

7.6 Civil unrest

Protests, demonstrations, riots and other mass gatherings or disruption – as well as the authorities' response to them and any criminality or extortion that ensues – can pose a risk to people, property and humanitarian operations. In any operational context, but especially in tense and contested settings, civil unrest can erupt suddenly and may involve or turn into violence and aggression. Violence can break out spontaneously, or it might be planned and instigated. Planned, peaceful gatherings such as political events or protests can devolve unexpectedly into civil unrest. Equally, long-simmering tensions can suddenly erupt into violence following a trigger event. Aid organisations can also face risks from unruly crowds, even mob violence, in programme settings such as distribution sites and displacement camps. This chapter covers some of the potential mitigation measures for these risks, including situational awareness, preparation (SOPs and contingency plans), and training and awareness of potential courses of action.

7.6.1 Situational monitoring and analysis

While challenging to predict and track, it is important that civil unrest and its different manifestations form part of risk analysis and regular monitoring efforts.

- **While not all can be predicted, it can be useful to identify potential triggers.** Examples include: political and economic changes such as a decision by a foreign power to intervene militarily; a sudden economic crisis brought on by international trade conditions; a government decision to cut subsidies on essentials such as food or fuel; a decision to close a refugee camp before people are willing to go home; the arrest or assassination of a prominent figure; aid distributions; and national/local elections.
- **Growing tension and frustration can often be detected in advance.** Close monitoring of local media and sentiment is important, and if possible, should be a designated responsibility of a staff member or unit. This could include tracking local news and social media, maintaining contact with local communities and leadership and testing levels of acceptance.
- **Context analysis can help predict possible responses to civil unrest.** The legal context and how past events unfolded can help predict how local authorities and others may respond to demonstrations and other gatherings. These can feed into planning and preparedness measures.

Case example: Non-violent responses to civil unrest can still pose a risk to operations

Violence is not the only risk that aid organisation staff face during periods of civil unrest. One such example occurred during the 2018 election season in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the authorities shut off internet and SMS services nationwide for 20 days, with implications for aid operations and security risk management.

Organisations might consider the following questions as part of their monitoring and analysis.

- Have there been episodes of civil unrest in the past? If so, where did they start, and how did they evolve? Is there a pattern that could repeat itself? What were the main causes? What level of violence was involved? Who or what was the target of that violence?
- What factors can trigger civil unrest? What form might any violence take? How have authorities previously responded to episodes of unrest?
- Who are the targets of local resentment and what is the root cause of this tension?
- Are the organisation or its staff vulnerable to the risk of civil unrest? How can vulnerabilities be mitigated?
- Are some staff at more risk than others, considering their personal risk profile?
- Are specific projects or types of intervention at risk, for example projects deemed to be at odds with the local culture or religion, or perceived as supporting one warring party or another?
- How do the authorities respond to civil unrest at national, local and community level? Gas? Water cannon? Rubber bullets?
- How do religious or ethnic authorities respond to civil unrest (indigenous law and practices)?

Relating to the organisation's own activities and programmes, questions to consider include:

- What expectations do local inhabitants have?
- Are they expecting something from the organisation, e.g. a distribution?
- Can the organisation manage expectations through clear communication prior to any programmatic activity?

Case example: UN staff killed in an unrelated protest in Afghanistan

An organisation in proximity to civil unrest can be at risk of violence even when it is not the direct target, as this example involving the UN shows. In 2011 there were protests in northern Afghanistan in response to the burning of a Qur'an by a US pastor in Florida. The protest was planned but violence spread spontaneously and was unforeseen. When protesters breached the UN compound guards opened fire. Four guards, three UN staff members and five protesters were killed.

7.6.2 Planning and preparedness

Planning and preparedness measures might include the following:

- **SOPs and contingency plans.** Plans and procedures should cover all possible events that could become violent (planned protests, election rallies, social and community events, aid distributions and any other large gatherings) and their consequences (government restrictions, theft, looting and other forms of violence). Each office will likely require its own security procedures and protocols, including contingency plans (hibernation, evacuation and relocation plans); up-to-date contact lists (available to all staff); up-to-date contact lists for medical emergencies (hospitals and air charter companies for example); and information security protocols (regular computer backups and marked files/documents to be destroyed and taken in case of evacuation, for example). Once plans have been developed, staff must be informed and trained on procedures and expectations.

- **Taking protective measures.** Measures should directly refer to the risks and threats identified. Safe rooms could be designated and prepared in each building, with hibernation kits, communication equipment, first aid kits and fire extinguishers. In the event of power outages or interruption of communication services, power and communication backup systems should be available in all of the organisation's buildings.
 - ▶ See *Chapter 7.2 on site security.*
- **Movement management.** If civil unrest is imminent, the organisation can consider alternative work modalities for its staff, such as working from home, reducing staff numbers or movement restrictions. Consideration should also be given to when and where crowds are likely to gather and where they will move to (via which route). In the case of a political rally routes may be clearly identified. In the case of a distribution, this would include well-managed entrance and exit routes for aid recipients and staff, as well as setting up first aid response areas.
- **Incident and crisis management response.** The organisation should be prepared to quickly respond in the event of a critical incident, or if civil unrest triggers an organisational crisis management response.
 - ▶ See *Chapter 4.4 for more on incident response and crisis management.*
- **Training on key actions that staff can take to keep themselves and their colleagues safe.** Staff are, of course, entitled to participate in gatherings and exert their rights as citizens, and organisations can provide training to ensure that, if these events become dangerous, staff know how to keep themselves safe. This training could cover knowledge and awareness of security rules and procedures, especially around high-risk events or locations, how to respond to crowd control weapons such as rubber bullets, clubs and tear gas, and guidance on how to seek safety and shelter. Staff must be made aware that their safety takes priority over the organisation's equipment, premises or stores. If possible, valuable equipment such as laptops should be removed and equipment that cannot be removed could be disabled (e.g. vehicles). Sensitive equipment that cannot be removed or disabled may need to be destroyed.
- **Visibility.** Staff should consider their organisational visibility. If an organisation has good local acceptance and is not directly targeted, it may be protected from crowds if it is clearly visible and identifiable. However, if an organisation is a focus of dissatisfaction, or is not well known locally, it would be better to remove office and vehicle signage and for staff to adopt a low profile.

► See Chapter 4.2 for more on acceptance measures.

Guidance during elections

Know the context

What is the political system and electoral process? Who are the candidates and what is their political agenda? What is the election calendar?

Know the different stages of the election period and associated risks

The stages can often be broken down into pre-election/campaigning, polling/voting, vote counting and results declaration, the installation of a winner and accompanying celebrations/protests.

Each of these stages can vary in duration from a day to months. Associated risks include online incitements to violence; acts of violence or riots near polling stations or during mass gatherings; escalation and perpetuation of ethnic or sectarian violence; clashes between groups; theft, vandalism and physical attacks on property; and intimidation and harassment of individuals, groups and organisations. Authorities may impose curfews and movement restrictions, curtail the media, shut down services/utilities (e.g. internet and electricity) and detain organisational staff. Political groups have been known to confiscate organisational assets for electoral purposes.

Implement mitigation measures

Mitigation measures can include:

- Travel management protocols, including movement restrictions and curfews (especially around high-risk areas and during particular election stages).
- Guidance for staff on how to stay safe when voting (such as not travelling alone and being situationally aware).

- Securing buildings and vehicles; preparing staff on how to respond to incidents of theft, harassment, intimidation and detention and an increased number of checkpoints and roadblocks.
- Adapting ways of working during election periods (e.g. remote working).
- Guidance for staff on how to keep themselves safe in heated political climates (e.g. avoiding political discussions (in person and online), not wearing colours that could be affiliated with a political party and keeping an eye out for groups and discussions that could turn violent).

Staff can be trained on how to liaise with political parties and authorities in the event they ask for support or services.

7.6.3 During an episode of civil unrest

If civil unrest breaks out before the organisation has had time to take mitigation measures, or if those measures fail, it is imperative that staff monitor the situation closely and are prepared to take immediate action. This might include the following:

- **Implementing contingency plans.** For example, if protesters or rioters enter a building, staff immediately take shelter in a safe room.
- **Reconsidering modes of transport and restricting travel, particularly in risky areas.** For example, it may be safer to travel in nondescript local vehicles or taxis than in large, conspicuous vehicles.
- **Considering whether to request support from the authorities/security forces.** Security forces will likely be armed and this needs to be balanced against organisational policy and the level of risk, especially if security actors are involved in controlling or dispersing crowds.
- **Ensuring that communication between staff is maintained.**
- **Potentially opening up channels of communication with protest leaders.** All negotiations should ideally be conducted by staff who have received training in this area.

Case example: Humanitarian organisations attacked during communal violence

In 2014, mobs attacked the offices and residences of several humanitarian organisations in Myanmar. The attacks were fuelled by tensions between two religious groups. Several offices and buildings were entered, and furniture and equipment were destroyed. Following the incident humanitarian staff were relocated from their offices, disrupting operations. The incident shows how disputes can quickly spiral, creating risks for aid organisations in the area. Better monitoring of the local context could have identified likely risks ahead of the incident, giving organisations more time to prepare staff and facilities.

7.6.4 After an episode of civil unrest

Following an incident, organisations may wish to:

- Consider the working modalities of staff – it may be better for them to keep working from home and to maintain a low profile while things settle down.
- Maintain heightened security measures until the situation has clearly calmed down and there is no perceived risk of further threat or retaliation.
- Consider the impact of the event on affected staff and provide support as required – be prepared to support staff who have relocated or been evacuated.
- Consider the organisation’s public relations position and what messages, if any, the organisation issues – a constant review of public sentiment and the organisation’s outreach efforts is beneficial.
- Be prepared to face hostile surveillance in the aftermath of a serious event linked to the organisation.
- Consider a review of the organisation’s decision-making and actions – learning lessons from past events plays a critical role in improving an organisation’s safety and security risk management system and programmatic approach (e.g. how distributions are conducted).

Further information

Resources

International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) (n.d.) ElectionGuide (www.electionguide.org/elections).

Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) (2019) *Surviving a protest* (www.osac.gov/Content/Report/ob882e6f-c05f-4d1c-9601-15f4ad6883fc).

OSAC (2022) *Preparing for election violence* (www.osac.gov/Content/Report/d7cd68ad-cee9-4386-b647-1e9f5c7745f6).

OSAC (2023) *Coups d'état: thinking through your organization's response* (www.osac.gov/Content/Report/cf60640f-7c0b-4410-ae6f-228341955588).