



Aid Worker Security Report 2024

Balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- ▶ 2023 was the deadliest year for aid workers ever recorded, with fatalities more than double the annual average.
- ▶ The death toll was driven mainly by the war in Gaza, which, since its onset in October 2023, has claimed the lives of more than 280 aid workers to date, mostly in collateral violence.
- ▶ Sudan and South Sudan also saw record numbers of aid workers killed in 2023, adding to the spike in fatalities.
- ▶ The changing global conflict landscape has seen the proportion of aid worker killings committed by state actors rise relative to non-state armed groups. That those who are supposed to uphold international humanitarian law are increasingly responsible for the deaths of aid workers and civilians highlights the challenges and limits of humanitarian advocacy.
- ▶ At the country and regional levels, humanitarian advocacy efforts have had little evident success in achieving better access and protecting aid workers in current conflicts, and global humanitarian advocacy campaigns have not curbed the upward trend of aid worker casualties in conflict.
- ▶ When aid organisations confront the behaviour of powerful actors, it can sometimes put aid personnel and programming in danger. However, neither the risks nor the effectiveness of aid organisations 'speaking out' are well demonstrated or understood.
- ▶ While the security risks of advocacy can be better mitigated through improved coordination, organisational processes, and risk analysis tools, more significant rewards remain out of reach – dependent on the international political will to apply pressure for accountability and justice.



The AWSD records major incidents of deliberate violence affecting humanitarian personnel. These include:

- killings
- kidnappings (lasting over 24 hours)
- serious injuries
- rape and sexual assault

This report is based on verified incident statistics from the Aid Worker Security Database and key informant interviews with 30 humanitarian practitioners and advocacy experts.

For more information and past years' reports, visit <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/reports>

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics, 2014–2023

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of incidents	194	150	164	160	229	276	283	272	247	281
Total aid worker victims	340	290	296	315	409	481	484	466	459	595
Total killed	130	111	109	140	131	125	117	141	118	280
Total injured	89	110	99	103	147	234	242	203	146	224
Total kidnapped*	121	69	88	72	131	122	125	122	195	91
International victims	33	30	43	28	29	27	25	23	23	26
National victims	307	260	253	287	380	454	459	443	436	569
UN staff	71	44	71	48	70	37	58	55	76	243
International NGO staff	152	173	161	109	186	260	228	203	177	178
National NGO staff	71	39	41	84	128	154	168	187	184	119
Red Cross/Crescent Movement**	43	31	21	74	25	16	28	11	9	51

*Survivors, or whereabouts unknown

**Includes International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and national societies.

In a year marked by high civilian casualties and record numbers of aid workers killed, the question of how to hold warring parties accountable for their duty to protect and facilitate humanitarian relief efforts has become more urgent and elusive.

Trends in security incidents highlight the growing role that state actors play in the violence affecting aid workers, suggesting a further erosion of international humanitarian law and a shrinking of security within humanitarian operations.

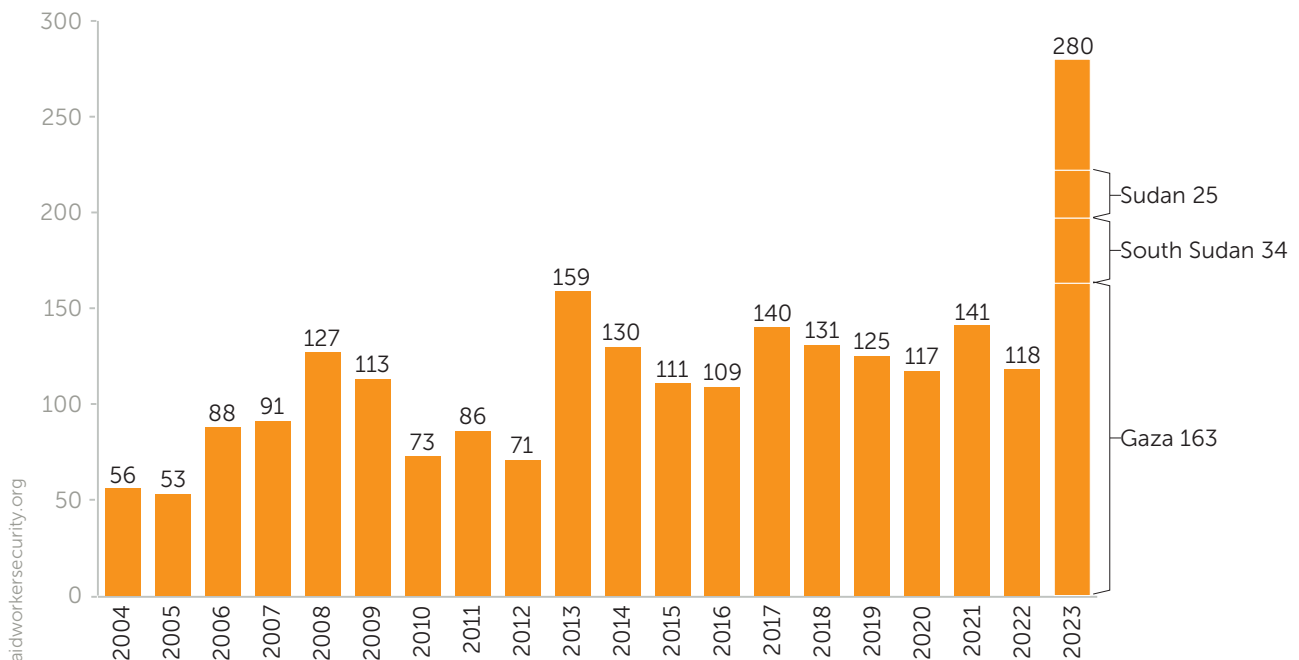
In Gaza, Sudan, and other conflicts, concerted humanitarian advocacy efforts with governments – both public and behind the scenes – have resulted in little change in policy and tactics. Far from protecting and facilitating humanitarian aid, militaries have repeatedly obstructed and endangered it. Global efforts to address the problem of violence against aid workers through UN resolutions and international media campaigns like #NotATarget, have also not managed to slow the continued upward trend of global casualty numbers.

This year’s Aid Worker Security Report examines the challenge faced by aid workers attempting to practise humanitarian advocacy: how and where it has been effective, when and why it has failed, and what risks it potentially poses to personnel and operations.

1.1 Global totals

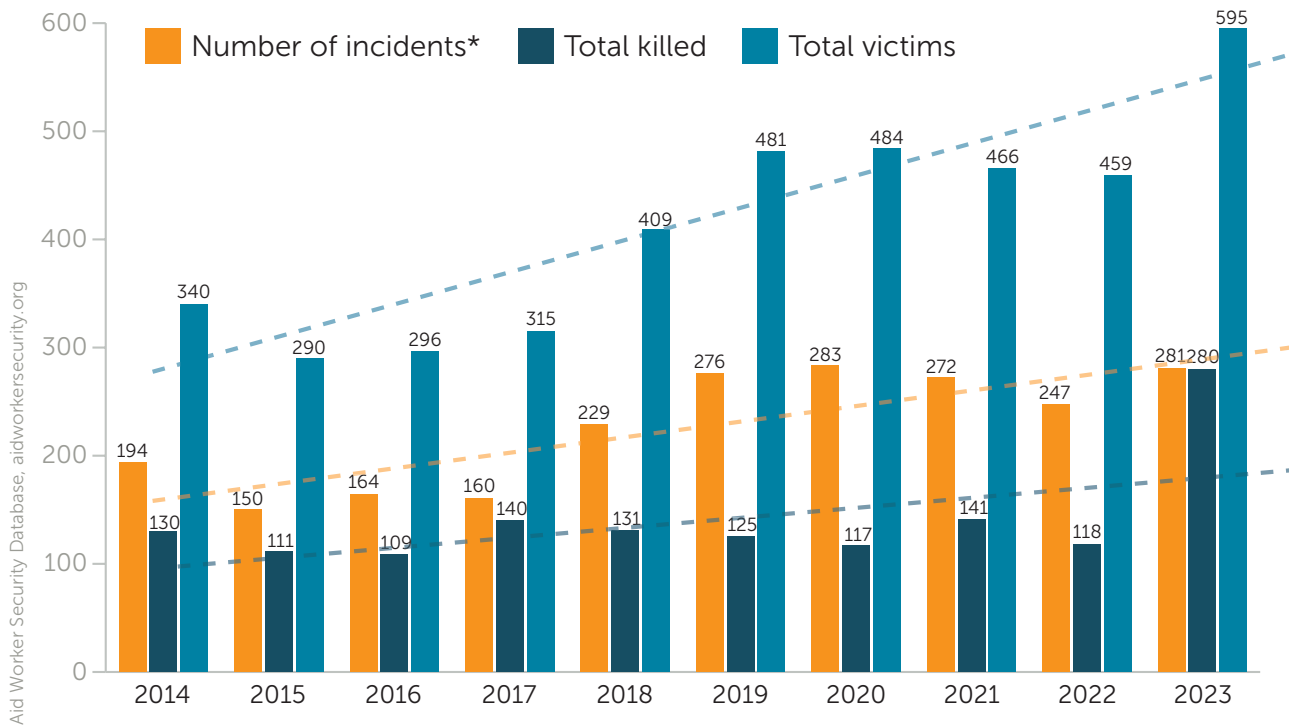
Record fatality numbers in Sudan, South Sudan, and Gaza drove the total number of aid workers killed in 2023 to the highest ever recorded (280). More than half of these fatalities occurred in Gaza (163) in just the first three months of the conflict, mostly due to airstrikes.

Figure 1: Aid worker fatalities, 2004–2023



In total, at least 595 aid workers were victims of major attacks in 2023, with 280 of those killed, 224 wounded, and 91 kidnapped. The ongoing intense conflicts in Gaza and Sudan make it difficult to know the true extent of attacks and injuries at the time of writing as many organisations are still working to verify the status of their staff and partners.

Figure 2: Major attacks, victims, and fatalities, 2014–2023



*Limited information on non-fatal casualties in Gaza means that the 2023 numbers for total attacks and victims are likely significantly undercounted.

1.2 Most violent contexts

Although major attacks affecting aid workers took place in 33 countries last year, 62% of all victims were in just three contexts; Gaza, Sudan, and South Sudan.

In Gaza, 163 aid workers died between the start of the conflict on 7 October 2023 and the end of the year – a higher number than ever recorded by the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) globally in one year. Most of these fatalities were due to collateral violence from aerial bombardment and rockets/shelling (largely people killed while sheltering at home or in public locations), reflecting the generally very high civilian death toll of a major military campaign in a dense urban environment. While the exact percentage is still unknown, a smaller but still very significant number of aid workers were killed while engaged in relief work, in attacks on ambulances, aid convoys, medical and shelter facilities, and distribution sites. Even if only 25% died ‘on the job’, this is still far more than most conflict-affected countries recorded by the AWSD. The casualties continued to mount in Gaza through 2024, with another 120 reported aid workers killed by early August.

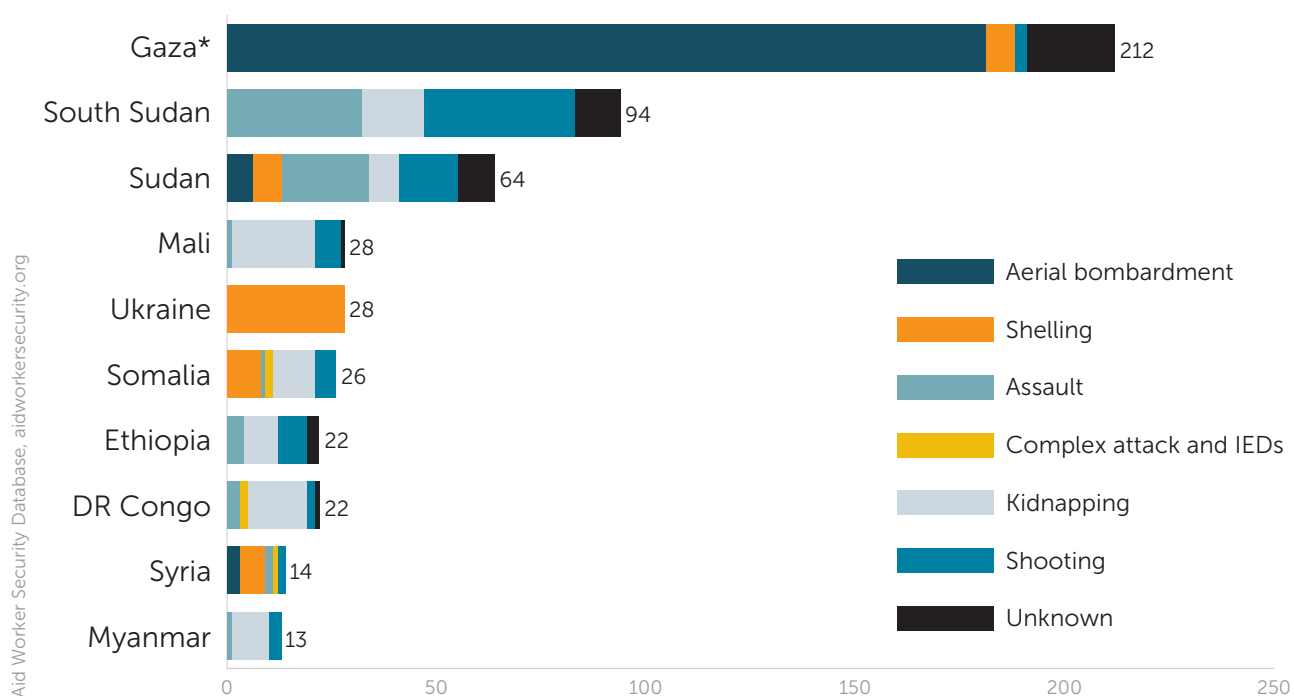
Since the eruption of conflict in Sudan in April 2023, aid worker fatalities recorded by the AWSD were higher there than in any other year, including at the height of the Darfur conflict. The majority of these killings occurred in ambushes, raids, and individual targeted attacks, with only 39% due to collateral violence between the warring parties. The most common means of violence was small arms shootings, followed by shelling and aerial bombardment. Of the 36 incidents recorded in 2023, 15 were in the capital Khartoum, where fighting was initially concentrated, and 17 occurred in the Darfur region as the conflict spread.

After a small decline in the number of aid worker victims in 2022, violence surged again in South Sudan in 2023, with the most fatalities ever recorded in the country. South Sudan has been among the most violent contexts for aid workers for many years running, with ongoing civil, intercommunal,

and criminal violence occurring in an atmosphere of impunity. Shootings remained the most common means of attack, with 45% of attacks occurring on roads during transit. Last year also saw a slight rise in incidents perpetrated by criminal gangs, which have proliferated amid the unstable economic environment created from over a decade of civil conflict and instability.

Other countries notable for high numbers of aid workers affected by major attacks in 2023 were Mali, Ukraine, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Myanmar (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Top 10 most violent contexts for aid workers by number of victims and means of attack, 2023



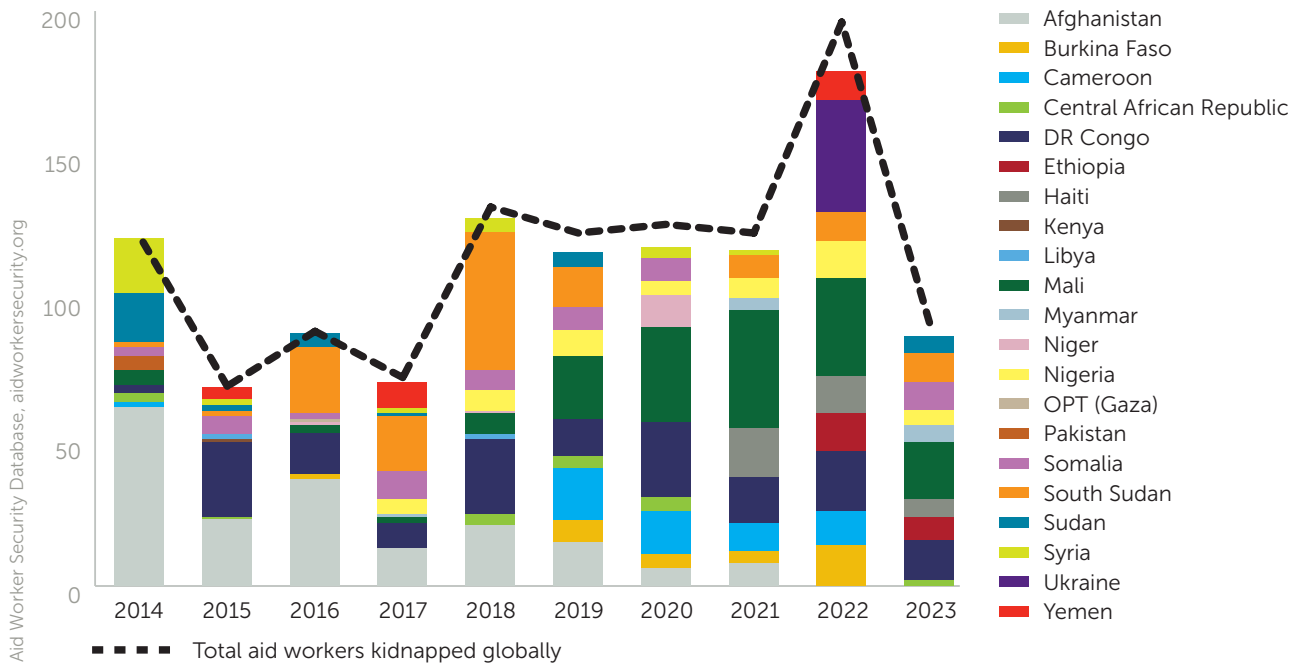
*Does not include a full count of aid workers wounded in Gaza, due to the difficulty in obtaining verified reports of non-fatal injuries amid the ongoing conflict.

Globally, kidnappings of aid workers in 2023 fell to their lowest level since 2017. The largest drop was seen in Ukraine, where battle lines have stabilised, and the number of kidnapped aid workers fell to zero after a total of 39 in 2022. Mali and Burkina Faso, where kidnappings had surged in recent years, saw the second biggest declines. According to data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), abductions among general civilian populations also fell across the Sahel.¹ While part of the reduction of aid worker kidnappings could be because some international aid organisations have reduced their operational presence, it is likely that the changing conflict dynamics, and the presence of the Wagner Group squeezing rebel groups and ISIS- and Al Qaeda-affiliated militants, has temporarily created more secure conditions in some areas.

Despite the drop overall and in the countries listed above, Somalia and Sudan suffered renewed attacks in 2023 after having no kidnappings reported in 2022 (Figure 4)

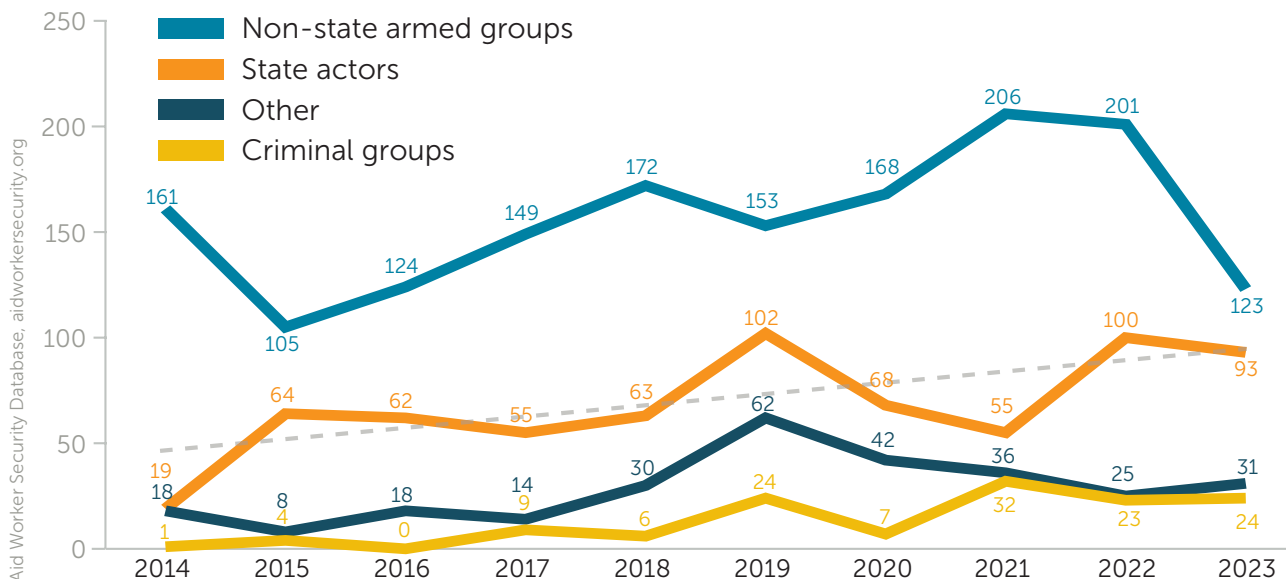
¹ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). Data export tool <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/> Retrieved 5 August 2024.

Figure 4: Number of aid workers kidnapped, 2014–2023



The recent increase of major armed conflicts involving national militaries, such as those in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, has resulted in an increase of aid worker attacks being committed by state actors. Of the 33 countries where major incidents of violence against aid workers took place in 2023, 10 experienced attacks perpetrated by a state actor. Due to the difficulty in attributing perpetrators to incidents during active conflict, this analysis only includes incidents where the perpetrator is known. However, it is significant that 57% of all the fatalities in 2023 occurred as a result of aerial bombardment – a means of violence almost exclusively used by state actors. Additionally, although not tracked by the AWSDB, anecdotal evidence over the past few years suggests a major rise in arrests and detentions of aid workers by government actors.

Figure 5: Number of victims by perpetrator type,* 2014–2023



*For incidents where the perpetrator type was known

Although non-state armed groups remain the most frequent perpetrators of attacks on aid workers, the relative rise in state actor involvement has disturbing implications for international humanitarian law and the rules of war. Intensive individual and collective efforts by humanitarians to advocate for protection of civilians, expanded access for relief aid, and security for aid operations has not yielded meaningful results with government and military actors in the contexts of Gaza and Sudan.² Nor is there evidence that global advocacy campaigns have changed the trajectory of aid worker violence, which continues to trend upward over time.

The following sections draw on practitioner interviews and a review of the literature to examine how humanitarian actors approach advocacy efforts to protect aid workers and promote safe humanitarian access, and how they assess and mitigate the associated risks.

2

Humanitarian advocacy and its relationship to secure access for aid

Humanitarian advocacy aims to influence policies and behaviours for the benefit of crisis-affected people. Advocates can be organisations, officials, and individuals, including crisis-affected people themselves, seeking to raise awareness of humanitarian needs, protect civilians in conflict, and ensure secure and unimpeded access for humanitarian relief activities.

2.1 Objectives and approaches

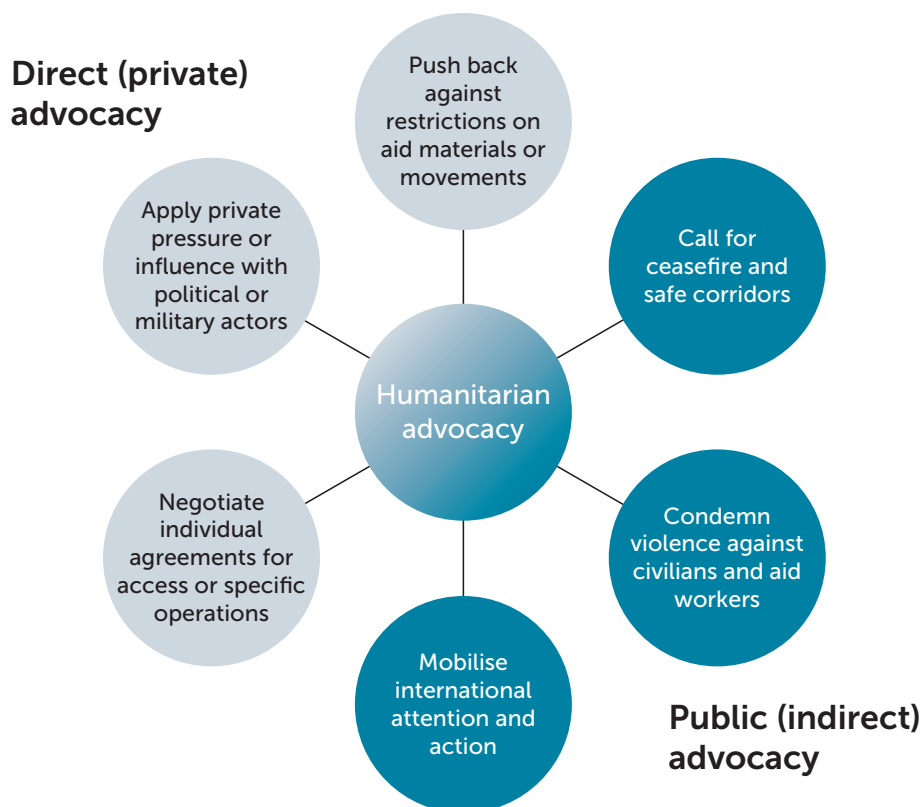
Humanitarian organisations employ a range of approaches and methods, singly or in combination, depending on the circumstances and their objectives (Figure 6). For some organisations, advocacy is not a strategic project but an ethical one; a moral duty to speak out and bear witness to suffering and injustice. Such organisations will practise advocacy for its own sake, as a core component of their mission. For others, advocacy is a tool for achieving programming objectives, and often takes place behind the scenes in direct negotiations or lobbying and legal action.³ Organisations also differ in their approaches to the balance of public and private advocacy. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) famously prioritises behind-the-scenes negotiations and influence, whereas others are more likely to speak out in public, using 'name and shame' tactics to influence change.⁴

² See: Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Czwarno, M., Breckenridge, M.-J., and Duque-Diez, M. (2024). *Humanitarian access SCORE report: Gaza – the first six months. Survey on the coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness of humanitarian aid*. Humanitarian Outcomes. https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/SCORE_Gaza_2024; and Harvey, P., Stoddard, A., Czwarno, M., Breckenridge, M.-J., and Duque-Diez, M. (2023). *Humanitarian access SCORE report: Sudan. Survey on the coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness of humanitarian aid*. Humanitarian Outcomes. <https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/score-report-sudan-2023>

³ Metcalf-Hough, V. (2022). *Advocating for the better protection of civilians: From stagnation to action*. HPG report, Overseas Development Institute (ODI). https://media.odi.org/documents/HPG_protection_advocacy_report_final_rev.pdf

⁴ An example is the joint communications by NGOs in Gaza: <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/gaza-humanitarian-snapshot-2.pdf>

Figure 6: Examples of advocacy activities undertaken by humanitarian organisations



Both public and direct advocacy can be a collective endeavour, involving multiple humanitarian actors speaking through NGO forums, UN leadership, or other joint processes. Other forms of indirect advocacy involve partnerships and collaboration between different types of actors; for instance, when humanitarian organisations provide information confidentially to human rights organisations whose role is to speak out. Selecting the most advantageous method in different scenarios is a key aspect of organisations’ analysis (or discussions) around advocacy, according to practitioners interviewed for this report.

In aid organisations with a less formal approach to advocacy, the distinction between advocacy, communications, and fundraising activities can be unclear, often leading to their conflation. Even among organisations that pursue a deliberate and strategic application of advocacy, however, few can point to specific, measurable results tracked against concrete objectives. Advocacy, as practised in the humanitarian sector, appears to be more art than science, adding to the uncertainty about how it affects security for aid operations.

Some advocacy action focuses specifically on the protection of aid workers. World Humanitarian Day commemorations and the #NotATarget social media campaign, for example, aim to raise awareness of violence against aid workers and pressure states to take action to address it.⁵ Advocacy for protection of aid workers and operations directly invokes international humanitarian law as enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, and links to wider efforts to persuade states and warring parties to protect civilians from violence and abuse.⁶

⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2018). 2018: #NotATarget. <https://about.worldhumanitarianaday.org/campaign2018/>

⁶ “The Parties to the conflict shall allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of all relief consignments, equipment and personnel.” (Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, Article 70,2); “Personnel participating in relief operations shall be respected and protected.” (Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, Article 71,2).

2.2 The security paradox

Even as humanitarians advocate for the security and protection of their personnel and the people they serve, most agree that the act of advocacy can itself provoke resentment, reprisals, and even violence against them.

State governments, militaries, non-state armed groups, international policymakers, and anyone in a position of power or influence can be a target for advocacy efforts. States, who have committed to uphold the tenets of international humanitarian law, are in many ways the natural target for humanitarian advocacy, but can also potentially be the source of some of the worst blowback for humanitarians – expelling organisations, obstructing operations, and detaining or harassing aid workers.

In August 2021, the Ethiopian government suspended the operations of two large international NGOs for three months, halting critical relief programming, having accused them of spreading misinformation. In Sudan in 2019, several international NGOs were expelled after President Omar al-Bashir accused them of interfering in the country's internal affairs. UN officials and aid agencies have come up against similar reprisals from the Ethiopian and Nigerian governments when their advocacy efforts were characterised as meddling or spying. And NGOs in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan have historically faced heavy government scrutiny and restrictions – particularly those engaged in advocacy and human rights.

Humanitarian actors therefore find themselves having to balance risks relating to advocacy against the potential benefits of positively influencing parties to conflicts – an assessment for which there is little hard evidence to guide them.

3

Risks versus rewards: A look at the evidence

In interviews for this report, humanitarian staff involved in advocacy, security risk management, and programming shared how their organisations balanced the risks and rewards of advocacy in different scenarios. Much of this decision-making remains subjective. On the one hand, it is not possible for aid organisations to make this calculus with analytical rigour, because the complex and dynamic nature of humanitarian contexts doesn't allow for establishing clear cause-and-effect relationships. On the other hand, the humanitarian literature on the subject has also found very little measurable evidence and interviewees said that few organisations have frameworks and systems for such analysis.⁷

ICRC's 2018 study, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, did find some indicative evidence that engaging with armed groups can yield positive outcomes for civilians and humanitarian efforts.⁸ The findings from eight case studies demonstrated that informal norms, including community and family influences, often shape the actions of soldiers and fighters more than formal training in international humanitarian law (a traditional means for ICRC's advocacy with state governments and militaries). The findings were promising, but at the same time highlighted the enormous challenge and limited effects of attempting to persuade war fighters to protect civilians and allow for secure humanitarian access.

According to interviewees, decisions on public advocacy often come down to a balance between perceived immediate, direct risks to specific operations and staff versus uncertain, longer-term benefits for the humanitarian response as a whole. Private advocacy, on the other hand, involves

⁷ Metcalf-Hough (2022).

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross. (2018). *The roots of restraint in war*. <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4352-roots-restraint-war>

interacting with dangerous actors, balancing the risks that come with that interaction with the benefits of building relationships with power-holders that can help aid workers gain secure access (Table 2). Another important consideration is that advocacy efforts may struggle to maintain levels of attention and support over time, with target audiences at risk of becoming desensitised to repetitive messaging, with implications for assessing rewards and risks.

Table 2: Risk-reward matrix

	Possible harms	Possible benefits
Public advocacy (speaking out)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct attacks against staff • Intimidation or harassment • Arrests and detentions • Expulsion or suspension of operations • Staff members PNG'd* • Bureaucratic obstacles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness and policy attention • Public/political pressure for better humanitarian access and protection • Support for people in need and aid response efforts
Private/direct advocacy (negotiations and direct appeals to governments, armed groups, and influence-holders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactions with potentially dangerous actors and raising the organisation's profile with them, risking future targeting • Public perception that organisations are 'complicit' or 'not doing enough' • Similar risks of possible and administrative obstacles as public advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established relationships and communication channels with power-holders and conflict parties, enhancing negotiation effectiveness • Allows face-saving alternative for actors to change behaviour, without being named-and-shamed

*Declared persona non grata and required to leave the country.

3.1 Reprisals, obstruction, and loss of access

There are many examples of deliberate harm to aid organisations as a result of their advocacy efforts, including: harassment and intimidation, office raids and seizures of property, arrests and detentions, and physical harm to staff. These harms are much more commonly experienced by national and local organisations than international ones, and particularly when their advocacy involves criticising government policies, calling out corruption, or advocating for the interests of marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities. As one interviewee commented, "[internationals] get expelled but [nationals] get arrested". In the worst cases, arrests can lead to torture and disappearance.

For international organisations, interviewees indicated that the most frequently seen forms of blowback to advocacy are largely bureaucratic in nature, such as delays in issuing visas and permissions. However, programmes have also been shut down, and on rare occasions organisations have been forced to leave countries and cease operations.⁹ Personnel of UN agencies and international NGOs have occasionally been 'PNG'd' (declared persona non grata and required to leave the host country) at least partially because of their humanitarian advocacy efforts.¹⁰ And short of this, interviewees said, an aggrieved government "... can make your, or your organisation's, life difficult without having to resort to PNG". Expulsions of individuals or organisations, even when temporary, can have a distinct chilling effect, which one interviewee likened to "inter-generational agency trauma" that affects what they are willing to say in the future. Yet outright organisational expulsions remain relatively rare, given only a handful of examples from the hundreds of organisations working across scores of countries over the last two decades.

⁹ Examples include two international NGOs expelled from Türkiye in 2017, and 13 international NGOs expelled – and 3 national NGOs shut down – by the Sudanese government in 2009.

¹⁰ Most recently, seven UN officials were expelled from Ethiopia in 2021.

3.2 Risk aversion and ‘the risk of doing nothing’

Interviewees noted that risks are poorly evidenced or analysed, and may be used by organisations as an excuse for playing it safe and not advocating for protection and access when it is called for. Research by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on humanitarian advocacy for protection of civilians found that the humanitarians had not analysed the risks or identified potential mitigation measures when carrying out these advocacy activities.¹¹

Another research report, produced by the Global Protection Cluster, found that:

Many of the risks associated with protection advocacy are often assumed, rather than assessed, and frequently overstated. In a survey with international, national and local protection organizations, 68% indicated they had not experienced repercussions related to the advocacy work they engage in, while 70% of local and national actors specified they had not experienced repercussions for undertaking advocacy to strengthen protection.¹²

Similarly, most practitioners interviewed for this study were unable to point to specific examples where their organisation’s advocacy efforts led directly to security incidents, yet still felt that there were real risks involved with advocacy. A notable exception was in Ethiopia during the Tigray conflict. After making public statements critical of the government, NGOs experienced raids on offices, which were used to find failures to comply with bureaucratic regulations (such as expired visas, project agreements and unregistered satellite phones), which provided a pretext for harassment or expulsion.

Though some risk assessment tools for advocacy exist¹³ (Oxfam was cited by interviewees as having good risk assessment frameworks in areas that involve advocacy, for example), most NGOs have much less formal processes for considering advocacy’s potential risks against potential rewards – or none at all. And without a thorough risk analysis, it is easy for risk avoidance to become a default tendency. As one interviewee noted, “The weight of unquantifiable risk is really hard. Risks are often assumed – but there is a need to be conservative,” adding, “you don’t know until you annoy the wrong person and someone is killed.”

In authoritarian settings such as Myanmar, the choice between advocacy and access can be stark, and UN agencies and some international NGOs have come under criticism for staying quiet so that they may continue to maintain operations in an ever more constrained sphere of access.¹⁴ The failure of UN-led processes to get the balance right between advocacy and access, in Myanmar and elsewhere, is a consistent finding from reviews.¹⁵

¹¹ Davies, G. (2021). *Protection advocacy by international NGOs in armed conflict situations. Breaking the barriers.* HPG briefing note. ODI. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Advocacy_IP_INGOs_briefing_note_web.pdf

¹² Global Protection Cluster. (2022). *Advancing risk-informed advocacy in support of access that protects.* Thematic segment – access for protection concept note, Global Protection Forum 2022. https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/8_att_concept_note_final.pdf

¹³ Oxfam (2019) Civic Space Monitoring Tool: Understanding what is happening in civic space at a local and national level, Civic Space Monitoring Tool: Understanding what is happening in civic space at a local and national level – Oxfam Policy & Practice; UNICEF. (2010). *Advocacy toolkit. A guide to influencing decisions that improve children’s lives.* <https://preparecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/UNICEF-Advocacy-Toolkit-2010.pdf>; CARE International. (2014). *The CARE International Advocacy handbook.* <https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Care%20International%20Advocacy%20Handbook.pdf>

¹⁴ According to the AWSD, in the last five years Myanmar state forces perpetrated 26 separate incidents of violence against aid workers, with 42% of those occurring in custody. This means that national aid workers are facing political violence and accusations whether or not their organisations are publicly speaking out.

¹⁵ Davies (2021); Rosenthal, G. (2019). *A brief and independent inquiry into the involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010-2018.* <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3809543?v=pdf>; HERE-Geneva. (2024). *Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the response to the crisis in Northern Ethiopia.* Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation, Inter-Agency Standing Commission. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Northern%20Ethiopia%20IAHE%20Full%20Report%20May%202024.pdf>; Petrie, C. (2012). *Report of the Secretary-General’s internal review panel on United Nations action in Sri Lanka.* <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/737299?ln=en&v=pdf>

Interviewees also spoke about the need to balance the risks of doing advocacy against the risks of not doing it. Even when advocacy is unlikely to have immediate effects in terms of influencing the behaviour of warring parties, some insist it is still necessary to signal the unacceptability of violence and refusal to allow humanitarian aid. Moreover, not pushing back against obstruction, predation, and diversion of aid can gradually increase risks particularly for national staff. One mentioned the ‘frog in boiling water’ problem, where failures to speak out and challenge abuse gradually increase risks.

3.3 “Too little, too late, and not working”

Just like its associated risks, assessing the potential benefits or achievements of advocacy in increasing access and reducing violence against aid workers is limited by a lack of evidence and the problem of attribution. In the Gaza conflict, despite intense collective advocacy efforts by the UN and aid organisations with the Israeli government and armed forces, life-saving assistance continues to be blocked at the border and aid operations inside the territories imperilled by collateral and direct violence.¹⁶

Aid workers involved in the Gaza response express a widely shared sense of futility. Said one, “At this point, advocacy on Gaza has become more about the need to continue to put on record the continuing awfulness of what is happening than any real hope of it making a difference on the ground.”

According to an advocacy coordinator for an international NGO, the relationship between aid agencies and governments in current crisis contexts seems to have become more adversarial and polarised in general. Aid organisations can no longer depend on escalating the issues to donor governments to use their diplomatic influence because donor governments are less present and engaged or have less traction with crisis-affected states in a shifting global political landscape. As a result, she said, “Advocacy is too little, too late and not working.”

Public advocacy campaigns to condemn violence against civilians and aid workers lack focus and a theory of change for achieving their objectives, according to some in the sector. “Advocacy is often an echo chamber – the humanitarian system advocating to itself to make it feel better”, said one interviewee. “There’s a lot of going through the motions with no influence.” Others defend these efforts, however, noting that aid worker security campaigns such as #NotATarget raise visibility of the problem and increase public knowledge of international humanitarian law and humanitarian efforts. The point, they say, is to drive public discourse and combat the ‘normalisation’ of the violence rather than to directly influence the behaviour of warring parties or hold them accountable. For example, it has helped to focus the attention of donors and aid agency leadership on the need to support strengthened security risk management in humanitarian operations.

3.4 Advocacy for justice and accountability

Beyond stopping warring parties from continuing their attacks, several interviewees emphasised the need for stronger connections between advocacy and efforts to pursue justice and accountability. In Ethiopia, NGOs have made significant organisational investments in seeking justice for staff who have been killed, attempting to hold perpetrators accountable in legal processes. Other notable efforts in the past include the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) demand for an independent investigation and accountability after a US airstrike bombed a hospital it supported in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing 42 people. While the US government admitted fault and offered compensation to victims’ families, MSF did not achieve the independent inquiry it sought, and no criminal charges were brought against those involved.¹⁷ Similarly, Action contre la Faim (ACF) has repeatedly called for an independent international investigation of the 2006 execution-style murders of 17 ACF staff members in Muttur, Sri Lanka, during the country’s civil war.¹⁸ Despite substantial evidence suggesting the involvement of Sri Lankan security forces, no one was held accountable, and the case remains unresolved.

¹⁶ Stoddard et al. (2024).

¹⁷ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). (n.d.). *Kunduz hospital attack*. <https://www.msf.org/kunduz-hospital-attack>

¹⁸ Action contre la Faim (ACF). (2013). *The truth about the assassination of 17 aid workers in Sri Lanka*. <https://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/en/publication/the-truth-about-the-assassination-of-17-aid-workers-in-sri-lanka/>

In a singular example of justice served, a military court in South Sudan convicted 10 soldiers for their roles in a 2016 attack on an NGO compound in Juba in which they killed one staff member and raped several others, sentencing them to prison terms ranging from seven years to life.¹⁹ This outcome was achieved after intense US diplomatic pressure and facilitation of the trial process.

The rarity of accountability and apparent lack of recourse with host governments or conflict parties has created a widespread sense of impunity for attacks on aid workers working in conflict and crisis areas. As a result, victims and their families that seek redress are left to find it mainly through suing the aid organisations that employed them.²⁰

3.5 Organisational challenges

Interviews revealed internal organisational issues that complicate effective advocacy. A key concern was the 'siloining' of advocacy as a separate project or department, isolated from programming and security risk management. Across the board it seemed there was little engagement of security risk management staff and processes in the planning and execution of advocacy initiatives. When advocacy is pursued in isolation, the associated risks can go unaddressed, potentially blindsiding other staff. Numerous instances can be found where one part of an aid organisation made public statements that inadvertently created risks for colleagues on the ground. This issue also affects the broader community of aid organisations operating in the same area. While diverse advocacy tactics can be strategically beneficial when coordinated, uncoordinated public or private advocacy by an individual organisation can create significant risks.

Multi-mandate organisations can find balancing advocacy and humanitarian activities particularly challenging, as the objectives of the different mandates of an organisation (speaking out versus providing aid) can sometimes come into conflict and create internal tensions. Likewise, national and local organisations face a different range of risks and possible mitigating measures than international ones, highlighting the need for greater focus on advocacy risks specific to local actors.

A couple of NGO interviewees also raised the concern that the people staffing advocacy roles tend to be relatively junior, and lack the skills and experience to work effectively across different units when it came to decision-making in high-risk environments. "At ground level," said one, "what really makes a difference is staff and their skills, so training staff in access negotiations so they are better equipped to carry out effective local level advocacy."

At the same time, they noted, "Too many senior humanitarian leaders don't understand and don't engage with advocacy," mistakenly seeing it only as public statements, and neglecting "all of the behind-the-scenes options that are available and often more effective."

¹⁹ Dumo, D. (2018, 6 September). *South Sudan soldiers sentenced to jail for murder, rape in 2016 hotel raid*. Reuters. [https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-sudan-soldiers-sentenced-to-jail-for-murder-rape-in-2016-hotel-raid-idUSKCN1LM1QM/#:~:text=JUBA%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20A%20South,pay%20compensation%20to%20the%20victims](https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-sudan-soldiers-sentenced-to-jail-for-murder-rape-in-2016-hotel-raid-idUSKCN1LM1QM/#:~:text=JUBA%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20A%20South,pay%20compensation%20to%20the%20victims)

²⁰ Legal Action Worldwide. (2023). *Justice and accountability for attacks on aid workers: What are the barriers and how to overcome them?* <https://www.legalactionworldwide.org/accountability-rule-of-law/report-justice-and-accountability-for-attacks-on-aid-workers-what-are-the-barriers-and-how-to-overcome-them/>

According to practitioners consulted, some tools and standard mitigation measures can be better deployed than they currently are. For example, tools and frameworks for advocacy risk assessments that already exist in humanitarian settings, such as Oxfam's Civic Space Monitoring Tool, could be replicated and disseminated by NGO forums preventing the need for the sector to 'reinvent the wheel'.²¹ Tools can also be borrowed from human rights and civic NGOs, for whom advocacy – and its attendant risks – are their stock-in-trade. An example is the Frontline Defenders 'holistic security framework'.²²

Interviewees also underscored the importance of collective advocacy. The roles of OCHA, humanitarian coordinators, and donor governments are essential in advocating with authorities on behalf of operational agencies. Also valued are the non-operational actors like Refugees International, Geneva Call, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, which in some circumstances can advocate more forcefully and facilitate behind-the-scenes dialogue. Finally, NGO forums can be very effective in addressing advocacy issues with authorities while diluting the risks for any one organisation.

In addition to better integrating security risk management considerations and expertise into advocacy planning and processes, aid organisations can consider the following risk mitigation measures, especially in contexts where the risks to advocacy are perceived to be especially high:

- ensuring that advocacy messages are first shared privately with the targeted actors
- enlisting senior leadership, staff outside the country, coordination bodies, or other third-party organisations to be the messenger
- identifying escalation pathways for advocacy (private and public), and keeping other organisations, donors, and embassies informed
- carrying out risk assessments for planned advocacy activities, including the potential short and long-term impact on national staff and partner organisations
- contingency planning for potential pushback and harassment from authorities relating to advocacy, up to and including detentions and violence, such as having established relationships with government actors, specialised lawyers and support services for affected staff
- establishing monitoring mechanisms to understand the impact (positive and negative) of advocacy efforts, including impacts on aid worker security
- supporting efforts to monitor and track incidents of violence, harassment, and denial of access – this data can be used by coordinating bodies like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to 'make the case' for the greater protection of aid work to governments and conflict parties (while being mindful that constant repetition of the same message can alienate or desensitise advocacy targets)

²¹ Oxfam. (2019). *Civic space monitoring tool*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/>; UNICEF. (2010). *Advocacy toolkit. A guide to influencing decisions that improve children's lives*. <https://preparecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/UNICEF-Advocacy-Toolkit-2010.pdf>; CARE International. (2014). *The CARE International advocacy handbook*. <https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Care%20International%20Advocacy%20Handbook.pdf>

²² Front Line Defenders. (2016). *Workbook on security: Practical steps for human rights defenders at risk*. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/workbook-security-practical-steps-human-rights-defenders-risk>

- actively encouraging OCHA, humanitarian coordinators, and donor governments to forcefully advocate with authorities on behalf of operational aid organisations (as they have sometimes shown reluctance to do)
- conducting more nationally- and locally-focused advocacy, as public engagement campaigns within countries at local and national levels were perceived by interviewees as lacking, and potentially more effective than global campaigns
- when considering advocacy measures focused on addressing violence against aid workers, systematically exploring the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of advocacy – the Working Group on Protection of Humanitarian Action has developed a tool to support organisations with this.²⁴

As the international community marks another World Humanitarian Day with record high numbers of aid worker casualties, humanitarians can be forgiven for feeling a sense of futility. However, in the face of crises like Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, global leaders have recognised the urgent need for new measures to address the deteriorating norms around secure access for aid. In May 2024, the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution to strengthen the protection of humanitarian workers and UN personnel operating in conflict zones, adding to several already existing resolutions focused on aid worker protection.²⁵ Spearheaded by Switzerland, the new resolution condemns the rising violence against aid workers and (once again) calls on conflict parties to adhere to international law. In a new development, however, the resolution stresses the importance of accountability, calling for thorough investigations into violations against aid workers and ending impunity for such attacks. The UN Secretary-General is tasked with providing concrete recommendations within six months to enhance protection and accountability, including legal avenues for attacks on humanitarian and UN personnel. The resulting recommendations may present an important opportunity for innovation around advocacy, and a promising path forward.

²³ For general guidance on how to carry out joint humanitarian advocacy see: International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). (2017). *NGO fora advocacy guide: Delivering joint advocacy*. <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/ngo-fora-advocay-guide-delivering-joint-advocay/>

²⁴ Working Group on Protection of Humanitarian Action. (2018). *Toolkit: Responding to violence against humanitarian action on the policy level*. <https://library.alnap.org/help-library/toolkit-responding-to-violence-against-humanitarian-action-on-the-policy-level>

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