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The Evolution of Aid Protection: a future informed by Afghanistan

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Abstract

The need for protection during complex crises is unremitting. Studies spanning the past decade prove humanitarian aid workers are at great risk while working within conflict zones and insecure contexts. This influx is due to the proliferation of politicization of humanitarianism, donor involvement, and lack of communication between involved parties. This exploratory study uses longitudinal data collection by way of semi-structured qualitative interviews. The research examined how humanitarian workers' need for protection, while providing aid to Afghanistan, will change the future of humanitarian response.

It was concluded that although in the past decade, on-site actors felt they had enough physical protection, especially in regard to rapid-onset incidents, they vocalized the urgent need for psychological protection. The future of humanitarian response must understand that burnout, PTSD, and mental health issues are besetting these workers. Results spoke to the effects of protective protocols set in place mid-way through the crisis in Afghanistan. The impediment of community engagement and restraining aid workers to their offices ultimately created more work. Reflecting on the strategies of humanitarian action employed in this emblematic crisis will have a great impact on many individuals' futures and should be significant in the tailoring of new operations in humanitarian response.

Key words: Humanitarian aid, Afghanistan, protection, safety, protocols, armed-conflict, response, mental health, exploratory study, qualitative data

Introduction

Humanitarian roles have shifted as it continues to grow from a grassroots initiative, an innate human centered desire to help and assist, into a profession that co-exists with complex societies and complex emergencies. "The massive humanitarian crises have shown that the 'safe havens' humanitarian action were originally meant to provide have become targets of political violence" (De Lauri, 2018). Some of these past experiences have instigated a wave of humanitarianism and political fusion. With the growth of complex-crisis, we are seeing increased manipulation from military and political forces, top-driven initiatives, coercions due to financial ties and collaboration with organizations. Accountability within the humanitarian institution is imperative. The rapid pace and fluidity of today's conflicts enable the industry to move onto the next crisis before honestly evaluating the previous.

Two decades after the insurgent group was removed, once again, a rebel-to-party transition prevailed in Afghanistan; the Taliban coming to power. During the conflict in Afghanistan, aid organizations and humanitarian workers have made great efforts to stabilize the state. However, with ever changing politics and the need for protection, humanitarian work has become more dangerous and increasingly complex.

This study seeks to understand the trajectory of humanitarian workers by examining their function within Afghanistan. In this respect, part of accountability and future planning is derived from reflecting on the past. This research will examine how humanitarian workers' need for protection, while providing aid in Afghanistan,

will change the future of humanitarian response.

A few lessons from the earlier years of crisis in Afghanistan have been implemented. Research will seek to evaluate lessons derived from the first half of the conflict. Cimino's report shows violence against aid workers increased four-fold over the past decade. Pointing out that the rise was not universal but led by Afghanistan (Cimino, 2020, p.3). What has that taught the aid industry? In context, this research will bring important understanding to future operations in hope for better consequential realities for humanitarian actors by examining Afghanistan as a case study. This study will consider the relevance of impartiality. It will ask how the protective measures affected aid workers ability to operate, and how political involvement impedes or benefits aid workers.

Humanitarians should take advantage of 'failing up.' The widely known posture of using failure as a catalyst for growth and greater understanding. Humanitarianism as an institution has a unique advantage of learning from crisis to crisis. It can implement major change and apply solutions in rapid real time scenarios. These overall concepts are learned from scenarios that should utilize data to translate to correcting policy. In Schweizer's journal, 2004, he acknowledges inspiration from a number of experiments, integrating humanitarian action into policy frameworks as responses to past conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda. Agreeably, it is critical to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to respond more appropriately for the future. It is necessary to adapt procedure and response due to learned experiences. Thus Afghanistan should be considered.

Indicative of the evolution of protective issues over the last two decades, one can witness the changing systems. Afghanistan is no novelty. Humanitarian Policy group, 2020[1], provides a curt summation of important timeline cases including the 2009 Sri Lanka conflict spurring new reports. Notably the 'Rights Up Front' report, that has shaped the UN's future architecture of protective approaches. Syria caused the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, IASC, in 2013 to affirm the protection of humanitarian action. Next moving into the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit which majorly emphasized the safeguarding of humanitarians. And the years, conflicts and need for protection continues on. "Such a wide-ranging, extensive protection framework has increased the risks, and the reality, of a fragmented approach and an overly complex agenda for…leadership to take forward" (Bowden & Metcalfe-Hough, 2020, p.5).

Older arguments from Kouchner insist, "it is not so much that humanitarians need to learn to be political as States must learn to be humanitarian," and Braumann's somewhat opposing belief; political independence was an important ethical principle for humanitarian action (Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 2004). As this field matures, the approach to assistance changes due to specific crises. But there needs to be clarity on the future of humanitarian aid. Since 9/11, 2001 soft-power, hard-power, and politics "have become increasingly and intentionally intertwined… This merger both drives and reflects how donor countries' national interests impact international development in general and how the politics of

western aid is being securitized, especially in areas considered conflict hot-spots" (Fisher & Anderson, 2015, Harald & Lie, 2020, p.3).

There have been many approaches in regards to aid workers providing on-site assistance. More recently the trend of " 'humanitarian' military interventions and the involvement of organizations during peace-building operations" have revamped conversations on the moral legitimacy of using humanitarian assistance as political leverage, conflict resolution and nation-building (Schweizer, 2004, p.554). However, that approach, now over a decade old, has shown the repercussions of such involvement. This is something learned from Afghanistan. This is something still being argued and analyzed within the community and should continue to be evaluated by those that were involved first hand

Significance and Relevance

To contextually frame this research interest, the crisis in Afghanistan has become a particularly watched political development. A lynchpin case for this decade in terms of international relations, the redefinition of aid, and the argument of impartiality; a humanitarian principle (Holandesa, 2020). Globally, this could impact not only the regional powers, but the international community and the aid institution as a whole.

For the purpose of this study, the 'conflict' timeline will be referring to the last 21 years. It is important to place time parameters on this study since it is referencing a State with a

1. Bowden, M., & Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2020, November). Humanitarian diplomacy and protection advocacy in an age of caution. Humanitarian Policy Group.

history of multiple conflicts. It is a country with chronic insecurity and insurgency. This study is focused on the past 21 years and refers to the conflict, which is also known by some as The War On Terror. This timeline provides ample examples of political correlations that overlapped humanitarianism, international politics, and global views. It can also be argued that the State is still in crisis. Although the American military has been evacuated, there are thousands of people in need. For these reasons it is significant to provide clarity on which part of Afghanistan's history is being referenced.

The Taliban's relationship with aid workers during the war shifted certain humanitarian approaches. This is important to notice. The Taliban's approach to kidnapping humanitarian workers and multiple bombings can validate some contributions to the rise in data. Attacks on aid workers worldwide rose. 2001 resulted in a total of 29 documented incidents compared to 2020's, 276 major aid worker attacks2 (Major Attacks on Aid Workers, 2021). Economically, Afghanistan is currently one of the world's "most aid-dependent countries. Donors have invested $65BN in grants since 2002" (Watkins, 2021). This topic is relevant due to the future of response during insecure conflicts, the way aid workers operate and the safety for all. It is important to examine growth, change and take into account the conduct of a powerfully large industry.

In order to move forward with future aid operations extensive historical data must be considered. Equally, new research is imperative. As mentioned, this is not the first consequential case in terms of changing strategies in the humanitarian sectors, but Afghanistan is proving

to be this century's vignette case.

How will humanitarian workers need for protection, while providing aid in Afghanistan, change the future of humanitarian response? What can the humanitarian sector learn from their strategies within Afghanistan? What was successful? How did collaboration and communication impact safety measures?

Four components can be compiled in tier-like contextual categories which help expound on the significance and relevance of this study and its complex topic:

Political impact

> The political impact incorporates the consequences of protection and ability to assist vulnerable populations while governments are politicizing the conflict and strong-arming organizations. Leveraging protective assistance for manipulated aid.

> The impact can also fall on negative externalities, infusion of conflict from the sending to the receiving state due to the geopolitical relationships, rebel mobilization, rebel validation and political affiliation of humanitarian organizations and the Afghan people.

Economic impact

> This involves the ramifications of humanitarian organizations following donor wishes or assuming donors desire actors to continue working when they are in unnecessarily dangerous situations. As well as the lack of funding based on reputation, safety, or global media

popularizing the conflict.

» Humanitarian actors unable to reach the Afghan community due to checkpoints, blockades or turf wars. Inability to secure donor funding because dangerous zones impede access which causes lack of program completion.

Environmental impact

» This involves the consequences of the refugees receiving assistance, with aid blocked or organizations having to leave due to endangerment. The increasing danger to aid workers also increases harm toward civilians.

Sociocultural impact

» The social complications of humanitarian workers needing more protection can be subsumed from social disorder, complexity of political strife and partnerships with government donors as well as support from military engagement. This support alludes to some Afghan communities that aid organizations are not impartial.

General Parameters

The general parameters are based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with six serving and former humanitarian workers, officials, researchers and investigative journalists. A conversation spanning experiences of humanitarian protection, political impact, funding and future responsibilities. In-depth literary and second-hand comparative research is included in this study. The overall purpose is to ameliorate the ongoing conversation of

humanitarian development; an institution that requires greater accountability and greater processing systems. The humanitarian sector is in need of accountability, cross-communication and teamwork.

To generally hypothesize, these interview samples would add insightful interpretations of protection issues, policy, and lessons learned for future development. Informative dialogue should draw on their experiences to highlight opportunities to advance strategies and urge engagement, as a critical tool to uphold the protection of humanitarian workers, and ensure intended outcomes in complex crises. In other words, if interviewees who were a part of this conflict spoke of their experiences, then participants would contribute enlightened reality and reflection to a globally significant crisis because the important lessons to learn from said crisis need to be applied to a new era of aid.

Alternatively, it is expected to discover that mre protection is needed. That the humanitarian standard of impartiality and neutrality are an impossibility, and will forever be a standard of the past, an ideal more than a reality. It is also assumed to hear corroboration of past research. That external decisions from donors and top-down design cause misdiagnosis and unwise strategy for the workers on site. And finally to establish that enforced protection of aid workers impeded their ability to work and fully succeed in their programs — which there is currently minimal data to prove this theory.

Operational Definitions

During the research process, *'protection'* and *'safety'* will be measured. For the sake of reliability, these are terms that require operational definition. For use in this study, the word *protection* is regarding protection against physical danger and harm, manipulation which could also manifest in 3rd party ransom. *Protection* includes physical and psychological protection from rebel groups, governments, internal organization structures, and non-state armed groups, NSAGS. *Protection* in this instance is protection of the humanitarian actor themselves. Not the protection of civilian, beneficiary or Afghan.

In terms of *safety,* this is speaking directly to physical safety. Safety of physical danger, ransom, harm, robbery and so on. Was the person free to move about? Is the person uninjured? The word *safety* in this instance is toward the humanitarian actor and their whereabouts. Was it safe for them to operate in that area? Could they move freely without fear of death, exploitation, kidnapping, assault, robbery, explosions and so on. Could they do their job without being in danger? To be safe meant they were secure and their well-being was intact and considered.

Finally, to define humanitarian aid actors or aid workers. The *humanitarian actors* are all of the professionals taking action or participating in the humanitarian industry. For this study, they are the on-site professionals, operating within Afghanistan. The humanitarian aid workers participating in the Afghanistan conflict. This report will use humanitarian aid workers and actors synonymously.

Literary Review

The literary review covers multiple studies pertaining to humanitarian action, humanitarian protection, policy, the Taliban, and alternate parties involved in this conflict. Its scope is largely set within the parameters of the case of the Afghan conflict, however some outliers do exist including the international community and global governments. These outliers extended into humanitarian action in other regions with international aid workers. The focus was set on the ability to deliver aid safely and effectively, the protection and political agendas of humanitarian workers, as well as focusing on the relationship between 'impartial' humanitarian actors and the armed groups involved in the conflict. These explored the relationships between humanitarian groups, the government, and the Taliban.

Patterns were discovered in the methods used tocollect research within these research studies. All of these studies used primary sources through methods of interview, and secondary sources through literary reviews to collect data. With the exclusion of one; which used a triangulation method with both interviews, literary reviews, and the addition of a questionnaire. In general, the majority of literature surrounding this topic uses qualitative protocols to emphasize the need for protection of humanitarian actors in conflict zones and provides evidence that humanitarian sectors are increasingly becoming more dangerous. Sample sizes were all together on the smaller side due to the nature of the topic and the possible dangers of extracting sensitive information. Contrarily, Overseas Development Institute, ODI, an organization spearheading research in this region around armed groups,

were able to gather well rounded interviews. They recorded samples of engagement from all sides of the conflict;160 participants.

The review of the chosen literature uses the thematic method to outline and draw analytical comparison of themes. The recurring topics that emerged were the following: politicization of humanitarian action and communication between all parties all surrounding the general emphasis of protective needs. All themes have emerged from research using established frameworks, and most confirm and add to established knowledge in the field.

Theme: Politicization of humanitarian action

Research hypothesizes the need to find achievable independence, in order to "enhance operational security" from politics in order to project an image of neutrality (Stoddard et al., 2009). Years later, ODI proves that one cause of increased risk is due to the appearance, and the fact, of governmental influence on aid work. Political connection to humanitarian action is shown to exacerbate insecure contexts. To elaborate, "widespread suspicion of aid agencies also supports an inclination to ban access or any desire to allow it" (Jackson et al., 2012, p.31). Political affiliation, even accepting monetary support, affects humanitarian agency reputation with armed groups, such as the Taliban. Donor expectations of said aid workers has deteriorated humanitarian workers' impartiality (Jackson et al., 2012). Contrastingly, donor relations can deteriorate with agencies due to humanitarian collaboration with opposing parties, like

the Taliban. All the literature describes this multidimensional relationship as complex.

"Attacks on aid workers in the most insecure contexts were increasingly politically motivated, reflecting a broad targeting of the aid enterprise as a whole" (Stoddard et al., 2009, p.1). Inviting certain Non-State armed groups, NASAGS, to the conversation around international law and governance is beginning to be thought about, and peace-plans have begun to be redefined (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021). However, many officials don't consider changing their normative policy practices (Jackson et al., 2012). More proof supporting its benefits needs to be brought forth (Somer et al., 2020). ODI has begun to talk about risk mitigation by politically engaging with NSAGS instead of isolating them during conflict. Again, this is in effort to encourage the international community towards new approaches (Cimino et al., 2020).

2020 data published has found 27% of development practices are peace and security-related within the top fifty-affected countries (Cimino et al., 2020). There is hopeful development in 2020 for an integrated approach to peace-building (Cimino et al., 2020). A conversation around the word 'peace' is moving from a single definition to applying it as a concept." 'Peace' is not intended as the absence of a violent conflict, but as a more complete concept of social harmony, economic prosperity, good governance, cultural dialogue, non-discriminatory enjoyment of fundamental freedoms and human rights by all" (Cimino et al., 2020, p.137).

Overlapping themes were found during review,

on the insistence that the industry come to terms with the inevitable changing operational reality. Research shows frustrations are growing between aid protection and on-the-ground relations between groups. There is some misrepresentation and miscommunication between reality and upper-level management. However, it has not yet been translated into policy changes (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021). Luckily, it is announced upon Cimino's report (2020), that the 2030 peace-building plans will "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels [and] develop effective accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" (P.137).

Clearly, "reconciling what are at times competing agendas continues to be a major challenge" (Bowden & Metcalfe-Hough, 2020, p.3). This is an industry argument. Naturally, organizations have different priorities but distinction should be made. If a focus is development or peace building work, then do that. But it should not then be claimed as humanitarian action. Not communicating true mission statements is a factor that is challenging the reputation and creating large-scale issues, especially when it comes to translating humanitarianism to people outside the industry bubble. The 'humanitarian mission creep,' coined by Barnett (2011), declares that the ethos of the humanitarian principles are pressured and stretched, and gradually truncated. Harald and Lie's research, 2020, provides an example of such practice:

> The humanitarian present — i.e. the idea that humanitarian action is about the here and now, not what occurs before or after the crisis is being undermined by

humanitarian involvement in prevention and reconstruction activities…which traditionally has been the scope of development aid — but 'as humanitarians began imagining how to build peace after [or before] war, they slipped into building states' (ibid.: 3), which undeniably verges on politics and thus has a poor fit with the A-political humanitarian principles (p.3).

Donors to government connections are increasing their ties to the way humanitarian actors can function and, opposing sides, such as the Taliban are viewing actors as components to governmental goals or politicizing aid. These reasons have increased aid workers' exposure to risk causing a greater need for protection. If agencies can brainstorm new ways to operate and build programs without the purse strings of governments, reputations and impartiality could stay intact — enabling more secure environments. "There is no novelty in stating that both humanitarian and development aid produce political effects (Yamashita, 2015, p.11).

Theme: Communication between all parties

"The reach of Taliban governance demonstrates they do not have to formally occupy territory to control what happens within it" (Jackson, 2018, p.5). Governments aside, rebel parties such as the Taliban controlled areas in the region — including control over how humanitarian actors could conduct their work. "Those who were able to exert leverage and bargain…get better terms for themselves and their communities" (Jackson, 2018, p.29). Not only is open communication

important for aid workers to safely do their jobs, but the studies show communication provides insight into non-government actors (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021, Cimino, 2020, Jackson, 2018, Somer et al., 2020). There are areas with multiple authorities attempting to impose their rule. With this delicate balance, risk mitigation can be established with the solution of discussion (Jackson, 2018). It is shown the Taliban "encourage government service delivery as long as this is according to their rules" (Jackson, 2018, p.29). Communication opens up opportunities for the greater transparency that is needed in complex conflict (Cimino et al., 2020). Now, this is a parallel process, but it should be a communal operation (Somer et al., 2020).

It has been said no one would suggest revising the law of naval warfare without consulting the world's navies (Sassòli, 2019). Organizations are beginning to call for dialogue between themselves — both on state and international levels (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021). These documents agree that with the occurrence of violence against humanitarian actors, solutions should be collectively resolved, but they are usually handled at the individual level (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021 Gode, 2014). Interagency and global coordination should be occurring (Stoddard et al., 2009). Information is not communicated with partner organizations, which can also implicate reputations of all aid organizations in the eyes of the Taliban and other NSAGS (Jackson, 2018). Truly, insecure environments are an 'all parties conflict' and suggestions toward inviting all groups to negotiation tables are surfacing as a third solution (Somer et al., 2020). This research plans to pull

information from many multi-level participants and add to this lack of communication and in turn, coordination.

Stoddard's research in 2009 discovered two choices in reaction to increased violence; withdrawing or "running intolerable risks to the lives of staff and partners" (p.10). This is in alignment with Gode's (2014) discoveries of risk-taking. He emphasizes the withdrawal and bunkering of humanitarian workers to mitigate attacks. But that bunkering of aid seems to defeat its own purpose (Gode, 2014). Despite strides in security, humanitarian agencies still face dilemmas in insecure environments (Stoddard et al., 2009). These researchers agree in many ways that "short-term adaptations often compromise long-term security" (Stoddard et al., 2009, p.1).

Secondary research speaks to the interplay of safety and reputation. Reporting of security incidents leads to frustrated donors (Gode, 2014, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2021). Some donors claim that risk and humanitarian actors go hand-in-hand, or come with the job, resulting in under-reporting attacks from the organizations themselves (Gode, 2014). This complicates the aspect of the need for communication. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2021) also confirmed the loss of funding due to reporting of security incidents with humanitarian actors.

Altogether, experience in Afghanistan was perceived as a profoundly sharp example to the "difficulties in developing a unified approach" (Bowden & Metcalfe-Hough, 2020, p.8). Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough's (2020) research study described the efforts required to get development actors, human rights, political actors, military,

humanitarian and security people to share information. Claiming it was the most difficult. Yet, communication with more than oneself proves beneficial to the masses. Still, shared analysis and information across party lines is not present enough. "Even within the UN that was difficult" (Bowden & Metcalfe-Hough, 2020, p.8). Mediating the responsibility to protect aid workers and the beneficiary population is quite a workload, yet gatekeeping intelligence will not assist anyone's working goals.

Methodology

This study, examining how humanitarian workers' need for protection, while providing aid to Afghanistan, will change the future of humanitarian response, was built on a theoretical framework utilizing an exploratory approach. This inductive process will be used to guide, seek new insight, and question what is truly happening in the current world of humanitarian response rather than prescribe blanketed solutions. How will the need for protection, while providing aid to Afghanistan, change the future of humanitarian response?

The design of this study was informed by results of previous qualitative studies from ODI and other strategic and policy institutes, as seen in the above literature review. Longitudinal data collection by way of qualitative interviews have been developed and executed. However, rather than revisiting the same individual participant, this study is longitudinal by way of analyzing the country over a protracted time period. It is important to note that some participants did return on numerous occasions, over a span of

years, to the same area, and were able to detect changes over time. *(See figure 1.)*

The qualitative data used in this analysis was obtained via semi-structured interviews of on-site humanitarian actors and other professionals involved in the crisis including, on-site journalists and on-site researchers. Primarily open-ended questions were used to understand the perspectives of the work in Afghanistan while different dangers and agendas impede humanitarian assistance. The researcher was the key instrument and the interviews were managed over video call, in the subjects chosen area of comfort. Six one-on-one interviews were conducted, lasting an hour and a half. These were done separately and confidentially. *(Outline of qualitative interview found in appendix C.)*

Thematic content analysis will allow patterns and trends to emerge with this chosen method. This data may supply the international and national community with information of similar protocols and procedures while exposing similar areas of risk and issue. As the literary review explored, collaboration and communication between organizations are weak. Recording true patterns of operation, or solutions, from another group may contribute to encouraging cross-sectoral communication.

Ethics of Research

To protect the integrity of the participants, these interviews were fully confidential. The participant was given ample background information on the study and was presented with an informed consent form. (*See appendix A)*. This was signed

prior to the collection of interviews, specifying each permission. The data collection first and foremost respected the rights of people.

The organizations, governments, professionals, vulnerable populations and participants should not be affected by revealing information of this study. Subjects were able to exit the interview at any time or deny specific questions without consequence. All interviews took place in the month of June, 2022. The subjects were alone and uninterrupted during the interview. The recorded interviews, with consent from participants, are stored solely on a locked hard-drive and will be disposed of in five years' time. Each interview was recorded, upon consent, and transcribed.
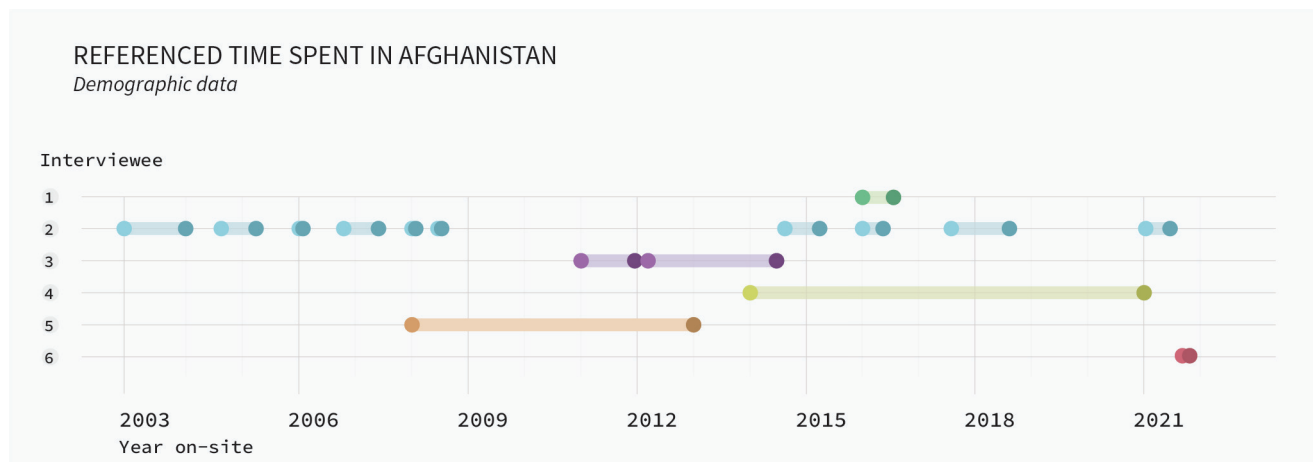
Participants and Sample

This study used purposive sampling aiming to target humanitarian actors who worked in Afghanistan over the last 10 years. These included aid workers on-site: humanitarian officers, program coordinators, deputy directors, project evaluators, and fund coordinators. Interviewees also included investigative journalists, on-site researchers of policy, safety and advocacy. This provided a more holistic stance on the topic of study. Allowing both internal and external perspectives into the conversation surrounding aid work.

Participants consisted of many nationalities, including an Afghan national, which also contributed to furthering justifiable perspectives. Participants' involvement spanned the last decade of this conflict. One participant had been on-site in 2003 and 2008 but also revisited in later years, 2015 and 2021. The national participant had also been in the country throughout their life, with the exception of a couple years to study abroad. This study has representation of experiences from the invasion in 2003 continuing all the way to the Kabul evacuation on August 15, 2021[2].
(See Figure 1 for participants' time spent in Afghanistan.)

Figure 1.

REFERENCED TIME SPENT IN AFGHANISTAN
Demographic data

2. Time parameter on this study is the last 21 years of conflict. This timeline provides ample examples of political correlations that overlapped humanitarianism, international politics, and global views.

The participant pool was small due to the nature of this study. Prior to the interview it was ensured that bicultural and bilingual translators were not needed. Each participant spoke English at a high level, college level or above.

Reliability and Validity

The timeline of this study was from April 2022 to July 2022. Consistency of measurement was strong as data collection methods were scripted. The execution of the interview was very consistent. From the control side, each conversation was held in the same room, on the same device, with the same conductor, in the same month. The qualitative interview did have availability for flexibility in terms of clarifying what participants had said, asking for background knowledge if they were speaking about information that needed context or pretext, and the general flexibility open-ended interviews allow.

Due to the study's complex topic, the terms used were not only conceptually defined but clear with specific operational definitions when appropriate. As previously explained, 'protection' and 'safety' were properly defined. All participants operated primarily out of Kabul, Afghanistan. The design of the qualitative collection allowed the researcher to focus on the participants' meanings as well as learn meanings the participants had about the topic discussed.

Cause and Effect

The overall research experience felt somewhat isolated as data collection and analysis was done remotely. My advisor was across the world, the cohort was spread out and the participant pool were from many different areas, leaving collection, analysis, and navigation of this process wanting for collaboration. Despite the isolation, I did have support and it was incredibly interesting. The conversations held with each participant was enlightening, not just on a professional level but on a personal level. I was skeptical of collecting from a more upper level group of people instead of vulnerable populations, but was grateful the direction of the study led to that outcome. It is felt that much was shared and connections were made.

With every interview, it seemed as though more imperative information was gained and it was difficult to not stray from the initial research question. Each dialogue led to a rabbit hole of curiosity and the desire to amend and update the topic. Thankfully qualitative studies allow for emergent design, where the initial plan for research "cannot be tightly prescribed and all phases of the process may change or shift after research begins" (Muntaha, personal interaction, 2021). Although slightly skewed from the original intent, the research is more relevant and up to date.

There is much to uncover in the humanitarian industry and it was onerous to not completely alter the study from the new information that was constantly being presented. Each interview would lead to another topic. There was, and still is, so much to learn.

Another obstacle that arose during the overall process came from the design of the participant pool. Because the sample was from many

different actors in the industry, some questions felt foolish to ask. However it is not valid or reliable to assume a participants opinion and it was determined to keep all interviews as consistent as possible. When a participant alluded to a belief or notion, the opportunity was given for them to blatantly and outrightly say the opinion, belief, or experience. Due to the diverse pool, all questions needed to be included in the study. Each participant said 'great question' at a different point, validating the importance of diversity of questions.

The original research design was a mixed-method study. It is no longer mixed. The missing piece in the final study being the collection of quantitative data focused on donor funding. The original topic did have a focus on donor influence contributing to the protective issues of aid workers. Prior to data collection this was amended and the study was re-designed due to participant and time restraints. Retrospectively, this was a beneficial change as data collection revealed the conversation around donor meddling is not as relevant as it once was. Meaning, donor contribution has been brought to the industry's attention, whereas there are larger gaps in knowledge around issues such as mental health that need to be brought to the industry's attention.

Positionally

As lead researcher, I am a caucasian American. A graduate student in her late twenties. I am tied to this topic simply as an American. These do contribute to the internal bias of the study. Every American has a story tied to Afghanistan, more

colloquially, 9/11. I have never lived or visited the country of Afghanistan nor have I worked as a professional in the humanitarian aid industry. During this study, it has been enlightening to learn, expand and reflect on my own predispositions and assumptions surrounding this topic. My privileges seep into the use of the term 'international community' as well. Coming from America, I am included into the privilege of the western international community, and was raised in a democratic nation that is predominantly christian.

Delimitations and Limitations

Historically, there have been many tide-changing conflicts that should have altered the humanitarian approach (Schweizer, 2004), narrowing to one country such as Afghanistan, can bring limitations. This crisis is case specific so it cannot be duplicated or reproduced. In many studies, multiple larger conflicts were cross-referenced. Additionally, some participants in this study naturally referenced other complex-crisis they had worked in. In this case, isolated experiences are a limitation.

The sample size is extremely small. As an inductive study this impacts the research consequentially. How is it progressive for the entire community if a large portion of voices are not heard? There are multiple organizations that have been involved in this crisis over the last decade, from small grassroots to large international players. With such a small size, not all organizations and their approaches are represented.

Continually, some organizations provide life-saving aid whereas other support sectors such as the justice sector or the development sector. To be more accurate, this study should have focused on one sector, and not the humanitarian institution as a whole. This study should have strictly defined humanitarian aid. That distinction alone, who belongs in what sector and what work is involved in each, is something that complicates expectations and henceforth the analysis of expected work.

This research is exploratory and does not include a collection of views from the beneficiaries in Afghanistan. The length of this study could also impact the research significance, many factors play into safety, protection and lack of funding. Since these were qualitative interviews, the responses could be misunderstood and bias may result. Some participants were still working the same positions, some had PTSD. All of these are major factors that result in bias.

Results and Findings

Inductive research revealed several themes relating to the predetermined research question; how will humanitarian workers' need for protection, while providing aid to Afghanistan, change the future of humanitarian response? While the predetermined themes will be discussed other emergent categories were discovered. Both these predetermined and emergent themes were categorized in multiple sections; protection, lack of movement, community engagement, impact of Afghanistan, impartiality and neutrality.

The following information will expound on the results and findings of this research study and

extractions from the interviews will be used to support these coded patterns.

The need for Protection

Results show that five out of the six interviewed claimed they thought humanitarian workers had enough protection. *(See Figure 2)*. It is important to note, all that answered yes had been involved in the crisis following the updates to protective protocols, such as bunkerization, which were due to the security threats plaguing aid in Afghanistan. As a predetermined category, these answers did not fit into the expected outcome. Thus disproving part of the original hypothesis, that humanitarian actors need more protection. However, this does assist the overarching exploratory desire of the study. Gaining this feedback is additive to the contradictory evidence seen in previous research. This information adds knowledge to a topic that needs to be updated.

Humanitarian Coordinators from the UN, most of whom had been Program Coordinators and Affairs Officers described their protective measures as adequate. Prior to adding verbal confirmation, almost all firstly reacted with a physical shrug. Before answering in a seemingly nonchalant tone, they chose adjectives such as "medium" and "8/10" to rate their protection level. This scale was unprompted and chosen fully by the participant themselves. Their responses communicated an almost tired relationship with protective protocols. Their safety scale leading to a generalized verbal walk through of bunkerization practices.

Other participants, those who freelance,

are nationals or affiliates of more grassroots organizations, had a comparatively vibrant response to measures of safety. All candidates organically gravitated toward the topic of civilian protection, not overall security and not the worker themselves, whether that be protection toward a national or international colleague. More-so, the interviewees connected to the UN were more focused toward the topic of beneficiaries, while others were more focused on human rights.

Contradicting the results that aid workers currently have enough protection, the reasons transcribed in conversation provide areas for external parties to further assume a potential need. Many participants organically moved onto civil protective issues abandoning their own need for safety. This communicates a few points:

I. That when the individual belittles their own need for safety, it is easier for working companies and governments to overlook their entire need for protection and will sacrifice safety in the way of program success.

II. The individual excuses protective measures claiming, 'it's a part of the job.' Although this is true, the job is to provide aid in dangerous circumstances. But measures can be taken to mitigate chaos. In discussion around communicating with rebel groups and placing oneself in harm's way for urgency's sake, one participant claimed, "if it is lifesaving aid, do it. But, you have to have reason to do it…90% of aid is not life saving…" Shrugging the evaluation of each situation and generalizing 'being in danger' as part of the job legitimizes or excuses placing the individual in harm's way.

III. In a deep rooted sense, this justifies martyrdom or an arrogant form of the western defined savior complex. Essentially stating that one's life is more important than another. Risk is inevitable. Continuing to skirt around the issue of safety and refocus conversations around civil safety depresses the institutional evolution of conducting aid. Change will not come unless it is talked about and the continued, even stigmatized danger of aid work cannot adapt.

The primary data results show on-site actors claim there is enough protection, though profoundly, all data from second-hand research claim otherwise. The aid security database shows no severe increase in violence. In 2017, violence jumped past 159 documented actions and has progressively stayed within the 229 - 275 range (Aid Security Database, 2022). The question could arise, will organizations claim more protection is needed than the worker themselves? And more skeptically, would the motivation of said organization be to ensure a workforce, keep a reputation or is it for insurance purposes? The Aid Security Database echos evidence toward the primary research findings.

Two of the six participants commented on protective protocols, the attendance of provided Security Officers creating a heavier workload. (See Figure 2). During reflection, one director said they "nearly got killed looking out for him [security officer]…He didn't understand the cultural nuances, he understood security, but not Afghanistan. So I had to take care of him as well."

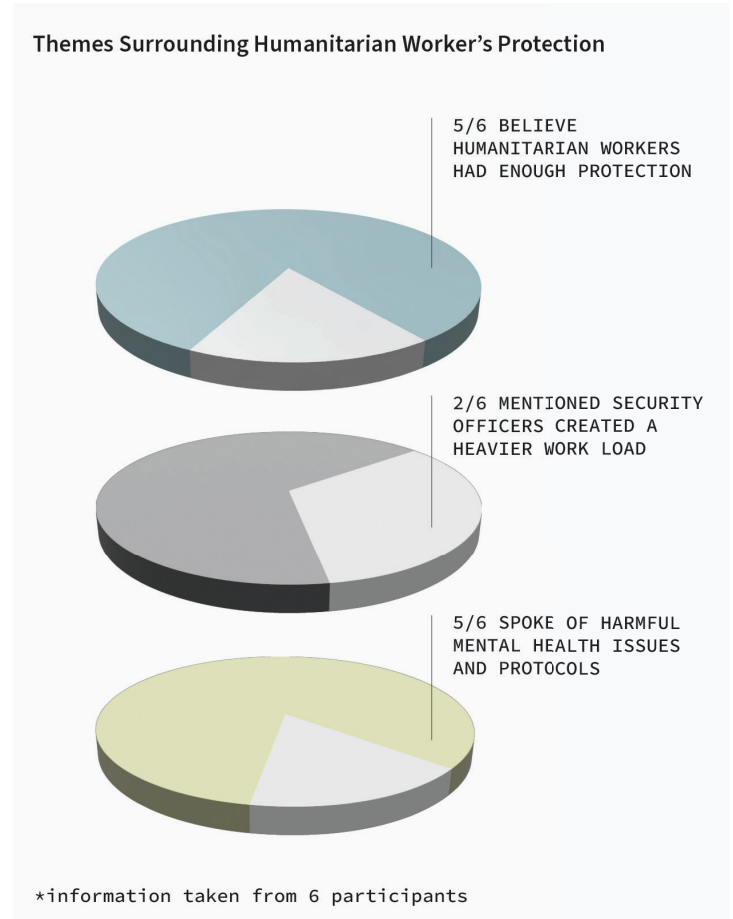It was proven that provided safety was

per-organization and not cross-sectoral nor collaborative. In the same breath, a participant also said that their safety was not the organization's responsibility but their own. Upon analysis, this is contradictory. If an organization is providing their worker with protection, that communicates at least partial responsibility. Whether it is true or not, perception is important. However, when probed if the participant felt it was more for bureaucratic purposes or actual care, they established it was for systematic protocols set in place. To be able to analyze for example; why the danger took place, who approved the operation, If it was a freak accident, was it an employee mistake and so on.

Protection issues have slowed due to quicker adaptations and harsh lessons learned during the former half of this crisis. A participant noticed "more recently, it's flattened off — the number of killings — in general…aid worker insecurity has not increased in the last 10 years like it was. I would think partly 'cause the more strictly neutral thing they're doing…they're not trying to social engineer any more. Which was a huge mistake. But they're also more locked down, working more remotely, less integrated with the communities as the whole." The aforementioned reasonings showed up in themes with multiple interviewees and will be analyzed further.

Psychological Protection

This emergent category proved a major pattern. Five out of six participants brought up mental health issues and PTSD. *(See figure 2).* Each person

Figure 2.

Themes Surrounding Humanitarian Worker's Protection

5/6 BELIEVE HUMANITARIAN WORKERS HAD ENOUGH PROTECTION

2/6 MENTIONED SECURITY OFFICERS CREATED A HEAVIER WORK LOAD

5/6 SPOKE OF HARMFUL MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND PROTOCOLS

*information taken from 6 participants

organically mentioned this issue prior to a prompted question. Participant One enlightened the study, "…on the psychological side I think that is where there is a huge need. We just wait for any humanitarians to burn out and leave. So on the humanitarian side of psychological support, no, nothing is being done so far to protect."

All of the employees or past employees of the UN brought up mental health issues. They interpreted organizational stigma surrounding this topic and said more support was needed. They also mentioned that long-term trauma care is non-existent and instead they witness poor coping skills between their colleagues, including alcohol abuse, self-abuse, familial and

drug abuse. When asked if policy changes would help, it was made clear the organization needs to first internally change. Change in stigma cannot be derived from policy or protocol, but the surrounding culture and belief of the topic. When asked they concluded;

> "We need the space and the mentality to talk about it, and to accept it, and to define burnout as a clear cause of allowing you to rest. And, so, [okay yes] policy to identify it, prevent it — but — I have colleagues who talked about burnout and they got fired because they are designated as weak, even from peers. They say, 'Oh, you cannot stand in a difficult situation, you are not fit for humanitarian [work] … Burnout is still taboo and [so the organization] they're happy to see you drink and use any [negative] coping mechanism."

While a participant stated that regional counselors were a part of protocol during rapid onset incident response, they went on to say, "the question [are you okay?] wasn't asked enough." When asked to expound on that process, its stigma, and availability they provided, "we have 1 person for 10,000 and you can call them if you have a bad day, but [they are] not even addressing the cause or the stress, or making sure people get enough rest, or have too much pressure…"

Another participant honestly shared, "I didn't get any debrief, I didn't get any stress counseling. I left the country with PTSD… it was a real mess for a couple of years so it wasn't good. The organization didn't do anything." They continued to share that although the organization did not do anything, it was not the organizations fault.

These participants spoke of experiences of bombings, friends and colleagues being killed, hostile negotiations and kidnappings. Six out of six endured violence and feeling unsafe on multiple occasions. Humanitarian workers need protection. While this data has shown they feel physically represented they need psychological protection. Participants speak to the need firstly for identification, acceptance, and validation that burnout, PTSD and trauma are real and life-altering issues.

Inability to Move: effects of protection protocols established during the conflict

When asked about the obstacles in accomplishing their working goals, each interviewee claimed that inability to move freely was impairing. Limited movement was a reaction to security issues. Some phrases after the initial response included, "being limited to a desk," "ecochamber," "it's not easy," "you have to trust…because you're not able to go yourself."

Longitudinal insight on this topic resulted in the following statement: "I've been back in Afghanistan 6-7 times. And each time becoming, it was more and more isolated because of security…We couldn't leave, the last couple of times I couldn't even leave my compound. Previously in late 2008, 2009, I just ignored all the curfews and security restrictions because I always had done." Disregarding the safety protocols and continuing on as they once operated provides evidence of fragmented protocols and operational realities. Internal operations should be continually accessing the true need of lockdown procedures.

Limited movement does not just impede face-to-face contact and local trust building but also prolongs the working assignment. One participant explains that when needing to run a simple errand, transport blankets, or speak in person to a colleague, they would have to wait for a convoy, plan ahead and be very patient. "You cannot do a lot of things and you have to delegate [to colleagues, partner organizations etc.]" Overall, the study proves inability to move hindered actors.

Community Engagement

83% interviewed advocated for the benefits of community engagement. Although, as years passed in this conflict and protection was needed, impeding community integration created more issues and higher risk. Not only were humanitarian actors at greater risk, but they vocalized feeling out of touch and that execution of projects and programs took more time due to added layers of protocol – ie. information having to travel through more channels.

One Humanitarian Officer, who has worked in the field for 18 years at large organizations including the UN and the Norwegian Refugee Council, NRC, commented that after 9/11, a lot of bunkerization "came from a very close relationship with huge military apparatus." This established the explicit reality of the 'guarantee of security.' Being surrounded by three story walls and armed guards. While the besetting danger did need new protective orders, the on-site workers and international community can now see the effects it had on community

engagement, being in-touch with civilian need, and agency reputation.

This participant highlights the effects of isolation or remote work from a community as a protection response;

> Most of the time the neutralization of the attack came from the community itself because they would say, 'no, don't hurt these guys because they are helping thousands of us.'… I see it where I work now in Yemen as well. Most of the serious incidents we have is when the community disregards [the organization], when the acceptance is no longer there, then you get the hazard.

Their assessment was continued by saying that communicating why you are there, and continuing community engagement provides greater safety and less work than having to operate from a physical structure or bunker.[3]

Another participant shared personal experiences of their plan to open an office in a reputedly safe village, untouched by the Taliban or IS, Islamic State. Due to community intel, they were warned at the last minute it was no longer a safe area and multiple lives were saved. They continued, "The more you hunker down inside your bunker, the more security you surround yourself with; in a sense, you become more vulnerable because the best security you have is integration into the community, and certainly some of the best decisions that we made, we made because it [was passed onto us from human intelligence]."

Contrastingly, this same participant did note they have experienced purely remote

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3. Many organizations did not structure protection this way, many remained open to the communities with no armed vehicles, barbed wires, etc. Those were in general, agencies providing more life-saving aid.

work in countries like Egypt and Iraq, which were effective and successful. However, they recognized those projects were geared more toward human rights activities. Upon analysis, this is an area where labeling scope of work and labeling representation is important and maybe even lifesaving.

Not only did lack of community access prove to be more harmful, lack of community contact impacts "policies [that] actually did not fit the reality." A consequence understood by many interviewees. "We did not have much access to Afghans…it was a huge huge issue and that's why most of the policies…it did not match with any reality in the area of Afghans."

Donors and international actors merely wanted to act fast, check off their box, and send photos of accomplished projects. A few participants noted these gaps, with the root cause being lack of community conversation. There were examples of activity centers being built in areas that actually needed schools. There were themes of poppy eradication by payout without culturally understanding the traditions in Afghanistan. Without understanding the Why: the reasoning behind practices, one cannot change future outcomes. Continuing the example, if organizations understood that poppy farming is a deep rooted generational tradition, they would have saved thousands of dollars and hours of time. This understanding would have only come from communication with the community. Now those fields, cleared for only one year – which gave a pat on the back to international onlookers — are filled with poppies once more. Not directly, but indirectly this issue links to protection protocols. It was enough for interviewees to

highlight as another importance to community engagement.

Lastly, secondary research from a 2020 study corroborates these ideals with their own interviewee stating:

> There were worries that international humanitarian actors in general were becoming increasingly distant from communities affected by conflict – partly justified by rising security concerns for aid workers. [Arguing] the separation of humanitarian actors from local communities perceived to be undermining the basis of their advocacy (Bowden & Metcalfe-Hough, 2020, p.12).

The Influence of Afghanistan

Opening statements from each participant repeatedly emphasized the personal and professional impact of Afghanistan. As established, these participants have decades of field experience, worked in over 40 major conflicts and evaluated multiple others. Even still, each qualified professional claimed Afghanistan as the "craziest work." One participant with 18 years of prior experience humbly noted it as an "extreme learning experience." Each interviewee left this country with a similar feeling of impact despite each interviewee being on-site for a different length of time *(refer to Figure 1)*. Results prove that length of time is not a factor in terms of impact.

As the conversations continued many reasons were given to validate Afghanistan's reputation. Collective thematic patterns emerged: safety and security, major lessons and success of projects
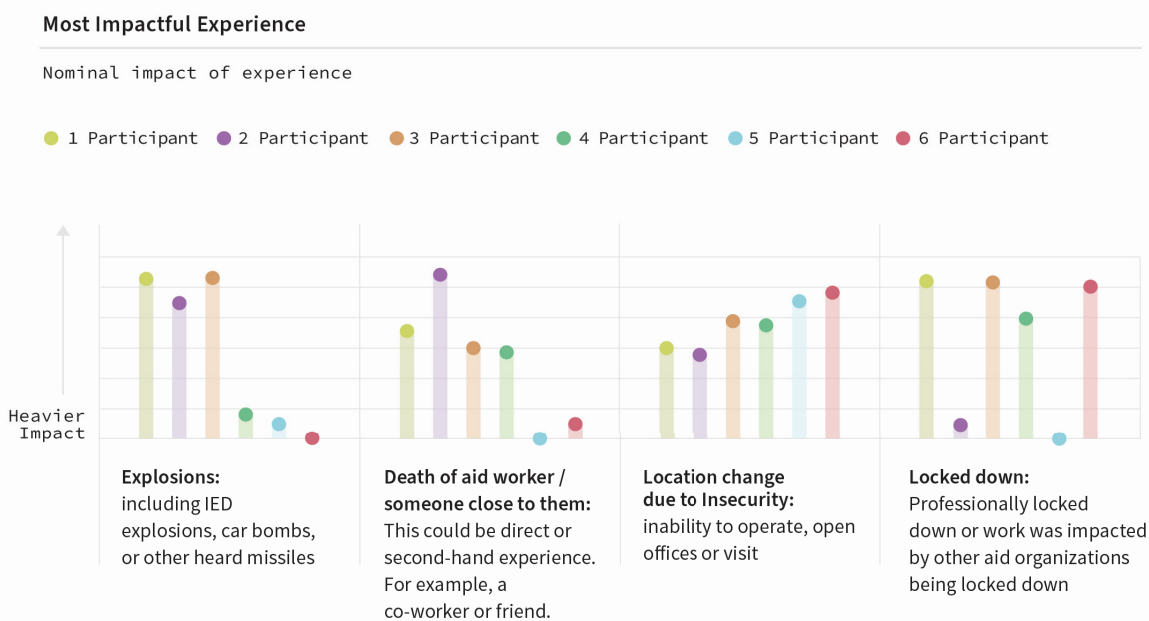
or purposeful career achievement. Professionals in the industry continued to reveal Afghanistan as the crisis where politicized aid and military action seriously crossed boundaries and reared negative impacts. The length of the conflict and international involvement gave opportunity to see both the implementation and the outcome of intermixing aid with other agendas.

Another major lesson taken from this conflict was practical protective measures. Practical structural designs were put into practice. One example provided was the practical knowledge of how many feet a wall needed to be built from a bunker in case an explosion went off. This was learned due to an overwhelming amount of IED explosions, *Improvised Explosive Device*. Humanitarian workers learned how to run a convoy, work with armed guards and escorts.

Revolving around the need for protection, it was made clear from each individual that Afghanistan has already provided global benefits. Factually, the birth of the International NGO Safety Organization, INSO can be attributed to this conflict. Originating in Afghanistan, previously called ANSO, Afghanistan NGO Safety Office. They are now operating in at least 16 countries (INSO, 2022). Two interviewees highlighted their success, contributing it to the positive outputs from Afghanistan. Acknowledging the benefits of INSO's replication, repetition, and implementations in other insecure contexts.

The work was hard and the conflict was long. The security issues created a more heightened work environment with newer challenges, enabling project results to feel all the more successful. There were many projects accomplished. Many policies were passed for

Figure 3.

Most Impactful Experience

Nominal impact of experience

● 1 Participant   ● 2 Participant   ● 3 Participant   ● 4 Participant   ● 5 Participant   ● 6 Participant

Heavier Impact

Explosions: including IED explosions, car bombs, or other heard missiles

Death of aid worker / someone close to them: This could be direct or second-hand experience. For example, a co-worker or friend.

Location change due to Insecurity: inability to operate, open offices or visit

Locked down: Professionally locked down or work was impacted by other aid organizations being locked down

* Visually analyzed and configured by quoted response, amount of times brought up in conversations and overall tone.
**The question initially posed: Are there any impactful experiences that you have witnessed or participated in?

civilian protection and within the justice sector — the candidates proudly remembered these programs years later. Each candidate raved about the locals and the landscape, one found their life partner while on this job. Altogether, Afghanistan was highly impactful.

Impartiality and Neutrality — a moot point

When asked about their ability to respond and work impartially or neutrally throughout the involvement in the crisis, it was answered with a generally spirited response. It was observed that all participants who had worked for the UN or still work for the UN, responded very automatically. Almost sounding rehearsed in their response. The sterile answer to the question included a response that they were in fact able to respond impartially. While all other participants, demographically outside of the UN's employment, had expressed impartiality was a complicated topic, and made sure to qualify themselves. Contrasting these UN employees, one interviewee made strong statements against the ability to be impartial:

> That's a big question because you know, I'm not somebody who subscribes to the notion that anybody can be impartial or neutral. And I think that that's a historical misconception that I think is, frankly speaking, a white-centric notion of what it means to kind of be — above the narrative — and what it means to be an impartial observer of things. And how does that become the default narrative? And who does that narrative belong to? So like, if I'm a white man, the understanding is that I'm impartial or neutral, but if I'm a person from

the community within [where] that story is taking place and I'm talking about it myself, well now I'm impartial. And it's like — well, just because you're from without doesn't mean you're impartial. Not only are you not impartial, you're also less knowledgeable. And so then whose understanding of these things are we meant to take on?

Alternative to claiming themselves capable of impartiality and neutrality, one participant views this entire notion as old and outdated. Arguing the focus should be on efforts and strategies of globalized migration. The conversation of impartiality languishing. By this point it should almost be assumed that it is forever moot. Henceforth moving to, "the big challenge of humanitarianism today." Which in their view, "isn't about neutrality…it's about how we cope with globalized worlds and what that means… the challenges of migration." Those issues would be worth the collective time and effort of the humanitarian industry's focus.

Of all the predetermined and emergent themes, the topic of impartiality has ranged most on the spectrum. Where participants did agree was in terms of funding. Five out of six interviewed believe donor funding impacts impartiality. Research followed up by asking if the humanitarian industry has learned from this issue. One responded with experience:

> I would say no and I give the example… That's the question that we ask in the meetings. Will we have in Somalia [an] Afghanistan-like scenario? But no one is doing anything to avoid [it], we just react to it because for them, politically, it is very risky to engage with Al-Shabaab and sometimes the organizations,

they don't want to engage with us because we are not neutral. Because we list[ed] Al-Shabaab on a terrorist list. So it is already too late. So no, I don't think a big lesson was learned from the international community at all in Afghanistan [on this topic] taking the example of Somalia now.

The researcher followed up with questioning what should have been taken as a lesson learned from Afghanistan. How should dialogue in current meetings be unfolding?

Any organization classified as terrorist, it should be and can remain. But all these exceptions are made for engaging them on a humanitarian and human rights purposes should always be exempted. So, keep the political and humanitarian [field] more separate and to make sure that more and more funding is based on humanitarian need, and based on countries, and based on both parties to the conflict. So where there is conflict [it] should be two party — not the party designated as us against them, bad against good.

Is there space for impartiality in the future of aid? Since the crisis in Afghanistan, The UN Summit, 2016, has called for new approaches to transcend the "humanitarian realm." These have now been publicly established that humanitarians engage in:

…conflict prevention and address its root causes, which are activities not only typically designated to the development segment but also activities taking place before the humanitarian crisis occur, thus infringing on the notion of the humanitarian present. Second, it called for increased humanitarian emphasis on political diplomacy and
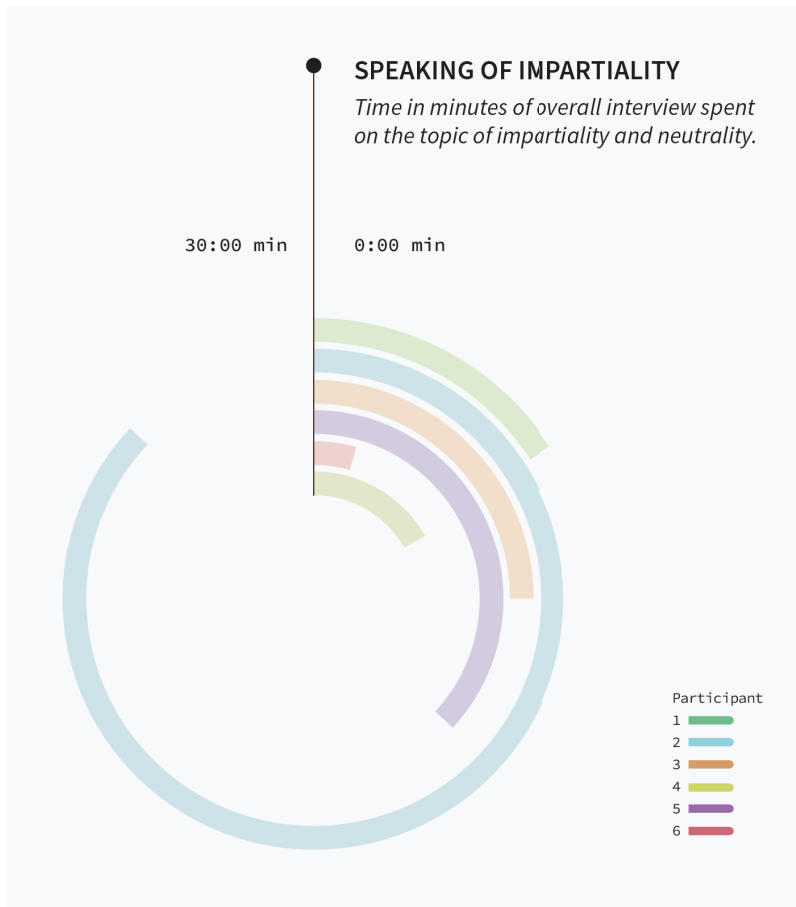
conflict resolution, being typical peace building activities and infringing on humanitarianism's A-political principles. (Harald & Lie, 2020, p.2)

With a publicized announcement of involvement that will contradict the humanitarian purist view, perhaps the topic of impartiality should be moved away from as interviewee two prophesied. As past research proves politicized engagement during Afghanistan caused increased violence and confusion on the humanitarian front, these new approaches should either be communicated with an understanding that impartiality will no longer be possible with acts in the development, political diplomacy and conflict resolution segments. Although it could seem taboo, even ludicrous, to throw the founding humanitarian principles out the door, do they cause more confusion and detriment for the future of humanitarian response?

As some analysis provides, fooling oneself as impartial may not be detrimental in action but is consequentially detrimental to claim impartiality when one is operating in peace-missions within government insurgencies. The Humanitarian Development-Nexus, 2020, divulges that through practices emerging "from the bottom and by top-driven policy initiatives: practitioners increasingly engage aspects outside of the humanitarian present, see the war-to-peace transition as a continuum, and thus decompartmentalized how various actors operate in distinct (temporal) phases of the crisis" (Harald & Lie, 2020, p.11). This reflects back on the formative humanitarian scope.

Summary of Findings

Figure 4.

SPEAKING OF IMPARTIALITY
Time in minutes of overall interview spent on the topic of impartiality and neutrality.

30:00 min   0:00 min

Participant
1
2
3
4
5
6

also noted the patterns of newer conflicts – those the humanitarian industry has not yet learned or adapted since Afghanistan. For example, the impacts of labeling oneself impartial in Yemen.

Although it was expected to hear that the interviewees would have wanted more protection within the insecure environments they were working, all felt safe enough and believed risk mitigation was applied and respected. They did collectively advocate for psychological protection as well as overall industry understanding about those issues. With discussions around policy and politics, the interviewees spoke of impartiality and neutrality with differing views. An unsurprising verdict. However, some results linked impartiality as a lackluster subject for the future of aid, which was in accordance with a portion of the hypothesis.

Overall the methodological design provided data to examine how humanitarian workers need for protection, while providing aid to Afghanistan, change and should continue to shift the future of humanitarian response. These lessons will hopefully continue to inform the future of aid. The experiences shared provided insight into lessons that were both learned and applied – now ready for evaluation and ideas for future development and action. This informative dialogue provided evidence toward the tools that assisted measures of safety. Overall the participants did speak to their personal experiences during their time in Afghanistan and provided accounts of restriction, safety, fear, danger, and mental health issues. They have gleaned skills from Afghanistan and begun to either apply or hope to apply elsewhere. They

Secondary research provided a nudge to the original hypothesis, that external decisions from donors and top-down design cause misdiagnosis and unwise strategy for the workers on site. Corollary this seemed inconclusive. The interviewee who has worked the most in research and policy claims this is still true and attributes a large part of the failed state to this issue. While others, candidates who worked more on the program side of aid, claim that was to a degree learned earlier on in the crisis and organizations are more careful to separate themselves from earmarked funding.

Profoundly, three interviewees brought up the distinction of international vrs. national aid actors. Some are hinting that international actors are more protected. One national understood that in some instances they had greater access to locals, were more protected and could get true information. They did include that they were still overall less considered. Another major concern brought up around the topic of national aid actors were program end or evacuations. Are national aid workers thought about during the end of crisis? "The people we employed from that country… a lot of them work for so long in Afghanistan, for 20 years. [Nationals say], 'that's who I am. First I'm an Afghan, then I'm Mohomud and then I am Save the Children. I don't know how to do anything else.' I think that's a tragedy, and we should be able to prepare for that from the beginning."

The humanitarian industry is not immune to the politics of race, even on a micro-level. A class-like system should not be built around who is the more important aid worker. Protection should be given to every employee, including protection of livelihood. End of programs and projects are inevitable and the nature of aid work is mobile but more positive exit strategies can be developed so national workers are not cast away.

This was not a study to separate the UN from other humanitarian workers. Results strongly indicated contrasting beliefs and experiences from the other candidates. An unsought discovery. The UN participants seemed more rehearsed during the traditional topics. Whereas the other candidates provided more candid, thoughtful and seemingly emotional responses. The final overarching assumption prior to

conducting these interviews was confirmed. Enforced protection of aid workers impedes their ability to work and fully succeed in their programs. Although there is much program success, it was harder to achieve and more time consuming. Protective orders and safety measures, though rightfully in place, caused workers to delegate, lose touch with community as well as lose the benefits of human intelligence. Relationships with contacts on the ground were strained corollay resulting in more dangerous situations due to lack of approachability, poor reputation or lack of rapport.

The Way Forward

» It is found that community engagement provides protection as well as efficient work. Community engagement provides understanding both culturally and practically, and continues to build reputable pathways for future actors to benefit from. With this discovery, it is recommended that within reason, community engagement should be one of the last avenues to block. Active communication with local beneficiaries should be held in high regard.

» In terms of safety, community engagement will provide protection to each aid worker. The bunkerization tactic should be seen as a last resort. Protective measures have limited freedom of movement, disabling community engagement. Aborting relationships with local communities proves to increase aid workers exposure to risk, a stark contrast to the original hope. If organizations can brainstorm new ways to operate and build programs without total isolation, reputations and human

intelligence could stay intact — enabling more secure environments.

» Do the issues that arise from lack of movement outweigh the protection that is gained? What are new ideas for humanitarian practices that provide protection, but minimize the 'ecochamber' effect? How can we support local engagement yet continue to provide safety to actors?

» Organizations know What programs and Why programs are implemented but there is a gap around the question, How? Lack of planning leads to poor exit strategies, dangerous situations and box-ticking goals. Taking the time to build a program and execute said program with culturally appropriate measures will beneficially serve many levels of action. Unfortunately the humanitarian community has still not yet found a successful way to strategize the How. This gap could be studied further.

» Exit strategies should include trauma care protocols for on-site workers. Within this protocol it should not simply provide a standard surrounding the provision of care, but create an intentional guided plan of action, crisis specific.

» Profoundly, there is evidence that international aid workers and national aid workers are unequally treated. Future studies are needed to provide factual data to conclude these observations. Much has been done to provide secure measures of operation, but a class-

like system has been built surrounding who is the most important to protect. Not only is evidence needed for national aid security, but exit strategies for national actors need to be designed. When a program ends and aid is distributed, when international actors move to the next site, where do the national aid workers go? They lose their job and some of their identity. What is done to honor their service? Such abandonment should not be acceptable in the future of aid.

» There were negligible strategies to untie aid from governmental donors. As learned, parties do not respond well or are not willing to work with organizations if they are in cahoots with opposing sides. This feeds into reputation and issues of impartiality. Lack of communication, standards and inability to clearly define the objectives and type of aid organization muddies ability to access areas controlled by others, among other consequences. Organizations should always establish what type of aid they are giving, is it lifesaving? Is it building the justice sector? Are they on a peace-mission? These indicators draw boundaries around execution of strategic partnership, communication and will provide overall safety in the industry.

» Gather up-to-date research pertaining to this topic. With outcomes of this war and the conflict zone more stable, what evidence can be gathered to support or condemn future strategy building? Humanitarian needs will continue in this region. Will there be change in executing delivery? Since the Taliban

have now transitioned to power, will that affect the security of aid workers that did not have adequate reputation with them prior to assuming power? More widely, when insurgencies 'win' are they more likely to cooperate with international aid?

» Although the original hypothesis supposing humanitarian actors need increased physical protection, the study has shown that on-site actors feel they have enough rapid-onset physical protection in place. However, needs have evolved into an urgent requirement of greater support in long-term trauma care. Mental health issues, coping strategies, support from the working organization and PTSD needs to be normalized and established. Humanitarian workers need psychological protection.

Conclusion

While research shows politicization of humanitarian action unremitting, including funding ties and partiality, the negative impact on agency reputation which can develop into violence cannot be denied. As witnessed from the first half of this conflict, there has been growth in protective measures toward humanitarian actors. In examining how the need for protection, while providing aid in Afghanistan, changed some approaches of humanitarian aid, it is clear other responses need to change. Both newer strategies and the more current results of the conflict need to be reflected upon.

These considerations should include the new era of aid, critiquing impartiality when it is moving toward development and peace-building, the importance of building and keeping relationships with the beneficiary community and the politics of race. In examining how the need for protection while providing aid in Afghanistan exposed areas of improvement — it is most importantly deduced that the future of humanitarian aid should respond and protect humanitarian workers with and from long-term trauma and the harmful, lasting psychological effects of crisis care.

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We do not have the luxury of meeting the challenges of the future with the strategies of the past *(Somer & Heffes, 2020, p.12).*

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Appendix

Appendix A — Consent Form

My name is Tabitha Babcock, and I am a student through SIT's Humanitarian Assistance and Crisis Management Master's program. I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of this degree M.A. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you are asked to sign and return this form, and please keep a copy for your personal records.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Provided for the study:
How will humanitarian actors need for protection while providing aid change the future of humanitarian action?

Researcher Name: Tabitha R. Babcock
Advisor: Azim Khan

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to add foundational knowledge and progressed strategies to humanitarian aid work during complex crises in order to provide safer protection in the midst of future crises. There are no correct or incorrect responses, only your feelings regarding the following statements and questions.

STUDY PROCEDURES
Your participation will consist of responding to several open-ended questions. The process will require approximately 30 minutes of your time once the interview begins. Audio-visual recording will be used for future reference and the interview will be transcribed. You are welcome to participate in the study without visual recording. The interview will take place at a quiet, uninterrupted location of your choosing, over MicrosoftTeams.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study and no penalties should you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During the interview you have the right not to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time, for any reason.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
There are no anticipated benefits to participating in this study other than offering foundational knowledge to the field.

PARTICIPATION CONFIDENTIALITY
In the final published results, country of origin and professional titles will be used to identify candidates. No physical characteristics or names will be released. No personally identifying information will be collected for this study. Data will be stored in a password protected database accessible only to myself and my advisor. Data will only be analyzed in a secure setting. Once the study is complete, data will be destroyed. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no identifiable information will be used. No raw data will be published. If data from the study is requested by a future researcher, and the study is deemed appropriate by myself or my advisor, it will be permitted. However no raw data, i.e. recordings, audio or visual, emails etc. or release of identity will be allowed or permitted.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

"I have read the above and I understand its contents. I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older."

Participant's signature: _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature: Date _____

Consent to Audio-video-Record Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice and consent:
_____ (initial) I agree to have audio and video recorded during the interview.
_____ (initial) I agree to have only audio recorded during the interview.
Would you like an emailed summary of research results?

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:
_____ (initial) Yes
_____ (initial) No

If yes, provide the email most suitable to send results to: _____

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at tabitha.babcock@mail.sit.edu or my advisor at azim.khan@sit.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION
In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by SIT's Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training

Institutional Review Board

1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676

Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA

irb@sit.edu

802-258-3132

Appendix B — Demographic Form

Professional title at the time of involvement:
Professional title in current role:
Age:
Location of involvement (city/village and goverate):
On or off site?

Appendix C — Qualitative open-ended interview

Sample of questions

To qualify* All questions are focused on the time you spent working with or in Afghanistan.

- Explain what safety and protection means
- Can you describe your overall experience involving Afghanistan?
- Are there any impactful experiences that you have participated in or witnessed?
- Do you feel you were able to respond/work independently and impartially throughout your involvement in the crisis?
- What were the obstacles in accomplishing your working goals?
- Describe how physically safe you felt while conducting your work.
- How could those hazards be minimized?
- When aid workers were intentionally in danger/attacked, what was your organization's response?
- In your experience, how are politics, humanitarian action, and funding related?
- How does politicization impact an agency's reputation with the beneficiary States?
- Do you feel organizations, donors and workers adequately understand each other's roles?
- In your newer positions, have you observed the adaptation of procedures and policies due to learned experiences in Afghanistan?

- What can the humanitarian sector learn from the operations in Afghanistan regarding safety?
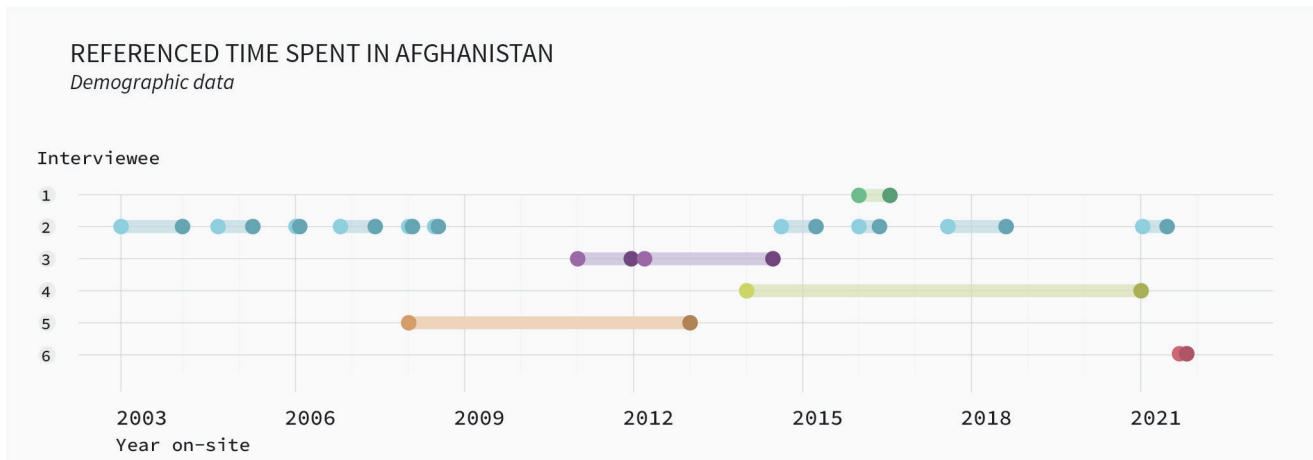
Figures and Charts

Figure 1. Found on page 13.

Figure 2. Showcasing overall answers regarding protective opinions.
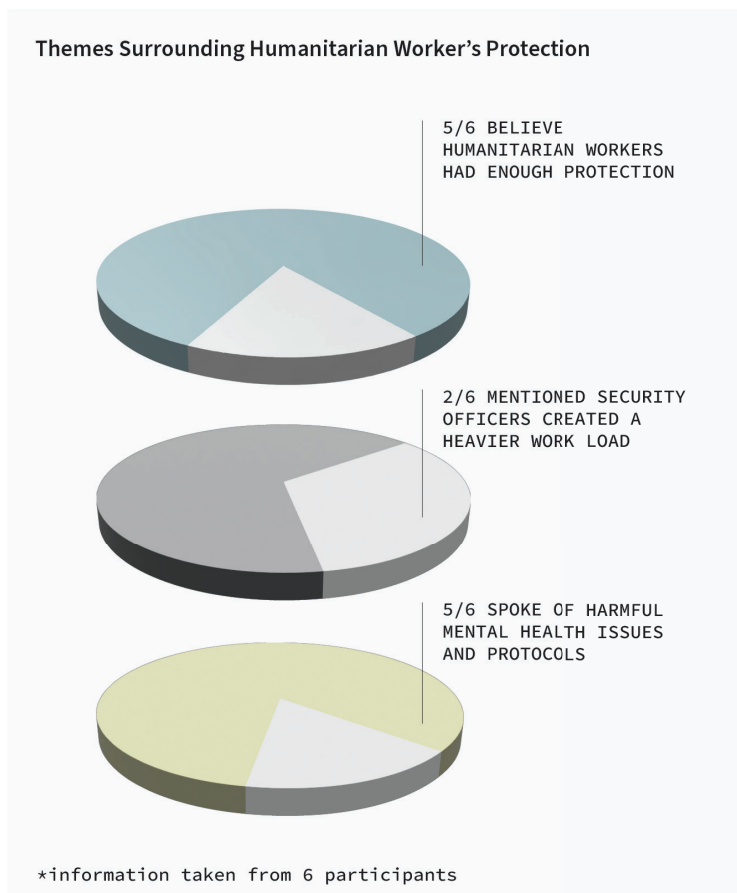This figure is found on page 18.

Figure 3. can be found on page 23.

Most Impactful Experience

Nominal impact of experience

● 1 Participant ● 2 Participant ● 3 Participant ● 4 Participant ● 5 Participant ● 6 Participant

Heavier
Impact

Explosions:
including IED
explosions, car bombs,
or other heard missiles

**Death of aid worker /
someone close to them:**
This could be direct or
second-hand experience.
For example, a
co-worker or friend.

**Location change
due to Insecurity:**
inability to operate, open
offices or visit

Locked down:
Professionally locked
down or work was impacted
by other aid organizations
being locked down

* Visually analyzed and configured by quoted response, amount of times brought up in conversations and overall tone.
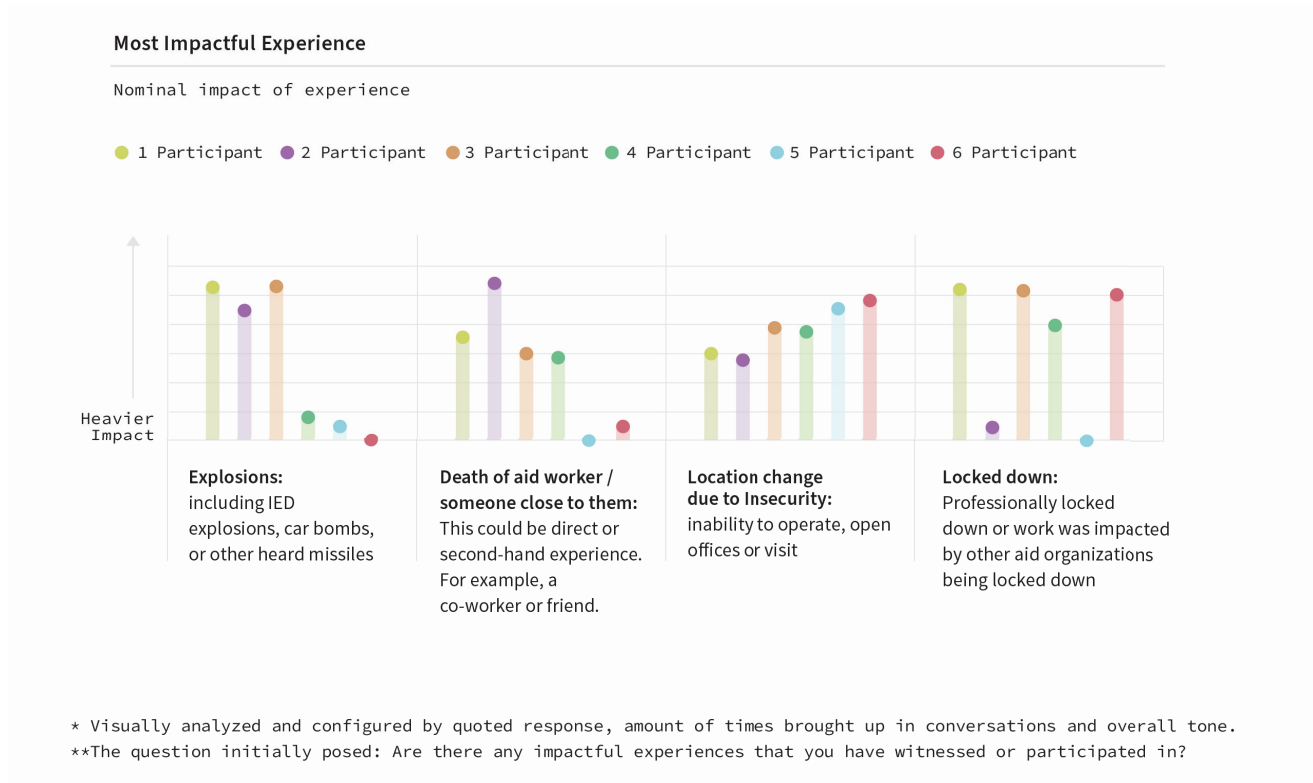**The question initially posed: Are there any impactful experiences that you have witnessed or participated in?

Figure 4. can be found on page 25.

SPEAKING OF IMPARTIALITY
*Time in minutes of overall interview spent
on the topic of impartiality and neutrality.*

30:00 min   0:00 min

Participant
1
2
3
4
5
6