

# Funding Cuts, Uncertainty, and Organisational Change: Effects on the Psychosocial Well-Being of UN/INGO Personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Recent reductions in international donor funding, including significant cuts to United States foreign assistance, have intensified uncertainty and organisational change across the humanitarian and development sectors. United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations operating in Sub-Saharan Africa have been particularly affected, with funding shortfalls triggering widespread organisational restructuring. These changes have manifested in contract terminations and non-renewals, personnel relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement, raising growing concerns about the psychosocial well-being of affected personnel. Despite increasing recognition of duty of care within humanitarian systems, empirical research capturing the lived experiences of personnel navigating such funding-driven disruptions remains limited, particularly within African operational contexts.

This study explores the effects of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change on the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews with twenty personnel members from UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations. Data were collected between November and December 2025 and analysed using thematic analysis to capture shared patterns of meaning across participants' narratives.

The study focuses on three key restructuring pathways: contract terminations and non-renewals, relocation and downgrading, and forced early retirement. By foregrounding personnel perspectives, the research provides significant insights into emotional distress, identity disruption, coping processes, and resilience in the context of organisational uncertainty. The findings contribute to the emerging literature on humanitarian workforce well-being and offer evidence-based implications for organisational change management, psychosocial support, and ethical leadership within UN and INGO settings in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**How to cite this paper:** Azinwi Terence Niba "Funding Cuts, Uncertainty, and Organisational Change: Effects on the Psychosocial Well-Being of UN/INGO Personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-1, February 2026, pp.240-250, URL: [www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd100049.pdf](http://www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd100049.pdf)



IJTSRD100049

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**KEYWORDS:** *Psychosocial well-being, Humanitarian workforce, Organisational change, Funding cuts, Job insecurity, United Nations personnel, International non-governmental organisations (INGOs), Sub-Saharan Africa, Occupational stress, Resilience and coping.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the humanitarian and development sector has increasingly operated within a context of financial volatility, political uncertainty, and shifting donor priorities. In late 2024 and throughout 2025, reductions in United States foreign assistance funding, including substantial cuts to USAID allocations, generated widespread financial strain across United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations

(INGOs) worldwide (Development Initiatives, 2024; OECD, 2025). These funding contractions have been particularly destabilising for operations in Sub-Saharan Africa, where UN agencies and INGOs play a central role in delivering humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, health, and development programming amid protracted crises and structural vulnerabilities (UN OCHA, 2024).

As funding shortfalls intensified, many organisations were compelled to implement rapid organisational restructuring. These changes have commonly included contract terminations and non-renewals, personnel relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement. While such measures are often framed as necessary fiscal or strategic responses, a growing body of research indicates that funding-driven organisational change is associated with heightened uncertainty, emotional distress, reduced morale, and weakened trust in leadership (Kiefer, 2005; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). In humanitarian and development contexts-where personnel routinely operate under conditions of insecurity, heavy workload, and moral complexity-these psychosocial stressors may be particularly pronounced (Cardozo et al., 2012; McFarlane, Kaplan, & McFarlane, 2020).

Recent analyses have begun to document the organisational and psychological consequences of large-scale restructuring within multilateral and humanitarian institutions, including within the United Nations system (Ahmed, 2025; OECD, 2025). However, existing scholarship has largely focused on workforce reductions at a macro or institutional level, with limited attention to the lived psychosocial experiences of affected personnel, particularly within Sub-Saharan African operational contexts. Moreover, research has tended to privilege layoffs as the primary restructuring mechanism, often overlooking other forms of organisational change-such as relocation, job downgrading, and forced early retirement-that may be equally disruptive to personnel well-being.

Importantly, much of the literature on organisational change and employee well-being remains grounded in corporate or Global North settings, with comparatively little empirical work centred on UN and INGO personnel working in African contexts (Brough et al., 2020; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2013). These contexts are distinct. Personnel are frequently embedded in fragile political and socio-economic environments, exposed to chronic insecurity and ethical stressors, while simultaneously navigating precarious employment arrangements linked to short-term donor funding cycles (Eriksson et al., 2013). As a result, funding cuts and organisational restructuring may exert compounded psychosocial effects, extending beyond employment loss to include identity disruption, family instability, diminished social status, and prolonged uncertainty.

In response to these gaps, the present study examines the effects of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change on the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. Using a qualitative design, the study centres

personnel voices to explore how individuals experience, interpret, and adapt to three key restructuring pathways: (1) contract terminations and non-renewals, (2) relocation and job downgrading, and (3) forced early retirement. By foregrounding lived experiences, the study seeks to generate contextually grounded insights into the psychosocial consequences of donor-driven organisational change.

The study is theoretically informed by Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Beck, 1976), Lewin's Change Management Theory (Lewin, 1951), and Community Resilience Theory (Norris et al., 2008). Together, these frameworks facilitate an integrated examination of cognitive appraisal and reframing processes, organisational change dynamics, and resilience at both individual and collective levels. Applying these perspectives to the experiences of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa offers a novel contribution to the literature on humanitarian workforce well-being.

By focusing on African operational contexts and drawing on qualitative accounts from personnel across organisational settings, this study responds to calls for more context-sensitive, personnel-centred research in the humanitarian and development sector (Ager et al., 2020; Strohmeier & Scholte, 2015). The findings are intended to inform organisational policy, ethical leadership, and psychosocial support strategies within UN agencies and INGOs operating under conditions of funding uncertainty and structural change.

## 2. Problem Statement

Over the past two years, the global humanitarian and development system has entered a period of acute financial contraction. Reductions in United States foreign assistance-historically one of the largest sources of humanitarian and development funding-have significantly disrupted the operational capacity of United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) worldwide (Development Initiatives, 2024; OECD, 2025). These funding cuts have generated widespread uncertainty and accelerated organisational restructuring across the sector, with particularly severe consequences for programmes and personnel deployed in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN OCHA, 2024).

Sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affected by fluctuations in international aid financing. The region hosts a high concentration of UN and INGO operations addressing protracted humanitarian crises, armed conflict, displacement, food insecurity, public health emergencies, and climate-related shocks (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2024). As donor funding contracts, organisations operating in these contexts

are frequently compelled to implement rapid cost-containment measures. These measures often include contract terminations and non-renewals, personnel relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement. While such restructuring is typically justified as a financial necessity, it has profound implications for the psychosocial well-being of personnel whose professional lives, identities, and family systems are closely tied to organisational stability and mission continuity.

Existing research demonstrates that organisational uncertainty and employment insecurity are strongly associated with adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional exhaustion, and diminished sense of control (De Witte, Pienaar, & De Cuyper, 2016; Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). Within humanitarian and development settings, these effects may be amplified due to the cumulative burden of occupational stressors such as exposure to violence, moral injury, high workload, and chronic insecurity (Cardozo et al., 2012; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2013). When funding cuts trigger abrupt restructuring, personnel may experience a convergence of external operational stress and internal organisational instability, placing their psychosocial well-being at heightened risk.

Despite growing recognition of duty of care and workforce well-being within the humanitarian sector, empirical research has largely focused on trauma exposure, burnout, and stress related to field operations, rather than on the psychosocial consequences of funding-driven organisational change itself (Ager et al., 2020; McFarlane et al., 2020). Moreover, much of the literature examines layoffs as the primary indicator of organisational disruption, with limited attention to other restructuring mechanisms-such as relocation, job downgrading, and forced early retirement-that may be equally destabilising but less visible. These forms of change can entail loss of professional status, reduced income, family dislocation, and erosion of long-term career expectations, all of which carry significant psychosocial implications.

Recent analyses have begun to acknowledge the organisational and psychological strain associated with large-scale restructuring within multilateral institutions (Ahmed, 2025; OECD, 2025). However, there remains a critical lack of qualitative, personnel-centred research examining how UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa experience, interpret, and cope with funding-induced uncertainty and restructuring. In particular, little is known about how personnel cognitively appraise these changes, how they navigate identity disruption and loss, and

how resilience is mobilised-or undermined-within contexts of prolonged uncertainty.

This gap is especially concerning given the strategic importance of human capital to humanitarian and development effectiveness. Personnel well-being is directly linked to organisational performance, ethical decision-making, retention of expertise, and the capacity to operate safely and effectively in high-risk environments (Brough et al., 2020; IASC, 2022). When organisational change is experienced as opaque, unjust, or psychologically overwhelming, it risks eroding trust, commitment, and resilience-outcomes that may ultimately undermine programme delivery and institutional credibility.

Accordingly, there is a pressing need for empirical research that examines the psychosocial effects of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change on UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. Such research must move beyond aggregate indicators and capture lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and adaptive responses. By focusing on three key restructuring pathways-contract terminations and non-renewals, relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement-the present study seeks to address this gap and generate evidence to inform organisational policy, leadership practice, and psychosocial support strategies in an increasingly volatile funding environment.

### 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Funding Cuts, Uncertainty, and Organisational Change in the Humanitarian Sector

The humanitarian and development sector is highly dependent on donor financing, rendering organisations particularly vulnerable to shifts in geopolitical priorities and funding flows. Recent reductions in United States foreign assistance have significantly disrupted humanitarian financing globally, contributing to programme closures, downsizing, and organisational restructuring across UN agencies and INGOs (Development Initiatives, 2024; OECD, 2025). Sub-Saharan Africa, which receives a substantial proportion of humanitarian and development aid, has been disproportionately affected by these funding contractions (UN OCHA, 2024).

Organisational change literature consistently identifies uncertainty as a central psychological stressor during periods of restructuring. Uncertainty surrounding job continuity, role clarity, income stability, and future career trajectories has been shown to negatively affect employee well-being and organisational commitment (Bordia et al., 2004; Kiefer, 2005). In humanitarian settings, funding-driven uncertainty often unfolds rapidly and with

limited transparency, amplifying perceptions of unpredictability and loss of control among personnel (Strohmeier & Scholte, 2015). Organisational responses such as contract non-renewal, relocation, downgrading, and forced retirement may therefore be experienced not only as administrative decisions, but as existential threats to professional identity and personal stability.

### 3.2. Psychosocial Well-Being of UN and INGO Personnel

Psychosocial well-being refers to the dynamic interaction between psychological functioning, emotional health, and social relationships within a given context (WHO, 2014). For UN and INGO personnel, well-being is shaped by both external operational stressors and internal organisational conditions. Extensive research has documented elevated levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among humanitarian workers, often linked to exposure to conflict, displacement, and moral distress (Cardozo et al., 2012; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2013).

However, comparatively less attention has been paid to organisational determinants of psychosocial well-being, particularly those associated with employment insecurity and restructuring. Job insecurity has been robustly associated with adverse mental health outcomes, including emotional exhaustion, reduced life satisfaction, and impaired coping capacity (De Witte et al., 2016; Sverke et al., 2002). In humanitarian contexts, where personnel may already experience cumulative stress, funding-related organisational change may exacerbate psychological vulnerability and undermine resilience (Brough et al., 2020).

Relocation and job downgrading present additional psychosocial challenges. Forced relocation may disrupt family systems, social networks, and access to support, while downgrading can erode professional identity, status, and perceived self-efficacy (Ashforth, 2001). Similarly, forced early retirement may precipitate feelings of loss, marginalisation, and diminished purpose, particularly when retirement is imposed rather than chosen (Wang & Shultz, 2010). These restructuring pathways remain underexplored in the humanitarian literature, especially within African operational contexts.

### 3.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Lewin's Change Management Theory, and Community Resilience Theory. Together, these frameworks enable a multi-level analysis of individual cognition, organisational processes, and

adaptive capacity in the context of funding-driven change.

#### 3.3.1. Cognitive Behavioral Theory

Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), as articulated by Beck (1976), posits that individuals' emotional and behavioural responses to stressors are shaped by their cognitive appraisals rather than by events themselves. From this perspective, organisational restructuring—such as termination, relocation, or forced retirement—does not inherently determine psychological outcomes. Rather, outcomes are mediated by how individuals interpret and cognitively frame these experiences.

In contexts of funding cuts and uncertainty, personnel may engage in maladaptive cognitive patterns, including catastrophising, hopelessness, or negative self-appraisal, which can intensify distress. Conversely, cognitive reframing—interpreting disruption as temporary, meaningful, or growth-oriented—may support psychological adaptation and resilience. CBT therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how UN and INGO personnel cognitively process organisational change and how these appraisals influence psychosocial well-being.

#### 3.3.2. Lewin's Change Management Theory

Lewin's (1951) Change Management Theory conceptualises organisational change as a three-stage process: unfreezing, change, and refreezing. The unfreezing stage involves disruption of existing norms and structures, often accompanied by uncertainty and emotional disequilibrium. The change stage entails transition and adaptation, while refreezing involves stabilisation of new roles and systems.

In funding-driven restructuring, personnel are often forced into prolonged unfreezing, characterised by sustained uncertainty and lack of closure. When organisational change is rapid, opaque, or recurrent—as is often the case in donor-dependent systems—the refreezing stage may never fully occur. Lewin's model is therefore particularly relevant for analysing how organisational change processes are experienced by personnel and how inadequate change management may exacerbate psychosocial strain.

#### 3.3.3. Community Resilience Theory

Community Resilience Theory, as articulated by Norris et al. (2008), conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process linking adaptive capacities to positive adjustment following disruption. These capacities include social capital, economic resources, information and communication, and collective competence. Although originally developed in relation to communities facing disaster, the

framework has been increasingly applied to organisational and occupational contexts.

Within UN and INGO settings, resilience is shaped not only by individual coping strategies, but also by organisational support systems, leadership practices, and peer networks. Funding cuts that erode social cohesion, reduce institutional support, or undermine trust may weaken collective resilience, thereby amplifying psychosocial vulnerability. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa adapt-or struggle to adapt-to systemic funding shocks within constrained organisational environments.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative methodology, using a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of United Nations and international non-governmental organisation personnel affected by funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational restructuring in Sub-Saharan Africa. Phenomenological research designs are particularly suitable when the purpose of inquiry is to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of significant personal and professional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought to capture personnel's subjective experiences of organisational change, specifically contract terminations or non-renewals, relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement, and how these experiences influenced their psychosocial well-being. Rather than examining predefined variables, the design allowed participants to articulate experiences of uncertainty, loss, adaptation, and resilience within complex humanitarian and development work environments. A qualitative approach was therefore deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and its emphasis on meaning-making, depth, and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 4.2. Study Context

The study was conducted within the context of humanitarian and development operations in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region significantly affected by donor funding volatility, particularly following reductions in U.S. foreign assistance. These funding cuts have contributed to widespread organisational restructuring across UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations operating in the region, resulting in increased uncertainty, contract non-renewals, personnel relocation and downgrading,

and early retirement measures. Data collection took place between November and December 2025, a period marked by heightened organisational instability and workforce insecurity across the humanitarian and development sector in Africa.

### 4.3. Population

The total population for this study comprised personnel working within United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations operating in Sub-Saharan Africa who were exposed to funding cuts and related organisational restructuring. Within this broad population, the target population consisted of personnel working within the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa and INTERSOS Cameroon. These organisational contexts were selected because they represent both multilateral and international non-governmental organisational structures that have been directly affected by funding reductions and restructuring processes in the region.

The accessible population was drawn from personnel within these target populations who were reachable during the study period due to the researcher's prior and current professional engagements within both organisational contexts. The accessible population included fifty-two UNDP personnel affiliated with the Regional Bureau for Africa and seventeen INTERSOS personnel based in Cameroon. From this accessible population, a qualitative sample was drawn for in-depth interviews.

**Table 1: Accessible Population, and Sample Distribution**

Organisation	Accessible Population	Interview Sample
UNDP (Regional Bureau for Africa)	52	10
INTEROS (Cameroon)	17	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>20</b>

*Source: Authors' projections (2025), informed by publicly available organisational information and operational context*

### 4.4. Sampling Techniques

The study employed a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify personnel who had direct experience of funding-related organisational change relevant to the study objectives, including contract termination or non-renewal, relocation or job downgrading, and forced early retirement (Patton, 2015). Convenience sampling was applied due to the researcher's professional engagement within the humanitarian and development sector, which facilitated ethical access to eligible participants within the accessible population.

This combined sampling approach is widely used in qualitative research involving specialised professional populations, particularly in humanitarian and organisational studies where access may be constrained by ethical, security, and institutional considerations (Palinkas et al., 2015).

#### 4.5. Participants

A total of twenty participants took part in the study, comprising ten UNDP personnel affiliated with the Regional Bureau for Africa and ten INTERSOS personnel based in Cameroon. Participants included both national and international personnel occupying a range of professional roles and levels of seniority. Eligibility criteria required participants to have directly experienced at least one form of funding-related organisational change, namely contract termination or non-renewal, relocation or job downgrading, or forced early retirement. To protect confidentiality and minimise organisational risk, specific job titles, duty stations, and organisational units are not disclosed.

#### 4.6. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted remotely to accommodate participants' geographical dispersion, security considerations, and professional obligations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in English or French, depending on participant preference. An interview guide was used to explore participants' experiences of organisational change, perceptions of uncertainty, psychosocial impacts, coping strategies, and perceived sources of support. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they considered most salient.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed during transcription to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

#### 4.7. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. Analysis involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, and final theme definition. An inductive analytic approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. The analysis focused on identifying shared psychosocial experiences related to terminations, relocation and downgrading, and forced

early retirement, as well as processes of meaning-making and adaptation.

#### 4.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to protect their anonymity. Given the sensitivity of employment-related disclosures, particular care was taken to avoid organisational identification and to minimise potential professional risk. Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with applicable institutional research ethics requirements.

#### 5. Findings

The thematic analysis yielded four overarching themes reflecting personnel's lived experiences of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change. These themes capture the psychosocial impact of contract terminations or non-renewals, relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement, as well as broader experiences of uncertainty and adaptation. Findings are presented thematically, with illustrative excerpts drawn from participant narratives.

##### 5.1. Psychosocial Distress Associated with Contract Terminations and Non-Renewals

Participants who experienced contract termination or non-renewal described profound psychosocial distress characterised by anxiety, loss of professional identity, and feelings of abandonment by institutions to which they had demonstrated long-term commitment. Many participants reported that the uncertainty preceding non-renewal was as psychologically distressing as the termination itself, describing prolonged periods of hypervigilance, disrupted sleep, and persistent worry about financial security and family stability.

Several participants articulated a sense of symbolic loss linked to the abrupt ending of their professional roles, particularly within mission-driven organisations. For many, employment was closely tied to personal values and identity, and termination was experienced not merely as job loss but as a rupture in meaning and purpose. As one participant noted, *"It wasn't just the contract ending; it felt like the organisation was suddenly telling me I no longer belonged."*

Participants also described feelings of perceived disposability, particularly where non-renewals were communicated with minimal explanation. This experience contributed to emotional exhaustion and diminished trust, with some participants expressing lingering bitterness and reduced confidence in institutional loyalty.

## 5.2. Relocation and Job Downgrading as Experiences of Loss and Disempowerment

Relocation and job downgrading emerged as a distinct source of psychosocial strain. Participants described relocations from higher-cost to lower-cost duty stations, as well as downward shifts in job grade or role scope, as experiences marked by loss of professional status, financial insecurity, and diminished autonomy. For some, relocation was experienced as punitive rather than supportive, particularly when perceived as a cost-saving measure rather than a career development opportunity.

Job downgrading was frequently associated with feelings of humiliation, erosion of self-worth, and concerns about long-term career trajectories. Participants highlighted the psychosocial burden of maintaining professional responsibilities while experiencing reduced recognition and compensation. One participant reflected, *“You are doing similar work, sometimes even more, but with less pay and less respect. It takes a toll on how you see yourself.”*

Family disruption also featured prominently, particularly where relocations affected schooling, spousal employment, and social support networks. Participants described cumulative stress arising from managing professional uncertainty alongside domestic instability, further exacerbating emotional strain.

## 5.3. Forced Early Retirement and Anticipatory Identity Loss

Participants who experienced forced early retirement described this process as psychologically disorienting and emotionally distressing. Many reported that retirement was imposed with limited preparation time, leading to feelings of loss of control, grief, and premature disengagement from professional life. For some, early retirement disrupted long-term financial planning and intensified fears about aging, relevance, and social isolation.

Participants articulated a strong sense of anticipatory identity loss, describing how professional roles had structured their daily lives, social identities, and sense of contribution. The sudden removal of this structure was experienced as destabilising. One participant stated, *“I wasn’t ready to stop. It felt like my usefulness was taken away before I was finished giving.”*

Forced retirement was also associated with perceived injustice, particularly where participants believed their experience and institutional knowledge were undervalued. This perception intensified emotional distress and contributed to feelings of disenchantment with organisational leadership.

## 5.4. Navigating Uncertainty, Coping, and Emerging Resilience

Across all categories of organisational change, participants described pervasive uncertainty as a central psychosocial stressor. Uncertainty related not only to employment continuity but also to organisational direction, leadership transparency, and future opportunities. Participants described prolonged periods of emotional limbo, during which planning for the future felt impossible.

Despite these challenges, participants also articulated adaptive coping strategies and emerging resilience. These included cognitive reframing, reliance on peer support networks, spiritual or meaning-based coping, and proactive career reorientation. Several participants described deliberately reframing organisational change as an opportunity for personal growth or reassessment of priorities, though this process often followed an initial period of distress.

Access to psychosocial support, whether formal or informal, was identified as a critical protective factor. Participants who reported supportive supervisors or collegial environments described greater emotional containment and reduced feelings of isolation. Nonetheless, many participants expressed concern that organisational support structures had not kept pace with the scale of workforce disruption.

## Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that funding cuts and associated organisational restructuring exert significant psychosocial effects on UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. Terminations, relocation and downgrading, and forced early retirement were experienced not only as administrative decisions but as deeply personal events affecting identity, emotional well-being, and perceptions of organisational justice. While signs of resilience and adaptive coping were evident, these emerged unevenly, with some colleagues drawing on available psychosocial support mechanisms, while others did not actively seek or engage with such support.

## 6. Discussion

This study examined the effects of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change on the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. The discussion interprets the findings through the theoretical frameworks guiding the study—Cognitive Behavioral Theory, community resilience theory, and Lewin’s Change Management Theory—and situates them within relevant empirical literature.

### 6.1. Contract Terminations and Psychosocial Well-Being

The findings indicated that contract terminations and non-renewals negatively affected the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. Participants reported heightened anxiety, emotional distress, loss of professional identity, and feelings of rejection following termination or notification of non-renewal.

This finding aligns with Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), which posits that emotional distress arises not solely from external events but from individuals' cognitive interpretations of those events (Beck, 1976; Beck & Haigh, 2014). In the present study, participants frequently interpreted termination as personal failure, devaluation, or abandonment by the organisation. These maladaptive cognitions—such as catastrophising future prospects or internalising organisational decisions as personal inadequacy—intensified emotional distress and undermined psychosocial well-being. CBT provides a useful lens for understanding how negative automatic thoughts following termination amplified anxiety and emotional suffering.

Empirical support for this interpretation is provided by Paul and Moser (2009), whose meta-analysis demonstrated a strong association between involuntary job loss and adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and reduced psychological well-being. Their findings emphasise that the psychological impact of unemployment is mediated by cognitive appraisals, particularly perceptions of loss of control and identity threat. This mirrors the present study, where participants described termination as deeply personal and identity-disruptive rather than merely economic.

Overall, these findings suggest that contract terminations undermine psychosocial well-being primarily through cognitive mechanisms. In humanitarian and development contexts, where employment is closely tied to personal values and purpose, negative cognitive appraisals following termination may be especially potent, highlighting the importance of psychosocial interventions that support cognitive reframing and emotional regulation.

### 6.2. Relocation and Job Downgrading and Psychosocial Well-Being

The study found that relocation and job downgrading negatively affected psychosocial well-being, particularly through experiences of loss of status, financial strain, disruption of social networks, and reduced motivation.

This finding aligns with community and ecological resilience theory, which conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process shaped by individuals' access to social, economic, and organisational resources (Ungar, 2011; Rutter, 2012). Relocation and downgrading disrupted participants' access to key protective resources, including stable professional roles, collegial support, financial security, and a sense of belonging within familiar work environments. As resilience is sustained through interactions between individuals and their environments, the erosion of these supports weakened participants' capacity to adapt effectively to organisational change.

Empirical evidence supporting this interpretation is found in Ungar (2011), who demonstrated that resilience in high-stress occupational contexts depends heavily on contextual supports such as social connectedness, meaningful work roles, and institutional recognition. When these supports are compromised, individuals exhibit increased vulnerability to psychological distress. This is consistent with the present findings, where participants described relocation and downgrading as destabilising experiences that eroded their coping capacity.

These findings indicate that relocation and job downgrading affect psychosocial well-being by undermining resilience-supporting systems rather than through individual vulnerability alone. In Sub-Saharan African humanitarian contexts—often characterised by economic uncertainty and limited alternative employment—such disruptions may significantly reduce personnel's ability to recover psychologically.

### 6.3. Forced Early Retirement and Psychosocial Well-Being

The findings revealed that forced early retirement adversely affected psychosocial well-being, with participants reporting loss of purpose, diminished self-worth, emotional distress, and difficulty adjusting to abrupt role transitions.

This finding aligns with Lewin's Change Management Theory (Lewin, 1947), which conceptualises change as a process involving unfreezing, change, and refreezing. Forced early retirement represents a sudden and externally imposed unfreezing of long-established professional identities without adequate preparation or support to facilitate refreezing into new life roles. Participants' distress reflects a breakdown in the change process, where insufficient communication, planning, and transitional support hindered psychological adjustment.

Empirical support for this interpretation is provided by Van Solinge and Henkens (2008), who found that involuntary retirement is associated with poorer psychological well-being compared to voluntary retirement. Their study highlights loss of control and inadequate transition planning as central mechanisms driving distress, which closely parallels participants' experiences in the present study.

Taken together, these findings suggest that forced early retirement undermines psychosocial well-being through poorly managed organisational change processes that disrupt identity, autonomy, and life structure. Without deliberate refreezing strategies, early retirement may function as a psychosocial shock rather than a manageable transition.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1. Conclusion

This study examined the effects of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational change on the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel in Sub-Saharan Africa. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explored personnel's lived experiences of contract terminations and non-renewals, relocation and job downgrading, and forced early retirement within humanitarian and development contexts characterised by financial instability.

The findings demonstrate that funding-driven organisational change has profound psychosocial consequences for personnel. Contract terminations primarily affected well-being through negative cognitive appraisals, including feelings of rejection, loss of identity, and heightened anxiety. Relocation and job downgrading undermined psychosocial well-being by eroding resilience-supporting resources such as social networks, professional status, and financial security. Forced early retirement disrupted identity and purpose, particularly where organisational change processes were abrupt and insufficiently supported.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce the relevance of Cognitive Behavioral Theory, community resilience theory, and Lewin's Change Management Theory in understanding how personnel experience and respond to organisational change. Together, these frameworks highlight that psychosocial distress is shaped not only by structural decisions but also by cognitive interpretations, access to contextual supports, and the quality of change management processes.

Overall, the study underscores that funding cuts and restructuring are not merely administrative or financial challenges but constitute significant psychosocial risks for humanitarian and development personnel. If unaddressed, these risks may undermine

staff well-being, organisational resilience, and ultimately the effectiveness of UN agencies and INGOs operating in high-pressure environments.

### 7.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to support the psychosocial well-being of UN and INGO personnel during periods of funding cuts, uncertainty, and organisational restructuring.

First, UN agencies and INGOs should integrate psychosocial risk considerations into organisational restructuring and funding-related decision-making processes. Contract terminations, relocations, downgrading, and early retirement should not be treated solely as administrative or financial actions but as changes with significant psychosocial implications. Transparent communication, clear timelines, and consistent information-sharing can help reduce uncertainty and mitigate distress associated with abrupt organisational change.

Second, organisational leadership and human resource units should be strengthened in their capacity to manage change humanely and ethically. Senior managers and supervisors should receive training on change management, psychological safety, and the psychosocial effects of employment-related uncertainty. Leadership that demonstrates empathy, fairness, and consistency can significantly reduce anxiety and perceptions of organisational injustice during restructuring.

Third, staff counselling services within UN organisations and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) personnel within INGOs should be recognised as critical actors during periods of organisational change. These departments should be adequately resourced and actively involved in supporting personnel affected by terminations, relocations, downgrading, and forced early retirement. In addition to individual counselling, staff counsellors and MHPSS professionals should implement preventive and proactive well-being initiatives, including stress management, cognitive reframing, and resilience-building programmes tailored to periods of uncertainty.

Fourth, staff counselling and MHPSS units should play a strategic advisory role with organisational leadership, providing guidance on the psychosocial implications of restructuring decisions. By sensitising decision-makers to the emotional and psychological impact of organisational change, these professionals can contribute to more supportive and sustainable change processes.

Fifth, organisations should actively promote a culture that normalises help-seeking and psychological support. Personnel should be encouraged to access staff counsellors, psychologists, and MHPSS services during periods of transition. Early engagement with available support services can enhance coping, facilitate adjustment, and reduce the risk of prolonged psychosocial distress.

Finally, future research should explore the long-term psychosocial effects of funding volatility and organisational restructuring in humanitarian and development contexts, including longitudinal studies that examine recovery trajectories and protective factors over time. Comparative studies across organisations and regions would further strengthen the evidence base needed to inform policy and staff well-being interventions.

Overall, addressing the psychosocial impact of funding cuts and organisational change requires coordinated efforts across leadership, human resources, and staff support systems. Protecting personnel well-being is not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic investment in organisational resilience and effectiveness within UN agencies and INGOs operating in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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