



Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk

There is growing recognition that the wellbeing of defenders is key to the sustainability of their activism. Human rights defenders who work in insecure, difficult and dangerous contexts are at risk of experiencing burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. At the same time, cultures of human rights practice tend to value bravery, commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness, which inhibit defenders from engaging in self-care. This policy brief, which accompanies the *Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk*,¹ provides guidance based on our research on the issues faced by relocation coordinators, wellbeing support providers, and other protection actors as they provide support to defenders on relocation initiatives.

Introduction

Temporary international relocation initiatives enable human rights defenders at risk to spend a period of time abroad, often as a measure of last resort, for their protection. The number and size of these initiatives have increased significantly in recent years.² These relocation initiatives relocate not only individuals self-identifying as human rights defenders but also a wide range of other individuals and groups facing risks arising from shrinking civic space, including journalists, lawyers, academics, writers, and artists. While these initiatives respond to the immediate physical safety and security needs of defenders, their impact on defenders' wellbeing is complex. Many stakeholders noted that the defenders most in need of

relocation may be least able to access relocation precisely because of their deteriorated state of wellbeing.

Defenders on relocation initiatives arrive in relocation often having experienced prolonged periods of insecurity and with past experience of traumatic events. There is growing evidence that activists working in insecure environments face immediate and chronic challenges to their wellbeing.³ Relocation itself can be a stressful experience, removing defenders from their usual networks of support and placing them into foreign social, linguistic and cultural environments. In our research, using psychometric surveys of defenders in relocation initiatives, we found moderate to high levels of burnout

and post-traumatic stress disorder, and mild to high levels of anxiety and depression, amongst most respondents.

Wellbeing during relocation

While every defender has a unique experience of relocation, we found common themes in their experiences of wellbeing. Most found that relocation had an overall positive effect on their wellbeing. As a defender observed:

At least I can sleep... I can think better; I can define the points I want to achieve. It's easier... In [my country] I would be... fighting for everything... fighting to pay my house rent; fighting to moderate my relationship with my good friends; fighting to... help my family, have a good lifestyle, good life needs; fighting all the time. But here I have no problem with home, with the house, with money, with food, nothing; just think and try to achieve your goals...here nothing became harder.

Beyond a greater sense of security, defenders also benefited from the development of new skills and networks of support while in relocation.

The perception of wellbeing varied significantly over the course of relocation, often beginning with a 'honeymoon' period in which defenders felt contentment, relief and joy. This gave way to a period of listlessness, loneliness, and struggle. Some grappled with feelings of vulnerability, dependency and isolation in their new, unfamiliar surroundings. Defenders also missed and felt guilty and worried over those left at home – their colleagues, family, partners, and children. Some experienced racism, homophobia, language barriers, and 'culture shock' related to the weather, customs, and food in the country of relocation. Feelings of anxiety often increased as the end of relocation neared.



Wellbeing practices in relocation

Relocation initiatives offer a wide range of wellbeing support, such as referral mechanisms for local wellbeing support providers, friendship groups for defenders, physical exercise, yoga, sports, nature-based activities, art- and music-based therapies, nutrition programmes, counselling, bodywork therapies, talk therapies, and coaching. However, we found that the uptake of wellbeing support varied amongst defenders. The poor mental health of defenders arriving on relocation often posed the biggest barrier to their seeking of support: exhaustion, stress, isolation, and guilt prevented some defenders from being able to prioritise their own wellbeing. Men, more so than women, found it difficult to reveal their suffering to others and to ask for help.

Some defenders were reluctant to seek the help of mental health professionals. Some were concerned about the social stigma associated with seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist, worried that they would be labelled as being 'crazy'. A defender struggled to articulate what he needed from such support:

I approached such a point of need, where I think I need somebody to get into my brain. I feel sick. I'm not physically sick, but what I'm feeling can eventually make me physically sick.

Is that because my pain comes from within? It comes from inside my marrows of my bone... I need somebody who has the ability to get into my brains, holding my hands – not just get into my brains imposingly, but get into my brains with me... to put me back in order; and that kind of help is extremely difficult for me to find...

Some defenders expressed wariness about interacting with mental health professionals, concerned that the information they shared in confidence during therapy would be passed on to others, such as State authorities or members of their community. LGBTIQ+ defenders were worried about discussing about their private lives in their home countries where homosexuality is illegal. In some contexts wellbeing interventions are sometimes misinterpreted as 'witchcraft' or contrary to religious norms.

A therapist highlighted the importance of explaining the role of mental health professionals to human rights defenders, saying:

[it helps] if you explain to them little by little that a psychologist will help you to understand your history and can help you calm down so you can have a space of trust to ignore the suffering you have had over a long time. You

have to start to demystify what a psychologist means for them; that they have the wrong idea. Also tell them they are not getting crazy; that they have normal reactions because of all the atrocious experiences they have lived.

The short length of most relocation initiatives also restricted the willingness of some defenders to participate in wellbeing activities, and of mental health professionals to offer certain types of interventions. The continuity of care after the end of relocation was an issue identified by all stakeholders, and one without an easy solution. Wellbeing support providers were concerned that there weren't trained professionals back home that defenders could see, or that if there were, the cost of accessing their support would be prohibitive.

All stakeholders emphasised the need to take a flexible approach to offering support, including accepting that not all defenders will take up all wellbeing activities. Flexibility included recognising the different perceptions of the support defenders may have based on their personal lived experience and the socio-political context from which they came.

Wellbeing support providers

As indicated by the wide range of wellbeing interventions offered in relocation, wellbeing support can be provided by a wide range of actors, including but not limited to mental health professionals. Coordinators of relocation initiatives recommended developing a network of wellbeing support providers before the arrival of defenders. Both defenders and coordinators have expressed greater satisfaction with wellbeing support providers who understand defenders' specific needs and the particular contexts from which they have come:

They have to understand social justice. They do have to understand structural violence. One reason why I recommend them not to send them to psychologists or mainstream psychologists, government, private, is because these people have no understanding about structural oppression. If they don't understand that, they see these people having a bad behaviour, or, 'Why don't you take care of yourself? You should eat well, you should sleep well,' they start preaching them.

Such wellbeing support providers were seen to be more credible and trustworthy, to better understand the situation of defenders (including the competing demands they face), and to be less likely to pathologise defenders' activism. These wellbeing support providers were seen to recognise that periods of negative wellbeing are a normal response to the trauma and stress experienced



by defenders and to focus more on the resilience of defenders and the rewards of activism.

Relocation initiatives can support wellbeing support providers in better understanding the socio-political context of defenders and reflecting upon their own personal and professional position. Despite the challenges to supporting defenders, wellbeing support providers spoke about the positive effects that supporting defenders had on their own wellbeing. They talked about feeling fulfilled, inspired, privileged and empowered by their work with defenders.

Wellbeing of others in relocation

It is important to keep in mind that supporting defenders on relocation also impacts upon the wellbeing of coordinators and wellbeing support providers. In the same way that the wellbeing of defenders is becoming increasingly recognised as key for the strength, resilience and longevity of the movement, it follows that the wellbeing of those supporting defenders must also be prioritised, if relocation is to be as effective as possible.

Coordinators often felt overwhelmed and under-supported in dealing with the wellbeing of defenders. Coordinators seldom receive training on wellbeing and often struggle to set sustainable limits on their role:

[T]hey get off the train, off the plane and then, having to take them to their accommodation, take them out, give them a meal, be nice and take them back, make sure that they ... You know? It was a bit ridiculous ... I'm thinking, 'Actually, I really need help. I really need help.'

Similarly, wellbeing support providers recognised that they often fell into the same trap as the defenders they supported, in terms of risking burnout, exhaustion, and not being able to switch off. They repeatedly emphasised the importance of prioritising self-care activities, which could include many things, from undergoing psychoanalysis themselves, to reading, dancing, seeing friends, getting regular deep tissue massages, or programming in time off after working for days at a time on difficult cases:

You have to be constantly looking for strategies to look after and to say to yourself this is happening to another person, it's not happening to me and I have to be fine so I can listen to her, support her, help to find in life the beauty, the friendship and the love.

Both mental health professionals and coordinators thought it essential to set boundaries, which became easier to do over time. Coordinators spoke positively about initiatives within their organisation which prioritised staff wellbeing alongside the wellbeing

of defenders. All stakeholders agreed that relocation initiatives and all those involved with relocation must model good wellbeing practices. Although all stakeholders were conscious of the challenges in addressing wellbeing, they frequently linked their commitment to wellbeing to their participation in the human rights movement, and described it as part of the bigger project of ensuring not only the wellbeing of defenders but that our human rights movements become communities of mutual care.

Endnotes

¹ The *Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk* are available at hrdhub.org/wellbeing

² Martin Jones, Alice Nah, and Patricia Bartley "Introduction" in Maik Müller, ed. *Temporary Shelter and Relocation Initiatives: Perspectives of Managers and Participants* (Martin Roth Initiative, 2019) at 10.

³ See Alice Nah, "Wellbeing, Risk, and Human Rights Practice" Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 1, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York (2017), available at securityofdefendersproject.org; Sarah Knuckey, Margaret Satterthwaite, and Adam Brown, "Trauma, Depression, and Burnout in the Human Rights Field: Identifying Barriers to Resilient Advocacy" 49 *Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev.* 267 (2018).

About this project:

This Policy Brief is based on research findings from the project *Temporary International Relocation Initiatives and the Wellbeing of Human Rights Defenders at Risk* through which we interviewed over 100 human rights defenders, relocation coordinators, wellbeing support providers, and other protection actors from all regions of the world about the wellbeing of human rights defenders in temporary relocation. We also conducted psychometric surveys, interviews on wellbeing, and wellbeing workshops with more than 20 defenders on relocation.



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Martin Jones, Alice Nah, and Tallulah Lines, Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk, Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 8, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York, available at hrdhub.org

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