

News

Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle



Working in
development

Wed 19 Apr 2017 12.31 CEST

🕒 This article is more than 8 years old

The salary gap between expat and local aid workers – it's complicated

Tobias Denskus

It's time for more nuance and less ideology in the debate about expat aid workers being paid more than local staff at NGOs



📷 Aid workers from the west generally get paid more than national staff working in NGOs.
Photograph: Alamy

Aid workers have been discussing the issue of expat versus local worker salaries for some time now. From one side of the argument, it looks pretty simple: why should expat workers swing into town and get paid far higher rates than their national colleagues?

It's worth taking a more nuanced assessment of the professional realities in the aid industry that are changing rapidly. We also need to put aside ideology and look at the administrative realities of living the expat aid worker life. And finally, we need to think about how we can move the debate forward beyond salaries.

The aid industry, including both humanitarian and development work, has been changing significantly over the past few years. “Localisation” is a term being used to describe this: large international NGOs such as [ActionAid and Oxfam have moved or will move](#) their global headquarters to the global south.

And despite the fact that a recent [Overseas Development Institute report](#) states that development organisations are “behind the curve” on changes in the workplace, discussions are taking place that will transform the sector.

Aid work is professionalising and that will mean more opportunities for local workers and changing roles for expats. Skilled professionals for project management, IT and creative industries are already in demand in growing economies across Africa and Asia, and the relatively small aid industry will have to offer incentives to attract and retain local talent. A new generation of internationally educated, global professionals with local language skills is sought in many sectors.

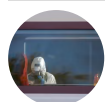
That said, expat aid workers will continue to exist. And

Most viewed



Live

India v Women final - li



Live

Cambria stabbing British suggests terrorism update



Marjorie Bill Ma extrate

■ ■ *The simple truth is that most aid workers do not have generous UN or diplomatic housing, or moving allowances*

the fact is that most of them are embedded in a secondary financial economy, as well as the country they have been posted to. The unexciting reality of earning a taxable income abroad, maintaining a link to their home countries and preparing for a life after aid work means they need to earn a higher salary to make aid work a viable career. The simple truth is that most aid workers do not have generous UN or diplomatic housing, or moving

allowances.

And since claims of paying professionals a professional salary apply globally just as they do locally, it also means finding a balance between paying a project officer in Brussels or Nairobi.

Despite anecdotal evidence about local prices hikes, [a study from 2006 \(pdf\)](#) suggests that UN missions, often the epitome of expat aid work, contribute significantly and in diverse ways to the local economy.

Often, local staff in the back office work close to a regular 9-5 job, whereas many expats work different - often longer - hours, travel more or need to engage with global headquarters across time zones. National staff's long-term perspectives may also differ from a six-month contract for an expat colleague, so comparing the two is tricky.

And yet, this discussion strikes a chord with many professionals in the industry. I agree that the issue of benefits such as travel allowances or schooling support for local staff in addition to their salaries needs more attention.

The truth is that many expat NGO workers probably live less privileged lives than those in diplomatic missions and they can't always freely choose how to live, as they are entangled in security protocols and the desire of their home countries to create a competitive and comparative global service across countries - regardless of where they are posted.

One issue that seems to get lost in the salary discussion is the risk of aid work being reduced to a capital city-centered endeavour. The global elite is as much present in Geneva or London as it is in Bangkok or Nairobi, but the bulk of aid work takes place in the field and we need to ensure adequate benefits for local and expat aid workers in different environments.

So how can we ensure that frontline health workers or drivers in the regional hubs are included in the conversation rather than focusing on who should have the right to send their children to the private American school?

There should be a more nuanced discussion on absolute and relative privilege beyond salaries that takes more dimensions of wellbeing and professional development into consideration. How can stress, long-distance relationships and the ethos of aid work as an impartial and solitary endeavour be redefined in a globalised world with many challenges?

Expat aid workers are also needed as vocal advocates for public debates around global development at home. Rather than approaching the topic purely from a moral perspective of "Do expat aid workers deserve higher salaries?" we should also discuss how entrenched inequalities, outside the control of the aid industry, cause different salaries and benefit structures to exist.

Tobias Denskus is a senior lecturer in [communication for development at Malmö University, Sweden](#) and edits the [Aidnography](#) blog. Follow [@aidnography](#) on Twitter.

Join our community of development professionals and humanitarians. Follow [@GuardianGDP](#) on Twitter.



Two m
after m
Cambri



The lux
builds l
Americ
hungry