



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



**Partnerships** vary in form, length, scope and degree of collaboration. In this paper, they are generally defined as any formalised (contractual) mode of association between an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) and a local or national NGO (L/NNGO).

L/NNGOs usually distinguish between two types of partnerships:

- 1. 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.
- 2. Project-based partnerships:** Arrangements between INGOs and L/NNGOs that are funded to complete a specific project and are generally short-term.

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

L/NNGO, Africa

**While good practice examples exist, the research shows that, regardless of the level of risk in an environment, security rarely features prominently in partnership discussions or budgets.**

***'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

- There is a widespread absence of conversation, dedicated budget lines for security and basic security requirements within partnership agreements.
- Discussions about risk often seem to focus on the priorities of international partners, centring on 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 they face.

The dominance of short-term, project-based partnerships often prevents L/NNGOs from receiving strategic and sustainable support for security risk management (SRM). Their reduced timeframe and scope of engagement are not conducive to building relationships of trust between partners and may impede mutual understanding.

In contrast, L/NNGOs expressed their appreciation of INGO partners that commit to the long-term, engage with the context, are flexible with budgets and support and invest in building a trusting relationship.

# Barriers to adequate security discussions and support

The research highlights various barriers that prevent the adequate discussion of, and support for, SRM in partnerships:

- **Financial disincentives and power imbalances** – such as the fear of losing funding, competition between L/NNGOs, budget rigidities and pressure to reduce overheads - often deter L/NNGOs from voicing security challenges or requesting additional support.

*86% of survey respondents 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'.*

- **A lack of transparency** reinforces existing misunderstandings around the security risks that L/NNGOs face. Such misunderstandings may relate to a lack of contextual awareness, or assumptions around local staff's risk exposure or appetite.

- **Misconceptions and conflicting understandings** can arise from an absence of joint risk and context analysis, a lack of regular and adequate communication and language barriers. Misunderstandings are further perpetuated by different proximities to the context, limited physical engagement and a lack of common vocabulary around risks.

*79% of survey respondents declared that dynamics around SRM tend to be more problematic when INGO partners are not based in-country.*

***'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

**Figure 1:** Financial disincentives to transparent discussions of security risks



The absence of adequate discussions and mutual understanding partly explains why, in some cases, L/NNGOs are offered support or training that doesn't match their needs. Communication issues and problematic power imbalances further increase the likelihood that L/NNGOs push themselves to take on additional risks without accessing proportional resources and support to mitigate them.

# Security risks for L/NNGOs and risk perceptions

**Figure 2:** Security risks faced by L/NNGO staff



*'Just because we are local doesn't make us immune to threats.'* L/NNGO, Africa

**Misconceptions must be addressed.** A common perception at the global level is that local actors don't face the same level of insecurity as international actors; or, taken to the extreme, that local actors barely face risks at all.

**L/NNGOs are exposed to multiple threats.** L/NNGOs and their staff are usually more vulnerable to threats stemming from authorities and national legislation (such as arbitrary detention or sanctions), as well as frontline, physical threats (such as killing by armed groups) and targeted threats to individuals (such as being ostracised by local communities). The likelihood and impact of these threats vary according to the risk profile of both the organisation and its staff.

► See GISF research paper, *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles* (2018).

For L/NNGO staff, threats often overlap between professional and personal lives and are not necessarily visible to international partners. For those 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' may not be drawn, because risk present in one's personal life can spill over into work-related risks. On the flip side, work-related risks – such as threats from community members or authorities – do not disappear when the working day ends.

**Differential risk perceptions:** L/NNGOs' approaches to security risks and definition of their risk threshold are strongly affected by their proximity to the operating context, their feeling of risk ownership and their sensitivity to risk habituation.

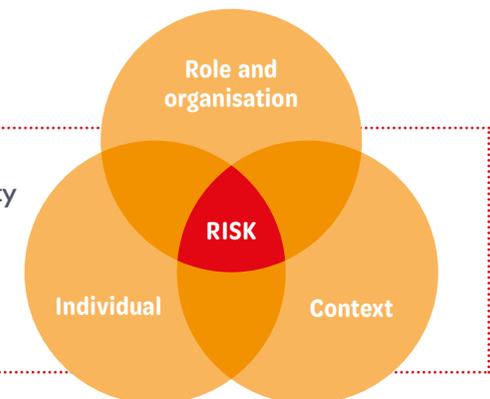
- **Security risk ownership:** A sense of responsibility towards fellow citizens and familiarity with risks may push L/NNGO staff to take on more risk to deliver relief. Feelings of ownership toward these security risks also heavily influence L/NNGOs' perceptions of risk transfer.

*'It's our problem to fix, we don't expect outsiders to shoulder the responsibility.'*  
L/NNGO, South America

- **Security risk habituation:** The long-term exposure of L/NNGO staff to a context and its risks facilitates the internalisation of threats, which may reduce their conscious reaction to threats. However, this doesn't reduce these individuals' vulnerability to psychosocial risks, nor does it mean that INGO staff can't experience similar levels of risk habituation.

*'It is difficult to separate work risks from normal life.'*  
L/NNGO, Africa

**Figure 3:** Intersectionality of risks



# Practices and needs for security risk management

Whilst L/NNGOs' SRM practices vary significantly, both smaller and larger organisations expressed a wish for their support needs to be addressed.

**Recognising local skills:** multiple L/NNGOs voiced a desire to see their skills fully recognised (not only those skills traditionally valued by INGOs). Among other domains of expertise, many of the L/NNGOs observed demonstrate extensive competency in establishing and maintaining acceptance – a pillar of many organisations' SRM strategies. Other skills noted include coordination and negotiation, in-depth contextual knowledge and an ability to maintain continuous contact with communities despite changes in the context.

**Figure 4: L/NNGOs practices of security risk management**

How often risk management practices are observed



**Each L/NNGO has different strengths and needs, and the support provided by partners must be adapted to their specific context and priorities. The following list provides an overview of the most common L/NNGO support needs identified in the research.**

- 1. Organisational SRM:** developing plans and protocols and establishing an inclusive SRM culture.
- 2. Equipment:** accessing secure vehicles, communication and data protection equipment, office security technologies, etc.
- 3. Training:** how to build a SRM framework, personal security trainings (HEAT) and digital security.
- 4. Duty of care:** the provision of adequate insurance for staff, compensation payments for injury and psychosocial support.
- 5. Public engagement and advocacy:** the development of a collaborative advocacy strategy with INGO partners and increased public mobilisation.

# Reconceptualising risk transfer to reflect reality



**Risk transfer needs to be reconceptualised.** This process, at the core of the localisation agenda, is often misunderstood as the linear passage of risks from international agencies to L/NNGOs. To better reflect L/NNGOs' lived experiences, a new definition of risk transfer is suggested.

**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.*

**Risks aren't only transferred between actors but are also created and transformed within partnerships.**

- 46% of survey respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that partnering with INGOs could create additional challenges in managing relationships with government.

**Security risks shift in different directions, including from local to global.** L/NNGOs are not just passive recipients within risk transfers but are agents able to act on these processes (e.g. they may transfer risk upwards to international partners). Shifting perspective on these dynamics reveals relationships of complementarity between partners.

**Risk transfer involves and impacts more actors than simply NGOs.** Donors may transfer and create risks for aid actors by shaping their economic environment and creating additional pressures to take on more risk. NGOs, whether local, national, or international, can also 'transfer' security risks to communities due to their presence and/or activities in the area.

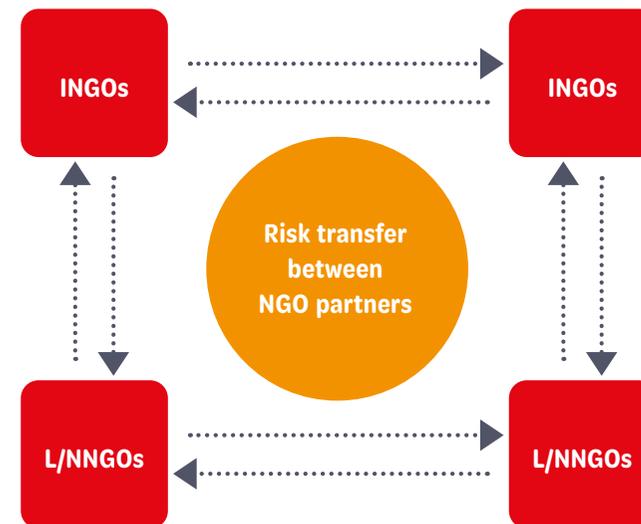
**Perceptions of risk transfer differ.** The fact that certain situations are considered as instances of 'risk transfer' is heavily influenced by subjectivities and perceptions around risks and programme ownership, both from L/NNGOs and INGOs.

Risk transfer may occur in deliberate but also non-deliberate ways, resulting from the divergent natures, origins, motivations, and risk appetites of different aid actors..

***'[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

**Figure 5:** The different directions of risk transfer



# Sharing responsibility for security risks in practice

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

Survey respondent

Sharing risks in partnerships requires:

- **Taking into account structural constraints and power imbalances in partnerships:** Understanding the effects of power dynamics, resource capacity and trust is essential to ensure an adequate analysis and discussion of security risks in partnerships.  
*86% of survey respondents stated that the pressure from INGOs for tight budgets impacts proper security budgeting.*
- **Including local perspectives in discussing and acting on security risks:** L/NNGOs must be able to safely voice their challenges (and successes) in partnerships, and make informed decisions about accepting or rejecting risks.
- **Supporting sustainable partnerships and collective action:** Partnerships should allocate sufficient resources to SRM and focus on sustainable improvements rather than ad hoc actions with short-term impacts. As well as supporting individual L/NNGOs with SRM, INGO partners should consider supporting local, national and regional networks of L/NNGOs.

## Actions and discussion points



The below points should be considered as the beginning of a process of reflection and action to improve INGOs' and the broader sector's support to L/NNGO partners in managing security risks. This list is expected to form a basis for further dialogue.

### On INGOs

1. INGOs should initiate conversations about security risks with L/NNGO partners on equal terms to ensure that L/NNGOs can safely express their concerns, needs, and opinions regarding SRM.
2. INGOs should allocate sufficient and dedicated funding to SRM in their partnerships with L/NNGOs.
3. INGOs should provide tailored and flexible support to partners on SRM, recognise local partners' existing capacities and respect their opinions.
4. INGOs should have policies that clearly define their duty of care obligations toward the various categories of staff they engage with, including the staff of partner organisations.

### On the broader sector (UN agencies, donors, governments, INGOs and L/NNGOs)

1. The aid community should adopt a more comprehensive definition of risk transfer, which includes all aspects of how risks are shifted and generated in partnerships.
2. The aid community should improve the direct access of L/NNGOs to platforms discussing and sharing information around the localisation agenda and SRM.
3. Participants in the Grand Bargain and supporters of the localisation agenda should increase their attention to security issues and consider SRM as an essential enabler for L/NNGOs' leadership of humanitarian action.
4. Donors and aid actors should increase funding for SRM and question the structure of the current grant and partnership formats, through the local lens.
5. Collaboration between L/NNGOs at the local, national and regional levels, and collaboration with INGOs, should be supported to develop collective solutions to insecurity.