What is Holistic Security for Human Rights Defenders?

All of us desire and need a sense of security, the feeling that we are protected from harm. When we feel safe, we can relax our bodies, calm our minds, rest and recuperate. If we are unable to feel safe for extended periods, it is possible for us to quickly become tired, miserable and even physically ill. As human rights defenders, we sometimes choose to sacrifice our sense of safety (at least temporarily) in the pursuit of a better society, free from oppression and exploitation. Unfortunately, in the course of our work as human rights defenders, we are occasionally confronted by others who will try, perhaps through violence, intimidation and harassment, or by more subtle methods of oppression, to prevent us from achieving our goals.

Maintaining and expanding our space

Incidents ranging from arrests, intimidation and violent attacks, to harassment, reputational attacks, surveillance and social exclusion, can all be viewed as attempts made by our adversaries (those who don't share our aims or actively oppose them) to limit or close the spaces in which we work and live. These 'spaces' can mean literal physical spaces, including public squares and areas where groups can protest or demonstrate, our offices or homes, as well as our economic space (by limiting our access to resources), our social space (by limiting our freedom of expression or peaceful association), our technological space (through censorship, surveillance and access to our data), our legal space (through judicial, administrative or bureaucratic harassment), our environmental space (through promotion of 'development' models which are not sustainable), to name but a few.

By adopting an organised approach to security, our ultimate aim is to defend our space for work and, ideally, expand it so that the societies and States in which we operate will move with us towards respecting and protecting human rights.

In order to do this, we can adopt various tactics and utilise tools and weave them into plans for our human rights activities. These tools and tactics often correspond to one or more strategies for maintaining and expanding our space for work: those

which encourage others to **accept** our work; those which **deter** attacks against us, and those with which we **protect** ourselves.

Work Space

△ Acceptance
△ Protection
△ Deterrence
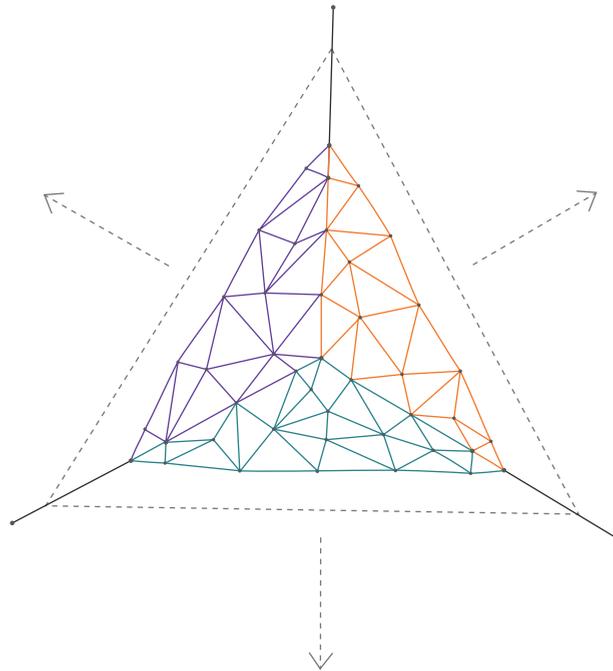
These over-arching strategies are expanded upon in more detail in
Section III | Strategise.

Well-being as subversive and political

The threats faced by human rights defenders are varied and complex. We are perhaps used to thinking about security in rather narrow terms such as protecting ourselves from violent attacks, office raids, judicial harassment or threats from armed groups.

While an organised approach to these kinds of threats is indeed necessary, a holistic approach to security goes beyond that. Threats may also include structural forms of violence and harassment: economic and other types of marginalisation, extremely heavy workloads, lack of financial security, stress and traumatic

experiences among a host of other factors. Such threats not only affect us, but also have implications for the people around us, including friends and family. Further, we must recognise that external threats affect not only our physical safety but also the space within ourselves, our bodies and our minds which, when threatened, inhibit our capacity to carry out our work and be content doing so. Well-being is central not only to carrying out our activism effectively but also to our ability to think as 'objectively' as possible, analyse and strategise.

A holistic approach to security understands self-care not as selfishness, but as a subversive and political act of self-preservation. How we define our well-being in the context of activism is subjective and deeply personal. It is influenced by the differing needs of our bodies and minds, the challenges we face, our beliefs (religious, spiritual or secular), our gender identities, interests and relationships. As activists and human rights defenders, we must define security for ourselves and build solidarity and support for one another into our groups, organisations and movements on this basis.

In spite of threats to our space for work and personal expression, we don't often give up: we decide to keep challenging the injustices which we see in the world. For this reason, **we can think of security for human rights defenders as well-being in action**: being physically and emotionally healthy and sustaining ourselves while continuing to do the work that we believe is important, and carrying out the necessary analysis and planning to stay secure on our own terms.

Taking control of our information

No organised approach to security is complete without an organised approach to information and data management. The tools we rely on to manage our information – digital and analogue – also form part of our space for work and are subject to many of the same threats which we face in other areas.

Largely unseen and operating behind closed doors, the surveillance industry has experienced huge growth since the turn of the century. Access to our sensitive data (the files we manage, our email and mobile phone communication, etc.) is ever more important to those seeking to hinder the work of human rights defenders. Equally, the digital dimension now comprises a huge part of our lives, yet many of us feel that it is not within our control or treat it as something which does not impact our 'real' security. We must challenge these perceptions; identifying our sensitive data, understanding where it is stored and who has access to it, before undergoing a process of implementing means to protect it is not only a security measure, but also an act of political self-empowerment.

Holistic Security

△ **Physical Security**
Threats to our physical
integrity. Threats to our
homes, buildings, vehicles.

△ **Psycho-social Security**
Threats to our psychological
wellbeing.

△ **Digital Security**
Threats to our information,
comunication and equipment.

— Holistic security analysis,
strategies and tactics.
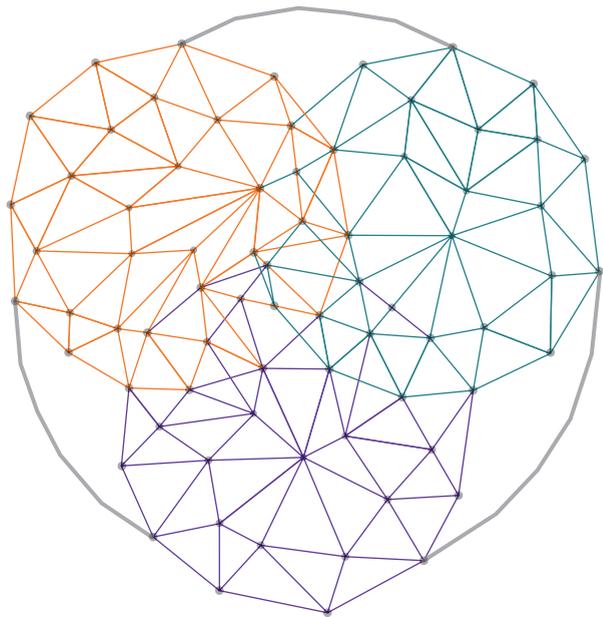
Holistic security practice, therefore, refers to the conservation of the well-being and agency of ourselves as human rights defenders, our families and communities, through the consistent use of psycho-social, physical, digital and other tools and tactics in ways that reinforce (rather than contradict) each other. These tactics enable us to increase our overall security, mitigate the threats we face and expand the choices we are able to make on a day to day basis.

Resilience and agility

It is worth bearing in mind that the threats and challenges in the world around us are always changing. This is particularly true for human rights defenders.
We must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we can plan for everything. Unfortunately, due to our work, 'unexpected' events are almost the norm for many of us and activist communities need to be able to develop the necessary emotional and mental flexibility to deal with this. Cultivating a strong sense of well-being and feeling mentally and emotionally centred, is critical in a context where the risks and threats that we encounter are largely unpredictable.

Given the needs and demands of activism that can destroy even the best laid security plans, a more realistic approach is not to ignore the unexpected but instead to incorporate it into our responses. In this sense, it is not sufficient to simply develop a security plan and follow it to the letter. Rather, it is better to work with the unexpected and develop other attributes such as presence of mind or centredness to sharpen our ability to cope with it.

We often continue to carry out our work in full awareness of the threats that come along with it. Indeed, it is our own vulnerability that keeps us connected to the experiences of others whose rights are being violated. It is not possible to make ourselves completely 'safe' and perhaps it is not even desirable. With this in mind, we also need to build **resilience** and **agility**. Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from set-backs or injuries. Agility is the ability to quickly adopt new security practices in response to new or emerging threats. The goal is not to be safe through doing nothing, but to consciously face threats and protect ourselves and our communities as much as possible, so that we can still be engaged and active.

For most human rights defenders at risk, the notions of resilience and agility are not new, nor is the idea of having tools and tactics for staying safe during dangerous work. In this first exercise, we will explore some of the existing practices we have for staying safe.

Note: The exercises throughout this manual can usually be done alone or in a group. In some group settings the topics addressed may be sensitive or divisive. It is therefore important that you create a 'safe' space where everyone in the group feels comfortable speaking and sharing their own opinions and there is a general atmosphere of trust. Some tips on how to create a safe space include establishing shared agreements at the beginning of the conversation, being mindful that it's OK to have differing opinions, making sure that all members of the group are heard and that each person's contribution is treated as equally valid.

Exercise

Reflection on existing security practices

Purpose & Output

This exercise helps you reflect on what security means to you and explore the security tactics, plans and strategies that you consciously or unconsciously have in place.

You get a snapshot of your existing practices, how they interact with each other and how you can use it as a foundation for the next steps.

Input & Materials

If you want to document the results, write the answers on a flip-chart or sticky notes on a wall.

Format & Steps

Individual reflection or group discussion
Ask yourself or the group the following questions:
1. Think about the word 'security' or 'safety'. What does it actually mean to you? What do you need in order to feel secure or safe?
2. What do you do every day to avoid danger and protect yourself, your property, your friends or family?
3. When was the last time you did something which made you feel safe and strong?
4. Call to mind an activity you carried out which was dangerous. What did you do in order to stay safe?
5. What other people are important in helping you to feel secure or safe?

6. What resources or activities are important in helping you to feel secure or safe?

Take note of your answers to these questions as they will be useful in later exercises and Sections of the guide and will remind you that you are not building new practices from 'scratch'.

Colleagues or team members might feel strange talking about 'security' if there is no existing organisational culture of talking about these issues. This exercise can nevertheless be utilised to start such a process of awareness raising.

The exercise itself might start the process of generating ideas on what to improve or add to your security practices. You might want to take notes on these in preparation for Section III | Strategise which deals with planning.

As activists, we may pay little conscious attention to security, and only passively note the absence of danger or feeling insecure. By referring to holistic security as 'well-being in action', we propose to be more conscious about security from an empowering perspective and to create an integrated experience by grounding security in our daily perceptions of threat and security, our feelings, reflections and practices shaped by the communities in which we live and work.

In the rest of Section I | Prepare, we begin preparations for a more comprehensive and organised approach to security. We start with an examination of how people react to danger and threats on a physiological level and in what ways this affects our perceptions, mindset, and subsequent actions. We then explore working in teams and groups while being under stress and danger and how positive (and negative) dynamics emerge in this context which will influence our security.