

Session 4:

Understanding and Assessing Challenges and Threats in Context

TIME: 135 MINUTES

ACTIVITIES:

- *Presentation on threats*
- *Threat assessment exercise*

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

- to give participants space to discuss the challenges and threats they are facing;
- to ground conceptually concepts such as ‘capacities’, ‘challenges’, ‘obstacles’, ‘risks’, ‘threats’, ‘thresholds of acceptable risk’ and ‘vulnerabilities’; and
- to help participants assess challenges and threats in a structured way.

ADAPTATION NOTES:

Challenges and obstacles versus threats: some group members, particularly those who have experienced very extreme levels of threat, will understand immediately the concept of ‘threats’. For others, the terms ‘challenges’ or ‘obstacles’ may be easier to work with than ‘threats’. This is because the threats they may face are more subtle – or so ‘normalised’ that they do not perceive them as ‘threats’. Instead, they may consider an attack or arrest as real ‘threats’ but the threat of violence against them (as women) as part of normal life. In such cases, substitute the words ‘challenges’ or ‘obstacles’ for threats, and keep in mind that the group may need additional support in analysing these challenges/obstacles – in which case, Session 5: Contextual Analysis is particularly important for setting these challenges/obstacles into a clear context.



EXERCISE:

PAGE 1/2

FORMAT:

PRESENTATION

Threats Presentation

TIME: 15 MIN

REQUIRED MATERIALS: FLIPCHART WITH DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS SUCH AS 'CAPACITIES', 'CHALLENGES', 'RISKS', 'THREATS' AND 'VULNERABILITIES'.

SUMMARY:

This is a brief presentation that grounds thinking on threats and sets the stage for the next exercise.

TOOLS TO ASSESS THREATS²²

Key risk-related concepts are as follows – facilitators should prepare the definitions on a flipchart beforehand:

Risk: the possibility that some harm will occur;

Perceived risk: the idea, or absorbed concept, that a threat is real;

Threat: a declared or indicated intention to inflict harm;

Capacity: any resource (including abilities and contacts) that improves security;

Vulnerability: any factor that makes it more likely for harm to materialise and that may result in greater damage

Note that capacities and vulnerabilities are flip sides of the same coin.

KEY EXPLANATION POINTS:

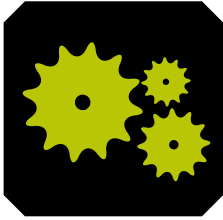
threats are strategic: there is always a reason behind a threat, and there is always a source;

threats are based on fear: ironically, a woman human rights defender only will face threats because she is effective, and because her work is perceived as a challenge to existing systems and power structures;

threats can be subtle and particularly gendered: while we are very familiar with threats such as direct physical violence and arrest, there are many other ways in which women human rights defenders are threatened, such as through isolation, defamation, slander, psychological intimidation and threats to family members at their place of work and in schools;

threats hold far less power when we examine them clearly and extract them from this hidden, subtle context, by:

- recognising the *strategies and motives* behind threats;
- understanding the *what, the why and the who* behind threats;
- assessing your vulnerabilities, and your capacities to combat these threats; and
- determining *what level of risk is posed, and what level of risk is acceptable to you, your organisation and your family.*



EXERCISE:

PAGE 2/2

FORMAT:

PRESENTATION

Threats Presentation

FACILITATION NOTES:

- Some aspects of these talking points can be incorporated into earlier sessions or integrated into a more dynamic discussion – if you find that the previous session has resulted in the group naturally entering into a discussion of threats, then you can go straight into the following exercise and incorporate some of the threats text as commentary. This depends on the group – some need to spend more time with you to ground them in ‘theory’, whereas others prefer you to talk less and for there to be more of a dynamic dialogue.
- It may be helpful to distribute the ‘Threshold of acceptable risk’ handout for reference (see Part Three: Facilitator’s Toolkit).

EXERCISE:

Threats Brainstorm

Assessing Risk: Threats, Vulnerabilities, Capacities

FORMAT:

GROUP
EXERCISE
REVIEW

TIME: 15 MIN

REQUIRED MATERIALS: FLIPCHART WITH DEFINITIONS OF ‘CAPACITY’, ‘RISK’, ‘THREAT’ AND ‘VULNERABILITY’ AS WELL AS THE RISK ASSESSMENT FORMULA.

SUMMARY:

This provides an introduction to and an explanation of the following group exercise.

KEY EXPLANATION POINTS:

Facilitators select two key threats from the group (either raised in previous discussions or during the discussion after the threats presentation). These are the ‘what’. Write them up on the flipchart. Ensure that one threat is a traditional ‘public’ threat and that the other is a ‘private’ threat.

Then, as an example for the following exercise, facilitators should ask the group to analyse:

- *who* are the sources of the threat; and
- the ‘*why*’ – what is behind the threat.

Next, ask the group to list the:

- capacities to address the threat; and
- vulnerabilities to the threat.

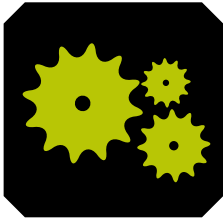
Ask the group to assess the *level of risk* that these threats pose, given their list of capacities and vulnerabilities. They can refer to the Threshold of acceptable risk handout²³.

Alternative option:

In addition to these questions, ask the group to describe the potential impact/consequences of the threat – that is, if the threat is realised, what will happen in the ‘public’ sphere and the ‘private’ sphere?

Example structure:

Threat	Who?	Why?	Capacities	Vulnerabilities	Risk Level
Graffiti on the wall next to the house of a woman human rights defender, denouncing her as a Western spy or saying she is rich	Local criminal groups, probably encouraged or paid by the government	To discredit her, ruin her reputation in the community	Access to media, international support	Neighbours already uncomfortable, family is nervous	Moderate
Harassment at a checkpoint that she has to cross every week to get to villages	Soldiers	To intimidate her, extort money	Good reputation and support from villagers	Often travelling alone, transport is unreliable	High



EXERCISE:

PAGE 1/2

FORMAT:

GROUP
EXERCISE

Threats Group Work

Assessing Risk: Threats, Vulnerabilities, Capacities

TIME: 30–60 MIN

REQUIRED MATERIALS: FLIPCHART WITH DEFINITIONS OF ‘CAPACITY’, ‘CHALLENGES’, ‘PERCEIVED RISK’, ‘RISK’, ‘THREAT’ AND ‘VULNERABILITY’. FLIPCHART SHOWING EXAMPLE (SEE TABLE ABOVE), AND ENOUGH FLIPCHART PAPER AND MARKER PENS FOR FOUR OR FIVE GROUPS.

SUMMARY:

Exercise to assess actual threats participants are facing, using the risk assessment tool described above.

KEY EXPLANATION POINTS:

Divide participants into groups of four.

Within the groups, each participant lists two important threats they are facing – one ‘private’ and one ‘public’. It is important that they list current, pressing threats (we will use these again in a later exercise).

Next, participants should describe the source of the threat (the ‘who’) and the reasons/motivations (the ‘why’) behind the threats.

Then they should list their capacities and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis each threat (note that there could be repetition in the answers to both questions – this is fine).

Finally, they should assess the ‘level of risk’ posed by each threat. These should be listed on flipchart paper.

Small groups will report back on their threats.

FACILITATION NOTES:

This exercise provides a good time to give participants a chance to move around and to lighten the atmosphere – you will have been talking about difficult topics for several hours now. Make the group selection process fun.

Facilitators should consider whether participants should choose their own groups randomly, or whether they should preselect them – this will depend on group dynamics (that is, if some participants clearly require support to be more active or less dominating). Group selection exercise options are as follows:

- **Preselected groups:** put post-its on everyone’s back with an animal or a shape representing one of the four groups. Everyone finds each other without saying the name of the animal or shape – that is, they have to copy the moves and sounds of the animal or present the shape to each other in order to figure out what is on their back.
- **Randomly chosen groups:** offer participants an item such as a stone (four or five colours) or toy animal (four or five types), with each stone colour or animal type forming a group.

It can be difficult for some to recognise ‘private’ threats (and for some to recognise any threats at all), so this is an



EXERCISE:

PAGE 2/2

FORMAT:

GROUP
EXERCISE

Threats Group Work

Assessing Risk: Threats, Vulnerabilities, Capacities

exercise in which facilitators should be very active in supporting the groups as they work.

One alternative to the exercise is to list the challenges/threats (generally) and during the analysis process, ask participants to include the 'private' and 'public' consequences of each challenge/threat.

The purpose of doing this exercise as a group, even though the task requires outputs per individual (that is, their two threats), is to provide a supportive environment in which to discuss and draw out threats. This can be done in pairs or triads, but should not be done alone.

See Part Three: Facilitator's Toolkit for 'Exercise: defining the threshold of acceptable risk' as an option for individual written work – consider sequencing and accompaniment carefully here – this exercise works best after a group discussion of threats.