

PRINCIPLE

SEEK SAFETY IN SUPPORT NETWORKS

When activists are threatened, it's important to harness national or international networks that can provide support and deter violence.

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“IMPUNITY MAKES POTENTIAL AGGRESSORS MORE LIKELY TO ACT, SO YOU MUST DO WHAT YOU CAN TO CHALLENGE THAT IMPUNITY.”

You're an activist, you want change, but powerful people are threatening violence to stop you from achieving your goals. It is vital that you put in place measures to keep you and your colleagues safe. One proven mechanism is to develop national and international support networks that can be activated at times of heightened risk, harnessing public and/or international support to deter violence against you. This is a strategy that groups like Peace Brigades International have been using to keep human rights defenders safe for over 30 years.

You need to be aware why and how you might be at risk. Whose interests are you threatening? What or who might influence the behaviour of that individual or institution to deter them from hurting you or locking you up?

To effectively deter violence against you, you need to be able to create a *political cost* that those threatening you would pay if they attacked, and make sure that they are aware of that cost. What would make those people think twice before attacking you? Is it the threat of public uproar? Is it the possibility of a diplomatic sanction? Damage to their international reputation?

POTENTIAL RISKS

Remember that your security situation is constantly evolving in response to the activities you carry out, the interests you threaten, and the victories you achieve. Don't rely upon any single strategy to keep you safe. Rather, keep analysing and evaluating. Document any incident that might be perceived as a threat and be aware that, at some point, the only way to keep safe might be to physically relocate for a while.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Angola 15+2

Based on this analysis, you can begin to assemble a support network of citizens, NGOs, journalists, embassies, politicians, or United Nations (UN) experts who are attentive to your situation, primed to take action in the case of any threats to you and your colleagues, and capable of exacting a political cost against those who might attack you. You will need to make sure your adversaries are aware of the network, its weight, and its willingness to react.

Support networks should seek to prevent as well as respond to risks. You will likely face efforts to discredit or demonize your activism, thus making you more vulnerable to attack. To avoid this, you might ask organizations in your network to take actions that will legitimize your work, either publicly, or in private with those who would do you harm. Impunity makes potential aggressors more likely to act, so ensure that your network is vigorous in demanding justice and accountability for any and all attacks.

Your potential aggressors need to understand that the world is watching and their image is at stake.

Peace Brigades International, for example, takes a very hands-on approach to creating this deterrent. When invited by threatened human rights defenders, they will arrange for international volunteers to accompany the defenders in their daily work and embody that international concern. However, this is just one way to make your support network visible. A respected newspaper may publish a story based upon an urgent action issued by an NGO, an important diplomat may meet directly with the government agency or business that opposes your demands, a solidarity caravan may visit your community, or a UN Committee may speak out about your case.

You are the best positioned to know what will really keep you safe, choosing from a range of practical and political measures. But ensure you take the time to do the analysis necessary before you start to campaign, and look for opportunities to use support networks as part of your security strategy.

LEARN MORE

Peace Brigades International
<http://www.peacebrigades.org>

Frontline Defenders
<http://www.frontlinedefenders.org>

International Service for Human Rights
<http://www.ishr.ch/>

Amnesty International
<https://www.amnesty.org>

- Burmese Students' Long March
- Disrupting Obama's town hall in Myanmar
- Hacking Apartheid
- Schools of Struggle
- Street Graduation
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- #ThisFlag
- Zapatista Caravan

Tactics

- Civil disobedience
- Hashtag campaign
- Hunger strike
- Jail solidarity
- Phone banking
- Subversive travel
- Visibility action

Principles

- Activate international mechanisms
- Burn brightly, but don't burn out
- Foster safer spaces
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Practice digital self-defence
- Use organizing strategies that scale

Theories

- Anti-oppression
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Cultural hegemony
- Human rights
- The social cure

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Communications, Community building, Digital security, Human rights, International solidarity, Media

Nonviolent Peaceforce

<http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org>

Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the
Protection of Human Rights

Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren, Kumarian Press, 1997

https://books.google.com/books/about/Unarmed_bodyguards.html?id=XOOFAAAAMAAJ

The Need for Protection Networks for Women Human Rights
Defenders

Marusia López Cruz and Cristina Hardaga Fernández, ISHR, 2015

<http://www.ishr.ch/news/need-protection-networks-women-human-rights-defenders>

¡Involúcrate!

Peace Brigades International, 2014

<https://vimeo.com/73793085>

Programa de Asesorías en Seguridad y Protección para Personas

Defensoras de Derechos Humanos - Guía de facilitación

Brigadas Internacionales de Paz, Proyecto México, 2014

http://www.pbi-mexico.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/mexico/images/News/Reducido_GuiaFacilitacion.pdf