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## Section A: Policy and Planning

# Module 6: Preparing for the "new normal"



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### Introduction to the series

The pandemic continues to impact not only the security risks that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may face but also the way risk treatment measures are developed, implemented and communicated to staff. As we get used to new ways of working with COVID-19, and the focus is, rightly, on the pandemic and its impacts, we must ensure that we do not lose sight of ongoing and emerging security situations and issues.

### Introduction to the module

Since the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic in March 2020, many organisations have adjusted to the impact of COVID-19 on their operations and ways of working. Before moving forward, it is important for decision-makers to reflect and regroup. This module provides insight into how to prepare your organisation for the coming period of uncertainty that lies ahead.

### Acknowledgements

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## Why is preparing for the “new normal” important during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### Reducing uncertainty

If and when a vaccine is discovered, it is unknown how long it will take to be effectively deployed. In the meantime, there will be ongoing clusters of outbreaks and possible widespread community transmission in the areas where HQs are based and where we operate, accompanied by much of the same social, economic and political pressures we have seen so far. There is also a growing anti-vaccine campaign which may impact on the overall effectiveness of a vaccine in curbing the pandemic.

Because it is uncertain how the pandemic will evolve, managers must continue to plan ahead and remain adaptive. Feelings of uncertainty contribute to psychological stress among staff, and managers can reduce this by taking control of the situation and involving staff in planning for the future. Moreover, a well-structured and inclusive planning process can potentially have a positive effect on staff morale (and possibly catalyse unforeseen, constructive outcomes).

### Consolidating gains

In many ways the COVID-19 pandemic has improved safety and security awareness in organisations and helped many to expedite the integration of risk management and programming, as well as with other departments such as HR. In those organisations that already had a strong relationship between security and programs, this pre-existing bond proved beneficial in addressing the unique problems that COVID-19 presented. In other organisations such a strong relationship has been lacking. In either case, leaders have an opportunity now to refine and solidify new ways of working within their organisation, where it is beneficial. For example, the urgent need to adapt program policy to meet safety standards may have necessitated a new level of interaction between security risk management and program personnel within organisations.

Another example being the need for greater coordination and planning for medical evacuation has strengthened the links between HR and Security. Furthermore, there has been an increased transfer of responsibility to national staff and partners. A structured period of reflection and planning can assist all parties to acknowledge the benefits of this type of exchange and potentially improve their long-term relationship.

### Staying agile

In addition to reflecting on the past, it is important to have a distinct and informed vision of the future. Some decisions and measures that were introduced in the first months of the crisis may no longer be appropriate for the current situation, or sustainable in the long term. For example, if only a handful of people have been leading the management response since March, you may opt to reconfigure decision-making structures to allow individuals to take a break (and invite others to the table).

The needs of those the humanitarian system aims to support continue and are likely to increase with ongoing conflict, natural disasters, and the global economic impacts of the pandemic still to be felt. Security risk management must be increasingly agile to enable programmes to be implemented in the continuing uncertainty of the ‘new normal’.

### Planning for resource allocation

The global economic recession will likely continue to narrow the extent of available funding for the coming months and years. Therefore, it is necessary to have a realistic understanding of the future in order to know where to allocate funds and other resources (including time and attention). While you may have a clear picture of the resources required to sustain operations under the current conditions, this knowledge does not necessarily reflect future developments or how they will impact your needs.

For example, organisations may routinely budget a certain percentage of program costs to cover international staff travel and remote communication technology; however this may no longer be an accurate projection under current and expected conditions. Taking the time to form an accurate projection of future conditions will allow you to allocate funding for items more appropriately, such as estimated costs of remote capacity building and advanced communications technology.

### The (accidental) three phases of the aid sector’s response to COVID-19

Many international aid organisations followed a similar trajectory in their response to the pandemic. This common set of experiences is a potential starting point for future planning.

#### Phase 1: Tracking, ad hoc response

From December 2019 to late February 2020, most organisations engaged in some degree of epidemic monitoring and/or ad hoc, disparate management responses. This was led primarily by regional offices and/or programmatic areas most affected at the early stage of the pandemic. At this point many organisations struggled to find the right balance between decision-making authority at the country, regional and headquarters levels.

#### Phase 2: Centralised coordination efforts

During the first six months after WHO declared the pandemic (11th March 2020), agencies began to adopt more coherent strategies for managing risk and changes to operations at the global level.

Most organisations established task forces or crisis management-style teams dedicated to decision-making and dissemination of information. Depending on the scale of an organisation’s operations, these decision-making bodies range in size and scope. For example, some large agencies have a network of task forces, layered vertically (i.e., country, regional and HQ levels) and horizontally according to areas of concern (e.g., Duty of Care, logistics, program policy, etc).

During this phase it became clear to most organisations that collaboration between programs, HR and safety and security is critical to effective decision-making. Also, during this time, global policies and procedures have either been created or revised to address COVID-19. Global updates have been regularly shared from HQ through a centralised mechanism (e.g., intranet, email).

#### Phase 3: Preparing for the new normal

Looking forward toward the longer-term, agencies should invest in a review of current operational responses to the pandemic and begin to devise a more sustained way forward and must consider how SRM will remain effective. Below is suggested good practice as organisations approach this phase.

#### Further information

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[GISF: GISF COVID-19 Resource Collection](#) ; this collection of regularly updated resources for security managers dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic includes interactive maps, datasets and analysis.  
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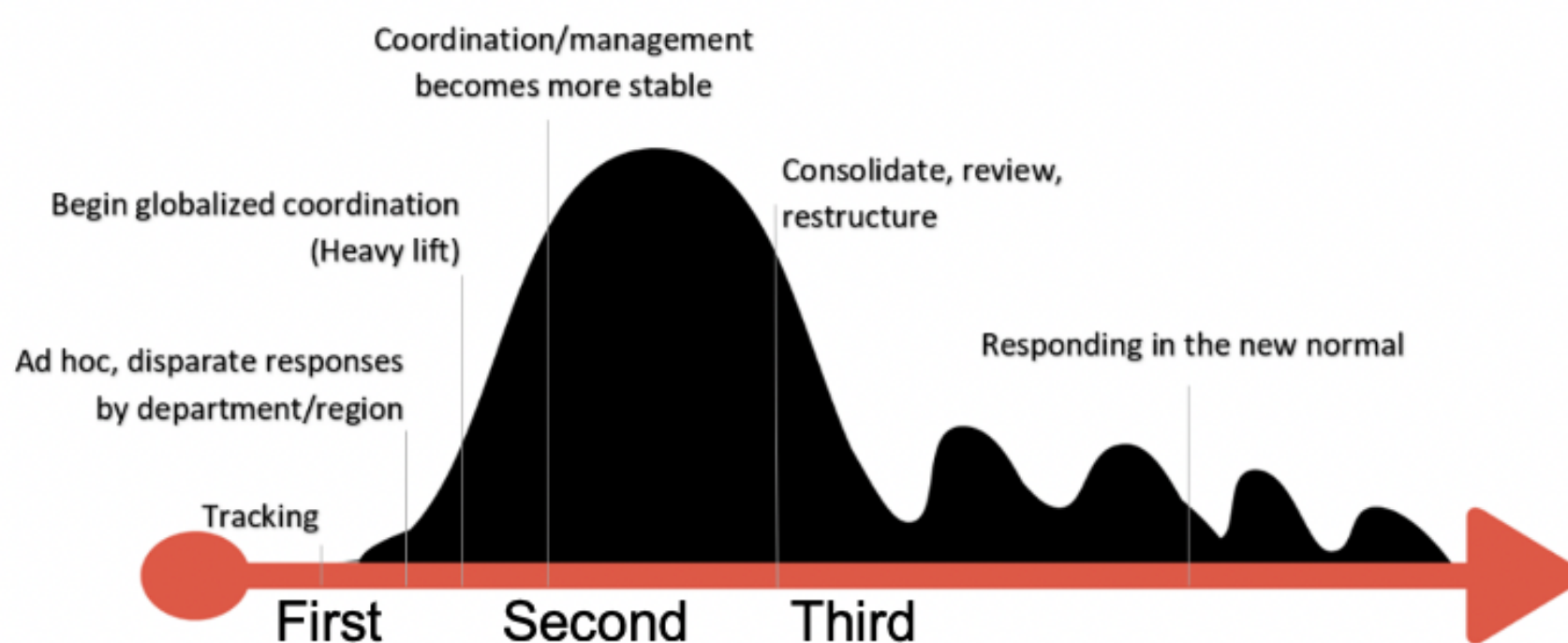


Fig. 1: The (accidental) 3 phases of the aid sector’s response to COVID-19

## Good practice for security risk management: Preparing for “the new normal”

### Monitoring and analysis of risk

In order to remain agile and responsive to current events, every organisation should invest in its ability to track the pandemic and its impact or potential impact on their areas of operation. Even agencies operating in a handful of countries should be able to anticipate changes in their operating environment at the local level. This is an even bigger priority for organisations with a large geographic spread. Due to the financial impact of the recession, organisations may be reliant on existing staff to conduct this type of predictive analysis. However, the value of this function should be acknowledged and invested in whenever possible.

#### Useful sources

**Insecurity Insight:** [Understanding the changing security context in relation to the pandemic and how safety and security incidents are affecting operations.](#)

**Global Health Security Index**

**Our World In Data: COVID-19**

**New York Times: Coronavirus Tracking Dashboard**

**Johns Hopkins University: Coronavirus Data Repository on Github**

**World Health Organisation: COVID-19 Dashboard**

### Assess your current capacities

It is important at the onset of Phase 3 to examine what resources and capacities are in place to ensure operational continuity under the current conditions. Agencies should review what was developed in Phase 1 and Phase 2, with the aim of taking stock and moving forward.

The following are resources and capacities you may want to account for in your assessment:

### Centralised travel management system:

- Do you have a systematic way to track the physical presence and travel of all personnel, including vetting and agreeing new requests through the appropriate decision-making authority, a central system for international travel, and in-country systems for national and local travel?
- Are in-country and regional travel authorisation and tracking systems coherently linked with the central system at head-quarters level?
- Are up-to-date tracking of travel testing requirements/feasibility, quarantine/isolation requirements in place?
- Do you have prepared and resourced contingency plans for transporting infected persons to their home countries (in isolation) if required?
- Are insurance limitations and restrictions clear, e.g. medical evacuation, crisis response support?

### Internal information management:

- Do you have a system in place for tracking new operational developments, new humanitarian responses and decisions that have been made?
- Do you have a way to ensure clear, predictable messaging around COVID-19 related changes, including operational updates and the dissemination of current policies and procedures?
- Do you have a realistic picture of how changes to policies and procedures have been received or put into practice?
- Has vertical communication (i.e., between country, region and HQ) been disrupted during Phase 1 and Phase 2, and is there a need to reinforce trust and understanding going forward?
- Do you have a system in place for managing information, disinformation, and misinformation? [See Module 2: Information Management](#)

**Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and contingency plans:**

- Are your usual SOPs and contingency plans adapted to meet COVID-19 considerations, such as social distancing requirements, personal protective equipment (PPE), and the possibility of border closures?
- Do you have contingency plans for COVID-19 related events such as case management of infected personnel?
- Are these plans and procedures realistic and viable, with resources in place to support them, particularly considering travel restrictions at all levels?

**Context analysis:**

- Do you have an updated contextual understanding of the operating environment in light of the significant changes that have occurred (e.g., perceptions of internationals/aid agencies by the communities, changes in threat levels, impact of growing economic crisis, etc.)
- How are you ensuring your context analysis is up to date and accurate as travel restrictions and access limitations change the way information is collected?

**Staff Resilience:**

- Have you addressed the emotional burden of the pandemic on staff?
- Have you assessed the stress placed on national staff that have been asked to shoulder the burden of the operation, and perhaps pushed aside again when international staff were allowed to return?
- How much capacity do your staff have to continue working in isolation/remotely?
- Do you have the resources in place to support long term work-from-home arrangements?

**Crisis/incident management response:**

- Are crisis or critical incident management response plans in place to address those crises that are specific to COVID-19 (e.g., infection of staff, outbreak, closure of airspace during a secondary crisis)?

**Sustainability:**

- Given that the external impact of COVID-19 is likely to remain in flux, are your current methods for COVID-related decision-making and information management sustainable in the long term?

 **Further information**

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**GISF: Security to go: a risk management tool kit for humanitarian aid agencies**: modules on security risk management planning process, actor mapping and context analysis, travel safety, and others

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 **Useful sources**

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**Thrive worldwide: Collection of COVID-19 resources on mental health and resilience, including tips for remote learning, advice for coping with isolation and considerations for hybrid workspaces.**

**The Konterra Group: Recovery & Wellness – COVID-19: Operating Considerations for U S Based International NGOs.**

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**Investing in government relations**

Scenario planning can be particularly useful in forecasting the actions and decisions of governments in countries of operation. By assessing the organisation’s current level of engagement with the governments in question, you can identify gaps and opportunities to improve relations with those actors. This will help better position your agency to remain operational if future restrictions on the movement of goods and personnel are introduced (or reintroduced).

 **Useful sources**

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**Human Risks Stakeholder Analysis Guide**

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### Maintaining relations with affected communities and other stakeholders

Much of the management response to COVID-19 to date has focused internally on Duty of Care and wellbeing of staff. However, these efforts need to be balanced with accountability toward affected populations. It is critical to assess the impact of your agency’s decisions and actions over the past six months on the communities you are there to serve, as well as any other stakeholders with whom you have been working closely (e.g. local partner organisations). Note that in holding these discussions, agencies should be prepared to address community concerns regarding the potential for aid agency staff to spread COVID-19. This can be done at the local level, through an assessment style approach involving Key Informants and Focus Group Discussions. Outcomes of these assessments should be integrated into your organisation’s management response.

#### Useful sources

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**Aid Works:** [Evaluation Process Toolkit](#)

**World Food Program:** [Stakeholder Analysis Technical Note](#)

**GISF:** [Partnerships and Security Risk Management: from the local partner's perspective](#)

**British Red Cross:** [Community Engagement Hub :tools and resources on COVID 19](#)

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### After Action Review (AAR)

Some agencies may opt to conduct an After Action Review (AAR), or evaluation, to take stock of the decisions and actions that were made during the first six months of the crisis. An AAR can help to identify lessons learned and address outstanding concerns about how things were handled. While this is a valuable process, it should be done to inform future planning and decisions. (see Scenario-based Planning).

#### Further information

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**Better Evaluation:** [After Action Review](#)

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## Tools for decision-making

### Scenario-based planning

Once you have an overview of your organisations’ current management response capacities, the next step assesses what may need to be revised or created in accordance with potential future needs. Scenario-based planning is a common approach to contingency planning in both safety and security management and emergency response. It involves:

- developing predictive scenarios (often focused on best case, worst case and most likely);
- assessing how current operational conditions may be impacted by these scenarios; and
- anticipating any changes to current practices that need to be made in preparation for these scenarios.

Future scenarios should be based on existing predictive analysis about the realistic global trajectory of COVID-19 (see Monitoring and analysis of risk), as well as local knowledge about the potential implications for the countries where you are operating. It is also important to agree time period and indicators for reviewing and updating the scenario planning.

### Useful sources

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**ACAPS:** Scenario-building: How to build scenarios in preparation for or during humanitarian crises

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### Risk monitoring matrix

Establishing a global system of risk levels and indicators is a good way to ensure appropriate delegation while maintaining a centralised approach. For example, a COVID-19 risk monitoring tool can be developed from the standard Security Alert Level Matrix (a risk management tool that is traditionally employed to track changes in a set of pre-determined political, social, and security indicators to assess the level of operational restrictions required in response to the situation at hand). This tool can be adapted to address factors such as rates of transmission, government-imposed restrictions and security considerations that are specifically related to the pandemic.

### Useful sources

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**NGO Risk Management:** Security Alert Level Matrix Tool

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### Further information

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**GISF:** Security to go: a risk management toolkit for humanitarian aid agencies; module 3, risk assessment tool.

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### Internal decision-making bodies

It is important that the exchange of critical information continues to occur across departments, and that certain decisions are made jointly. Consideration needs to be given to how to continue to do this as working practices take on some pre-pandemic characteristics as well as continue to evolve.

It is logical at this point to disband ‘special measures’ established in earlier phases and identify ‘usual’ line management approaches appropriate to new practices, perhaps keeping a task force, or similar, for oversight or to become involved in critical issues (e.g., outbreak at an office, etc). Such task forces or working groups will need to be regularly reviewed to take account of routine line management and other issues, also frequency of meetings or membership may need to be adjusted to match evolving needs.

### Leadership in decision-making

Beyond the creation of tools and systems, senior management at the global level should be prepared to make tough decisions when major changes to policies, procedures and/or approaches are required. While security risk managers have a prominent role in informing these decisions, executive level leaders bear ultimate responsibility for addressing these concerns.

Executives (with the support of security personnel) should be prepared to make difficult decisions, including:

- **Program criticality**

Decisions that dictate what programs should be continued or discontinued, according to the degree of risk that they entail. Generally speaking, the output of a program needs to be weighed against two factors: 1) the safety and health risk to staff and other stakeholders; and 2) the organisational risk of exerting a disproportionate amount of effort on managing a program amid fluctuating transmission rates and accompanying travel restrictions.



If a program may need to be frequently stopped, started, and reorganised, this is an obvious drain on resources that may not be worth the cost.

- **Travel criticality**

Decisions that determine when and why staff should be permitted to travel between countries or geographic areas. For example, should staff be permitted to travel as soon as a given border reopens, or should additional considerations be taken into account? Is the staff in question considered to be in a high-risk group for COVID-19? If travel is possible, what contingency measures are in place for staff who become exposed to COVID-19 in the given country or location?

- **Transformational change**

The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities that have always been inherent in the structure and ways of working within the international aid sector. Leaders should seize this opportunity to make transformational decisions that seek to improve operational response. For example, should senior field positions continue to be held by international staff, who may be severely constrained in their ability to oversee operations at the ground level and require an excessive investment of resources? Or would resources be better invested in providing the necessary support to national staff to fill the same position?

Security risk managers will also have their own leadership and decision-making challenges to ensure their teams remain effective, safe and well.

## **Inclusivity considerations for preparing for “the new normal”**

Planning for the future (assessment, scenario planning and management response) should be designed in a way that is as inclusive as possible. For example:

- Planning and decision-making teams should be diverse with regard to demographics (e.g., gender, race, age, nationality, abilities) and representative of each part of the organisation.
- Ways of working should be considered: the impact on wellbeing and resilience of staff and teams; anxiety about returning to the office; isolation problems of those unable to return; external factors such as childcare and economic hardship.
- Recognise that successful on-line engagement needs its’ own design and planning and is not as simple as moving face to face meetings on-line.
- Documents and issues under consideration should be sent well in advance of meetings to ensure that participants have fair access to information, and have time to analyse and prepare their input adequately.
- Consider different options for ensuring impartial facilitation of meetings and events, and choose which approach fits your organisation or team best:
  - a) Identify staff members who are well-regarded and trusted by the majority of participants, and provide them with additional guidance in their role as facilitator.
  - b) Establish a system of rotating facilitators, to ensure all participants are equally given the chance to lead.
  - c) Hire an external facilitator.
- Invest in simultaneous translation whenever possible. At a minimum, insist on consecutive translation wherever it could benefit any participant. Language should never be a barrier, even in online meetings.
- Leaders and managers should “do their homework” prior to meetings, and come prepared to engage in potentially sensitive topics in an informed and respectful manner.
- Encourage participants to genuinely listen to the experiences of others and account for their personal biases.

- For crisis response, consider creating a ‘diversity committee’ that can provide alternative understandings of the situation to support the crisis response team.
- Recognise the opportunities created as trainings move on-line and national staff are given more responsibility.

 **Useful sources**

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**The New Humanitarian:** [Decolonising aid, again](#)



**Aid Reimagined:** [“How to be an anti-racist in aid”](#)










**Harvard Business Review:** [Make your meetings a safe space for honest conversation](#)

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**Conclusion**

COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on the international aid sector for months and years to come. Reactive modes of operating are not sustainable or effective in the long term. Agencies should take the following steps in order to regroup, revise, move forward and remain proactive:

-  Get a realistic picture of where you are at in terms of your ability to operate under the current conditions, and re-asses this status on a regular basis.
-  Project at least one year into the future, and assess what may need to be revised, developed, procured, eliminated, or otherwise changed internally to cope with projected eventualities. Build agility and flexibility into plans.

-  Identify indicators which would cause the scenario / contingency planning to be revisited (e.g. if travel restrictions change for more than 10% of countries of operation) and regular review timelines (e.g. every 3 months).
-  Preserve and/or develop avenues for communication between different parts of the organisation that would otherwise be siloed, both vertically and horizontally.
-  Clarify any outstanding confusion around decision-making authority, and clearly define future decision-making processes.
-  Build a system of alert levels and corresponding actions that will enable rapid changes to operations, in accordance with local levels of risk and restrictions.
-  Ensure systems and process are agile and flexible.
-  Keep tabs on the current state of the pandemic and invest in resources to help you do that.
-  Be clear to staff about what they can expect from you as an employer.
-  Dare to ask and address uncomfortable questions about the future.
-  Review when changes to documents, systems and processes are completed.