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Protecting Those Who Protect

*Advancing Humanitarian Responder Safety
and Resilience in Kenya*

May 2026

Executive Summary

Humanitarian responders are at the heart of delivery of assistance in Kenya, as they respond to floods, disease outbreaks, displacement and other humanitarian shocks at the frontlines. Yet the safety and wellbeing of responders are increasingly threatened by physical, environmental, operational, and institutional risks that undermine not only their own protection, but also the effectiveness, continuity, and credibility of humanitarian action. Security continues to be a major concern for humanitarian actors around the world, where hundreds are impacted by violence and operational risks each year. The risks are particularly high for local responders, who constitute the largest share of humanitarian workforce yet they often operate with limited security and protection mechanisms.¹ The safety and security of responders should not be treated as secondary but a systemic issue that directly shapes response effectiveness, service continuity, operational efficiency, and community trust.

This policy brief argues for the establishment of a National Humanitarian Responder Safety Framework in Kenya as the overarching architecture for aligning relevant policies, legal instruments, coordination mechanisms, institutional safeguards, financing arrangements, and operational systems to strengthen the safety, protection, and effectiveness of humanitarian responders through a whole-of-society approach anchored in government leadership, humanitarian systems strengthening, private sector innovation, and community participation.

Key Messages

- Responder safety is foundational to humanitarian effectiveness. When responders are exposed to risk, service delivery, response time, and community trust are compromised.
- Current approaches are fragmented and insufficient. Safety is often treated as an internal organizational responsibility, despite being shaped by broader systemic factors (World Health Organization)²
- Local responders face disproportionate risks. Community-based actors are the most exposed yet least protected.¹
- Private sector capabilities remain underutilized. Opportunities for innovation in infrastructure, logistics, and technology are not fully leveraged.
- A coordinated, whole-of-society approach is essential. Effective humanitarian systems require collaboration across sectors.³

¹Global Interagency Security Forum. (2024). The evolution of security risk management in the humanitarian sector. Retrieved from <https://www.gisf.ngo>

²World Health Organization. (2021). Occupational safety and health in public health emergencies: A manual for protecting health workers and responders. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

³United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2023). Humanitarian access overview. Retrieved from <https://www.unocha.org>

1. Background and Context

Kenya continues to experience frequent humanitarian emergencies including climate-induced disasters, epidemics and displacement. The crises demand quick, timely and sustained response. More often than not, humanitarian responders operate in difficult and volatile environments often within or near affected communities

However, the humanitarian landscape is becoming increasingly complex and dangerous. Humanitarian Outcomes reports that incidents impacting humanitarian workers are on the rise around the world, reflecting an increase in risks for frontline response.

Responder safety is a determinant of the effectiveness of the humanitarian service delivery. As highlighted by the International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs (ICHA), when responders are unsafe, it is not only individuals who are placed at risk, but also service delivery, operational continuity, and community confidence in humanitarian systems.⁴

Furthermore, humanitarian action is increasingly interdependent with other systems including public infrastructure, transport, health and digital technology, meaning that integrated and multi-sectoral approaches are needed.²

2. Problem Statement

In Kenya, the humanitarian environment is becoming more complex and challenging, with multiple operational, physical, environmental and institutional risks and constraints. Responders often face danger of physical insecurity such as conflict, accidents and unsafe operating conditions, especially during emergencies like flood, disease outbreak, displacement, civil unrest, etc. Meanwhile, climate-related hazards are exacerbating the risks of frontline humanitarian operations, such as extreme weather events, droughts, flood events and heat stress. Poor infrastructure and logistical systems, such as the lack of good transport networks, communication systems, emergency gear and delayed access to affected areas, also hamper response operations. Gaps in regulatory and institutional safeguards has also resulted in many responders working without adequate safety protocols, social support structures, insurance coverage and duty of care arrangements. These gaps taken together lead to diminished operational efficiency, a lag in humanitarian response, higher physical and psychological risk for responders, loss of trust between communities and humanitarian actors, and ultimately, degradation of the humanitarian system as a whole. Responder safety is not sufficiently considered in national policy frameworks, disaster preparedness systems and public investment agendas, despite the critical role responders play in protecting dignity and life.

These challenges need to be tackled collectively and effectively within a whole-of-society response, focusing on the safety of responders in humanitarian policy and practice. Government of Kenya should operationalize and institutionalize a National Humanitarian Responder Safety Framework, which embeds responder safety in Disaster Risk Management, occupational safety and emergency preparedness frameworks.

⁴International Center for Humanitarian Affairs. (2026). Why safety of humanitarian workers is paramount.

There is an investment need for resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, safe transport and communication technologies, and responder protection mechanisms especially in high-risk and underserved areas. The private sector should facilitate innovation through digital coordination platforms, risk-monitoring technologies and improved logistics systems; for humanitarian actors, institutionalisation of strong duty of care policies, provision of psychosocial support services and ongoing training on the safety of humanitarian responses are needed. The process of involving communities in co-designing localized safety and risk mitigation strategies is also important to build trust, accountability and operation effectiveness. By continuing to work together across sectors, Kenya can enhance its humanitarian action system to ensure communities, and humanitarian workers, are safer, more resilient and more effective.

3. Policy Gap Analysis

- 1. Fragmented Policy and Regulatory Frameworks:** Responder safety is not comprehensively embedded in national disaster risk management or occupational safety systems.²
- 2. Limited Multi-Sectoral Coordination-Safety:** Responder safety is often treated as an internal issue rather than a shared responsibility across sectors.⁴
- 3. Inadequate Investment in Operational Infrastructure:** Underfunding for critical transport, communication, and digital systems limits safe and effective response operations.
- 4. Disproportionate Protection:** Local responders face disproportionate risks due to limited access to safety resources and protections.¹

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Government of Kenya

- Develop and implement a National Humanitarian Responder Safety Policy integrated within disaster risk management systems.³
- Strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks to incorporate humanitarian contexts within occupational safety standards.²
- Invest in critical infrastructure, including transport, communication, and early warning systems, particularly in high-risk regions.

5.2 Private Sector

- Invest in technology solutions such as real-time risk monitoring, geospatial mapping, and digital coordination platforms.
- Strengthen logistics and supply chains to ensure safe mobility and access to protective equipment.
- Establish public-private partnerships (PPPs) to co-design scalable solutions aligned with humanitarian priorities.

5.3 Humanitarian Sector

Humanitarian organizations should:

- Institutionalize security risk management systems and standardized safety protocols.
- Expand training in preparedness and risk mitigation.
- Strengthen psychosocial support, insurance, and duty-of-care frameworks.
- Generate evidence to inform policy and advocacy efforts.⁴

5.4 Community Systems

- Engage communities in co-designing safety and risk mitigation strategies.
- Strengthen community-based early warning systems.
- Enhance accountability and feedback mechanisms to build trust.³

5.5 Cross-Cutting Recommendation: Establish a National Multi-Stakeholder Platform

- Convene government, private sector, humanitarian actors, and communities.
- Coordinate implementation, financing, and accountability.
- Align national priorities with global humanitarian standards.

6. Expected Outcomes

- Improved safety and wellbeing of humanitarian responders
- Increased resilience and sustainability of humanitarian systems
- Improved efficiency and responsiveness to humanitarian needs.
- Enhanced Community Trust and Engagement
- Greater capacity for resilience and sustainability of humanitarian systems

7. Conclusion

Responder safety is not an optional component, it is a necessary part of good humanitarian systems. Unless those who provide humanitarian assistance are protected, humanitarian systems may become dysfunctional, untrustworthy and unsustainable. A coordinated, whole-of-society approach that rests on investments, partnerships and policy reform provides a route toward a safe, resilient and effective humanitarian ecosystem in Kenya.^{4 1}

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