

Humanitarian Aid Worker Retention:  
Is General Motivation Theory Enough?

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**Abstract**

In the socially impactful realm of humanitarian business, job dissatisfaction has led to high turnover and low retention, causing many organizations to struggle and sometimes fail. To increase motivation and satisfaction, the differences between general motivation theories and common humanitarian motivations should be analyzed. These analyses can then be applied to increase retention. While most general motivation theories like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs point to internal or personal needs being met, humanitarian employees are mainly motivated altruistically. Therefore, this research will demonstrate that altruistic motivations have a greater role in humanitarian retention than traditional motivation theories. Existing human resource policies stemming from general motivation theories can be strengthened using new initiatives that target altruism, ultimately decreasing turnover.

### **Humanitarian Aid Worker Retention: Is General Motivation Theory Enough?**

A pressing issue in the impactful humanitarian realm is retaining employees. More specifically, in 2020, the voluntary turnover rate for nonprofits was 19% compared to the all-industry average of 12% (Strub, 2020). As turnover is one of the biggest issues in humanitarian disaster relief organizations, it has caused many organizations to struggle with “capacity building and organizational learning” (Richardson, 2006, p. 334). Turnover has even caused many humanitarian organizations to completely fail (Dubey, 2016). This high turnover rate is primarily due to job dissatisfaction based on the perception of one’s work. Overall turnover in the humanitarian field is not mainly due to external factors like in for-profit organizations, but instead is a result of job dissatisfaction stemming out of how one perceives the work and the readiness to be in humanitarian work (Dubey, 2016). To increase the humanitarian employee’s view of and satisfaction with their job, employers must analyze how to better motivate their employees. By analyzing general motivation theories such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in comparison to humanitarian motivations, employers can better motivate their humanitarian workers. This comparison and these findings can help reduce the turnover rate in the humanitarian industry as employees will be properly motivated.

### **Relationship Between Motivation & Retention**

To understand the rationale behind analyzing traditional motivation theories such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Alderfer’s ERG Theory, and McGregor’s Theory X in comparison to humanitarian motivations, one must first understand the proven relationship between employee motivation and employee retention. In general, motivation is a crucial factor in all organizations due to the idea that when employees are well-motivated, they complete their

work efficiently (Springer, 2011). Furthermore, motivation encourages the employee to put extra effort into their job (Akhtar et al., 2014). The level of motivation also drives the effectiveness of staff and the overall success of the organization, and if the motivation level of staff is low, the combination of low motivation, efficiency, effort, and effectiveness leads to a greater chance of an employee leaving the place of work (Cheema et al., 2013). Therefore, when there is less focus on employee motivation, employee turnover will increase.

Employee retention is a large issue for all fields due to the related costs, but one example of the relationship between motivation and retention is displayed clearly in the banking industry in Pakistan (Salman et al., 2014). Researchers performed studies on this industry and discovered that there is a positive effect on staff retention from effective employee motivation (Mgedezi et al., 2014). Therefore, when employees are satisfied, they are less likely to leave the organization (Shah & Asad, 2018). Shah and Asad (2018) performed a study to identify the relationships between motivational factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, perceived organizational support, and employee retention. They used a sample of 383 employees of commercial banks in Pakistan to collect data through a questionnaire, and the results on the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and employee retention are crucial for this paper.

The results support the idea that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors are both important in staff retention in the bank industry in Pakistan as both forms of motivation are shown to have positive impacts on retention (Shah & Asad, 2018). In other words, when employees are motivated well, they have a better view of an organization, and when they have a better view of an organization, they stay there longer. Therefore, as employees are motivated and satisfied in their positions, their loyalty to, commitment to, and perception of the organization increases. Although this study was done on the banking industry in Pakistan, the results are still

important in the broader connection between motivation and retention as it is just another example of the importance of motivation factors in employee retention. For instance, researchers also found that Vietnamese employers value job satisfaction/motivation as a major factor for employee loyalty (Trinh et al., 2023). Furthermore, researchers performed a study on nonprofit employees in Belgium and South Africa and found that various employee engagement/motivation techniques contributed to employees' desires to remain with an organization (Renard & Snelgar, 2016). These examples support the necessity for both for profit and nonprofit organizations to recognize and use correct motivation techniques to decrease turnover.

Additionally, Eberendu and Kenneth-Okere (2015) performed much research on the importance of employee turnover and how employee engagement, motivation, and satisfaction impact retention. One key finding said that disengaged, dissatisfied, and unmotivated employees multiply the results of lower employee performance and higher turnover (Jeswani & Sarkar, 2008). To increase employees' commitment to an organization and therefore improve retention, employers must come to understand what employees are looking for in a career and workplace and motivate them accordingly. In other words, employers need to identify what motivates employees to retain them longer.

Understanding and monitoring employee motivation is also crucial to reduce the costs of turnover as increased turnover rates lead to increased labor costs (Dermody et al., 2004, as cited in Eberendu and Kenneth-Okere, 2015). Motivating employees by providing environments where employees feel happy and most productive then leads to job satisfaction. In turn, job satisfaction is important in human resource aspects such as performance, non-attendance, and quitting. As this research shows, employee retention has been proven to be linked with employee

motivation. In the humanitarian sector of organizations, employee motivation can also be targeted to decrease the employee turnover rate and increase employee retention. Therefore, through the analysis of general motivation theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and proven humanitarian motivations, humanitarian employers can learn to better motivate their staff to work towards improving the 19% voluntary turnover rate found in the nonprofit industry (Strub, 2020).

### **General Motivation Theory**

The theories of motivation that have been developed focus on specific factors that encourage workers to pursue excellence in their jobs and build the organization (Bushi, 2021). No matter the size of the company or stage of development it is in, employee motivation is commonly implemented across almost all business sectors, and motivation is defined as how someone's effort is directed towards or at a specific goal, including the intensity of the effort, the direction, and the persistence of effort (Bushi, 2021). Therefore, employee motivation is an important part of getting employees to achieve what they are supposed to achieve in an organization. Out of this common emphasis, many theories of motivation have been developed (O'Neil & Drillings, 1994).

The most well-known theory of motivation is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which indicates that every person must first take care of their physiological needs, then their safety, then social needs, then esteem needs, and finally self-actualization (Bushi, 2021). Another well-known theory is Alderfer's ERG Theory which emphasizes existential needs, relationship needs, and growth needs. Additionally, McGregor's Theory X emphasizes a negative view of employees by assuming that employees do not like work and must be forced into doing their work while McGregor's Theory Y views employees positively in that they enjoy work as rest

and put expectations on themselves. Moreover, Hull's Drive Theory asserts that unfulfilled physical needs drive motivation (O'Neil & Drillings, 1994). Some other lesser-known theories of motivation include Ouchi's Theory Z, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, McClelland's Three-Needs Theory, Locke's Goal-Setting Theory, Skinner's Reinforcement Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, and Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Bushi, 2021). Overall, companies who desire to motivate their employees need to know these motivational theories to maximize their performance and increase retention.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

For this analysis, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs will be the motivational theory of focus due to its historical prominence. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was proposed in a 1943 article by Abraham Maslow, a behavioral scientist/psychologist (Lussier, 2019). This theory quickly gained ground in both management and psychology circles with Californian companies quickly adapting the theory in the 1960s. It continued to grow in popularity as companies in the U.S. began searching for new approaches to managing and motivating their employees in an ever-changing world and economy. Although Abraham Maslow died in 1970, his work has remained relevant even today (Maslow et al., 1998).

### **Importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Throughout history, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been used to develop an organized way to teach employers how to motivate their employees (Lussier, 2019). Specifically, the hierarchy dominates the fields of organizational behavior and development and allows management to create training for its leaders on how to rightly stay motivated and motivate others. Furthermore, Maslow's Hierarchy is important because employees must be happy in their workplaces to be the most productive possible. Maslow's theory supports this and advocates for

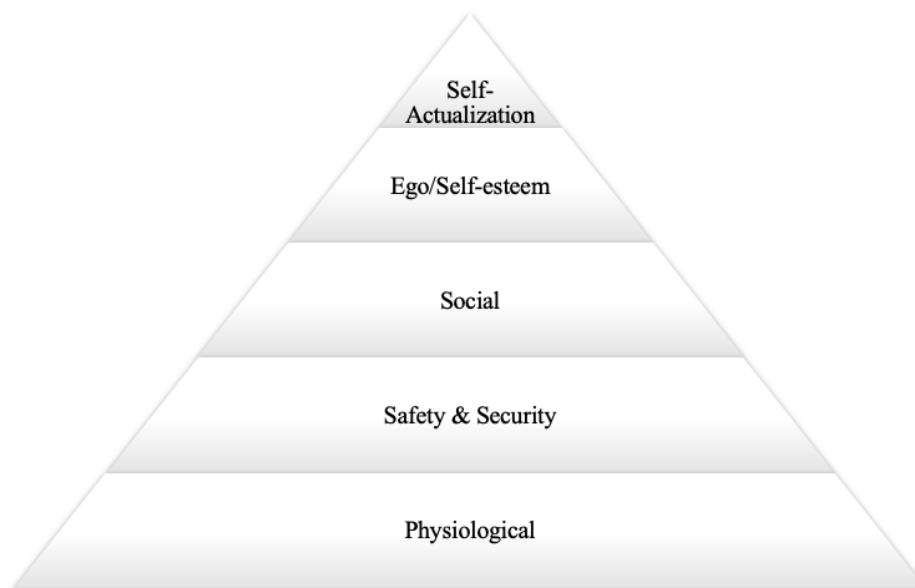


the happiness of the employee. In particular, the self-esteem need in the hierarchy was found to be one of the most applicable stages, with most employees desiring to be taken seriously and rewarded accordingly (Stewart, 2018).

To fully understand Maslow's Hierarchy, one needs to understand the practical use of the theory and each stage. The theory is often described as a pyramid with the most crucial needs Maslow identified at the bottom of the pyramid and the most advanced need of self-actualization at the top (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). In this pyramid, the subject being motivated cannot move on to the next level of the pyramid without first achieving the baseline needs. With this knowledge, Maslow identified five major needs/stages of motivation (Maslow et al., 1998). From the bottom of the pyramid to the top, the stages are as follows: physiological, safety and security, social, ego/status-esteem, and self-actualization. These are pictured in Figure 1.

### **Figure 1**

#### *Maslow's Pyramid*



*Note:* This figure was created based on research performed by O. A. Ihensekien and A. C. Joel (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023).

### **Maslow's Stages**

The first stage in Maslow's model is the physiological stage. In this stage, the most elementary needs must be met for the employee to move on to the next stage. These needs include necessities such as food, shelter, water, air, and clothing (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). In any workplace, these needs can be fulfilled through the provision of clean and safe water and working conditions. Companies also provide for physiological needs through a basic wage (Stewart et al., 2018). As these characteristics are crucial to personal survival, most workplaces implement and need this stage for their employees.

The second stage in Maslow's Hierarchy is the safety and security stage. In this stage, Maslow established that after the most basic physical needs are met, people must then feel safe, secure, and stable (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). In the workplace, many employers meet this stage of needs in ways such as pay/salary increases, job security, and fringe benefits like insurance, days off, etc. An employer can also satisfy this stage by providing a secure and unchanging vision because if a company loses its vision or focus, many employees doubt the overall security of the organization (Maslow et al., 1998).

The third stage in the hierarchy is the social stage. After safety and security, Maslow determined social needs such as friendship, companionship, and affection can be achieved (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). Therefore, company initiatives encouraging social synergy or cooperation can work to fulfill this stage (Maslow et al., 1998). Specifically, in the workplace, this stage of needs is impacted by the quality of the circle of influence surrounding the employee (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). One aspect of this is the quality of the supervisor/management relationship with the employee. Also, the employee must feel as though they are involved in a working group of peer employees that fits their personality, position, and other needs. With good

relationships with management and peer employees, the employee's need for social satisfaction can be met through the avenue of "professional friendship" or at least people they work well alongside.

The fourth stage of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is the ego or status esteem stage. This stage consists of needs for "status, self-esteem, self-respect," and overall recognition (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023, p. 39). An individual at this stage desires to be involved in something important (Maslow et al., 1998). One way these needs can be met is simply through the job title the employee is given such as "General Manager" or "Team Leader" (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). When job titles insinuate greater responsibility, the employee might feel greater levels of recognition from upper management and subordinates. Furthermore, when the employee is given important responsibilities or work, they feel the esteem that comes with management trusting them with those responsibilities. Another practical way employers meet this stage of needs is through merit pay systems where performance leads to greater compensation or bonuses. In this, the employee's performance is recognized monetarily. Additionally, methods of employee recognition that bring greater respect are often implemented, such as awards like "Employee of the Month" or "All Star Employee." Through creativity and strategy, management can meet the ego or status esteem level of motivation.

Finally, the fifth stage of Maslow's needs is self-actualization. This stage of the theory is the final and most advanced stage of motivation and represents the needs for growth, advancement, and personal achievements (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). According to Maslow, each of the previous stages must be met before a person can fully and primarily desire growth and personal advancement. In fact, these people integrate their work with their identity (Maslow et al., 1998). In the workplace, self-actualization can be achieved through challenging work,

opportunities to express creativity and individuality, and positional advancement in the organization or business (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). Through challenging work, employees can improve and learn as they face difficulties not previously faced before. Opportunities to express creativity and individuality give the self-actualized person the ability and power to implement new ideas for the improvement of the organization and oneself (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). The ability to advance in the organization further satisfies this stage of motivation because it allows for positional improvement and promotions, leading to increased responsibility, decision-making, recognition, and improvement of oneself.

The five stages emphasize the linear achievement of needs to best motivate employees to perform their jobs and duties. This theory has been commonly used in the workplace for various kinds of organizations for many years, helping management target the needs and motivations of their employees. For instance, the theory is present in the hotel industry with companies like Joie de Vivre heavily relying on it in its early years of operations (Conley, 2017). Furthermore, automotive companies such as Harley-Davidson use Maslow's research. In fact, one of Harley Davidson's consultants went to graduate school with Maslow and found his research appealing. As a result, Harley Davidson's organizational remodeling in the 1980s-1990s partially relied on Maslow's theory. Maslow's Hierarchy has also impacted other well-known companies such as Whole Foods Market, Apple, and Pinterest. The stages have even been applied in many nonprofit organizations with policies such as base pay being established to fulfill Maslow's first stage (Bassous, 2015).

## **Motivations in Humanitarian Organizations**

### **Altruistic Motivation**

In humanitarian organizations, employees are mainly altruistically motivated (Gomez et al., 2020). Simply put, altruism is defined as “a desire to benefit someone else for his or her sake rather than one’s own” (Batson, 2011, p. 3). In other words, altruistic motivations in humanitarian employees come out of the desire to serve and help someone else in need. However, this motivation has historically been seen as complex as well. Smith (1981) defined altruism as a layer of motivation in humans that is only present to the extent that the person finds intrinsic fulfillment from trying to fulfill other people’s intrinsic needs without expecting any reciprocal action. This definition of altruism is more detailed and complex as it introduces how altruism can have roots in multiple aspects of motivation. In this definition, the individual is identified as having intrinsic satisfaction due to helping someone who is not expected to return the behavior. Using this term of intrinsic satisfaction gives altruism a broader scope and increases its complexity. This complex definition of altruism can also be applied alongside the simpler definition of altruism (helping others at no benefit to oneself) (Batson, 2011). With this understanding, the burden or care one feels towards another person in need is satisfied when acted on. This gives the person intrinsic satisfaction and maintains a selfless view of altruism (Smith, 1981). However, the altruistic desire to serve others might also be rooted in the desire to look good to the surrounding community. Therefore, while altruism is identified as a specific motivator, it ultimately comes from a variety of sources.

Another paradox in the concept of altruism is found when considering impartiality versus partiality. On one hand, altruism can occur due to the “utilitarian principle in which each counts for one and nobody for more than one” (Elster, 2006, p. 186). In this case, the altruistic

motivation comes from the recognition of the intrinsic equality of every person, leading to the desire to help those in need. On the other hand, altruism can result due to emotional attachments to the person or group of people in need. For instance, if the person or group in need is family or of personal interest to the motivated individual, the individual might feel a greater altruistic pull to promote their welfare at their own expense. The more complex definition of altruism given by Smith is appropriate for this example as the individual displays a possible self-serving interest (Smith, 1981). The motivated individual is partial towards a certain group; therefore, they might have a selfish desire to help those they are close to over anyone else. Furthermore, altruism can come out of other aspects such as logic, reason, emotion (as discussed), and selfless interest (Elster, 2006).

Furthering the complexity of altruism comes the idea that altruistic actions may arise out of selfish motivations, showing how altruistic motivations can be intertwined with deep-rooted and sometimes selfish intrinsic motivations. One researcher identified four typologies of humanitarian/altruistic self-centered motivations: the humanitarian tourist, the martyr, the militant, and the crusader (Gomez et al., 2020). A humanitarian tourist participates in humanitarian aid to feel better about oneself and their personal growth. People attracted to humanitarian work for this reason often emphasize what they personally obtain, such as growth (Mostafanezhad, 2014). The martyr is an individual who works in humanitarian aid due to their own guilt or moral obligation to do so, not necessarily because they desire to (Gomez et al., 2020). That is, people sometimes desire to avoid feeling guilty if they were not to participate in the action, and this ends up being the driving force for the altruistic output (Price, 2017). The crusader is a person who has a selfish desire to preach their beliefs to the receiving group (Gomez et al., 2020). Lastly, the militant is an individual who has a political agenda behind aid.

Each one of these typologies has the potential to be a source of altruistic behavior if combined with selfless motives or sometimes disguised as selfless motives. Overall, no matter how complex the nature of altruism may be, it is proven that altruism is one of the driving factors in humanitarian aid. The following examples support this.

### *A Turkish Altruistic Example*

One example of altruistic motivations being the primary motivation in humanitarian work comes from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Turkey. Turkish NGOs have been carrying out humanitarian work around the world because humanitarian work is necessary for people impacted by crises to be able to return to normal life (Mehmetcik, 2019). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Turkey became the largest humanitarian helper in 2018 as the government, institutions, and charities often work together to carry out aid initiatives. Its largest recipient countries were Syria, Somalia, Kyrgyzstan, Albania, and Afghanistan. Therefore, humanitarian aid is now a key characteristic of Turkey's international policy. In a survey conducted through interviews, twenty-five humanitarian workers from these Turkish NGOs were asked questions concerning the most important factors for their participation in humanitarian aid and were asked to rank their choices (Mehmetcik, 2019). The first question focused on the major drivers of sending aid to specific geographical areas. In response to this question, the interviewees were given the options of humanitarian/altruistic sentiments, religious motivations, operational limits (the aid activities' ability to be done), national sentiments, and financial motivations. The results of this question showed that humanitarian/altruistic motivations are the most important motivations for these Turkish humanitarian workers. Following behind altruistic motivations were religious motivators and operational limits. Religious motivations often present themselves as altruistic values, showing

that even the second most popular driver of Turkish aid relates to altruistic motivation (Oberholster et al., 2013 & Salek, 2015).

Another question sought to identify the major factors that influenced the scope of the interviewees' humanitarian activities (Mehmetcik, 2019, p. 263). The factors consisted of the need of the people, the country to receive the aid, Turkish priorities, and institutional priorities. According to this survey question, every interviewee stated that the need of the people was the top priority. These results point to a specific form of altruism: need-altruism. Need-altruism is defined as the desire to help people based on the need instead of relational preference (Ferguson et al., 2024). As a result, the results from this question further support the previous question on the main driver for providing aid.

#### ***Altruism Shown at the U.S.—Mexico Border***

Another example supporting altruism as the most important driver of humanitarian aid is the motivation found at the U.S. and Mexico border. Based on interviews with humanitarian workers at the U.S.—Mexico border, their motivation was primarily altruistic and can be separated into four altruistic types: the Do Gooder, the Good Samaritan, the Activist, and the Missionary (Gomez et al., 2020). The Do Gooder is the individual who is motivated to simply do something to reduce suffering and is primarily informed by their morality and desire to do what is right. An individual displays this typology when they directly act in accordance with their strong morals (Flynn, 2019). The Good Samaritan wants to work in humanitarian aid to carry out acts of service and follow their religious teachings (Gomez et al., 2020). For instance, Sisters in the Catholic faith often act altruistically out of their “Code of Canon Law,” an application of their religious beliefs (Daikia et al., 2022). The Activist is a humanitarian who is altruistically motivated to protect the value of a human by protecting rights, working against abuse, and



promoting justice in society (Gomez et al., 2020). This typology is primarily informed by rules and imperatives. Lastly, the Missionary is the religious humanitarian who is altruistically motivated to protect the sanctity of life and follow the rules of their religious beliefs/text. Again, the Sisters of the Catholic Church exemplify the Missionary typology as many promote mercy and justice out of the value of life (Daikia et al., 2022).

Following the establishment of these typologies, the researchers conducted 20 formal interviews and several more casual conversations with staff and volunteers from four different humanitarian organizations working in Tucson, Arizona, two of which are Christian (Gomez et al., 2020). The four organizations were Humane Borders, Tucson Samaritans, Green Valley-Sahuarita Samaritans, and No More Deaths. When considering the Missionary type in the interviews, it was expressed in a low number of people due to its emphasis on the rules or religious life. However, one nun expressed her motivation to follow Pope Francis' theology. This motivation agrees with the Catholic value for life as shown in Catholic Sisters' basis for altruism (Daikia et al., 2022). Looking at the Good Samaritan type, about half of the study's interviewees expressed this typology. For instance, one woman expressed that she began serving with Tucson Samaritans through the influence of her Pastor and her own moral beliefs.

Furthermore, this study's results placed a heavy emphasis on the Do Gooder type with multiple workers and volunteers explaining that they wanted to do the right thing by not allowing people to die in the desert if they could do something about it. These results coincide with the fact that many humanitarians participate in the work because of the value they place on their morals (Flynn, 2019). Lastly, many interviewees fell under the category of Activist as they had a desire to prevent the deaths of those suffering, promote the human rights of migrants, and protect

their fellow humans (Gomez et al., 2020). Therefore, the results and process of this study showed the importance of altruistic motivations and altruistic types in humanitarian motivation.

### **Personal Motivators**

Apart from altruism, employees in the non-profit sector are motivated by factors such as personal development, internal/moral satisfaction, and mutual connections (Frame, 2019). One example of this is moral motivation (Komenská, 2017). Moral motivation is thought of as considering what should be done in terms of what causes are promoted and what social consequences would occur if one did not act. In this way, humanitarian employees and volunteers can be driven by rational thinking and moral obligation to the members of their personal moral community. Another example is through the personal connections that lead to a humanitarian drive. Twenty-nine interviews were analyzed to discover motivations for helping refugees resettle in a politically hostile area (Yarris et al., 2020). The first motivation found consisted of the humanitarian workers having personal or family connections with those affected, and the second major motivation was emotions following the personal connections. Therefore, humanitarian relief also relies heavily on personal motivations due to morality and personal connections.

### **Religious vs. Secular Motivators**

Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations seem to have similar motivations, however, employees at faith-based humanitarian organizations have a religious duty in addition to their altruistic motivations. Faith-based nonprofits of almost any religion are usually characterized by religious affiliation, mission statements with religious values, religious donors, and a board structure that is influenced by religion (Ferris, 2005). The desire for justice for the persecuted and poor ultimately stems out of the belief that every person is valuable in the sight of

God in most faiths, specifically Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Ferris, 2005 & Salek, 2015).

Although Christians, Jews, and Muslims agree that every person has value, they usually differ in the groups they reach with assistance. Jewish and Islamic NGOs focus on serving their own communities, whereas Christian organizations tend to be globally minded (Ferris, 2005).

Although faith-based and secular humanitarian motivations differ due to religious duties, they both display altruistic tendencies. For example, Christian NGOs are mainly altruistically motivated. To answer the general question of why people from Christian non-profits or humanitarian organizations go on international job assignments, 158 workers were given a scale-based survey to rate 45 given reasons for working internationally based on how important they were in their decision to work for the organization (Oberholster et al., 2013). The results of these surveys showed that altruism was the major motivating factor for Christians working in the international non-profit sector. Furthermore, Islamic Relief Worldwide displayed that Muslim humanitarians also prioritize altruism and recognized that the foundation for this altruism is the dignity given to mankind by God (Salek, 2015). While Christian and Muslim humanitarians display altruism with a religious foundation, secular humanitarians also display altruism through their main goal of alleviating human suffering (Salek, 2015). Therefore, there are key connections between Christian, Islamic, and secular humanitarian motivations. To best hire/find employees with the most dedication to the cause, managers ought to learn to recognize these motivations and how they could positively or even negatively impact their organizational effectiveness.

For most faith-based humanitarian organizations, faith has been found to be the key motivator to altruism and lasting commitments to the organization (Frame, 2019). Additionally, almost two-thirds of faith-based employees and three-fourths of NGO employees chose to go

into humanitarian work due to their previous work experiences. One study showed that the faith-based organization's mission, vision, and impact are positively related to employee motivation in the organization. In this study, 41 interviews took place, with employees from 13 faith-based organizations and 12 secular NGOs working in Cambodia. Based on the interviews, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and NGOs seem to work for similar causes, people, and issues, but the faith-based organizations had spiritual foundations built into their values and therefore communicated these values differently (Frame, 2019).

Additionally, while the secular NGO employees focused on the emotional and physical health of people, the FBO employees focused on spiritual, physical, and emotional health (Frame, 2019). Both FBO and NGO employees prioritized prior life experiences as motivations for working in humanitarian aid. This result correlates with the theory that personal experiences increase the understanding of people being in need and the desire to help people in need (Frieson, 2023). Additionally, FBO employees focused on a "call" they felt from God to go and emphasized obeying God and His Word as the primary motivator for humanitarian work (Frame, 2019). Therefore, faith was infused in the personal and organizational motivational factors of FBOs, as opposed to secular NGOs.

### **Political and Strategic Motivations**

Another common motivation for humanitarian organizations and employees falls under the category of political/strategic motivation. As shown by the previously mentioned "militant" typology, humanitarian employees are sometimes motivated by political agendas and missions (Gomez et al., 2020). Referencing a data set of 270 natural disasters, it is shown that emergency humanitarian aid is significantly impacted by politics and strategy, not just altruistic motivations (Fink & Redaelli, 2011). Most countries seem to favor helping other countries that are rich in oil

and close in proximity. Therefore, notice should be taken of the political and strategic influence on humanitarian affairs, especially when considering governmental humanitarian policy.

Furthermore, humanitarian workers often experience a combination of outrage at humanitarian crises from a political perspective (Laqua, 2014). Additionally, humanitarians often advocate for their missions by leveraging politics, needs, and rights, making it often hard to differentiate motivations for humanitarianism, whether they are purely altruistic, religious, political, or acts of solidarity.

Another example of political/strategic motivations in humanitarianism is from post-Cold War history. In the 1990s, Western democracies, such as the United States and France, had to decide whether to intervene with aid in places like Northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda (Krieg, 2013). Before assisting, these Western countries considered various factors, such as the economy, geo-strategy, and politics of the countries in need. Furthermore, through a study on the American humanitarian motivations for providing food aid to Africa, researchers found that one of the most influential factors in this humanitarian relief was geopolitical interests (Ball & Johnson, 1996). In this study, geopolitical interest outranked even altruistic motivations. Therefore, due to the government oversight of aid, the secular aid movement occurring after the Cold War displayed the political and economic humanitarian motivations that often influence governments in humanitarianism. However, although humanitarians-both governments and individual workers-often have personal, religious, and political motivations, the most prevalent motivation in humanitarian employees is altruism.

### **Maslow's Theory vs Humanitarian Trends**

Generally, research shows that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs does not completely apply to humanitarian employees' motivation. This is due to the complexities involved in altruism and

the inflexible nature of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The primary difference between Maslow's theory and common humanitarian motivations is that the theory focuses on self-centered needs and does not account for selfless/altruistic motivations. Deferring from Maslow's theory, humanitarian employees are usually altruistically motivated and desire to help others over themselves as shown through the previously discussed research. Looking at the first stage of physiological needs such as air and food, a normal business might fulfill these needs with heating and cooling (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). The business could also fulfill this through a basic wage (Stewart et al., 2018). In the second stage of safety and security, the needs are often fulfilled through pay raises and benefits, and in the third stage of social needs, businesses try to fulfill these through quality leadership and developing a culture of workplace friendship (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). In stage 4 (ego/status esteem), the need for recognition and self-esteem are often fulfilled through merit pay or even just recognition. Finally, the fifth stage of self-actualization focuses on fulfilling achievement/growth with opportunities for promotions and creativity.

In each of these stages, Maslow emphasizes a focus on the individual's needs, making it a more self-centered theory (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023; Stewart et al., 2018). However, humanitarian employees have often demonstrated the desire to focus on others' needs or display selfless motivations (Gomez et al., 2020; Mehmetcik, 2019). Therefore, due to the individual-focused nature of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it does not account for the possibility that one might be selflessly motivated. A humanitarian organization fulfilling the stages in Maslow's theory might assist in making a position more attractive to an individual, but ultimately the use of the theory alone does not target the crucial consideration of altruism.

Furthermore, due to many humanitarian workers' altruistic motivations and the theory's lack of consideration of altruism, it is natural for the implications of altruism to not be displayed

in the structure of the theory. The structure of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs involves five stages that an individual passes through in a linear fashion to be best motivated (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). However, humanitarian workers displaying altruistic motivations often do not prioritize climbing/passing linearly through Maslow's Hierarchy before expressing them. For instance, one author writes, "One thinks in this respect of the Mother Teresas, Albert Schweitzers, and Gandhis of the world, as well as many lesser-known individuals who put their lives at risk for social justice and environmental and religious causes" (Koltko-Rivera, 2006, p. 310). Here, Mother Teresa, Schweitzer, Gandhi, and others like them are known to put their lives in danger to help the people in need in their specific domain. This is a direct violation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which says that an individual needs to fulfill their physiological needs in stage 1 first before advancing on to the following stages (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023). This need is said to be fulfilled in ways such as a safe workplace which is not accomplished when these figures are putting themselves in danger for their mission and finding meaning in their work as Maslow suggests in stage four. Therefore, the altruistic motivations of humanitarians can lead to skipping stages in Maslow's Hierarchy, showing that the theory does not account for the implications of altruism.

Additionally, Maslow's theory not only does not account for altruism or its results, but it is too structured for the complexity of human motivation in general. As another author describes, "the two sides of the typology (self-centered and other-centered) can sometimes coexist, and individual people can experience and express motivations that mix and match among the different types proposed here" (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 6-7). In other words, selfish and altruistic motivations can often exist at the same time, meaning that an individual can be motivated by several factors at once. Therefore, the altruistic, personal, religious, secular, political, and

strategic humanitarian motivations discussed, and the motivations found throughout Maslow's Hierarchy can simultaneously exist in an individual. Another author describes motivations as "balanced dual tension" where multiple tendencies occur alongside one another (Kovac, 2016). As a result, the structure of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs does not allow for selfish and altruistic motivations to occur at the same time or even the nature of altruism found in humanitarian employees.

### **Applying Findings in Retention**

As discussed, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs does not account for altruism in that altruism causes individuals to skip stages or have both altruistic and self-centered motivations simultaneously. Therefore, due to the disconnect between the theory and common humanitarian motivations, humanitarian employers ought to motivate their employees based on this knowledge. As Maslow's Hierarchy has been proven to be successful due to its common historical use, it can still be used loosely in humanitarian organizations with the recognition that it is lacking in some areas and that the order of the stages may not always apply. However, it focuses on the individual's internally focused needs, so to better motivate and retain employees, employers must target both these hierarchical needs as well as altruism in humanitarian employees. Therefore, humanitarian organizations need to intentionally implement consistent human resources initiatives that better target altruism alongside the basic initiatives resulting from Maslow's Hierarchy.

One example of targeting altruism in employees is to surround employees with tangible evidence such as videos and pictures of what their organization's work is completing. One example of this is in humanitarian work in Guatemala (Putman et al., 2009). As Indigenous people often carry out most of the humanitarian process in Guatemala, there has been evidence



of exposure to violence, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and burnout for these workers. Therefore, there was a need for more support for these workers to remain in humanitarian work. Based on interviews with these workers and their stated motivating factors, organizations could have encouraged them to remain in the field longer by reminding the workers of their significant impact through evidence. Similarly, organizations have often sent pictures of sponsored children and those impacted to their donors and volunteers (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006). Just as the goal of this is to extend the relationship between the organization and the donor, organizations can use similar techniques to extend their working relationship with the employee. Providing evidence like this to employees of humanitarian organizations reminds them that they really are helping other people as their altruistic motivations are driving them to do so.

Another way to target altruism alongside loosely using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is to provide face-to-face interactions with the people who are impacted by the organization to remind the employees once again that people around the world really are in need. As there is a growing argument for humanitarian drives coming out of experiences and personal encounters with humanitarian issues, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas evaluated James Orbinski's humanitarian/medical relief journey and how his personal experiences impacted his commitment to humanitarian work (Frieson, 2023). There were three major scenarios in Orbinski's life that caused him to have a humanitarian mindset for most of his life: (1) his recognition of a Jewish man who has survived the Holocaust; (2) his brother's sickness and a stranger's help; and (3) a television report he saw about a famine in Ethiopia. In the first major scenario, Orbinski watched a documentary on the Holocaust and then met a former Jewish prisoner in person. The combination of learning about a situation and then coming face-to-face with someone impacted

by the situation led to a greater humanitarian drive. Through all three of these experiences, Orbinski's call and desire to help others increased.

Additionally, a nurse by the name of Helen Zahos worked in the humanitarian field for 17 years (Dragon, 2017). She experienced bomb aftermaths, natural disasters, and even physical attacks from other people while on the field. However, by experiencing these hardships firsthand, she was drawn to continue humanitarian work and action. Therefore, because humanitarian altruism and motivations can stem from experiences in a person's life, implementing opportunities for humanitarian employees to experience and come face-to-face with the people being impacted can encourage and sustain altruistic motivations, ultimately reducing turnover.

Furthermore, faith-based organizations, specifically Christian could remind their workers of the hope they have that is the basis for their desire to help others in the humanitarian field. For instance, thirty evangelical Christians involved in humanitarian work in South Sudan were interviewed to understand how people stay committed to humanitarian work (Kaler, 2018). The results showed that faith impacts views of time and allows workers to stay committed to dangerous and even hopeless-seeming work. Those interviewees expressed their frustrations with the seemingly never-ending cycle of suffering in South Sudan, yet because they believed in "divine time" and a God outside of human time, they could persevere in endless impossible situations. Based on these interviewees, Christian humanitarian workers maintain motivation in hard humanitarian situations due to the belief that God can work in ways that do not make sense in human time constraints. These employees make meaning out of time and make sense out of situations with the foundational view of God being in control of time. As a result, consistently reminding Christian humanitarian employees of the basis for their altruistic motivations can help sustain those motivations for a longer period. Therefore, to rightly balance Maslow's Hierarchy

of Needs, common humanitarian motivations, and the differences between the two, humanitarian organizations can loosely follow the theory by implementing the fulfillment methods for each stage discussed earlier while recognizing the downfalls (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023; Maslow et al., 1998). Then, alongside these common human resources practices, the organizations can implement methods that specifically target altruism in humanitarian employees. These methods include examples such as surrounding the employees with evidence of their impact, providing opportunities for firsthand experiences, and reminding employees of the faith aspect of humanitarian aid if applicable.

### **KPIs in Humanitarian Retention**

After implementing new motivational techniques, it is important for the humanitarian organization to measure and track retention indicators to see if they are increasing retention (Phillips & Connell, 2003). One of the key performance indicators (KPIs) that should be used is the employee turnover rate, which has been discussed in general terms throughout this analysis. It is proven to be a key indicator of employee morale, motivation, and satisfaction (Mitrovska & Eftimov, 2016). In practical terms, this measurement can be calculated in two main ways. The first way uses the number of employee departures and average number of employees. The formula is displayed in Equation 1.

$$Turnover = \frac{\text{number of employee departures during period}}{\text{average number of employees}} * 100 \quad (1)$$

This formula measures the overall employee turnover for the organization during the measurement timeframe. Therefore, the organization needs to ensure there is a simple way to track the number of employees at the beginning and end of a timeframe and the number of departures during that timeframe. The second way to calculate turnover is displayed in Equation 2.

$$Turnover = \frac{\left( \begin{array}{l} \text{total number of employee departures} \\ - \text{uncontrolled departures} \end{array} \right)}{\text{average number of employees}} * 100 \quad (2)$$

In this formula, employee turnover is calculated based on voluntary departures and does not include involuntary departures, or decisions stakeholders did not have control over. This allows organizations to calculate turnover apart from departures due to medical necessity, death, or unavoidable relocation. Both turnover calculations would help track motivation and retention success.

Another KPI that humanitarian organizations should track and measure in relation to retention is the monetary turnover cost (Mitrovska & Eftimov, 2016). As much research shows, monetary turnover cost is usually at least as much as the employee's annual salary, but it can be up to 200-250% of the employee's salary when it comes to higher-level positions (Bliss, 2004). Therefore, tracking turnover cost is a reliable way to track the impact of employee turnover in the organization as different positions hold differing values for the organization. For example, while the turnover rate of three low-level departures and the turnover rate of three high-level departures would be equivalent, the turnover cost of the three high-level departures would be significantly higher. To quantify and track the cost of turnover, humanitarian organizations must consider the "costs of employee's departure, recruitment, selection, training and development and loss of productivity costs" (Mitrovska & Eftimov, 2016, p. 28; see also Cascio, 1991; Wasmuth & Davis, 1983). Then, the total turnover costs can be found by adding each of these considerations. Overall, each of these KPIs provides useful information as to whether the retention rate is successfully improving due to a motivation initiative. The turnover rate and turnover cost can be measured and compared to different timeframes to measure improvement. If the performance indicators are negative, measures can be taken to identify and address issues. If

improvement seems to have taken place, the organization might choose to increase the initiative. No matter the case, it is crucial to track progress in retention.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, humanitarian organizations struggle with employee retention, and this struggle has resulted in organizational barriers and even failure. As the humanitarian realm's high employee turnover rate is primarily due to job dissatisfaction, these organizations need to improve their employee satisfaction to maximize their impact. It is proven that good motivation techniques result in staff satisfaction and, therefore, staff retention as the employee will have a better view of and relationship with the organization. Therefore, comparing traditional motivation theory used in almost all industries with the true motivations of humanitarian employees assists in identifying special considerations in humanitarian motivation policies.

This analysis has displayed how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is commonly used across business sectors, including the nonprofit sector. The five stages of the theory have direct implications for how an organization structures its motivation policies. However, humanitarian employees primarily display altruistic motivations alongside lesser factors like personal, religious, moral, political, and strategic motivations. When comparing the application of Maslow's theory with displayed humanitarian motivations, clear issues arise. Primarily, Maslow's Hierarchy does not account for altruistic tendencies as it instead focuses on self-centered needs, leaving little to no room for the selfless tendencies of nonprofit workers. Additionally, the structure of the theory is too rigid for altruism because humanitarians often do not linearly pass through the stages of Maslow's theory before expressing their altruistic motivations.

As a result of the disconnect between Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and humanitarian motivations, humanitarian employers need to intentionally target altruism in their motivation policies alongside common workplace initiatives. Practical examples of targeting altruism include surrounding employees with evidence of their successful work, providing firsthand experiences with the people in need, and faith-based organizations reminding their workers of their hope. More research needs to be done on the long-term results of these specific methods, but by tracking their initiatives with KPIs like employee turnover and monetary turnover cost, humanitarian organizations can work to increase employee retention and better impact the world.

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