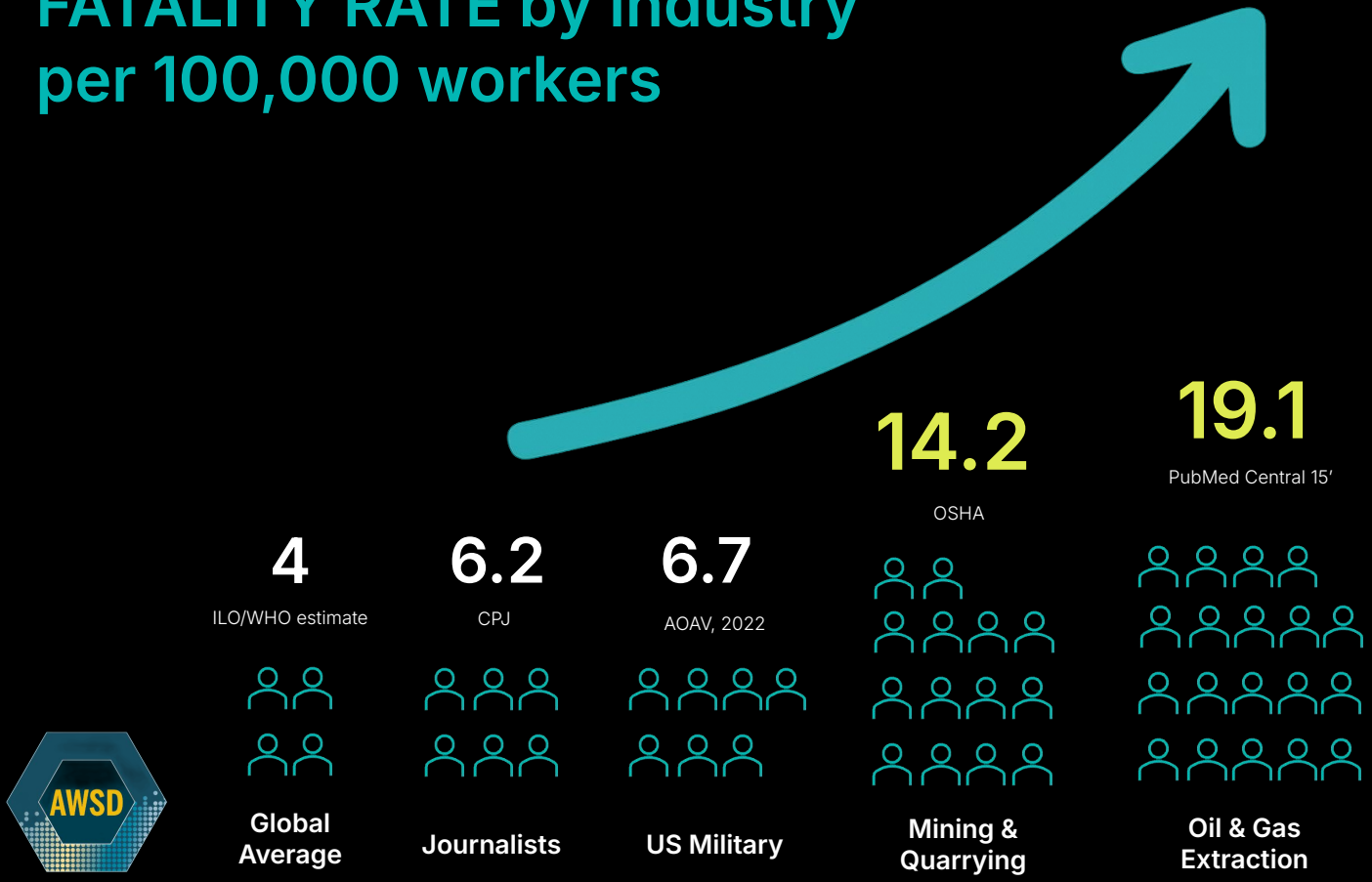
Organisational Risk Tolerance in the Humanitarian Sector

“Turning Principles into Practice: The Role of Risk Tolerance in Humanitarian Action.”

Setting the Context: Why Risk Tolerance Matters?

FATALITY RATE by industry per 100,000 workers



Based on ~ **383** killed in 2024 (for major incidents, Aid Worker Security Database) workforce ~630,000 (ALNAP) → ~61/100k

Defining Organisational Risk Tolerance

The balance between principles, people and purpose

Risk tolerance is the level of risk an organisation is willing to accept in pursuit of its objectives, after controls are in place.

- Risk tolerance sets the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable risk.
- It operationalises risk appetite through defined thresholds and indicators.
- It guides risk management decisions in complex humanitarian settings — helping agencies act decisively, ethically, and safely.

Translating Tolerance into Practice

From Strategy to Field Decisions

Tolerance starts as a leadership statement, but unless it's **operationalised** through policy, it stays abstract.

- **Strategy:** Defines the level of uncertainty the organisation will accept to achieve its mandate (Principles, Duty of Care).
- **Frameworks & Policies:** Frameworks like risk matrices, deployment thresholds, and criticality criteria codify this intent.
- **Embedding into Operational Systems:** Tolerance lives in SOPs, access protocol and security controls.
- **Individual Decision Making:** Should reflect organisational tolerance but allow for decentralised decision making.

CASE STUDY: Burkina Faso 2019/20

Translating Risk Tolerance into Practice

CONTEXT: An expanding Islamist insurgency, rising insecurity, and intense donor pressure to maintain countrywide programming.

CHALLENGE: How to create a shared, measurable understanding of risk tolerance across regions and leadership levels.

- Country leadership lacked a unified system to gauge when to continue, adapt, or withdraw operations.
- HQ and field teams held different perceptions of acceptable risk.
- Needed a repeatable, evidence-based framework linking risk to operational decisions.

Intervention: A structured risk logic connecting field-level assessments to leadership decisions.

- **Developed five risk domains:** *Social & Political, Crime & Security, Conflict, Terrorism & Kidnap, Access Constraints, Infrastructure.*
- Each domain included observable statements scored 1–5.
- Scores reviewed bi-monthly by Country Director, Security Advisor, and Regional Office.
- Aggregated scores produced a risk rating linked to operational directives:

RATING	THREAT LEVEL	SECURITY LEVEL
1 – 1.79	VERY LOW	NORMAL
1.8 – 2.59	LOW	PRECAUTIONARY
2.6 – 3.39	MODERATE	WARNING (RESTRICTED MOVEMENT)
3.4 – 4.19	HIGH	STAND-BY (PARTIAL EVACUATION/ HIBERNATION)
4.2 - 5	EXTREME	OFFICE CLOSURE & SUSPENSION OF ACTIVITIES

The Importance of Risk Assessment

Defining what's acceptable, and what's not

Risk tolerance defines how much **uncertainty** we're willing to live with, but the risk assessment process tells us **where we stand within that tolerance.**

- **Purpose:** Risk assessments are not about eliminating risk, they're about understanding what's acceptable, what's manageable, and what crosses the line
- **Linking Principles and Duty of Care:** Every risk assessment sits at the intersection of three forces, our principles, our people, and our performance.
- **Outcome:** Structured risk assessment turns abstract tolerance into daily operational logic.

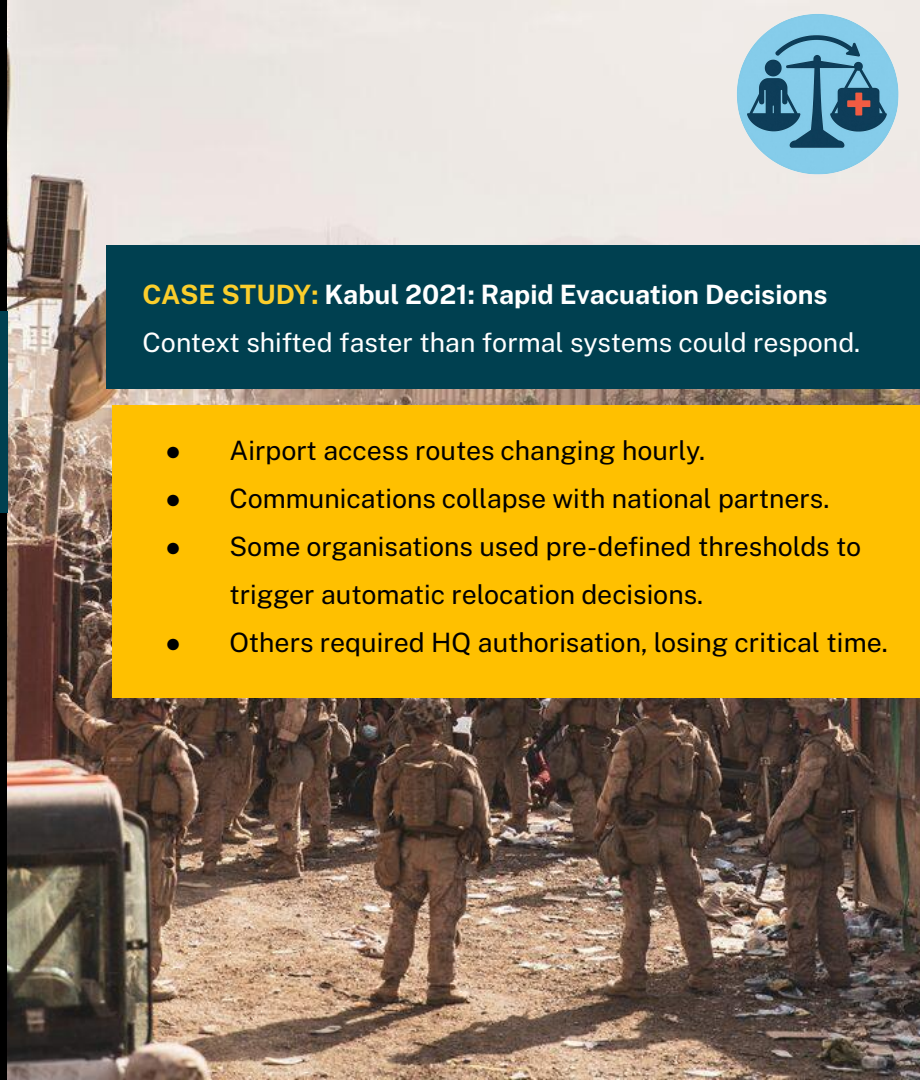
- Defines 'go/no-go' thresholds.
- Informs mitigation plans and escalation triggers.
- Ensures donor and leadership accountability by linking exposure to agreed tolerance.
- Creates a consistent baseline across all country programmes — reducing subjective interpretation.

Dynamic Risk Management

Adapting decisions as the context shifts beneath us

Dynamic risk assessment is the **continuous**, **decentralised** process of **adapting decisions** to **evolving threats** while staying within organisational risk tolerance and humanitarian purpose.

- **The Nature of Fluid Contents:** Field conditions can change in hours, not days (Northeast Nigeria).
- **Dynamic Decision Making:** Field teams must make rapid judgments that still align with organisational tolerance (Kabul).
- **The Role of Leadership and Comms:** Clarity from the centre empowers autonomy at the edge (Ebola).
- **Embedding Dynamic Practice:** Dynamic assessment is a behaviour, not a form.



CASE STUDY: Kabul 2021: Rapid Evacuation Decisions

Context shifted faster than formal systems could respond.

- Airport access routes changing hourly.
- Communications collapse with national partners.
- Some organisations used pre-defined thresholds to trigger automatic relocation decisions.
- Others required HQ authorisation, losing critical time.

Organisational Culture and Risk Appetite

How values and behaviour shape decisions under pressure

Risk tolerance is filtered through culture and how people perceive leadership priorities, not just what's written in a policy

- **Culture Shapes Risk Interpretation:** Culture defines how people interpret tolerance, whether they see it as permission to act safely or pressure to deliver at any cost.
- **Leaders set the emotional temperature for risk:** Leaders signal what the organisation truly values through their reactions to caution, escalation, and failure.
- **Staff must believe they can act within tolerance boundaries without career risk:** Psychological safety allows staff to make honest, risk-aligned decisions without fear of blame or reprisal.

EMPOWERED CULTURE	COMPLIANCE CULTURE
• Informed, shared decision making • Safe to speak up or pause • Balanced risk-taking modelled • Near misses are leaning • Tolerance understood collectively.	• Top-down decisions. • Fear of blame and/or reputational risk. • Delivery at all costs signalled. • Near misses are hidden. • Tolerance interpreted individually.

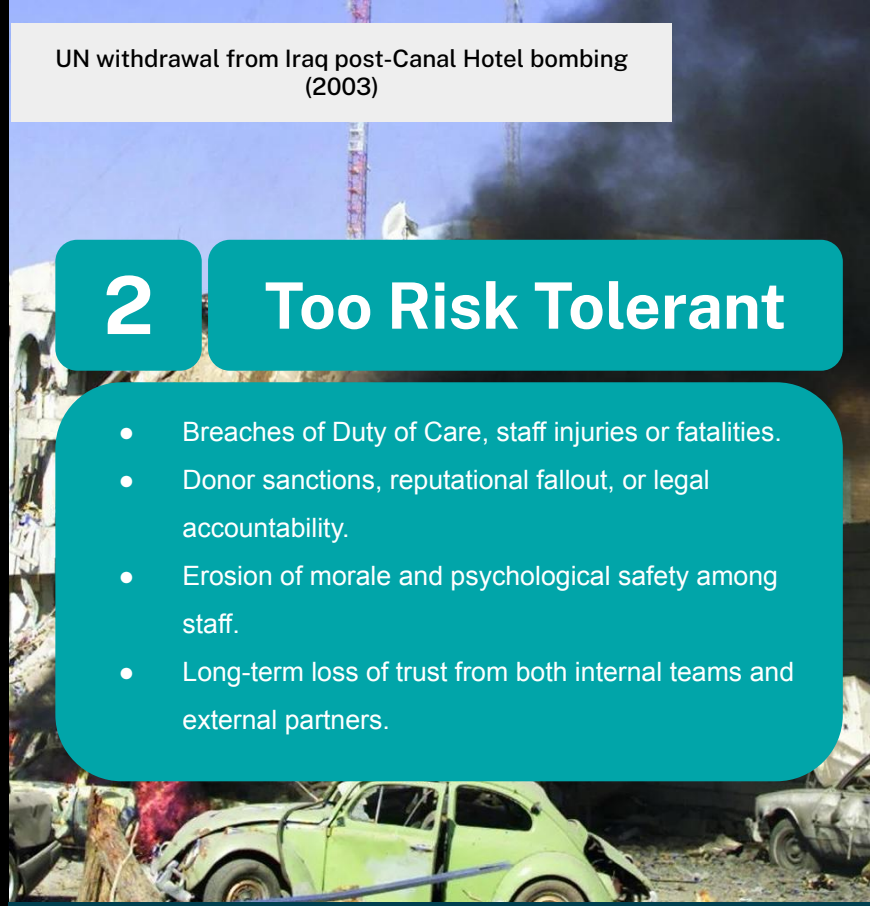
Consequences of Misaligned Risk Tolerance

When good intent collides with poor balance

When an organisation's risk tolerance and behaviour diverge, the consequences can directly impact access, safety, credibility, and mission integrity.

1 Too Risk Averse

- Loss of humanitarian access, populations left unreached.
- Compromised principles, especially Impartiality ("aid by need").
- Reputational damage for failure to deliver on mandate.
- Erosion of trust from donors and communities who perceive risk avoidance as inaction.



UN withdrawal from Iraq post-Canal Hotel bombing (2003)

2 Too Risk Tolerant

- Breaches of Duty of Care, staff injuries or fatalities.
- Donor sanctions, reputational fallout, or legal accountability.
- Erosion of morale and psychological safety among staff.
- Long-term loss of trust from both internal teams and external partners.

Balanced risk tolerance is achieved through deliberate governance, continuously reviewed, debated, and codified to ensure agility without chaos.

Emerging Challenges

The evolving frontiers of humanitarian risk

Humanitarian operations are confronting rising risks as long-standing protections erode, leaving aid workers exposed even in contexts once governed by clear humanitarian norms.

- **Legal protections are weakening,** with both governments and armed groups increasingly targeting aid workers.
- **Humanitarian space is shrinking,** limiting safe and impartial access to affected populations.
- **Disinformation, politicisation, and surveillance** are heightening risks and undermining community trust.
- **Neutrality and visibility no longer guarantee safety,** organisations must adapt their risk tolerance to this new reality.

A Changing Humanitarian Risk Landscape

Cyber Threats: ICRC (2022) cyber attack on data servers exposed sensitive beneficiary data.

Disinformation & Politicisation: Neutrality is eroding as aid becomes a tool — and target — in political and information battles.

Natural Hazards: The accelerating tempo and cascading nature of disasters. Mozambique's 2024–25 cyclones Chido, Dikeledi, and Jude.

Political & Legal: Sanctions risk posed to INGOs in Syria for interacting with de facto authorities.

Reputation and Psychological Risks: The increasing recognition of the need to ensure the wellbeing of employees in the industry.

The Rule of Three

Understanding Risk Tolerance in the Humanitarian Sector

1. **Purpose Defines the Limits:** Our principles tell us why we act, risk tolerance defines how far we can safely go to uphold them (operational and context specific).

2. **Governance Turns Intent into Practice:** Clear leadership, structure, and culture translate tolerance from written policy into real-world decisions.

3. **Adaptation Sustains Relevance:** Risk tolerance must evolve as threats shift, in today's politicised environment, neutrality alone no longer defines what is safe or acceptable.