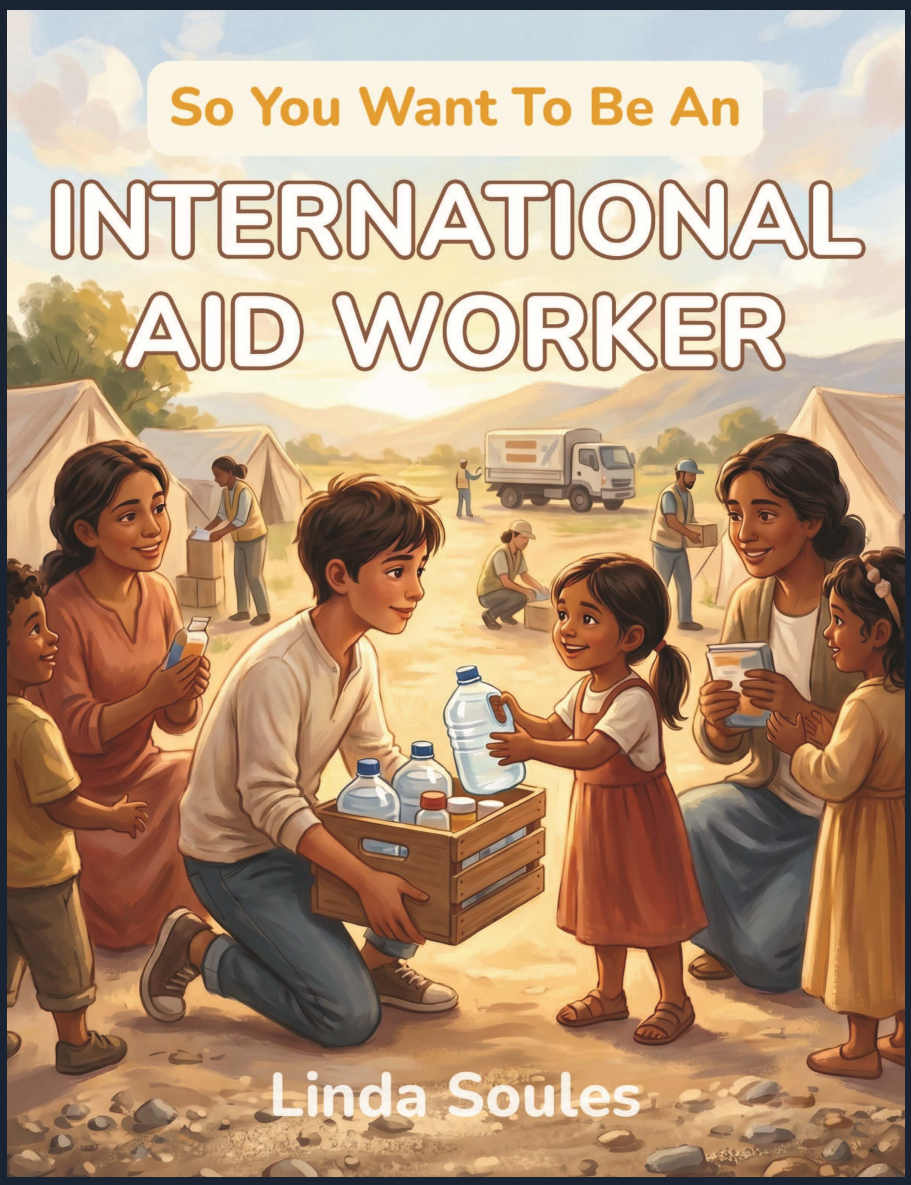
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So You Want To Be An International Aid Worker

Linda Soules

BookGist Summary

So You Want To Be An International Aid Worker

by Linda Soules

Genre: Children's Nonfiction

Key Takeaways

• International aid work combines urgent relief—food, clean water, shelter, and medicine—with long-term development that helps communities recover and become more self-reliant.

• Effective humanitarian action follows four principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Assistance is based on need, not politics, identity, or allegiance.

• The rule to “do no harm” requires aid workers to listen before acting, respect people’s dignity, and consider whether assistance could damage local livelihoods or create dependence.

• Local staff and affected communities are central to disaster response. International workers should support existing leadership, learn from local knowledge, and work in partnership rather than present themselves as rescuers.

• Much of aid work is practical coordination: assessing needs, managing supplies, planning routes, calculating resources, writing reports, and adapting when conditions change.

• Humanitarian careers draw on many specialties—including health, engineering, logistics, education, agriculture, languages, and finance—and usually require relevant skills and experience.

• The work can be deeply meaningful, but it also involves limited resources, difficult choices, physical hardship, safety risks, separation from home, and the possibility of burnout.

• Successful aid workers pair compassion with problem-solving, humility, resilience, steady courage, curiosity, communication skills, and the ability to rest and care for themselves.

• The long-term measure of success is not how long an aid organization stays, but whether a community gains the capacity to meet its needs after outside assistance ends.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is especially suited to curious young readers exploring careers, particularly those who care about fairness, international issues, public service, or helping people in practical ways. It is also useful for parents, teachers, and youth leaders looking for a grounded introduction to humanitarian work and an opening for conversations about disaster response, dignity, and global responsibility. Readers interested in health, engineering, logistics, education, languages, or community service will find examples of how those interests can contribute to aid work. Unlike career books that focus mainly on dramatic rescues or personal achievement, this guide emphasizes teamwork, local leadership, ethical decision-making, and the everyday planning behind effective assistance. It is honest about danger, limited resources, and emotional strain while offering approachable ways to prepare, including volunteering locally, learning languages, and practicing practical problem-solving. Its historical profiles, memorable examples, glossary, and suggested activities make it a useful starting point for readers who want both inspiration and a clearer picture of what the work actually involves.

Chapter Summaries

What If You Were an Aid Worker? — The Work and Its Purpose

The book introduces international aid workers as people who help communities survive and recover from crises such as earthquakes, droughts, floods, and war. Their work may involve delivering medicine, establishing feeding centers, restoring schools, or bringing clean water to displaced families. Humanitarianism means recognizing every person as equally worthy of care, wherever they were born. The book also broadens the reader’s idea of aid: a clown helping children laugh, a teacher turning a metal trunk into a chalkboard, and a rat detecting landmines can all contribute to humanitarian work. Aid work has two connected phases. Relief meets immediate needs quickly, and depends heavily on logistics: getting the right supplies to

the right people at the right time despite closed airports, damaged roads, or administrative delays. Development continues after the emergency, supporting schools, health care, livelihoods, farming, and reliable water systems. Good aid workers ask both what people need today and what will help them need less outside support in the future.

An Aid Worker's Compass — Principles and Responsibility

In crises and conflicts, aid workers rely on four principles to guide difficult decisions. Humanity means everyone's suffering matters. Impartiality means help goes first to those in greatest need, without discrimination. Neutrality means not taking sides in a conflict, helping preserve access and trust. Independence means deciding whom to assist based on need rather than the demands of governments, armies, or donors. At a checkpoint, an aid worker's answer is that they are on the side of whoever needs help most. These principles are joined by "do no harm." Well-intended assistance can cause damage if it undermines local businesses, creates systems a community cannot maintain, or excludes people from decisions about their own lives. The book compares this to doing someone else's homework: it may seem helpful initially but leaves the person less able to manage later. The practical lesson is to ask questions, listen carefully, stay humble about what one does not know, and design help with the people who will live with its consequences.

How People Become Aid Workers — Skills and Workplaces

There is no single route into humanitarian work. Aid organizations need specialists in public health, nursing, medicine, engineering, logistics, nutrition, water and sanitation, agriculture, education, social work, and international relations. They also depend on practical abilities such as driving, repairing engines, managing budgets, and speaking languages. The book recommends building a useful skill first, gaining experience closer to home through volunteering or service programs, and then pursuing entry-level roles such as internships, assistant positions, or United Nations Volunteer placements. Professional positions are competitive and often require a degree, relevant experience, and safety training. Aid workers may study the Sphere Handbook, which sets minimum standards for humanitarian assistance, including a guideline of at least 15 liters of water per person per day. Employers range from United Nations agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to large and small nongovernmental organizations. Work settings vary just as widely: disaster zones, remote villages, refugee camps, flood areas, and even emergencies in wealthy countries. Local staff, protection officers, nutrition specialists, volunteers, and remote mapmakers all contribute to the response.

The Tools of the Trade

The book presents clean water as one of humanitarian aid's most essential tools. In crowded settlements, unsafe water and poor sanitation can cause deadly disease outbreaks, as illustrated by the cholera epidemic near Goma in 1994. Water, sanitation, and hygiene

work—often called WASH—includes drilling wells, laying pipes, setting up tanks and taps, building toilets, and promoting handwashing. Behind every delivery is a supply chain that moves goods from warehouses through ports, borders, trucks, and damaged roads. Skilled logisticians plan alternate routes because the conditions on the ground rarely match the map. Other tools meet specific needs. UNICEF's School-in-a-Box contains classroom materials for 40 students and a teacher, including a metal trunk whose painted lid can become a chalkboard. Cash and payment cards let families choose what they need while supporting local shops. Before distributing anything, teams conduct a needs assessment and listen to residents; otherwise, donations can become "SWEDOW"—stuff we don't want—such as winter coats sent to tropical Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami. Local knowledge is equally vital: community members can identify trusted leaders, vulnerable households, useful routes, and customs an outside worker might miss.

The Best, Hardest, and Most Surprising Parts of the Job

The most rewarding moments are often concrete: a clean-water system starts working, a malnourished child regains strength, or a family receives shelter and blankets. Aid workers also witness the generosity and resourcefulness of people affected by disaster, who frequently organize to help one another. The work offers variety, international teamwork, opportunities to learn languages and cultures, and the satisfaction of contributing to a global effort—even when the people helped never learn the worker's name. The hardest reality is that resources are never sufficient for everyone. Staff may have to decide which village a single truck can reach, and then live with the knowledge that others remain without help. Field conditions can mean long hours, rough weather, simple food, separation from family, danger, and emotional strain; burnout is a serious risk, so rest and recovery are part of doing the job responsibly. The book also challenges the outsider-as-hero image: local people are usually the first responders, and most professional aid workers are local staff. International workers should go only with an organization, a clear role, and the resources to contribute. Success means building local capacity so assistance can eventually leave.

A Day in the Life

A sample day in a relief operation shows how humanitarian work blends field visits, logistics, distribution, listening, and administration. The worker begins by checking messages and security updates, then visits water points with a local colleague to confirm that taps work, tanks are full, and water is safe. Conversations with families reveal small problems—such as a frequently broken tap—before they become larger ones. Back at the office, the worker checks registration lists and deliveries, adapting the plan when a truck runs late and a wandering goat eats part of a list. The afternoon distribution is organized with local staff and community volunteers, who lead much of the work while the aid worker helps solve problems and protect a fair, respectful process. Afterwards, the worker asks residents what went well and what remains difficult, then shares those observations at a coordination meeting with

other organizations. The day ends with notes and figures that help keep funding and supplies flowing, followed by a deliberate break. The example emphasizes that a plan is only a starting point, that community feedback shapes tomorrow's response, and that rest makes it possible to keep showing up.

The People You Work With — Teams and Human Impact

Aid work is collaborative. Local employees and community members bring essential knowledge and often carry out much of the response, while engineers, nurses, drivers, coordinators, and other specialists contribute their expertise. Community leaders can help build trust, and donors expect organizations to account honestly for how contributions are used. The people receiving assistance are not merely beneficiaries; they are experts on their own lives and should help shape the work. Unexpected contributors illustrate the variety of humanitarian teams. Clowns Without Borders brings laughter to children living through conflict and displacement, using physical comedy that crosses language barriers. In Cambodia, the landmine-detecting rat Magawa located 71 mines and 38 other unexploded devices, earning a bravery medal. Aid's impact is both immediate and human: a family may receive water, food, and shelter after fleeing with almost nothing, while respectful treatment helps restore a sense of dignity and connection. The book also points to refugee athletes, including the first Refugee Olympic Team, as reminders that people displaced by crisis continue to pursue ambitious lives.

Qualities, Skills, and Getting Ready

The most important qualities of an aid worker are a sense of shared humanity, practical problem-solving, humility, resilience, and steady courage. Compassion provides motivation, but it must be joined to the ability to manage real constraints and find workable solutions. Humility means recognizing that a newcomer may know the least about a place and being willing to change course when local people have better information. Resilience does not mean ignoring sorrow; it means accepting support, taking needed rest, and returning to the work without pretending to be fearless. The book highlights less obvious skills too. Mathematics and money management help teams calculate water requirements, toilets, budgets, and supply needs—for example, a camp of 50,000 people requires 750,000 liters of water each day at the 15-liter guideline. Languages show respect and help workers understand what people need; even imperfect attempts can build connection. Humor helps teams endure difficult weeks when it is shared kindly and directed at one's own mistakes. Young readers can prepare by learning about other countries, studying languages and useful subjects, volunteering locally, practicing organization and problem-solving, listening carefully, and developing healthy habits.

Humanitarians in History

Profiles of humanitarian leaders show how different lives can lead to service. Henri Dunant organized care for wounded soldiers of every side after the 1859 Battle of Solferino; his ideas helped inspire the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention. Sadako Ogata expanded protection for displaced people, including Kurdish families trapped inside Iraq, showing that human need can demand action beyond narrow rules. Salva Dut, who fled war as a child, later founded Water for South Sudan, which has drilled hundreds of wells in remote communities. Other examples demonstrate that humanitarian work can begin with modest means or challenge public indifference. Abdul Sattar Edhi built a major ambulance and social-service organization from a small clinic in Karachi. Eglantyne Jebb founded Save the Children and helped establish principles of children's rights, arguing that children's needs should cross enemy lines. Fridtjof Nansen organized the return of prisoners of war, supported famine relief, and created the Nansen passport for stateless refugees. Together, these stories show that humanitarian leadership can involve organizing, advocacy, practical services, or changing the rules that leave people unprotected.

Facts, Questions, and Finding Your Path

Short facts make the field's systems and creativity tangible. Food can be dropped by plane when roads are blocked; the red cross, red crescent, and red crystal emblems identify protected humanitarian services; and refugee camps can develop into cities with schools, shops, and public gathering places. Aid workers use specialized shorthand, treat severely malnourished children with ready-to-use peanut paste, and mark World Humanitarian Day each August 19. These details reinforce that emergency response depends on both inventive solutions and carefully organized systems. The book closes by asking readers to consider who needs help most, whether they have asked people what they need, and how to strengthen rather than diminish dignity and independence. It suggests related careers—including emergency management, refugee casework, logistics, diplomacy, public health, social work, translation, and journalism—for readers drawn to similar purposes. Further reading, websites, organizations, and activities such as mapathons and the 15-liter water challenge offer practical next steps. The author's final message is that a wider sense of responsibility begins close to home: listen first, keep learning, and let the circle of people you care about grow.

Notable Quotes

> *"“You are not on anyone's side. You are on the side of whoever needs help most.”"*

> *"“What do these people need today?”"*

> *"“What will help them not need me a year from now?”"*

> *"“Good aid workers are trying to work themselves out of a job.”"*

"“In humanitarian work, careful is heroic.”"

"“The supplies keep people alive. The dignity helps keep them whole.”"

"“I am human, and nothing human is foreign to me.”"

"“Listen first, and keep showing up.”"

Full Summary

An international aid worker, also called a humanitarian worker, helps people survive and recover from crises anywhere in the world. When an earthquake flattens a city, drought ruins crops, or war drives families from their homes, aid workers may bring clean water, food, shelter, and medicine. One might run a feeding center during a famine; another might pipe water into a refugee camp, deliver medicine to a village cut off by floods, or help keep a school open during war. The work begins with a belief that every human being matters, wherever they were born.

Humanitarian work can also take unexpected forms. A rat may sniff out landmines left behind after a war; a clown may help children laugh in a refugee camp; a teacher may turn the lid of a metal trunk into a chalkboard. These different jobs share a purpose: easing suffering while treating each person as fully human, with the same worth as anyone else. Organized international aid is relatively recent. More than 150 years ago, Swiss businessman Henri Dunant’s response to suffering on a battlefield helped inspire the Red Cross, and eventually the United Nations agencies and relief organizations that employ hundreds of thousands of people.

The work has two closely connected parts. Relief means meeting urgent needs quickly. When disaster strikes, people may need clean water, food, shelter, and basic medical care to survive the next few days. Getting the right supplies to the right people at the right time is called logistics, and it can be harder than it sounds. Imagine thousands of tents held at a border for a week because a form is missing a stamp, while families nearby sleep in the rain. Roads may be washed out and airports closed; without careful logistics, supplies cannot reach people who need them.

Development is the longer-term work of helping people recover and become more self-reliant, often continuing after news cameras have left. It can mean helping farmers obtain seeds and tools, getting children back into school, restoring water systems and health care, and helping people earn a living. Aid workers must consider both immediate needs and what will make outside assistance less necessary in the future.

When the right course is unclear, humanitarian organizations rely on four principles as a guide. Humanity means that anyone who is suffering deserves help, wherever they are. A

child in a distant village matters as much as a child nearby, and a wounded soldier as much as a wounded farmer. Impartiality means that the people in greatest need come first. If 200 families are waiting and there is enough rice for only 100, aid workers prioritize those in the most danger, such as babies and people who are very sick. Religion, race, politics, and personal connections do not determine who receives help.

Neutrality means not taking sides in a conflict. An aid worker may have strong feelings about a war, but openly supporting one army can destroy the trust needed to reach people on every side. Independence means making decisions according to need rather than allowing a government, army, or donor to dictate who receives assistance. If a government offers money or protection on the condition that food go only to its supporters, an independent aid group must refuse. At a checkpoint, when soldiers demand to know whose side a truck carrying food is on, the answer is that it is on the side of whoever needs help most. In dangerous places, that commitment can be what allows the gate to open.

These principles are joined by the promise to “do no harm.” Assistance given carelessly can make a crisis worse. Distributing free food in a way that undermines local farmers may damage people’s livelihoods; building something a community cannot maintain may leave them worse off when it breaks. Making decisions for people instead of with them can strip away their dignity and say in their own lives. Good intentions are not enough. Aid workers need to think carefully about the effects of their actions, listen before acting, and remain humble about what they do not know about a place and its people.

There is no single route into humanitarian work, and aid workers come from many backgrounds. Organizations often need people with specialized skills: public health, nursing, medicine, engineering, logistics, nutrition, water and sanitation, agriculture, education, social work, or international relations. Practical abilities matter too. Organizations need people who can drive heavy trucks, repair engines, manage money, or speak several languages. Rather than hiring general helpers, aid groups often look for specialists who can do something a crisis requires.

Many future aid workers build experience in stages. First, they develop a useful skill. Then they gain experience closer to home, perhaps by volunteering with a local Red Cross, helping after floods or fires, or spending a year or two in a service program such as AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps. Their first job with an aid organization may be an internship, an assistant role, or a position as a United Nations Volunteer. It may be in a difficult posting that more experienced staff are less likely to accept. New workers also train in first aid and personal safety, and study the Sphere Handbook, which sets out minimum standards for assistance in a crisis. Its guidance includes the standard that each person needs at least 15 liters of water a day.

Getting a first professional job can be difficult. International positions often require a college degree, sometimes a graduate degree, as well as relevant experience. Most professional aid workers are paid, though often less than they could earn using the same skills elsewhere, and jobs may last only as long as funding for a particular project. Employers range from major institutions to small independent organizations. They include United Nations agencies such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and thousands of non-governmental organizations, or NGOs. Doctors Without Borders sends doctors and nurses to run field hospitals and respond to diseases such as cholera, while smaller groups may focus on drilling wells in a single region.

Once an operation is underway, aid workers rely on tools that are practical rather than glamorous. Clean water is one of the most important. In crowded camps, illnesses spread by dirty water can become deadly. In 1994, cholera swept through camps near Goma, in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, killing tens of thousands of refugees in about a month. Aid workers respond by drilling wells, laying pipes, setting up water tanks and taps, building toilets, and teaching habits such as handwashing. The work is called WASH, short for water, sanitation, and hygiene. Some people spend whole careers thinking about toilets—and rightly take pride in it.

Another essential tool is the supply chain: the journey that takes supplies from a warehouse onto a plane or ship, through a port and across borders, onto a truck, down a damaged road, and finally to a family. Aid workers track thousands of items, plan routes around closed borders and washed-out bridges, and fix the many small problems that could delay a delivery. A good logistician has a backup plan, and often another one, because the route shown on a map may not be passable on the ground.

Some supplies are designed for a specific purpose. UNICEF’s School-in-a-Box is a waterproof metal trunk with materials for forty students and a teacher, including pencils, notebooks, chalk, a clock, a globe, and paint and a brush. The teacher can paint the lid and use it as a chalkboard, allowing classes to begin again even in a tent. Cash is another increasingly common tool. Rather than give every household the same sack of rice, aid organizations may provide money or a payment card, letting families choose what they need while supporting local shops. In one camp in Jordan, refugees have paid for groceries with an eye scan at the checkout.

Before distributing anything, workers conduct a needs assessment: they ask questions and listen to learn what people need, who is most at risk, and what the community can already do. Rushing in with whatever is available can be useless or harmful. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, warehouses in tropical Sri Lanka received winter coats and even stiletto heels. Aid workers call unusable well-meant donations SWEDOW, or “stuff we don’t want.” Money is often more helpful than donated goods because it costs nothing to ship and can be spent on

what is actually needed. Local knowledge matters just as much. A local driver may know which road turns to mud in the rain; a teacher may know which families are too proud to ask for help. Good workers hire local people, try to learn the language, and follow the community's lead.

The best parts of the job can be visible and immediate: watching clean water reach a camp, seeing a child regain strength, or helping a family get a tent and blankets before a cold night. At times, the difference is written plainly on someone's face—the knowledge that a person is alive because help arrived. New aid workers are also often struck by the courage and kindness they encounter. Neighbors share scarce food, parents comfort frightened children, and communities organize to care for one another. Workers may arrive expecting to help people they imagine are helpless, then leave humbled by the bravery and generosity they have witnessed.

The work also brings variety and adventure. An aid worker might help establish water systems on one continent, then support school rebuilding on another, working with colleagues from many backgrounds and learning unfamiliar foods, languages, and places. Beyond any particular posting, there is the satisfaction of belonging to a worldwide team that treats human suffering as everyone's concern. The people helped may never learn a worker's name, but the worker can know what the work made possible.

The hardest truth is that aid workers cannot help everyone. There is never enough food, shelter, money, time, or staff, and funding can rise or fall with the decisions of governments and donors. Programs close, jobs disappear, and workers must make painful choices about which village a truck can reach. They may work as hard as they can and still know that some people were left without help. Learning to do as much good as possible while accepting what could not be done is one of the job's heaviest lessons.

The work can also wear down the body and the heart. Postings may mean long stretches away from home, heat or cold, mud, long hours, simple meals, and little rest. Workers learn to sleep through generators and rain on tent roofs, and to make do with bucket showers. They miss birthdays and holidays; in some emergency postings, family members cannot come, so parents may spend months apart from their children. Repeated exposure to suffering can lead to burnout, a deep exhaustion that makes it hard to continue. Resting, leaning on friends, and going home to recover are part of staying useful. Aid workers also face physical danger: some are injured, kidnapped, or killed every year, and most of those harmed are local staff. Organizations train employees in safety and withdraw them when the risk becomes too great.

One surprise is that the first responders are usually not international workers at all. They are the people already there: neighbors, local nurses, teachers, and shopkeepers who begin rescuing and organizing long before an outside team arrives. Most professional aid workers are local staff. International workers join them to support the people leading the response.

That is why a kind-hearted person should not simply buy a ticket after a disaster and arrive alone. Without training, supplies, or a team to join, an unprepared volunteer may become another person the community must feed and shelter.

Another surprise is how ordinary much of the work looks. There are dramatic moments, but far more time goes to planning, spreadsheets, meetings, supply lists, budgets, and reports. New workers may expect rescues and instead find themselves managing a warehouse, tracking truck fuel, or counting buckets. Careful organization is part of saving lives. The deeper aim is capacity building: helping communities gain the skills and resources to keep things working after outside aid leaves. A successful aid worker is, in a sense, working toward the day the community no longer needs them.

A day in a relief operation might start at six in the morning, with breakfast, overnight messages, and security updates about which roads are safe. The plan includes checking water points, organizing a distribution, and attending a coordination meeting—but everyone knows the plan may change. At eight, a worker visits the taps with a local colleague, checking water quality and tank levels while speaking with families. A grandmother reports that a tap keeps breaking, and the worker notes it before the small problem grows.

Back at the office tent, the worker confirms that supplies have arrived and checks the distribution list. Then a goat wanders in and eats a corner of the list. A fresh copy is printed, the goat is ushered out, and the team learns that the delivery truck is late, so the afternoon’s plan must be adjusted. After lunch in the shade, the distribution begins with local staff and community volunteers doing most of the work. The aid worker helps keep it orderly and fair, paying particular attention to older people and families with young children. Afterwards, conversations with camp residents reveal further needs, including a concern about the school tent.

At the evening coordination meeting, organizations compare plans so that no supplies are duplicated and no one is overlooked. Another group’s water engineer agrees to fix the broken tap. Later come notes, figures, and reports that help keep supplies and funding moving. Then the worker stops for the day, shares a meal, calls home if possible, and rests. The need will still be there tomorrow.

Aid workers depend on one another. Local colleagues and community members are at the center of the team, joined by engineers, nurses, drivers, and coordinators. Trust also comes from community leaders—elders, teachers, religious figures, and local officials. Donors, from governments to families and businesses, provide the money and deserve an honest account of its use. Above all, the people receiving assistance are experts on their own lives.

Some teammates bring unexpected skills. Clowns Without Borders sends professional clowns to refugee camps and disaster zones. The organization began in 1993 after children in

Barcelona raised money to send Spanish clown Tortell Poltrona to refugee camps in Croatia; their pen pals had written, “We miss laughter.” More than four thousand children came to the first show. Physical comedy needs few words: a clown slipping on an invisible banana peel can cross language barriers.

And not every coworker is human. In Cambodia, a giant African pouched rat named Magawa detected seventy-one landmines and thirty-eight other unexploded bombs. Light enough not to set them off, he searched a tennis-court-sized area in twenty minutes—a task that could take a person with a metal detector up to four days. His reward was a treat of banana, avocado, or peanuts. In 2020 he became the first rat to receive a gold medal for bravery, and six years later a seven-foot statue of him was unveiled in Siem Reap.

The qualities that matter most are a sense of shared humanity, practical problem-solving, humility, resilience, and steady courage. Compassion may make you care, but it takes calm resourcefulness to find a way across a broken bridge or get clean water to a crowded camp. You must be willing to listen to people who know the place better than you do, and to change your plans when they have a better idea. Resilience does not mean never feeling sorrow or exhaustion; it means leaning on others, resting when necessary, and finding the strength to return. Courage is not fearlessness, but the steadiness to show up, make fair choices when not everyone can be helped, and speak up when something is wrong.

Some essential skills may seem less heroic than they are. Aid workers use math to calculate supplies, budgets, and transport. At a minimum of fifteen liters of water per person each day, a camp of fifty thousand people needs 750,000 liters daily. If a water truck holds 10,000 liters, that is seventy-five truckloads. A target of one toilet for every twenty people means 2,500 toilets for the camp. Language matters, too: trying even a few words shows respect, though a small mistake can change “I am so tired” in Spanish into “I am so married.” French, Arabic, and Spanish can open many doors. And humor helps teams endure hard weeks; being able to laugh at your own mistakes shows that you are still learning.

Humanitarian work has been shaped by people who saw suffering and refused to accept that it was someone else’s concern. In 1859, Swiss businessman Henri Dunant came upon the aftermath of a battle near Solferino, where tens of thousands of wounded soldiers had little care. He rallied villagers to help the wounded on every side. Wearing a white suit, he became known as “the man in white,” while the women working beside him repeated, “Tutti fratelli”—“All are brothers.” Dunant later proposed that countries train neutral volunteers to care for the wounded in wartime. His idea led to the Red Cross, founded in 1863, and the first Geneva Convention. Though he lost his money and was nearly forgotten, his story eventually reached the newspapers; in 1901, he shared the first Nobel Peace Prize.

Sadako Ogata became the first woman to lead the United Nations refugee agency at sixty-three. Soon after she took office in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Kurdish families fled

into freezing mountains between Iraq and Turkey, but Turkey closed its border. The agency's rules seemed to exclude people who had not crossed into another country. Ogata chose to send help into Iraq anyway, putting their protection ahead of the rulebook. She later led the agency through wars in the Balkans and Central Africa and helped change how the world responds to people displaced within their own country.

Salva Dut was eleven when war reached his village in southern Sudan in 1985. Separated from his family, he joined the boys later known as the Lost Boys of Sudan, walking hundreds of miles to find safety and spending about ten years in refugee camps. After a family in Rochester, New York, welcomed him in 1996, he eventually learned that his father was alive but ill from drinking dirty water. Salva founded Water for South Sudan in 2003. The organization has drilled more than 640 wells in remote villages, and one of its rigs is nicknamed the Iron Giraffe. With a well nearby, children who once spent hours fetching water can go to school.

Abdul Sattar Edhi arrived in Karachi in 1947 as a nineteen-year-old refugee from India with almost no money. He opened a free medical clinic in a tiny room, then began driving injured people to hospitals himself. By collecting donations on the sidewalks with a begging bowl, he built the Edhi Foundation, which grew to operate more than 1,800 ambulances, along with shelters, orphanages, and rescue boats. Its cradles gave parents who could not care for a baby a safe place to leave the child. Edhi lived simply, and Pakistan honored him with a state funeral when he died in 2016. His life showed that great humanitarian work need not take place abroad.

After the First World War, British activist Eglantyne Jebb was outraged that children in defeated countries were starving because a blockade kept food from reaching them. Arrested in Trafalgar Square for distributing photographs of hungry children, she was fined five pounds; the prosecutor, impressed by her, paid the fine. In 1919, she and her sister Dorothy Buxton founded Save the Children to help children across enemy lines. Jebb also wrote a short list of children's rights, including safety, food, and care. Adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, it eventually developed into the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. She wanted the organization to "work for its own extinction": the real victory would be a world where children no longer needed saving.

Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen turned his fame toward humanitarian work after the First World War, when millions had been uprooted. As the world's first official High Commissioner for Refugees, he organized the return of about 450,000 prisoners of war and helped lead famine relief. Many refugees had no country willing to claim them, so they lacked papers that would let them travel or work. Nansen created a document called the Nansen passport, giving hundreds of thousands a legal identity and a chance to rebuild their lives. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922.

Humanitarian work has its own unexpected details. When roads are blocked, the World Food Programme has dropped grain from planes, wrapping each sack in extra bags to keep it from bursting. The red cross and red crescent, and since 2005 the red crystal, mark protected humanitarian work. Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp has grown to include markets, schools, clinics, and barbershops; its busiest shopping street is nicknamed the Champs-Élysées. Aid workers also speak in a thicket of abbreviations: a WASH team might need NFIs for IDPs before the next sitrep—that is, water and sanitation staff need non-food items for internally displaced people before the next situation report. A peanut-based, ready-to-eat nutrition paste, inspired by Nutella and invented by French expert André Briend in 1996, has helped bring severely malnourished children back to health. Each August 19, World Humanitarian Day honors aid workers, including those who have died while helping others.

Preparation can begin long before a first job. Learn about other countries and the events shaping people’s lives; try Model United Nations, where you speak for another country. Start a language, volunteer at a food bank or shelter, and practice helping without pity. Take on projects that involve organizing, building, budgeting, or fixing things. Practice listening more than talking, care for your body and spirit, and keep learning health, science, math, geography, and writing. The questions to carry with you are simple but demanding: Who needs help most, and have I asked what they need? How can I protect dignity and help people grow stronger? How can I do the most good without causing harm?

If you are curious about the wider world, feel the troubles of distant people as real, and stay calm while solving practical problems, humanitarian work may suit you. Its close cousins include emergency management, refugee casework, logistics, diplomacy, public health, social work, translation, and journalism. The author describes the calling as a way of drawing the circles of care wider, until strangers begin to feel like neighbors. You can start without crossing an ocean: learn, listen, and help where you are. Somewhere, a truck is carrying tents, a well is filling its first jug, and an aid worker is asking a family what they need. Such work begins with someone doing the math, asking the questions, and listening to the answers. Keep your circle wide.

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