterized by organizational uncertainty (ALNAP, 2022c; Slim, 2015).

Sudden job loss, early retirement, or involuntary program termination emerges as a critical stressor with substantial psychological, social, and economic ramifications. Staff report initial experiences of disorientation, professional identity disruption, and anxiety in response to abrupt contract terminations or project discontinuations, exacerbated by the absence of structured counseling, formal offboarding, and psychosocial support programs within humanitarian organizations (Tol et al., 2014; O'Donnell, 2022). These conditions necessitate reliance on informal coping mechanisms, self-directed adaptation, and peer support.

Humanitarian personnel employ multi-dimensional strategies encompassing cognitive, operational, and emotional adaptation. Cognitive approaches include reflective practices, documentation of operational lessons, and advocacy for systemic improvements. Operational strategies involve proactive career planning, diversification of skill sets, pursuit of short-term consultancies, engagement in volunteer community-based initiatives, and transition into allied sectors such as local NGOs or government programs (Hobfoll et al., 2015; Dara et al., 2021). Emotional adaptation strategies rely on peer support groups, faith-based networks, and community alliances to provide reinforcement, guidance, and validation during periods of uncertainty (American Psychological Association, 2022). These strategies collectively facilitate the maintenance of professional identity, psychological stability, and operational continuity.

Adaptation to early retirement or involuntary job loss also requires proactive identity and career management. Maintaining engagement through mentorship, knowledge transfer, and voluntary sector participation enables continuity of professional purpose. Financial planning, budgeting, and income diversification are essential to mitigate the economic consequences of abrupt workforce reductions, particularly in fragile contexts with limited employment alternatives (International Labour Organization, 2021; World Bank, 2020).



Organizational responsibility is pivotal in supporting staff through transitions. Structured offboarding programs including career counseling, skills certification, mental health support, and networking opportunities enhance resilience and facilitate workforce reintegration (Headington Institute, 2023). Provision of advance notice for contract terminations, transitional support packages, and alumni networks preserves institutional knowledge, operational capacity, and community trust (Oxfam America, 2025). Evidence indicates that such institutional interventions reduce attrition, sustain motivation, and accelerate reintegration of experienced personnel when operational conditions permit.

Beyond individual and organizational strategies, community engagement functions as an essential component of resilience. Local communities often provide informal support including temporary employment, small loans, and volunteer participation enabling displaced or retired humanitarian personnel to maintain sectoral engagement and professional networks. Such mechanisms mitigate the risk of service disruption, preserve community trust, and maintain operational knowledge within local contexts (Ager et al., 2012b; World Bank, 2020).

Sustainable, ethical, and effective humanitarian systems necessitate the prioritization of staff well-being alongside community needs. Investment in psychosocial support, equitable labor practices, professional development, and structured transition programs constitutes a necessary precondition for maintaining operational resilience, ethical integrity, and accountability (Bradbury et al., 2018b; World Health Organization, 2021). Recognizing both national and international staff as essential partners and integrating lessons from reflective field experiences fosters human-centered and durable interventions. The strategies, reflections, and case examples presented herein provide an evidence-based framework for constructing adaptive, accountable, and resilient humanitarian organizations capable of sustaining service delivery in complex and unstable operational environments.

The findings from the key informant interview reinforce the significant multidimensional impacts of aid funding cuts on humanitarian workers and the communities they serve. These results align with existing literature that highlights how financial instability in the aid sector reverberates beyond organizational operations to affect the well-being of staff and beneficiaries (Ager et al., 2012b; Slim, 2015).

Psychologically, the reported demotivation and feelings of being unappreciated resonate with studies that document how humanitarian staff experience burnout and reduced morale when their contributions are undermined by structural challenges such as funding shortfalls (Loquercio, Hammersley & Emmens, 2006). This underscores the need for organizations to strengthen recognition systems and psychosocial support mechanisms to mitigate negative effects on staff mental health.

Economically, the degradation of living standards among staff families echoes research showing that national humanitarian workers in particular face heightened precarity, as their income is often the sole means of household support (Fechter,

2016). Aid cuts therefore not only impact staff directly but also ripple out to their dependents, amplifying vulnerability within communities already affected by crises.

Operationally, the interview highlighted delays in service provision due to reduced staffing. This finding supports broader analyses of humanitarian downsizing, which note that funding volatility disrupts continuity of care and diminishes trust between aid providers and communities (ALNAP, 2018). Such gaps can have life-threatening consequences in fragile contexts like South Sudan, where timely intervention is critical.

Coping and adaptation strategies, as suggested by the respondent, point to the importance of resilience at multiple levels. Encouraging families and communities to diversify income sources and plan for funding fluctuations reflects a shift from reliance on aid to shared responsibility for survival strategies. This aligns with resilience-building frameworks that emphasize local capacity, adaptability, and resource mobilization in the face of humanitarian uncertainty (Béné et al., 2012).

Overall, the results highlight the interconnected nature of funding cuts, where financial decisions at the organizational level create cascading effects on staff well-being, household economies, operational efficiency, and community resilience. Addressing these challenges requires not only advocacy for more predictable funding but also internal organizational reforms that prioritize staff welfare and support locally led coping mechanisms.

Majority of the study population suggested that early retirement can be rewarding if undertaken with careful financial planning. Respondents cautioned against impulsive expenditures—such as purchasing vehicles, constructing large unfinished houses, or remarrying—which often lead to rapid depletion of pension savings. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of saving at least 70% of pension funds in secure accounts or low-risk investments, while allocating the remaining 30% to sustainable ventures such as agriculture, poultry, or animal farming. Such practices were seen as crucial to maintaining financial stability, long-term security, and peace of mind in retirement, consistent with literature highlighting the role of prudent financial management in safeguarding post-retirement well-being (Kim & Moen, 2002; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

The majority of participants also highlighted the psychosocial consequences of sudden job loss. When UNHCR announced a one-month notice of downsizing, a peer support team—trained by HQ staff counselors—was mobilized to provide emotional assistance. While this support was valued, testimonies revealed that for many staff the termination of contracts was experienced not simply as unemployment, but as a form of forced early retirement. Limited job opportunities and the sporadic nature of humanitarian emergencies in South Sudan exacerbated this sense of premature exit from the workforce, echoing findings from studies on humanitarian workforce vulnerability and occupational stress (Ager et al., 2012b; Connorton et al., 2012).

Participants consistently reported severe disruption to livelihoods. Many staff

with long-term contracts had adjusted their lifestyles on the assumption of job security—enrolling children in international schools, relocating families to safer cities, and making financial commitments tied to steady income. The abrupt end of contracts forced these arrangements to collapse, leaving many without alternative income sources, which aligns with research on the economic precarity faced by humanitarian workers in resource-limited settings (McAlister et al., 2019).

Finally, testimonies underscored the resilience of people in South Sudan as a critical coping resource. Respondents noted that this resilience has enabled humanitarian workers and their families to endure financial shocks, adapt to unstable conditions, and maintain a sense of continuity despite adversity. This observation is consistent with resilience theory, which emphasizes the capacity of individuals and communities to withstand stressors and reorganize in the face of uncertainty (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018), and with humanitarian workforce studies highlighting resilience as a protective factor against burnout and psychosocial distress (Ager et al., 2012b).

In March 2025, UN Women conducted a rapid global survey to assess the impact of funding reductions on local women-led organizations operating in crisis contexts. The survey included 411 organizations across 44 countries. Findings indicate significant operational and financial strain: 90% of respondents reported adverse financial effects, nearly 50% anticipated closure within six months, and a majority had already reduced staff or suspended critical services (UN Women, 2025). These results underscore the severe vulnerability of local women-led organizations to fluctuations in humanitarian funding.

These global findings mirror the experiences of humanitarian organizations in South Sudan, where abrupt aid cuts similarly jeopardized operations, disrupted essential services, and compelled staff to reduce personnel or suspend programs. The parallels highlight the broader systemic vulnerability of civil society and humanitarian actors to funding fluctuations, particularly affecting groups with limited financial reserves or alternative revenue streams. Such patterns underscore the urgent need for sustainable funding strategies and targeted support mechanisms to ensure continuity of critical services in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.

Policy Implications: Recommendations for Sustainable Humanitarian Workforce Management

Enhance Financial Literacy and Planning: Humanitarian organizations should provide training and guidance on financial management, encouraging staff to save a substantial portion of their income in secure or low-risk investments and to plan proactively for periods of income instability.

Enhance Financial Literacy and Preparedness: Humanitarian organizations should integrate financial management training into staff development programs. This includes guidance on savings, low-risk investment options, and financial planning to help employees prepare for potential income interruptions resulting from funding cuts or organizational restructuring.

Strengthen Psychosocial Support Systems: Establish or reinforce peer-support networks, confidential counseling services, and staff well-being initiatives to address the emotional and psychological challenges associated with sudden job loss or contract termination. Early-warning mechanisms can help identify and support at-risk staff before crises escalate.

Provide Transitional and Safety-Net Assistance:

Develop targeted transitional assistance programs for affected employees, including severance packages, temporary stipends, relocation support, or job placement services. These measures can cushion the immediate impact of funding disruptions and facilitate smoother career transitions.

Promote Sustainable Livelihood Options:

Encourage and support staff engagement in sustainable income-generating activities such as agriculture, poultry, or small-scale entrepreneurship. Capacity-building initiatives in business management and vocational skills can enhance self-reliance and economic resilience.

Build Organizational Resilience and Flexibility:

Humanitarian agencies should strengthen contingency planning and adopt flexible staffing models that allow for rapid adaptation to funding fluctuations. Scenario-based workforce planning can ensure operational continuity during financial uncertainty.

Leverage Community and Family Support Networks:

Recognize the critical role of family and community resilience in staff coping mechanisms. Integrating family-centered support measures and community engagement into staff welfare policies can enhance overall workforce stability.

Advocate for Predictable and Equitable Funding:

Collaborate with donors and policymakers to promote multi-year, flexible funding arrangements that prioritize national staff retention and capacity strengthening. Stable financing is essential for reducing operational vulnerability and ensuring continuity of humanitarian assistance.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its focus on South Sudan may limit the generalizability of findings to humanitarian contexts in other countries.

Second, while the inclusion of personal reflections provides valuable insider perspectives, it may also introduce potential bias due to the author's own experiences in the sector.

Despite these limitations, triangulation with interviews and document reviews helps to enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings.

Conclusion: Honoring Humanitarian Workers and Strengthening Systems

The Hidden Toll of Aid Cuts: A Humanitarian Worker's Testimony highlights the

experiences of humanitarian staff in volatile, resource-limited settings, with a focus on South Sudan. The study shows that effective humanitarian interventions depend not only on funding, logistics, and planning but fundamentally on the resilience, expertise, and ethical commitment of those delivering aid. Abrupt program changes, contract terminations, or early retirement create emotional, social, and economic challenges that extend into families and communities. Despite these pressures, humanitarian workers demonstrate remarkable adaptability, employing coping strategies such as peer and community support, career planning, and income-generating initiatives. Yet, the absence of structured counseling, offboarding, and psychosocial support amplifies the personal toll, highlighting the need for workforce-centered institutional interventions. Sustainable humanitarian systems require recognition, transparent communication, equitable labor practices, and professional development to strengthen both individual and organizational resilience while maintaining trust with communities. By acknowledging the human cost of aid disruptions and implementing robust support mechanisms, organizations can honor the contributions of humanitarian workers, foster adaptive and ethical practices, and ensure that humanitarian action continues effectively to meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full Meaning
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resources
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
USD	United States Dollar
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
WHO	World Health Organization
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
ILO	International Labour Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
MoH	Ministry of Health
CRA	Commission for Refugee Affairs
IOM	International Organization for Migration

Appendix One (1): Ethical Considerations and Consent

Dear Colleagues,

I, Dr Sebit Mustafa Sebit, PhD, am conducting a research study titled: “The Hidden Toll of Aid Cuts: A Humanitarian Worker’s Testimony—The Real Story of Humanitarian Workers Surviving in a Shifting Aid System.”

The purpose of this study is to explore how abrupt aid funding cuts affect humanitarian staff in South Sudan, focusing on the psychological, economic, and operational challenges they face. The research also seeks to highlight resilience strategies at the individual, family, community, and organizational levels that can help sustain effective aid delivery.

You are invited to contribute by responding to the guiding question below:

Guiding Question

Based on your personal or professional experience, how have aid funding cuts affected humanitarian staff, and what strategies have you observed or practiced that help workers, families, communities, and organizations adapt to these challenges?

Confidentiality and Consent

Participation in this study is voluntary. All information you provide will be used only for academic purposes and will remain confidential. By choosing to respond, you are giving your informed consent to participate under these conditions. Your insights will add valuable perspective to this study and help strengthen understanding of humanitarian staff experiences.

Thank you for your time and contribution.

Sincerely: Dr. Sebit Mustafa, PhD, sebison81@gmail.com

Appendix Two (2): About the Author



Dr. Sebit Mustafa Sebit, PhD in Public Health, is a public health expert, humanitarian practitioner, and researcher with extensive experience in refugee and emergency settings. He currently serves on the PhD Advisory Committee at Texila American University and volunteers with the founding team of the Islamic University of South Sudan.

Dr. Sebit has held key roles in humanitarian and public health initiatives, including work with UNHCR on refugee health programming, serving as an M&E Specialist with Action Against Hunger International (AAHI), and contributing to public health programs with the Ministry of Health in South Sudan.

An accomplished academic, he played a pivotal role in establishing the Islamic University of South Sudan and has served as Adjunct Assistant Professor of Public Health at the University of Juba, mentoring students in research and data analysis using SPSS, Epi-Info, ENA, KoboToolbox, and Excel. He has published numerous research papers on public health and data management and is the author of the

book *The Nubi Reverse Migration to South Sudan: The Story of the Most Neglected Stateless Person in the World*. His research interests span child survival, M&E, Public Health, nutrition, and social studies, including notable work on the reverse migration of Nubians in East Africa to South Sudan. In addition to his academic and humanitarian contributions, Dr. Sebit serves as Information Management Advisor on the Board of Trustees for Tawasul Humanitarian Islamic Organization. He brings extensive experience working in remote, challenging, and insecure environments, effectively bridging humanitarian action, public health leadership, and academic research. Sebit81@gmail.com