

Life of an international aid worker in a COVID-19 world

by Atiq Rahman

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Melbourne Airport during the pandemic
Photo Credit: Atiq Rahman

For those of us who have chosen international aid work as a profession, living far from homes and families is part of our livelihood. Some of us relocate to a new country without the family, while some might take their partner and children with them. Either way, we leave behind a whole social network of parents, siblings, relatives and friends.

We adapt ourselves to this transient lifestyle, with travel between home and work locations becoming a regular feature. Many of us keep a semi-packed travel bag ready, as we are often expected to travel at short notice. The process seems fairly easy to us – buy a ticket, show up at the airport on time, jump on the plane and off we go. However, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this regular aspect of our work has had a complete transformation.

Around March 2020, the majority of international aid workers were asked to return to their home countries, as governments around the world were starting to close their borders. At that time, the best guess was that the relocation would be for a short period of time before we could return to our respective work bases.

But as national borders remained closed indefinitely, many international aid workers were made redundant. Others had their positions completely overhauled – for example, changing from a long-term in-country position to short-term remote positions. Those who could maintain their usual position under a remote working arrangement had to resettle in their home country – often needing to find a new place to stay, and arrange for someone else to pack up the households that they had left in the host country.

I consider myself as one of the ‘lucky’ ones, who could continue remote working from my Melbourne home. While working from home during this pandemic has become standard practice for many, it has a different meaning for an international aid worker. The distance between work and home is not only a change of suburbs, rather it is a change of countries or even continents, separated by thousands of kilometres and different time zones.

We had to adapt our work systems and processes overnight to prolonged remote working modalities. At the same time, we had to ensure that there is appropriate level of support and care for the local staff, who also had to transition to working from home. Working on human development without any physical human interaction has made our work even more challenging.

After 15 months of remote working, I was redeployed to Jakarta in July 2021. This required an individualised risk assessment specific for the redeployment, a risk management plan, and multiple reviews from the employer, the donor and the Australian Border Force before I could return to my work location. The main impediments were access to vaccination, medical facilities and health insurance coverage within the host country, ability to arrange medical evacuation if needed, travel restrictions imposed by country of origin and host country, and availability of flights.

The experience of the travel felt almost unreal – pre-travel COVID-19 test, wearing masks all through the journey, deserted airports, air crew dressed in hospital-grade PPE, multiple layers of checks at Jakarta airport, hotel quarantine, and more rounds of COVID-19 tests before I could settle down to my new residence in Jakarta.

Even after the redeployment, I feel my life as an international aid worker has changed forever. Just as 9/11 completely changed the security rules of the air transport industry, COVID-19 has done the same to risk management practices.

As in other professional sectors, 'COVID-safe workplace' became a new buzzword for us. But the challenge for us has been to find the right balance between restrictions imposed by the host government while maintaining safety standards of the donor, who may have a different set of requirements. We have had to dedicate a significant portion of our resources to ensuring our delivery modalities remain COVID-safe. This has also required revision of our workplan and expected outcomes.

The biggest challenge has been to maintain effective relationships with our stakeholders – colleagues, partner government officials and target communities. After two years, we all now recognise that no number of meetings over Zoom, Webex or WhatsApp could replace the effectiveness of one face-to-face interaction.

COVID-19 has also made a profound impact on how we remain connected to our families and home countries, and maintain our social life in the host country. We have had to practice self-imposed restrictions on our day-to-day movements to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Being separated from family and shunning social interactions has resulted in prolonged periods of isolation, and

strain on mental wellbeing.

We can no longer plan a visit home to see family with a degree of certainty. We are in a constant process of adaptation to the changing individual circumstances of the traveller, travel eligibility set by the airline, and entry requirements set by destination countries. Even after meticulous planning, a trip back home is not guaranteed – it can get cancelled at the last minute if the traveller tests positive, or is identified as a ‘close contact’ of a positive case. For the same reason, the possibility of family or friends from home visiting us is equally uncertain.

As international aid workers, we are expected to have a high degree of flexibility and determination, as we are often exposed to unexpected events, whether natural or human-induced. But the impact of COVID-19 on the life of international aid workers across the globe is so different and profound it cannot be compared to any previous events. Living through this pandemic for the last two years has demonstrated the need for us to become ever more resilient and adaptable. The key is to accept whatever life throws at us and try making the best out of it. In other words, “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade”!

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