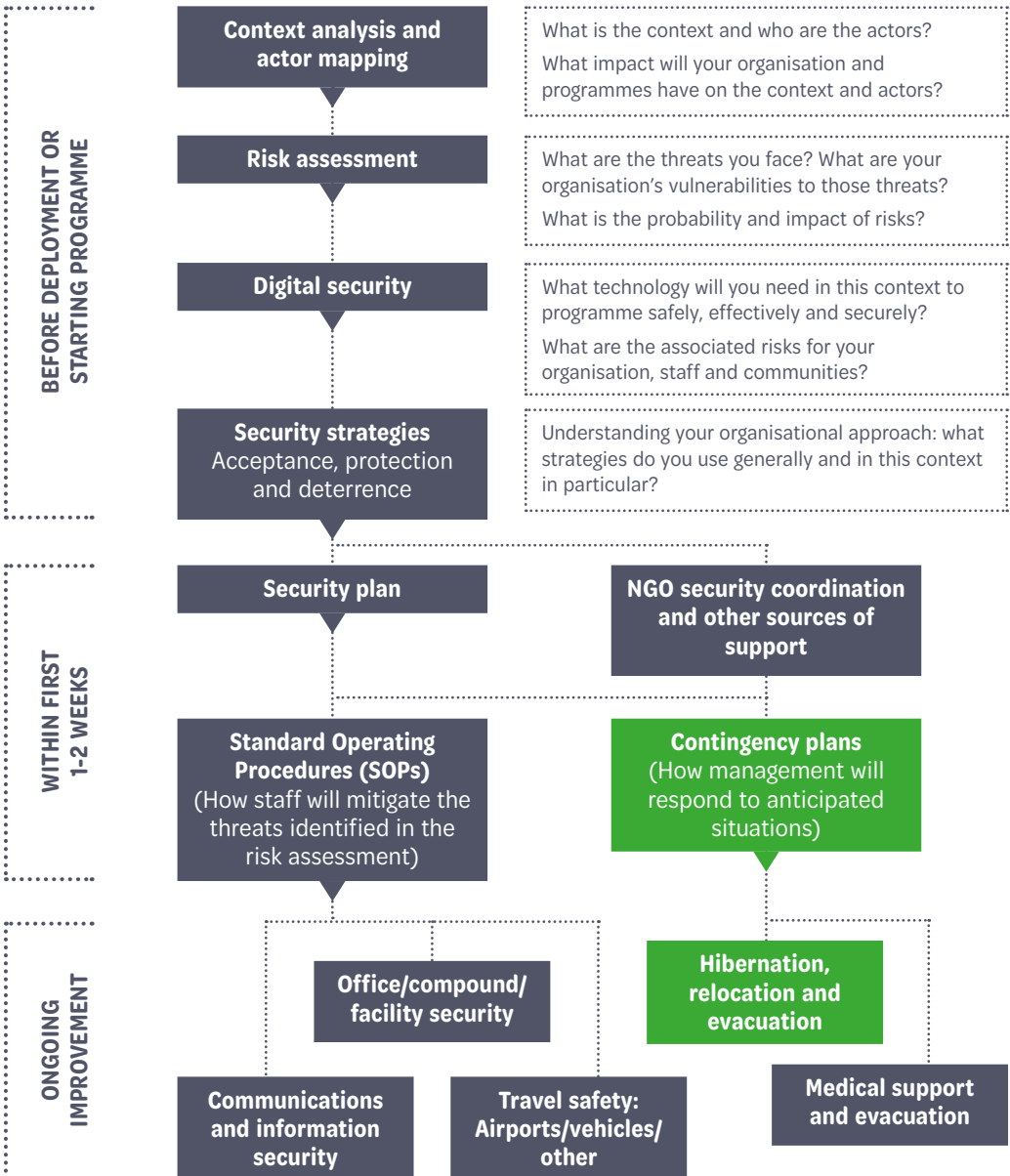


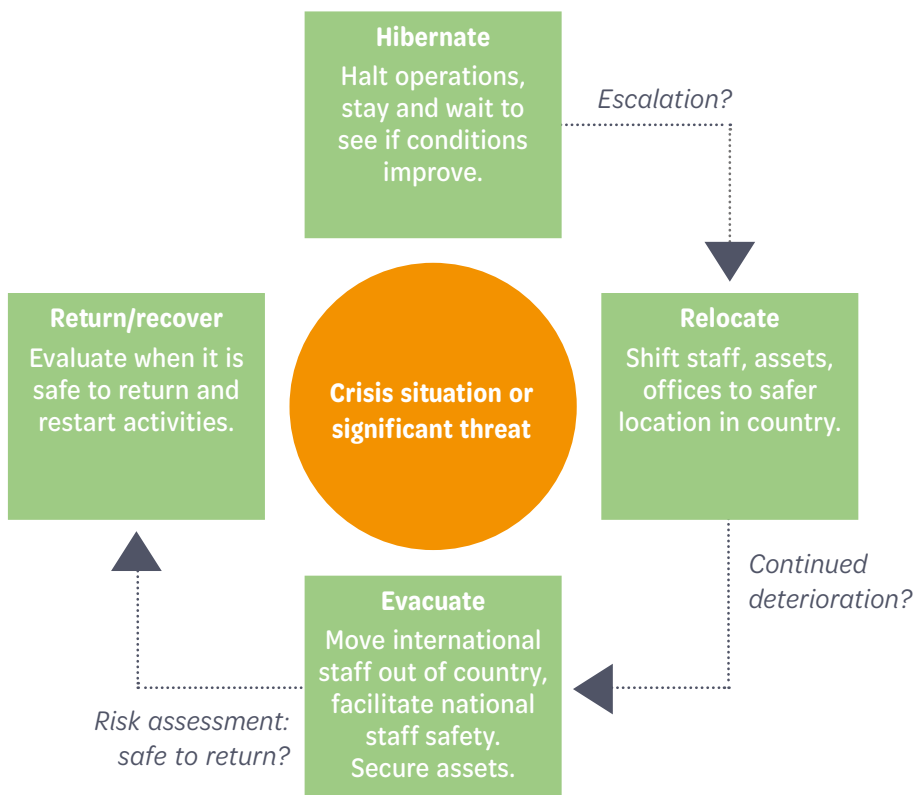
# 11

# Hibernation, relocation and evacuation



Aid agencies often work in regions where natural disasters occur or conflict threatens the human environment. As such, it is important to put some thought into how your organisation will react to a situation where it becomes unsafe for a short or extended period. There are typically three levels of reaction to a significant change in the threat context:

- Hibernation:** Staff stay at home and there is a temporary halt to programming during a crisis period. In some circumstances, staff may be required to shelter in the office or compound.
- Relocation:** Shifting offices and/or activities from an unsafe area to a safer location, usually on a temporary basis and within the same country.
- Evacuation:** Suspending operations in a country, evacuating internationals to another state and national staff from deployed areas to their home areas. Some limited programming may continue using remote management, depending on the situation.



It is important to identify ‘triggers’ that can be agreed upon between in-country staff and headquarters to determine when the various contingency plans should be activated. For example, for flooding, when rainfall levels reach a historic level that normally results in flooding, hibernation or relocation contingency plans can be activated. If armed conflict in another part of the country expands to an agreed upon line or area, relocation contingencies can be activated.

► *See Glossary*

By agreeing these triggers in advance, all in-country staff, host government, headquarters and donors will understand your decision. However, it may not be appropriate to share these triggers or resultant actions with particular actors. For example, when considering where you might relocate activities if armed conflict comes too close to your current location, it might not be appropriate to share this information with actors in the conflict in case it affects their decisions or increases your vulnerability as a target.



**It is important that, as far as possible, triggers are developed when the situation is calm. If decisions are made during the heat of the crisis, peoples’ perception of risk will affect the decision-making process.**

While no two crises are alike, there will normally be some warning that the situation is deteriorating or a natural disaster is imminent. While some natural disasters occur with no warning (as is the case with many earthquakes), for others, like tropical storms, flooding or deteriorating conflict, there is usually some warning or indicators. Each contingency plan should have three phases:

- Warning phase: alerts all stakeholders that it is time to prepare.
- Activation phase: sets the contingency plan into motion.
- Recovery phase: details how the organisation will return to operations safely.

Re-location and evacuation of staff may be phased, with different triggers applicable for different staff. For example, in an area subject to flooding the triggers might be: heavy rain for six days with possible flooding, no essential staff relocated; heavy rain for eight days and rivers reaching an agreed level, all staff relocated.

Defining essential staff will vary between organisation and context, and may also vary for different risks. Role, programme, experience and personal risk appetite will all play a part in the identification of who

essential staff is. Ethnicity and nationality should also be considered for conflict-related risks.

Most organisations have a 'free to go' policy where individuals have the right to relocate or evacuate if their personal sense of risk is exceeded. Individuals should be made aware of organisation's policies in contexts where relocation and/or evacuation may be required.

## Hibernation

Good practice:

- Ensure offices have stockpiled emergency food, water and first aid supplies for anticipated number of people and agreed period of time.
- Stockpiled supplies should be appropriate: non-perishable, portable and nothing frozen as it can go off if the generator breaks down.
- Stockpiled supplies should be accessible (e.g. in places at risk of earthquake, do not store supplies in an area that is safe from theft but prevents staff from retrieving the supplies in case an emergency – in this case, an earthquake – happens).
- Have appropriate communication equipment at hibernation location (e.g. if you are moving into an enclosed safe room, a satellite phone will not work).
- Have a back-up generator and fuel, if applicable.
- Pay staff 2-3 weeks salary in cash to allow them to survive.
- Contact suppliers, banks and advise them of your plans.
- Have staff work from home but check in daily and advise on their situation and observations.
- Minimise activity in office, back up key files offsite, and disable vehicles if there is a threat of theft during chaotic periods.
- Liaise with other NGOs in similar situations.
- Maintain contact with communities to gather information and let them know they are not forgotten.

## Relocation

Good practice:

- Identify in advance locations that you can temporarily relocate to if the operations centre or a specific region becomes unsafe to work in. These can include:
  - Existing field offices
  - Other NGO compounds

- Guest houses
- Other secure locations
- Ensure that the temporary location has suitable phone and internet access.
- Maintain good communications with communities so that they do not feel abandoned and thus damage your acceptance strategy.
- ▶ *See Module 5 – Security strategies: acceptance, protection and deterrence*
- If staff members have been relocated, ensure that any evacuation contingency plans are updated accordingly, in case the situation deteriorates further. If staff are registered with the United Nations, the embassy or insurance company at a particular location, make sure that the information is updated.
- Ensure national staff and their families are also taken into consideration so staff are not asked to leave their families in dangerous areas while they go to work in safety.
- ▶ *See GISF guide ‘Office Closure’*

## Evacuation

Good practice:

- Do not focus entirely on international staff. National staff hired in one area and employed in another (re-located staff) are often at far more risk than internationals. Ensure nationals are internally evacuated to their home areas prior to pulling out.
- Do not promise to evacuate national staff. It is not the role of NGOs to create refugees nor is it legal to employ staff in a third country.
- Pay staff one month’s salary in cash prior to evacuation.
- Establish communication channels with remaining national staff and communities to assist in determining when it is safe to return.
- Plan how assets such as vehicles and computer equipment will be secured in-country or legalities of moving them to a neighbouring state.
- Do not rely on the United Nations to evacuate your international staff. Make your own arrangements.
- Do not rely on promises from embassies to evacuate all your staff, especially if the international staff member is not a citizen of that country.
- If you have insurance have clear details of what it covers. For example, it may specify a particular standard of runway which is only available in the capital city.

Once staff have been evacuated it can be very difficult to return to the same location. When developing the contingency plan for evacuation, consider indicators for return as well as how to maintain relationships previously developed with different stakeholders. Evacuations should always be considered as last resort measure.