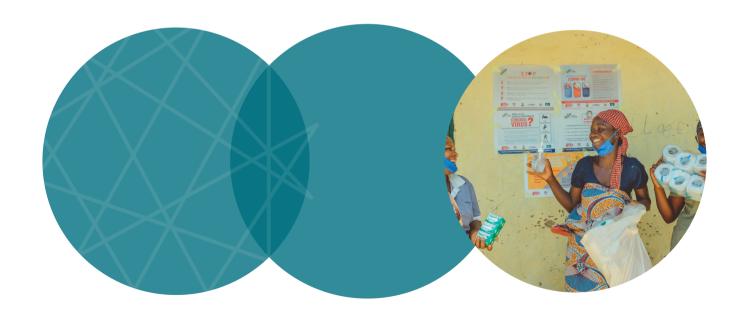gisf

Section B: Operational Security

Module 12: COVID-19 Related Threats and Mitigation Table

Section B: Operational Security

Module 12. Covid-19 related threats, risks and mitigation table

Introduction to the series

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

Introduction to the module

This module sets out COVID-19 related threats to personnel, assets, and operations; providing detailed descriptions of the threats in each category, associated risks and possible mitigation measures.

In a simple, tabular format the module provides comprehensive information about the many types of threats that may face organisations and personnel and suggests possible measures that may be taken to mitigate the risks.

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Threats to Personnel

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
A1	Exposure to COVID-19	There is a chance that individual personnel or an entire office/site location will become exposed to COVID-19.	Forced closure of office and/or programme site(s) (See Threats to Assets) Personnel become exposed to COVID-19 during travel mandated by the organisation	Ensure physical distancing, hand hygiene and disinfection/cleaning, and respiratory etiquette in all common spaces. Maintain, update and rehearse (as appropriate) contingency plans for all associated risks.
A2	Illness due to COVID-19	There is a chance that individual personnel will fall ill with COVID-19, or have to take care of a dependant who has become ill.	Prolonged absence due to medical leave HR gaps and turnover Hospitalisation Death Medical evacuation Long-COVID/Disability	There is a chance that individual personnel will fall ill with COVID-19, or have to take care of a dependant who has become ill.
A3	Reduced access to general and emergency healthcare (non-COVID)	There is a chance that medical resources will become overwhelmed by COVID-19 and/or they will be inaccessible for routine care, minor or non-COVID emergencies due to local policy restrictions.	Personnel are not able to access routine, minor and/or non-COVID medical care Personnel have reduced access to emergency medical services	Monitor local restrictions and capacity; adjust contingency plans and SOPs as needed. Update contingency plans and/or make alternative arrangements for non-COVID medical care as needed, particularly in areas where malaria, dengue and other such diseases are endemic. Communicate alternative procedures to all staff.
A4	Evacuation (for medical and/or security reasons)	There is a chance that international personnel will be unable to access medical or security evacuation options, either because of government imposed travel restrictions or an inability to obtain transportation. In such cases the organisation may be responsible for arranging unexpected emergency support, including accommodation, meals, medical care, financial assistance, travel arrangements, security/or and family support.	Limited emergency medical or security evacuation of international staff Insufficient resources for in-extremis support	Check with insurance providers regarding COVID-related services. Update contingency plans and/or make alternative arrangements for medevac/evacuation as needed. Withdraw or reduce non-essential staff and dependants from areas with inadequate capacity. Impose caps on staff numbers based on local medical capacity and infection rates.
A5	Domestic violence See module B9	Lockdowns and economic fallout have increased the risk of domestic violence during the pandemic, particularly for women and girls.	Personnel experience domestic violence Personnel commit acts of domestic violence	Develop localised guidance for addressing gender, sex-based violence and domestic abuse. Use a gender-nuanced checklist to review security plans, evacuation points, concentration points, and travel arrangements. Ensure HR support is integrated into incident reporting and response.
A6	Online harassment	An increased risk of online harassment has been reported during the pandemic, particularly for women and individuals with diverse SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression).	Personnel are harassed online – Internally (e.g., sexual harassment, violations of Code of Conduct and HR policy, etc). Personnel are harassed online – Externally (e.g., doxing, threats on social media, etc).	Create contingency plans for associated risks. Create and enforce SOPs to reduce risks of online harassment Provide staff with briefing and training on safe usage of social media, digital hygiene/security. Ensure staff understand how and when to report online harassment. Consider anti-doxing training for higher profile/public individuals.

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
A7	Stress, burnout and mental health issues	Mental health risks have risen generally worldwide as a result of the pandemic and its social and economic consequences.	Stress Burn-out (leading to HR gaps and turnover) Long term depression, anxiety and other mental health issues Domestic violence	Provide information about emotional health and relational concerns that may surface or be exacerbated under current conditions (e.g., depressed or anxious mood, grief/loss, burnout, substance misuse/abuse, parenting, suicide, intimate partner violence). Encourage staff to practice self-care and a healthy work-life balance. Inform managers of the resilience and mental health care resources available, how to access them, and how to communicate this information accurately to staff. Identify roles that expose specific staff to higher levels of stress and risk of burnout; determine what resources (e.g. training, psycho-educational materials) can be provided. Provide opportunities for staff to offer input into policies that directly affect their work experience. Consider ways to allow staff to structure their days to manage energy and other commitments. Develop a protocol for response to reports of employees who are struggling to cope.
A8	Attacks or threats to health workers (verbal or physical)	The spread of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 has given rise to attacks and threats against health workers seen to be involved in COVID-19 treatment, quarantine oversight and vaccination rollout.	Verbal and physical assault Threatening messages Online harassment	Identify situations in which this risk is high. Provide opportunities for staff to express their concerns. Include staff in the development of mitigation measures. Ensure staff understand how and when to report incidents, including near-misses or suspicious activity. Monitor incidents in your context or similar contexts. Adjust plans or other mitigation as needed. If the risk is high, consider physical security upgrades for facilities, and measures to protect personnel in transit.
A9	Anti-foreigner and racially motivated attacks and threats (verbal or physical)	Anti-foreigner sentiment rose at the beginning of the pandemic, and has seen intermittent spikes throughout. Incidents are not limited to aggression against foreigners, but may also target national or local personnel returning to their communities, or those who are perceived as being foreigners because of their race. Attacks have particularly affected Asian communities in Africa, the US and UK.	Verbal and physical assault Threatening messages Online harassment	See above + If risk is high, consider physical security upgrades for residences as well.
A10	Attacks or threats towards people with more spending power (verbal or physical)	Economic inequality has increased globally as a result of the pandemic. In many countries, employees of international organisations are considered to be wealthy relative to the average population. Those who have been employed throughout the crisis may be subject to increased threats or acts of violence as a result.	Verbal and physical assault Threatening messages Online harassment Profit-seeking crime (e.g., robbery, kidnapping for ransom	See above + If risk is high, consider physical security upgrades for residences as well.

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
A11	Disinformation and misinformation (affecting personnel) See module A2	Disinformation and misinformation regarding COVID-19 have been rampant. Personnel may be influenced by misinformation and disinformation, leading to poor health and safety practices and decisions (e.g., not wearing a mask, vaccine hesitancy). In addition, data modelling and reporting may not accurately reflect reality, leading to poor policy decisions about safety measures and resource allocation.	Personnel disregard social-distancing and health and safety measures Waste and inefficiency Misguided policy decisions Degradation of trust	Provide factually accurate information for all staff on a timely and regular basis. Monitor local information sources. Regularly update security plans and procedures to reflect changes in the context. Address any known incidents in which disinformation or misinformation is circulated internally.
A12	Civil unrest and state violence	Protest movements have risen globally amid deepening inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. These include anti-lockdown protests, movements for social justice (including anti-corruption and anti-racism), and those in defence of human rights. In several countries such protest movements have been met with state violence (e.g., by the military, police or intelligence services) targeting organisers and attendees.	Roadblocks and area closures Delays (programmatic or logistical) Use of non-lethal weapons (tear gas, rubber bullets, etc) Theft and looting Damage to property Assault and battery Arrest and detention	Monitor incidents of civil unrest and related social/political/economic indicators. Clarify obligations and rights of the employer towards personnel (e.g. legal/family support in case of arrest) and personnel towards employer (e.g., prohibiting visible affiliation while at protests). If it is known that personnel are participating in protest gatherings, or likely to be bystanders, provide guidance on how to keep safe.
A13	Arrest and detention	There may be an increased likelihood of arrest and detention in light of COVID-19 containment measures (e.g., staff may be found in violation), and in case of civil unrest (e.g., staff may be arrested during protests). The potential impact of arrest and detention is also increased, due to the high COVID-19 infection rates within detention centers, as compared to the general population.	Arrest/Detention of staff HR gaps Diversion of time and resources to crisis management Stress Financial loss (if fines must be paid)	Identify situations in which this risk is high. Create and disseminate guidance for personal conduct to reduce likelihood of arrest/detention Train personnel in de-escalation and legal rights (in case of arrest/detention). Create an organisational contingency plan in case a staff member is arrested/detained, and a crisis management plan (in case situation is significant or escalates). Ensure staff emergency contact information, next of kin, and other relevant personal information is up to date and kept in a secure location.
A14	Violent extremism	Violent extremist groups globally aim to exploit the pandemic as an opportunity to spread disinformation, undermine confidence in government institutions and increase their support base. As potential targets in the public space are reduced due to COVID-restriction measures, these groups may increase their targeting of critical infrastructure (e.g. hospitals and supermarkets), as well as protest gatherings.	Terror/mass casualty attacks Online harassment Threat messages Verbal and/or physical assault	Monitor (via media and social media) potential intent of extremist groups toward your, or similar, organisation/s. Ensure staff understand how and when to report incidents, including near-misses or suspicious activity. If the risk is high, consider physical security upgrades for facilities, and measures that will protect personnel whilst in transit.
A15	Unable to provide in-person security training	Social distancing and travel restriction measures have limited capacity to provide in-person security training. This also impacts onboarding, security briefings and other events that affect personal and organisational risk.	Reduced security awareness and compliance Increased accidents and incidents Reduction in incident reporting Reduced capacity to manage incidents	Where possible, bring trainings on-line. Keep track of whether training requirements for personnel are being met, identify gaps and develop a plan to address them Designate your organisation's threshold of acceptable risk when it comes to gaps in training (e.g., are there deployments or projects that need to be suspended if personnel are not adequately prepared). Plan for a coordinated surge in training, post-vaccination

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
A16	Delays in vaccination of personnel	Personnel's access to the COVID-19 vaccine depends on several variables, including availability in their home or host country, the policies that govern distribution where they are located, eligibility, and other factors including gender, race, ethnicity, age, geographic location, etc.	Staff become infected/spread of infection Hospitalisation Death Closure of office/site/programmes Delays in programming Continued travel restrictions for unvaccinated staff	Plan and budget for vaccinations. Clarify vaccination status with staff as much as possible, and seek methods to support them in getting vaccinated if it is not readily available to them. Consider reaching out to other organisations, UN agencies and donors who may be able to assist

	Threats to Assets (including Funding)			
No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
B1	Corruption	The large number of resources provided and the speed with which they were disbursed during the pandemic provides opportunities for corrupt practices, such as embezzlement, bribery, as well as manipulation of procurement processes.	Embezzlement Bribery Manipulation of procurement processes	Communicate zero tolerance policies to personnel, partners and stakeholders. Assess where gaps in oversight may have created higher risk during the pandemic; investigate any red flags. Before entering into new contract arrangements, assess the risk involved and conduct appropriate due diligence. Communicate procedures for whistleblowing and the protection of whistleblowers to personnel.
B2	Loss of assets	Personnel may require assets (furniture, laptops) to be used at home. If these assets are not typically used outside the office, they are more likely to become lost. Regular inventory practices in offices and warehouses may also become more difficult to carry out or oversee.	Loss of assets	Work with logistics to ensure asset inventory procedures are updated to reflect Work-From-Home conditions. Work with logistics to ensure that staff who are using organisational assets at home are clear on their proper usage, maintenance, check-in/out procedures, etc.
B3	Theft/Looting	Although crime rates dipped sharply in several countries at the beginning of the pandemic, rates rose again shortly thereafter. In particular, theft, looting and other profit-seeking crimes have risen, particularly in areas economically affected by lockdown and social distancing measures. There is an increased likelihood of large-scale theft and looting (e.g., electronics, vehicles, furniture) whenever buildings are left unoccupied and unguarded. This risk is also elevated in areas prone to civil unrest (e.g., near economic centers and government buildings).	Theft Looting	Arrange regular security oversight (e.g., guard service, CCTV) of office and other sites left unoccupied. Take special precautions to protect offices or other sites during periods of anticipated civil unrest. Communicate and enforce access control policy/procedures to all personnel during WFH periods.

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
B4	Property damage	The risk of property damage is elevated wherever offices, warehouses and/or project sites are left unoccupied and unguarded. This risk is also elevated in areas prone to civil unrest (e.g., near economic centers and government buildings). Damage may be intentional (e.g. vandalism during civil unrest) or unintentional (e.g. flooding, water leakage, electrical fire).	Property damage (intentional) Property damage (accidental)	If offices/facilities are unoccupied for extended periods, ensure that power and water are cut, where appropriate. Take special precautions to protect offices or other sites during periods of anticipated civil unrest.
B5	Attacks or threats towards healthcare facilities and/or transport	The spread of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 has given rise to attacks and threats against health facilities and transport seen to be involved in COVID-19 treatment and vaccination rollout.	Threats of physical violence against health facilities and transport (leading to potential delays or suspension of activities) Physical attacks against facilities and/or transport Protests targeting health facilities	Identify situations in which this risk is high. Provide opportunities for staff to express their concerns. Include staff in the development of mitigation measures. Ensure staff understand how and when to report incidents, including near-misses or suspicious activity. Monitor incidents in your context or similar contexts. Adjust any plans or other mitigation as needed. If the risk is high, consider physical security upgrades for facilities, and measures to protect personnel in transit.
B6	Office or project site closure due to COVID-19	Offices and project sites may be forced to close due to suspected or actual exposure to COVID-19.	Delays Financial waste and inefficiency Stress Degradation of trust/weakening of community acceptance	Enforce necessary precautions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Integrate scenario-planning into programme design. Allocate funding in the budget for contingencies. Work with programmes, communications, HR, logistics and others to develop contingency plans for any event that is likely to occur Involve staff who may be affected by these contingencies in your planning. Inform staff of contingency plans so they know what to expect; aim to address outstanding concerns.
B7	Failure of partners/ contractors/ suppliers	Social distancing, lockdown measures and related economic consequences may cause disruption to supply chains and/or threaten the survival of contractors and partners. This risk is particularly high for local or smaller entities, but can potentially impact larger international partners, contractors and suppliers as well.	Delays Financial waste and inefficiency Stress Degradation of trust/weakening of community acceptance	Integrate scenario-planning into programme design. Allocate funding in the budget for contingencies. Work with programmes, communications, HR, logistics and others to develop contingency plans for any event that is likely to occur
B8	Reduced availability of funds See module A5	The spiralling economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 has spared no country, including every major donor government from the EU to the UAE. Many donors have increased domestic spending to combat COVID-19, and forthcoming years will see fewer resources dedicated to international assistance.	Reduced funding for safety and security Furloughing or layoffs	Establish clear thresholds of risk whereby projects do not proceed without proper mitigation in high-risk environments. In high-risk environments, ensure safety and security is involved at the beginning of project/proposal development as well as at critical junctures where decisions regarding resource allocation are made (e.g., budget revision).

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
B9	Increased costs due to inflation / exchange rate fluctuation	Rates of inflation have risen globally due to the economic impact of the pandemic. This has caused an increase in prices for certain commodities. Exchange rates are subject to fluctuation as well, potentially impacting overall cost for certain transactions.	Financial loss Reduced funding for safety and security Furloughing or layoffs	See above
B10	Increased costs and/or reduced output due to social distancing measures in programming	Increased operational costs of running programmes in the pandemic are primarily due to requirements for social distancing. When fewer people can occupy physical spaces, costs multiply for things like transportation of personnel, housing, and office space.	Financial loss Reduced funding for safety and security Furloughing or layoffs	See above

Threats to Operations (incl. Reputation)

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
C1	Digital surveillance/ attacks	Worldwide, the response to COVID-19 has triggered an increase in government domestic digital surveillance to facilitate contact tracing. At large, governments are increasingly using digital surveillance tactics such as blanket and/or biometric data collection and retention, location monitoring and facial recognition to track and monitor citizens. This coincides with a rise in authoritarianism in several countries, where governments are known to apply increasingly invasive and pervasive digital surveillance for the purposes of political repression. Furthermore, these tools may be used by private sector, non-state actors and political parties to advance their own goals.	Digital surveillance Targeted digital attack (phishing, ransomware, Denial of service attacks) Exposure of information by others (partners, ex-employees)	Conduct digital surveillance awareness and protection training for all staff Conduct a briefing during onboarding on how to avoid digital surveillance. Limit access to files on server according to need. Provide staff with briefing and training on safe usage of social media, digital hygiene/security. Ensure staff understand how and when to report suspected loss/exposure, or attempts to acquire information through social media/social engineering. Conduct site security assessments (or self-assessments) at staff work-from-home (WFH) locations to ensure that InfoSec protocol can be followed. Invest in equipment/adjustments to WFH offices. Develop WFH InfoSec protocol and brief staff.

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
C2	Disinformation and misinformation (affecting reputation)	False information about COVID-19 has spread quickly and widely through social media, text messaging and mass media throughout the pandemic. Misinformation and disinformation range from opinion to false accusations, hate speech, conspiracy theories and attempted hacks and scams. There may be serious reputational and consequent security risks to organisations, or possibly to the wider aid sector, if staff are perceived to have spread the infection to communities or others	Degradation of trust/weakening of community acceptance Damage to relations with key stakeholders (e.g., government, non-state armed groups) Reduced participation in programmes Online harassment, smear campaigns Increased bureaucratic restrictions Forced closure of programmes or offices Threats and attacks toward sites, transport or personnel	Assess the risk of reputational damage to your organisation due to misinformation/disinformation related to COVID-19 . Monitor media and social media for coverage of COVID-19, including political statements and incidents that may impact public opinion. Work with programmes to assess the risk of reduced participation, weakening of community acceptance and damage to stakeholder relations. Develop procedures to reduce the likelihood of these risks and how to deal with them if they occur. Work with Communications and Management to develop a plan for handling such incidents. Work with Communications and HR to develop a plan for handling information about infections affecting personnel. If the risk of threats or attacks are high, put in place mitigation to reduce this risk (see above: Personnel and Assets: Attacks or threats)
C3	Delays, suspension or discontinuation of programmes)	Programmes that are introduced and/or continue to operate during the pandemic are subject to frequent delays, disruptions, long-term periods of suspension and/or indefinite closure, due to fluctuating infection rates and related government restrictions.	Financial waste and inefficiency Unplanned office/site/programme closure Stress Furloughing or layoffs Degradation of trust/weakening of community acceptance	Integrate scenario-planning into programme design. Allocate funding in the budget for contingencies. Work with Programmes, Communications, HR, Logistics and others to develop contingency plans for any event that is likely to occur Involve staff who may be affected by these contingencies in your planning. Inform staff of contingency plans so they know what to expect; aim to address outstanding concerns.
C4	Travel and physical access restrictions	In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, various countries and regions have implemented mandatory quarantines, entry bans, or other restrictions on citizens and/or foreigners. These restrictions have ranged from selective to global (e.g., complete border closure, prevention of all travel). Most of these restrictions have been subject to fluctuation, being introduced and rolled back intermittently as a part of broader public health policy considerations. In some places, travel restrictions and bureaucratic impediments have been applied politically.	Border closures Roadblocks Delays in obtaining visas/denial of visas Travel changes/cancellations Stress Reduced oversight Financial waste and inefficiency Degradation of trust/weakening of community acceptance	Establish a systematic way to track the physical presence and travel of all personnel, including vetting and agreeing new requests through the appropriate decision-making authority, a central system for international travel, and in-country systems for national and local travel. Ensure in-country and regional travel authorisation and tracking systems coherently link with the central system at head-quarters level. Ensure up-to-date tracking of travel testing and quarantine/isolation requirements. Prepare and resource contingency plans for transporting infected persons to their home countries (in isolation) if necessary and possible .
C5	Reduced security oversight for non-COVID related issues, due to diversion of human resources	During the pandemic security management personnel and resources may be diverted towards planning, coordination and crisis management for COVID-related needs. Non-COVID-related incidents are less likely to be reported by staff who perceive that the internal security risk management system is preoccupied. These compounding dynamics may result in a lower degree of attention paid toward managing non-COVID-related risks.	Insufficient security staffing Gaps in incident reporting and management Gaps in routine security management planning and oversight	Assess current HR and organisational resources and how they are allocated. Conduct internal review to identify any potential gaps that may have occurred. Request additional support and/or redistribute current resources as necessary.

No.	Threat	Detailed description	Associated risks	Possible mitigation
C6	Investigative Delays	When travel is reduced and staff are not in the office, it can be challenging to follow up on investigations (e.g., allegations of Code of Conduct, PSEA violations, corruption, etc.).	Time lapses reduce effectiveness and accuracy Increased sense of impunity leads to increase in future incidents	Develop specialised guidance to make up for gaps in physical oversight Invest in local capacity Plan for a coordinated surge in investigation activity, post-vaccination