



## Strengthening Security Training for Defenders at Risk

What do defenders at risk value about security training? How can this be done well? How does security training contribute to protection? The most valuable kinds of security training are not those that focus on top-down knowledge transfer from 'experts' to defenders, but which support defenders in: increasing rights awareness; conducting context analysis, stakeholder analysis, and risk assessment; developing security management practices; sharing experiences; building networks of support; reflecting on everyday practices related to security; and adopting a multidimensional understanding of security that includes mental and emotional wellbeing.

### Introduction

Security training has become a key way in which protection actors support defenders at risk in developing security management practices. When done well, defenders at risk find this type of training valuable and desire more of it. Protection actors conduct security training for defenders in different ways, with different pedagogical styles, and with different definitions of security. This Policy Brief summarises reflections from over 400 defenders at risk in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia on security training, highlighting what they value and what they recommend for more effective security training.

In this study, 64 percent of 391 survey respondents said that they had received formal training on how

to manage their own security (see Table 1). 65 percent of men received an average of 2.3 trainings each, 62 percent of women received an average of 1.9 trainings each, and 60 percent of transgender defenders received an average of 1.5 trainings each. Overall, more men received more training than women. However, as the sample of defenders in this study is limited, the percentage of defenders at risk in each country who have received training is likely to be much lower.

There are many ways in which security training is conducted – from workshops conducted on a one-off basis (that may last several days) to those that are embedded in longer-term relationships that may include regular follow-up, accompaniment, coaching, or assistance.

## The Focus of Security Training

### Rights awareness

Defenders in our study valued training that helped them to develop their awareness of rights. Security trainings provide opportunities for defenders to discuss the meaning of the term 'human rights defender' and their right to promote and protect human rights as stated in the 1998 Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and as protected through local laws.

### Analysis of dynamic, local contexts

Defenders valued training that enabled them to conduct context analysis individually and collectively based on recent developments, current issues, and accurate information. They noted the importance of paying attention to emerging trends at the local level. They valued opportunities to discuss the factors and actors that they should attend to when managing their personal security in their specific contexts. A transwoman defender from Colombia recommended having "...more debate on the particularities, specificities, singularities and needs of the people attending [the training], depending on the context in which they live and / or develop their activities."

Defenders valued focus on the identification, analysis and management of threats and risks in relation to their vulnerabilities and capacities as individuals and as collectives. They emphasised the importance of analysing threats and attacks directly relevant to them. For example, defenders from Colombia noted the importance of focusing on threats by non-state actors, while defenders from Egypt noted the need to examine threats related to the legal status of their organisation and their possible arrest and prosecution.

They also noted the importance of having space to reflect on the risks they faced, which they might have normalised or neglected in their daily lives.

*... it's normal for humans who have faced many risks (their own or others) that there comes a time of trivialising them, growing accustomed to the risks, and begin to dismiss the need to constantly be reviewing and learning about issues. It happens to all defenders.*

**Defender working on rights of political prisoners, Colombia**

Defenders noted the importance of understanding risks in relation to political, social and economic structures and inequalities in society, that are often invisible. A woman defender working on the rights of women and LGBTIQ\* persons in Kenya was critical of security trainings that "were anchored on a human rights framework that overlooked the intersections of socio-economic, political and cultural justice of our communities".

*[Security trainings] are necessary but must be integrated into and be critical of social processes in Mexico, looking beyond the current situation and taking into account the risks that exist, which may even include people infiltrating social movements or organisations.*

**Defender working on civil and political rights, Mexico**

Security training helps defenders to build security awareness and daily vigilance. As a woman defender in Kenya working on the rights of human rights defenders observed, "they have helped in changing my attitude towards security concerns".

Table 1: Security Training Received by Country

Country	"Have you received any formal training on how to manage your own security?"			Average number of trainings received			
	Yes	No	Unsure	All	Men	Women	Transgender
Colombia	68 %	31 %	1 %	3.6	4.6	2.6	1.0
Mexico	81 %	16 %	3 %	2.8	3.1	2.6	N/A
Kenya	70 %	29 %	1 %	1.7	1.9	1.5	1.0
Indonesia	59 %	38 %	3 %	1.3	1.4	1.0	3.0
Egypt	42 %	46 %	12 %	1.0	0.7	1.4	1.0
<b>ALL</b>	<b>64 %</b>	<b>32 %</b>	<b>4 %</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.5</b>



### *Building social support and networks*

A strong theme in our research was how social support was key to the security and protection of defenders. In times of difficulty it was often family, friends, neighbours, community members and fellow defenders who provide immediate assistance. Defenders expressed that they wanted to learn more about how to build networks and support for their work.

Defenders observed how conflict, harassment and violence within human rights movements and organisations have grave impacts. A woman defender in Mexico noted:

*When violence comes from within, from the closer sphere - such as (intimate) partners, colleagues from the same organisations, machismo within social movements - when that happens, there is a danger of fracture, sometimes even more dangerous than that related to external actors... we need to work on that with networks of defenders in order to empower defenders...*

A lawyer working on land rights from Indonesia valued the emphasis on "conflict management both internal and external", and a defender from Egypt working on the rights of human rights defenders welcomed "guidance and advice on how to deal with conflicts and violence".

### *Strategies and tactics for managing the multiple dimensions of security*

Defenders appreciated learning practical ways of protecting themselves. They noted the importance of gaining digital security skills; focusing on information

management; learning how to safeguard privacy in the face of surveillance; and learning how to manage risks related to the use of information and communication technologies.

Defenders valued security training that provided 'safe spaces' where they could talk about experiences and emotions that were difficult to share. Security trainings were opportunities for them to exchange ideas on how to manage stress and fear, and to feel affirmed and encouraged. As a campesino leader from Colombia expressed, "We don't feel as alone as before". Emphasis on self-care and mental and emotional wellbeing was particularly valued.

*[Security trainings] are important for everyone in the organisation... [defenders] should be aware of how to take and limit risks, manage stress and fear; understand that ours is a cause that motivates - let us not be defeated by the smear campaigns and the threats, and continue as a united and strong team.*

### **Lawyer working on victims' rights, Colombia**

Defenders also noted the importance of advocating for and relying upon institutional protection and prevention.

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

The most valuable types of security training are ones specifically tailored to the specific needs and local contexts of defenders. Defenders noted that risks differed from one geographical area to another. A

defender from Mexico working on civil and political rights observed critically,

*The workshops are seldom aimed at specific issues in the field. I think in Mexico the reality is very complex and above all changing. The country has nothing to do with what it was 10 years ago, and each city or population changes very abruptly in certain junctures.*

Defenders valued security training that was developed in consultation with them and delivered in their own language, using pedagogical methods appropriate to them.

Repeatedly, defenders stated that they wanted training that was strategic and practical, not just theoretical. They valued concrete suggestions that were actionable in daily life given their realities and constraints. Some also observed that they could not always implement all the actions that were suggested by trainers.

*[It is important to] offer mechanisms that are easier to obtain; things from day-to-day life. More concrete recommendations, less talk. It would be better to give just three concrete examples of things that could be done. The training with [name of organisation] was very curious, it was too exaggerated, they gave too many suggestions of precautions to take, and so many that one cannot remember them all. They offered so many that one left the training feeling traumatized.*

#### **Lawyer working on victims' rights, Colombia**

Overwhelmingly, defenders wanted to receive more regular training. As a defender from Mexico observed, "They are necessary but never sufficient and usually have little follow-up". They also said it was important for training to be conducted for more defenders, including community members (not just leaders), defenders in rural areas, and women defenders.

Defenders did not like training that was too rushed, too shallow, or too didactic. They did not like training by trainers who did not know the local context well or who, as a lawyer working on mining and environmental rights in Colombia observed, came "with an outside view of the situation... offer[ing] conclusions from a distance". An Afro-Colombian leader expressed the importance of having "(m)ore participation of the people speaking

in their own words, explaining what happened to them, to be able to transmit it within communities". Another defender from Colombia working on the rights of LGBTIQ\* persons stated,

*They need to be more participatory and include the knowledge of local people and of the people at risk more. They need to highlight the opinions of the people who have the most experience, which, inevitably, are the people at risk and the people in the field. There needs to be more dialogue during them.*

*The people that have lived the conflict themselves and personally are better at giving workshops, otherwise many times they don't understand the context. I think a "double point of view" could be really interesting. For instance, a comparison between countries that have or are experiencing the same situation could teach us a lot. For example, a comparison between the mining situation in Guatemala and the mining situation here in Colombia.*

#### **Woman defender working on mining and environmental rights, Colombia**

Some defenders noted the value of using role plays to help them anticipate scenarios, visualise threats, and deal with risks in practical ways. They also liked using case studies based on real events and experiences. They enjoyed training methods which involved active participation and which were responsive to their needs and concerns.

Defenders valued opportunities to share their personal experiences and ask questions. As a defender from Colombia working on anti-militarism and the rights of LGBTIQ\* persons said,

*[The trainings] are too short. Most of the time, the trainers come in on a plane that morning, and leave by plane that same afternoon. People (HRDs and people at risk) want to share their experiences with the trainer. They get really excited to talk to them and talk about their experience. There needs to be time to talk about their experience and then ask other questions.*

Defenders appreciated when food, transport and accommodation related to training were covered for them.

Several defenders suggested that it would be beneficial to involve state actors in security trainings. As a woman *campesino* leader from Colombia opined,

*Include the authorities responsible for the protection of defenders and their regional teams, in a way that makes them feel that they have to carry out the established programmes to this end and be able to actively respond to the guarantees of defending and being defended against systematic human rights violations.*

However, some defenders were very wary of this approach as it might disrupt the trust necessary for security training and be a way for state authorities to appear concerned about their protection without genuine commitment.

Defenders noted the value of external facilitation, but also that they had to put the knowledge and self-reflection into practice themselves. As a defender from Colombia noted, what was needed was 'a little on the outside to help; a lot within to transform'.

### Implications for Practice

- Recognise that externally-imposed security training is often ineffective. Defenders themselves must want to receive security training and support for them to be useful.
  - Support defenders (individuals, groups, communities, and organisations) in integrating security issues and management in their daily lives. Recognise that for collectives, internal group dynamics influence attitudes, behaviours, and daily practices.
  - Support the delivery of security training that is tailored to the specific contexts and needs of defenders at risk. Involve defenders in the design of training, incorporating their perspectives.
  - Broadening the reach of trainings to defenders who are isolated (particularly those in rural areas); woman defenders; defenders of LGBTIQ\* rights; and defenders of land and environmental rights.
  - Create safe spaces in security trainings where defenders can share their experiences, struggles, and emotions, while safeguarding against re-victimization.
  - Support defenders in developing and implementing action plans for their security that are realistic, feasible, and actionable given their realities and constraints. Help them to identify the support they need for the implementation of such action plans and assist them in building this support.
- Assist defenders in building networks and support for their work at multiple levels. Facilitate self-reflection on the causes of conflict within human rights movements and organisations and how these can be managed. Encourage reflection on how repression and political violence contributes to interpersonal conflicts and tensions.
  - Integrate security training with other measures to strengthen the security of defenders, such as emergency support in high risk situations and the longer-term development of an enabling environment for the promotion and protection of human rights.

### About this project:

This Policy Brief is based on research findings from the project 'Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support' which examines the experiences of human rights defenders at risk in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya and Indonesia.

Interviews and surveys were conducted with over 400 defenders between July 2015 and November 2016.



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*

Centre for Applied Human Rights  
University of York  
Yorkshire House  
6 Innovation Close, York Science Park  
Heslington, York YO10 5ZF  
United Kingdom

+44 (0)1904 325830  
cahr-admin@york.ac.uk  
[york.ac.uk/cahr](http://york.ac.uk/cahr)

### Principal Investigator

Alice M. Nah

### Research Team

Sherif Azer  
Patricia Bartley  
Peter Cousins  
Indria Fernida  
Kholoud Hafez  
Budi Hernawan  
Irina Ichim  
Katrina Maliamauv  
Erick Monterrosas  
Patrick Mutahi  
Paola Pacheco Ruiz  
Emily Schmitz

### For more information

[securityofdefendersproject.org](http://securityofdefendersproject.org)  
[security-of-defenders-project@york.ac.uk](mailto:security-of-defenders-project@york.ac.uk)

### Reference

Nah, A.M. (2017) Strengthening Security Training for Defenders at Risk, Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 3, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York, available at [securityofdefendersproject.org](http://securityofdefendersproject.org)

### Illustrations

Lara Luna Bartley

### Design

Design and Print Solutions