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SECURITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: SUPPORTING GRANTEE SAFETY

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Threats and vulnerabilities of human rights defenders working in different contexts

Protecting and Promoting the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) People (Esther Adiambo, PEMA-Kenya)

- Inherent tension between safety and visibility.
- Security situation is exacerbated by sensational media coverage and inflammatory rhetoric of religious leaders, many of whom accuse LGBTI HRDs of representing Western interests and benefitting personally from Western funding.
- Digital threats a major concern. Some LGBTI activists embrace social networking (facebook, twitter) as a means of overcoming isolation and growing their networks. However, this can put them at additional risk.
- Esther highlighted that some PEMA members face threats from family who are not supportive of their activism or identity. On the flip side, PEMA's members' family and partners have also faced threats due to the work of PEMA.
- At times, political leaders galvanize supporters by pitting them against sexual minorities. (even those politicians that are friendly behind closed doors undermine LGBTI activists in public).
- Similarly the media has been hostile to sexual minorities in PEMA's community. PEMA has prioritized working with the media to raise awareness regarding LGBTI rights and have won a few key supporters.

Resource Rights and Corporate Accountability (Claudia Samayoa, UDEFEGUA, Guatemala)

- Governments are undermining activists' credibility and putting them in danger by claiming HRDs are terrorists, anti-development, or a threat to national security
- A complex web of state and non-state actors are responsible for threats, making it difficult to discern who is behind each attack

For example, in the case of Guatemala, many of the people working for security companies working for mines are former military, some of whom have been accused of rights abuses

- Resource extraction projects often are linked to organized crime and local corruption

Conflict and Intersectionality: Example of Activists Working on LGBTI Rights in the Context of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict (Rauda Morcos, Aswat, Palestine)

Example of 2007 Aswat conference, which faced threats from diverse religious fundamentalist groups:

- Israeli police would not have been willing to support a group of Palestinian activists
- Two important Palestinian organizations came without being publicly announced, which provided a measure of protection and legitimacy within the community
- International interference can make things worse. It is the right of local groups to decide when they feel it is best to stop working underground and put an issue on the political agenda.

HRDs Working in the Context of Political Transition: Example of Promoting Women's Rights in the Wake of the Egyptian Revolution (Nawla Darwiche, New Woman Foundation, Egypt)

Example of women's rights in Egypt:

- Increasing threats from religious fundamentalists
- Even greater restrictions on civil society and foreign funding than those that existed before the revolution are choking organizations
- Torture and killing of activists, journalists and political opponents
- Non-state actors, including reactionary groups that undermine HRDs' security by accusing them of being agents of the West
- This has been successful in turning popular opinion against HRDs

Responses and strategies

Being a Responsive Funder

"Provide discreet, timely, core funding." (Nawla Dawiche)

- When a Palestinian LGBTQ group organized a convening, UAF gave them a grant to hire a private security company, rather than relying on the Israeli police for their protection
- When contexts are changing quickly, funders need to be adaptable to activists' needs.
- Funders wanting to support organizations fighting to stay open – provide core support rather than funding activities. Be willing to shift support in that direction if requested.

- Fund organizations with various statuses – e.g. private companies, law firms. But be ready to pay associated taxes.

Being a Responsible Funder

“How do we talk about security and how do we fund it? This theme has come up often. We were reacting to a lot of emergencies, but Wellspring and our grantees didn’t know what we could do around prevention.” (Catherine Townsend, Wellspring Associates)

- Questionnaire provides guidance to funders and grantees around prevention.
- Training and related equipment/software for digital security is necessary.
- There is much more money for training than there is for the implementation of what is learned.
- Funders should work with grantees on a risk analysis and security plan, including support for staying in-community versus evacuation.
- Encourage grantees to ask for capacity building funds up front, hire security organizations to help with grantees’ security.
- Site visits: organizational information on an itinerary should be shared with caution.
- Important to travel with the same taxi drivers whom grantees trust, rather than introducing new taxi drivers to grantees without notice.
- Lure of funding draws people to behave in ways that they otherwise wouldn’t. The burden is on the funder to ensure that communication remains private and anonymous.
- Avoid asking questions to grantees that would create difficult choices – e.g. they should not have to wonder, ‘do we risk our safety by taking these funders around the community or do we not have them come?’
- Be cautious about visiting organizations – don’t visit offices if this will attract negative attention.
- It can be very dangerous for funders to insist that they need to have their name on the programs or materials they have funded. (e.g. EU funding requires this)
- Funder communications: can garner unwanted attention, e.g. when grants lists are published online.
- Name activities differently so as not to attract attention: ‘education’ or ‘travel’, not human rights. Tension for funders between wanting to advocate for HR funding by publicizing it and demonstrating its impact, and protecting the security of grantees.

Security planning and training

“It’s better to have five security rules and commit to them than it is to have many rules that aren’t followed.” (Claudia Samayoa, Founder, Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit)

- Security training requirement: executive director attends. Give grantee a few security related changes that they can work on immediately.
- Create networks to share information about threats. Early warning and prevention are critical.

- Want to provide shared, collaborative space and be inclusive of many groups. But means information becomes dispersed and lose control of it. One strategy is to keep groups small and only give information to those who need it.
- Organizations rely too much on the director. If threatened, the director should be able to leave the organization and the work should be able to continue.
- Have to create boundaries with activists who don't follow security protocols and then continually request support in emergencies.
- Lists of participants with contact information can be a security risk.

Protective accompaniment

"Protective accompaniment means being present without being a protagonist." (John Lindsay-Poland, Research and Advocacy Director, Fellowship of Reconciliation, USA)

- Means having a physical presence 24/7 – being present without being a protagonist. Raises profile of community and increases legitimacy of defenders; involves monitoring and public awareness-raising.
- Funders can think of themselves as protective companions. E.g. if a grantee is testifying at a court case, attend with him/her.

Digital security

"In the Middle East, the security of Twitter can be problematic, but we used it to create a revolution." (Nawla Dawiche)

- Tactical Technology Collective's security in a box is a good resource.
- Skype is owned by Microsoft, which does not have a good track record on security (e.g. allowing China to eavesdrop). Google Talk can be better.
- Facebook is a challenge for personal security but it remains an important tool for mobilization.
- Don't be so scared you are paralyzed.

Advocating as a funder

"Effective international action must be fast, accurate, and strategic." (Mary Lawlor)

- It is helpful to strategically develop personal contacts with those who we ask to take action. Do not ignore the oppressors.
- International action can also be counterproductive and should always be led by defenders themselves and their families.
- Funders can pressure their own governments to keep other governments (e.g. Egypt) accountable for violations of freedoms of organizations and refuse to disclose information about civil society organizations.
- LGBTQ organizing in Palestine: better for straight Palestinians to stand in solidarity than to have a lot of noise from Western funders, which can add to the perception that LGBT issues are a Western invention.