

Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders in the face of Non-State Actors
Initial Reflection and Questions, January 2017
Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) & JASS (Just Associates)

Overall

- We need to redefine protection and security of HRDs. While traditional protocols and measures that secure offices, provide cameras and panic buttons and protect individuals who are most at threat continue to be important, protection and security in the face of non-state actors also demands strategies that improve the sustainability and resilience of communities, organizations and movements. Strengthening includes the capacity to conduct detailed analysis, and to create protection and communication networks that can prevent, not merely react, to threats and attacks. These strategies should promote collective protection where all the members, not just the leader or coordinator, are responsible for the security of each other.
- The analysis of context, power and violence enabled us to better grasp the continuum and the interconnections between threats, attacks and killings of HRDs, the legal restrictions on civil society and the stigmatization of HRDs and their organizations. Together these contribute to the crackdown on civil society space and undermine human rights activism.
- We left the meeting with a collective sense of urgency that we must improve the coordination between distinct actors and organizations and across geographic levels, better anchoring international efforts at community level. We also felt a desire to re-orient protection strategies to include strategies to strengthen organizations in communities.

Context-specific, dynamics of power (beyond the state and non-state), systemic, intersectional

- We need a thorough, in-depth analysis of the political economy shaping violence and restrictions against HRDs and the wider crackdown on civil society space. This is essential to ensure that strategies aimed at strengthening communities, movements and organizations work in harmony with strategies that seek to protect and expand civil society space i.e. more holistic, less siloed strategies.
- An analysis of risk, threats, repression must be context specific and examine the convergences and complicity between state and non-state actors as well as understand how they manipulate social norms/beliefs to discredit and isolate movement leaders and HRDs.
- We need to better understand how power dynamics within social structures (perpetuated in organizations and communities) increase risk and vulnerability (e.g. “structural violence”); inequality and exclusion within communities create fault lines that make it easy to divide, isolate, discredit and silence defenders. Targeting women can contribute to the further break down of social networks and families that are key to the resilience of defenders and movements.
- The creation of safe spaces for collective contextual analysis is a protection strategy in itself. We must recognize the strategic value of analysis, support and resource the time, space processes for analysis; they help to address, in a preventive way, changes in dynamics of power, evaluate strategies, etc.

Non-State actors

- Non-state actors include both legal and illicit actors –organized criminal networks and legal economic entities (national and transnational) are converging and competing for turf, e.g. “traditional and emerging economic powers” particularly as organized crime moves into mining and other sectors. Organized crime has become increasingly better coordinated with the State to control geographic areas and attack

defenders and their organizations. For example, drug traffickers have installed “neo-feudalism” – they control and govern all aspects of territories including security and infrastructure projects.

- Non-state actors include fundamentalist religious groups and political extremists who influence social and political views and manipulate discontent, promote passivity. Non-state actors are deeply embedded in families and communities through their membership - -which affirms the need to ground protection in community and organizational strategies
- These groups (churches, religion, corporations etc.) further their economic and political interests and influence through the state in different ways. Despite their differences, they are becoming more coordinated in their impact. The core conflict between these actors and social movements/human rights actors was described in the gathering as “The dispute over bodies, territories, the truth.” In different ways, diverse human rights defenders are promoting an alternative paradigm of “development”, society and thought. Violence against defenders is framed as an “acceptable cost” for the imposition of a certain economic, social and political model. “Defenders are abnormal in this delinquent normality.”
- Through their integration and complicity with the state, non-state actors influence security policies that support an expanded role of the police and armed forces in controlling dissent, and contribute to narratives and fear that serve to justify violence and the power of those who yield it. This has meant that “not only is the state co-opted, society is also co-opted”. The collusion of state and non-state actors in perpetrating aggressions against human rights defenders is evolving into a terror-based governance model.
- Organized crime has become increasingly necessary for sustaining and expanding dominant political interests and their spheres of influence: “Groups in political power are involved in organized crime.” Actors such as drug traffickers control territories, need to govern territories, control security, finance, construction of infrastructures. The transnational nature of organized crime also enables it (and other de-facto powers) to benefit from international impunity.

Gender analysis of violence and protection processes

- Women play a crucial role in community resilience and in organizations’ security; women are the first-responders to social breakdown, crises (health, economic, environmental) and community conflict.
- It is important to strengthen women’s leadership, voice and recognized roles within organizations and movements is a key element of protection; gender discrimination is ingrained in organizational practices and communities; the invisibility of women, lack of recognition of their contributions or acceptance for their public roles and voice can weaken organizations and movements while increasing the risks women face. A thorough contextual power analysis (and risk assessment) must include an analysis of gender-intersectional dynamics of exclusion and conflict.

Protection anchored in communities and collective protection

- In the face of non-state actors, security and protection strategies need to be grounded in the realities of specific communities and geographic areas; be shaped by a clearer concept of territory. This demands:
 - Regularly conducting-convening local contextual power analysis, mapping distinct actors and interests – both visible (formal/state) and shadow powers – and their intersections and relationships.
 - Recognizing that strategies are context specific and should be developed and implemented on a case-by-case basis. While there are regional and global patterns and useful lessons learned from concrete experiences of protection, each moment and context has its own complexities that require specific strategies to be informed by an updated analysis and power mapping; for this, it is

important to look at unlikely allies that might have useful information/analysis to guide strategy, for example, from within parts of the business community or governments – not as homogenous as may appear.

- Community-centred protection and people-to-people communication networks that monitor territories and can act quickly in the face of threats or attacks are key. Breaking isolation and addressing situations of vulnerability in the territories is also a protection strategy.
- Having a presence in territories (where defenders are) is of utmost importance – this is particularly relevant for international protection organizations. In order to understand local contexts and ensure that global strategies align with and support community-based strategies, going and spending time in the territories where these threats and attacks are taking place is critical. However, the demands of international organizations on local actors can be excessive and should be better coordinated .
- In addition to protocols, measures and campaigns, “protection” needs to be re-conceptualized to include community-based and collective strategies that enable organizations and communities to be stronger, more resilient, more cohesive and inclusive. These include “safe spaces” and deep processes for learning, power analysis, well-being, dealing with fear and trauma, rituals and celebration, political education, development of new leaders (to prevent easy targets and make women’s leadership more visible). These strategies enable communities and organizations to resist the narratives that divide, isolate and discredit defenders, and that sustain them through tough times, as well as manage risk more fully.
- Collective process can build trust which is critical to people-to-people social networks that are essential for quick response to fast-changing and unpredictable contexts.

Protection networks

- Building networks among defenders and organizations is critical. Institutional networks are important to coordinate and share information, strategies to minimize duplicity and maximize impact, but people to people are more responsive in real time
- Networks require resources and time to generate shared analysis, agreements, trust, political complicity, and possible collective action against risk.
- Network-building should include activities that generate hope and incorporate collective "rituals". These networks should protect not only the defenders who have organizational identities, but also those who do not.

Official / legal mechanisms for protection

- Protection mechanisms highlight the limitations of national security systems and policies and impunity.
- How can advocates better use legal protection mechanisms to increase the political cost to the state for acts of aggression?

Strategies of international advocacy

- We asked ourselves “what will international advocacy look like in the era of Brexit/Trump?”
- Some global strategies may unintentionally create additional risks for local actors. How to map out risk and impact at all levels and in consultation with the groups affected before taking action and taking measures to mitigate potential risk?

- While there is a need to ground international strategies in specific contexts through consultation with local actors, international NGOs need to coordinate their demands and engagement with local actors. The same few leaders are bombarded by multiple demands for the same information, verification, etc. The demands can be duplicative. How to ground and coordinate strategies without creating additional demands? In attempting to coordinate among international organizations, how do we deal internally with the institutional pressures for branding, competition for donors and the need to demonstrate credibility?
- Results/analysis/campaign gains, including resources, from international efforts are often not shared with the communities or groups who may be the focus of a particular campaign. This is a missed opportunity for learning and strengthening, and gives the impression that some international groups are only in it for themselves.
- Communication strategies aiming to increase the visibility, public recognition and protection of defenders by promoting the rights framework and those who defend it, are not very effective in winning over large-scale public opinion or that of policy decision-makers. They do not speak to the values held by those people or the culture and lived experience through which they filter what they're being told. We need to re-design communications by and for defenders on the basis of "strategic frame analysis", using values, frames and metaphors that resonate with them and provide a bridge to our respect/protect/enable narrative; and, we must better integrate communications strategies with other tactics, around building constituencies, for instance.
- Since individual defenders are targeted to isolate and undermine their leadership, it may not make sense for International security and protection approaches to solely focus on individuals. Collective protection approaches might offer more effective prevention.
- International organizations give too little attention to campaigns in the countries of origin of the companies that are committing human rights violations. "Why is it so difficult for international organizations to campaign against companies in their own countries?"

Role of donors:

- Donors need to begin to move away from "models" of security and protection that do not take into account the complexity of the context we are currently facing. Protection and security involve flexible funding for organizations, movements and communities can use as they see necessary to ensure effective measures in this much broader definition of security and protection. Flexible funding is therefore a fundamental part of ensuring protection and security of human rights defenders.
- Funders must do all they can to ensure emergency rapid response funding is congruent with what it is meant for: this means, getting that funding to the defenders (and potentially their organizations) as quickly and with the least burdens and paperwork as possible.
- As a practical step, donors could consider doing an audit of where their funding for security and protection is actually going – assess the mix of resources to global, regional, national and local actors. An audit could provide a baseline for helping funders to track what it means to move to a broader their strategy. Funders should re-direct resources to focus more on prevention and collective processes that strengthen protection networks and reduce the dynamics of competition for resources. Donors need to pay attention to the dynamics generated by a perceived "decrease in funding for organizations to do their work vs. increase funding for security measures and campaigns."