

Navigating Uncertainty in Humanitarian & Development Work: Building Resilience in Times of Funding Challenges

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Introduction

Humanitarian and development work is driven by purpose, but it is also deeply affected by the ebb, flow, and even the freeze of funding. Uncertainty around contracts, project sustainability, and long-term impact can create significant psychological stress for individuals and teams. Whether facing project delays, funding cuts, or job instability, these challenges can take a toll on mental health, motivation, and overall well-being.

This tip sheet explores the emotional and psychological impacts of funding uncertainty and provides practical strategies to build resilience and maintain well-being during these challenging times.

The Psychological Impact of Funding Uncertainty

Unpredictable funding cycles can lead to:

- Chronic stress and anxiety about job security, future funding, and personal financial stability.
- Emotional exhaustion and burnout from managing increased workloads with fewer resources.
- Loss of motivation and morale when projects are delayed, downsized, or ended abruptly.
- Survivor's guilt when colleagues lose their positions while others remain.
- Feelings of powerlessness due to external funding decisions that impact work and beneficiaries.

Seven Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Well-Being

1. Focus on What You Can Control: Uncertainty can feel overwhelming, but redirecting energy toward actionable steps can help build a sense of agency. Identify small, tangible actions such as updating your skills, networking, or preparing for potential transitions rather than fixating on external uncertainties.

2. Strengthen Your Professional and Peer Network: Strong connections provide emotional and practical support during uncertain times. Engage with professional groups, mentors, and colleagues to stay informed about opportunities and share experiences with others who understand the challenges of humanitarian and development work.

3. Develop a Contingency Plan: Having a plan in place reduces stress and prepares you for potential changes. Consider alternative career paths, explore upskilling opportunities, and maintain an updated resume or project portfolio. Having options increases confidence and reduces the feeling of being trapped by external decisions.

4. Set Boundaries to Prevent Overwork: When funding is uncertain, the pressure to prove value can lead to unsustainable work habits. Maintain healthy boundaries by setting realistic goals, taking breaks, and protecting your personal time. Overworking does not prevent funding challenges, but it can lead to burnout and long-term exhaustion.

5. Acknowledge and Validate Your Emotions: Ignoring stress and frustration can amplify anxiety. Take time to process your emotions through journaling, talking with a trusted colleague, or seeking professional support. Recognizing and naming your emotions helps in managing them more effectively.

6. Reconnect with Your Purpose

When work feels uncertain, reconnecting with the reason you do it can provide motivation and clarity. Reflect on your personal mission and the impact you've had, even if a project ends. Meaningful work extends beyond any single funding cycle.

7. Prioritize Self-Care and Mental Health: The stress of funding instability can drain emotional and physical energy. Maintain a routine that includes regular exercise, adequate rest, social connection, and stress-management techniques like mindfulness or breathing exercises. Taking care of yourself helps sustain resilience over time.

Final Thoughts: Thriving in Uncertainty

The unpredictable nature of humanitarian and development work can be challenging, but resilience is about adaptability, not just endurance. By focusing on what you can control, building strong support networks, and taking care of your well-being, you can navigate funding uncertainty with greater confidence and sustainability.

Your skills, passion, and impact extend beyond any budget cycle. Investing in resilience will help you continue making a difference in your work and community, regardless of external challenges.

If you found this resource helpful and believe you or your organization could benefit from further support on these topics, the Headington Institute offers a range of services to meet your needs. We provide in-person and virtual workshops, webinars, psychological consultations, and leadership consultations tailored to help teams and individuals navigate high-stress environments and foster resilience. For more information, visit our contact page at <https://www.headingtoninstitute.org/contact/>. Current clients can email us directly at support@headingtoninstitute.org. We're here to support you.