

Inner Beliefs and Values

Our instinctive physiological responses are not the only resource we have at our disposal to help us build resilience when facing threats. Understanding ourselves and our security in this context also demands that we reflect on the values and beliefs we bring to our activism: they inform how we perceive the world and society around us, our role within it, and indeed our understanding of security and well-being. From this perspective, it is helpful to recognise the inner beliefs and values which inspire us, motivate our work and build our resilience. It is equally important that we respect the values and beliefs of our colleagues and fellow human rights defenders in order to avoid contributing to division, tension and mistrust in our collectives, organisations and movements.

The inner beliefs and values that underpin our work vary greatly. For some, they may have their roots in traditional cultural, religious or spiritual beliefs; for others, they may be entirely humanist or atheist. In any case, for many human rights defenders, inner beliefs and ethical values are a fundamental lens through which we perceive the world: they offer many of us a sense of purpose; they can help us find inner peace in times of turmoil, strength in the face of adversity and healing when hurt.

However, these values are often deeply significant and personal, and we might hesitate before voicing them to others. We think about bringing our values to our work as a personal process, but what does it look like to be explicit about our values as individuals, or indeed our common values as a collective or movement? If we articulate our ethos, beliefs and their associated rituals, and recognise the role these values play in inspiring our activism and maintaining our resilience, we will be more inclined to create, respect and defend space for them within our work.

Conversely, it may also be the case that we assume (correctly or incorrectly) that our colleagues or fellow human rights defenders share the same values or beliefs as we do. Acting on the basis of these assumptions, we can inadvertently limit the space for the distinct values and beliefs of others during our work together. Regardless of what values or beliefs underpin our work, it is beneficial to forge a group environment in which we can be confident that the values that motivate us are respected and perhaps even celebrated.

A first step towards a more comprehensive view of our values – be they atheistic, spiritual, religious or otherwise – is to create a safe space where we can share them with those around us. This can prove a communal source of mutual understand-

ing, inspiration, growth and support, paving the way for us to better understand why, as activists, we take the risks we take, and enabling us to better care for each other in the course of our work.

Further, such a space must be open and respectful, wherein each person feels able to share the values which inspire them in a way which does not lead to judgement, arguments or dogma, but rather fosters solidarity, mutual respect and learning.

Faith and cultural practices as a source of connection or division

As much as faith and cultural practices can be a unifying or connecting factor within your team, they can also become the opposite. If minority practices are discouraged, for example by not taking dietary requirements (which may be cultural, ethical or religious) into account when organising group meals or creating an atmosphere of ‘us and them’, they can become a divisive force. This negatively impacts not only those who are marginalised, but the entire group.

Looking at wider society, faith and cultural practices could form a unifying (and perhaps strategically useful) connection between you and the society you want to transform. However, it could also become a divisive factor, which separates you from the ‘others’, and could be exploited to stigmatise or target you.

For a closer look at these connecting and dividing factors, and how you can impact them, see [Section III | Strategise. The Do-No-Harm Approach](#).

So far we have discussed holistic security in terms of individuals. Nevertheless, as human rights defenders, we seldom work alone and most of us have families and communities which may also be directly or indirectly affected by our work. Commonly, we work with peers and in groups. As groups, we need to build sufficient trust to talk to each other meaningfully about our motivations and fears, to develop a shared understanding of the risks and threats facing us, to agree an integrated set of security practices, to build solidarity, resilience and agility together and to hold each other accountable for consistently implementing those practices. We will explore the dynamics of these relationships in the context of our work in the next Chapter.