



Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support: A Study of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia

Summary of Findings

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Introduction

In this paper, we present key results from a research project examining how human rights defenders navigate risk, manage their personal security, and receive protection support in Colombia.² Between July 2015 and March 2016 we interviewed defenders who have experienced risk or threat in the past five years, both individually and in focus groups, and asked them to complete a survey.³ We adopted the definition of a ‘human rights defender’ as set out in the Declaration of Human Rights Defenders⁴, that is, anyone who promotes and strives for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

¹ This paper was translated by Martha Isabel Sanabria Rodriguez, Reference: Nah, AM; Cousins, P; Schmitz, E; Bartley, P; and Maliamauv, K (2017) Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support: A Study of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia, Summary of Findings, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York. This paper was presented at the **Workshop on the Analysis of the Findings of the Research Project in Colombia** organized by the University of York and Fellowship of Reconciliation Peace Presence (FORPP), Colombia in Bogotá on 7 July 2017. Available at <http://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.

² This research was also conducted in four other countries – Mexico, Indonesia, Egypt, and Kenya – using the same research protocol. For more information on this project, see: <http://securityofdefendersproject.org/>

³ A small number of participants did not complete the survey.

⁴ Formally known as the *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, accessible at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>.

This paper highlights some of the key findings that emerged in this study, including: the type and impact of threats and attacks experienced; perceptions and experiences of state protection measures; the protection of collectives, communities and ways of life; the protection of families; the security management practices that participants adopt; experiences of security training; the level of support for human rights work that participants receive; common barriers to security management; reflections on wellbeing; and perceptions of ‘human rights defenders’ in Colombia.

The Participants in this Study

There were 89 participants from Colombia in this study (out of a total number of 407 from five countries), comprising 45 men, 41 women and three transgender persons. They were from a wide range of backgrounds and engaged in a broad range of human rights activities in Apartadó, Baranoa, Barranquilla, Barrancabermeja, Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Buenaventura, Cali, Guamoco, Huila, Ibagué, Istmina, Ituango, Popayán, Putumayo, Quibdó, San Onofre, Sincelejo, South Bolívar, and Soacha working on issues such as civil and political rights, freedom of expression, enforced disappearances, the rights of political prisoners, indigenous peoples’ rights, land rights, environmental rights, the right to health, the right to education, women’s rights, rights of LGBTIQ* persons, workers’ rights, rights of *campesinos* and rights of displaced persons.

The participants were between 20-74 years old, with a mean age of 46.7 years. 60.8% of participants were married or living with a partner, 6.3% were in a relationship, and 32.9% were single. 77.2% had children. 43.0% live and work in both urban and rural areas, 32.9% live and work in urban areas, while 22.8% live and work in rural areas. 32.1% of participants were employed, 26.9% were self-employed, and 41.0% were unemployed.

73.4% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as an employee or volunteer in a formal/registered organisation; 29.1% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as a member of an informal/ unregistered group, community or network; and 6.3% described themselves as conducting their human rights work alone.⁵

The participants described themselves as having conducted human rights work between 1 and 35 years, with an average of around 12 years. Most (77.9%) described themselves as leading others in human rights work most of the time (rather than following others most of the time).

Types of threats and attacks experienced

The most frequently mentioned were threats (including death threats) to themselves and to their family members, and other forms of harassment. Some experienced multiple attempts

⁵ Participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

of attack or kidnap, sometimes by armed men. In some cases, their colleagues and children were murdered, raped or injured. Defenders also described: being followed and having their communications monitored and intercepted; attacks on their homes; gendered attacks (further described below); physical attacks (including rape); investigation and criminalization; arrest and detention; infiltration by the government; and stigmatisation.

Types of perpetrators

Over half of the defenders interviewed cited State actors (in particular, the police, military, elected officials, and intelligence agencies) as the primary source of threat and violence against them. While over half also cited paramilitaries as another source of threat, many defenders emphasized that there were clear lines of activity and permissiveness between State actors and paramilitaries. A lawyer and researcher, said:

Initially [those responsible were from] the intelligence and security services of the State. And more recently, even though threats supposedly come from the Águilas Negras [paramilitary successor organisations], they are backed up by state intelligence. They wouldn't be capable of doing anything themselves.⁶

Defenders working on environmental rights and the right to land, and against mining activities identified corporate actors as key sources of attacks against them. They also noted the involvement of State actors and paramilitaries working with companies. An environmental defender working on the rights of people affected by major dam projects stated:

Behind these [attacks] are large-scale interests... I also feel that there are three sources of threats or attacks: the military or police – most of the violence comes from them, including a case of torture. There are battalions contracted by [the *Empresas Públicas de Medellín*, Medellín Public Services]. Secondly, there are attacks by known paramilitaries, and thirdly, the project's own private security. The ones most difficult to figure out are the paramilitaries, because we don't know who pays them or who they work for, but otherwise it's very clear, they have specific contracts with the business, and they are attacking us. In any case the discourse is always the same, even with the paramilitaries.⁷

The impact of threats and attacks experienced

86.5% of participants who answered the survey said that they were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about their physical security.⁸ 84.2% of participants were 'concerned' or 'very

⁶ Participant working on human rights research in Baranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-A-M-013

⁷ Participant working on environmental rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-A-F-027

⁸ Participants were given the following options: 'I don't know', 'Not concerned at all', 'Not too concerned', 'somewhat concerned' and 'very concerned'.

concerned' about their digital security. 81.3% were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Speaking about the impact of threats, a woman defender from Bogotá said:

A hit man once told me, a good scare is better than a dead person. It's better to really scare the person, or put them in jail, or lower their self-esteem than kill them, because killing them would call a lot of international pressure. This was told to me by a person that had killed more than 3,000 people.⁹

A woman defender working on State violence and the rights of political prisoners expressed the increase used of surveillance and its impact:

In 2000, threats began to change. We can't say that they decreased. They were different. Assassinations decreased but illegal actions through military intelligence increased. There was an increase in interceptions in communication devices, of wire-tapping cell phones, of constructing psychological persecution, etc. During this time, we began to experience more cases of being followed. It is a very terrible feeling when you know you are being followed in the street; if they are following you to assassinate you, to disappear you, to threaten you, etc. These kinds of actions have very big psychological impacts; it's another way of threatening someone.¹⁰

Gender and violence

A woman defender spoke about the changing shape of violence as she moved from working on women's rights to environmental rights. As an environmental rights defender, the threats were explicitly to "eliminate us from the face of the earth.... they are determined to finish off the existence of any opposition to megaprojects".¹¹ While working on women's rights however, the threats she faced were not to "destroy us, to put an end to our existence, it was more about putting us off our struggle". She explained:

We experienced verbal aggression when we denounced violence against our partners – we were shouted at or insulted, because they considered that our [women's] bodies belonged to them. We denounced how women fell pregnant when the military were in a given area, and then didn't take responsibility for their children. But the military would accuse us of going looking for people to sleep with. So there were a whole series of making reports with the police which were painful for us, as women who are owners of our bodies.

⁹ Participant working on the rights of victims in Bogotá. Interviewed in July 2015. [COL-B-F-001]

¹⁰ Participant working on State violence and rights of political prisoners in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-B-F-029.

¹¹ Participant working on environmental rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-A-F-027.

A woman defender spoke about the brutal sexual violence she experienced and the impunity that followed:

I was beaten and raped. They did to me what you don't do to any human. But I trust that there is a God; I am God's daughter. They let me go at about 4am or 5am in the morning; I looked like a piece of meat. They told me not to leave my village. I was naked and without footwear on an unpaved road. Someone picked me up along the way and gave me a shirt. He dropped me off at a petrol station and I carried on home from there. I was terrified, I didn't know what to say. What could I say? The police were part of the paramilitary structure. And nothing has ever happened as a result.... Time went by and I lived my life as normally as possible. You feel ashamed, but you don't want to give in.¹²

Gendered slurs and the threat of sexual violence is used against women defenders and the daughters of defenders.

Trans and LGBTIQ* defenders also faced additional discrimination because of their gender identity and sexual orientation. One male defender working on rights of LGBTIQ* persons said,

Amongst the LGBT population, we are used to our rights being undermined; and when their rights are taken up and defended, they feel yet more vulnerable. I had pamphlets under my door telling me to leave, saying that we were damaging their image, attacking their rights. It is necessary for society to re-imagine what it means to be gay or lesbian...The threat said that we do not want gay people spoiling our town, change or get out of town, you're affecting the good image of our town.¹³

The institutionalized discrimination of LGBTIQ* persons and the complicity to violence by the State and by the larger community also results in very few avenues to redress, as expressed by a transwoman defender here:

Once I asked a police officer to respect me and respect my way of being. He told me to be quiet if I "didn't want to wake up with my mouth full of flies" [*la boca llena de moscas*]... I realized that my reports to the police weren't helping to solve the problem. They were just passing along what I had written to another office, but no one wanted to do anything. The authorities that have the capacity to do something don't want to help the LGBTI community, and in particular, transwomen. We aren't

¹² Participant working on the rights of *campesinos* and land rights in Sincelejo. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-A-F-019

¹³ Participant working on the human rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Baranoa. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-A-M-014

given the importance that we deserve. We are a group of people that, historically, have been discriminated against, excluded and criticized.¹⁴

Perceptions and Experiences of State Protection Measures

Experiences of UNP Measures

The National Protection Unit (*Unidad Nacional de Protección*, UNP) has a mandate to focus on the protection of human rights defenders. However, protection by the UNP has been flawed, including a lack of funding, resources, organisation, accessibility and practical protective measures. Defenders are also suspicious of its original ties to corrupt State entities and a rampant intelligence scandal. Costs run around €80.6 million a year, 70% of which goes to private security companies (2,430 bodyguards have been contracted from these companies), and reports show the UNP has a deficit of €28 million (COP 70 billion).¹⁵

In addition to various logistical problems, many UNP recipients expressed that the methods and mechanisms provided for their security were often inadequate, unsuitable, and intrusive. The UNP provides defenders with bodyguards, armoured cars, cell phones, and bullet-proof vests – measures that are often incompatible with the way that defenders live their lives. In some cases, recipients were given bullet-proof vests which did not fit correctly; in others, they received cell phones which did not function correctly or they were not supplied with adequate means to make phone calls. A defender observed, “The travel subsidy was supposed to last for six months, but I only got the money for two months.”¹⁶ Another said, “What use is an armoured car to a *campesino*?”¹⁷ These measures also do not protect family members or friends who share the same risks.

While material mechanisms, such as an armoured car, serve a limited function, the presence of a bodyguard can leave defenders without personal space and, ironically, with increased insecurity:

A car doesn't guarantee the kind of safety that I need. And a bodyguard isn't with you all of the time – he doesn't work on weekends for instance – and when my bodyguard isn't on duty, I can't leave my house. And when the bodyguard is there, I have no privacy. I want to be free! This isn't living!¹⁸

Some defenders accepted State protection measures reluctantly:

¹⁴ Participant working on the human rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-B-TF-035.

¹⁵ See: Protection International (2017) Colombia, <http://focus.protectionline.org/countries/colombia/>, accessed 3 July 2017.

¹⁶ Participant working on civil and political rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in December 2015 A-F-040

¹⁷ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Sincelejo. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-024

¹⁸ Participant working on the rights of victims and on land rights in Barrancabermeja. Interviewed in October 2015. COL-B-F-025-FG4

I don't want anything from the State, I don't trust them and I don't recognise their obligation. But the Inter-American Commission said that I had to accept the measures. I would prefer to run the risk... You should be able to freely reject an offer, but then the State will say that it offered you support and fulfilled its responsibility.¹⁹

Defenders expressed cynicism towards the State and how it discharges its protection duties. A lawyer in receipt of official protection, but cognisant of the role of government entities in human rights violations said, "It's like having a vampire in charge of the blood bank."²⁰

In some cases, defenders refuse State protection measures: "You really have to take responsibility. Not everything is down to the State. We have to implement certain things ourselves, for example reading and practising all the advice."²¹ At times, moral considerations come into play: "there are people who, for ethical reasons for example, can't accept certain measures, such as armed protection."²²

It was clear from a number of interviews that state authorities conceptualised security too narrowly. A woman defender in Cauca put it thus:

Seguridad refers to all the conditions necessary to make human and political life flourish. These are conditions of dignity. But security [...] is reduced to a military or police perspective. [...] People have been sold the idea that the more troops, the more security. More bodyguards, more bullet-proof vests, and more armoured cars. The overall perspective is missing.²³

The significance of prevention, investigation and countering impunity

Local and national governmental institutions designed to offer assistance, investigate crimes and prosecute perpetrators remain ineffective. Defenders who have approached State institutions for redress encountered inefficient, bureaucratic responses: "The *Fiscalía* [Office of the Attorney General] and the Interior Ministry offer no reason for hope. They are inept, indifferent and cold institutions."²⁴ As a transwoman defender said,

¹⁹ Participant working on the rights of forcibly disappeared and the right to truth and memory in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-026

²⁰ Participant working on the rights of political prisoners in Bogotá. Interviewed in July 2015. A-M-002

²¹ Participant working on the human rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Baranoa. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-014

²² Participant working on human rights research in Baranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-013

²³ Participant working on the rights of *campesinos* and land rights in Popayan. Interviewed in December 2015. A-F-033-FG5

²⁴ Participant working on State violence and the rights of victims in Bogotá. Interviewed in March 2016. F-028-FG4

We have registered more than 150 reportings of police abuse in the ten years that we've been working. These cases are individually documented and have been all been reported to the authorities, including information like time and place, and details about the incident. Of these reportings, there has not been one disciplinary sanction towards the police. The response to our complaints and to the reporting by transwomen, is – if you hit a gay person, if you torture a gay person or even kill her – nothing will happen. And the police have even said that to us: “Go ahead, report us! Nothing will happen!”²⁵

The lack of investigations have led to reduced confidence and fewer incidences of reporting. A defender observed,

If people see that crimes are not investigated when reported by someone with a high-profile, they ask themselves why they should bother potentially running the risk of something happening to them if they report what happens to them.²⁶

Indeed, across our interviews, opinions were split as to whether defenders should or would report threats or attacks to state authorities.

A woman defender in the North expressed: “[Protection is] not just something physical; you use investigative and judicial mechanisms, and protective and preventive policies.”²⁷ She emphasised, “If there is impunity, nothing will ever change.”

The importance of recognising the work of human rights defenders

While they were critical of state protection measures, defenders emphasised the importance of state recognition of their work and state involvement in their protection. A woman defender, when asked what could increase her security, replied:

The international community can help, but the local authorities are more important. It's more important that they recognize your work and what you are doing. If they can recognize what you do as something valid – this provides many opportunities for security measures.²⁸

As another defender stated, “The police and high-level army officials need to recognise the legitimacy of the work we do.”²⁹

²⁵ Participant working on the human rights of trans* persons in Cali. Interviewed in December 2015. COL-B-TF-036

²⁶ Participant working on the human rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Baranoa. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-014

²⁷ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Sincelejo. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-024

²⁸ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Barrancabermeja. Interviewed in November 2015. COL-B-F-031

²⁹ Participant working on the rights of political prisoners in Bogotá. Interviewed in July 2015. A-M-002

While the UNP is fraught with problems, delivers inadequate measures and does not respond to the root causes that generate risks for defenders, it does however offer institutional legitimisation to the defenders it supports.

Protecting Collectives and Communities

We interviewed a number of defenders in *campesino* communities and of indigenous or Afro-Colombian ancestry. The threats they faced coincided with those of other defenders – they were vulnerable to armed groups and attempts had been made to obstruct their activities. Nonetheless, we found that there was a difference in their responses – security and protection were understood not just in terms of the impact on individuals alone, but in terms of how they impacted the whole community.

At the heart of this paradigm is land and territory. Under Colombia's 1991 Constitution, for example, indigenous communities are granted the right to exercise sovereignty over territories recognised as their own. Law 70 of 1993 provides a similar, though not as expansive, framework for the Afro-Colombian population. Underpinning the exercise of indigenous sovereignty is an entire cosmovision:

We all defend the indigenous jurisdiction, in search of harmony and balance, in the hands of our elders. This is in danger, because the ordinary branches [of the Colombian State] do not want to recognise this. This is not something written down, but oral traditions are valid for us, and laws are divinely ordained by Mother Nature and our gods (which are the sun, the moon, water). If someone commits an offence against our customs, we judge it according to our customs.³⁰

The *campesino* vocation also relies heavily on an attachment to land:

We have been able to prolong our stay on our land in the face of more than 18 years of State terrorism. We [...] insist on the right to our land, we publish online acts of violence and human rights' violations that occur, we continue to farm the land and we are recovering our self-sufficiency, including exporting cocoa and bananas.³¹

The indigenous guard is a visible manifestation of indigenous sovereignty, one held to be recognisable, trusted and respected, both on and beyond indigenous reserves. The guards offer protection to territories as a whole, and to governors in particular. As individuals, they are unarmed beyond bearing sticks symbolising their authority. Their authority derives from the respect they receive from their communities rather than their use of force. As a defender stated: "For the indigenous guard to try to take on people armed with guns, with

³⁰ Participant working on the rights of indigenous peoples in Popayan. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-031

³¹ Participant working on land rights and the rights of displaced persons in San José de Apartadó. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-025

only their sticks, that's not going to end well..."³² Nonetheless, they form part of the 'executive' agency which governors exercise on their territory.

Some of the Afro-Colombian community we interviewed were developing their own equivalent, the *guardia cimarrona*. However, this concept was at an early stage of development and, from what we observe, does not seem to enjoy the same legitimacy in the eyes of the Colombian State.

We found that meaningful, comprehensive protection went beyond defence of the territory, and was conceived of in terms of communal responses to "our health, our education, our productivity."³³ 'Western' medicine and psychosocial approaches did not hold the same weight as traditional knowledge. Similarly, the typical State-provided security measures (bodyguards, armoured cars, bullet-proof vests did not resonate with their traditions.

Those interviewed also emphasised the importance of commitment to communal processes, practices and ideals from within. For communities that came together because of a shared purpose (such as for defending their rights or their territories), coherence and close bonds are common. In the face of imminent threat from armed groups, however, their continuation depends on their ability to stay organised: "Another thing that makes me feel insecure is the lack of awareness within our communities as to what constitutes communal rights. When this knowledge is lacking, it increases the danger."³⁴

Protecting Families

Everywhere we went, defenders expressed that attacks on family members were amongst the most harmful and feared. These threats carry deep, personal and psychological impact, affecting entire family units and households. While many defenders expressed the willingness to assume the risks their work implied, they did not expect this of their families.

Some felt there was a special impact on young children, not yet old enough to understand the complexities of human rights work:

How am I supposed to explain to him that they are body guards, and that they are armed? I have had to explain to the body guards that they cannot let my son see that they have guns. But it's getting harder as he gets older. I have tried to maintain a certain distance between my son and the body guards. But he is starting to ask things that are very hard for me to explain. I think this could also generate issues in

³² Participant working on the rights of indigenous peoples in Quibdó. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-006

³³ Participant working on the rights of indigenous peoples in Quibdó. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-006

³⁴ Participant working on the collective rights of the Afro-Colombia community in in Quibdó. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-005

the future for him as well. I think it could generate things that might be impossible to undo for him.³⁵

While UNP protection measures affect privacy and home life, many defenders also observed that they don't protect family members. A beneficiary of UNP measures commented that her bodyguards only ever accompanied her, despite the measures being extended to cover her family.

[My family] is the most important thing for me. There are many protection programmes, but they don't take into account the family component. I once had the opportunity to leave for Europe, but it only covered me. The threat is difficult enough, but it becomes harder if the family is not taken into account. To avoid the family being unprotected at home and worried themselves, I think these programmes could take better account of the family component.³⁶

As children and the family are often placed at the heart of aggressions and threats, it is important to take families and family unity into account in the design and implementation of protection mechanisms.

Security Management Practices

The defenders in this study described taking on a wide range of self-protection measures, such as: avoiding habits and routines; steering clear of public leisure activities (such as attending theatres, cinemas and clubs); relocating themselves and/or family members (either within Colombia or abroad); and reducing their visibility. They often also campaigned to highlight insecurities in their work and developed and used security protocols. Table 1 indicates the frequency in which defenders in this study engage in some commonly adopted security management practices.

³⁵ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Barrancabermeja. Interviewed in November 2015. B-F-031

³⁶ Participant working on human rights research in Baranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-013

Table 1: The Frequency of a Selection of Security Management Practices

Security Management Practice	Percent who practice this 'often', 'almost always' or 'always'
Assess the risks involved in their human rights work	55.4% ³⁷
Proactively manage the risks involved in their human rights work	58.1% ³⁸
Follow a personalised 'security plan' (a plan of what to do in response to specific threats)	42.7% ³⁹
When doing sensitive work, making sure that someone else knows where they are going and what they are doing	77.4% ⁴⁰
Before doing sensitive work, making contingency plans in case things go wrong	52.7% ⁴¹

However, defenders also noted the pressure of sticking to self-imposed routines:

It's complicated to submit yourself to these types of measures; it's difficult not being able to go out and eat, to play football, etc. Sooner or later you get a 'flexibilisation' of rigid routines of self-protection. It has serious effects on family life, people naturally become more flexible.... When my daughter was born, it was a very difficult time. I was more threatened then than I am now, and I had to deal with there being a new-born in the family. It was really very hard; I couldn't enjoy anything. I have a problem with my daughter being around my armed bodyguards. I feel a lot of guilt because of the weight on my family situation.⁴²

Risk assessment and security planning were important methods they adopted. A defender said,

We are being clear about the importance for our movement of dedicating time and spaces as a means of protection in its own right, because the struggle is so difficult

³⁷ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 59.7%, Kenya 71.1%, Indonesia 62.2%, Egypt 51.3% (Average 59.9%).

³⁸ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 67.1%, Kenya 66.7%, Indonesia 64.6%, Egypt 39.5% (Average 59.2%).

³⁹ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 58.0%, Kenya 64.0%, Indonesia 60.1%, Egypt 34.6% (Average 49.9%).

⁴⁰ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 90.4%, Kenya 80.3%, Indonesia 64.2%, Egypt 71.8% (Average 76.8%).

⁴¹ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 63.0%, Kenya 70.3%, Indonesia 50.6%, Egypt 53.9% (Average 58.1%).

⁴² Participant working on the rights of political prisoners in Bogotá. Interviewed in July 2015. A-M-002

and we are permanently anxious. So we run workshops to identify all the risks, vulnerabilities and possibilities that we have.⁴³

However, some defenders tend not to adopt security measures. A defender offered her interpretation as to why:

Because they have failed to understand that you can't defend others or a cause without firstly taking care of yourself. They have lost the basic survival instinct – running, seeking shelter. It could be martyrdom or egocentricity. [...] It's a question of them wanting their name to live on, not their cause. If you want to make a difference, you defend a cause, not your name.⁴⁴

For some, the violence is so pervasive, that 'protection' seems impossible. A transwoman defender who faces multiple layers of violence not just because of her work but because of her identity, there is a sense of impossibility around protection:

What can one do to prevent something from happening? Tell me, what can one do? The only thing that one can do is to be very careful, know how and where to walk around, and be very aware of their surroundings. But what can one do to prevent something when they don't know where the threat might come from, or when, or how it might arrive? Meanwhile when one is busy doing their work, the other is busy planning how to attack them. I am not really concerned with prevention. I try to be very alert, but more than anything, I continue living my life... (You can't stop living) Right, you have to go out, have fun, do things. Be in a relationship. Have all of this, including all of the problems that it includes.⁴⁵

Networks of Support, International Accompaniment

Networks of human rights defenders (both local and international) were integral to the security strategies of the defenders interviewed. Most defenders in this study received support from others in the human rights movement within and outside of Colombia. As mentioned above, collectives and communities also organized their own protection, such as through the 'indigenous guard'.

A common strategy consisted of receiving international protective accompaniment, which was widely appreciated:

I understand they [international accompaniers] can't be with us all the time. But if they could be, I would renounce my State protection measures. Firstly, because of their independence from the State. Secondly, I don't like being accompanied by

⁴³ Participant working on environmental rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-027

⁴⁴ Participant working on environmental rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-027

⁴⁵ Participant working on the human rights of LGBTQ* persons in Quibdó. Interviewed in September 2015 B-F-004

armed men. I would like my privacy, but as a woman, there are questions of intimacy. [...] The international accompaniers are often women too. It's a more human accompaniment, they know the context and they can make representations which makes things safer for us. Even a high-ranking soldier once said to me that international accompaniment is the best 'protective jacket' that I could have.⁴⁶

International accompaniment is premised on a willingness to maintain a high public profile. However, one beneficiary pointed out that "It's not the same accompanying a lawyer or a trade unionist, as it is to accompany a victim. They did not recognise that, despite keeping a lower profile, we victims are just as deserving of accompaniment."⁴⁷

Many also sought assistance from state authorities but often did not receive the help they wanted or expected.

Security Training

67.9% of defenders in this study stated that they had received training on security management. Men received slightly more training than women. 70% of men received an average of 4.6 trainings while 66.7% of women had received an average of 2.63 trainings. The average number of trainings received was 3.6 per person.

Recommendations for future security training included:

- Deeper, longer security trainings, provided more frequently to defenders as well as their communities
- Better follow-up, communication and support after training, and with evaluation of the adoption and usefulness of security management practices
- More previous work with communities before conducting trainings; exploring, understanding and incorporating the knowledge of local communities
- Basing the training not on law and norms, but on the daily practices of defenders and communities
- Greater accuracy on current issues
- More debate on the particularities, specificities, singularities and needs of the people attending the training, depending on the context in which they live and develop their activities
- Provide space for defenders to share their experiences
- More participation of the people speaking in their own words, explaining what happened to them to be able to transmit it within the communities
- Recognise that organisations need to have some space for self-reflection and to work on internal transformation

⁴⁶ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Sincelejo. Interviewed in November 2015 A-F-024

⁴⁷ Participant working on the rights of forcibly disappeared and the right to truth and memory in Bogotá. Interviewed in November 2015 A-F-026

- Practical rather than just theoretical training
- Simplify the techniques and protection measures offered; make it easier to follow the steps needed in cases of emergency; avoid providing too many suggestions of precautions to take; offer measures that are easier to obtain from daily life
- Focus on psychosocial support
- Focus on managing and leading groups of people, and how to keep groups united

Level of Support for Human Rights Work

As mentioned earlier, the defenders in this study reported receiving high levels of support for their human rights work.

Table 2: The Level of Support Received from Human Rights Work

Levels of support described as being 'High' or 'Very High' from their:	Percent of participants in Colombia
Partner	55.1% ⁴⁸
Parents	48.7% ⁴⁹
Close Friends	53.8% ⁵⁰
People doing human rights work in the same country	64.5% ⁵¹
People doing human rights work in other countries	47.4% ⁵²

⁴⁸ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 64.4%, Kenya 52.0%, Indonesia 63.8%, Egypt 48.7% (Average 56.8%).

⁴⁹ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 53.5%, Kenya 35.1%, Indonesia 61.9%, Egypt 21.3% (Average 44.1%).

⁵⁰ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 78.1%, Kenya 61.1%, Indonesia 74.3%, Egypt 68.4% (Average 67.1%).

⁵¹ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 73.0%, Kenya 70.2%, Indonesia 75.6%, Egypt 65.8% (Average 69.7%).

⁵² Percentages in other countries: Mexico 45.2%, Kenya 37.7%, Indonesia 58.3%, Egypt 58.7% (Average 49.5%).

Barriers to Security Management

We asked participants to identify the level of significance of specific barriers to security management.⁵³

Table 3: Barriers to Security Management

Barriers to security management described as being a 'very significant barrier' or a 'rather significant barrier':	Percent of participants in Colombia
Lack of Technical Support from Experts	66.2% ⁵⁴
Lack of Knowledge	65.8% ⁵⁵
Lack of Money	86.4% ⁵⁶
Lack of Support from Leaders in my Organisation / Group	38.4% ⁵⁷
Lack of Support from Family	25.0% ⁵⁸
Lack of Support from Close Friends	33.8% ⁵⁹

Reflections on Wellbeing

One term seemed to capture the idea of wellbeing amongst defenders in this study: tranquility (*tranquilidad*).

The impact of continuous threats and attacks affects not only their work, but the defenders themselves, their support networks, their families, and their social structures. A continuous assault makes it difficult for defenders to address the impact on themselves. A woman defender shared with us how she encourages other defenders to take care of themselves but struggles to do this for herself:

Initially one doesn't value this. You realise when your body gives in. I don't practice what I preach to the communities I support; I don't let it out. There is pressure and a lot to deal with; if it's not one thing, it's another. There isn't time [to take proper care]. I split up from my partner who moved [abroad] following interrogation and imprisonment. My daughter has real emotional difficulties and is having treatment,

⁵³ Participants were given the following options: 'Very significant barrier', 'Rather significant barrier' and 'Not really a significant barrier'.

⁵⁴ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 73.6%, Kenya 89.4%, Indonesia 78.6%, Egypt 78.6% (Average 77.3%).

⁵⁵ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 71.9%, Kenya 57.9%, Indonesia 76.4%, Egypt 73.7% (Average 69.1%).

⁵⁶ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 82.1%, Kenya 92.2%, Indonesia 71.6%, Egypt 73.1% (Average 81.1%).

⁵⁷ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 43.8%, Kenya 54.0%, Indonesia 65.8%, Egypt 53.4% (Average 51.1%).

⁵⁸ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 16.2%, Kenya 25.0%, Indonesia 63.0%, Egypt 55.9% (Average 37.0%).

⁵⁹ Percentages in other countries: Mexico 22.9%, Kenya 35.5%, Indonesia 58.1%, Egypt 48.6% (Average 39.8%).

she is very aggressive and she responds as though she is always on the defensive, as though she or I are about to be attacked. As you say, what can I do? Should I get out?⁶⁰

The defenders in our study struggle to prioritise ‘wellbeing’ even when they thought it was important. Some expressed near-exhaustion as a result. While there existed recognition that this was a personal choice, the following remark was typical: “It’s a question that people underappreciate. They don’t believe that the moment will arrive when they will be affected. But it’s quite the opposite.”⁶¹ In some cases, this bordered on the sacrificial mindset: “the attitude of self-sacrifice also persists: we work extra, Saturdays, bank holidays, nights; we don’t turn our mobiles off.”⁶²

Some defenders feel that they cannot afford to engage in wellbeing practices, and that there are limited opportunities for defenders that focus on psychosocial interventions.

As I said before, I would love to give everything up and take a break. It’s urgent. But for this, we need resources, and it would have to come out of my pocket. There’s no organisation that would fund a two-month break and get away from it all. People will only get you out if you are about to be killed. But if you’re head or your heart is full, that’s no good.⁶³

Others still put it down to the lack of State focus on psychosocial matters:

Health is a right, it is a duty of the State to guarantee this. There should be prolonged work with psychologists; Colombians should undergo psychosocial or mental health treatment. The violence here has been brutal. The sort of work I am talking about would require an enormous investment. People believe that the violence has only affected victims, but this is not the case. It has affected all of us. And this shows in the everyday language and attitudes which people have towards life.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, some organisations, such as MOVICE and ASFADDES, pay attention to the wellbeing of their members.

There are different ways defenders strengthen their wellbeing, and the tactics and strategies that work for some may not work for others. An indigenous leader observed,

⁶⁰ Participant working on the rights of *campesinos* in Baranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-015

⁶¹ Participant working on human rights research in Baranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-013

⁶² Participant working on the rights of political prisoners in Bogotá. Interviewed in July 2015. A-M-002

⁶³ Participant working on the rights of victims and political prisoners in Sincelejo. Interviewed in November 2015. A-F-024

⁶⁴ Participant working on the rights of women in Quibdó. Interviewed in September 2015. A-F-004

We don't really use the 'psychosocial' concept. We believe that the work we do as indigenous people is better for us. We are all in our right minds; we all have our five senses; we are not crazy. Just because there are armed groups present, it doesn't mean we are in a bad way. However,... there were 18-20 suicides in the last four years... We have tried 'Western' psychology, but it didn't improve matters. The indigenous medics have blessed us and offered advice. This has been better for us.⁶⁵

Another defender observed,

The victims of development have been affected psychologically due to the threat of losing their territory. This loss can bring them to crisis; this crisis can bring them to death. We also understand that the way to help these people is not through individual psychological help, but collective psychological treatment. This could involve something like recovering historical memory – what life was like when they were children, what the environment was like, and the river is like. For instance, we do activities like making lunch together and going together to eat it by the river, and they talk about life when they were children. Through this act, they are re-living as well as living their lives again. Doing this type of psychological treatment involves an integral approach. If you don't understand the socio-environmental situation, you can't understand the psychological condition of the people. We are trying to reconstruct their historical memory through real life.⁶⁶

Many defenders emphasised the importance of social support from friends, co-workers, and other defenders for their wellbeing. They spoke about the importance of 'sharing struggles', creating spaces in their office to talk about problems, and psychosocial care, whether professional or informal. We also heard repeatedly how defenders drew comfort from religious practice and the belief that a higher being was protecting them. We were similarly struck by the value that some people attached to maintaining a (sometimes dark) sense of humour and finding joy in the work they undertook.

Perceptions of 'Human Rights Defenders' in Colombia

Of the participants in this study, 85.1% referred to themselves as a human rights defender, a relatively high percent of participants compared to those from other countries (an average of 75% across all countries).

A relatively small number of participants thought that the public perceived human rights defenders positively (14 percent).⁶⁷ Many more thought that the public had mixed perceptions of human rights defenders – both positive and negative (44 percent), or that the public just had negative perceptions (42 percent).

⁶⁵ Participant working on the rights of indigenous peoples in Quibdó. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-006

⁶⁶ Participant working on environmental rights and victims in mega-projects in Huila. Interviewed in November 2015 B-M-032

⁶⁷ Based on responses from 57 participants who addressed this topic in interviews and focus groups.

While the frequency of stigmatisation has diminished under the current administration of President Juan Manuel Santos in comparison with his predecessor Álvaro Uribe Velez, who left office with a notorious legacy for publicly stigmatising the human rights community, its impact has run deep, and continues to influence the current human rights context. Many defenders, while cognisant and appreciative of President Santos's toning down of the negative discourse of the Uribe administration, continue to feel these effects today:

The term is widely associated with the guerrilla. This was particularly true under the disastrous "long night" of President Uribe's government. [...] As human rights defenders, we have been categorised as guerrilla. About three years ago, a Somos Defensores survey showed that society's view of the value of human rights defenders had improved a little. But Uribe was responsible for stigmatising us. The guerrilla has its own discourse about defending the people. And so when you also have a discourse in favour of the rights of the majority, people assume that there is a link. Uribe and his officials were very clever with the media. To struggle for individual or collective rights meant you were a revolutionary in the common mind. President Santos recognised the [legal term] armed conflict, and so there was space for human rights defenders to talk about that again. Under Uribe, it was all about terrorism, and human rights defenders were consequently guerrillas or terrorists.⁶⁸

The impacts of stigmatization may not be felt on an immediate basis, but has long-term effects, ranging from psychological distress to the increased risk of physical harm. Unlike physical attack and threat, the invisibility of stigmatization makes it hard to confront:

They know that this can do a lot of harm, so at certain points they have put a lot of energy into delegitimising us. They do propaganda; they attack us on TV and radio programmes. It is moral damage. It is very difficult to confront it, there is no means to combat it, no way of reaching the mass media to say it's not true, that corrections should be made.⁶⁹

Although many defenders reported a decrease in stigmatisation after President Uribe left office, it continues to be a problem, and has even taken on new forms. Recently new types of stigmatisation have arisen, including claims that defenders have 'invented' threats to qualify for armoured cars and bodyguards; accusations that defenders are simply trying to receive money; and allegations that defenders lie about threats. According to a defender working in Bucaramanga, stigmatisation – whether tied to accusations of links with insurgency groups or accusations of the misuse of protection mechanisms for political status – delegitimises their work and creates divisions between them and the communities they support and defend.

⁶⁸ Participant working on women's rights in Quibdó Interviewed September 2015.

⁶⁹ Participant working on victims' rights in Bogota. Interviewed July 2015 A-M-001

Some human rights defenders, however, see beyond the stigmatisation and rescue the value of the work they undertake. In attempts to broaden and reframe the terms of the debate, one defender said:

Defending our rights is everyone's business. If you are defending water or a public service, you are defending people's rights. That is why we created the slogan 'We are all Defenders'.⁷⁰

Some defenders were worried about how the term 'human rights defender' has been appropriated by different groups.

It's different now than some years ago. I observe that people use the term 'human rights' defender' more frequently about themselves now. There are even some aggressor organisations that call themselves human rights defenders! This suggests that the meaning of the term has changed. In one way, this is positive. The term has been 'de-sectorised'. But this broadening or re-signifying, has had other effects. For example, this question of aggressors harnessing the language of human rights: the paramilitaries who demobilised now speak of the right to re-enter the labour market in terms of human rights. I'm not saying that there isn't a right to work, but traditionally human rights were a defence against the power of the State; it was about insisting that the State fulfil its duties. There is a distortion when a structure that killed many people, like the paramilitaries, defends the right to work and supports the labour reform which President Uribe himself brought in.⁷¹

Some defenders expressed concern about how the term 'human rights defender' is now associated with the work of individual 'heroes' who 'save' others. A defender expressed,

I also think it takes away the 'collectivity' of human rights work. In the Inter-American Court, for example, they always say things about how great human rights defenders are and how they are saving people, about how they are famous. But what they don't recognize is that this work is not accomplished alone—no one does human rights work alone. Human rights work is done collectively. For example, once we tried to get community protection for an indigenous group in Cauca in the [IACHR] Commission. In indigenous communities, the leadership roles are always changing, they are rotating. For the Commission they couldn't understand why we couldn't identify a few permanent leaders. They wanted to identify heroes. But it's not about heroes – it's a network of people. The same thing happens with UNP protection schemes – the schemes are organized for individuals, not groups. They don't understand that it's a group effort, and the group runs the risks.⁷²

⁷⁰ Participant working on rights of victims and political prisoners in Barranquilla. Interviewed in October 2015 A-M-011

⁷¹ Participant working on human rights research in Barranquilla. Interviewed in November 2015. A-M-013

⁷² Participant working on environmental rights in Bogotá. Interviewed in September 2015. B-F-016

Recommendations

These are some recommendations that arise from this study:

Recommendations for State actors

- Continue and deepen the discourse, in public and private, that the work of human rights defenders is valid, necessary and legitimate
- Repudiate statements by political or institutional actors, whether in government or opposition, aimed at stigmatising defenders
- Recognises that the basis for successful protection is the proactive prevention of incidents, including early warning systems, and rigorous investigation of crimes
- Recognise and address the threats and attacks mounted by paramilitary successor-groups and corporations against defenders, as well as the collusion between such non-state actors and state actors
- Provide more resources and support to the UNP so that their protection measures are accessible and timely and defenders are treated with respect and empathy
- Regard postings to UNP and other State protection bodies as technical rather than political appointments and encourage continuity of staff in posts. Consider devolving decision-making authority to departmental and/or municipal levels.
- Tailor protection measures to the needs of defenders, based on their circumstances. Take seriously their discomfort or ethical concerns about armed protection. Consider who they trust to provide protection measures. Recognise the need for personal space and privacy, especially for women defenders. Protect families who also share the risks that defenders experience. Include a focus on the wellbeing of defenders as an aspect of security.
- Recognise the multiple and specific forms of risk experienced by women and LGBTIQ* defenders and tailor protection measures accordingly
- Recognise that the rejection by defenders of a certain means of protection does not diminish the role of the State in their protection.
- Recognise and respond favourably to the evolving nature of communal and ancestral means of protection
- Increase substantially the availability of support for psychosocial and healthcare interventions for defenders, recognising the need for these to be culturally and socially appropriate

Recommendations for other non-state protection actors

- Provide spaces and initiatives to foster a culture of well-being across and within collectives and organisations dedicated to the defence of human rights.
- Advocate for differentiated perspectives, such as those of women defenders, indigenous defenders, and LGBTIQ* defenders, in the development of protection strategies.

- Highlight and promote the legitimacy of and necessity of the work of human rights defenders.
- Pool resources and work collaboratively in the design and provision of protection training for human rights' defenders.
- Engage municipal and regional State actors in a dialogue to enhance recognition of needs and implementation at the most local level.
- To the international community: encourage and expand schemes to monitor and work closely with individual and collective defenders in their protection, in addition to advocating for their rights.

Recommendations for defenders

- Constantly review individual and collective protection practices, and include measures for wellbeing- see <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/policy-briefs-en>
- Consider the extent to which expectations of sacrifice and martyrdom affects the security and wellbeing of defenders