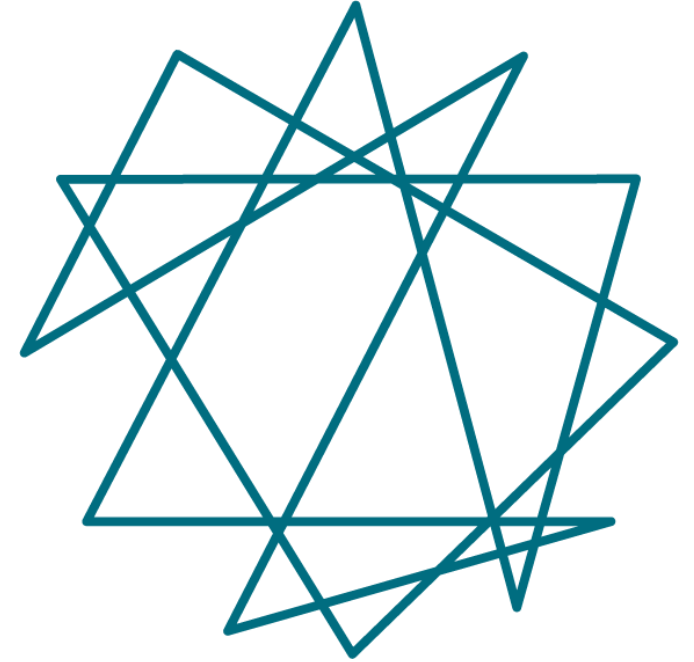gisf

Section A: Policy and Planning

Module 7: December 2022: COVID-19 - Where are we now?

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Introduction to the series

The pandemic has impacted 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 got used to new ways of working with COVID-19, and the focus was, 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 gathers experiences and perspectives, by speaking to people working in NGO Security Management and the wider Humanitarian / Development sector via interviews and through surveys on the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the world of NGO Security Risk Management to understand where we are now.

Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

State of the sector

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the NGO security sector has sought innovation to enable safe access to programmes. Tools and approaches have been developed, not least this series of modules. But where are we now? Have we reached the 'new normal'? What is the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on our sector? Or have we moved onto the next set of crises? And if we have, are we ready for them?

All NGO Security Focal Points (SFPs) value a review after an incident. Even if it doesn't tell them anything they don't already know, it provides a point they can go back to and review. This review does just that – it marks a line in the sand as we hopefully transition out of the COVID-19 years.

In common with all of those who worked through the pandemic, Headquarter or regional-based SFPs have worked remotely more often, have travelled less, have learned to use communication technology more efficiently, but have endeavoured to maintain their support for their colleagues around the world or their region in a context of change and limited resource.

And no two agencies have been affected the same; similarly, no two have responded the same. Some have downsized, some have continued working throughout, some have grown – and some have closed. All have had their operations affected in some way. And all have not only been affected by COVID-19, but also by significant subsequent global developments. This module gathers experiences and perspectives, by speaking to people working in NGO Security Management and the wider Humanitarian / Development sector via interviews and through surveys on the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the world of NGO Security Risk Management to understand where we are now.

Internal reflections

During August and September 2022, the Security Focal Points (SFPs) of 18 agencies of varying sizes were surveyed [1] about the impact of the pandemic on their roles. Key findings included that:

- 8 of the 18 agencies (44%) were seeing less travel than before COVID-19 and 7 (38%) were travelling the same amount as before
- Half of the SFPs surveyed were travelling less than they did before the pandemic
- Of those who were travelling less, the biggest impacts on their working life were reduced 'informal' information gathering and a deterioration in the quality of relationships with colleagues
- It was noted that some agencies who had maintained their level of travel, were subsequently reviewing it, not because of COVID-19 but in light of the increasing cost of travel
- Some noted increased localisation of processes, which has been enabled by developing remote audit tools or more virtual meetings
- It was commonly felt that internal travel risk management practices, and certain external travel providers, were not as effective as they had been pre-COVID-19 and had become 'rusty'.
- The two most frequently identified positive impacts were better work / life balance for SFPs (12 responses) and better communication with colleagues (11), enabled by improved communications technology. Indeed, better communication tools were cited as a major reason that the impact of the disruption of the pandemic had not been as bad as it could have been.
- All staff who responded were working fewer days in their organisation's office.
- In addition, respondents saw clear advantages from:
  - Work-life balance enabling better mental health and reducing risk of burnout
  - Enabling more staff around the world to have better access to conference calls and the decision making process

What is clear is that we are no longer bound by internally imposed COVID-19 restrictions – for instance on working from home, wearing masks, self-testing for COVID-19 before coming into work and limiting travel; we have now moved into a world where the Covid-19 related restrictions placed on an SFP are those externally imposed – international travel restrictions, or testing regimes required on arrival in a specific country.

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[1] Survey of the UK INGO Humanitarian / Development SFP Network July – September 2022; results were disseminated at the September 2022 meeting of the network

As the pandemic lost its initial impetus during 2021, our eyes turned to other emerging issues such as: the increased frequency of climate change induced natural disasters, political conflicts and shifting geopolitical allegiances, and the possibility of an impending global recession.

This module asks where we are now in terms of COVID-19 and whether we are ready for the next disruptive event, whatever it might be.

> *"We've expanded our organisation, both in terms of hiring and physical presence."* - SFP 1

> *"The impact of COVID-19 is exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and global economic downturn, this is … why travel is limited on cost grounds as NGOs get squeezed."* - SFP 2

Travel risk management

Security managers are usually closely engaged with their organisation's travel management. As noted earlier, 8 of the 18 agencies (44%) were seeing less travel than before COVID-19 (7 or 38% were travelling the same amount as before). But that also means that the majority – 56% - are travelling as much as before the pandemic, or more. Indeed, a major factor for not travelling was not COVID-19, but the increased cost of air travel in 2022, compared to previously. At time of writing, air fares have risen 30% in the last year alone. [2]

In June 2022 at a UK based forum, several SFPs noted concern that due to pandemic induced staff shortages, some travel agencies had not maintained the standard of service that NGOs expected. As a result, some NGOs had started a process, or had considered a process, to take travel management, which had been previously outsourced, back in house. The survey quoted at the start of this noted that 39% of the respondents had an in-house travel purchasing function, though 78% of agencies had access to an external portal for booking flights.

Interestingly, two thirds of the respondents did not record travellers' vaccination information and/or relevant pre-existing medical conditions before travel to higher risk countries. Although this might seem alarming, especially having just gone through a pandemic, agencies who did not collect this information reported complexities with data protection legislation, and therefore relied on trust and for staff to declare pre-existing medical conditions, and still do. This is an area that should be revisited in the future.

> *"Because we now have no internal COVID-19 restrictions for travel, my travel is to countries with no significant COVID-19 restrictions, and I am happy and allowed to travel ."* - SFP

> *"We travelled less in 2020 and 2021 but are now back roughly at the same level. However, this may change now that the flight costs are going through the roof."* - SFP

> *"Since we lifted some travel restrictions earlier this year I personally have visited several countries due to a large part on changing security context and increased complexity in key areas requiring me to conduct an in-person assessment."* - SFP

- 🔵 Our staff are now travelling less   8
- 🟠 Our staff are travelling about the same   7
- 🟢 Our staff are now travelling more   3

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[2] https://www.in2013dollars.com/Airline-fares/price-inflation/2021-to-2022?amount=100

The impact of changed working relationships

All the SFPs we spoke to had changed their working patterns since the onset of COVID-19 by reducing the number of days they worked from their office (although more than one had already worked fully remotely prior to the pandemic). Most agencies require staff spend a minimum amount of time in their office but have retained contracts that define the office as the place of work; a small number have moved to working from home contracts. The change has impacted the way that relationships across an organisation are maintained as online communications have become as important, if not more important, than face to face meetings.

Headquarters and regionally-based SFPs already work remotely from most of their key contacts and have always had to rely on visits to their local offices to understand contexts and build trusted relationships. With less travel there are fewer informal conversations, fewer chance meetings, reduced exposure to operational contexts and of course, greater reliance on our colleagues in project locations. Whilst this has potentially made the work of security managers more challenging in the short term, some agencies have been pushed to meet the growing demand and need for more localised project ownership and management. The 'Partners and Localisation' A.3. module of this series noted that "COVID-19 has forced many international agencies and donors to trust local actors in ways they never have before. This trust must outlast the pandemic." However, not all agencies have taken the opportunity to decentralise key functions or process, and it is for each one to ask itself if more needs to be done in this area.

🔍 Further information

GISF (2021) Keeping up with COVID-19: essential guidance for security risk managers, Module A.3. Working with partners and the localisation agenda. Global Interagency Security Forum.

For the security manager, a key impact has been on the crisis management process. Where agencies in the past have had designated crisis rooms with equipment ready to use, the emphasis has now moved to ensuring that the teams have access to appropriate online tools and that in the event of a crisis they can be contacted wherever they are.

The potential negative impact experienced by some is that a security focal point can feel 'always on call' and this demands clearer designation of exactly who is on call and when. The impact is greater on smaller agencies, where fewer alternative crisis team members can be called on.

Business Continuity

If we are now considering that we are past the worst impacts of COVID-19, to what extent are we prepared for the next big disruptive event?

First of all, what might that event be? It could of course be another pandemic.

Scientists had been predicting that the world would soon see another pandemic, similar in scale to the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918-1920. It was assumed that it would be caused by an influenza virus, a theory that seemed well placed with repeated outbreaks of bird flu and swine flu in recent years. However, the world was caught unawares when a different type of virus, a coronavirus, became the cause of the 2019 pandemic. Whereas we already had substantial knowledge about flu and had vaccines prepared, the course of the COVID-19 illness was not understood in the early days of the pandemic, and we did not have any vaccines.

Unfortunately, we remain just as vulnerable as ever to a flu pandemic. Although one would hope that we would be better prepared than we were for COVID-19, with less international cooperation over health matters than ever, that may not be the case.

"In my professional career we're actually at the most vulnerable we've ever been," said, the medical research charity that is the UK's biggest philanthropic donor. "We've no idea what's circulating in the animal kingdom or in humans across most of the world…because geopolitics is getting in the way," - Sir Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust [4]

[4] https://www.ft.com/content/75b4f761-c341-432a-a1ac-f3b87c359b12?segmentId=114a04fe-353d-37db-f705-204c9a0a157b

There are other potential crises. At time of writing the conflict in Ukraine has the potential to deteriorate into a more global conflict and is already impacting on conflict and hunger around the world as well as energy supplies. Many of our colleagues are engaged with supporting teams during the conflict but wider risk management is not necessarily prepared for a global conflict situation – and has not been in living memory. Many have also noted concerns about Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear Defence risks, specifically emerging from the Ukraine conflict, and very few have access to up-to-date defence protocols or PPE in case of an incident in Ukraine, currently the most likely location of an incident. Associated risks, such as the rise of digital insecurity in the last two decades, have increased dramatically since the conflict in Ukraine.

Crises can also develop slowly and, if we are not vigilant, surprise us like the often-quoted 'frog in a boiling pot [5]'. There has been a gradual increase in the number of state level conflicts around the world since 1945, and as a result a security manager's portfolio is increasingly affected by conflict. [6] There are more climate related crises today than ever before [see useful resource]. The number of digital impacts on agencies are increasing [7]. Donor priorities have also changed, and this has impacted on the way funding for security functions has been allocated, and in many cases either reducing the number of staff working on security or reallocating them to offices in different countries.

Have we maintained our funding in security risk management – and have we had the time or opportunity to ensure our systems are robust and well tested for our situation today?

It is critical for each organisation to ask itself whether it is truly ready for the next crisis, to revisit their business continuity plans in the light of all the learning from COVID-19, and to ensure that they think through likely response to the key threats – whether they are conflict, digital, another pandemic or increased cost. A common complaint in the sector is that operational risk management implementers do not always have a clear pathway to the ear of the Trustees responsible for strategic risk management; without that, an organisation might effectively be blind to the risks it takes and underinvest in core security management and business continuity preparation at a time when other significant priorities, also underfunded during the pandemic, clamour for attention. And by focusing on the big risks, they might hamper the maneuverability and proactive nature some small agencies can swerve with less complex change management.

> **Are you prepared for the next disruptive event, whatever it might be?**
>
> *"Yes. If it's cyber, we're investing in that. If it's energy we're getting solar. If it's flu we're prepared for self-isolation. Bring it on." - CEO of small not-for-profit agency*

📖 Useful sources

Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre (2020) *UN: Climate-related disasters increase more than 80% over last four decades.*

In the face of these emerging challenges and contextual changes, are we still as prepared as we have been for the next additional crisis?

Inclusivity considerations

As noted earlier, too often Headquarters or Regional offices make assumptions about what our colleagues in our regional, national and local offices have been trained on, their internet bandwidth, time zone and cultural availability and even power supply. These all conspire against full participation and must be properly considered.

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[5] Allegedly a frog placed in a pan of cold water that is gradually heated does not detect a significant change at any point and would be boiled to death. The security analogy is that when a risk level increases gradually, it might not be detected until it is too late to effectively mitigate.

[6] https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/the-number-of-active-state-based-conflicts?country=~OWID_WRL

[7] https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/one-in-eight-charities-had-a-cyber-attack-last-year-data-shows.html (Oct 2022)

The unequal rollout, and unequal perception of the value of vaccinations, have combined to result in clear discrimination between staff in less vaccinated countries having less access not only to health protection, but also therefore to activities that require some form of protection, which might include international travel. Work to promote staff vaccination take up, (including the "Why I'm Vaxxed" initiative by GISF have addressed perception issues but vaccination rollout remains partial globally and a significant number of the world's population, and therefore of NGO staff, remain unvaccinated [see useful source]. Vaccination hesitancy is by no means limited to COVID-19, but the mass vaccination programmes have raised pre-existing suspicion of vaccine programmes and their purpose.

📖 Useful sources

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Our World in Data (2022) COVID-19: Where are the world's unvaccinated people?

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In theory, living through a pandemic with its associated messaging about the value of hygiene, should make us more sensitive to infection-based diseases, and in the global north it is now more common, or even acceptable, for office workers to stay at home if they have a cold. But other diseases have dropped from our awareness because attention has been focused on COVID-19 with significant implications for both local populations and staff.

🔍 Further information

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GISF (2021) Why I'm vaxxed personal stories from aid workers around the world. Global Interagency Security Forum.

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For example, Zika virus is widely seen as a problem "only" for Central and South America. However, whilst a mild disease in most people, it may have a catastrophic effect in pregnant women causing severe brain abnormalities in the unborn child.

Agencies should be aware that women in all stages of pregnancy are at risk, which has implications for female staff travelling to an at-risk area who may not yet have divulged their pregnancy to colleagues; this needs a balance between the risk appetite of an organisation and the traveller.

For the Security Risk Management perspective, the prevalence of risk associated to illness demands attention, and requires a rethink of how agencies manage and monitor the health of staff, particularly travellers for whom they have a duty of care. As noted earlier, if only a third of agencies surveyed record travellers' vaccination information and/or relevant pre-existing medical conditions before travel to higher risk countries, this appears to be an area for review. Respondents noted that the rationale for not monitoring can revolve around data sharing – not wishing to keep sensitive medical data about colleagues, so therefore putting the onus on them to manage their own medical conditions and to take informed choices on their suitability to travel. This is an area for ongoing review.

Conclusion

COVID-19 had a massive impact on our sector, and we all benefit from many of the innovations that have been adopted during the pandemic – the tools to support changed working styles are here to stay. But we are now working in a context of increased pace of change, so agencies should ask themselves the following questions:

Travel Risk Management

- Are your travel systems operating as effectively and safely as they did before the pandemic?

Changed Working Relationships

- Do you know how well every one of your offices around the world are able to interact with all our communications technology? Do you adequately support them?
- If you have transferred security management responsibilities or oversight to other offices, do the current implementers have the expertise and support they need to implement to organisational standards?

Business Continuity

- Do your risk assessments show any high impact risks with rising likelihood? Might they increase to an unmanageable level? How would you manage them if they actualised?
- Are you genuinely digitally secure?
- Is there a clear link between the operational risk manager and your Board and their risk management decisions? Are all the significant operational risks represented appropriately on the organisational risk register?

Inclusion

- Are you confident that you understand the medical profiles of your staff travellers?

"COVID? We're back to business as usual. There isn't much prevention in place, particularly in the context of the massive floods we're in the middle of."
- Director of Operations, NGO in Pakistan.