

5.2 Security training

Security training within the humanitarian sector has grown significantly in recent years and, although it has drawn learning from the private and government sectors, it has evolved into a unique and diverse area of practice. Despite much research, general guidance development and efforts to improve the quality and consistency of security training in the sector,⁸⁰ there is still no standard approach to security training.

The following chapter covers existing approaches to security training, including the benefits and challenges of different types of training, and key considerations for organisations regarding basic needs and equity of access to these resources.

5.2.1 Why is security training important?

While this GPR focuses on the work of security staff, many, if not most, security decisions are made by individual staff members. For that reason, all staff, no matter their role, should be able to make informed security decisions to avoid incidents and respond effectively in the face of threats. Security training plays a foundational role in this and is a key building block in meeting duty of care obligations and creating a positive security culture.

5.2.2 Types of security training

Security training can be divided into three categories:

- General safety and security awareness, provided to staff through inductions and briefings.
- Personal safety and security skills training, such as hostile environment awareness training (HEAT).
- Security risk management training for staff with security responsibilities, which can include crisis management training.

A potential fourth category is strategic security risk management training for organisational leaders – usually senior management and security directors. This covers issues such as how security interfaces with other organisational

⁸⁰ Such as the NGO Safety and Security Training Project by EISF and InterAction (2014): <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ngo-safety-and-security-training-project-how-create-effective-security-training-ngos>

processes and risk management, as well as how it fits into other policies and areas of work, especially duty of care. This level of training is rare.

Security awareness: inductions and briefings

Basic safety and security awareness training is commonly provided to staff at the beginning of their employment with an organisation or when they arrive in a new location. These sessions are generally brief and focus on providing staff with a general overview of the organisation’s security policies and procedures, including resources and contact points, as well as key roles and responsibilities (including staff members’ own responsibilities). In this sense, awareness sessions are different from most personal safety and security training, which tends to be more generic and does not always cover organisational procedures.

Security awareness sessions can focus on particular types of risks – often related to a particular context – and may also cover broader challenges, such as issues relating to identity-based risks and other concerns e.g. digital threats. Sessions may also cover safety risks, such as fire safety, especially in project locations, though these may occasionally be covered separately from security discussions, especially where organisational focal points for security and health and safety are separate. These types of awareness-raising sessions can become tick-box exercises, especially if they are provided online and do not offer opportunities for questions.

Table 7 Security awareness briefings: example content

Example content	Description
Security approach	An explanation of the organisation’s approach to security, its duty of care obligations to staff, the risks its staff face and the organisation’s attitude to risk (i.e. risk appetite).
Security policy	An introduction to the organisation’s security policy and other relevant policies, including related key principles and security requirements and their application.
Security risk management structure	An overview of the roles and responsibilities with regard to managing security within the organisation.

Example content	Description
Expectations	The organisation's expectations of individual staff, including their responsibility for their own security and that of their colleagues, and relevant actions and behaviours. It can also cover what staff should expect from the organisation regarding security, including the right to withdraw or say 'no' if they feel a situation is insecure.
Travel security	The organisation's security arrangements for travel.
Emergency procedures	An explanation of the organisation's procedures in the event of an emergency, such as medical assistance. This can include providing staff with all necessary information for them to report an incident and seek assistance (e.g. how to call the medical insurance provider).
Incident reporting	An explanation of what incidents should be reported and how to report them.
Resources	Staff are provided with relevant resources, including documents, online resources, handbooks, guides and training material.

Adapted from Bickley, S. (2017) *Security risk management: a basic guide for smaller NGOs*. EISF (<https://gisf.ngo/resource/security-risk-management-a-basic-guide-for-smaller-ngos/>).

Personal safety and security training

More in-depth personal safety and security training may be appropriate for staff working in higher- risk locations. These courses tend to be longer – some lasting several days – and can be provided by qualified staff within an organisation or external service providers.

While security awareness sessions tend to focus on building an understanding of – and adherence to – organisational security protocols, personal security training is often more generic and usually focuses on developing behaviours and skills to keep staff and their colleagues safe. Table 8 below lists some example learning objectives.⁸¹

⁸¹ For more learning objectives in personal security, see EISF and InterAction (2014).

Table 8 Example learning objectives

Objective	Description
Situational awareness	Consideration of surroundings and local perceptions.
Security conscious	Awareness of – and personal responsibility for – decisions and actions that can affect personal and organisational security.
Personal risk profile	Awareness of how each member of staff may be perceived through their appearance or actions, including any displays of wealth or status, confident and composed behaviour, tactful and diplomatic language, and respectful attitudes towards local cultures and customs. It is also important to be clear that sometimes personal profiles are misperceived or cannot be mitigated at an individual level (such as where there may be ethnic targeting or negative attitudes towards women).
Communication	Remaining in contact with colleagues as appropriate and in line with organisational expectations.
Personal response	Empowering staff on how to respond effectively to threats, hostility, crises and stress.

The level of detail and duration of a personal security training course is generally determined by the level of risk a staff member may face. Personal safety and security training can take many forms, but ideally should be adapted to each organisation, the needs of staff and the location in question. What works for one organisation or location may not be suitable for another. Security training courses have become increasingly professional and widespread in recent years (though with varying levels of quality and credibility), with many considering hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) the ‘gold standard’ in personal security training for high-risk contexts.⁸² While there is no set format for HEAT courses, they typically last 3–5 days and involve a combination of classroom-based learning and exercises and more in-depth simulation scenarios, which generally involve placing participants in life-like stressful situations with props and actors.

⁸² HEAT is the predominant type of training, although there are a number of variations, including hostile environment and first aid training (HEFAT) and hostile environment training (HET).

Many argue that the simulation component makes HEAT different from general personal safety and security courses. Quality HEAT courses are based on the principles of high-fidelity stress exposure training (or stress inoculation training), developed in the field of psychology. Research on high-fidelity stress exposure training in professions such as medicine and aviation supports the effectiveness of such training when it:

- conveys knowledge and familiarity with the stress environment to form accurate expectations;
- conveys knowledge about the effects of stress on the brain and behaviour and how to control these responses safely; and
- builds confidence in the person's ability to perform in gradually more stressful scenarios.

HEAT simulations allow individuals to witness their instinctive reactions in highly stressful situations. Whether they tend towards 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze' or 'friend/fawn' (i.e. capitulate and comply) responses, they will be more equipped to manage these reactions in real-world scenarios. By practising skills under pressure and stress, the hope is that trainees will better retain and apply the knowledge should it be needed.

Some HEAT courses also cover trauma first aid. Most HEAT courses are provided by specialised external service providers. In some contexts, country-level entities offer open HEAT courses.

In addition to general personal security training courses and HEAT, there are other courses relating to personal security – the UN, for example, has developed security training specifically for women called the Women's Security Awareness Training (WSAT).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, more personal safety and security courses are being provided online and in modular format (both facilitated and non-facilitated), with some providers also advertising online HEAT courses. Free online personal security courses are also increasingly available on training platforms targeted at humanitarian workers.⁸³ Some larger organisations have developed in-house online security training.

⁸³ Examples are in the 'Further information' section at the end of this chapter.

Some organisations and training providers have opted for a blended approach to training, where a portion of the training is provided online, followed by an in-person component with exercises and simulations.

Simulation-based security training: potential downsides

HEAT courses are an area of contention within the humanitarian security community. While often described and seen as ‘the’ security training for working in high-risk locations, with some staff expecting it from their employing organisations as a matter of course, its limited availability and accessibility and high cost make it a commodity available to only a select few aid workers (although the expansion of the sector has increased its availability in recent years). While to date, there have only been a few studies demonstrating the effectiveness of HEAT simulations,ⁱ research on how the brain responds to threatening situations indicates that previously learned cognitive information becomes unavailable unless it is also solidified with more visceral experiences.ⁱⁱ

The quality of the simulation of a HEAT course can vary from well-managed, psychologist-supported and moderately stress-inducing simulations to more extreme simulations that can be physically and psychologically distressing. Training courses intend to promote skills retention but, if pushed too far, especially without psychological support, the stress experienced by trainees could have the opposite effect. More concerning is the risk of traumatisation or re-traumatisation in security training simulations, depending on how sensitive a participant may be to certain triggers.

While the most extreme simulations – hostage-taking scenarios, for example – are now less common in the humanitarian sector, the risk of harming participants by putting them through stressful simulations remains a concern. Good practice suggests aiming for moderate levels of stress (to encourage memory formation) while ensuring that simulation scenarios are clearly linked to specific learning objectives, and participants are encouraged to focus on how they react to stressors to learn more about their own responses to stress.

While the risk of harm cannot be removed completely, experienced training providers have put in place safeguards. These include having a qualified psychologist administer confidential pre-training psychological and trauma history questionnaires and providing consultations with participants of concern prior to the training. An onsite psychologist can also be made available to support participants during simulations. All trainers, learners and actors should feel empowered to step out of a simulation at any point if they feel it is beyond them to manage. Finally, a psychologist can follow up with any participant who struggled in the training to ensure their wellbeing. Overall, any stress-inducing simulation should aim to have well-trained role players, psychological support personnel and clear guidelines and rules.

i Turner, C.R., Bosch, D. and Nolty, A.A.T. (2021) 'Self-efficacy and humanitarian aid workers' *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 6(1), 1–12 (<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00092-w>) and Roberts, N.T. (2021) *Hostile environment awareness training for humanitarian aid workers: an outcome evaluation*. Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Psychology.

ii Arnsten, A.F. (2015) 'Stress weakens prefrontal networks: molecular insults to higher cognition' *Nature Neuroscience* 18(10), 1376–1385 (<https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.4087>) and McEwen, B.S. and Akil, H. (2020) 'Revisiting the stress concept: implications for affective disorders' *Journal of Neuroscience* 40(1), 12–21 (<https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0733-19.2019>).

Security risk management training

In-person and online training courses in security risk management for humanitarian staff cover essential aspects of managing security, including how to identify risks and mitigate them, as well as how to respond to particular situations or crises, including detention and kidnapping. Increasingly, these courses are considering identity-based risks and how to incorporate these within security risk management.

Training tends to be externally provided, but some organisations have developed internal systems to train staff to become security focal points. Some of these courses have become part of a certification programme to formally recognise

the skills and competencies of security staff (see ‘Further information’ at the end of this chapter).

Specific training on different aspects of security risk management is also readily available, such as training on incident reporting, driving (defensive, safe and armoured vehicles), and crisis management; courses include tabletop exercises, which can cover multiple offices in different locations across an organisation. External service providers also offer crisis management courses, and guidance on how to develop and facilitate this type of training is available online (some examples are in ‘Further information’ at the end of this chapter).

There are examples of strategic training courses for senior leaders, such as security directors and senior leadership with security responsibilities, for example on duty of care and security risk management frameworks. However, security risk management training resources for senior security staff remain uncommon and most learning is shared through networking organisations and at events and workshops.

5.2.3 Challenges

Despite progress in the provision of security training to humanitarian aid workers, significant challenges remain – especially in personal safety and security training.

Table 9 Challenges in the provision of security training

Area	Challenge
Disparities	National aid workers, including those working for international organisations, are much less likely to receive personal safety and security training than their international counterparts.
Access	There is a lack of locally accessible and language-appropriate security training available, which makes it more challenging to provide resources to national aid workers. Limitations in the location and timing of courses can also hinder staff more generally from accessing training. Additionally, there are concerns that HEAT courses have come to be seen as the gold standard in security training, while not being financially or logistically accessible to most humanitarian aid workers, especially national aid workers.

Area	Challenge
Effectiveness	Despite a reliance on personal security training to prepare staff to work in high-risk locations – particularly HEAT courses – there is limited published evidence on the effectiveness of different types of personal security training. While published studies support the efficacy of such training, most reports of impact are anecdotal.
Costs	Security training can vary significantly in cost depending on what is provided to staff and where, with many security staff forced to make decisions over who gets trained and who does not, based on available funding.
Sustainability	Training courses tend to be one-off experiences. Even though some organisations require refreshers every few years, much of the information imparted is quickly forgotten without regular practice or a clear link to work responsibilities.
Quality	The absence of a clear standard for personal safety and security training means a wide variance exists between courses, both those provided within organisations and those provided by external service providers. Organisations with less knowledge of security risk management or fewer financial resources are more likely to inadvertently pick poorer-quality security training for their staff.
Relevance	Some security courses, particularly those provided online, lack tailoring to specific contexts, programmes, organisations and individuals. Although this makes the training more accessible, it also risks not being relatable to the trainees' particular needs and experiences.
Diversity	Although there has been progress in this area, there is still a lack of diversity in trainers, which can impact their ability to effectively engage with – and tailor content to – diverse groups of aid workers.

Adapted from GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) *State of practice: the evolution of security risk management in the humanitarian space* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/security_risk_mgmt_humanitarian_space_2024).

5.2.4 Good practice considerations

Organisations should make special efforts to ensure that all staff have access to security training and learning opportunities, but especially staff members most exposed to security risks. This means going beyond a simple assessment of training needs and carrying out an organisation-wide evaluation of risk levels of different staff, their access to security training and measures to cover identified

gaps. This can be complemented by the translation of training materials into relevant local languages. For some international organisations, this has meant reducing the provision of HEAT courses to free up funding for comprehensive personal security training for more staff – especially those who would normally not receive training.

Case example: Security as a right

One organisation's security team has focused on fostering an organisational environment that sees security as a right. This involves educating staff on what they should expect from the organisation in terms of security support and how to raise concerns if what is provided in practice does not match what staff have been told to expect. This is reinforced in training and through awareness-raising to empower staff to exercise their right to security.

Online training has become an important resource within the humanitarian sector. Increasingly, security training courses are available at cost and free, with differing levels of detail, covering multiple aspects of security, and in an increasing number of languages. The advent of artificial intelligence has sped up the process of developing and translating new online courses. While the generic nature and 'cookie cutter' design of online courses – especially those that are freely available – remains a weakness, these resources can serve as an introduction to security that can be complemented by more detailed and organisation-relevant training.

A challenge with designating security training by contextual risk levels is that it can lead to gaps in threat events, such as interpersonal violence, which are more likely to be covered in higher-risk personal training courses but are relevant to most staff, no matter their location. For this reason, some organisations and training providers have adopted a modular approach to training, designating certain topics as 'core' for all staff and building modules on top based on individual needs, location, threats, organisational identity and frameworks.

Some external training providers offer bespoke courses adapted to particular needs. These can be expensive. In-house training, while also a significant organisational investment in terms of funding and personnel, allows courses to

cover organisation-specific circumstances, such as the type of programming and any particular staff profiles, and have greater adaptability to particular contexts and challenges. Several resources exist to support organisations with developing in-house security training (see ‘Further information’ at the end of this chapter).

Several organisations have opted for a training of trainers approach, which allows them to build internal capacity and provide bespoke training in more locations. Such approaches struggle with quality control and must be closely monitored. Interagency collaboration and joint investment to provide context-appropriate security training courses to local aid workers have also proven useful and can reduce training costs.

In order to reinforce the learning imparted during training courses, some organisations have built in ongoing reference to safety and security issues in routine work and established periodic safety and security drills. For those with security responsibilities, some organisations have developed a mentoring programme and assigned ‘homework’ that relates to the trainees’ actual responsibilities, allowing them to learn while doing their work. For example, one UN agency provides 90 days of on-the-job training for security personnel following its security course.

Inclusive security in training

Discussing differentiated risks based on identity profiles can be challenging. Training offers an opportunity to tackle myths and prejudices in this area, and several trainers have used the space to encourage staff to think beyond their own identity profiles. Below is a list of examples of how inclusive security has been addressed in training.

- Real-life examples from the group, anonymised and shared and discussed by the facilitator. It can be impactful to hear what colleagues face on a daily basis (including internal threats). Even if there is animosity to that particular profile, most individuals do not want harm to come to their colleagues.
- A role-playing exercise in which trainees are asked to consider the risks faced by imaginary characters with unique identity profiles in particular situations.

- The purposeful recruitment of diverse trainers, which offers trainees an opportunity to hear first-hand the security challenges particular identity profiles face. It can also be helpful for trainees to see similar profiles in positions of influence and respect (e.g. teachers). In general, a combination of trainer profiles (gender, ethnicity, background and skills, for example) is good practice. The diversity of trainers should aim to reflect the diversity of trainees.

One organisation’s security training covers issues such as what staff with limited mobility can do at checkpoints or during crossfire, and how their colleagues can support them in these circumstances.

Table 10 Considerations for selecting training providers

Consideration	Factors
Profile	The training provider’s values, motivation, ethics and culture align with the organisation and its staff. Ideally, training teams are put together considering all the skills and backgrounds required, including their ability to engage with humanitarian programme staff adequately.
Reputation and experience	Trainers are able to provide references and credible testimonials from other aid organisations, and have the capacity and experience to train humanitarian aid workers. Contextual experience is relevant when courses are in a particular geographical location. A teaching background or technical expertise in particular topics (e.g. sexual violence or trauma) can also be important.

Consideration	Factors
Content	<p>The content of the security training aligns with the types of risks the organisation's staff are likely to face, and its overall security approach. It may be appropriate to seek training with simulation exercises, but these can be too aggressive or inappropriate for the staff being trained. The content covers relevant soft and hard skills.</p> <p>Some courses may focus on higher-impact and lower-likelihood risks, such as abduction, and may neglect lower-impact but higher-likelihood risks, such as interpersonal conflict and chronic stress.¹ More advanced courses may consider staff wellbeing and stress management, as well as identity-based risks. Many organisations include first aid training. This should be context-appropriate and provided by a trainer with the necessary qualifications.</p>
Costs	<p>A comparison of costs between different training providers is good practice but should also account for the quality and content of the training provided. Additionally, consideration should be given to whether it is more appropriate to train fewer staff members with higher-quality and more intensive security courses, or to choose a cheaper option that reaches more staff – especially those most at risk of experiencing a security incident.</p>
Individual trainers' identities	<p>It is good practice to consider trainers' individual skills, knowledge and experience, and whether particular trainers can be requested. Having a diverse team of trainers who reflect the profiles of the staff being trained (e.g. all genders and relevant ethnicities) can encourage greater participation and engagement.</p>
Location and language	<p>The location and accessibility of training are particularly important considerations, including the languages the training is available in and costs related to attendance.</p>

¹For more information on content considerations, see: EISF and InterAction (2014).

Adapted from Bickley (2017) *Security risk management: a basic guide for smaller NGOs*. EISF (<https://gisf.ngo/resource/security-risk-management-a-basic-guide-for-smaller-ngos/>).

Case example: Trauma-informed training principles

One organisation that provides in-house personal safety and security training with simulation components has developed trauma-informed training principles for its course. These are:

- **Safety** – trainers take measures to ensure participants feel psychologically and physically safe during the training.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency** – trainers let participants know in advance what they should expect from the course, the simulations and the trainers; there are no surprises, and staff are informed in advance of topics that could be triggering.
- **Support and connection** – trainers make concerted efforts to engage with participants one-on-one, and participants work together in small groups; in-house counsellors are on standby during the course, and there are external counselling options for staff needing more support.
- **Collaboration and mutuality** – the course is designed to encourage sharing of experiences by participants.
- **Empowerment, voice and choice** – the course covers good practice (rather than ‘do’s and don’ts’) and encourages participants to examine what may work for them in different contexts; participants can remove themselves from a scenario that feels unsafe or that crosses their own personal boundaries.
- **Social justice** – the training recognises the power dynamics between individuals, and specifically speaks to issues of identity and risk; in order to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes, fictional locations used for the training do not resemble real-life contexts or people.
- **Resilience, growth and change** – the course is meant to increase confidence among participants by making them feel safe, supported and validated; teaching methods validate participants’ responses; all simulations have debriefing sessions afterwards where participants reflect on what worked for them and what did not.

Further information

Guidance

EISF and InterAction (2014) *NGO Safety and Security Training Project: how to create effective security training for NGOs* (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ngo-safety-and-security-training-project-how-create-effective-security-training-ngos>).

GISF (2022a) *Security and safety training pack* (<https://gisfprod.wpengine.com/long-read/security-safety-training-pack/>).

GISF (2022b) *Inclusive security session plan*. Security and safety training pack (<https://gisf.ngo/long-read/security-safety-training-pack/3-training-resources/>).

GISF (2023) *NGO crisis management exercise manual: a guide to developing and facilitating effective exercises* (www.gisf.ngo/resource/ngo-crisis-management-exercise-manual-a-guide-to-developing-and-facilitating-effective-exercises/).

GISF (n.d.) *1. Security training*. NGO Security Toolbox (www.gisf.ngo/toolbox-pwa/resource/1-field-security-training/).

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Training resources

DisasterReady: www.disasterready.org/

GISF: <https://gifsfprod.wpengine.com/training-events/>

IFRC: <https://ifrcstaysafe.org/stay-safe-e-course>

INSSA: <https://inssa.org/certification>

Kaya: <https://kayaconnect.org/>

UNDSS: <https://training.dss.un.org/thematicarea/category?id=6>