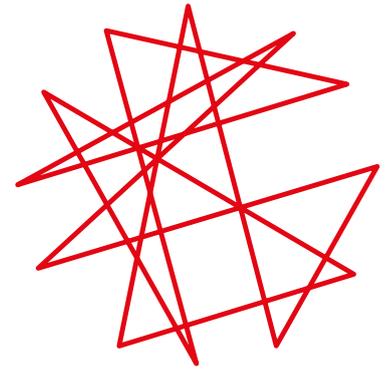


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Partnerships and Security Risk Management: from the local partner's perspective

GISF Research Paper



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Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF)

- GISF is a peer-to-peer network of security focal points who represent over 100 aid organisations operating internationally.
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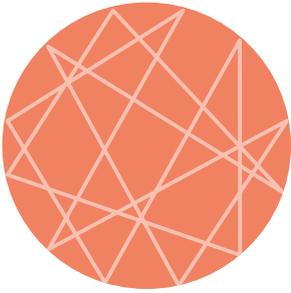
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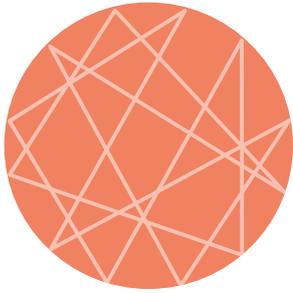
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Foreword

The research and drafting of this paper occurred before the spread of COVID-19. Whilst the researchers couldn't have foreseen the effects of the pandemic, the findings and lessons provided in this paper appear all the more relevant in the current context.

Movement restrictions, repatriation of international staff, difficulties in maintaining aid delivery, as well as high degrees of uncertainty about future travel, have generated a renewed focus on localisation. The current crisis is a ripe moment to analyse the failures of the localisation agenda and to improve practices. One of the central issues to be addressed is the lack of consideration for local aid workers' security.

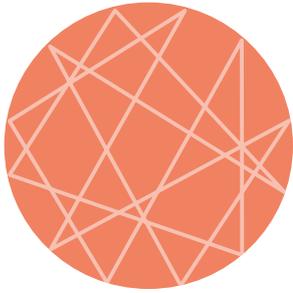
COVID-19 is one among the many threats local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) deal with, and one among many obstacles they face when assisting populations in need. Local NGOs and communities have always been the first responders to humanitarian crises and the last remaining afterwards. While they take most of the safety and security risks associated with such operations, they seldom receive adequate support from international partners (such as INGOs, UN agencies and donors).

The pandemic revealed both good and bad examples of partnerships. Various L/NNGOs shared that their INGO partners and donors supported them in adapting their programmes to COVID-19, allowing for the reallocation of existing funds. Others, however, saw their demands for flexibility with grants rejected, funding for the pandemic overwhelmingly given to international entities, and expressed frustration with the inefficiency of the current system. Some felt burdened by the loss of international staff and NGOs in the country.

Despite these challenges, L/NNGOs developed creative ways to face the crisis and to provide support where it was most needed. Where aid delivery endured, aid workers continued to manage the usual safety and security threats (floods, terrorist attacks, bombings, etc.) alongside the pandemic.

As the aid sector seeks to better support local action, it must ensure that L/NNGOs are able to work in a safe and secure way. This is vital to the success of relief operations and the achievement of equitable partnerships.

Whether change will happen depends on the ability of aid actors to seize the present opportunity and turn aspirations into practices.



Executive summary

The role of local and national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) in the delivery of humanitarian and development services, as well as in other sectors such as human rights defence, continues to gain in prominence – and is increasingly recognised. Many do so with the financial and technical support of international NGOs (INGOs). The ‘localisation’¹ of aid for sustainability and effectiveness, as well as greater insecurity and limited access, is contributing to a greater reliance of INGOs on local partners to implement aid programmes globally. These partnerships result in processes of mutual risk transfer between L/NNGOs and international NGOs (INGOs) but haven’t always translated into better security risk management (SRM) for local actors. Despite their central, frontline role in bringing relief to communities, until now the views of L/NNGOs on the security threats they face, the way they manage them and their partnerships, haven’t been researched in depth.

Aiming to improve the understanding of, and collaboration on, SRM between partners, this research paper seeks to:

- 1)** Provide insight into L/NNGOs’ security risk management culture, perceptions, capacities, practices, needs and expectations in their partnership with INGOs;
- 2)** Establish a platform for L/NNGOs to share their views and enhance dialogue between international and local/national NGOs;
- 3)** Identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of support in partnerships and better mutual understanding.

The report is mainly targeted at staff that have partner management and relationship responsibilities including security advisors, human resources staff and senior management, as well

as general project/programme managers within international, national and local humanitarian and development organisations.

Through a literature review, a global survey with over 200 respondents, more than 70 interviews with representatives of L/NNGOs, and four case studies (in Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Syria), the research found that, regardless of the level of risk in an environment, security doesn’t feature prominently in partnership discussions or budgets.

The perspectives of those interviewed for this study have already been a wake-up call for their international partners and for themselves.

The majority of L/NNGOs surveyed mentioned a widespread absence of conversations, of dedicated budget lines for security, and of basic security requirements within partnership agreements. Discussions about risk often seem to focus on international partners’ priorities, centring around fiduciary or legal risks. The failure to prioritise security within partnerships justifies the impression amongst staff of L/NNGOs that INGO partners are simply not concerned about the security risks L/NNGOs face. While this is not always the case, and various examples of good practice exist, most interviewees felt on their own when it came to dealing with security.

Various barriers to the adequate discussion and support of security risk management in partnerships were identified. Financial disincentives (such as the fear of losing funding, competition between L/NNGOs, budget rigidities and pressure to reduce overheads) deter L/NNGOs from voicing security challenges and requesting additional support. This absence of transparency reinforces existing misunderstandings around the security risks that

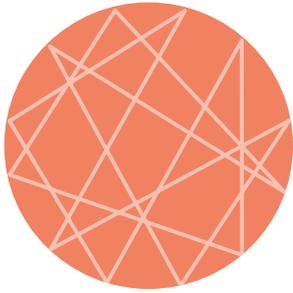
¹ Various criticisms have been formulated against the term ‘localisation’, for reflecting a bias towards an international perspective of the aid system. This paper acknowledges these remarks and refers to the ‘localisation’ agenda to designate the system which is and has been called as such; but favours the term ‘local action’ when referring to new processes.

L/NNGOs face (e.g. assumptions that they face lesser levels of risks or misunderstandings of the context). Misconceptions arise from the lack of joint risk and context analysis, lack of regular and adequate communication, but also language barriers. The dominance of short-term, project-based partnerships further prevent strategic and sustainable support to L/NNGOs' SRM capacity. Their reduced timeframe and scope of engagement are not conducive to building relationships of trust between partners and impede mutual understanding. This also explains why L/NNGOs, in some cases, receive support or security training that doesn't match their needs. In contrast, L/NNGOs expressed their appreciation of INGO partners that commit to the long-term, engage with the context, are flexible with budget and support, and invest in building human rapport.

Improving partnerships requires better understanding of L/NNGOs' security risks and their approach to managing them. Due to their proximity to the context, L/NNGOs are generally more exposed to security risks than INGOs. Besides physical frontline threats, they are more vulnerable to threats stemming from authorities, national legislations and local communities. As both nationals and aid workers, L/NNGO staff often suffer from the overlap of security risks between their personal and professional lives (e.g. security risks may persist for a long time, even affecting staff's family members). Their proximity to the operating context influences L/NNGOs' approach to security risks. Their staff will experience varying degrees of risk ownership and risk habituation. A sense of responsibility towards fellow citizens and familiarity with risks may push them to take on more risk to deliver relief. Practices of SRM differ according to the nature of the L/NNGO – with the largest faring better and having, in some instances, well-developed systems and protocols. Among smaller organisations, researchers observed an absence of systematic approaches to SRM – at least in the way it is done by INGOs. Whilst expressing a desire for their skills to be recognised, L/NNGOs also voiced many support needs (including establishing a security culture, developing protocols, receiving security training, equipment, insurance and seeing their international partners publicly condemning the threats they face).

L/NNGOs do feel INGO partners have a certain responsibility to support them in managing the security risks associated with partnering on aid operations. Whilst 'risk transfer' is the most adequate term to describe processes at play in current partnerships, it needs to be reconceptualised. Besides being transferred, risks are also created and transformed in partnerships. They shift not only from INGOs to L/NNGOs but also from the local to the global level and involve additional actors such as donors and communities. Security risk transfer may be intentional or unintentional and is perceived differently depending on the partners. This research paper suggests the following definition of risk transfer: the formation or transformation of risks (increasing or decreasing) for one actor caused by the presence or action of another, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Some L/NNGOs see risk transfer as occurring when they are asked to take on further tasks by their partners but don't receive proportionate funding to manage the additional risks. Whilst 'risk-sharing' remains an aspiration, there are various practical ways to ensure that responsibility for risks is more equitably shared between partners. Acknowledging the impact of existing power imbalances, including local partners on an equal footing when discussing and acting on security risks, committing resources and favouring sustainable engagement are among the changes necessary to improve the handling of security risks in partnerships. Supporting platforms and strengthening mechanisms that facilitate collaboration between NGOs at all levels also emerged as a desirable outcome.

Through this paper, GISF hopes to start an open conversation on managing security risks in partnerships and pave the way towards better collaboration.



Introduction

Partnering to deliver aid relief means creating, transferring and sharing security risks. Both by necessity and by choice, the global community is increasingly advocating for local and national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) to lead aid response, encouraging the development of further partnerships between L/NNGOs and international NGOs (INGOs). The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit spread the ambition to make relief operations ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’.² However, whereas participants to the localisation agenda focused on transferring responsibility, no proportionate attention was dedicated to the security risks being transferred – and whether enough resources to manage them were provided. This gap is surprising when we consider that one of the most common reasons INGOs enter into partnerships with L/NNGOs is to adapt to insecurity.³

‘The use of local partners or subcontractors primarily as a risk-transfer strategy – rather than due to local capacity-building agendas – was highlighted as a challenge facing the humanitarian community in many locations.’⁴

While partnerships contain the promise of stronger operations, they also involve various security risks, mainly borne by local partners. Despite widespread under-reporting, L/NNGO staff represent 42% of the total reported numbers of aid workers killed in 2019;⁵ it is likely that the real figures are much higher. Regardless of this frontline exposure, local perspectives on security risks, their management, and partnerships with INGOs are rarely heard or discussed as part of the global debate on localisation and aren’t well covered within existing literature.⁶

This lack of communication and investigation feeds into several misunderstandings around the security risks L/NNGOs face, the risk transfer processes they engage in, and their expectations towards INGO partners. International partners often assume that L/NNGO staff are less at risk because they are embedded in the context, that they can deal with higher risks because they are so used to them and, sometimes, that they are less impacted by psychosocial distress because they have become desensitised. Similar misconceptions exist around ‘risk transfer’ processes within partnerships and, again, local perspectives are rarely heard. A much more refined and inclusive analysis is necessary to reflect the reality of the movement of security risks between INGOs and L/NNGOs. Such improvements necessitate breaking away from an international-centric perspective and making efforts to listen to the partners who are directly exposed to the consequences of security risks in humanitarian operations.

L/NNGO staff and national staff of INGOs

While this research focuses on L/NNGOs, some of the findings extend to national staff of INGOs. In both cases, there can be misconceptions around the level of security risks that national staff face, assumptions that they don’t need psychosocial support to the same extent as international staff, and inequalities in accessing adequate insurance.

² United Nations, 2016.

³ Egeland. and Harmer, 2011:25.

⁴ Jackson and Zyck, 2017:14.

⁵ Total number of aid workers counting UN, INGOs, ICRC, IFRC and donor staff. For more data see: <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents>.

⁶ A thematic review of the literature was conducted (see the reference list in the Annexes for a full view of the literature engaged with) to situate the research questions by seeking out gaps in the literature.

Types of partnerships

It is not easy to define 'partnership' between INGOs and L/NNGOs - something which, in itself, shows how many different viewpoints there are to consider. Across the humanitarian space, arrangements between local and international NGOs adopt a range of different shapes, from loose alliances that don't involve monetary exchange, subcontracting relationships based on the delivery of measurable outputs, to long-term collaborations within network organisations (e.g. Caritas). Seeking to capture this diversity, and acknowledging coexisting concepts of partnerships, this paper adopts an inclusive definition of the term:

Partnerships: any formalised (contractual) mode of association between an INGO and a L/NNGO, across all sectors and contexts.

Partnerships can be fitted into different categories, according to the lens adopted to analyse them. Noting the absence of commonly agreed typology, this paper adapted and tested four partnership categories identified by a recent Humanitarian Outcome publication.⁷

While these categories distinguish relationships according to the division of authority between partners over a project and the degree of autonomy they hold, the interviews and survey conducted in this study with L/NNGOs revealed two other variables used to differentiate the types of partnerships they are involved in:



Length – whether partnerships are long-term agreements or short-term collaborations, and



Scope – whether partnerships (and/or grants) are specifically tied to a project or have a broader, more strategic scope.

Combining these two factors suggests that L/NNGOs usually distinguish between two types of partnerships:

- **Long-term and strategic**, and
- **Short-term and project-based**⁸

These different ways to categorise partnerships give insight into local perceptions of the elements that matter the most for good humanitarian partnerships – namely, long-term, equitable, engagement with a broad, strategic scope for support.

Partnership categories:⁹

(1) Directive – based on a sub-granting/contracting relationship where the L/NNGO is sub-contracted to implement part or all of a project under the direction of the INGO;

(2) Supportive – where the L/NNGO partner has some involvement in programme design and receives a benefit beyond the monetary amount of the contract, including such things as training and institutional support, technical assistance and mentoring;

(3) Co-operative – involving joint programming between a national and international NGO on equal footing, with each maintaining financial independence; and

(4) Framework partnership – where strategic goals are advanced by national actors with the INGO providing funding and support but having little or no direct role in implementation.



⁷ Stoddard, Czwaro and Hamsik, 2019:15.

⁸ Definitions are provided in section 1. 1.

⁹ To access the categories and diagram created by Humanitarian Outcomes, see Stoddard, Czwaro and Hamsik, 2019:15.

Research objectives

The main focus of the study rested on exploring L/NNGOs' perceptions and perspectives about the dynamics of their partnerships in relation to security risk management (SRM), as well as factors influencing their perceptions of risk transfer. These two topics turned out to be the most important areas to investigate as – according to local partners – they lie at the core of the discussion about security in partnerships.

If perspectives on partnerships vary, they also vary with regards to SRM. In 2012, GISF (then called EISF) produced a research paper entitled *Security Management and Capacity Development: International agencies working with local partners*¹⁰ that aimed to 1) better understand the responsibility of INGOs in ensuring the safety and security of local partners, 2) analyse issues they faced while doing so, and 3) identify strategies to better support L/NNGO partners. Through interviews with INGO representatives, this first analysis brought key insights into partnership dynamics, including strengths and weaknesses from the INGO perspective. The current research seeks to build on this work by dedicating similar attention to the L/NNGO perspectives. This project aims to make the first steps towards effective collaboration for security risk management between INGOs and L/NNGOs, through the achievement of three key objectives:

1. To provide insight into the SRM culture, perceptions, capacities, practices, needs, and expectations of L/NNGOs in their partnership with INGOs.
2. To constitute a platform for L/NNGOs to express and share their views and enhance dialogue between international and local/national NGOs.
3. To identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of support in partnerships and improve mutual understanding.

¹⁰ EISF, 2012.

¹¹ Stoddard, Czwarno and Hamsik, 2019: 31.

Research interest

Humanitarian action is facing many challenges which emphasise the need to improve international solidarity. Crises are proliferating – climate change, pandemics, protracted conflict, diplomatic rivalries, revival of ethno-nationalist tensions – each multiplying the impact of the others. With this, the ability, as well as the legitimacy, of INGOs to respond to these crises adequately is being questioned. The structure of international aid is increasingly criticised for perpetuating power imbalances rather than solving them. At the local level, L/NNGOs face backlash from those against their actions or mandate and deal with the effects of governments seeking to control aid delivery by criminalising aid activities or instrumentalising them for political gain. To counteract the shrinking of the humanitarian, development and human rights space, and to address existing challenges, effective partnerships are necessary.

SRM is an essential enabler of relief action and a condition for fair partnerships. As L/NNGOs take responsibility for, and leadership in, delivering humanitarian assistance in partnerships, they also take on security risks – even when risk transfer is not intended. This should not be ignored by either partner. Various examples of equitable, empowering and effective partnerships exist in the humanitarian space which consider the security risks faced by L/NNGO staff and programmes. However, these are not the norm, and whilst there are examples of good practice, they lack consistent application.

'The effectiveness of security cooperation varies widely across organisations and contexts.'¹¹

The first step in improving the way security risks are handled in partnerships is to improve mutual understanding between partners, and create space for local perspectives, expectations and experiences to be heard. In providing insights into L/NNGOs' specific security risks and their approach to them, this paper introduces an account of partnerships that is more inclusive of the local viewpoint and challenges conventional views of concepts such as 'risk transfer'. By doing so, this paper seeks to open a conversation about security risk management in partnerships on a more equal basis.

Overview

The Research Methodology section introduces the research process, providing information on its different stages, its limitations, and summarising key observations on the four case studies – Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Syria.

Part 1 introduces findings from the research.

Section 1 analyses partnerships through the local perspective. It highlights the absence of security discussions across contexts and models, and the consequent perception that international partners are not concerned about L/NNGO staff's security.

Section 2 delves into the obstacles to candid discussions about security risks and adequate support for L/NNGOs' SRM. It first demonstrates that financial elements disincentivise L/NNGOs from voicing security needs. It then outlines how communication issues prevent sound collaboration on security risks, and finally addresses the negative effects of short-term, project-based partnerships.

Section 3 provides insight into the specific risks faced by L/NNGO staff. It explores their approach to SRM, first indicating how their proximity to

the operating environment influences their risk threshold, and then investigating their SRM practices and needs for support.

Part 2 presents the concepts and ways to move forward that can be drawn from the research findings.

Section 1 suggests a revised definition of risk transfer, to better reflect the reality of risk movement in partnerships. It emphasises the creation and transformation of risks in partnerships, the various directions in which risks flow, and observes the role of intention and perceptions of risk transfer. Building on the research findings, it then suggests three ways to share, rather than transfer, risk within partnerships. Finally, it contains a list of areas for improvements and suggestions on actions to take.

The Conclusion section summarises the key findings and sheds light on essential steps to improve SRM in partnerships.

The Annexes contain additional results from the survey and longer reports on the case studies.

Methodology

The methodology for this research was based on four interlinked components: a literature review and scoping interviews; an online survey; key informant interviews; and case study-based field research. Each phase built on the previous and informed the next, ensuring a coherent and logical research methodology.¹² The paragraphs below describe 1) gaps in the literature; 2) the research process; and 3) key observations on each case study.

Literature review

Several research projects have examined partnerships between international and local/national NGOs in humanitarian and development settings, but none so far have focused on L/NNGO

perspectives on the implications for security risks.¹³ Some papers have touched on the topic, all concluding that further investigation is required and that security risks deserve much more attention in partnerships.¹⁴ The state of the literature partly reflects INGOs' priorities; notably, their attention to fiduciary risks. Documents reviewed for this research related to generic security and risk management issues, with a bias towards international organisations, the localisation agenda, and partnership models – again with a bias towards the international side of the equation.¹⁵ However, new papers are emerging, promoting a more localised approach to research and giving priority to L/NNGOs' perspectives and participation.¹⁶ Nonetheless, very few of the existing publications deal directly with the security practices of L/NNGOs, civil society organisations (CSOs), or community-based

¹² A list of the countries from which survey respondents and interviewees participated in the study can be found in annex 3.

¹³ Schreter and Harmer: 2013.

¹⁴ Haver and Carter, 2016 ; Stephen, 2017; Jackson and Zyck, 2017; Egeland and Harmer, 2011.

¹⁵ This bias is explained in Carothers, T. and Brechenmacher, S. (2014); Fairbanks, A. (2018); Stoddard, A., Czarwano, M. and Hamsik, L. (2019); Hamsik, L. (2019); and for instance visible in Sigh, I. (2012); Nobert, M. (2019).

¹⁶ Fast and Bennett, 2020.

organisations (CBOs).¹⁷ The vast literature on the civic space and the challenges faced by CSOs in carving out space to work¹⁸ does not focus on SRM, but rather on other risks stemming from NGO-state relations such as administrative, fiduciary and legal challenges to the creation of civil society space. This paper, therefore, contributes to the literature by presenting perspectives which are more inclusive of the local viewpoint, challenging the conventional view of partnership models, and providing insight into L/NNGOs' security risks and their management.

Research process

1. Scoping interviews

Interviews with 22 individuals helped set the frame of the research. They included representatives from GISS member organisations, national NGOs and security consultants.

2. Online survey

A series of qualitative and quantitative questions to uncover patterns in partnerships, and prevalent SRM issues, was completed by 193 representatives of L/NNGOs.¹⁹

3. Key informant interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 76 staff from L/NNGOs or NGO platforms from 23 countries.²⁰ The widest geographical scope was attempted, to achieve an overview of security issues and partnerships.

4. Case studies

Four case studies – Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Syria – were undertaken by researchers to further explore key themes identified in the survey and interviews.²¹ Countries were selected to ensure diversity and complementarity in terms of political and cultural structures, the security context, and the aid environment.

Field trips: In Colombia and Myanmar, researchers spent several days with an L/NNGO to carry out interviews with different members of staff and observe SRM practices. This provided them insights into how the hosting L/NNGO thought about, and dealt with, security issues. For Ethiopia²² and northwest Syria, researchers conducted comprehensive face-to-face interviews with staff of multiple L/NNGOs, to explore common issues faced by organisations in the respective contexts. The research on northwest Syria was conducted from Gaziantep, Turkey, in order to observe how remote management was affecting L/NNGOs' SRM practices and relationships with partners.

Minimising biases: Two groups were formed to minimise the impact of unconscious bias and blind spots. An advisory group composed of five representatives from local NGOs or platforms provided input at critical stages of the research (e.g. study design and data analysis). A second peer review group composed of NGO security and partnerships experts was created, to provide critical feedback throughout the research project, from the research design to the report-writing phase.

The findings of this research are primarily qualitative in nature: Against the vast number, and diversity, of local and national NGOs, and the different experiences they have with partnerships with INGOs, this study can only reflect the opinions of those that participated in the online survey, the interviews, and the case study research. However, commonalities in views across the range of the L/NNGO staff consulted underpin the key findings, providing strong evidence that these issues are applicable to the sector at large.

¹⁷ See glossary for working definitions.

¹⁸ See particularly the work on civil society space by organisations such as the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (<https://www.icnl.org/>), CIVICUS (www.civicus.org), and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (www.icvanetwork.org).

¹⁹ The survey was disseminated in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. Annex 2 presents a more comprehensive review of the survey findings.

²⁰ 43 interviews were carried out in person, 31 by phone, and two by email. Interviewees were selected based on their responsibilities for partnership relations and/or security management.

²¹ Other factors taken into consideration were geographical spread, the presence of a critical mass of GISS members, access feasibility for researchers, and the willingness of L/NNGOs to host researchers.

²² In Ethiopia, a planned field visit outside Addis Ababa had to be cancelled at the last minute due to logistical and administrative constraints outside the control of the researcher.

Observations on the case studies

Although security contexts and partnership situations differ, in all four contexts studied, L/NNGOs felt that security was not sufficiently discussed with their international partners. Whilst interviewees face many context-specific challenges, they also have underlying commonalities, which can be summed up in a general feeling of being left alone to deal with security issues. Although, in all four countries visited, L/NNGOs had a relatively strong sense of ownership over the programme and risks, they believed international partners had a responsibility to support them in SRM issues.

Competition for funds and a perceived disconnect from the local security context by international partners were consistently raised. In Ethiopia, Myanmar, and northwest Syria, interviewees predominantly face short-term, project-based funding cycles that leave little room for (security-based) capacity-building and for trust relationships to be established. The competition for funds deters requests for, and allocation of funds to support, SRM.

The research mainly draws examples from the case studies to illustrate its analysis of security risk management and partnerships. The analysis, arguments and observations, however, build on the exchanges and results obtained through all interviews and survey responses.

CASE STUDY



Colombia

It was considered critical to carry out a case study in Latin America because of the region's perceived relative isolation from other humanitarian and development contexts. Colombia was chosen for the prevalence of international and national aid organisations in the country as well as the complexity of the environment, with conflict, post-conflict, development and humanitarian themes and actors overlapping.

Staff of the NNGO visited perceived a mismatch between the actual local security context and the prevalent narrative amongst international actors – that Colombia had entered a post-conflict phase and was no longer a high-risk environment. This narrative led to institutional donors and the aid community shifting priorities and focus. This shift resulted in reduced awareness of 'what is happening on the ground', less funding for security, and less scope to discuss context developments with partners.

Without access to significant funding for SRM, local partners had little choice but to rely on acceptance strategies²³ to carry on their work, despite the risks created by armed groups. Risk transfer, therefore, occurred at various levels, between INGOs, NNGOs and LNGOs, from NGOs to communities, as well as from NGOs to hired contractors.

²³ See definition in the glossary.

CASE STUDY



Ethiopia

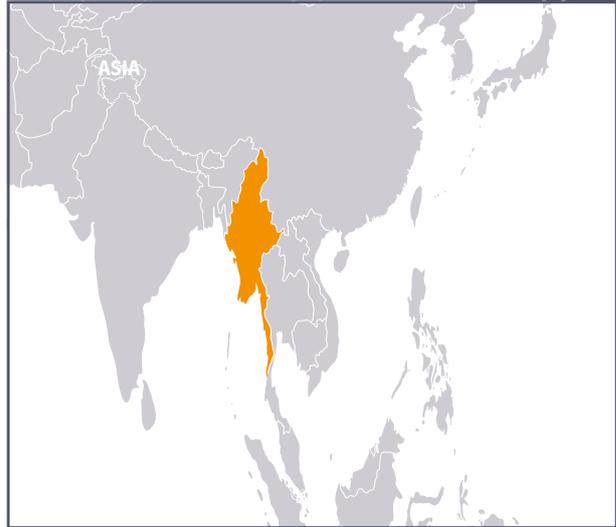
The decision to select Ethiopia as the African case study was based on the role government has played in controlling civil society action and its impact on INGO-L/NNGO partnerships.

Despite the relaxation of the regulatory environment, the importance of government monitoring remains a strong influence on the way L/NNGOs operate, and the marks left by decades of control endure. Since the legislative loosening, INGOs are said to have shifted towards direct project implementation, rather than sub-contracting to L/NNGOs. By doing so, they directly compete for funding with L/NNGOs, and can 'poach' aid workers from local NGOs by offering better employment conditions and benefits.

When partnering with international NGOs, L/NNGOs report issues around contextual understanding, mentioning misunderstandings with their international counterparts and deeming that they at times under- or over-estimate security risks. These various assessments may lead local partners to either take on more risk than they are comfortable with or, conversely, to constrain their activities.

The absence of flexible funding and security training was also raised several times.

CASE STUDY



Myanmar

The choice of Myanmar lay in the relatively young civil society and L/NNGO sector evolving in what remains a fairly restrictive political and administrative environment. Myanmar as a focus country for localisation efforts also represented an opportunity to observe the impact of the localisation agenda.

Local and national NGOs reported working in isolation from the international support network, which is partly due to government restrictions on INGO access to the most conflict-affected and politically sensitive areas. This disconnect and relative isolation explains why most local organisations didn't understand – or hadn't even heard of – the concept of risk transfer.

The L/NNGOs visited tended to consider security their own business and expected little help from INGOs. In this setting, the lack of continuity and consistency in support that results from short-term, project-based partnerships with INGOs further prevents the development of local security risk management capacity.

CASE STUDY



Northwest Syria

This context was chosen for the extreme challenges it poses to aid organisations in terms of the security environment, humanitarian access, and the consequent requirement for cross-border support and remote management. Government criminalisation of medical assistance in rebel-held areas, and the constraints generated by counter-terrorist measures, create serious risks for Syrian L/NNGO staff, which remain with them long after they have stopped operating. The impact of counter-terrorist legislation (CTL) is particularly striking considering that stringent regulations are applied by Turkey and Syria, in addition to measures imposed by international donors, who are particularly cautious with operations close to the conflict. The scale of international aid efforts and the amount of attention dedicated to the Syrian war create unique conditions for the local response in northwest Syria, with increased collaboration between international and local aid actors. L/NNGOs which have offices in Gaziantep, Turkey, are able to access (security) coordination mechanisms, and topics such as duty of care are high on the community's agenda. However, the intense competition for funding, as well as the predominance of project-based partnerships, remain major barriers to transparent security discussions. Access challenges faced by INGOs feed a disconnect from local contexts, whereas overexposure to security risks explains the high levels of risk habituation amongst L/NNGO staff.

Caveats and learnings

The research faced various challenges, including time and resource constraints and availability of interviewees. These limitations represent learning opportunities and highlight avenues for future research.

Research on security is known to be difficult given the sensitivity of the topic and its intersection with various other sensitive subjects (repression by authorities, terrorism and opposition, diverse profiles of staff, etc.). Even though confidentiality was emphasised throughout the project, it is unlikely that interviewees fully disclosed their views (75% chose to remain anonymous). Face-to-face engagement proved to be key in enabling more open conversations and, in these settings, L/NNGOs brought up more critical perceptions of their partnerships than they had provided through the survey. This highlights the importance of investing in building relationships of trust in order to reach transparent discussions on risks (see part 1, section 1 and 2).

The research did not investigate in depth how personal characteristics (gender, religion, race, sexual orientation, social or political background, etc.) are perceived and integrated within L/NNGOs' security risk management. The topic of diversity and inclusion in relation to SRM on the organisational level did not emerge as a prominent factor in the research interviews, quite possibly because the concept and terminology is – like that of risk transfer – understood and framed differently across cultural settings. Given the complexity of the concept and diversity in how it is viewed in different contexts, a more in-depth study would be required to further explore the impacts of diversity and inclusion on SRM within local/national organisations (see part 1, section 3).

The literature review primarily builds on articles produced by researchers based in the global north and has been limited by the fact that few articles written in non-dominant languages are translated into English.

The research sought to have the broadest geographic and cultural scope possible, and while there were limited survey responses from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is hoped that the field study in Syria ensures their voices are included.

While the research sought to investigate practices of SRM in partnerships (such as incident reporting, joint risk assessment, crisis management, etc.), the insights it provides are limited by a basic lack of such

practices. As section 1 reveals, few partners ever discuss SRM, and even fewer collaborate on it in a structured way.

Finally, although the researchers and writers tried to convey the perspectives of L/NNGOs in the most authentic way possible, the analysis is certainly not exempt from all biases. This paper aims to start a conversation rather than to close it and welcomes further testimonies, debates and criticisms on the topics it explores.

The strength of this research is that it addresses and reflects upon structural issues within the aid sector, while providing insights into specific cases. By cross-analysing contributions from over 200 individuals and in-depth studies in four regions, it identifies crucial issues with the way security risks are managed that are visible across partnerships. Findings from this research provide a solid basis for all partners to build on and to start discussing and improving SRM.



Research

1. Local perspectives on partnerships and security risk management

This section explores how L/NNGOs consider international partners and the way they address L/NNGOs' security risks in partnerships. No correlation could be established between context, partnership type and SRM practices. This can be partly explained by the fact that, regardless of an environment's level of risk and partners' capacity to handle it, security doesn't feature prominently in partnership discussions – or budgets. Additional explanations can be found in the fact that the quality of partnerships can vary depending on personal relationships and staff turnover, and that evaluating a specific type of partnership is made difficult by the lack of a common typology to categorise them. This section, finally, explains why, in the opinion of L/NNGOs consulted for this study, the topic of security is insufficiently prioritised and inadequately addressed in partnership discussions.

1.1. Relationships between L/NNGOs and international partners

L/NNGOs and international partners

L/NNGOs engage in multiple partnerships with INGOs. The type and size of an organisation, the sectors with which it engages, the kinds of partnerships it establishes with INGOs and other actors, are all important elements that determine how L/NNGOs approach and manage security risks.

Both the type and number of partnerships are heavily influenced by the structure of the L/NNGOs. As with the term 'INGOs', the concept of 'L/NNGOs' covers organisations that vary considerably in programme, size and capacity.²⁴ As this research sought to capture this diversity, it adopted an inclusive definition of L/NNGOs, consulting organisations that ranged from small CBOs with less than ten staff and little organisational infrastructure, to large organisations, who provided grants and subcontracted programmes to other L/NNGOs or CSOs. The definition used in this report is as follows:

L/NNGOs: *NGOs self-identifying as such, based in a state that is part of what is commonly called the 'global south', with programmes in one or multiple countries in their region.*²⁵

The situation and profile of L/NNGOs is far from static and can be subject to rapid evolution. The context in which they operate and the role of civil society within this context are key factors. In Syria, for instance, several organisations have grown significantly since their creation at the beginning of the conflict in 2011, and some have developed branch offices in Europe or the United States (US). Whilst a large majority of the L/NNGOs who participated in this study were recipients of INGO funds for the direct delivery of services, some of them also sought funding directly from institutional donors, making them both *recipients* of, and *competitors* with, their INGO partners.

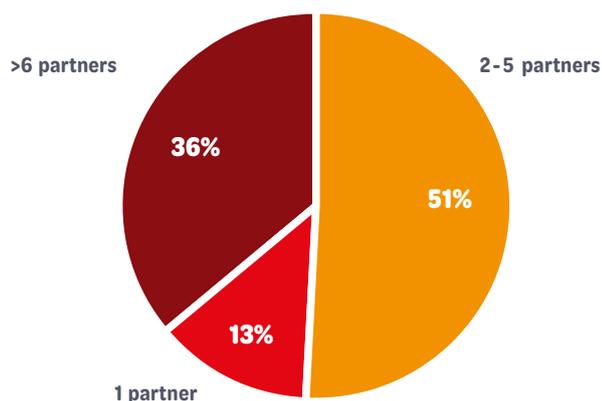
²⁴ For further reflections on the definition of 'local', see Fast and Bennett, 2020.

²⁵ Organisations with a demonstrably global operational reach and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement were excluded. This definition instead designates NGOs that have offices in neighbouring countries (e.g. Turkey and Syria). For explanations on the difference between LNGO and NNGO see the Glossary.

Despite their diverse sizes, most L/NNGOs consulted through the survey have multiple INGO partners:

- **64 (36%) had six or more,**
- **89 (51%) had between two and five, and**
- **23 (13%) had only one INGO partner.**

Number of INGO partners of survey respondents



The term ‘partners’ designates various realities. Each partnership has different attributes, with some lasting several years and including various support measures and SRM collaboration, and others lasting just one year and involving little collaboration besides a subvention for a specific project.

It should further be noted that L/NNGOs engage with networks that operate at all levels, from field level operational groupings to national and regional alliances, and from national fora to international coordination bodies. On the national level, L/NNGOs may have relationships with other national NGOs or national or regional NGO networks. As well as this, they sometimes work as civil society support organisations and act as grant-making organisations to other local and national NGOs.

No strong correlation between partnership types, contexts and security risk management

A key objective of the research was to analyse whether a relationship exists between the type of partnership, the context, and L/NNGOs’ approach to managing security risks. Noting the absence of common typology amongst INGOs to designate various arrangements, this study adapted and tested a definition of four types of partnerships – directive, supportive, co-operative and framework partnerships – created by Humanitarian Outcomes.²⁶



► See introduction for the full definition of partnership categories.

However, the findings of the survey, supported by the interviews and case studies, revealed no strong correlation between partnership types, operating context and SRM practices.

The survey showed a blurred picture in comparing partnership models, revealing nuances but no striking differences regarding their impact on SRM. Some correlation was found between factors such as the INGO’s understanding of the local context, its understanding of the partner’s risk exposure, security management practices and the type of partnership model. There is some, but fairly limited, advantage to L/NNGOs in ‘framework’ and ‘cooperative’ partnerships in comparison to ‘directive’ and ‘supportive’ models.

²⁶ Stoddard, Czwaro and Hamsik, 2019: 14-15.

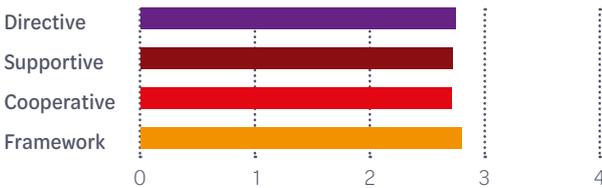
L/NNGO survey respondents' opinions	Partnership types	Directive	Supportive	Cooperative	Framework
Believe their INGO partners have a good understanding of their security practices.		68%	70%	82%	87%
Feel that their INGO partners have a good sense of the risks they take.		77%	78%	90%	87%

INGOs in cooperative or framework partnerships also tend to be perceived as having a very slightly better understanding of the local context, expecting

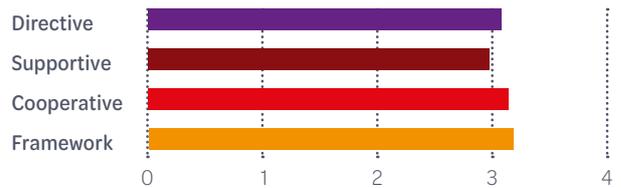
L/NNGOs to report incidents and developing a relationship based on trust, as the below graphs show.

Comparing different relationship models

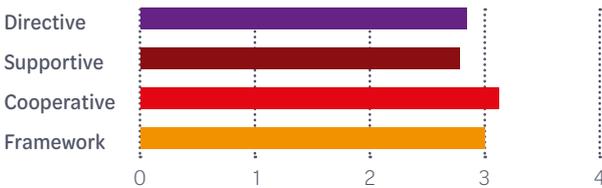
1. Where the INGO expects us to take security specific actions, this has been backed by appropriate funds



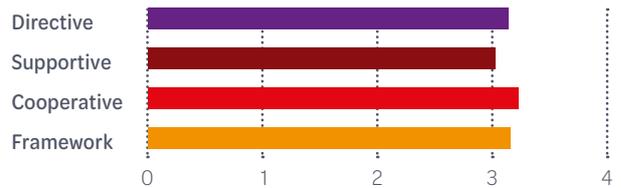
4. The INGO expects my organisation to report security incidents to them



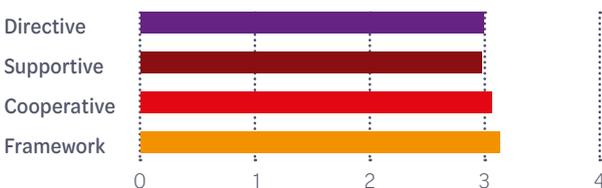
2. The INGO has a good understanding of my organisation's security management practices



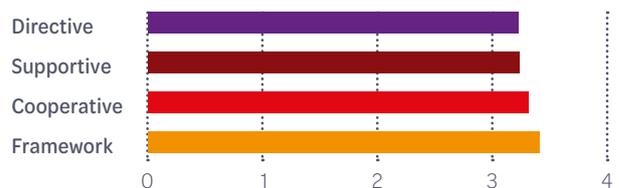
5. The INGO has good understanding of our local context



3. The INGO has a good sense of the risks my organisation takes



6. The relationship is based on mutual trust



Respondents were asked to indicate the prevalent type of partnership model their organisation works within (directive, supportive, cooperative, framework partnerships²⁶), then answer a series of questions about the nature of the relationship in practice. Graphs show average scores of survey responses, based on rating data on a scale of 1-4. 1 indicating the participants 'strongly disagree', 2 that they 'disagree', 3 that they 'agree' and 4 that they 'strongly agree'.

The lack of strong correlation between these factors (partnership type, context and SRM practices) within the survey has several interconnected explanations:

a) L/NNGOs may have had difficulty fully disclosing their concerns in the survey

Whilst the survey showed that, overall, L/NNGOs have a generally positive view of their INGO partners and their relationships, the interviews and case studies indicated a more critical picture of partnership relations and the quality of interaction regarding security. This may be the result of two factors. One is that the interviews allowed the interviewees to express a more nuanced view on the discussion topics than the survey did. The other is the assumption that the interviewees felt more confident to provide frank and more critical feedback once a level of trust had been established with the interviewers. Respondents to the survey may have been less candid because of a concern that their answers may not be treated confidentially.²⁷ The researchers' experience of conducting interviews clearly indicates the importance of building trust through in-person engagement when partners engage in discussions about sensitive subjects, such as security (see section 2.1).

b) L/NNGOs approach partnerships differently

If INGOs lack consistency in the way they categorise partnerships, L/NNGOs were also unfamiliar with the typology used in the survey and struggled to fit their partnerships into these categories. Interviews and survey responses showed that they instead differentiated their relationships according to their length and scope. When combined, both factors seem to constitute two types of partnerships:

Strategic partnerships: *arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs that are defined by long-term relationships, in which part of the budget is dedicated to supporting L/NNGOs' general capacity.*

Project-based partnerships: *Arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs that are funded to complete a specific project and are generally short-term.*

This approach reflects L/NNGOs' perceptions of elements that matter to good humanitarian partnerships – namely, length of the relationship and investment in general support. However, it should be noted that the multiplicity of factors at play in partnerships makes it difficult to distinguish relationships according to a single element. As L/NNGOs engage in different partnerships,²⁸ and may implement different types of programmes in different contexts within one country (such as short-term emergency response projects in a conflict area, and a developmental programme elsewhere), it proved difficult for them to isolate the impact of each factor.

c) Personality differences and staff turnover impact partnerships

'It also depends on the individuals within the organisations, not only on the organisations themselves.'²⁹

L/NNGO interviewee, MENA

Beyond the structures of partnerships, a few interviewees stated that personal relationships are as important as organisational links. Depending on the INGO counterpart's personality, and interest in security, the support for SRM received by L/NNGOs may vary significantly. Some L/NNGOs indicated that smaller and medium-sized INGOs are generally better able to provide a feeling of human connection and to establish trust and rapport. Unsurprisingly, longer-term partnerships appear to equate with better security discussions, when relationships are stronger and more trusting, and L/NNGOs perceive their international partner as having a better understanding of the context. However, even within these partnerships, a high turnover rate may hinder understanding of L/NNGOs' security needs and practices, indicating that ensuring continuity of staff is as critical as the institutional investment in a partnership. The importance of investing sufficient time to select adequate partnership focal points and staff has also been highlighted in other research.³⁰

'They stay for a year, then leave. That means that [L/NNGO name] knows the history of the project and the partnership much better than the partner.'

L/NNGO interviewee, MENA

²⁷ This could explain why in the survey results female respondents did not appear to feel at greater risk than their male colleagues, but in the key informant interviews they did.

²⁸ Eighty-nine (51%) respondents reported their organisation had between two and five INGO partnerships. Sixty-four (36%) had six or more, and twenty-three (13%) had only one INGO partner. Please also see survey results in annex 2.

²⁹ Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, 75% of the interviewees requested to remain anonymous. Quotes and examples are not attributed as they could create risks for the L/NNGO community in the respective contexts.

³⁰ Jackson and Zyck, 2017.

d) SRM rarely features in partnership discussions

'We don't ask for funding for security. You are expected to get on with that sort of thing on your own.'

L/NNGO, Africa

The lack of correlation between the variables listed above and security issues may also be a reflection of the reality that security is simply not a topic that features prominently in partnership discussions, regardless of contextual risks and partners' capacity to handle it. Face-to-face interactions and field observations confirmed that the security risks faced by L/NNGO staff and how to manage those risks are generally insufficiently addressed with INGO partners. However, as outlined above, L/NNGOs have different experiences with different partners, and sometimes different experiences with the same partner depending on the characteristics of the contract, and the multitude of factors shaping the partnership. The study also identified some cases where consistent international partner engagement and support is considered as highly valuable and encouraging of a trusting relationship.

The next part of section 1 investigates the lack of inclusion of security risks in partnerships, and section 2 explores some of the barriers to conversations, about and support, for L/NNGOs' SRM.

1.2. A lack of consideration for L/NNGOs' security risks by INGO partners

'Sometimes we get a message of condolences when there is a death, but that's about it.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Absence of budgets for and requirements related to SRM in partnerships

'We have never asked for this kind of funding because there aren't even budget lines for that in the partnership agreements.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Interviews and case studies demonstrate that SRM is rarely sufficiently included in partnerships. Few grant schemes require the inclusion of a budget line dedicated to SRM,³¹ and even fewer require local partners to have specific SRM arrangements in place. The absence of security as a topic (being neither mentioned nor required) explains why some L/NNGOs didn't know it was possible for them to ask for security-related funding or support. L/NNGOs explain that they are generally assumed to include security-related costs within the overheads, while also being faced with a general message to keep the budget low and reduce overheads as much as possible. Where they exist, the security sections in grant contracts with partners are often perceived as no more than a check-list exercise with little follow-up or confirmation that plans are adequate, or even exist.

'In terms of security, there are not many differences in requirements: they only ask that 'security protocols are in place, but don't check.'

L/NNGO, South America

³¹ This is also the case for many INGOs.

(Under)reporting security incidents

Practices of incident reporting within partnerships varied significantly, depending on the size of the L/NNGOs and their SRM capacity, but also on the requirements of the INGO partners and the quality of relationships between the parties. In terms of requirements, some international partners didn't ask for incident reports, or only required that they were included within general progress reports. Other international partners provided templates to follow and required more detailed reports, the consequences of which were reviewed with L/NNGOs. In cases where INGOs' interest in security incidents is perceived to be low and where trust between partners is equally low, L/NNGOs declared that they only reported major incidents and downplayed others. The extent of risk habituation in L/NNGOs also affects which incidents are deemed worthy of being reported (see section 3.2). Finally, concerns about the confidentiality of incident reports were also voiced and, in cases where authorities heavily monitor communications, L/NNGOs were fearful of facing repercussions for reporting issues.

While 87% of survey respondents stated that their SRM policy required them to report security incidents, only 38% of them stated that this was followed in practice.

- ▶ **The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) collects data and information on security incidents affecting aid workers. To learn more about it, visit: www.aidworkersecurity.org**
- ▶ **Insecurity Insight develops reports on security incidents affecting aid workers within their project Aid in Danger. To learn more about them and their data, please visit: www.insecurityinsight.org**

There is a global phenomenon of under-reporting security incidents suffered by L/NNGO staff (this includes physical and psychosocial injury, trauma, abuse and death). Despite this widespread under-reporting, the data collected by Aid in Danger shows

that 42% of the total number of aid workers killed in 2019 were national staff of L/NNGOs, suggesting that the real figures are likely to be much higher. National staff of INGOs are also very exposed to threats; in 2019, they represented 52% of the aid workers killed, wounded or kidnapped.

A focus on fiduciary or legal risks

Within partnerships, space to discuss security risks is often limited. Across interviewees and in all four case studies, L/NNGO staff explained that international partners consistently show more concern about risks related to financial management (fraud and corruption), and the counter-terrorism clauses in their partnership agreements, than about staff safety and security. In northwest Syria and in Myanmar, several interviewees felt that during periods of heightened insecurity, their international partners prioritised discussions around consequences for programme implementation over discussions about the security of the partner's staff.

'Security analysis and incidents are included in project cycle reports [...] but more as a justification for programme progress, rather than looking at staff safety.'

L/NNGO, South America

These findings echo those of the study 'Accelerating Localisation Through Partnerships'³² which explained that: *'The issue of safety and security management did not feature highly in survey responses or in-depth consultations', even though 'the research was conducted in two of the most dangerous countries for aid workers: South Sudan and Nigeria.'* This emphasis on fiduciary risks was further visible in the support international partners provided to L/NNGOs. Several interviewees shared that while they didn't receive any support in terms of SRM, INGOs offered them training in complying with due diligence processes and managing fiduciary risks.

Although the overall majority of local partners did not benefit from SRM engagement with their international partners, there are various examples of partnerships that fare better and provide effective – and highly valued – support to L/NNGOs. Some of these examples and the lessons they bring will be introduced later in this report.

³² Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam (2019) Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships: Recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action, p. 17.

A perceived lack of concern for L/NNGOs' security

'These 'donors' are more concerned with cost cutting than quality, and safety and security concerns are low on the list of concerns.'

L/NNGO, Asia

The above findings (lack of budget, conversations and prioritisation of security) explain why some L/NNGOs believe that their international partners are not concerned about the security of local partner's staff. This impression is reinforced by the application of different security standards for various groups of staff (INGO international staff, INGO national staff, L/NNGO national staff). Amongst the examples

shared were discrepancies in the floats provided to INGO and L/NNGO staff, even when going on a joint mission. Although questioning these standards and the different responsibilities INGOs seemed to bear towards staff, most interviewees were unfamiliar with the concept of 'duty of care', perhaps in part reflecting the fact that security rarely features as a priority in partnership discussions.

'It doesn't need to be at the same level [as INGO staff], but there should be something. It is not acceptable to give me such a small amount of money that I can't afford to stay somewhere with basic levels of security and safety.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Duty of care discussions in the INGO community

Although discussions around duty of care have gained traction following the Oslo District Court ruling on the Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council case in 2015,³³ there is currently no agreed international understanding of NGOs' duty of care obligations toward the various categories of people they work with (employees, volunteers, consultants, partners, etc). Studies addressing the topic show that *"duty of care" technically does not extend to local partner organisations in the same way it does to an international organisation's own national staffers*,³⁴ a gap that is generally justified by a lack of means, with INGOs declaring that covering local partners would *'bankrupt [them]'*.³⁵ According to the research done by Humanitarian Outcomes, *'INGO stakeholders clearly feel an ethical obligation exists to mitigate risk to their partners to the maximum extent possible'*,³⁶ and some of them do develop initiatives at their own cost to support L/NNGO partners, for instance by supporting their access to incident insurance. Such actions, however, do not seem systematised, and while some organisations have developed internal policies to clarify their duty of care responsibilities, many others have not.

Example

Syria: duty of care, progress in policy but enduring support needs in practice

In 2018, the escalation of violence and the shift towards government control of areas in southern Syria brought the need to evacuate civilians as well as humanitarian staff to international attention. This renewed interest bolstered various initiatives within the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF) and the UN, to promote common standards and a comprehensive approach to duty of care that included Syrian partner organisations.³⁷ Although research interviewees acknowledged the progress made on a policy level within SIRF, they continue to require support to enhance their SRM, including training, resources for equipment and staff and assistance in policy and protocol development.

³³ For further information on the case see EISF paper (2016) 'Duty of Care: A review of the Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council ruling and its implications'. Also see the CINFO Duty of Care Maturity Model - (<http://dutyofcare.cinfo.ch/>), along with the joint CINFO - EISF study, (2018) 'Duty of Care under Swiss law: how to improve your safety and security risk management processes'.

³⁴ Egeland and Harmer, 2011: 40.

³⁵ Stoddard, Czwaro and Hamsik, 2019: 24.

³⁶ Ibid: 24.

³⁷ Duty of Care Framework For Humanitarian Organisations in Syria (Nov 2019); SIRF Note on Duty of Care (Oct 2018).

2. Barriers to transparent security discussions and adequate support for SRM

This section investigates obstacles to adequate discussions about security risks and support for L/NNGOs' SRM in partnerships. It demonstrates that local partners are often deterred from voicing the security challenges they face, due to power imbalances, competition with other L/NNGOs, and pressures to keep budgets low within a short-term funding cycle, which fuels their fear of losing funding. Effective collaboration between partners is further impeded by several misunderstandings around the security risks L/NNGOs face and the contexts in which they evolve. These misunderstandings are perpetuated by language barriers, limited physical engagement and a lack of common vocabulary around risks. Communication issues, in addition to the constraints of project-based partnerships, help to explain why L/NNGOs all too often risk pushing themselves to take on additional risks but don't access proportional resources and support to mitigate them.

2.1. Financial disincentives to transparent discussions about security risks

'The balance of power between INGOs and [L/N]NGOs makes it harder to negotiate.'

Survey respondent

Power imbalances and funding dependency

Power imbalances strongly affect the behaviour of L/NNGOs towards their INGO partners and their willingness to share security risks. In two of the four case studies (northwest Syria and Myanmar), L/NNGOs perceived their partnership relations with INGOs as continuing to be shaped by a hierarchical donor-recipient dynamic, resulting in a power imbalance that discourages L/NNGOs from raising their concerns and vulnerabilities in terms of risk exposure and management. L/NNGOs may be discouraged from voicing challenges as

they fear losing funding. For smaller organisations, losing funding can interrupt entire operations, and in countries which have less established – or absent – welfare systems, this may place staff in very precarious situations. In Myanmar, CSOs and CBOs reported having become used to a stop-start rhythm, in which they let staff go as projects end and re-employ them when new income streams are found. The dependence of certain L/NNGOs on INGO grants fuels their desire to appear as viable partners, and thus their tendency to downplay the security risks they may face or take. This applies in particular to the short-term project-grant based partnerships, but less to the longer, more stable partnerships, such as some faith-based partnerships, in which L/NNGOs feel a greater sense of security and confidence discussing these issues.

'In most cases, there is power imbalance between INGOs and local organisations, hence the resources allocated to security risk management may not be commensurate to the threats being addressed.'

Survey respondent

Competition for funding

Intense competition between L/NNGOs for grants can also deter them from demanding funding to cover their security needs. **86% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'being in competition for funds from INGOs makes it harder to budget properly for risk and security management issues.'**³⁸ A few L/NNGOs declared that seeking to submit competitive proposals could lead to reduced demands for security funding. In certain cases, L/NNGOs may also push themselves to take additional risks to deliver programmes, in order to obtain or retain subventions. In addition to competition between L/NNGOs, larger L/NNGOs sometimes found themselves competing against INGOs for donor funding.

'NGOs try to under-cut each other in contract proposals, sometimes to a dangerous degree as too many corners are cut, and the 'donors' are not concerned with these cut corners.'

L/NNGO, Asia

³⁸ See annex 2 for survey results.

Example

Ethiopia: competition between INGOs and L/NNGOs

As in other countries, the additional strain brought by competition has been observed in Ethiopia. Since the relaxation of the regulatory environment in the country, many INGOs are said to have increased direct project implementation rather than partnering with L/NNGOs for delivery. This additional competition makes it more difficult for NNGOs to access Western donors, as they may be less familiar with the specific formats of Western grant proposals or due diligence requirements than INGOs. It can also reduce their ability to adequately budget for security risks or encourage them to take on extra risks.

Budget pressures and rigidities

An absence of security concerns, budget requests, or other support requests raised does not necessarily mean that no concerns or support needs exist. When L/NNGOs obtain funding, the prevailing message that budgets must be kept tight, limited to direct programme costs, and that overheads will not be funded, does not encourage the requesting of 'additional' support. **86% of survey respondents stated that the 'pressure from INGOs to reduce overheads makes it harder to budget properly for risk and security management issues'**. In several cases, when partners eventually asked for additional funding, their demands were rejected.

'The reply [...] was usually: 'you are authorised to reallocate these funds from your existing budget, but there is no extra money available'. This meant we had to decide whether to reduce field activities - and our support to vulnerable communities - to improve our own security.'

L/NNGO, South America

However, in other scenarios, L/NNGOs declared that their partners were receptive to demands for additional security support once voiced, for example by providing additional training or psychosocial support to assist staff. A few interviewees also mentioned a reluctance to ask for funding because

of their awareness of INGOs' difficulties in obtaining funding for their own SRM.

Lack of transparency around security risks and their management

The need to maintain partnerships and attract new funding not only disincentivises L/NNGOs from asking for resources for SRM, but also from being transparent about their risk exposure, acceptance, and management capacity. Besides downplaying the risks they take, L/NNGOs may also be reluctant to share certain SRM practices – which may be considered unacceptable and/or illegal by their international partners (but are deemed necessary by local staff to continue programme implementation). Examples given include situations where L/NNGO staff illegally – and frequently – cross international borders to access project sites, without openly discussing the associated risks with their partners. Another organisation also mentioned that it was nearly impossible to arrange money transfers in a way that did not violate donor and legal domestic restrictions while ensuring sufficient cash liquidity at the project site. Elsewhere, it may be impossible to get physical access without making an informal payment:

'Of course, we have to pay them [terrorist group] to access some locations. They man the roadblocks where you have to pay a toll; that goes to [them]. It's impossible to totally prevent it and it just makes our work harder when these rules are put into place without good understanding of the operational context.'

L/NNGO³⁹

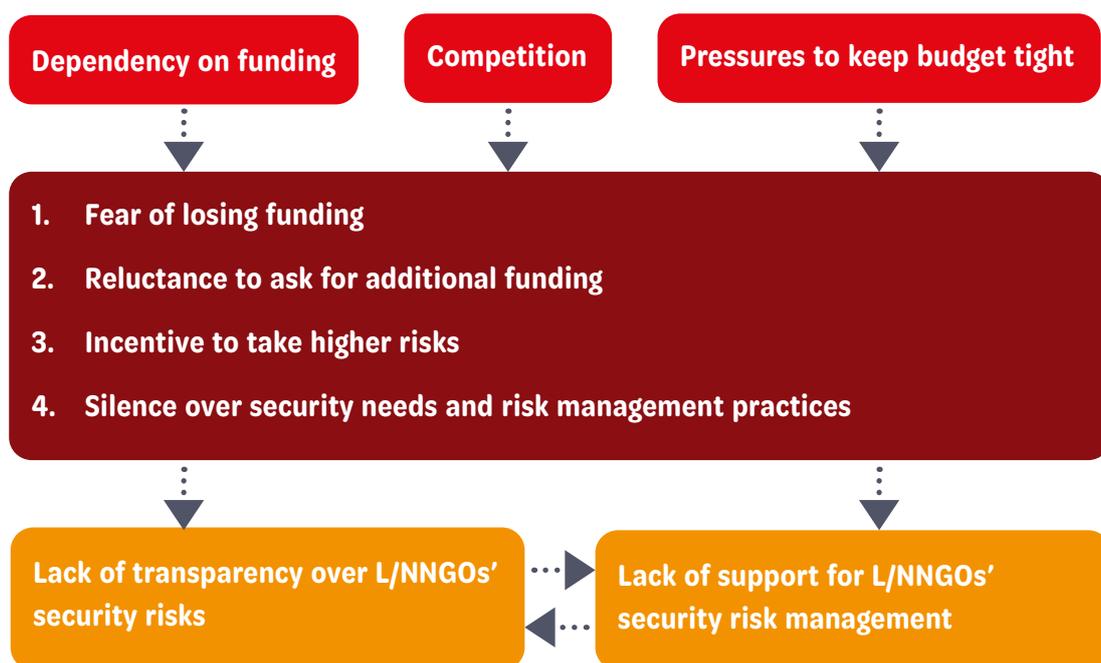
It should also be noted that, in some cases, international partners may turn a blind eye to what happens in the operating context and that a 'don't ask, don't tell' attitude prevails.⁴⁰ This is particularly true of contexts where it is increasingly difficult to negotiate access without breaking counter-terrorism or financial corruption rules and where even speaking with certain non-state armed actors is criminalised.

It is important to recognise that an absence of security concerns, budget requests, or other support requests raised, does not necessarily mean that no concerns or support needs exist.

³⁹ Those sharing these experiences requested that the locations remain anonymous.

⁴⁰ Jackson and Zyck, 2017.

Figure 1: Financial disincentives to transparent discussions of security risks



2.2. Communication barriers around the security risks borne by L/NNGOs

'They just don't understand what's going on.'

L/NNGO, South America

In addition to the perceived power imbalance and the negative consequences of the competitive funding environment, interviewees listed several other factors that can impact the quality of communications and interaction with their international partners on the subject of security. One area of concern is that good understanding and communication between international and national aid actors is often lacking.

Misunderstandings around L/NNGOs' security risks and their context

National aid actors point out that international aid actors often are less connected to the context – they may have a shorter presence in a context, are less embedded in it during their presence, and may have higher (international) staff turnover. As a result, they have a less thorough understanding of the political context, the local aid environment or

the realities of national aid actors, and how these impact on acceptance and security. **79% of survey respondents declared that dynamics around SRM tend to be more problematic when INGO partners are not based in country.** Media attention and labels attached to the context by the international aid community can further influence INGOs' perspectives.

Labels: *Terms attached to a certain zone, describing the nature of the humanitarian context or political state (such as active conflict, post-conflict, natural disaster, etc.) and related levels of security risks (high-, medium- or low-risk).*

The way a situation is labelled can have a serious impact on the security support provided to L/NNGOs. This highlights that cross-checking international sources with information provided by local partners is vital to make adequate decisions on security support. For instance, the application of a 'high-risk' label can lead INGOs and donors to adopt risk-averse attitudes towards a whole country, neglecting the existence of less dangerous regions within it (this was observed in parts of Ethiopia). Local staff who generally have a much more nuanced understanding of the context, may

want to pursue activities, deeming specific zones safe enough to operate, but be rebuked by their international partners. Conversely, risks may also be undermined or underestimated, as was observed in the Colombian case study.

- ▶ **Besides differences in contextual understanding, such situations also relate to differences in risk thresholds, which are explored in section 3.2.**

Example

Colombia: post-conflict label and security support

In Colombia, the NGO visited perceived a mismatch between the actual local security context and the prevalent narrative amongst INGOs and agencies of Colombia as having entered the post-conflict phase. The 'post-conflict' categorisation had led institutional donors and the aid community to shift priorities and focus in the past few years. This shift has decreased context monitoring, resulting in reduced awareness of what is happening on the ground and less funding specifically for SRM. The post-conflict narrative masks certain realities, such as the continued presence of armed groups, and amplifies an existing disconnect between local and international partners. In the case of the particular NNGO observed, staff felt a lack of space to discuss the security context with their international donor.

'INGOs should take some time off and visit their implementing partners for a joint needs assessment.'

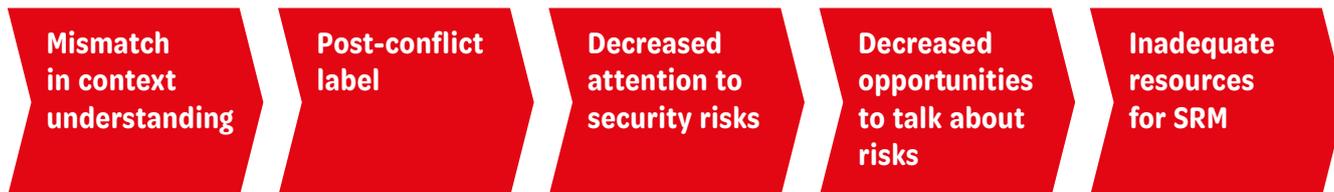
Survey respondent

Several L/NNGOs recognise that their international partners value local insights on contexts, but many others mentioned a desire to see deeper engagement from INGOs – including more frequent visits. Given the sensitivity and difficulty of discussing security issues in partnerships, holding direct and regular conversations may be critical in order to reach a common understanding on security risk issues and their management. This was confirmed by the Colombian case study, in which remote monitoring and communication through intermediaries⁴¹ limited opportunities for honest dialogue, but in-person interactions between partners facilitated trust and meaningful exchanges.

Communication cultures and language barriers

Language barriers, as well as cultural and behavioural differences, also affect the depth and meaningfulness of discussions around risk and security between international and local actors. Challenges to good communication are differences in communication cultures; oral versus written, or formal versus informal communication styles are often in tension. As the international community has selected the written format as the primary medium to communicate all types of information, it too often forgets that oral cultures of communication – as well as illiteracy – are still widespread in many

Figure 2: The impact of the 'post-conflict' label on security support in the Colombian case study



⁴¹ The local NGO visited had direct funding from a donor but the donor channelled communication through an INGO.

countries where aid agencies work. Differences in communication cultures may make it difficult for L/NNGOs to meet expectations from INGOs to receive and submit security reports, and/or to share security-related information. In addition, it is an old, yet still unresolved, issue that most coordination meetings are conducted in a European language, not spoken by many local staff. From high-level briefings to basic written resources in training courses, including security notices sent via email or messaging applications, an absence of translation often renders security information inaccessible to local aid workers and prevents them from sharing contextual insights. According to L/NNGOs, international partners need to develop more awareness of these barriers and engage in discussions on how to best overcome them.

Creating adequate translations

Creating adequate translations of security terms is both difficult and necessary. Translators must not only be able to speak two languages, but understand the socio-political context, and the use and historical background of certain terms, in order to convey the right meaning. Seizing the nuances of words is essential to avoid creating misunderstandings with partners – and potentially offending them. Issues have been noted in several instances, e.g. translating ‘gender’ as ‘sex’, distinguishing ‘safety’ and ‘security’; or ‘intelligence’ and ‘information’.

Figure 3: Communication and information issues and their impact on L/NNGOs’ SRM



2.3. Long-term impact of short-term engagement

The impact of short-term, project-based engagement

Even if INGOs and L/NNGOs partner for multiple consecutive contracts and projects, the short-term financial planning horizon of project-based partnerships compromises continuity and sustainability. Short-term arrangements leave little space to discuss support beyond resources and technical advice linked to specific project activities. The limited timeframe may restrict investment in and reflections about long-term improvement of L/NNGOs' SRM capacity, thus perpetuating their dependency on external actors. One L/NNGO shared the example of being given grants to buy small pieces of equipment that were repeatedly stolen because the office was insufficiently protected. Developing more effective security systems around the office involved more cost, which none of their international project-based partners were willing (or potentially able) to cover.

'We are only partnered project-by-project, so no one would take that responsibility for us anyway.'

L/NNGO, Africa

The lack of budget flexibility generally associated with project-based partnerships hinders L/NNGOs' adequate SRM. Interviewees explained that it was difficult to adapt to evolutions in the security context because their grant arrangements wouldn't always allow them to reallocate funding. Interviewees therefore value partners that closely follow changes in the context and are sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing operational needs – a characteristic mostly found in medium-sized or smaller INGOs.

The impact of lack of trust and mutual understanding

'The international organisations are always keen to hear from us what the situation is in terms of security. [...] But then they also don't necessarily believe us or have confidence in information from a local organisation.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Project-based partnerships leave little space to build rapport and to hold candid conversations about security risks. A lack of trust is a major obstacle to transparent communication,⁴² and a lack of regular communication is a major obstacle to building trust. If local partners don't have a space to openly share the challenges they face and how they manage them, INGOs cannot adequately understand their needs and capacities. Security issues may, therefore, go unnoticed and successes in managing them may be ignored. Conversely, longer relationships are more likely to build a more trusting rapport, and to familiarise the international partner with their local partner's approach to its context and constraints.

'There is very little space to discuss the context and risks, since security reports are now embedded in less frequent programme cycle reports. As an NNGO we are not invited to coordination meetings at country level.'

L/NNGO, South America

The lack of mutual understanding increases the likelihood that inadequate support will be provided to local partners. Some interviewees in Myanmar explained that the training provided by their international counterparts doesn't match the realities of the context they are operating in and doesn't make sufficient use of their own knowledge. Other L/NNGOs in Syria and Colombia expressed disappointment that training is not provided to those who need it the most: while senior management in the capitals are trained, staff in the field can't access basic security courses. Several L/NNGOs were critical of the way resources for SRM are allocated, stating that they are generally used in an ad hoc fashion, rather than contributing to building institutional capacity. They were also concerned that security or partnership requirements didn't adequately take into account the constraints they face. An L/NNGO in South America explained that they routinely ignored certain security measures required by their INGO partners, as those measures could place them at higher risk.⁴³

The importance and long-term impact of training was confirmed in the situation of a few L/NNGOs, who shared that while they didn't currently receive SRM support, they still benefited from the training that previous partners had provided and used the security protocols and plans built together.

⁴² See section 1.2.

⁴³ In this specific case, staff deliberately chose to go on missions without phones, given that the devices could be seen by local armed groups as an intention to spy on their activities.

Good practice example

Ukraine: Caritas Ukraine – Developing security capacities

Caritas Ukraine's response to the conflict that began in the Donbass region in 2014 is one example that shows how long-term and consistent collaboration between partners can support the strategic development of L/NNGOs' SRM capacity.

Prior to the conflict in Donbass, Ukraine was a stable context. Caritas Ukraine was engaged in several social care activities, such as the provision of home care for elderly people. The organisation did not need and did not possess any particular security systems or culture. The armed conflict dramatically changed the security environment and Caritas Ukraine staff, responding to the humanitarian needs triggered by the war, were suddenly exposed to active frontline risks, including shelling, gunfire, UXOs, detention, abduction, and harassment at checkpoints.

Caritas network members – including Caritas Germany, Austria, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and others – proactively mobilised to assist Caritas Ukraine's humanitarian response. Support included a budget for SRM that covered security staff salaries, equipment, training, and advice. Today, Caritas Ukraine has one dedicated Safety

and Security Manager, four security focal points, and a well-functioning SRM system and security culture, which allows the organisation to deploy around 120 staff in the frontline buffer zone.

The successful collaboration around SRM between Caritas Ukraine and its partners relies on three main factors:

- **Sustained and flexible budget support** – Caritas Germany provided long-term funding for humanitarian programmes, with enough margin to adapt to the demands generated by the conflict.
- **Comprehensive training programme** – the programme focused on building institutional capacity to manage security risks within Caritas Ukraine, thus ensuring its resilience and following autonomous handling of security risks.
- **Staff continuity and strong interpersonal relationship** – both the Caritas Ukraine Safety and Security Manager and the security consultant who provided training and advice to the organisation have remained in their roles since 2014.

3. Security risks for L/NNGOS and their management

The first step in improving SRM between partners is to understand L/NNGOs' security experiences. L/NNGOs are exposed to multiple threats, such as arbitrary detention by the authorities, killing by armed groups or being ostracised by local communities. Such threats overlap between professional and personal lives, and are not necessarily visible to international partners. The likelihood and impact of these threats vary according to the risk profile of both the organisation and its staff (which can reinforce each other). L/NNGOs' approaches to these security risks and definition of their risk threshold are strongly affected by their proximity to the operating context, their feeling of risk ownership and sensitivity to risk habituation. Whilst L/NNGOs' SRM practices vary significantly, both smaller and larger organisations expressed a wish for their support needs to be addressed.

3.1. What security risks do L/NNGOs face?

'INGOs perceive that locals are at lesser risk than INGO staff.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Several misunderstandings between partners prevent sound communication and collaboration on security risks. One frequently stated opinion by local and national aid actors interviewed is that their international partners felt that local actors must not face the same level of security risks as international actors; or, taken to the extreme, that they must face no risks at all. Although L/NNGOs acknowledge that they do know the context better, are more embedded in local environments, and have deeper networks which give them a certain advantage in terms of handling risks, they do not want to be perceived to have a lower risk profile than they do. The risks faced by local organisations will be different, but not necessarily lower, than those faced by international actors.

To allow a thorough assessment of the precise risk transfer that takes place between partners, or new risks are created, a comprehensive understanding of the risk profile of the local partner is essential. Although the risks mentioned below are also encountered by INGOs, the exposure and response capacities of L/NNGOs will be different. Whilst the list is not exhaustive, the threats identified below are among those most often experienced by L/NNGOs:

Physical threats: Shelling, killing, shooting, IEDs, kidnapping, carjacking, and violent robberies of compounds are examples of physical threats faced by L/NNGOs. Given that L/NNGOs are often the last aid organisations to operate in high-risk zones, when INGOs interrupt activities,⁴⁴ their staff are usually more exposed to frontline risks. The impact of incidents is likely to be higher, as L/NNGOs usually have fewer options for mitigating or responding to incidents (e.g. they may have limited access to compensation or insurance, absence of social safety net, risk extended to families, no option of repatriation etc.). In active conflict zones,⁴⁵ the impact of such threats is likely to be higher given that work occurs in locations regularly targeted, for example, by airstrikes, raids or shootings, and access to secure compounds is reduced. In non-conflict

zones, L/NNGOs remain more regularly exposed to frontline threats given their increased contact with, and travel to, communities. Being associated with INGOs can also increase the risks they face by affecting their image in local communities (e.g. they may be perceived as working for a foreign agenda, or as having desirable financial resources).

Targeted threats to individuals: Ostracism, assault, kidnapping, harassment and intimidation are all possible threats to which L/NNGO staff are more likely to be exposed than international staff, given their proximity to local communities. When L/NNGO staff have strong ties with – or belong to – the communities they are working with, these threats blur the boundaries between personal and professional risks. Any backlash, including peer-pressure, defamation or social exclusion, may thus have a powerful impact on the psychological or physical wellbeing of staff, as well as of their relatives. L/NNGO staff who are outsiders to the communities can also face heightened threats, due to missteps in the manner in which they engage with the community.⁴⁶ Situations where an organisation is perceived to be interfering with local norms or pursuing undesirable ends may also lead to various security threats.

Figure 4: Security risks faced by L/NNGO staff



⁴⁴ The proximity of L/NNGOs to conflict and continuous presence is one of the most common reason why INGOs enter in partnerships. For more information, see Egeland and Harmer, 2011; Stephen 2017; Jackson and Zyck, 2017.

⁴⁵ Such as Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and parts of DRC, amongst other contexts researched for this study.

Sexual orientation and gender identity expression based threats (SOGIE): sexual violence⁴⁷, bullying, defamation, assault, killing and spying are among the gender identity and sexual orientation based threats to which L/NNGO staff have a different level of exposure compared to INGO staff. Due to economic, civil, political, social, cultural, ethnic or religious differences, L/NNGO staff are particularly exposed to sanctions from authorities and communities related to their sexual orientation and gender identity expression. In countries where certain sexual orientations are illegal, and gender-based rights less acknowledged or less socially accepted, L/NNGO staff may face increased risks of assault or violation of human rights. Once again, their limited ability to leave the country or to access international protection, and their heightened proximity to local communities all mean that the impact of such threats is likely to be deeper.

‘Women are easier targets out there and are seen to be ‘prostitutes’ if they work with LGBTQ issues. Even the police harass our women staff more than our men. But, when men are attacked [...], the attacks can be even more vicious since they are thought to behave like women instead of men. In our society, a man behaving like a woman is very much frowned upon’.

L/NNGO, Africa

Sexual violence doesn't only affect women

Sexual violence against women has gained more visibility, but men and individuals of minority gender identity expression are also impacted. It is hard to accurately assess each group's level of vulnerability and investigate the scale of the threats due to the under-reporting of incidents. The stigma attached a 'lack of masculinity', fear of not being taken seriously or of suffering further repercussions (e.g. for staff members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community), are hurdles that deter the reporting of incidents.

► For additional information on the security risks faced by aid workers with diverse profiles, see EISF. (2018). *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles.*

⁴⁶ Such instances are more likely to occur when L/NNGO staff enter into communities with little understanding of the context, with poor preparation or low staff capacity.

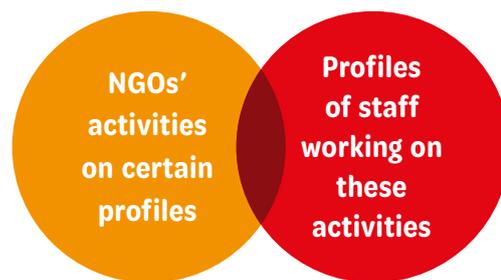
⁴⁷ For a definition of sexual violence and additional information on the topic, see EISF, 2019.

When organisational and individual risk align

‘We really need our partners to understand the different types of risk that we run as a women's organisation working with women who have been raped or abducted. We are more vulnerable than other organisations’

L/NNGO, Africa

Sometimes, especially with SOGIE-related rights, organisational and individual risks align. L/NNGO staff working in this field are particularly at risk, especially when they are women and/or have a non-traditional gender identity expression and/or sexual orientation. In these scenarios, staff carry a double burden of risk – due both to their personal profile, and to the fact that they work on a topic deemed controversial, which is likely to attract hostility. These threats are, of course, in addition to the risk that any L/NNGO usually faces (including physical, legal and operational risk).



Example

Africa: Gender and security risks

‘We do sometimes have threats from armed groups because of the kind of work that we do. In one case in 2016, we had a woman that was working in an area where there was a militia. She was giving talks on reproductive health and it was not well received. She was threatened and things got very rough. The police were there and helped to resolve the situation. The head of the rebel group got her telephone number and called from time to time. [They] also came to the office. We had to evacuate her from the area and put her in touch with international organisations that provide protection for people who are at risk in this way, but they were not able to provide funding to get her out of the area. The threats were imminent, and we had no choice, so she went into hiding. After a while they found her and killed her.’

Legal threats: Suspension or abusive control of programmes, criminalisation of activities, lawsuits, arrests and detention, are amongst the legal threats to which L/NNGOs are exposed. Increasingly, governments are developing legal restrictions within counter-terrorism frameworks, making the risk of criminal charges while working on aid operations both more frequent and severe – for example, the restrictions placed on money transfers in Myanmar, Somalia, and Syria (as part of counter-terrorism regulations). While both INGOs and L/NNGOs are affected by this risk, the impact on L/NNGOs is likely to be higher given that staff and families have limited options for international recourse, particularly in countries with rigid systems of justice. In such contexts, sentences can be heavy – including capital punishment – and legal protection minimal. Staff of L/NNGOs may not access the same degree of legal protection as their foreign counterparts, benefit from the legal support provided by INGOs or have the opportunity to leave the country.

programmes, advocacy, as well as medical actions and development activities), or who are linked with ‘undesirable’ INGOs, can be severely sanctioned. As citizens of the country of operation, L/NNGOs’ staff constitute easy targets for authorities which can abuse power with impunity (e.g. police forces requiring bribes or perpetrating violence; asking beneficiaries for personal information). Staff’s families are also more exposed to repercussions and may experience harassment, defamation or other threats. In various countries, the space for civil society action is increasingly being constrained by governments, suggesting that security risks stemming from authorities deserve particular attention.

‘Enough funds should be provided to pay for security because we have to pay police and community security when holding community activities and on field visits.’

Survey respondent

Example

Syria: the impact of counter-terrorism legislation (CTL)

In Syria, the aid response is essentially divided into that accepted by, and provided in, government-controlled territory, and that provided in opposition-controlled areas. The latter is considered illegal by the government, and anyone engaged in this aid effort risks being charged with (supporting) terrorism. Amongst the Syrian interviewees then in exile from their country, many declared that they are unable to ever return given that the risk of being prosecuted – or worse – will follow them for their whole life. In such scenarios, aid workers must decide between the risk of facing potentially degrading or inhumane treatment by authorities in Syria or seeking refugee status elsewhere.

Example

Digital security and government surveillance

This research highlights the impact of the intense monitoring of humanitarian action organised by national authorities in several countries. Due to this constant surveillance, some L/NNGOs were very reluctant to openly discuss security issues and expressed a particular need to improve their information and digital security, as leakages or interception of communications constitute real security threats.

‘The partners help with providing the technology to collect the data, but not to protect it.’

L/NNGO, Africa

Threats stemming from authorities: arbitrary killing, disappearance, degrading and inhumane treatment, spying, harassment, house arrest, frozen accounts are all threats to which L/NNGOs are particularly exposed from authorities.⁴⁸ Organisations whose activities are perceived as challenging the authorities’ policy or interest (e.g. rights-based

⁴⁸ There is a certain level of increased risk from governments and local authorities in many places – DRC, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Syria, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Pakistan to name only a few raised in this study.

3.2. Differential risk perceptions: security risk ownership, habituation and threshold

'It's our problem to fix, we don't expect outsiders to shoulder the responsibility.'

L/NNGO, South America

Several elements affect the way L/NNGOs approach risks and define their security risk threshold. Two variables related to L/NNGOs' proximity to the operating context are essential to consider – risk ownership and risk habituation.

Security risk ownership

Proximity to the operating context influences L/NNGOs' feeling of ownership of the security risks to which they are exposed. Interviewees in Colombia and Syria considered the conflict and its associated issues 'theirs'. They didn't perceive their international partners as 'transferring risk', as they had begun their activities before entering into partnership and would deal with the threats regardless of support from INGOs.

► *See part 2, section 1.1. on how risk ownership influences perceptions of risk transfer.*

These feelings of ownership are usually affected by broader dynamics related, for instance, to national culture and the structure of aid operations. Political, historical and ideological factors can explain the strong support for locally-led responses and wariness about the involvement of international actors. The form taken by a crisis response also determines the development of particular attitudes: where humanitarian efforts are driven by international actors (e.g. in large UN-led humanitarian responses), feelings of local ownership tend to be weaker.

Proximity to the context and risk ownership may push L/NNGO staff to take higher risks, as they often feel a responsibility – even *'a moral imperative to help their fellow-citizens that goes beyond professional considerations'*.⁴⁹ A Colombian interviewee explained that staff regularly broke curfews to stay longer with beneficiaries, as they sought to show solidarity with local communities.

'When security gets worse, it is the time they need us.'

L/NNGO, MENA

⁴⁹ Stoddard, Czwaro and Hamsik, 2019: 20.

⁵⁰ Also called risk desensitization or 'danger habituation', Van Brabant, 2010.

⁵¹ As mentioned in section 3.1, risks from one's personal life easily overspill onto one's work, and reciprocally, work-related risks – be they threats by community members or authorities – follow staff home after work.

Security risk habituation

'The problem is that people in Syria are used to risks.'

L/NNGO, MENA

'Some men didn't even get up from the table when the shell landed close to them and continued playing cards. Some [L/NNGO] staff have the same attitude.'

L/NNGO, MENA

Besides risk ownership, another consequence of L/NNGOs' proximity to the context is risk habituation.⁵⁰

Risk habituation: *A usually unconscious process of accustoming oneself to the presence of risks resulting from constant exposure to danger, and therefore decreasing one's conscious response to them.*

The majority of L/NNGO staff are born and/or have lived for extended periods in the environment they work in. Such long-term exposure to a context and its risks facilitates the internalisation of threats and makes individuals more likely to experience some degree of risk habituation. For instance, aid workers working in hospitals in opposition-held areas in Syria face the constant risk of being shot at during travel, regardless of the motive of their movements, whether it is work-related (transferring a patient from one hospital to another) or personal (buying food or visiting a relative).⁵¹ For L/NNGO staff that live and work in the same community, the boundary between work-related security risks and risks faced purely as a citizen is blurred. As such, a 'line' is not drawn, because risk present in one's personal life can spill over into work-related risks. On the flip side, work-related risks – be they threats by community members or authorities – also do not cease to exist when staff go home after work. Some even continue long after people stop working for an organisation (e.g. staff working for Syrian NGOs in certain areas risk facing delayed repercussions from government authorities).

'It is difficult to separate work risks from normal life.'

L/NNGO, Africa

‘Just because we are local doesn’t make us immune to threats.’

L/NNGO, Africa

Experiencing risk habituation – L/NNGO versus INGO staff

Risk habituation doesn’t only affect L/NNGO staff. Besides the influence of continuous exposure to risk, an individual’s sensitivity to risk habituation primarily depends on their levels of personal risk awareness and experience. International staff of INGOs who have lived for sustained periods in insecure environments can also become ‘risk habituated’. Individuals in this situation can be even more at risk, as they generally work with a shallower understanding of the context and can be oblivious to the severity or existence of various risks.

Once again, risk habituation tends to increase L/NNGOs’ risk threshold. An example is local aid workers who are so used to being threatened by local groups that instead of reporting and discussing an incident with their team, they brush it off and don’t even name it as an ‘incident’. Where exposure to high risk becomes the norm for communities, L/NNGOs – as part of the community – are likely to accept the same, or even higher, risk levels to provide critical services (e.g. staff of medical NGOs operating hospitals in Syria in the knowledge they may be targeted). The distinction between risk habituation and conscious risk acceptance may be blurred when there is no feasible option to avoid the risks and, therefore, cannot be generalised as it is influenced by context-specific factors.

- ▶ *Risk ownership and risk habituation critically influence the perception of risk transfer within partnerships, as seen in Part 2, Section 1.1.*
- ▶ *See the box included in Part 2, Section 1.2. on ‘What does it mean to accept security risks? L/NNGOs v INGOs’.*

L/NNGOs’ exposure to psychosocial risks

L/NNGO staff (and national staff generally) are also exposed to trauma, stress and other psychosocial risks. Being part of the local community and being used to their operating context doesn’t **necessarily** mean that staff possess a better ability to deal with associated psychosocial risks. L/NNGO staff are affected in the same way as other civilians fleeing or living in humanitarian crises or conflict environments.⁵² Given their involvement in the context, they may experience increased pressure from their communities when programmes do not satisfy their needs, and a heightened feeling of responsibility to provide assistance. They may be more likely to push their personal barriers or neglect their own well-being to deliver relief.

Given the generally limited resources allocated to L/NNGOs’ security risk management, L/NNGO staff seldom access psychosocial support, despite its importance.

3.3. L/NNGOs’ security risk management practices and needs for support

‘How to manage security was a big question when we first decided to set up our own NGO’

L/NNGO, Oceania

L/NNGOs’ SRM practices differ as much as L/NNGOs do. However, it was still possible to identify certain commonalities and to determine some of the most pressing support needs. Across contexts, sizes, and partnerships, L/NNGOs clearly expressed a need for more support to manage security risks, but they also expressed a wish for their skills to be acknowledged.

Discrepancies in security risk management by L/NNGOs

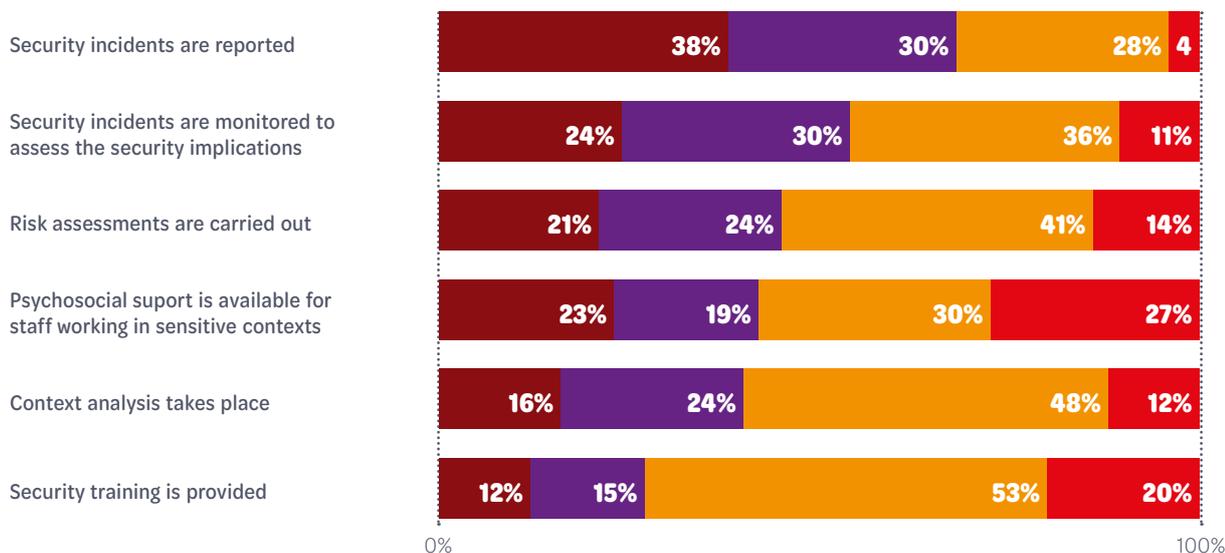
There are wide discrepancies within L/NNGOs’ SRM practices.

⁵² Stephen, 2017:20.

Figure 5: L/NNGOs practices of security risk management

How often risk management practices are observed

Always Usually
Sometimes Never



Key numbers

- 24% of the respondents declared that incidents are always monitored to assess their security implications,
- 21% said that risk assessments are always carried out,
- 23% declared psychosocial support is always available to staff working in sensitive contexts,
- 12% of the respondents stated that security training is always provided to their staff.

Few smaller NGOs had dedicated roles for security within their staff and many stated that security risks are considered the responsibility of every individual rather than something formalised at the organisational level. SRM practices are furthermore affected by L/NNGOs' proximity to the operating environment. If threats overlap between professional and private lives, security risk mitigation measures may also.

'If a community says they block the roads because they disagree with a programme decision, the community in which staff lives counter-threatens that they will block the roads also (even without the staff asking for it). The whole dynamics with risks and interventions are different.'

L/NNGO, MENA

Due to their familiarity with risks, some staff may tend to follow their own personal risk management techniques and can be reluctant to abide by the broader organisation's rules. On the other hand, staff can also use the mitigation strategies enforced within their organisations to deal with risks encountered in their private life. For instance, staff working for medical NGOs in northwest Syria use the skills and information they have learnt at work about blast protection and behaviour at checkpoints to respond to the threats that continue after they leave work.

Several L/NNGOs stated that they do not have any SRM policies or plans in place, and usually rely on advice from communities, news from the radio, or information provided by authorities to assess whether access to certain locations is safe. A few smaller L/NNGOs interviewed in the case studies admitted that they had little understanding of what professional SRM entails. They were unaware of the systems, tools and mechanisms applied in the sector, and wouldn't know what support to ask for from their international partners.

Unsurprisingly, the survey showed that the larger an organisation, the more likely it is to have a SRM system in place, including protocols and contingency plans. Various NNGOs proved to have elaborated SRM structures, operating with multiple security focal points, organising security training, following up on security incidents strategically and providing psychosocial support to staff.

Recognising local skills

Whilst these manifestations of SRM capacity are more easily acknowledged by INGOs, some L/NNGOs voiced their desire to see their skills recognised. This recognition should be locally-relevant, i.e., inclusive of more than just the competences valued by international organisations. Although research shows that working on an equal footing with L/NNGOs leads to more successful operations and more sustainable access,⁵³ the latest ODI research explains that international agencies continue to have difficulties in recognising local capacities.⁵⁴ Amongst other domains of expertise, several L/NNGOs demonstrate extensive competency in establishing and maintaining acceptance, a strategy which is a pillar of NGOs' SRM. L/NNGOs interviewed demonstrated strong coordination and negotiation skills (e.g. harnessing their networks and personal connections, mobilising their in-depth contextual knowledge and engaging with communities and local authorities), as well as the ability to preserve relationships of quality with beneficiaries, by maintaining continuous contact despite crises or changes in the context. Additionally, they proved their capacity *'to analyse and understand the local context (community dynamics, local conflicts and politics) and to engage with and understand affected people, their needs and their aspirations.'*⁵⁵ The risk awareness of L/NNGO staff may be easily mistaken for risk habituation, and therefore go unacknowledged by international partners. In many cases, L/NNGOs navigate threats from host communities and governments that are not necessarily visible to INGOs. However, it isn't always clear whether relying on acceptance is a strategic decision made by L/NNGOs or the only decision possible, given the expense of protective measures.

Needs for security risk management support

There are various opportunities – and needs – for INGOs to support and work with local partners on SRM. Each L/NNGO has different strengths and needs, and the support provided must be adapted to their specific context and priorities. The following list explores the most common L/NNGO support needs identified in the research.

⁵³ Haver and Carter, 2016.

⁵⁴ Fast and Bennett, 2020.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2020: 12.

⁵⁶ See EISF (2018) *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles*. European Interagency Security Forum.

1) Organisational security risk management:

Plans, protocols and procedures: Various L/NNGOs expressed the need to learn more about the fundamentals of SRM and how to embed it within their organisations. Some explained that they had greatly benefited from the support of international partners in devising adequate SRM plans, procedures and protocols.

SRM culture: In Ukraine and Syria, L/NNGOs believed that stronger engagement and accountability demands from their INGO partners would provide them with more leverage to instil better security awareness and discipline among their staff. In both environments – previously stable contexts that rapidly turned into war zones – some L/NNGOs indeed reported difficulties in convincing staff that risk mitigation is possible and creating a security management culture. As outlined in part 1, section 3.2, familiarity with risks may lead to fatalistic attitudes and in some instances impede the enforcement of SRM measures within L/NNGOs.

'It was very important to create a security culture and awareness among staff to counter some of the more fatalistic attitudes staff used to have (it is up to Allah).'

L/NNGO, MENA

Person-centred and intersectional approach to SRM:

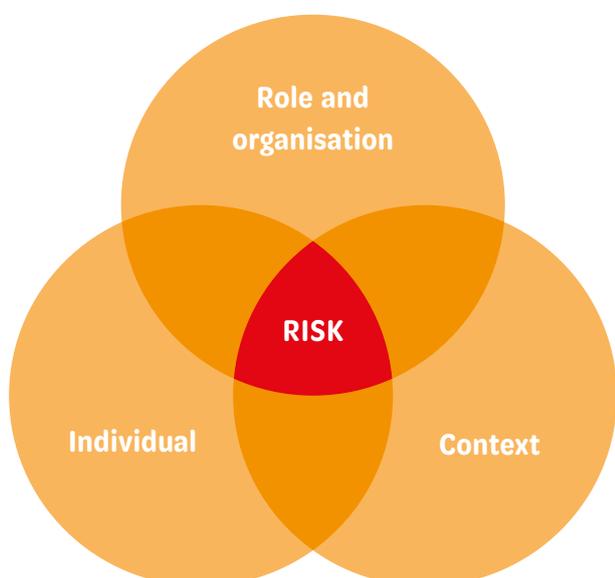
Interviews and case studies observed that L/NNGOs didn't appear very often to adopt an intersectional approach to security risks, taking into account the impact of the personal characteristics of all staff – with the exception of gender distinction. (It should be noted that INGOs equally have only started to recognise the need to adopt an inclusive approach to security.⁵⁶) Differences related to gender seemed to be more frequently acknowledged, although several female respondents shared that security protocols – when they existed – did not have a gender-differentiated component. In each case study, female staff interviewed felt at greater risk than their male counterparts. This was sometimes reinforced in cases where women were in positions of authority.

Whilst L/NNGOs prove to be sensitive to the risks generated by ethnicity, cultural, social, religious and

political differences, they rarely mentioned risks relating to SOGIE (with the exception of L/NNGOs whose activities are related). Because each context will produce different vulnerabilities for different categories of staff, it is essential to develop adequate mitigation measures, and dedicate commensurate resources to ensure all individuals are protected. Any analysis of risk transfer and support provided to L/NNGOs should be aware of the impact of personal identities and engage in appropriate conversations with local actors on the topic.

Figure 6: Intersectionality of risks

► See EISF (2018). *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles*. European Interagency Security Forum (EISF).



2) Equipment

Even L/NNGOs that had developed SRM systems didn't access all the necessary equipment to ensure adequate protection of their staff and operations. Organisations of all sizes mentioned the need to obtain better equipment including vehicles,⁵⁷ communication equipment, compound/office security technologies (CCTV, blast protection), data protection equipment, and power supply.

3) Training

As evidenced by the survey and the interviews, the need for skill and knowledge transfer on a range of issues is high, amongst others, for matters related to

institutional SRM (risk assessments, security policy, protocol development and actor mapping), but also for personal security trainings such as hostile environment awareness training (HEAT). Additional courses were needed in digital security (including how to protect data related to beneficiaries, use of how hardware and software, and technical support), as well as advocacy and negotiations. The importance of enabling the right staff groups to access relevant training was emphasised, i.e. training around personal security should be offered primarily to frontline staff, rather than at a capital city level where it has little relevance. L/NNGOs also voiced their desire to see increasing training of trainers (ToT) to ensure that learning could be further shared and capacity retained at the local level.

Capacity-sharing or capacity-building?

The term **capacity-building** is sometimes criticised for being 'patronising' and 'disempowering'⁵⁸ and encouraging the idea that L/NNGOs lack capacity rather than recognising their existing skills and knowledge. It has also been interpreted as perpetuating colonial and hierarchical thinking by which INGOs are recognised as the most-skilled, while L/NNGOs are solely the recipients of this knowledge.

The term **capacity-sharing** is preferred by many, as it highlights that learning is a joint process. It acknowledges that both parties have skills, as well as areas for improvement.

Few interviewees were familiar with 'capacity-sharing' and most referred to 'capacity-building'. Regardless of the term used, the above debate emphasises that partners should adopt an approach that is based on respect, openness to learn and humility. Collaborating on SRM shouldn't only be seen as a responsibility of INGOs toward their partners, but as a reciprocal opportunity to learn. Using clear language and ensuring words don't cause offence is part of this process.

► See section 3.3 on the lack of recognition of L/NNGOs' capacity, and Part 2, Section 1.2 and 1.3. for additional information on steps to move towards risk-sharing.

⁵⁷ Smaller L/NNGOs generally used motorbikes which can increase exposure to road traffic accidents (RTAs).

⁵⁸ Stephen, 2017:35.

4) Duty of care

L/NNGOs require additional funding to fulfil their duty of care obligations towards their staff. Several contexts do not have insurance markets, but even in countries where they exist, L/NNGOs may lack the funds to provide insurance for their staff. This also extends to compensation payments for injury or death. Funding should also be made available to support psychosocial care for L/NNGO aid workers. While some L/NNGOs mentioned in the survey that psychosocial care is available (with 42% saying it was always or usually available), almost no examples of INGO-provided psychosocial support, at least in terms of responding to security incidents, were observed in the case studies. Various L/NNGOs voiced a need to learn how to deal with constant stress and the traumatic events to which they are exposed.⁵⁹

Example

Ethiopia: psychosocial support

When asked about psychosocial support, a few interviewees responded that, because field staff are generally from the communities in which they work, they are better able to cope on a day-to-day basis. They then added that, considering the delivery and budgetary pressures they are under, such an 'intangible' risk could not be a priority issue, revealing that lack of resources, rather than lack of awareness, was a more important factor in the provision of psychosocial support.

5) Public engagement and advocacy

Several interviewees asked to see more public advocacy from INGOs on their behalf. Given their exposure and vulnerability to government restrictions and sanctions, and their inability to safely take a stand against them, L/NNGOs expressed the wish for more public mobilisation on the security risks they face. They would benefit from sustained and predictable advocacy support from their INGO partners in terms of lobbying international bodies and governments to adhere to relevant international normative frameworks.

Not all support needs can be readily addressed by INGO partners, which is why further discussions are needed with relevant platforms and donors to find creative solutions. It is not always the case that an individual INGO should satisfy all of the support needs alone; the best solution is often a collective response.

⁵⁹ See Stephen, 2017 and box section 3.2 on L/NNGOs' exposure to psychosocial risks.



Analysis

1. Reconceptualising risk transfer to reflect reality

A major finding of the study is that the concept of risk transfer needs to be clarified and better defined. L/NNGOs identified several complex factors that influence how risks are shifted and generated in partnerships, and didn't approach this topic through the lens of a linear transfer of risks. Informed by the reflections and experiences of L/NNGOs, this section elaborates a new definition of risk transfer that better reflects this reality. It shows that risks aren't only transferred between actors but are also created and transformed within partnerships. Security risks shift in different directions, including from local to global levels, and impact more actors than simply NGOs. While such 'transfers' can be either intentional or unintentional, L/NNGOs, on the whole, feel that international partners have a responsibility to support them in facing the risks. Sharing responsibility for security risks in partnerships requires that more attention is given to local voices and experiences, that stronger commitments are made from INGOs and that collaborative ways to manage security risks are supported.

1.1. Understanding and defining risk transfer

Although there is no globally agreed definition of 'risk transfer', the term is commonly perceived as designating a linear passing of risks from international agencies to L/NNGOs. Such a perception oversimplifies the reality of a process which is at the heart of the localisation agenda and is central to understanding SRM dynamics in partnerships.

The key informant interviews and the case studies confirmed that, with the exception of northwest Syria, the concept of risk transfer was actually not well understood and required further unpacking. To

better reflect the perceptions, observations, and thoughts of the L/NNGOs engaged in this study on how risks emerge and flow through the chain of aid actors, the researchers recommend a new definition of risk transfer.

Risk transfer: *The formation or transformation of risks (increasing or decreasing) for one actor caused by the presence or action of another, whether intentionally or unintentionally.*

The section below unpacks the different elements of this definition and highlights the importance of considering them when analysing risk transfer in partnerships. These findings are a first step to providing a more nuanced view, but the proposed risk transfer definition will need to be further refined and tested in the field to ensure its applicability and acceptability by all relevant actors.⁶⁰

Risk transfer or security risk transfer?

The term 'risk transfer' has its origins in the private insurance world where it usually refers to the management of fiduciary risks between contractual parties. As it became introduced in the non-profit sector, this focus on economic risks was partly preserved. However, NGOs increasingly recognise that risks should be approached in a holistic fashion given their interlinked nature – e.g. fiduciary or reputational risks impact security risks faced by staff, and reciprocally, security risks have fiduciary and reputational consequences.

The definition above can provide useful insight into the treatment and processing of other risks. However, this research paper focuses on safety and security risks. When references are made to 'risk transfer', these are the ones implied.

⁶⁰ For instance, in the future the term risk transfer could be re-labelled as it does not capture the creation of risks in partnerships. It is advised for the new interpretation to first be discussed and debated before bringing a new term into the world.

1) Transfers, creation or change of risks

In order to begin the discussion of risk transfer, it was important to understand whether the definition of 'risk' was shared. A large proportion of survey respondents agreed with the risk definition proposed in the survey:

Risks: *Physical or psychological risks arising from acts of war, violence, crime and other hazards.*

However, the survey revealed that the concept of risk transfer warranted much deeper investigation, as the responses varied significantly between the issue being categorised important, not important, or not applicable. The concept of 'transfer' can be misleading and falsely implies a zero-sum game. It suggests the movement of a set package of risks from one actor to another – and overlooks instances of risk sharing, risk transformation or the creation of new risks in relationships between aid actors. The proposed definition highlights that risks are not only transferred but can also be *formed and transformed* in partnerships.

- **46% of survey respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that partnering with INGOs could create additional challenges in managing relationships with government.**
- **41% agreed that it could create further difficulties in working with communities.**

Interviewees from certain countries explained that, due to the negative perception of international actors in their context, the best way for INGOs to protect L/NNGO partners in these environments is to conceal their partnership.

Considering that risks are not purely transferred also highlights the fact that risks vary according to the profile of the actors bearing them. During their 'transfer', the shape and level of risks are affected, and new risks can emerge. The specific vulnerabilities, relationships, or capacity to manage the risks of one organisation all contribute to determining the type of risks that they will, and are, willing to face in a given environment. If an INGO decides to stop operating in a region due to its insecurity and contracts an L/NNGO to pursue the activities, the security risks that local partners will face will be different from the ones that caused the INGO to interrupt its programme.

- ▶ *See part 1, section 3.1 for additional information on L/NNGOs' specific security risks.*

2) Different levels and directions of risk transfer

Risk transfer impacts various actors and follows multiple directions outside the transfer of risks between INGOs and L/NNGOs. Adopting a local perspective on risk transfer provides a more in-depth understanding of its diverse scenarios. This part explores commonly and less commonly observed variations of security risk transfer.

Risk transfer from global to local

A linear transfer where a powerful actor passes risks to a less powerful one. This is the most typically mentioned instance of risk transfer.



Donors to the aid community: In contexts where direct funding occurs,⁶¹ direct transfer of risk from institutional donors to L/NNGOs may take place. In a highly politicised environment, being directly and visibly linked to a Western donor affects an L/NNGO's reputation with national authorities, local communities or non-state groups, which can place staff at greater risk. In a more indirect, but no less powerful fashion, donors also transfer and create risks for aid actors by shaping their economic environment and creating additional pressures.

Self-imposed risk? External pressures play a crucial role in how security risks are managed and how much risk is taken by L/NNGOs. Competition for funding may lead L/NNGOs to accept more risk than they feel comfortable with. If organisations – and individuals – are to a certain extent 'self-imposing' these higher risk thresholds to remain competitive, they do so to adapt to an environment that donor behaviour has shaped. See part 1, section 2.1 for additional information on the impact of financial pressures on partnerships and SRM.

International partner to local and national NGOs: Most often, this is the type of risk transfer envisaged when the term is used. In many cases, INGOs decrease their own security risk burden by relying on local partners to implement their programmes – this may or may not increase the level of insecurity faced by their L/NNGO partners and may be unintentional or deliberate.

National to local NGOs/CSOs/CBOs:⁶² National NGOs that operate on a large scale may transfer security risk to local actors in the same way INGOs transfer risk to L/NNGOs. This can be deliberate, but in the cases observed, most came about as a result of how aid is organised and implemented.

'Do no harm' and security risk transfer from NGOs to communities. Acknowledging that humanitarian activities may cause inadvertent harm or pass on risks to communities, the 'do no harm' concept is a minimum standard for humanitarian action, requiring aid actors to ensure they don't expose populations to additional risks. A thorough analysis of risk transfer must be informed by this fundamental principle. For example, it should consider whether and how acceptance strategies used by NGOs can influence the risk profile of the community.

NGO to the community: Risk transfer doesn't only involve NGOs. At the most basic level it is possible for an NGO, whether local, national, or international, to 'transfer' security risk to communities, by adding risks to their lives through their presence and/or activities.

⁶¹ In this study a few national and local NGOs interviewed received direct funding from donors (examples include DRC, Benin, Somalia, Pakistan, Liberia, Colombia, PNG, Lebanon, Yemen Myanmar, and Ethiopia).

⁶² For an explanation of the differences between national and local NGOs as well as CSOs, refer to the glossary.

Example

Colombia: transferring security risks to communities

In Colombia, the L/NNGO observed relied on community leaders to negotiate access with armed groups in the area, and to intervene in the case of a critical incident (for example, the disappearance or abduction of a staff member in the zone). By acting as interlocutors, the community takes on some responsibility for the NGO's actions and behaviour. If an issue arose between armed groups and the NGO, it is likely that the community would be threatened or punished.

► See part 1, section 3.3. for more information on L/NNGOs' security risk management.

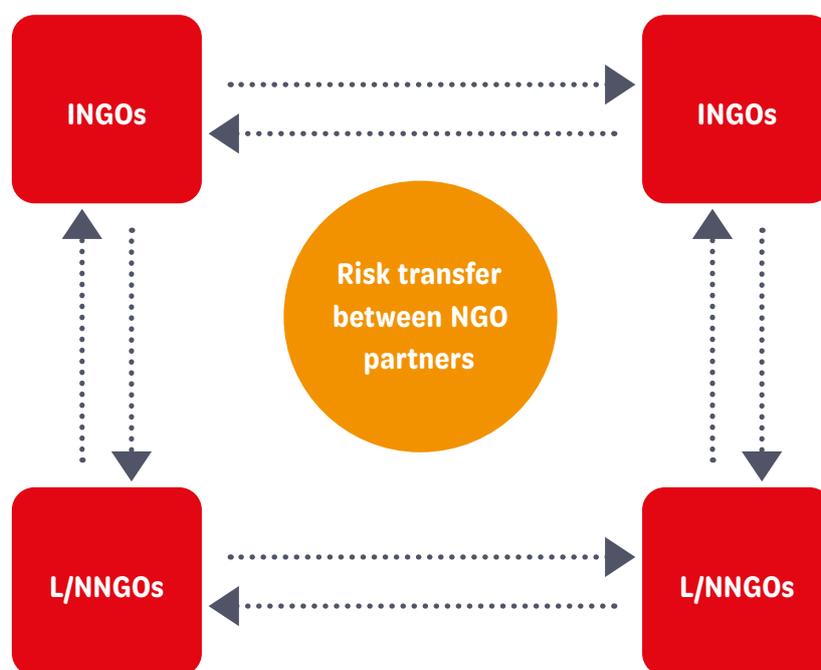
NGOs to contractors: Contractors⁶³ are generally contracted or employed on a different system to regular staff, which means that they may not be covered by the NGO's traditional security

management measures. In this way, risk is directly, and in some cases, deliberately, transferred from the organisation to the contractor. For example, the use of delivery companies for aid distribution implies a transfer of security risks such as road traffic accidents and carjacking.

From local to global and horizontal risk transfer

Adopting the L/NNGO perspective on risk transfer reveals that security risks don't only move from global to local levels. Security risks can also be transferred in an upward movement, from L/NNGOs to INGOs, and horizontally, between actors operating at the same level. Recognising that security risks move in various directions between aid actors sheds light on the agency of local aid actors, showing that they are not passive recipients within risk transfers, but are agents able to act on these processes. This shift in perspective reveals relationships of complementarity between partners, and the possibility for strategic transfer of security risks as a mean to protect parties who are most exposed.

Figure 7: The different directions of risk transfer



⁶³ Contractors are people brought in on a contract basis by organisations (international or national) to fulfil a certain role on a short-term basis, often paid for a service.

L/NNGOs to INGOs: This overturn of the typical risk transfer relationship refers to situations where L/NNGOs create, transform or transfer risks to their international partners, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, cases where INGOs carry certain advocacy messages on behalf of L/NNGOs or when an INGO's acceptance is affected by the actions of its L/NNGO partner.

Example

Africa: local to global risk transfer

An interviewee in this research explained that to deter their L/NNGO from continuing its human right activities, the national government regularly – and arbitrarily – detained its staff members. Given its high vulnerability to threats from authorities, the organisation used its international partners as proxies to publicly denounce the arbitrary detentions suffered by its staff. By doing so, it mitigated the risk of facing additional repercussions by authorities and avoided exposing its staff to further security risks.

The above example displays the importance of power imbalance in partnerships between INGOs and L/NNGOs. In most cases observed in this study, when local partners sought to transfer risks to INGOs, the latter were generally in a position to make an informed decision whether to accept or to refuse the risks, according to their own exposure and capacity to handle them, whereas the reverse isn't always true.

► See part 2, section 1.2. box 'What does it mean to accept security risks? L/NNGOs v INGOs'.

Horizontal 'transfer' of risk between NGOs: Aid actors do not operate in isolation, and the presence or work of one organisation can add or change risks to another. A lack of collaboration or, conversely, a close collaboration between NGOs working in the same location or sector, can impact the modalities of aid provision and, therefore, impact its associated risks, as well as the security risk profile of the aid responders. The aid environment is often crowded and, especially in a context of high competition, there may be insufficient attention paid to harmful effects of aid provision modalities on other aid actors.

Example

Colombia: horizontal risk transfer

In the Colombia case study, an L/NNGO and its INGO partner visited and carried out different programmes in the same area, working independently from each other but sharing logos and swapping vehicles. Both organisations could thus be identified as the same organisation despite having different risk profiles and vulnerabilities.

3) Intention and perceptions around risk transfer

'[Risk transfer is] mostly unintentional, but sometimes might seem deliberate: for example, asking us to reallocate existing funds to security within existing budgets, and not adding more money.'

L/NNGO, South America

A key facet of the new definition is highlighting that risk transfer occurs in deliberate but also non-deliberate ways. Most interviewees didn't perceive risk to be *deliberately* transferred from one actor to another, but rather to result from the divergent natures, origins, motivations, and risk appetites of different aid actors.

INGOs in partnerships – intentional and unintentional risk transfer

Research shows that INGOs commonly engage in partnerships with L/NNGOs to avoid security risks and enable the continuity of operations. However, this motive doesn't exclude others – various INGOs engage with local partners due to their own values, mandate, and commitment to the localisation agenda. Partnerships are also initiated to improve the efficiency and sustainability of humanitarian action – research has shown that partnering on an equal footing with L/NNGOs leads to more stable and successful operations.⁶⁵

It must, nonetheless, be acknowledged that several L/NNGOs did feel that security risks were deliberately transferred onto them.

⁶⁴ Jackson and Zyck, 2017: 57; Egeland and Harmer, 2011: 25.

⁶⁵ Haver and Carter, 2016.

'I think they understand the realities of the field, and because they know, they are deliberately transferring risk.'

L/NNGO, Africa

Local partners' perceptions of risk transfer varied significantly, with some deeming the issue essential and others considering the concept as not applicable. The research findings brought to light that the degree of ownership partners feel towards their programmes is critical to the risk transfer analysis. Staff that didn't consider the concept of 'risk transfer' to be valid explained that they would continue their activities regardless of the existence of their international partners, and in this sense, would take the same security risks. The fact that certain situations are considered as instances of 'risk transfer' is therefore strongly influenced by subjectivities and perceptions around risks and programme ownership of both L/NNGOs and INGOs. If an L/NNGO has complete ownership over a programme, and only relies on partners for funding, they are less likely to perceive a transfer of risk. On the contrary, if an L/NNGO takes over a programme begun by an INGO and works on a project contract basis, they are more likely to feel that risk is being transferred. This is especially the case if the INGO handed over the programme to decrease their own risk burden, as was the case in northwest Syria when the security situation deteriorated due to shifting frontlines.

In certain cases, L/NNGOs need funding and support in implementing their programmes, but the programmes are theirs. On the other end of the

spectrum are situations where L/NNGOs feel more like sub-contractors rather than partners.

The sense of ownership is a spectrum and most organisations fall somewhere in the middle. Regardless of whether risk transfer is perceived by the organisation, risks can still be transferred. The difficulty of L/NNGOs in perceiving risk transfer can also be explained by their lack of familiarity with the concept given that it is seldom – if ever – discussed with international partners. Various L/NNGOs, therefore, defined risk transfer as designating instances where certain actors were asked to take on more risks than others, especially when they didn't access commensurate resources to manage them. Some thus perceived that risk transfer could also apply to processes within organisations, for example, between HQ staff and field staff.

'Risk is transferred but not the resources required to mitigate and manage the risk'

Survey respondent

Regardless of perceptions of risk transfer and differences across contexts, almost all the L/NNGOs engaged with during the research stated that they feel 'on their own' when it comes to dealing with security risks. They believe that their partners do have a certain 'moral' or 'ethical' responsibility to ensure their security. However, where they aspire to receive more support for SRM, the lack of serious engagement by international partners on the topic leaves them with little choice but to rely on their own capacities.

Figure 8: L/NNGOs' sense of programme ownership and its impact on their perceptions of risk transfer in partnerships



1.2. Sharing responsibility for risks in practice

'Any risk can be sorted out through mutual discussion, shared understanding and proper planning for risk mitigation.'

Survey respondent

As the first part of this section explains, it is essential to question and challenge the meaning of risk transfer. Whether risk transfer is perceived or not, or happens intentionally or not, L/NNGOs believe INGO partners should share responsibility for the security risks that affect them. Moving from risk transfer towards 'risk sharing' requires a change in partnerships. Building on the research findings, the below section highlights a couple of steps in this direction.⁶⁶

Taking into account structural constraints and power imbalances in partnerships

L/NNGOs do not face or approach security risks in the same way INGOs do, because both their risk profile and the SRM measures they can implement differ. L/NNGOs don't accept – nor perceive – the security risks being transferred to them in the same way INGOs do, and it is vital to take this difference into account while discussing, entering, and maintaining partnerships. The conditions in which actors operate and the range of options available to them makes a critical difference in their decision to accept or reject security risks.

In some cases, L/NNGOs 'consent' to be exposed to security risks, because they have no – or very limited – option to do otherwise. Part 1, section 2 observes that L/NNGOs sometimes push themselves to take on more risks in order to retain funding and enable their programme to survive (as well as maintaining the livelihood of their staff). Understanding the effects of power dynamics, resource capacity and trust is essential to an adequate analysis and discussion of security risks in partnerships.

'It is not always easy to get to operate as equal partners. They come with the funding and that puts you in a beggar's position'

L/NNGO, Africa

While structural changes will take time to occur, it is still possible to share responsibility for security risks. A first step is to fully acknowledge and question these structures, as well as to start open conversations between partners about them.

Including local perspectives in discussing and acting on security risks

Section 1, 2, 3 and Part 2 demonstrate the existence of several misunderstandings around L/NNGOs' security risks and their management, as well as a lack of thorough and transparent discussion on the matter between partners. In order to share responsibility for security risks, partnerships must create space for L/NNGOs to voice their challenges (and successes) and to recognise the value of their

What does it mean to accept security risks? L/NNGOs vs INGOs

The decision to 'accept' security risks isn't made on equal terms by INGOs and L/NNGOs. Making an informed decision about security risks in partnerships implies:

- 1) Having the option to refuse (avoiding risk by operating somewhere else or refusing it by not undertaking the activities)
- 2) Having resources to adequately mitigate risks, if accepted (knowledge and material capacity to implement the preferred mitigation measures)

Risk acceptance usually refers to accepting 'residual risk' after the implementation of risk mitigation measures.⁶⁷ It, therefore, presupposes having resources to mitigate risk in the first place, which is not the case for many L/NNGOs. Besides limited resources, L/NNGOs face other constraints that crucially limit the range of options they have to reduce or avoid risks – for example, foreign staff have the option to leave the country of operation, whereas this is far more difficult for national staff.

► See part 1, section 3 for insights into L/NNGOs' specific security risks, determination of risk threshold and SRM practices.

⁶⁶ These suggestions are not comprehensive and will need to be further discussed, debated and explored by both L/NNGOs and INGOs.

⁶⁷ Behn and Kingston, 2010.

contribution to humanitarian action in general as well as to the field of SRM. The importance of including L/NNGOs' perspectives and experiences is demonstrated in this very research – 'risk transfer' cannot be adequately understood if it doesn't include or reflect the reality of L/NNGOs.

There are several obstacles to L/NNGOs' equal participation in discussions occurring within partnerships and within the aid sector in general. Interviews revealed that some of the terminology used by international NGOs and agencies (in meetings, platforms, webinars and so on) such as risk transfer, localisation, duty of care, or diversity and inclusion, isn't necessarily well understood or shared by L/NNGOs. This one-sided understanding is often caused or amplified by L/NNGOs' lack of access to platforms or meetings where these issues are discussed, as well as poor dissemination of these conversations at national and local levels. The fact that few L/NNGOs had heard of the 'localisation agenda' is indicative of the distance that remains to be covered before a true inclusion of local actors is reached. L/NNGOs' lack of familiarity with these concepts can be mistaken for lack of capacity or knowledge, perpetuating misunderstandings and the exclusionary dynamic of some of these exchanges.

Practical barriers to L/NNGOs' access to international platforms

Some very practical obstacles can limit L/NNGOs' access to security information and discussions. For instance, it is common for L/NNGOs not to be able to participate in electronic security information sharing platforms, when they work with 'non-official' email addresses (e.g. if their organisation doesn't have the resources to purchase a domain name and instead uses a standard email service such as Gmail).

Supporting sustainable partnerships and collective action

'The relationship is mostly not mutual – rather, it is a master-subordinate kind of relationship.'

Survey respondent

In a few cases, L/NNGOs tended to equate 'partners' with 'donors', demonstrating that they sometimes perceive the nature of their engagement as

mostly transactional rather than transformative or collaborative. For partnerships to reach these other dimensions, serious commitment towards local actors and their security risks is necessary. As explained above, this requires willingness and effort to hold difficult conversations and tackle security challenges (such as the impact of CTL). Building trust in partnerships is facilitated by long-term commitment, staff continuity, and regular engagement. Without improving trust on both sides, it is unlikely that partners will be able to move from risk transfer towards risk sharing.

Risk sharing or risk transfer?

Various actors involved in the localisation agenda advocate the use of 'risk sharing' rather than 'risk transfer'. However, the term 'risk transfer' better reflects the current reality of how risks move between actors, and, therefore, offers a more adequate lens for its analysis. Before moving to risk sharing, it is essential to understand the starting point of partnerships and, therefore, to analyse risk transfer processes.

Although 'risk sharing' doesn't have an internationally agreed definition, this research suggests that it should at least involve:

- 1)** understanding the specific risks faced by both partners (those that are created, transformed and transferred as well as those that pre-exist partnership, and how they affect them, as well as other surrounding actors),
- 2)** discussing these risks on equal terms (and ensuring that partners make informed decisions about accepting or rejecting them), and
- 3)** allocating adequate resources to manage and mitigate risks.

Several interviewees wished that INGO partners would support a long-term vision and focus on sustainable improvements rather than ad hoc changes with short-term impact. Although the partnership agreement is a good place to start, sustainable change implies collaboration at all levels.

Besides INGOs, L/NNGOs partner with other L/NNGOs and interact within various regional or national platforms. The importance of these networks is particularly noticeable in the nebulous aid environment of Myanmar, where thousands of

very small CSOs and CBOs are connected through local operational networks, in which they share resources and support each other in programme implementation. Various coordination platforms such as the South Sudan NGO forum, the Somali NGO forum or the Yemen Humanitarian forum provide other venues facilitating collaboration. Along with supporting individual L/NNGOs' SRM, INGO partners should consider supporting local, national and regional networks of L/NNGOs. Collaboration between various L/NNGOs and INGOs (or international agencies) can also be extremely successful and bring decisive change to L/NNGOs' security risk situations.. This was, for instance, noted in the OCHA-led Humanitarian Access Working Group for northwest Syria.

Good practice example

Syria: OCHA's collaborative solution to L/NNGOs' security issues

The OCHA-led Humanitarian Access Working Group for northwest Syria is considered to be particularly helpful to L/NNGOs as it provides them a platform to discuss and raise common issues of concern as a group, thereby 'protecting' organisations from having to expose their vulnerabilities or concerns as individual and identifiable organisations. In addition, OCHA plays an important role in access negotiations with non-state armed actors and their civilian counterparts. This mitigates risks for NGOs in two ways:

- 1. A coherent and unified position of organisations reduces the risk of manipulation and harassment of individual NGOs by armed actors (although the threats are by no means eliminated).**
- 2. The buffer it provides between the NGOs and listed groups mitigates against the risks of violating counter-terrorism clauses.**

In addition to improving collaboration between international and local actors, this example strengthens L/NNGOs' coordination and networking at the local level. As such, it demonstrates the value of collaborative action and the possibility of positively harnessing the complementarity of NGOs' risk profiles.

1.3. Action and discussion points

The action and discussion points listed below build on the findings from the research, reflections and conversations held during the March 2020 GISF forum. These points should be considered as the beginning of a process of reflection and action on how can INGOs and the broader sector best support L/NNGO partners in managing security risks. This list is expected to be a basis for further dialogue, and to evolve as conversations unfold.

The focus of the study – the perspective of local partners – means that perspectives from, and policy-developments in, INGOs have not been comprehensively captured. In addition, only a section of the local interviewees (mainly those at the director level in larger national NGOs) were aware of the current debates about policy issues on a system-wide level. Engaging in further discussions on the below action points and considering local reflections on an equal footing is vital. This report is not the last word on how to handle security risks in partnerships and much work remains to be done, in terms of research as well as practice.

On INGOs

1. INGOs should initiate conversations about security risks with L/NNGO partners on equal terms, to ensure L/NNGOs can safely express their concerns, needs, and opinions regarding SRM.

- a. Throughout partnership agreements, INGOs should proactively ask their partners about SRM rather than assuming that they will raise any issues they face.
- b. INGOs should gain a comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which L/NNGO partners make decisions to accept security risks.
- c. INGOs need to ensure the format of their discussions is informed by good cross-cultural communication practices, to facilitate open and honest information-sharing.

2. INGOs should allocate sufficient and dedicated funding to SRM in their partnerships with L/NNGOs.

- a. INGOs should include specific budget lines for SRM in their partnerships or grant proposals.
- b. Funding for several areas should be increased, including: training (digital security, negotiation,

HEAT, etc.), hardware and equipment, psychosocial support, social insurance.

- c. INGOs should support partners in estimating the costs of SRM if necessary.
- d. INGOs should include support for the SRM of L/NNGO partners in their advocacy strategy to donors.

3. INGOs should provide adapted and flexible support to partners on SRM, recognise local partners' existing capacities and respect their opinions.

- a. Partners⁶⁸ should undertake joint risk assessments to ensure they have a common understanding of the risks created and transferred in partnerships.
- b. Partners should establish mitigation measures that share risks based on the complementarity of their organisations' risk profiles (for instance international actors offering advocacy support to L/NNGOs).
- c. INGOs should provide adapted training to L/NNGOs that builds on their strengths, respects their approach and responds to their specific needs (training should be provided locally, rather than only in capital cities, and should target actors according to their exposure to security risks).

4. INGOs should have policies that clearly define their duty of care obligations toward the various categories of staff they engaged with, including partners' staff. A global and inclusive dialogue clarifying these responsibilities should take place.

- a. Before entering into a partnership agreement with L/NNGOs, INGOs should introduce and discuss their duty of care policy with partners.
- b. INGOs should provide opportunities for partners to freely ask questions about the policy, to ensure they make informed decisions and that both organisations understand each other's expectations and obligations.

On the broader sector – UN agencies, donors, governments, INGOs and L/NNGOs

5. The aid sector should adopt a more comprehensive definition of risk transfer; one that includes all aspects of how risks are shifted and generated in partnerships.

- a. The definition elaborated in this paper should be further discussed and tested between INGOs and L/NNGOs to confirm its practicality.
- b. The new definition should be used to analyse processes of risk transfer in partnership arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs (to inform joint risk assessment, risk mitigation measures and so on).

6. Aid actors – including UN agencies, donors, governments, INGOs – should improve the direct access of L/NNGOs to platforms discussing and sharing information around the localisation agenda and SRM.

- a. Local aid actors need to not only be consulted about localisation and security risks but actively participate in meetings and conferences.
- b. Their participation in conferences and meetings need to be systematised and international actors must take necessary measures to accommodate it (covering transport and accommodation costs, providing translation or interpretation services and demystifying jargon).

7. Participants in the Grand Bargain and supporters of the localisation agenda should increase attention on security issues and consider SRM as an essential enabler for L/NNGOs' leadership of humanitarian action.

- a. Advocacy efforts and communication campaigns should include the importance of SRM as essential enabler of humanitarian operations.
- b. Initiatives to record incidents affecting L/NNGOs' staff should be developed at the national and international level to create statistics revealing the scope of the problem.
- c. Meetings on localisation and risk should always include discussion of security risks and their implications for implementing humanitarian operations.

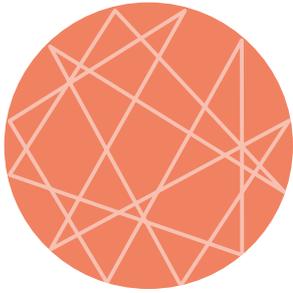
⁶⁸ The use of the term 'partners' in this example and the following, designates both parties of the partnership, L/NNGOs and INGOs.

8. Donors and aid actors should increase funding for SRM and question the structure of the current grant and partnership formats, through the local lens.

- a. Long-term grant partnerships should be privileged to favour strategic investment in capacity-sharing of L/NNGOs over short-term, project-based funding cycles.
- b. INGOs and donors should provide flexible formats for grant applications, to open opportunities for NGOs less familiar with international funds to apply.

9. Collaboration between L/NNGOs at the local/national/regional level, and collaboration with INGOs, should be supported to develop collective solutions to insecurity.

- a. INGOs should consider acting in consortium to pool resources and deliver support, including training, to a broader range of L/NNGOs.
- b. L/NNGOs should develop platforms to discuss security issues amongst themselves and voice concerns as a group. Where necessary, international agencies should support such platforms.



Conclusions

The security risks that L/NNGOs face and the way they manage them aren't sufficiently addressed in their partnerships with INGOs. Besides a lack of systematised collaboration and support within partnerships, there is an absence of conversation. Because issues aren't voiced – or listened to – security risks remain under-prioritised and poorly addressed. Frank discussions on equal terms between partners are necessary to collectively progress on the issue. This research project makes first steps in this direction by bringing the topic to the table, deconstructing obstacles to honest conversations on security risks and investigating the perspective of L/NNGOs on both their partnerships and SRM.

Many obstacles prevent candid discussions between partners. Part of the reluctance to speak openly about risks is due to the underlying structure of the aid economy. Competition for funds and pressure to keep budgets tight both discourage L/NNGOs from voicing their security needs and challenges, feeding the belief that they *'need to look good in front of the donors.'*⁶⁹ Aggravating these challenges are the predominantly short-term, project-based funding cycles that leave little space for organisational capacity building. This is a serious flaw in the way the aid system operates. Such relationships favour ad-hoc solutions for immediate issues rather than investment in long-term capacity-building. Adding to inequitable resource distribution, asymmetrical power dynamics are detrimental to full engagement by local actors in coordination and policy development. Such an imbalance gives a clue to what is potentially the most important obstacle to addressing security risks in partnerships; lack of trust.

Trust, and what limits its development, must be a starting point in further discussions about risk transfer, partnership models and their impact on security and risk management. The absence of trust implies an absence of transparency about

the security risks L/NNGOs face and their ability to manage them. Without such information sharing, it is impossible to adequately analyse and support L/NNGOs' SRM.

L/NNGOs have many needs for security support but also many skills in SRM. Reflecting the diversity of the L/NNGO community itself, both of these vary greatly. Adequate support requires a tailored approach to, and understanding of, each organisation. Such a process must include an analysis of the specific threats that local partners face, and acknowledging that certain security risks may not be visible to their international partners (e.g. the overlapping of professional and personal lives, exposure to sanctions from authorities and communities, etc). Taking into account local perspectives on security risks and their techniques for managing them is, therefore, essential. Local responders' attitudes to security risks and risk thresholds are informed by the conditions in which they operate and live. Their proximity to the operating context and communities they work with may generate a strong sense of ownership towards risk but also a certain desensitisation to danger. Both of these may encourage L/NNGOs to take higher levels of risks to deliver relief.

This thorough understanding of the operating context also forms an invaluable resource for L/NNGOs' SRM. For instance, L/NNGOs proved skilled in harnessing their extended networks, understanding communities' needs and norms, negotiating with various actors, and guaranteeing sustainable access. These resources are all too often underutilised and under-acknowledged by international partners. Effective support implies capitalising on the strengths of both INGOs and L/NNGOs. It also implies a shift in consideration and the recognition that collaborating on SRM is an opportunity to learn for both L/NNGOs and INGOs.

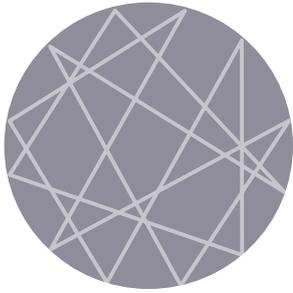
⁶⁹ Quote from interviewee in Gaziantep, Turkey.

The differences between, and complementarity of, INGO and L/NNGO profiles lies at the very core of risk transfer processes in partnerships. Adopting a local perspective on the issue reveals that 'risk transfer' is much more complex and multi-faceted than commonly thought. Risks are not only transferred but are created and transformed in partnerships. Risks don't only trickle down and don't only concern NGOs – they shift upwards and horizontally and include donors and communities. Risk transfer may be deliberate or not. L/NNGOs' perceptions of risk transfer are heavily influenced by their feelings of programme ownership, their sensitivity to risk habituation and their ability to avoid – or not avoid – risks. To better capture the reality of risks, a new definition and way of understanding risk transfer has been established in this study, which forms the basis for further discussion.

Whilst most interviewees feel 'on their own' when it comes to managing security risks, they believe that INGO partners have a responsibility to support them in doing so. Improving collaboration on SRM requires acknowledging existing power imbalances and including local partners in discussions and decisions about security risks on an equal footing. It also implies committing resources and favouring long-term engagement over project-based partnerships.

Achieving sustainable change requires solidarity and collective action. Despite global efforts, L/NNGOs consulted feel that the localisation agenda has had little tangible impact on their reality. This reflects the findings in the 2019 Grand Bargain report that *'there is still no critical mass of aid organisations making a strategic shift towards localisation in practice (unrelated to the constraints of some aid organisations' mandates) and inadequate incentives from donors for doing so.'*⁷⁰ While the localisation agenda hopes to address some of the structural challenges pointed to earlier, INGOs are essential actors in this process and must do their part. Local partners not only take on responsibilities, but also security risks associated with operations, and those must be properly analysed, discussed, and budgeted for. Disseminating innovations and spreading good partnership practices is needed to achieve meaningful change with regards to duty of care and risk transfer. There is a long way to go to improve partnerships and first steps can no longer be delayed.

⁷⁰ Metcalfe-Hough, Fenton and Poole, 2019:19.



Annexes

1. Case studies: main findings

Colombia



After the peace process between the Colombian government and the rebel group FARC, new armed groups moved into the rural areas in the south of Bolivar State, a region known for coca leaf production and illegal gold mining. Today, a mix of criminal and political armed groups with unclear delimitations and hierarchies remain dominant. A loose non-aggression pact between groups exists, sometimes with invisible boundaries. This fragmentation of armed groups has created confusion about who is who, and limited any chance for NGOs to directly negotiate access. The security environment – a tense calm with low risk of threats, IEDs, landmines, and targeted killings – can easily deteriorate when disputes between the armed groups and incursions by state forces erupt into armed attacks.

The context has been labelled ‘post-conflict’ by the international community and this has added to the perception among international actors that the context is more secure than it was before.

The NNGO visited perceived a mismatch between the actual local security context and the prevalent narrative of Colombia having entered the post-conflict phase that has led to institutional donors and the aid community shift priorities and focus. This shift decreased context monitoring, resulting in reduced awareness of ‘what is happening on the ground’, less funding specifically for security, and less space to discuss context developments with partners. **L/NNGOs must actively brief international actors on the security context.**

Most NNGO staff expressed a strong sense of programme ownership. This, combined with an apparent risk habituation, has created the feeling that the responsibility for managing security lies solely with the NNGO.

Instances of ‘horizontal’ risk transfer were observed. The NNGO visited and its INGO partner both carry out different programmes in the same (conflict) zone. Teams work independently from each other but share logos and swap vehicles. Both organisations could thus be identified as the same organisation despite having different risk profiles and vulnerabilities. Whilst security problems are recognised within each programme, they are not shared with the other programme teams working in the same area.

Risks can transfer from NNGOs to local communities. The NNGO observed relies on communities for information as part of its security management, and armed actors may hold community leaders responsible for the actions of an NNGO partnering with the community. The NNGO visited partly mitigated this risk by forming community groups without naming one person as a clear focal point.

Contractors feel they too suffer from risk transfer. A female contractor interviewed felt a transfer of risk within the team in terms of transport to field locations. With only one vehicle available, staff often use local transport to reach project sites in rural

areas – creating higher risks as local jeeps are more likely to be stopped by armed groups. The contractor felt that the nature of her contractual status was a disadvantage for ‘negotiating’ use of the NGO car.

Main issues

The NNGO visited in Colombia felt that the post-conflict label created a false perception of security not being an issue any longer, and the organisation struggled to find or create opportunities to properly brief one of their international partners⁷¹ about the security issues they continue to face (this ‘lack of space’ was also pointed out by interviewees working for other L/NNGOs in Colombia). Risk transfer takes place on different levels: between NGOs, from NGOs to communities, as well as from NGOs to hired contractors.

Ethiopia



Ethiopia is currently going through a period of transition. With the coming to power of the incumbent Prime Minister, the government is working towards a number of reforms, most notably the freedom of expression. As part of these reforms, in March 2019, Ethiopia passed a more liberal law governing NGOs – The Organization of Civil Societies Proclamation (CSO Proclamation). It is considered to be less restrictive than the 2009 legislation it replaces, which was criticised for its negative effect on the protection of human rights. The new law removed many of the restrictions around foreign funding for L/NNGOs which, at the time, largely

targeted organisations engaged in politically oriented or governance activities, due to the threat they were perceived to pose to the Government.

Historically, Ethiopia has maintained strong control over the activities of NGOs in the country.

At the local level, L/NNGOs contacted for this research collaborate with local authorities in one way or another – either in the selection of project target groups, in monitoring, in provision of security, or by being the first point of call for NGOs making entry into and operating in an area. In some instances, local government representatives interfere with the implementation process of a project, but, by and large, local government engagement is perceived positively by the NGOs visited as it provides them a level of acceptance by communities. In other, – particularly in more restive regions of the country where relations between communities and government are more tense – L/NNGOs may take a more cautious approach to collaborating with local authorities.

L/NNGOs in Ethiopia perceive the localisation agenda to be more rhetoric than practice.

Since the relaxation of the regulatory environment, many INGOs were said to have shifted to direct implementation rather than sub-contracting to L/NNGOs, thereby directly competing for funding with L/NNGOs. L/NNGOs also said that benefits such as insurance and better salary packages offered by INGOs pose a risk to their ability to retain qualified staff.

One of the risks of this competition is L/NNGOs pushing themselves to deliver in order to maintain their competitive edge, and, in the process, placing themselves at higher risk.

Additionally, L/NNGOs place themselves at risk when INGOs do not fully understand the context and have unreasonable expectations of access and security requirements of their L/NNGO partners. Competition for funds makes it difficult for L/NNGOs to advocate strongly for security funding when applying for projects. Interestingly, L/NNGOs sometimes perceive that risks are lower than INGOs believe. INGOs’ security thresholds are perceived as being very low, which can constrain their activities.

There is little debate in Ethiopia around the responsibility of INGOs and donors for L/NNGO security. L/NNGO networks and platforms are the ideal fora for such discussions, but they remain

⁷¹ An institutional donor, not an INGO.

piecemeal. A handful of donors are cognisant of the security risks to which L/NNGOs are exposed, but since few access funding directly from donors, these concerns are not fully articulated at the donor level, apart from the views of INGOs.

Most L/NNGOs do not take out insurance policies for their staff – accident, death, or medical. Should an accident or an injury occur in the course of duty, fellow colleagues will – voluntarily – raise funds to cover expenses. INGOs on the other hand are perceived to be well covered by all kinds of insurance, but these benefits are not transferred to their local implementing partners.

There was low awareness about the need for psychosocial support for staff, or indeed of its importance in relation to staff welfare. L/NNGOs were of two opinions: either that the field staff are generally from the communities in which they work, are better able to cope on a day-to-day basis, and therefore do not encounter work-related psychosocial issues; or that it was so intangible a risk that, considering the delivery and budgetary pressures they are under, it is not a priority issue. It is common knowledge that INGOs, as well as the UN, have specific mechanisms for their staff such as counselling or therapy, but these are not accessible to their partner staff.

Main issues

The influence of government on L/NNGOs' activities is relaxing but still remains important enough to affect the security risks they face and how they manage them. Whilst relationships with government can facilitate acceptance with local communities in certain cases, in others, they can create additional issues. Misunderstandings around the specific risk profiles of L/NNGOs relate to misunderstandings about the level of security risks in Ethiopia, which lead some INGOs to overestimate threats. The impact of competition for funding – between L/NNGOs and between INGOs and L/NNGOs – impedes L/NNGOs from adequately budgeting for security and is felt in the phenomenon of 'poaching' staff. Various L/NNGOs mention their need to receive additional support to provide insurance, psycho-social care, and security – rather than fiduciary – training to their staff.

Myanmar



Myanmar is a fast changing and relatively young aid environment since the change in government in 2015. Whereas, in the past, there were severe limits on the size and function of national actors, the opening up of the aid environment allowed for an expansion of the national NGO sector. There are currently thousands of very small CSOs/CBOs working in Myanmar. A number of national NGOs, which were created to provide support to the local NGO community, as well as grant-making organisations providing funding to local NGOs, are in operation in the country. Many L/NNGOs tend to work in alliances and networks – they share capacity, expertise, and resources on an ad hoc basis. Many INGOs state that they work within a partnership model in an effort to support local organisations and that Myanmar is a localisation 'test case' country. INGOs' access to areas of conflict remains very limited and a few larger NNGOs dominate the response in these areas. There are many on-going conflicts in the country which necessitates humanitarian programming, as well as many development challenges. The government of Myanmar retains a policy of restricting and controlling aid actors and the NGO environment.

There are few examples of partnerships which last more than a year or two. One of the biggest complaints of L/NNGOs is that they live from project to project and, between contracts, they must downsize their staff. The L/NNGO environment is very crowded and there is a lot of duplication between L/NNGOs. Most L/NNGOs are very small and

there are too many actors competing for the same funding and too much overlap between L/NNGOs.

Almost no organisation visited understood, or had even heard of, the concept of risk transfer. As the government remains highly restrictive and access for INGOs is problematic in the most insecure and conflict-affected areas, L/NNGOs take on risks with little INGO security support. As such, most L/NNGOs consider security their own business and do not expect much support from INGOs.

Security management is under-resourced and is, therefore, dependent on the capacity and interest of the L/NNGOs themselves. Development programming often relates to legal and rights issues. L/NNGOs do not work in an area until access has been negotiated with all relevant parties – this is often the sum total of the security management process. Acceptance is therefore the default security management strategy.

Localisation is popular rhetorically but limited in practice. There does not seem to be a very integrated engagement between L/NNGOs and INGOs, regardless of the localisation agenda and the reference to partnerships. This is partly a result of the relative youth of the aid environment and the changing political context.

Main issues

Despite Myanmar often being referred to as a ‘test’ country for the localisation agenda, L/NNGOs mentioned a lack of thorough collaboration and coordination with international actors. In many cases, L/NNGOs felt as though they were on their own and dealt with security issues autonomously. This situation is fed by various factors. For instance, there is a disconnect between partners due to government restrictions on INGO movements in certain regions (governmental oversight, especially that exerted over right-based NGOs, was noted as influencing NGOs’ activities). Moreover, the majority of partnerships observed were ad hoc and project-based in nature, thus preventing continuous and consistent support to L/NNGOs. The CSOs and CBOs visited rarely had formal SRM systems in place and primarily relied on negotiating access and acceptance with various parties. Many security threats exist and L/NNGOs would welcome additional – and adequate – support for SRM.

Northwest Syria



The operating environment for humanitarian organisations in northwest Syria remains profoundly challenging. Belligerent parties to the conflict show little respect for International Humanitarian Law, and targeting of civilian population and structures, in particular medical facilities, is frequent. Provisions in Syrian law allow for the detention and prosecution of aid workers operating in areas controlled by non-state armed groups, and several of the armed opposition groups have been listed as terrorist organisations by donor countries and by Turkey – which hosts the aid hub for the northwest Syria assistance operations. Humanitarian assistance is criminalised and highly politicised.

Most Syrian NGOs (SNGOs) describe their partnerships as largely transactional. Grants are made available to implement short-term projects. Donor organisations may have selected a number of SNGOs they work with for consecutive project cycles (referred to as strategic partnerships), but this rarely translates into strategic investment in these partners. The localisation agenda is not perceived to have had much impact yet.

Competition for funds among (S)NGOs is intense and contributes to an environment that is not conducive to transparent and candid conversations about security issues (risk exposure, incident reporting, access issues, support needs).

Direct access to donor funds remains challenging for SNGOs. This is perceived to be, in part, related to the preference of institutional donors for transferring the risks that come with sub-contracting to implementing partners of INGOs (financial, operational, reputational, and legal risks related to counter terrorism measures).

The security and access constraints require the coordination of assistance to be based in Turkey, making the humanitarian assistance delivery to the region a complicated cross-border and remote-support operation.

Northwest Syria presents a volatile security situation. Active armed conflict is conducted with modern weaponry, a multitude of armed actors and fluid alliances and little respect for the protection of civilians. Aid workers face a range of serious risks, including airstrikes, bombing, shelling, chemical attacks, abduction, detention, legal (terrorism) charges, and intimidation. Consequently, risk habituation among NGO workers is high, and is often fuelled by a strong sense of programme ownership. The sense of programme ownership impacts the perception of a transfer of risk. Despite this, SNGOs insist that partners supporting programmes financially do carry some responsibility to contribute to staff safety (among others, international actors aim to address the issues in a coherent manner through duty of care initiatives).

SNGOs face a highly complex counter-terrorism environment. Donor countries as grant givers, and Turkey as the host of the aid coordination hubs, impose restrictions aimed at preventing engagement with groups listed as terrorists. Aid workers in opposition-held areas are also at risk of being targeted or detained and prosecuted by the Syrian government. OCHA plays an important role in mitigating some of the external risks, by taking on the role of interlocutor and conducting access negotiations with non-state armed actors and their civilian counterparts on behalf of the NGO community. This mitigates counter-terrorism related risks and risks of manipulation and intimidation by the armed groups as NGOs negotiate in a coherent and unified manner.

Main issues

In northwest Syria, SNGOs – while perhaps not using the term risk transfer on a regular basis – conceived risk transfer to occur when certain actors were asked to take on more risks than others without receiving adequate resources to manage them. They, therefore, considered that risk transfer occurred between partners as well as within NGOs, between capital staff in Turkey and staff in the field. Whilst a strong programme and risk ownership feeling reduced the perception of transfer of risk, risk transfer still

occurs – in particular, regarding risks related to counter-terrorism. Several factors – including the competition among SNGOs for donor grants – create an environment that makes transparent discussions around security and risk transfer challenging.

2. Survey results

Survey data specific to a particular theme is integrated in the narrative analysis part of this report. The survey, available in four languages (Arabic, French, Spanish and English), was distributed through the GISF network and member organisations. That the uptake remained limited may be the result of a limited number of L/NGO platforms (known to the researchers and GISF) that could assist in the survey dissemination, internet access constraints in rural areas, and survey fatigue.

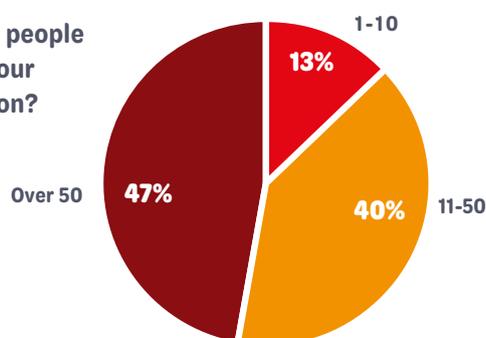
The quantitative analysis of the survey data breaks down by size of organisation, partnership category, geographical distribution, operating context, gender and security level.

Profiles of respondents and organisations

Of 193 respondents, 66% identified as male and 30% as female.⁷² 154 respondents from 33 different countries stated their organisation worked in only one country. Of those, 65 came from Sub Saharan Africa, 64 from South Asia, 13 from Latin America, 5 from the East Asia and Pacific region, 4 from the Middle East North Africa region, and 3 from Europe.

Just under half of respondents (90) work in organisations with over 50 people working for them (102 worked in organisations with less than 50 staff).

How many people work for your organisation?



Bigger organisations tend to have more partnerships than medium-sized and smaller organisations.⁷³

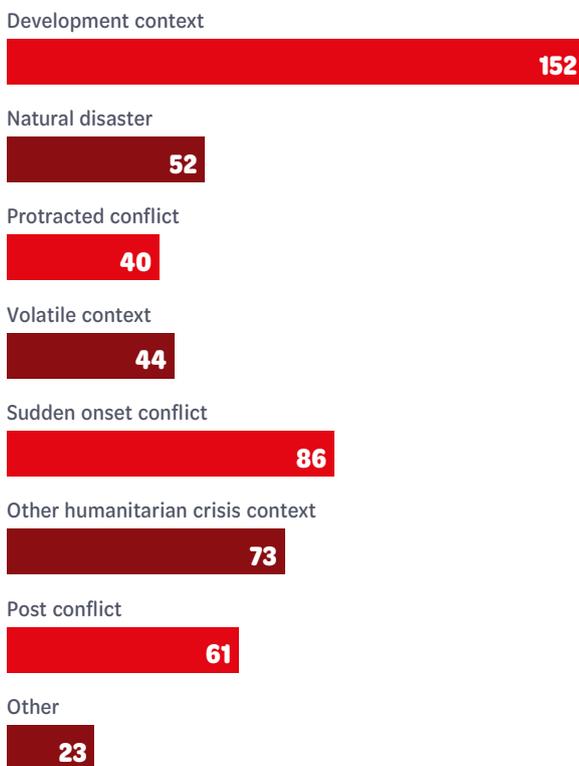
⁷² 6 identified as 'other' and 3 preferred not to disclose their gender identity.

⁷³ 46% of L/NGOs with over 50 staff have 6 or more partners. This number drops to 4% for organisations with less than 11 staff.

Operating contexts

Respondents were invited to select all definitions that best described the situation(s) that their organisation works in. Most respondents stated their organisation worked in multiple operating contexts. Respondents may have indicated multiple contexts because (a) the organisation works throughout the country in different operational contexts, (b) they were unsure about the labelling of the contexts, and (c) due to contextual changes over time.

Which of these definitions best describes the situation(s) that your organisation works in?

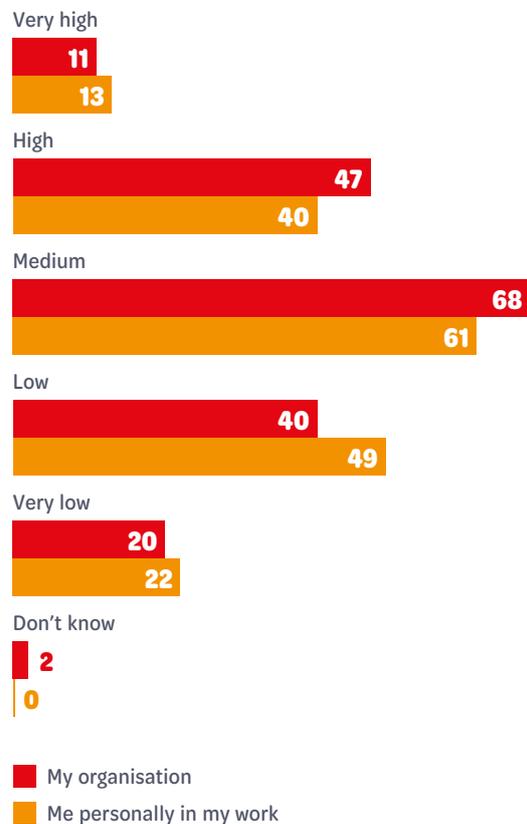


Level of security risk faced

Respondents were asked, "How would you describe the level of security risk in your day to day work faced by (a) your organisation and (b) you personally in your work":

On a scale from very high to very low, 36% percent of respondents described the level of security risk faced by the organisation as medium, followed by high (25%) and low (21%). The level of security risk faced by the respondent personally in their day to day work was similar, with 33% ranking it as medium, 22% high, and 26% low.

How would you describe the level of security risk in your day to day work?

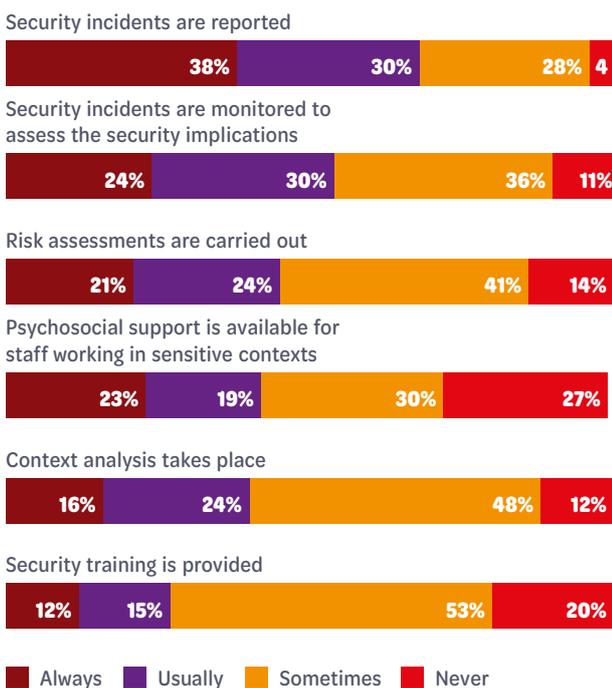


Protocols and practices in place

“Thinking about your organisation’s security and risk management policies and protocols, please indicate which of the following are in place”:



“Thinking about your organisation’s security and risk management practices, do any of the following take place, and if so, how regularly”:



Respondents were asked about the existence of SRM policies and protocols, as well as observed security management practices in their organisations.

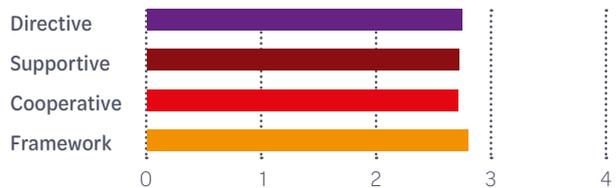
Comparing organisations by size (staff numbers), it emerges that the bigger the organisation, the higher the likelihood that policies and protocols are in place. That there might be a correlation between the size of an organisation and the use of systems and procedures is also reflected in the finding that organisations operating in more than one country appear more likely to have protocols and procedures in place than organisations that only operate in one country. **Of particular note is that only 27% of respondents answered that security training is provided either ‘always’ or ‘usually’. 20% reported that no security training is provided.**

Characteristics of partnership

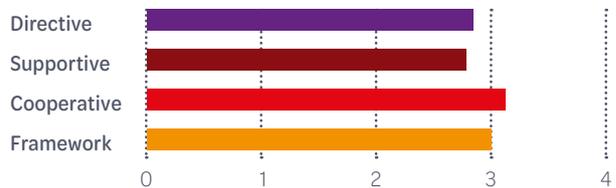
L/NNGOs consulted in key informant interviews and case studies revealed that most do not think of their partnerships in the categories tested (directive, supportive, cooperative, framework).

For each of the partnership models, a series of questions about the nature of the relationship in practice was asked:

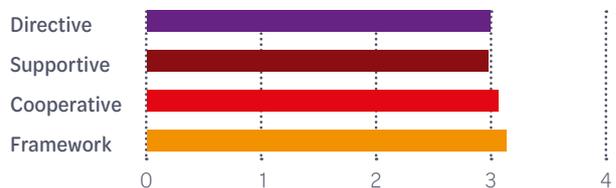
1. Where the INGO expects us to take security specific actions, this has been backed by appropriate funds



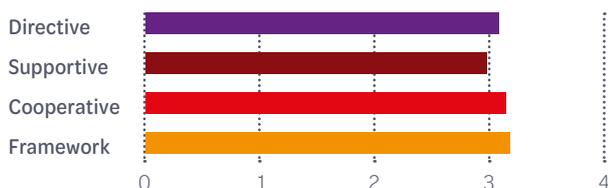
2. The INGO has a good understanding of my organisation’s security management practices



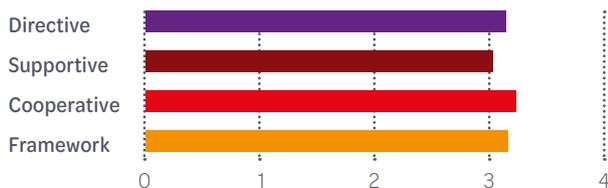
3. The INGO has a good sense of the risks my organisation takes



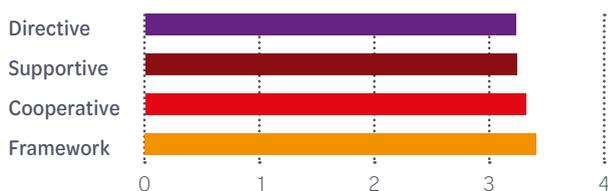
4. The INGO expects my organisation to report security incidents to them



5. The INGO has good understanding of our local context



6. The relationship is based on mutual trust



Graphs show average scores of survey responses, based on rating data on a scale of 1-4. 1 indicating the participants 'strongly disagree', 2 that they 'disagree', 3 that they 'agree' and 4 that they 'strongly agree'.

This shows that, on factors such as trust and contextual understanding, there is some, but fairly limited, advantage to local and national NGOs arising from 'framework partnership' and 'cooperative' relationships versus 'directive' and 'supportive' models. Responding to the question **'Where the INGO expects us to take security specific action, this has been backed up by appropriate funds', around one third of L/NGOs across all partnership models disagreed or strongly disagreed.**

Experiences and observations on working with INGOs

How much do you agree with...

Pressure from INGOs to reduce overheads makes it harder to budget properly for risk and security management issues



Being in competition for funds from INGOs makes it harder to budget properly for risk and security management issues



Different INGOs come with different expectations and procedures that are hard to reconcile



The dynamics around security and risk management tend to be more problematic when INGO partners are not based in country



My organisation is expected to report the same security incident multiple times to different INGOs



Having partnerships with INGOs can create additional challenges in managing relationships with the government



Having partnerships with INGOs can create additional challenges in working with the communities we are linked with



Some partnerships with INGOs would involve additional risk for my organisation



- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Competition for funds clearly affects security resourcing. 86% of survey respondents stated that the pressure from INGOs for tight budgets impacts proper security budgeting. The same proportion (86%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'being in competition for funds from INGOs makes it harder to budget properly for risk and security management issues'. 79% agreed or strongly agreed that the dynamics around security are more problematic when the INGO partner is not based in the country, indicating that the bigger the disconnect from the context, the more difficult discussions about security in partnerships become.

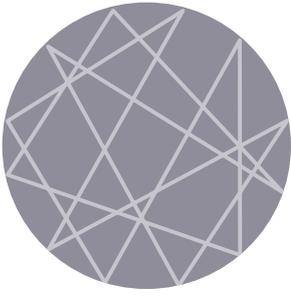
3. List of countries

L/NNGO staff from the following countries participated in the research study.⁷⁴

Key informant interviews were conducted with L/NNGO staff in countries marked with an *.

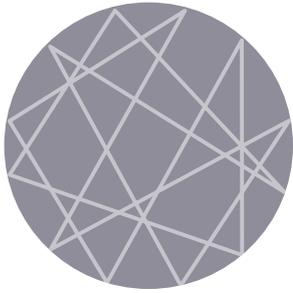
- Afghanistan*
- Angola
- Bangladesh*
- Benin*
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Burkina Faso
- Central African Republic
- Colombia*
- Democratic Republic of Congo*
- Egypt*
- El Salvador*
- Ethiopia*
- India
- Iraq
- Jordan
- Kenya*
- Lebanon*
- Liberia*
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Mexico
- Myanmar*
- Nigeria*
- Pakistan*
- Papua New Guinea*
- Peru
- Philippines*
- Rwanda
- Sierra Leone
- Somalia*
- Sri Lanka*
- South Sudan*
- Syria*
- Turkey*
- Uganda*
- Ukraine*
- Yemen*
- Zimbabwe*

⁷⁴ As several survey respondents did not cite their locations, the list may not be complete.



Abbreviations

CBO	Community based organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation
EISF	European Interagency Security Forum
GISF	Global Interagency Security Forum
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
INSO	International NGO Safety Organisation
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
L/NNGO	Local or national non-governmental organisation
SNGO	Syrian national non-governmental organisation
SRM	Security risk management



Glossary

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used:

Acceptance	'Acceptance is founded on effective relationships and cultivating and maintaining consent from beneficiaries, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders. This in turn is a means of reducing or removing potential threats in order to access vulnerable populations and undertake programme activities.' ⁷⁵
CBO/CSO	Community-based Organisation/Civil Society Organisation Small organisations which work only at the very local level and typically on a limited set of issues. These organisations are firmly grounded in the local community.
Duty of Care	The legal and moral obligation of an organisation to take all possible and reasonable measures to reduce the risk of harm to those working for, or on behalf of, the organisation.
International NGO	An NGO with operational reach beyond one country or sub-region.
Localisation	'The process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations' ⁷⁶
Local NGO	An NGO that operates mainly in one distinct geographical area of a country. Its staff are mainly from the communities the NGO serves. Local NGOs are typically larger than CBOs/CSOs and have a more formal and developed structure.
National NGO	An NGO that operates in several parts of a country or a few countries within the same region. Its staff may be transferred to work in areas other than their area of origin.
L/NNGOs	NGOs self-identifying as such, based in a state part of what is commonly called the 'global south', with programmes in one or multiple countries in their region. ⁷⁷
Partner	One member of a formalised (contractual) partnership between an INGO and L/NNGO.

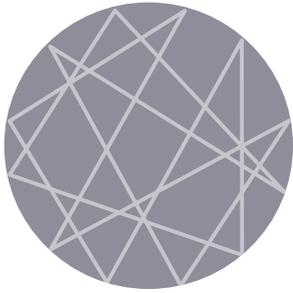
⁷⁵ Fast and O'Neill, 2010: 5-6.

⁷⁶ IFRC definition, retrieved from <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/ifrc-policy-brief-localization/>.

⁷⁷ Organisations with a demonstrably global operational reach and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement were excluded. This criterion rather designates NGOs that have offices in neighbouring countries (e.g. Turkey and Syria).

Partnership models	<p>(1) Directive – based on a sub-granting/contracting relationship where the national or local organisation is sub-contracted to implement part or all of a project under the direction of the INGO;</p> <p>(2) Supportive – where the national partner has some involvement in design and receives a benefit beyond the monetary amount of the contract, including such things as training and institutional support, technical assistance, and mentoring;</p> <p>(3) Co-operative – involving joint programming between a national and international NGO on equal footing, with each maintaining financial independence; and</p> <p>(4) Framework partnership – where strategic goals are advanced by national actors with the INGO providing funding and support but having little or no direct role in implementation.⁷⁸</p>
Project-based partnerships	Arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs that are funded to complete a specific project and are generally short-term.
Risk habituation	A usually unconscious process of accustoming oneself to the presence of risks resulting from constant exposure to danger, and therefore decreasing one's conscious response to them.
Risk owner	The person or entity with the accountability and authority to manage a risk.
Risk transfer	The formation or transformation of risks (increasing or decreasing) for one actor caused by the presence or action of another, whether intentionally or unintentionally.
Security risk	A physical or psychological risk arising from acts of war, violence, crime and other hazards.
Security risk management	The attempt to reduce exposure to the most serious risks (including contextual, programmatic and institutional) by identifying, monitoring and tackling key risk factors. It also involves balancing risk and opportunity, or one set of risks against another. Risk management should be seen as an enabling process, not simply a precautionary one.
Strategic partnerships	Arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs that are defined by long-term relationships, in which part of the budget is dedicated to supporting L/NNGO's general capacity.

⁷⁸ Adapted from Stoddard, Czwarno and Hamsik, 2019: 14-15.



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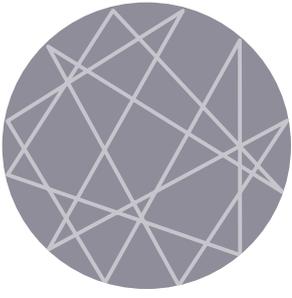
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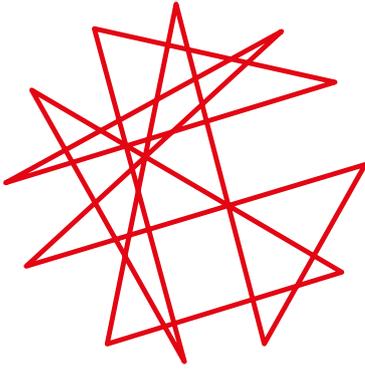
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