

Drawing a global security strategy

Purpose:

- Recognizing strategies and tactics already in place
- Analysing strategies and tactics already in place
- Defining the global strategy to occupy work space

Ad hoc deterrence strategy and tactics

Defenders and groups under threat use different ad hoc deterrence strategies to deal with perceived risks. These strategies will vary a lot depending on their environment (rural, urban), the type of threat, the social, financial and legal resources available, etc.

Most ad hoc strategies can be implemented immediately and in response to short- term objectives. They will therefore function more like tactics than as global response strategies. Most strategies also respond to individual people's subjective perceptions of risk, and could at times cause the group some level of harm, especially if the strategies used cannot be reversed.

Ad hoc strategies are closely related to the type and severity of threat and to the group's capacities and vulnerabilities.

When thinking about security and protection you must take into account both your own and other people's ad hoc strategies.

Reinforce the effective ones, try to limit harmful ones and try to respect the remaining ones (especially ad hoc strategies linked to cultural or religious beliefs).

Some ad hoc strategies adopted by human rights defenders:

- ♦ Reinforcing protective barriers, hiding valuables.
- ♦ Avoiding behaviour which could be questioned by another actor, especially if control of the territory where you are working is under military dispute.
- ♦ Going into hiding during high risk situations, including in places that are difficult to access, like mountains or jungle, changing houses, etc. Sometimes

whole families go into hiding, and sometimes just defenders. Hiding could take place at night or go on for several weeks, and might involve no outside contact.

- ◆ Looking for armed or political protection from one of the armed actors.
- ◆ Suspending activities, closing down the office, evacuating. Forced migration (internal displacement or as refugees) or going into exile.
- ◆ Relying on “good luck” or resorting to religious and “magic” beliefs.
- ◆ Becoming more secretive, including with colleagues; going into denial by refusing to discuss threats; excessive drinking, overwork, erratic behaviour.

Defenders also have access to response strategies. These can include issuing reports to publicise a specific issue, making allegations, staging demonstrations, etc. In many cases these strategies do not amount to a long term strategy, but respond to short term needs. In some cases the response strategies might even create more security problems than those they were intended to address.

Analysing deterrence strategy

Whether global or ad hoc deterrence strategy, take the following into account:

- ◆ **Responsiveness:** Can your strategies respond quickly to individual or group security needs?
- ◆ **Adaptability:** Can your strategies be quickly adapted to new circumstances, once the risk of attack is over? A defender may have several options available, for example to either hide or to live at other people’s houses for a while. Such strategies may seem weak or unstable, but often have great endurance.
- ◆ **Sustainability:** Can your strategies endure over time, despite threats or non-lethal attacks?
- ◆ **Effectiveness:** Can your strategies adequately protect the people or groups in question?
- ◆ **Reversibility:** If your strategies don’t work or the situation changes, can your strategies be reversed and/or changed?

Dealing with risk after doing a risk assessment

Once your risk assessment has been done, you need to look at the results. As it is impossible to measure the “amount” of risk you are facing, you need to establish an understanding of what the **level** of risk is.

Different defenders and organisations may perceive different levels of risk. What is unacceptable for some defenders can be acceptable for others, even within the

same organisation. Rather than discussing what “must” be done or whether you are prepared for going ahead with it, people’s different thresholds of risk must be addressed: you must find a commonly acceptable threshold for all members of the group.

That said, there are different ways of dealing with risk:

- ❑ You can **accept** the risk as it stands, because you feel able to live with it
- ❑ You can **reduce** the risk, by working on threats, vulnerabilities and capacities
- ❑ You can **share** the risk, by undertaking joint actions with other defenders to make potential threats to one defender or organisation less effective
- ❑ You can choose to **defer** the risk, by changing your activities or changing approach to reduce potential threats
- ❑ You can **escape** risk by reducing or stopping your activities (in some cases, it might imply going into exile)
- ❑ You can **ignore** the risk, by turning a blind eye to it. Needless to say, that it is not the best option.

Bear in mind that the level of risk is usually different for each of the organizations and individuals involved in a human rights case, and that attackers usually tend to hit in the weakest parts.

For example:

Let’s look at a case of a peasant killed by a landowner’s private army. Maybe several organizations and individuals are involved, such as a group of lawyers from the close-by capital city, a local peasant union and three witnesses (peasants who live in a nearby village). It is key to assess the different levels of risk of each of these stakeholders in order to plan properly for the security of each.

Summary

When it comes to security, defenders do not start from zero. They all have devised ways to handle risks and threats. The contrary might imply that they are not around anymore and/or have left their work.

Defenders have at least devised ad hoc deterrence strategies and tactics. Some might also have devised a deterrence global strategy.

Whatever the strategies, they need to respond to at least the following criteria: responsiveness, adaptability, sustainability, effectiveness and reversibility.

A risk assessment must be carried out in order to establish whether it is “acceptable”. Otherwise, the defender may reduce, share, differ, escape the risk.

Human rights defenders working in hostile environments

Too often, defenders work in hostile environments. There are many reasons why. Most relate to the fact that defenders' work may lead them to confront powerful actors who are violating international human rights law, be they government or state authorities, security forces, opposition armed groups or private armed gangs. These actors may retaliate by trying to stop defenders doing their work, through anything from subtle repression of attempts at free expression to declared threats and direct attacks. The actors' level of tolerance will depend on the defenders' work - some activities might be deemed acceptable, others not. Often this uncertainty is also deliberate.

Two important considerations should be made here. In many cases, only certain elements **within** complex actors (such as those mentioned above) are hostile towards defenders. For example, some elements within a government may be relatively serious about protecting defenders, while other elements may want to attack them. Defenders may also experience more hostility during times of political upheaval, such as elections or other political events.

Defenders' socio-political work space

This manual focuses on the protection and security of human rights defenders working in hostile environments. Of course action can be taken at the socio-political level: the campaigning and promotion activities of human rights defenders are often aimed at securing a broader acceptance of human rights within society or more effective action from political actors. We don't usually think of such activities as being about security but when successful they can have a positive impact on protecting human rights defenders' **socio-political work space**.

This socio-political work space can be defined as the **variety of possible actions the defender can take at an acceptable personal risk**. In other words, the defender perceives "a broad array of possible political actions and associates a certain cost or set of consequences with each action". The defender perceives some of these consequences as "acceptable and others as unacceptable, thereby defining the limits of a distinct political space"¹.

For instance:

A defenders' group may pursue a human rights case until one of the members of the group receives a death threat. If they perceive they have enough socio-political space, they may decide to make public that they have been threatened, and eventually go on with the case. But if they perceive that their political space is limited, they may reckon that denouncing the threat will have unacceptable costs. They might even decide to drop the case for a while and improve their security capacities in the meantime.

¹ This definition and other key parts of this concept have been taken from Mahony and Eguren (1997), p. 93. They have also developed a model of political space that integrates defenders' work space with the protective accompaniment of defenders.

The notion of “acceptable” risk can change over time and varies greatly between individuals or organisations. For some, torture or the death of a family member might be the most unbearable risk. Some defenders believe that being imprisoned is an acceptable risk, as long as it helps to achieve their goals. For others, the threshold might be reached with the first threat.

This political space of activity, in addition to being subjectively defined by those who move within it, is very sensitive to changes in the surrounding national political environment. You therefore have to look at it as a relative and changeable space.

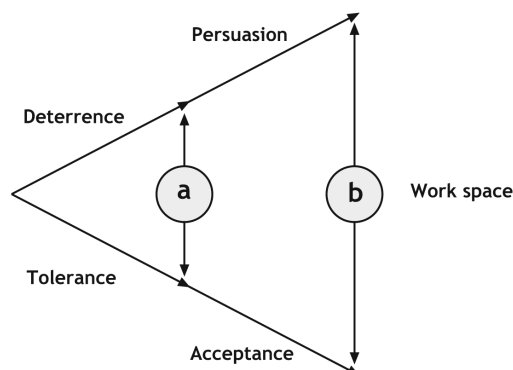
Security and defenders’ work space

All security strategies can be summarised in a few words: you want to expand your work space and sustain it in that way. Speaking strictly in security terms, defenders’ work space requires at least a minimum level of consent by the main actors in the area - especially by political and military authorities and armed groups who might become affected by defenders’ work and decide to act against them.

This consent can be **explicit**, such as a formal permit from the authorities, or **implicit**, for example, in the case of armed groups. Consent will be more solid if the actor can see some benefit resulting from the defenders’ work. It will be lower if the actor perceives related costs. In this case, their level of consent will depend on the political costs carried by an attack on defenders. These issues are especially relevant in armed conflicts where defenders face more than one armed actor. One armed actor might see defenders’ work as helpful to their opponent. Another actor’s open acceptance of defenders’ work may therefore lead to hostility by their opponent.

Defenders’ work space can be represented by two axes:

- ▣ one representing the extent to which the actor will tolerate or accept your work based on the extent to which your work impacts on the actor’s objectives or strategic interests (the tolerance-acceptance continuum)
- ▣ one representing the extent to which you can deter attacks, because of high political costs, expanding to when you can dissuade the actor on rational/moral grounds or even persuade them of political benefits to not attack you or violating human rights (the deterrence-persuasion continuum).



The expansion of your work space can be achieved over time. Achieving acceptance of defenders' work through a strategy of persuasion should take into account working for the needs of the population, your image, procedures, integration etc, as represented in space "b". But in areas of armed conflict the space usually remains limited to just that which follows from the armed actors' consent, partially generated as a result of the costs of attacking the defenders (deterrence), then having the space reduced to "a".

Generally speaking, space "b" is more likely to be occupied by non contentious defenders than by defenders who openly denounce abuses. Unless the potential aggressor achieves moral conversion and is persuaded of the goodness of the defender's work to the point of accepting it.

Global security strategy

- Expanding your work space by increasing tolerance and acceptance
- Expanding your work space: increasing deterrence and persuasion

Defining and implementing a global security strategy will contribute to raise the whole political cost of actions against defenders by reduce the level of impunity of potential aggressor and extending the work space of defenders. Therefore, the global security strategy relies a lot on advocacy.

Expanding your work space by increasing tolerance and acceptance

Your work may affect the objectives or strategic interests of someone who does not care much about human rights, leading to a hostile working environment for defenders. In order to gain acceptance, or at least consent, it is important to limit the confrontation to a strict minimum. Some suggestions for how to do this:

- ▣ **Provide information and training about the nature and legitimacy of defenders' work.** Government officials and other actors may be more inclined to cooperate if they know and understand your work and your reasons for undertaking it. It is not enough just for higher officials to be aware of what you do, because defenders' daily work usually involves many levels of officials in different government bodies. You should make a continuous effort to inform and train officials at all levels.
- ▣ **Clarify the objectives of defenders' work.** In all conflicts it is useful to clarify and limit the scope and objectives of your work. This will reduce misunderstandings or unnecessary confrontations that can stop defenders achieving their aims.
- ▣ **Limit your work objectives to match the socio-political space of your work.** When defenders' work affects an armed actor's specific strategic interests, the actor may react more violently and with less consideration for his image. Some types of work make defenders more vulnerable than others, so make sure your objectives match both the risk you can handle and your protection capacities as much as possible.

- **Allow space in your strategies for “saving face”.** If you have to confront an actor about human rights abuses seek to leave them a way to gain credit for taking action to address the situation
- **Establish alliances** widely with as many social sectors as possible.
- **Find a balance** between transparency in your work, to show that legitimate defenders have nothing to hide, and the need to avoid giving out information that could compromise your work or security.
- **Finally**, remember that the legitimacy and quality of your work are necessary conditions for keeping your work space open, but that may not be enough. You may also need to be able to deter potential aggressors (see below).

Expanding your work space: increasing deterrence and persuasion

Human rights defenders working in hostile environments should be able to conjure up enough political costs to frighten an aggressor into not attacking them: This is called **deterrence**.

It is useful to distinguish between “general” and “immediate” deterrence. **General deterrence** consists of the combined effect of all national and international efforts at protecting defenders, i.e. anything which helps to create a general understanding that attacks against defenders will have negative consequences. This can happen through wide thematic campaigns or training and information about protecting defenders. On the other hand, **immediate deterrence** sends a specific message to a specific aggressor to keep their attacks away from a specific target. Immediate deterrence is necessary when general deterrence fails or is seen to be insufficient, and when protection efforts are focused on specific cases.

Persuasion is a more inclusive concept. It can be defined as the result of acts which induce an opponent not to carry out a contemplated hostile action. Rational argument, moral appeal, increased cooperation, improved human understanding, distraction, adoption of non-offensive policy and deterrence may all be used to achieve persuasion. Each of these tactics is used at different times by defenders at the national and international levels. Defenders cannot of course use direct “threats” very often: the strategy is more about reminding others that, depending on their decisions, a series of consequences **could** occur.

Putting deterrence to work

In order to measure whether you have been effective in deterrence, a series of conditions must be met:

- 1 ♦ **Defenders must clearly specify and communicate to the aggressor what types of actions are unacceptable.** Deterrence will not work if the aggressor does not know which actions will provoke a response.
- 2 ♦ **The defenders' organisation must articulate its commitment to deterring the aggression in a way that makes the aggressor aware of it.** The organisation must also have a deterrence strategy in place.
- 3 ♦ **The defenders' organisation must be capable of carrying out the deterrence, and make the aggressor aware of this.** If a threat of mobilising national or international reaction is not credible, there is no reason to expect it to have a protective effect.
- 4 ♦ **Defenders must know who the aggressor is.** Hit squads often work in the dark of night and rarely claim responsibility. This therefore often boils down to analysing who might benefit from an attack. In order to improve the effectiveness of a national or international reaction, an assumption of "state responsibility", although correct, requires more specific information about which factions within the state apparatus are behind the attack.
- 5 ♦ **The aggressor must have seriously considered attacking and then decided not to carry it out** because the costs - due to the defenders' commitment - would be greater than the benefits.

It is difficult for defenders to dissuade an aggressor who will remain unaffected by a commitment to deter: this happens when governments can be punished by the international community, but cannot in turn punish the actual human rights violator. For example, private armies can be outside the government's reach or don't share its interests. In such cases, the aggressor may even benefit from attacking human rights defenders, because attacks will put the government in a difficult position and harm its image.

Defenders will never know in advance if their "deterrence commitment" is strong enough to dissuade a potential attack. The aggressor may expect benefits that defenders are not aware of. Assessing the situation as carefully as possible is a permanent challenge and may even be impossible due to lack of critical information. Defenders' organisations must therefore develop extremely flexible fallback plans and the ability to respond rapidly to unexpected events.

Table: Preventing a direct aggression – different protection outcomes

| PREVENTING A DIRECT AGGRESSION: DIFFERENT PROTECTION OUTCOMES | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 • Changes in the perpetrator’s behaviour: Deterring aggressors by increasing the potential costs of an aggression.</p> | <p>Confronting and reducing threats (by acting directly against the source, or against any action taken by the source)</p> |
| <p>2 • Changes in duty-bearer stakeholders’ compliance with the UN Declaration on HRD²: Dissuading aggressors by improving the likelihood of authorities taking action to protect defenders or to punish the perpetrators of an aggression.</p> | |
| <p>3 • Reducing the feasibility of the attack: Reducing defenders’ exposure, improving your working environment, managing fear and stress properly, developing security plans, etc.</p> | <p>Reducing vulnerabilities, enhancing capacities</p> |

² See chapter 1. For example, after a defender denounces threats, either the prosecutor or the police or some other body investigates what has happened and this investigation leads to action against those who are threatening the defender. Well, at least this may be the objective of a reaction to prevent an aggression.

