LIFELINE
FOR EMBATTLED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

RISK ASSESSMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The following information is an excerpt from the Lifeline Toolkit for CSOs in Restrictive Space (www.csolifeline.org/advocacy-toolkit). This provides a brief overview of how civil society organizations can think about risk assessment in the context of engaging in advocacy campaigns.

Situational Awareness Approach to Risk Management

Threats can change or increase quickly. It is good to take, time to identify, understand, and adapt to different situations. For example, developing **socio-political awareness** might include identifying who with power might feel a negative impact from your work (e.g. if you publish an anti-corruption report). Think about what resources they have to target your organization (e.g. youth militia). Likewise, **geographic awareness** might mean planning a protest route with options for protestors to disperse quickly and quietly if the authorities respond with excessive force. More on this approach is available from **Front Line Defenders**.

Risk Assessment Questions for Organizations

- If decision-making is primarily done by one person, or a few people, what is the back-up system for decision-making if they are arrested?
- Have you developed a written security procedure and provided security training to your staff? Have you tested to see if staff members follow procedures?
- Do you have a procedure for recruiting staff and volunteers to make sure they are not agents of governments or hostile groups? Do you have policies for when employees leave the organization, including unhappy employees (e.g. changing passwords or locks)?
- Are there specific security procedures for your occasional volunteers or visitors to your organization's office?
- Have you considered specific steps to reduce risk for victims and witnesses when documenting human rights violations?
- Is there support to address stress and burnout for you and your staff?
- Does the organization have a specific procedure to follow if there is an arrest or physical attack?
- Do you have a list of national and international contacts (e.g. embassies, media contacts, community leaders, and others of influence) that can be alerted to act in response to attacks?
- Do you have contact information for organizations that provide emergency assistance to HRDs/ CSOs at risk, and do you know what information they require? (e.g. **Front Line Defenders, Lifeline, UAF**)

EXAMPLE OF HOW TO STRUCTURE A RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk: Arrest in the context of police search of home and confiscation of papers/phone/laptop

Probability of this happening: Medium to high

Impact if it happens: Medium to high for myself, my family, and my organization

Threat assessment: Police usually raid homes in the early hours of the morning, and other HRDs have been targeted in this way recently.

Vulnerabilities:

- There is no due process; there will not be a search warrant or right to have a lawyer present
- We deal with sensitive information in my organization
- My young children live at home

Preventive Action:

1. Discuss the risk with my spouse and tell them who to call if the police arrive and what to do afterwards.
2. Arrange for the children to sleep at their Aunt's at times of heightened risk.
3. Investigate possibility of CCTV in home to record events.
4. Learn about my rights in detention so I can request them authoritatively (even though they may not be granted).
5. Have a lawyer briefed in case I am allowed access to a lawyer.
6. Do not store sensitive work information at home.
7. Delete or encrypt sensitive information from computer and phone
8. Ensure all my personal affairs (e.g. taxes) are in order so that they cannot become a pretext for a political prosecution.

(Source Front Line Defenders)

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CHECKLIST OF PRACTICAL SECURITY STEPS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

This is a brief summary of some practical security steps for civil society organizations. For more detailed guidance, see resource links below.

Home

- Assess where you think there are vulnerabilities in your home, and then explore ways to reduce risk. Remember, there are many low-cost or no-cost steps that you could take (setting an emergency procedure for family members, online self-learning, establishing community protection, ensuring consistent use of existing security hardware, such as locking doors and windows).
- If opting to install new security hardware, consider security measures that would not attract extra attention in your community, since that might increase your risk.
- Have a separate entrance and emergency exit if possible.
- Avoid taking work home if the content is sensitive.
- Ensure that you carefully follow other laws and regulations such as tax laws, traffic laws, and drug laws so you do not attract unwanted attention.
- Invest time and effort in developing good relations with your neighbors who could alert you to anything suspicious in the neighborhood.

Office

- Have a data protection plan and don't keep unnecessary data on-file.
- Use secure communication platforms like Signal and encrypted email whenever possible.
- Ensure that no staff member is working in the office alone; two or more is always safer.
- If concerned about an office break-in, first explore solutions that don't require a big financial investment. CCTV and security cameras can be useful to capture evidence and to dissuade intruders, but can have some downsides. Security cameras may give a false sense of security, could be easily hacked, and might require ongoing funds to maintain.
- Consider secure routes to and from work and secure locations for meetings.
- Develop a safe transportation plan so at-risk staff can use the safest options. This might require changing timing or location of meetings; changing the mode of transportation; and if necessary, providing funds to use private cars that would be undetected.
- Share sensitive information with as few people as possible, even among trusted staff.

Travel

- Consider having a code word to signify sudden danger and plan for daily check-ins with a trusted colleague.
- Avoid following the same routine that can be used by anyone surveilling you
- Consider safety when choosing meeting location, including number of exits and whether a more public venue makes you more or less safe.
- Keep passport/travel documents up-to-date (including visas), make copies of all documents, and place copies with a trusted colleague.

Detention/arrest/abduction

- Memorize your lawyer's phone number; do not answer any questions without presence of lawyer.
- Know your rights and request them firmly.
- Carry any necessary medication with you at all times.
- Share a list of emergency assistance programs with trusted colleagues in advance.

Demonstrations

- Consider organizing the demonstrators in groups of four – everyone should look out for each other.
- Consider enclosing your demonstrations in a human chain.
- Do not have all your key staff at a demonstration.
- Consider working with those that can act as 'accompaniers' (e.g. respected religious leaders, embassies staff from countries considered impartial).

Front Line Defenders Workbook on Security https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/workbook-security-practical-steps-human-rights-defenders-risk

Protection Handbook https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/protection-handbook-human-rights-defenders

Digital Security https://securityinabox.org/en/

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