

2.2 Advocacy and security

The relationship between advocacy and security in the humanitarian sector can be complex, with advocacy posing both risks and opportunities for aid worker security. Security staff can play a crucial role in ensuring advocacy efforts do not compromise security risk management efforts, but rather enhance security measures.

2.2.1 Advocacy in the aid sector

Humanitarian advocacy aims to influence the policies and behaviour of powerful actors for the benefit of crisis-affected people. This includes raising awareness of humanitarian needs, calling for the protection of civilians in conflict, and pushing for secure and unimpeded access for humanitarian activities. Advocacy frequently overlaps with access efforts and is similarly underpinned by international humanitarian and human rights law. Aid organisations may also advocate to promote specific social, economic or political changes aimed at improving the lives of marginalised or disadvantaged people.

Organisations can conduct advocacy through a variety of different means, both in public and behind the scenes.

- **Public advocacy** involves openly speaking out on issues, often through media campaigns and public statements. It aims to raise awareness, mobilise support and apply pressure on decision-makers by bringing attention to injustices or humanitarian needs.
- **Private advocacy** can involve behind-the-scenes negotiations, direct appeals and confidential discussions with government officials, armed groups and other power- or influence-holders. The goal can be to secure safe access for aid workers, influence policies discreetly or resolve specific issues without attracting public attention.

Organisations often need to balance these approaches, choosing the most appropriate method depending on the context, potential risks and desired outcomes. Irrespective of an organisation's structure and approach, however, the effectiveness of advocacy can depend on how well these align with overall

strategic goals and how they are supported by security risk management measures to mitigate potential negative impacts.²⁵

There is a tension within some multi-mandate organisations between traditional humanitarian activities and advocacy work. While humanitarian work is susceptible to threats such as criminality, advocacy work presents different types of risks, such as harassment from the authorities, imprisonment, expulsion from the country, the closure of activities or the seizure of documents and computers.

In many contexts governments are adopting more extreme positions, making NGOs with political agendas prime targets, and even targeting organisations whose mandate is more focused on service delivery as opposed to advocacy. Implementing effective mitigation measures in these cases can be challenging, as aid organisations face the full weight of the governmental apparatus against them. Establishing contacts within the government and employing specialised legal experts can help to reduce these risks. While both national and international aid actors are affected, staff of national organisations are likely to be more vulnerable.

2.2.2 Advocacy and security

Advocacy can have both positive and negative impacts on the security of aid workers and the overall security environment in which they operate.

Potential negative interactions

- **Increased risks.** Advocacy, particularly when it involves challenging powerful actors or government policies, can provoke a backlash including harassment, arrests, expulsions and even violent attacks against aid workers. In countries with shrinking civic space, such as Nicaragua and Myanmar, advocacy efforts have led to government crackdowns, including the expulsion of organisations and the targeting of their staff.
- **Compromised access.** Public advocacy campaigns can lead to restrictions on access to affected populations when governments or non-state actors perceive these efforts as hostile or as undermining their authority.
- **Potential for targeting.** Speaking out on sensitive issues, such as human rights abuses, can make aid organisations and their staff targets for violence, where advocacy efforts lead to direct attacks on aid workers.

²⁵ Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) *Aid worker security report 2024: balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2024).

Case example: Restricting civic space

In 2022 the Nicaraguan government enacted laws and resolutions that have resulted in the cancellation of legal registrations for over 770 NGOs and foundations, effectively forcing them to shut down. These actions have impacted a wide array of organisations, including those focused on medical services, child protection, women's rights and climate change. Since 2018 the government has revoked the registrations of more than 950 organisations, severely restricting civic space and hindering the ability of NGOs to operate and advocate for marginalised groups.

Potential positive interactions

- **Advocacy as a protective tool.** When aligned with security risk management efforts, advocacy can help enhance the protection of aid workers by promoting respect for international humanitarian law and raising awareness about the need to protect humanitarian operations. Campaigns like #NotATarget have aimed to raise awareness to help reduce violence against aid workers.
- **Leveraging advocacy for security.** Security staff can use advocacy tools to build acceptance and support for aid operations within local communities, reducing the likelihood of attacks.
- **Justice-related advocacy.** Advocacy towards justice for aid workers can include efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for attacks, harassment and violations against humanitarian staff. Organisations benefit from establishing clear protocols for when and how to pursue justice-related advocacy, ensuring any advocacy actions are informed by a robust risk assessment process.
- **Collaborative advocacy.** Forming alliances with other organisations, legal experts and international bodies can amplify the message while sharing the associated risks.

Advocacy has significant limitations. While it has had some success in achieving policy change, such as the Security Council Resolutions on the protection of aid workers,²⁶ in practice it has been largely ineffective in influencing state actors engaged in armed conflict: see, for example, the conflicts in Gaza and Sudan,

26 For example, UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024) on protection of humanitarian personnel and United Nations and associated personnel in armed conflict ([https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2730\(2024\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2730(2024))).

where state actors have continued to obstruct and endanger humanitarian operations despite extensive advocacy efforts.²⁷

2.2.3 Engaging security staff with advocacy

Security staff can play an important role in ensuring that advocacy initiatives improve security outcomes and do not compromise aid worker security.

Supporting advocacy to enhance security

- **Using security data for advocacy.** Security staff can provide valuable data on incidents, threats and the local context to support advocacy efforts. For instance, incident data can highlight areas where aid workers are most at risk, which can then be used to advocate for better protection measures from governments and armed groups.
- **Supporting public advocacy campaigns.** Security teams can assist in shaping public advocacy campaigns by providing insights into the security implications of different messages and strategies. This ensures that campaigns are not only effective in raising awareness, but also in maintaining the security of staff.

Ensuring advocacy efforts do not undermine security

- **Internal guidelines.** A structured approach with clear guidelines that integrate security considerations into advocacy efforts is beneficial. This might include protocols for speaking out, determining when and how to engage with the media and ensuring that any public statements are carefully vetted to avoid endangering staff. A good organisational policy could be to first assess the likely impact on staff and operations and seek input from security staff and staff members most likely to be affected before making any public statement about a particular situation.
- **Balanced approach.** Maintaining a balance between public and private advocacy can help ensure that efforts do not inadvertently place staff at further risk or hinder ongoing humanitarian activities.
- **Risk assessment and coordination.** Before starting any advocacy initiatives, it can be beneficial to carry out a risk assessment to evaluate the potential risks to staff and operations due to advocacy activities. This can involve analysing the political environment, understanding the potential for backlash and assessing how advocacy messages might be perceived by different actors.

²⁷ Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) *Aid worker security report 2024: balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2024).

The risk assessment should ideally include consideration of the short- and long-term impacts on national aid workers and partner organisations, where applicable.

- **Mitigation measures.** Security staff can help design and implement mitigation measures to protect staff during advocacy campaigns.
- **Risk–benefit analysis.** Organisations often struggle to balance the immediate risks of advocacy with potential long-term benefits due to the lack of measurable evidence and frameworks for assessing risks. To address this, organisations could implement a risk–benefit analysis framework that compares the potential negative outcomes with anticipated positive impacts of advocacy activities. This framework could involve identifying and categorising potential risks, assessing the anticipated benefits of activities, and using a scoring system to weigh them against each other. Scenario planning can help explore possible outcomes, and mitigation measures can be developed to address identified risks. Continuous monitoring and reassessment would allow for adjustments based on changing circumstances, and documenting outcomes can help build a body of evidence to inform future advocacy efforts.

Good practice checklist

- **Leverage existing tools.** Use and disseminate established advocacy risk assessment tools, such as Oxfam’s Civic Space Monitoring Tool.
- **Promote collective advocacy.** Encourage different actors (NGO forums, OCHA, donor governments) to advocate collectively, using non-operational actors for more forceful dialogue with the authorities.
- **Integrate security in advocacy planning.** Incorporate security risk management into advocacy efforts, ensuring all activities are informed by comprehensive risk assessments and implemented with risk mitigation measures in place.
- **Private advocacy first.** Share advocacy messages privately with targeted actors before going public.

- **Engage senior leadership and external messengers.** Use senior leadership, staff outside of the country or third-party organisations to deliver sensitive advocacy messages (information of abuses could be discreetly shared with human rights organisations, for example).
- **Identify escalation pathways.** Establish clear pathways for escalating advocacy messages, keeping other organisations and relevant stakeholders informed.
- **Contingency planning for pushback.** Prepare for potential pushback, including harassment or violence, by having established contacts and legal support ready.
- **Monitor advocacy impact.** Implement mechanisms to monitor both the positive and negative impacts of advocacy efforts, including on aid worker security.
- **Track and use incident data.** Track incidents of violence or harassment and use this data to advocate for aid worker protection.
- **Evaluate advocacy strategies for the protection of aid workers.** Develop tools to systematically assess the pros and cons of different advocacy approaches when addressing violence against aid workers.

Source: Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) *Aid Worker Security Report 2024: balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2024).

2.2.4 Security implications of dealing with the media

Dealing with the media

Aid organisations reach out to the media for a variety of reasons, including advocacy, which can have security implications. A poorly worded, inaccurate or inflammatory statement can put staff in direct danger and may even result in expulsion from a country. At times, a media department based in the head office and staff based in project sites can have conflicting goals. What raises an organisation's profile internationally may not help build trust with communities and local authorities. A clear system can be put in place to avoid negative incidents.

- **Media contact.** Clearly define who is responsible for media contact, drafting press releases and making public statements (including on social media).
 - **Approval of public statements.** For security reasons, it is advisable for the head of the organisation in the country to have final authority over media messages, involving security, regional and head office staff as appropriate.
 - **Authorised spokespeople.** Identify and train staff authorised to conduct interviews, ensuring they are well prepared. This might be limited to the senior leadership in the country or similarly qualified individuals.
 - **Media strategy planning for crises.** An approach can be designed and agreed on before crises occur, with prepared statements ready for various scenarios. Engagement needs to be timely and relevant, focusing on current events to maximise impact and avoid delays.
- *For more on communications during crises or critical incidents, see Chapter 6.1.*

Defining goals and shaping the message

Whatever the goal of media work is – for example, to advance advocacy goals or public visibility for fundraising – organisations will want to carefully balance this against security concerns. For example, a press release blaming a particular armed group for violence against civilians could anger that group and put staff at risk. It can be helpful to prepare a list of possible questions and answers before an interview with a view to keeping messages focused, being mindful of how answers could be received in light of the context and security environment.

Setting ground rules

Media interviews require practice and expertise. It is easy to get thrown by a provocative question and say something unplanned.

- **Be careful about attributing blame for a crisis.** In many complex political emergencies, it may not be possible to say unequivocally who is responsible. It is important to agree in advance on an institutional response for the media. Staff must be careful when relaying information and make sure it has been verified by a reliable source; if it has not, they should say so clearly. Spreading inaccurate rumours could inflame tensions.

- **Ensure there is mutual understanding about ‘off the record’ comments.**
Staff should aim to be clear with journalists when making off-the-record comments and check how the various elements of their interview will be attributed. Some common forms of light disguise in media reports, such as ‘a senior UN source’ or ‘aid agencies operating in the conflict zone’, may not be very effective. There may be only a few such aid organisations, and it might be obvious who the source was.

Finally, as mentioned previously, not all issues require media attention, and it might be appropriate to discuss possible concerns with the target actors in advance to see whether problems might be resolved through other means.

Further information

Research and discussion

Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) *Aid worker security report 2024: balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2024).

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Guidance

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Tools

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Working Group on Protection of Humanitarian Action (2018) *Toolkit: responding to violence against humanitarian action on the policy level* (www.actioncontrelafaim.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Responding-to-Violence.pdf).