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From staff burnout to human security: Stress governance in humanitarian systems

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Abstract

Humanitarian organizations operate in environments characterized by chronic insecurity, moral complexity, and increasing operational constraints. While stress among humanitarian personnel has traditionally been framed as an individual psychological issue, emerging evidence suggests that stress is structurally embedded within organizational systems. Building on prior analysis of humanitarian delegate stress, this article advances the concept of stress governance as a critical dimension of human security. Drawing on institutional practices of the International Committee of the Red Cross, including staff health management frameworks and specialized trauma interventions, as well as comparative insights from Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the article develops an integrated model linking structural stressors, organizational design, and policy responses into a coherent framework of stress governance. The article argues that unmanaged staff stress constitutes a systemic risk not only to organizational effectiveness but also to the protection of vulnerable populations. It concludes by outlining policy implications for humanitarian organizations, donors, and governance frameworks, emphasizing the need to embed stress management within broader human security strategies.

Keywords: Stress; Humanitarian work; Governance; Stress governance; Human security; Psychological health; Mental well-being

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian organizations are increasingly operating under conditions of protracted conflict, political fragmentation, and heightened insecurity. These developments have intensified the pressures placed on humanitarian personnel, who must navigate complex operational environments while adhering to ethical principles such as neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Their personal security is increasingly uncertain, and traditional norms of protection no longer reliably ensure their safety.

While the well-being of humanitarian workers has long been recognized as an important concern, it has traditionally been addressed through a predominantly psychological lens, focusing on individual resilience and coping mechanisms. This perspective, however, is increasingly inadequate. As demonstrated by Saner *et al.* (2024), stress among humanitarian delegates is not merely the result of exceptional events but is deeply embedded in the structural and organizational conditions of humanitarian work.

This line of inquiry builds on earlier work by Saner (1990), which highlighted the

long-standing recognition of stress as a critical but under-addressed dimension of humanitarian and organizational practice. That earlier contribution already pointed to the need to move beyond individual-level explanations toward a more systemic understanding of stress dynamics.

This article contributes to the literature by introducing the concept of stress governance as a bridge between organizational design and human security outcomes, thereby linking micro-level stress experiences to macro-level system performance. While existing frameworks such as burnout theory and job demands–resources models conceptualize stress primarily as an outcome of the interaction between individuals and their work environments, the concept of stress governance introduced here shifts the analytical focus toward organizational systems as active producers and regulators of stress. It extends existing approaches by integrating structural, institutional, and operational dimensions into a unified governance framework. This enables the analysis of stress not only as an outcome variable but as a systemic risk factor that shapes decision-making quality, organizational performance, and ultimately human security outcomes.

Drawing on empirical insights from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the analysis contributes to a more integrated understanding of the distinctive challenge of humanitarian work and the structural conditions that heighten workers' vulnerability to occupational stress.

This systemic perspective further advances the argument that stress in humanitarian systems must be understood as a governance issue, rather than solely a psychological or medical concern. By conceptualizing stress as a systemic risk and vulnerability, the article highlights the need for institutional arrangements that anticipate, manage, and mitigate stress across organizational levels.

The relevance of such an approach is also underscored by high-profile cases of organizational stress failure beyond the humanitarian sector. For example, the Foxconn suicides in China (approximately 14 deaths in 2010) (Chan, 2013) and the France Télécom crisis (more than 60 suicides between 2008 and 2011) (BBC News, 2019; Dejours & Bègue, 2009) illustrate how organizational structures and management practices can generate extreme psychological distress. While these cases differ in context, they reveal a common pattern: stress emerging not as an individual anomaly but as a systemic outcome of organizational design and governance practices. As such, they provide a comparative baseline for understanding stress as a governance failure rather than merely an individual condition.

The article makes three main contributions: it reconceptualizes stress as a governance issue, develops a three-dimensional analytical framework, and links stress dynamics to human security outcomes.

2. From individual to structural stress

The conceptualization of stress in humanitarian work has historically been shaped by a focus on traumatic events. Early interventions were largely designed to address the psychological consequences of exposure to violence, disaster, or extreme deprivation. While such events undoubtedly remain significant, this perspective risks obscuring the broader structural conditions that generate stress in everyday operations. Prolonged exposure to such embedded stress could result in diminishing psychological health and poor performance.

A growing body of literature challenges this event-based model. Connorton *et al.* (2012), for example, demonstrate that humanitarian workers frequently experience high levels of burnout and psychological distress even in the absence of singular traumatic incidents. Similarly, Lopes Cardozo *et al.* (2012) highlight the cumulative effects of prolonged exposure to challenging environments, including insecurity, isolation, and limited organizational support.

Saner *et al.* (2024) extend this analysis by identifying a range of structural stressors specific to humanitarian work. These include not only environmental factors but also organizational dynamics, such as conflicting mandates and institutional constraints. Together, these findings suggest that stress is best understood as a product of systemic conditions, rather than as a series of isolated psychological responses.

This shift toward structural explanations of stress is also supported by broader research in organizational psychology. Maslach and Leiter (2016) argue that burnout is fundamentally linked to mismatches between individuals and their work environments, rather than to individual weakness. Similarly, studies of humanitarian personnel have highlighted the cumulative impact of prolonged exposure to high-stress environments, even in the absence of discrete traumatic events (Eriksson *et al.*, 2009).

This perspective is further reinforced by recent interdisciplinary work on sustainable livelihoods and work systems. Carr *et al.* (2025) introduce the Wheel of Work and the Sustainable Livelihoods Index (SL-I), emphasizing that work-related well-being is shaped by the interaction of multiple structural factors, including economic security, organizational conditions, and social context. Their framework highlights that stress is not merely an outcome

of individual exposure but is embedded in broader systems of work and livelihood sustainability. This insight aligns closely with the argument advanced here, namely that stress in humanitarian settings must be analyzed as part of a systemic configuration of work conditions and institutional arrangements. Addressing stress and its consequences for both individuals and organizations therefore requires a systemic approach, in which stress is understood and managed as an embedded feature of organizational contexts and governance practices.

3. Organizational production of stress

Understanding stress as a systemic phenomenon requires examining how organizations contribute to its production. Three mechanisms are particularly salient.

First, role ambiguity and contradiction are inherent features of humanitarian work. Personnel are frequently required to balance competing mandates, such as maintaining neutrality while advocating for vulnerable populations. These tensions create cognitive dissonance and emotional strain, particularly in situations where clear guidance is lacking.

Second, structural constraints within organizations can exacerbate stress. Limited resources, donor-driven priorities, and bureaucratic procedures may restrict the ability of staff to respond effectively to complex situations in a timely manner. This can lead to frustration and a sense of inefficacy, contributing to burnout.

Third, sustained exposure to suffering and moral injury plays a central role. Humanitarian workers are regularly confronted with situations in which they are unable to provide adequate assistance due to operational limitations. This gap between moral obligation and practical capacity generates persistent psychological distress.

The concept of moral injury, originally developed in military psychology (Litz *et al.*, 2009), is increasingly relevant in humanitarian contexts. It captures the psychological consequences of actions—or inactions—that violate deeply held moral beliefs. In humanitarian work, moral injury often arises not from wrongdoing but from structural constraints, including in cases where institutional mandates—such as those of the ICRC—implicitly constrain the scope of action available to staff.

From a broader perspective, these mechanisms can be understood as elements of what Carr *et al.* (2025) describe as the structural determinants of sustainable livelihoods. In this sense, stress emerges when the conditions necessary for sustainable and meaningful work are undermined. Humanitarian organizations, unintentionally, expose individuals to stress, and at the same time operate within systems that may be highly vulnerable and tend to fail in supporting sustainable work practices.

4. Institutional responses to humanitarian stress

In response to the structural stressors identified above, humanitarian organizations have increasingly developed institutional mechanisms aimed at managing staff well-being. However, these responses vary significantly in their degree of formalization, centralization, and conceptual orientation, reflecting different organizational histories, mandates, and operational logics.

4.1. The ICRC: Formalized and integrated stress management

The International Committee of the Red Cross represents one of the most developed institutional approaches to stress management. As outlined by Althaus (2020), the organization has adopted a lifecycle-based duty-of-care model, encompassing pre-deployment preparation, in-mission support, and post-mission reintegration.

This model reflects a recognition that stress is cumulative and systemic, requiring continuous monitoring rather than episodic intervention. The integration of physical and mental (psychological) health within a unified framework further indicates an understanding of stress as a multidimensional phenomenon.

A concrete example of this systemic approach is the ICRC's structured pre-deployment preparation process, which includes psychological readiness assessments, contextual briefings, and expectation management for staff assigned to high-risk environments. During deployment, personnel have access to confidential counseling services and periodic health monitoring. Upon completion of assignments, staff undergo mandatory debriefings that include psychological screening and reintegration support.

In addition to this systemic approach, the ICRC has developed specialized protocols for extreme stress events. Aebischer Perone *et al.* (2018) describe structured psychological interventions for staff released from hostage situations, emphasizing phased recovery and long-term follow-up. Since then, ICRC has also developed Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for the field deployment (International Committee of The Red Cross, 2020).

This hostage-release protocol provides an illustrative case of how acute trauma care is embedded within a broader lifecycle-based system, combining immediate stabilization, medium-term counseling, and long-term monitoring. Such integration demonstrates how stress

management can be institutionalized as an ongoing governance function rather than treated only as an isolated or reactive intervention.

4.2. MSF: Decentralized and field-driven approaches

In contrast to the ICRC, MSF has historically relied on more decentralized and field-driven mechanisms for managing stress. These include peer support systems, informal coping strategies, and psychological debriefings following missions.

This approach reflects MSF's operational culture, which prioritizes rapid response, flexibility, and field autonomy. While such a model allows for adaptive and context-sensitive responses, it may result in variability in implementation and less systematic integration across missions.

For example, during high-intensity operations such as the Ebola response in West Africa, MSF teams relied heavily on daily peer-support practices and informal group debriefings to manage stress in real time. Field coordinators often facilitated structured conversations at the end of shifts, allowing staff to collectively process emotionally and ethically challenging experiences.

While professional psychological support was available, its use varied depending on mission context, leadership, and team dynamics. This example illustrates how MSF's stress management is embedded in operational practice and team culture rather than formalized institutional systems.

From an analytical perspective, MSF's approach can be characterized as operationally strong but institutionally less formalized, with stress management embedded in practice rather than codified in comprehensive governance frameworks.

4.3. IFRC: Psychosocial and community-oriented frameworks

The IFRC adopts a distinct approach, particularly through its emphasis on psychosocial support systems, often targeting both staff and volunteers.

Given its reliance on large volunteer networks, the IFRC framework extends beyond professional staff to include community-level resilience and peer support mechanisms (Snider, 2018). This broad orientation reflects the organization's mandate and operational model. It also introduces challenges related to standardization and resource allocation, for instance, when high demands from heterogeneous communal contexts require more tailored responses.

A key example is the IFRC's Psychosocial Support Programme, which is widely deployed in post-disaster settings. Following major crises such as earthquakes or floods, trained volunteers provide psychological first aid, facilitate group discussions, and support community-based recovery processes. These interventions often include structured peer-support sessions, community rituals, and activities aimed at restoring social cohesion and emotional stability.

Psychological first aid, as developed and disseminated by the World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, and World Vision International (2011), is a widely adopted, evidence-informed intervention. It is designed to provide immediate emotional stabilization, promote safety, and support short-term functioning in crisis-affected populations. Available evidence suggests that psychological first aid can reduce acute distress and support coping capacity, although robust evidence regarding long-term psychological outcomes remains limited.

While this approach broadens stress management beyond organizational staff to encompass volunteers and affected populations, it also introduces challenges related to training consistency, quality assurance, and resource availability across different national societies.

The IFRC approach highlights the importance of collective and community-based dimensions of stress management, complementing more individualized or organizationally focused models.

4.4. Comparative analysis: Fragmentation and convergence

A comparative analysis of these approaches reveals both divergence and emerging convergence.

- The ICRC represents a highly institutionalized and centralized model
- MSF exemplifies a decentralized and practice-based model
- IFRC emphasizes a community-oriented and psychosocial model

Despite these differences, all three organizations have increasingly recognized that stress is not merely an individual issue but requires organizational and systemic responses.

However, the comparison also reveals a key limitation. The absence of a fully integrated governance framework that aligns structural, institutional, and operational dimensions of stress management renders the current stress management responses suboptimal and continues to generate psychological injury that could be prevented or reduced.

These examples illustrate that while humanitarian organizations have developed diverse and contextually adapted approaches to stress management, their efforts tend to emphasize different dimensions of what this article conceptualizes as stress governance. The ICRC demonstrates strength in institutionalization, MSF in operational adaptability, and the IFRC in community integration. However, the stress-governance model remains an unmet need within the humanitarian system. In view of the increasing hostility and vulnerability of the humanitarian workers, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2008) has decided to review the Guideline on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Setting.

4.5. Implications for stress governance

These institutional variations provide the empirical foundation for the concept of stress governance developed in the following section. They demonstrate that while humanitarian organizations have made significant progress in addressing stress, their approaches remain partially fragmented, often emphasizing specific dimensions (e.g., clinical care, peer support, or policy frameworks) without achieving full systemic integration.

This fragmentation underscores the need for a more comprehensive framework capable of linking:

- structural sources of stress
- institutional responses
- operational practices

Current practices, as already discussed in preceding sections, represent different variations in tackling this institutional vulnerability and a major professional hazard with more or less effect. It is precisely this gap that the concept of stress governance seeks to address.

These observations also resonate with evidence from outside the humanitarian sector. The Foxconn case reflects a failure at the level of industrial work design and labor governance, while the France Télécom case demonstrates how organizational restructuring strategies can generate psychological harm at scale, ultimately leading to legal recognition of "institutional moral harassment." Compared to these cases, humanitarian organizations operate within environments where stressors originate not only internally but also externally, including armed conflict, political instability, and societal collapse. This distinction suggests that stress governance in humanitarian systems must extend beyond internal organizational design to engage with broader systemic and geopolitical determinants of stress.

5. Toward a model of stress governance

Building on the preceding analysis, this article proposes the concept of stress governance as a framework for understanding how organizations manage stress as a systemic and structural risk. Rather than treating stress as an individual pathology or an episodic disruption, stress governance conceptualizes it as an endogenous feature of organizational systems, requiring coordinated institutional responses.

Stress governance can be defined as a core organizational capability comprising the institutional arrangements, organizational practices, and governance mechanisms through which stress is anticipated, regulated, managed, and monitored across different levels of an organization.

This definition implies a shift from reactive intervention toward proactive system design, where stress is embedded into organizational risk management and operational planning.

5.1. Three-dimensional model

Stress governance operates across three interrelated dimensions:

(i) Structural dimension
This dimension refers to the organizational conditions that generate stress, including role ambiguity, workload distribution, decision-making hierarchies, and institutional contradictions. These factors define the *baseline level of stress exposure* within an organization.

(ii) Institutional dimension
This dimension encompasses formalized systems and policies, such as duty-of-care frameworks, health monitoring systems, and crisis response protocols. It reflects the extent to which organizations recognize stress as a governance issue and allocate resources accordingly.

(iii) Operational dimension
This dimension concerns the day-to-day practices through which stress is managed, including leadership styles, peer support mechanisms, informal coping strategies, and organizational climate. It captures the gap between formal policy and lived organizational reality.

5.2. Integration and system coherence

A central insight of this framework is that effective stress governance requires **a**lignment across all three dimensions, i.e., structural, institutional, and operational. Fragmentation—such as strong policies without operational implementation, or adaptive field practices without institutional support—leads to suboptimal outcomes.

This systemic perspective resonates with the framework proposed by Carr *et al.* (2025), where sustainable livelihoods depend on the interaction and alignment of multiple dimensions of work systems. In both cases, the absence of coherence across levels results in dysfunction, while integration enhances both individual well-being and organizational performance.

Alignment across the three dimensions occurs when structural conditions, institutional frameworks, and operational practices reinforce one another—for example, when organizational design minimizes unnecessary stressors, formal policies provide adequate support, and day-to-day practices reflect these commitments. Misalignment arises when these dimensions diverge, such as when formal policies exist without effective implementation, or when adaptive field practices lack institutional backing. This distinction provides an analytical basis for assessing the effectiveness of stress governance systems and generates testable propositions for future empirical research.

5.3. Stress governance as organizational capability

Stress governance should therefore be understood as a core organizational capability, comparable to logistics, security, or financial management. Organizations that fail to develop this capability risk not only staff burnout but also reduced operational effectiveness and strategic failure. This is of particular significance as humanitarian workers often work under precarious conditions, psychologically and politically, especially when providing humanitarian support and/or protection during conflict and war.

5.4. Causal pathways of stress governance

The analytical contribution of stress governance becomes clearer when specifying the causal pathways through which stress affects organizational outcomes. Structural stressors—such as role ambiguity, resource constraints, and moral tension—generate cumulative cognitive and emotional strain among personnel. This strain can impair attention, judgment, and decision-making capacity, particularly in high-pressure environments characterized by uncertainty and ethical complexity.

At the organizational level, such impairments may translate into reduced operational effectiveness, slower response times, coordination failures, or diminished quality of service delivery. In humanitarian contexts, these effects can directly influence the protection and well-being of affected populations, thereby linking stress to human security outcomes.

Conversely, effective stress governance mechanisms—such as integrated duty-of-care systems, continuous monitoring, and supportive leadership practices—can mitigate these effects. By reducing cumulative strain and supporting recovery, such mechanisms contribute to improved decision quality, enhanced organizational resilience, and more consistent operational performance.

These causal pathways highlight that stress is not merely an individual condition but a systemic variable influencing organizational effectiveness and risk.

6. Stress governance and human security

The concept of stress governance has important implications for the field of human security. Traditionally, human security has focused on protecting individuals and communities from threats such as violence, poverty, and environmental degradation. However, this perspective often overlooks the organizational infrastructures through which protection is delivered.

This article argues that stress among humanitarian personnel constitutes a systemic vulnerability within human security systems. The relationship between staff well-being and human security operates through several interconnected mechanisms.

6.1. Organizational effectiveness and decision-making

High levels of stress impair cognitive performance, judgment, and decision-making. In complex humanitarian environments, where decisions often involve ethical trade-offs and resource allocation in emergencies and under conditions of uncertainty, such impairments can have significant consequences. Reduced decision quality directly affects the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions and their ultimate goal of saving lives.

6.2. Institutional capacity and continuity

Chronic stress contributes to burnout, absenteeism, and staff turnover, ultimately weakening organizational capacity. In humanitarian contexts, where institutional knowledge, continuity, and accumulated social capital are critical, high turnover undermines both operational consistency and long-term engagement with affected populations, local authorities, and other actors.

These dynamics are consistent with findings in the broader literature on occupational stress and burnout, which demonstrate that sustained organizational strain can undermine both individual well-being and institutional performance (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In humanitarian contexts, where the stakes of decision-making are particularly high, such effects are amplified and could lead to loss of life.

6.3. Ethical integrity and humanitarian principles

Stress also affects the ability of staff to adhere to core humanitarian principles. Under conditions of prolonged strain, individuals may experience reduced tolerance for ambiguity, increased risk aversion, or emotional detachment. These dynamics can compromise neutrality, impartiality, and accountability.

6.4. Linking stress governance to sustainable livelihoods

From a broader perspective, these dynamics align with the argument advanced by Carr *et al.* (2025), who emphasize that sustainable livelihoods depend on the quality and sustainability of work systems. In humanitarian settings, the sustainability of staff well-being is directly linked to the sustainability of humanitarian action itself, where institutional accountability tends to be hard to measure. Integrity of the humanitarian workers tends to be the self-regulating modality in upholding humanitarian principles in situations of low order, low transparency, and traceability. Hence, the sustainability of individual psychological security anchors the motivation and capacities to perform.

6.5. Stress governance as a mediating variable

Stress governance can therefore be conceptualized as a mediating variable linking organizational structures to human security outcomes. Effective governance systems mitigate the negative effects of stress, enhancing both staff well-being and operational performance. Conversely, weak governance amplifies systemic risk, undermining both organizational effectiveness and the protection of vulnerable populations.

While humanitarian organizations have increasingly institutionalized mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), the empirical evidence base remains uneven. Available organizational data—such as program coverage and institutional frameworks within the ICRC and IFRC—demonstrate scale and commitment but do not provide systematic before-and-after comparisons of staff health outcomes. At the same time, a growing body of research on MHPSS interventions shows measurable improvements in psychological well-being, including reductions in distress, depression, and trauma-related symptoms (Bangpan *et al.*, 2017; Tol *et al.*, 2023). These studies indicate that structured psychosocial interventions can positively affect individual functioning and resilience in humanitarian contexts (Tol *et al.* 2020). However, this evidence is largely focused on individual-level outcomes and rarely examines how such improvements translate into organizational performance, decision-making quality, or system-level resilience.

Similarly, widely adopted interventions such as psychological first aid (WHO et al, 2011) demonstrate effectiveness in stabilizing acute stress responses, yet remain primarily focused on individual-level outcomes, with limited integration into organizational performance and governance frameworks.

This disconnect reveals a critical limitation in current approaches: the absence of integrated frameworks linking intervention effectiveness to organizational and governance outcomes. It is precisely this gap that the concept of stress governance seeks to address, by providing a systemic lens through which stress can be understood not only as an individual condition but as an institutional and operational variable shaping the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

While systematic comparative data remain limited, available evidence suggests that structured psychosocial interventions can improve individual coping capacity and reduce acute distress. At the organizational level, the expansion of such programs across humanitarian agencies indicates growing institutional recognition of stress as a critical operational issue, even if direct links to performance outcomes remain underexplored.

6.6. Stress governance beyond organizational boundaries

While cases such as Foxconn and France Télécom demonstrate how stress can be generated within organizational systems, humanitarian contexts reveal an additional layer of complexity: stress is often produced through the interaction between organizational mandates, rules of engagement, and broader geopolitical environments. Recent humanitarian crises in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine provide illustrative examples of such multi-layered stress dynamics.

In Gaza (2023–2025), humanitarian operations have taken place under conditions of extreme violence and systemic collapse. According to the United Nations and humanitarian reporting (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, n.d.; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 2023; World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, n.d.), hundreds of humanitarian workers have reportedly been killed during this period, while psychological assessments of affected populations indicate widespread depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Humanitarian personnel in this context are themselves directly exposed to violence, displacement, and loss, often without the possibility of recovery or psychological decompression. This represents a condition of stress saturation, where organizational mechanisms are overwhelmed by the scale and intensity of external stressors.

What distinguishes humanitarian contexts from other organizational settings is the simultaneity and intensity of stressors. Humanitarian personnel are often exposed to multiple overlapping pressures, including physical insecurity, moral dilemmas, resource scarcity, and institutional constraints, frequently without clear recovery cycles. This combination of acute and chronic stress exposure creates conditions of sustained psychological load that differ qualitatively from those observed in most corporate or industrial environments. As a result, existing organizational frameworks may be insufficient to fully capture or manage these dynamics, reinforcing the need for an integrated stress governance approach.

In Sudan, ongoing conflict and fragmented governance structures create conditions of chronic insecurity and institutional instability. Humanitarian workers operate under severe constraints, including limited access, resource scarcity, and exposure to violence. In such contexts, stress not only affects individual well-being but also contributes to breakdowns in organizational accountability and ethical conduct, as evidenced by reported cases of misconduct in humanitarian delivery systems. This illustrates how stress can interact with governance failures to produce broader institutional risks.

In Ukraine, the prolonged nature of the conflict has generated cumulative stress effects among humanitarian personnel. Continuous exposure to insecurity, trauma, and operational pressure, without sufficient recovery cycles, leads to the gradual erosion of psychological resilience. Unlike the acute stress saturation observed in Gaza, the Ukrainian context illustrates how long-term exposure can undermine organizational effectiveness over time.

These cases suggest that stress governance in humanitarian systems differs fundamentally from that in corporate or industrial settings. Stress in these humanitarian contexts does not typically manifest as clustered suicide events but rather as continuous, system-wide psychological overload. In contrast, cases such as Foxconn or France Télécom involve stress generated primarily within organizational boundaries; humanitarian stress is co-produced by organizational, institutional, and geopolitical dynamics. Consequently, the effectiveness of stress governance depends not only on internal organizational capacity but also on the ability of institutions to anticipate, navigate, and, where possible, influence the broader conditions that generate stress through the use of diplomatic engagement and coordination with external actors.

This implies an expanded understanding of stress governance as a multi-level capability, encompassing not only internal management systems but also engagement with external actors, including donors, governments, and multilateral institutions. In this sense, stress governance becomes linked to the broader capacity of humanitarian organizations to operate within, and potentially shape, complex geopolitical environments in ways that reduce exposure to systemic stressors.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that stress in humanitarian systems should be understood not as an individual psychological issue but as a structural and organizational phenomenon requiring systematic governance. By shifting the analytical focus from individual resilience to institutional design, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how stress is produced and managed within humanitarian organizations.

The concept of stress governance provides a framework for integrating structural, institutional, and operational dimensions of stress management. It highlights the need for alignment across these levels and underscores the importance of treating stress as a core organizational capability rather than an ancillary concern.

Furthermore, the article has demonstrated that stress governance has implications beyond organizational well-being. By affecting decision-making, institutional capacity, and ethical integrity, stress directly influences the effectiveness of humanitarian action and, consequently, human security outcomes. In this sense, stress governance should be considered an integral component of human security systems.

The integration of insights from sustainable livelihoods research (Carr *et al.*, 2025) further reinforces the argument that work-related well-being is embedded in broader systemic conditions. This interdisciplinary linkage opens new avenues for research and policy development, bridging humanitarian studies, organizational theory, and sustainability science.

Future research should explore the empirical measurement of stress governance, the comparative effectiveness of different organizational models, and the role of donors and governance frameworks in shaping stress management systems. For practitioners, the key implication is clear: sustainable humanitarian action requires a transition from reactive stress management toward proactive, system-wide stress governance.

8. Limitations and research agenda

This study is subject to several limitations that also point toward important avenues for future research.

First, the empirical evidence based on stress

management in humanitarian organizations remains fragmented. While organizations such as the ICRC, MSF, and IFRC have developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to MHPSS, publicly available data are largely limited to program descriptions, coverage indicators, or qualitative assessments. Systematic "before-and-after" evaluations of staff health outcomes at the organizational level remain rare. This limitation is not unique to the organizations examined but reflects a broader challenge in the humanitarian sector, where operational constraints, ethical considerations, and data sensitivity restrict the collection and dissemination of longitudinal staff health data.

Second, the broader evidence base on MHPSS interventions, while growing, is primarily focused on individual-level clinical and psychosocial outcomes. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews (e.g., Bangpan *et al.*, 2017; Tol *et al.*, 2023) demonstrate that such interventions can reduce psychological distress and improve functioning. However, these studies rarely examine how interventions translate into organizational performance, decision-making quality, or system-level resilience. As a result, a critical gap persists between intervention effectiveness and governance outcomes.

Third, the diversity of operational contexts and organizational models complicates cross-case comparison. Humanitarian organizations differ significantly in mandate, structure, and resource availability, which affects both the design and implementation of stress management systems. For instance, the centralized and institutionalized model of the ICRC contrasts with the decentralized and field-driven approach of MSF and the community-oriented framework of the IFRC. This variability limits the generalizability of findings and underscores the need for context-sensitive analytical frameworks.

These limitations highlight several priorities for future research. First, there is a need for the development of standardized indicators capable of measuring stress at multiple levels, including individual well-being, team dynamics, and organizational performance. Second, longitudinal and comparative studies should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of different stress governance models across organizations and operational contexts. Third, future research should explore the role of donors, regulatory frameworks, and international norms in shaping organizational approaches to stress management, including the extent to which stress governance can be embedded within accountability and reporting systems.

More broadly, advancing the concept of stress governance will require a shift from fragmented evaluation of individual interventions toward integrated assessment of organizational systems. Such an approach would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how stress affects not only individual well-being but also the effectiveness, ethical integrity, and sustainability of humanitarian action.

Future research should focus on the operationalization of the stress governance concept through the development of measurable indicators across structural, institutional, and operational dimensions. In addition, quantitative approaches, including path analysis and multi-level modeling, could be used to test the relationships proposed in this framework and assess their impact on organizational performance and human security outcomes.

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