Living in the Cocoon: Perceptions of Preparedness Among Humanitarian Aid Workers Deployed in Disasters.

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INTRODUCTION

- **Present Context:** The increasing frequency of climate crises and disasters has heightened the demand for humanitarian aid (Tholstrup and Vazquez, 2024) requiring humanitarian aid workers (HAWs) to deploy internationally to provide immediate relief (Cook et al., 2018).
- **Temporary Duty Assignments (TDYs):** When local responders and government services become overwhelmed, international HAWs step in through short-term deployments known as temporary duty assignments (TDYs) (Report of the Secretary-General,2016).
- **Research Context:** This study examines how HAWs perceive their preparedness for TDY deployments and whether their views change upon deployment.
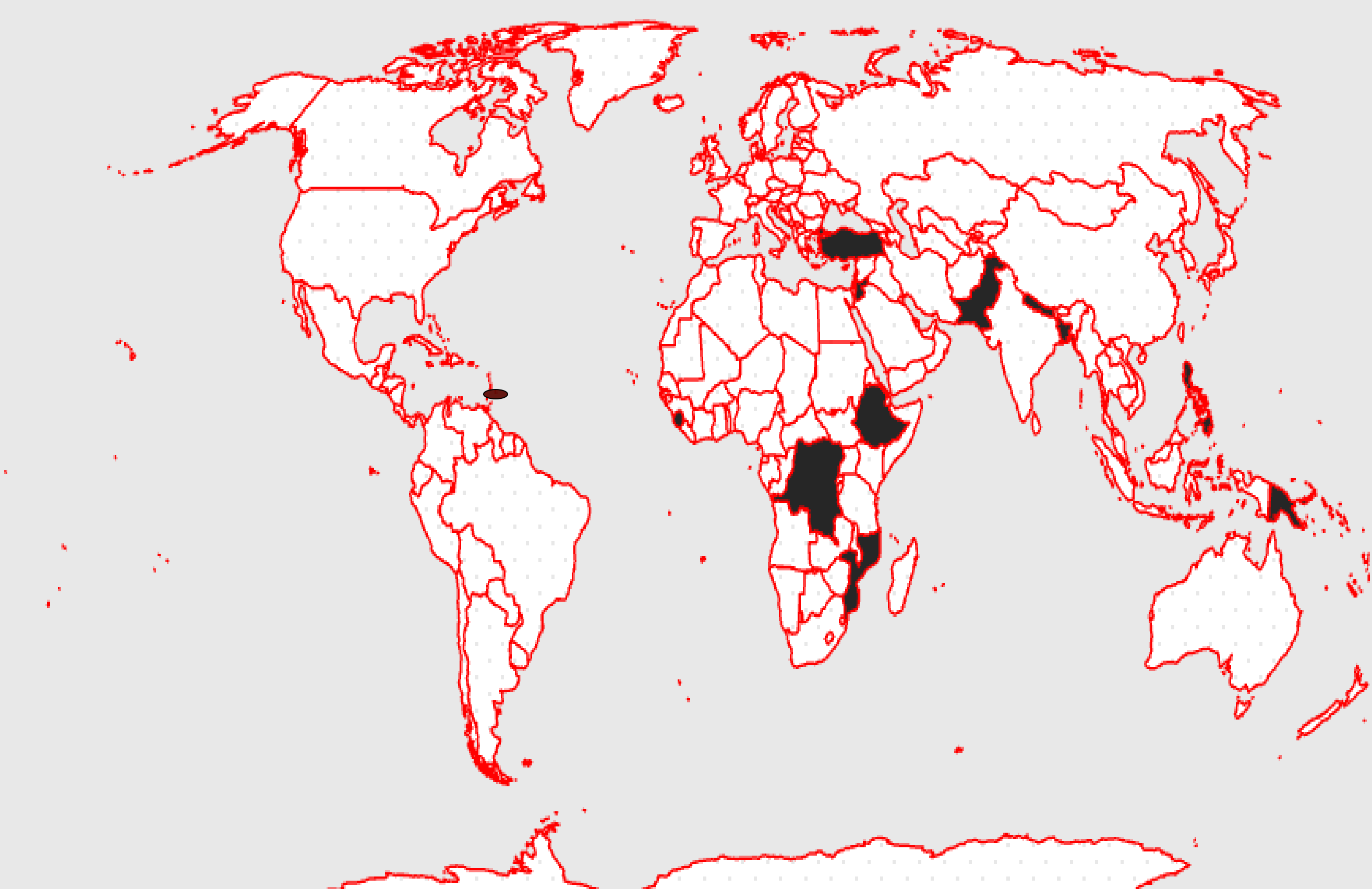
RESEARCH GAPS

- **Limited Attention to Humanitarian Aid Workers (HAWs):** Research on short-term deployments mainly focuses on military, peacekeeping, or medical personnels.
- **Gap in Study on Short-Term Mission:** Existing studies prioritize long-term deployments, leaving a gap in understanding HAWs' preparedness for short-term deployment during disasters.

METHODS

- **Approach:** Qualitative Research
- **Data Collection Method:** Semi-Structured Interview with 14 HAWs.
- **Criteria:**
1. Must be or have been part of an international humanitarian organization, bilateral agencies, or donor agencies.
2. Have at least one short term or TDY experience in a disaster area in a country outside of their duty station.
3. Must have completed a short term or TDY assignment lasting at least 2 weeks and no more than 6 months in a single deployment.
4. The short term or TDY deployment must have occurred within the last 10 years from the date of the interview.
- **Data Analysis Steps:**
1. Verbatim Transcribe
2. Inductive and Deductive Coding
3. Theme Identification

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Map: Participant's Country of Deployment

Deployment by Continents
Africa: 7
Asia: 6
Northern America: 1

Deployment by Country:
Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Democratic Republic Of Congo, Ethiopia, Grenada, Jordan. Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, The Philippines, Turkey

Deployment During Following Disasters
Earthquakes, Flooding, El Nino, Hurricanes, Drought, Cyclone and Epidemic.

Current Involvement of HAWs
Danish Red Cross
Logistics Cluster
RSK Shelter Charity
World Food Program
World Health Organization World Vision International

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ 1: How do humanitarian aid workers perceive their preparedness during international TDY deployments in disaster areas?

RQ 2: How do those perceptions compare to the realities that they experienced during their deployments?

FINDINGS

Theme 1: "Just pack light for three months":   Approach towards personal preparedness
"I ensured I had all the vaccinations... checked the expiry date of medicines... ensured my travel documents are up to date... prepare my summer dress and the reasonable clothes which would be acceptable to their culture."

Theme 2: "It was not anything really new": Limitations of checklist approach.
"You know, there was no comprehensive induction, and I was simply just given a link to [online learning platform] and told to complete a list of trainings...it wasn't anything really new to me."

Theme 3: "Most prepared with the whole knowing about the country context": Importance of understanding local knowledge.
"The best guidance was from the colleagues, the national colleagues who were from that area. So, they were quite supportive and teaching me along all the way."

Theme 4: "Never thought that I will have to stay in a tent": Disconnect between expectations and realities.
No, no, no. I never thought that I will have to stay in a tent. I thought maybe there is some, at least some hotel is there, or some proper accommodation is there.

Theme 5: "You just expected to continue work and nobody...stops you": Problem of burnouts and breakdowns among HAWs.
In emergencies, you just expected to continue work and nobody, or even if you continue yourself seven days a week and sometimes 12 hours a day, there's not often somebody who stops you.

LIMITATIONS

Cognitive Bias: Difficulty to remember as back as 10 years.
Reservations to Talk: Organization's overall preparation mechanism.
Limited to International Mission: Perceived Preparedness regarding local mission within a country is not addressed.
Economic Analysis: The investment and economic analysis regarding preparation is not covered by this research.
Organizational Preparedness: Do not consider how decision makers and senior management see their preparedness level.

SCHOLAR CONTRIBUTIONS

The paper is valuable in providing contribution in the field of preparations in short term deployment during international deployment when previous studies were mainly focused on either on long-term deployments or specific to medical emergencies.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Need of regular cross cutting training.
- Mentorship, simulations and drills.
- Focus on life saving.

CONCLUSIONS

- Although HAWs feel a sense of preparedness just before deployment, they seem to live in a cocoon of preparedness, as the realities they encounter after deployment often do not align with their prior expectations and preparations.
- The various strategies to expose the HAWs to the international disaster response needed to be adopted by the organizations so that the HAWs could better plan for their international deployment during disasters.

REFERENCES

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