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Integrating a Psychosocial Perspective into Human Rights and Protection Practices: A Case Study of Peace Brigades International (PBI) Mexico

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Executive summary

Recently there has been increasing interest in the psychosocial aspects of the work of human rights defenders in repressive contexts. This working paper presents some of the findings of a case study on the benefits of integrating a psychosocial perspective in human rights and protection work. The authors documented and systematically analysed the work done by Peace Brigades International (PBI) Mexico over the last ten years; the case study provides an example of a viable response to the negative psychosocial impacts of human rights work in repressive contexts. It indicates that the inclusion of a psychosocial perspective can be an important mechanism to strengthen human rights organisations and their members. The paper presents the specific psychosocial approach based on liberation psychology that was used by PBI Mexico and discusses how psychosocial support for human rights practitioners can be integrated into their day-to-day work. The paper then presents some of the benefits of the integration of a psychosocial perspective and finally offers some key learnings that emerged from the research.

Implications for practice

- Within psychosocial and security work it is important to consider all levels which are impacted by repression: individual, collective (organisation, community), and social (political and social context). Further, it is necessary to explicitly include an analysis of the (repressive) political context in which psychosocial impacts occur.

- Psychosocial support should use participative methodologies and work as much as possible with the specific challenges and situations the teams or individuals encounter in their work. In order to create resilience, it is important for individuals and teams to take ownership of their own processes. Coping mechanisms should not be imposed from the outside to avoid inducing resistance and/or dependence on intervention.

- Besides external support, it is imperative to create policies, protocols and tools to foster the mental health and wellbeing of the organisation and its members. It is good practice for these policies and protocols to be elaborated in participative processes, as commitment and implementation depends on the buy-in of all team members. Psychosocial workshops with an external professional can be an important tool to identify needs and gaps (in tools, protocols and policies, and/or their implementation in practice) and to help the team to make constructive proposals in response to such needs and gaps.

- Training, sensitisation and raising awareness about the psychosocial impacts of political violence (and human rights work in such contexts) for all staff and volunteer members who should implement existing mental health and security protocols are extremely important in order to achieve the integration of a psychosocial perspective in human rights work. People who are aware of the psychosocial impacts of repression are better placed to adequately support human rights defenders and

victims of human rights violations. They are also more willing to prioritise adequate self-care and organisational work on negative psychosocial impacts, fostering the resilience of the organisation and its members.

- There is a responsibility for each individual to care for their own wellbeing, but there is also a clear responsibility of the organisation to care for its members, making available adequate resources, as well as the necessary tools and policies. Organisations should cultivate an organisational environment that prioritises self and group care alike.

- There is a direct link between security and protection work and team members' wellbeing. When teams (or individuals) are stressed or adversely affected, resulting vulnerabilities and security breaches can put individuals and the organisation at increased risk. Trainings and workshops can be used to raise awareness of the link between security and mental health among members of the organisation.

- Like the integration of a security or gender perspective, the integration of a psychosocial perspective requires continuous work, commitment and dedication from human rights organisations, and cannot be achieved in one-off workshops. Psychosocial components should be reflected in work plans and job descriptions setting out clear responsibilities. If not, this work is likely to get lost or deprioritised in the often overloaded agendas of human rights defenders and their organisations.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a rapid expansion of concepts and tools in discourses and practices concerning the protection of human rights defenders. More recently there has been increasing interest in the psychosocial aspects of protection work. In particular, with a growth in many countries and regions in the risks related to human rights work and the number of human rights defenders who are threatened, attacked or killed, there has been growing demand by local defenders for adequate responses to the psychosocial effects of human rights work in repressive contexts. Some organisations and practitioners working on protection and security have started to reflect on the need to respond to the psychosocial effects of violence and repression, and there has been more emphasis on 'holistic' or 'integrated' approaches to security and protection for human rights defenders.[1] However, to date the inclusion of a psychosocial perspective in security and protection work is not common practice among organisations that work on the protection of human rights defenders.

Despite the growing demand and interest in this field, there is a lack of clarity on the part of many human rights organisations and donors alike, about what integrating a psychosocial perspective in human rights work looks like in practice. How is a psychosocial perspective linked to security and protection practices? How does the inclusion of such an approach contribute to the work, wellbeing and resilience of both an organisation and its members? Currently many of the materials that are available focus merely on 'emotional wellbeing' but do not consider other dimensions of a psychosocial perspective. In addition, there is little clarity about how psychosocial aspects can be effectively integrated into daily work, management practices, and organisational structures and procedures.

This paper documents the integration of a psychosocial approach into the work of Peace Brigades International (PBI) Mexico, an international NGO that provides protection, support and recognition for local human rights defenders who work in areas of repression and conflict. PBI uses a model of protective accompaniment, understood as a set of several instruments and tactics to protect defenders and to maintain and expand their space to continue their human rights work. In this paper, we describe the psychosocial approach used by PBI Mexico, highlight possible methods for integrating a psychosocial perspective into human rights work, discuss the link between a psychosocial approach and security and protection, and share some of the benefits and lessons learned through this practice.

Background and research methodology

PBI Mexico provides support and protection to at-risk human rights defenders. The PBI field volunteers provide protective accompaniment[2] in the field, and also engage with relevant stakeholders such as state authorities, representatives of the international community and, of course, representatives of local civil society. Most of PBI Mexico's staff work from a co-ordination office in Mexico City providing support for the PBI

[1] For example, in his February 2016 report the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders highlighted the need to foster a 'holistic security' approach that considers psychosocial aspects (see UN Human Rights Council 2016). Other examples are the Integrated Security Manual (*http://www.integratedsecuritymanual.org*) and the series about mental health and wellbeing in human rights on the openGlobalRights website (*http://www.openglobalrights.org/mental-health-well-being-and-resilience-in-human-rights*).

[2] For more information about the protective accompaniment work, see PBI's website (*http://www.pbi-mexico.org/field-projects/pbi-mexico/what-we-do/?L=yddinqxnlm*).

volunteers and for local defenders alike. They engage, for example, in direct advocacy work with relevant stakeholders and run a security and protection programme that provides security workshops for members of human rights organisations, human rights defenders, and local communities. Due to the nature of PBI's work, its staff and volunteers experience the frontline dynamics of human rights field work. The organisation considers that its work carries certain risks, which is the reason PBI in Mexico carries out its work with strict security protocols.

PBI Mexico started to consider psychosocial support to staff and volunteers in 2004, with the formation of mental health committees. Collaboration with an external expert – a psychologist specialising in the provision of psychosocial support in contexts of political violence and repression, Clemencia Correa (co-author of this paper) – began in 2006 and continued until 2016. In 2016 external support was transitioned to another professional expert, an arrangement which still applies at the time of writing. The collaboration with the external expert led over time to the integration of a psychosocial approach in the internal and external work of the organisation.[3] This contributed to organisational development processes which have strengthened PBI and its members.

In building this case study, we documented the objectives of the psychosocial support provided to PBI Mexico (by the external expert, and by PBI to its teams), the different stages of this support, and the joint work that was developed to integrate the psychosocial approach. We reviewed PBI Mexico's policies and manuals to document the integration of the psychosocial perspective into the documents that guide its staff and volunteers. In addition, we developed and sent a questionnaire to current and former staff and volunteers of PBI Mexico in order to gather information about their perspectives on the integration of the psychosocial perspective within the organisation. The questionnaire was answered by 25 staff members and volunteers who had been involved in PBI's field work for different periods between 2004 and 2016. After reviewing the responses to the questionnaires, interviews were conducted with ten representatives of PBI Mexico. All of this information and analysis was presented to PBI Mexico's members in a workshop to validate the preliminary results and to receive additional input for a publication in Spanish (Müller and Correa 2017). This working paper presents some of these findings.

We include in this paper quotes from the questionnaires and interviews. We are certain that there is no better way to show the benefits of psychosocial work. For the purpose of this paper the quotes have been adapted for clarity (without modifying their content), to ensure they are well understood in the context of this publication. To guarantee anonymity we do not provide names, positions or any other information about the individuals who are quoted. All the quotes are from the members or former members of PBI Mexico who participated in the case study.

[3] External work in this case does not mean that PBI Mexico carries out psychosocial workshops for human rights defenders, but that it integrates a psychosocial perspective in its analysis and interventions. There are several reasons why PBI Mexico has not to date carried out psychosocial workshops for human rights defenders. One important reason is that the organisation works with very limited resources and has carefully and slowly developed the professional work (such as the advocacy and protection programme) of the co-ordination office in Mexico City that complements the work of the voluntary field teams. Demand by local defenders for security and protection workshops and advocacy support has been high and the members of PBI Mexico felt that they were well placed to provide this type of support. A psychosocial perspective was incorporated into these different areas of work.

The approach used by PBI Mexico: a psychosocial perspective based on liberation psychology

The term 'psychosocial' has various meanings depending on different professional settings. PBI Mexico uses a very specific approach that is strongly influenced by Ignacio Baró's liberation psychology and links mental health and human rights work directly to the context of political violence. Two particularly important aspects of this approach are, firstly, both the inclusion of the social context in which an individual is affected and the inclusion of a broad definition of mental health that is not limited to emotional wellbeing (see below), and secondly, the idea of supporting individuals, organisations and communities with participative processes in order to mitigate the negative consequences of violence and to help them to resume or continue their life's work and human rights work while they face violence and repression.

Ignacio Baró was very critical of psychological approaches from the United States. From his perspective, these approaches did not sufficiently respond to the realities of the people affected by poverty and sociopolitical violence in repressive contexts. He was also critical of the assumption that psychology is a neutral and universal science that provides a framework applicable to all individuals without regard for contextual factors (Martin-Baró 1983). The psychosocial approach used by PBI Mexico does not pathologise stress reactions and does not aim to diagnose 'psychological disorders' (such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)). Instead, it looks at specific political and social contexts and interprets certain symptoms (such as stress, fear, terror and panic) as normal reactions where actors in society use violence, terror and fear as a strategy to prevent collective resistance and to put a stop to demands for social justice and human rights.[4] This critical approach takes into account the relationship between individuals and society in their specific social and political contexts. It does not presume a neutral stance and politically it takes a position in its demand for social justice and respect for human rights.

The psychosocial approach is especially useful for working with human rights defenders in repressive contexts since it includes a joint exercise to analyse their context. This analysis examines the underlying political and economic structures and the existing power relations that essentially link human rights work with mental health work. It directly links the impacts on individuals and groups with the political and social reality in which they occur. Psychosocial work aims to contribute to an awareness and recognition of the effects that political violence has on individuals, groups and society. It includes work on the often conflictive dynamics of organisations that work in these contexts, a close look at emotional wellbeing (as one aspect of mental health), and also the issue of security, since work is carried out in a risky environment.

This psychosocial approach considers it important to include three levels in mental health work: individual, collective and social. This is because individuals are always in relationship with others in a group and within a social context (see Figure 1 overleaf).

[4] For further information on the specific approach and the theoretical and methodological frameworks see Correa et al (2017).

Figure 1. The three levels of the psychosocial approach

This approach also emphasises that it is important to integrate the different dimensions that affect mental health, including emotional, physical, mental, spiritual and economic wellbeing.
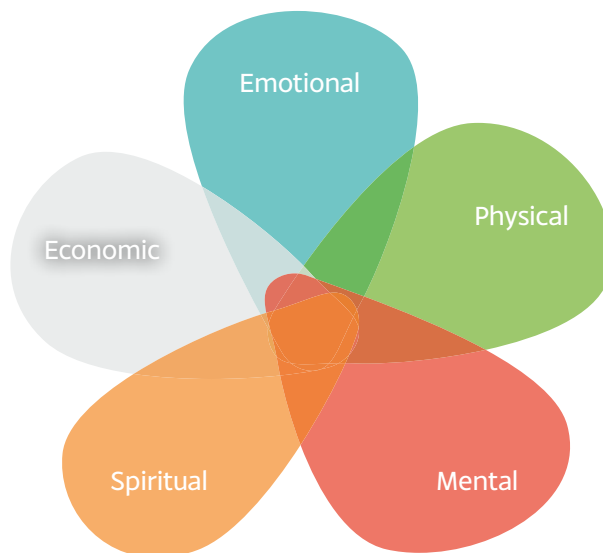
Figure 2. Dimensions of mental health

This psychosocial approach recognises that the struggle for human rights has historically played an important role in creating the minimum conditions in which human beings can live with dignity, including mental health. The demand for rights and better conditions has always confronted interest groups and people in power who enjoy privileges based on inequality. In many contexts within the struggle for human rights, the state has opted (and continues to opt) to defend the interests of certain sectors of (political and economic) power and to oppress human rights defenders. As a result, human rights work often involves risks that in turn can affect defenders and impact their health. In addition, the struggle for rights usually occurs in an asymmetric relationship between those with greater political and economic power and the defenders who often have fewer resources and less power. This psychosocial

approach directly links, on the one hand, the fight for human rights to achieve better conditions and an environment that facilitates a good state of mental health, and, on the other hand, the impact that human rights work has on the mental health of a person or a group due to the risks involved in doing such work in a repressive context.

Taking this into account, this approach to psychosocial support is not a process of containment or crisis intervention in which an external expert comes in to resolve a specific situation (such as high level of stress, trauma, burnout or conflict). Instead, it involves a joint process of facilitating a good understanding of the dynamics within the organisation, as well as the connection to the external context and underlying psychosocial dynamics, in order to collectively develop solutions. Obviously if the need arises, the external expert can work with individuals to follow up on issues that are not appropriate to work on in a collective process. However, the primary focus of the approach is on the collective rather than the individual – a key difference from many other approaches that tend to focus on individual emotional wellbeing or, for example, PTSD.

In this case study, the psychosocial support received by PBI Mexico contributed to the strengthening of the organisation and its members by providing support to the individual members, the internal dynamics of the teams, and the general structure of the organisation. The work has mainly been carried out through collective processes in joint workshops with members of PBI field teams and/or offices. This brought security and (emotional) stability to the staff and volunteers of PBI Mexico, enhancing their capacity to carry out their work with the least possible negative impact from the violent context and the specific dynamics of working with victims of grave human rights violations. It also brought increased clarity of roles, responsibilities, protocols and expectations, and positively impacted many other relevant aspects of the day-to-day work.

The effects of integrating a psychosocial approach

Before we describe how the psychosocial approach was integrated into PBI Mexico's work we present some of the benefits and effects of the integration of psychosocial support by means of concrete examples and quotes. We hope that this will help to ensure clearer understanding of the following explanation of various tools and protocols.

Strengthening the development of security strategies and compliance with security protocols

> When the mental health of the teams is good they are always better able to comply with security protocols and they do a better analysis. This not only influences PBI but also the work we do for the people we accompany.

> I believe that psychosocial support is a fundamental part of the security of individuals and organisations. This type of support gives back the humanity that you lose when you are surrounded by violence daily.

The psychosocial workshops have helped to strengthen security strategies, since staff and volunteers look at the issue of security from different angles. In addition to reviewing security rules, they look at how different areas of work are linked to security and protection, and how the organisation of work affects security (for PBI as well as the organisations it accompanies).

> " I also highlight this link between psychosocial support and protection, because when we felt supported by PBI Mexico in terms of mental health, it was easier for us to carry out our work to protect at-risk defenders.

> " If we think of security and protection as everything we do to maintain the space for our work and the space for the organisations we accompany, then not having mental health or having a distorted perception of risk can distort security or protection measures. If we do not consider the context when it comes to creating measures and security strategies, it will be difficult to propose an accompaniment that fits the real needs of the defenders. The psychosocial perspective is a fundamental component of integrated security since it gives a lot of attention to the defenders in their context and their specific situation.

As explained below, within the psychosocial work PBI collectively carries out context analysis. This allows team members to see how the context has an impact on the wellbeing of individuals and the group. Analysis of the context provides the foundation for any security plan. A collective analysis and collective awareness are highly important for the management of security and protection strategies. Without a common vision regarding the context and the risks, it is very difficult to reach agreement on appropriate measures and strategies for security and protection.

> " Psychosocial support directly addressed the reasons why there are protocols and safety rules for the team and was able to effectively explain them to team members who were sceptical of the need. The team was able to achieve a common vision, which facilitated living and working together.

It is difficult to have appropriate security strategies without a recognition of the effects of the security situation, and without the necessary tools to face this situation. Mental health workshops identify gaps in protocols, strategies, and implementation that have hindered an optimal response. The importance of these spaces for good security management cannot be over-emphasised.

Managing security is not easy; it is even more difficult to visualise how the effects of internal or psychoemotional dynamics can undermine security and protection. Normally there is a tendency to dissociate the psychosocial field from that of security, since the latter can be associated mainly with the development of security measures and not with the conditions that are required for their implementation. But rules and security measures are of little use if there is not a complete implementation of these measures by everyone. Approaching security from a psychosocial perspective can contribute to a fuller implementation of the protocols which have been established. It creates an awareness of how each member of an organisation can contribute to vulnerabilities or capacities in relation to security. For example, a person

who is not well (emotionally) may pay less attention to complying with norms or may have a lower capacity to react in the event of an emergency; this may contribute to vulnerabilities of the group or decrease its capacity for protection. Non-compliance with safety regulations or the burnout of one team member can lead to more vulnerabilities and risks which affect the whole organisation. As such, key issues addressed in the workshops include individual and group responsibilities, as well as the question of how the behaviour of individuals affects the collective (and vice versa). This is highly relevant because there are often different interpretations about the level of risk or the correct application of security rules.

> When you're not doing well, you do not pay so much attention to your surroundings, to the rules. You do not want to see the danger, [so] you do not understand a fundamental part of what PBI tries to protect.

Reducing tension, resolving conflicts, managing fear

Different interpretations of risk and its effects on organisations and groups working in a context of political violence are an important consideration relevant for many organisations, not only PBI. Differing interpretations occur often and can be a source of tension and conflict in groups, affecting collaboration, workflow, timing, and the capacity to respond, which can have an impact on security and protection. Through collective work that facilitates dialogue, a common vision can be created with regard to these elements, reducing tensions and conflicts.

When a team is stressed or not functioning cohesively this can hinder their ability to react and to construct strategies for themselves or for the people they accompany. When it is difficult to share information and analysis, this can affect the application of security standards and protocols for reacting. At the same time, emergency situations or insecurity can cause conflict, stress and fatigue, but since the workshops seek to address these factors this methodology allows for better overall management.

> In order to ensure an appropriate reaction to emergency situations, [during workshops] we worked to resolve conflicts by focusing on stress management and the consequences of sociopolitical violence.

The workshops and other spaces created to monitor mental health are important in enabling team members to express needs and agree on how to follow up on issues which arise. For example, in a workshop following a serious security incident to which each team member reacted differently, it was possible to work through the feelings of guilt and frustration and identify what the team members needed from the organisation to close the case and the ongoing alert.

Often conflicts and tensions that occur in the teams are linked to the external context and to the effects of stress and violence. Through the workshops it is possible for the members to see that and start working on how to resolve these tensions.

> **"** At the team level empathy was generated among team members, helping them to understand that each person lives and expresses fears in different ways. It also helped new members to adapt by explaining the reasons for the security protocols and restrictions. This prevented a major conflict that was developing, and which the rest of the team had had difficulty resolving.

People working in contexts of political violence are exposed to various impacts from the context itself, from the stress of the work, or from what has been called secondary trauma. This creates various sensations and emotions (guilt, frustration, powerlessness) affecting both their personal wellbeing and the dynamics of the team. Many of these are normal reactions linked to the context and type of work, and people may not be aware of it. One of the goals of the workshops is for members to recognise what happens to them, understand why it affects them, and have tools to manage those emotions in a constructive and healthy way.

Teams working in contexts of violence are usually under constant pressure. The workshops allow teams to look at difficult processes and situations (such as emergencies) retrospectively, to learn from them and even create policies that become norms or references for other teams. This improves their ability to handle difficult situations and strengthens the structure of the organisation and protocols. In PBI Mexico many advances were made in psychosocial and security work after an emergency activation. That is, most security, emergency response and early warning system protocols were developed or refined following specific events. In many cases the impetus to create or improve protocols resulted from a mental health workshop. These were moments of awareness and realisation regarding what works and how, and where improvement was needed.

Reflection on not only emergency situations, but also the challenges of daily work, was included in the workshops in such a way that it allowed for making proposals to improve procedures and internal protocols. Often the inherent dynamics of the day-to-day work of an NGO operating in a context of political violence, and the constant existence of new challenges, lead to continuous work that makes it difficult to stop and collectively reflect on specific events and activities of the recent past. The workshops allow for this to happen.

An important learning is the differentiation between fear and risk, both for the teams and for the defenders whom PBI Mexico accompanies. Being able to see the relationship between the two has helped people to cope with fear as well as manage risk. Fear is an emotion that one feels in the face of various situations such as danger. However risk is a situation that is created by aggression and/or vulnerability – one can feel fear without there being a risk. The goal is to focus on both issues and promote more awareness and knowledge of what is needed to address both risk and fear. "All security rules influence mental health in order to also control elements like fear." In this sense, the manual and security rules also help to manage fears.

Developing intercultural awareness and the capacity to listen

> ...the psychosocial support gives tools to the volunteers in PBI Mexico to broaden their view of the reality in which defenders live. Without a doubt this has an impact on the relationship that is created and on the understanding of the reality in which they live.

An important aspect of PBI's work that has been addressed in the workshops is cultural sensitivity. Volunteers in the field are foreigners in Mexico who are working with different populations including indigenous communities with different cultures and world views. This situation generates various dilemmas, which are important to look out for. One example is how to behave in rural communities.

It can be challenging to establish relationships when there are differences – between cultures, roles, and socioeconomic conditions – especially in violent contexts. Psychosocial support facilitates an understanding of the types of relationships that are generated with the accompanied human rights defenders. It allows the volunteers to understand the roles and expectations of each party, and to take actions that prevent further harm to defenders who have already suffered attacks.

> Most people who are accompanied by PBI are victims of serious violations of human rights. Having tools to prevent re-victimisation and to interview them in a way that does not cause more harm is important. This definitely allows for a more positive way of providing accompaniment.

In this work it is important to establish trusting relationships while maintaining a professional role. This empowers people to better manage situations of frustration and to be able to communicate better with the accompanied organisations. It also strengthens the ability of the volunteers to listen to the stories of the people who receive accompaniment. This is very important for their work. "For the defenders we accompanied, we were a moral support."

In many cases these are people who have had very difficult experiences and/or trauma. It is not easy to listen to their stories and also manage the professional work such as documentation of information. Psychosocial work strengthens that capacity. A good emotional state and good mental health allow people to take in information in a different way than if they are tired and burnt out. With the degree of exhaustion and fatigue, the risk of suffering from secondary trauma increases; if a person is already affected it is more difficult to listen and take testimonies about serious human rights violations.

In fact, many of the people who contributed to this report agreed that listening to testimonies is one of the hardest things to do during fieldwork.

> Something that has personally helped me a lot and that I had requested during workshops was to provide us with advice on how to relate to families of the disappeared. During my year, the hardest moments for me emotionally were listening to testimonies of mothers of disappeared people. At times, that pain scared me and I could not bring myself to talk to some families.

> Thanks to the workshops I have been able to better process this pain and talk more with the relatives, to share more. I believe that it has been positive for people in these groups to see that PBI volunteers are by their side supporting them with international observation and also through active listening.

The emotional state of a person greatly influences their ability to listen and provide accompaniment. If team members can trust their team and know they can share something later in a safe space, it makes it easier to listen to a testimony in a professional manner and share the emotional effects later.

> " We worked on how to handle emotions in meetings with defenders about complicated issues. It helped to maintain a balance between being empathetic, and maintaining the distance needed to be able to talk about relevant issues such as their risk situation and vulnerabilities.

The practices and protocols described below, support a good state of mental health for the team members. Additionally, within the workshops concrete sources of stress can be identified and coping mechanisms elaborated.

Building resilience, addressing helplessness and guilt

We understand resilience as the capacity of human beings to overcome periods of emotional pain and adverse situations, including the use of personal and collective coping mechanisms. When we talk about resilience we refer not only to the psychoemotional and personal realms but also to the political and collective realm. The psychosocial approach has contributed to the development of coping strategies and to the strengthening of PBI Mexico. The work is not only about dealing with traumatic events, attending to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, or being able to 'resist' the impacts of violence (such as feelings of helplessness, direct contact with stories of very severe human rights violations such as torture and forced disappearance). Rather, the goal is to empower team members and the organisation so that they can be proactive, creative and work better.

> " I insist that the quality of work greatly influences the mental health of the project in general. If we are good holistically (that is, when members are well and communication and coordination is based on relationships of mutual trust) we do better work, we produce better analysis.

One of the cross-cutting themes of the psychosocial approach is to strengthen different coping mechanisms for managing the personal and collective impacts of the work, as well as possible vulnerabilities. During the mental health workshops, specific psychoemotional, cognitive and pragmatic tools are used. They allow participants to reduce vulnerabilities and to solve difficulties that arise in this type of work. At the same time the workshops foster sociopolitical understanding.

Given the confusion that can be created due to the complexity of the context and the violence experienced, a fundamental aspect of the workshops is to facilitate more clarity about the context and what happens to the accompanied organisations. This allows for more clarity about what

is realistic to achieve and what is outside the sphere of influence, so that teams can develop realistic plans and avoid frustration and feelings of helplessness. Respondents reported a feeling of relief after working on this in the workshops.

When accompanying at-risk human rights defenders, people tend to experience some guilt if something goes wrong or if they think that they are not doing enough to counter the difficult situation in the repressive context. If these feelings are not addressed they may weaken the organisation, its members, and their capacity to cope and manage the situation. Feelings of guilt can also weaken the implementation of agreed security protocols. For example, individuals may get the impression that these protocols hinder their capacity to fully support the human rights defenders they are accompanying. The psychosocial workshops allow team members to work through these issues and to assess what can be done which is within their sphere of influence and according to existing capacities and conditions. This enables them to avoid feeling responsible for what is outside the scope of their responsibility. "The effect of the workshops was especially obvious when the context became difficult."

Developing a collective viewpoint

Through a collective process that fosters awareness and knowledge about what happens to the group, to the defenders, and in society, it is easier to generate a common vision of how to move forward.

> The psychosocial perspective helped me to position myself in Mexico, to know the context and to know my role, to have the tools to better accompany the defenders, to have tools not to break down during the most difficult periods.

The joint development of proposals by the team members to respond to identified needs and demands (linked to mental health and security alike) enhanced resilience in the teams. According to experts and clinical studies, active coping and mitigation strategies are an important factor protecting people from negative post-traumatic stress reactions. Another important protective factor that increases resilience is the existence of social support networks (Vázquez and Pérez-Sales 2003). Through the psychosocial work the teams function as social support networks for individual team members.

In situations of high pressure, people can lose a sense of the scale of impacts. The workshops were safe spaces that enabled them to identify and recognise these collectively and at the same time consider effective coping strategies; they allowed individuals to make better use of the wider group as a source of support. Group support improves development and the use of positive coping mechanisms.

> I remember a period when the context was very bad. A lot of violence, cases of accompanied human rights defenders who were in very complicated situations. Every day in the newspapers we saw the photos of dismembered bodies left in public places. It was in a mental health workshop that we realised that everyone was having nightmares, but none of us had shared that with the rest of the team. In the workshop we noticed that

all team members were affected. Part of our diagnosis was that everyone worked until very late and didn't disconnect at the end of the day. We worked on this in the workshop and if I remember correctly the nightmares went away.

The workshops also help people to see the link between psychoemotional dynamics and security. This provides a different perspective on vulnerabilities and capacities. An organisation that knows how to manage difficult internal dynamics and that is able to reflect on vulnerabilities becomes more resilient and better able to work in a difficult security context.

> Without a doubt, receiving good psychosocial support and having some mental health tools supports us fundamentally so that we are more rested and calm in response to emergencies or other delicate work.

Integrating a psychosocial perspective into the work of PBI Mexico

In the following sections we explain how in practice the psychosocial approach has been integrated into daily work and institutionalised within PBI Mexico. We focus on three key processes that fostered the integration: a) support by an external expert; b) the development and implementation of mental health policies, protocols and tools; and c) the inclusion of the psychosocial approach in the training of all the members of the organisation.

a) Externally facilitated spaces for reflection, debate and the development of individual and collective responses

In order to respond to the psychosocial impacts of human rights work in Mexico, for several years PBI worked with an external expert. The expert was initially contracted to respond to certain conflicts, burnout and stress in a specific field team, however, this initial contact eventually led to the establishment of broader support for the organisation as a whole.

Through her work, it became clear that what happened to the affected team was not simply due to individual and interpersonal dynamics, but was also an effect of working in the context of sociopolitical violence. As a result, PBI Mexico started to work on the integration of a psychosocial approach into internal organisational processes. Workshops with the external expert were offered not only to the field teams composed of volunteers but also to the co-ordination office in Mexico City. Eventually, workshops included all entities of PBI Mexico where necessary. Through regular workshops (and in some cases also through individual sessions) a wide range of topics were covered (see overleaf).

Table 1. Topics and aspects covered by the external expert in workshops

Areas affected	Most common impacts	Areas of work
■ context of sociopolitical violence ■ the development of the project ■ tasks and responsibilities ■ accompaniment of at-risk defenders ■ internal dynamics of the teams ■ personal conditions ■ intercultural awareness within the team and with accompanied defenders	■ frustration, helplessness, and confusion ■ fear and guilt ■ conflict in the teams and the effects on relationships ■ loss ■ stress from work	■ strengthen the project ■ strengthen the knowledge of the psychosocial impact of sociopolitical violence ■ strengthen the vision for the future and the strategic view of the work (often through joint analysis of the context) ■ psychoemotional implications for personal and work life ■ work dynamics; prioritisation of tasks, roles, responsibilities ■ interpersonal relationships ■ mechanisms to resolve conflict and communication ■ mechanisms to address secondary trauma ■ strengthening security measures and the sense of risk ■ intercultural processes

In order to create resilience, it is important for individuals and groups to take ownership of their own processes; coping mechanisms should not be imposed from the outside to avoid inducing resistance. Therefore, the methodology used had to cover the dimensions identified in the table above and to link them to the actual situations in the teams. For example, many conflicts within the teams were linked to stress and exhaustion. When people are in conflict and/or exhausted they are less likely to comply with security measures; this may increase the vulnerability of the organisation and its members. Fear, feelings of helplessness and frustration (all 'normal' in a context of political violence) affect people's capacity to do their job effectively.

One of the most important features of the psychosocial method used was that it is dynamic and flexible, and can be adjusted according to the context, the structure of the organisation, and the needs of groups. In the case of PBI Mexico, the external expert started by evaluating the organisation's needs jointly with its members, rather than working from a manual or set of established tools. The tools were built together according to the structure and capabilities of PBI.

The methodology focused on analysing the actual practices and experiences of PBI Mexico and its members in order to collectively develop knowledge and possible solutions for the problems identified. Spaces for reflection and

debate were created so that the teams could determine the concrete actions needed to solve problems that they identified in their work. This took place in workshops that were not specifically meant to be therapeutic sessions, even though a therapeutic space was often generated.

The focus of the workshops and the work was to create strategies and proposals to improve coping mechanisms. In addition, the workshops focused on facilitating the resolution of past/present conflicts and the prevention of future conflicts and problems. Thus, in these mental health workshops the team members themselves were able to identify gaps and vulnerabilities or difficulties so that, with the support of the expert, proposals could be made regarding specific situations. Since the response was jointly developed, the work strengthened the resilience of the teams and enabled them to face the impacts of their human rights work in a violent context. The methodology helped to reframe negative experiences in order to give them meaning and enable constructive coping.

b) The development and implementation of mental health policies, protocols and tools

PBI Mexico collectively developed a wide range of mental health policies, protocols and tools. The issue of mental health and a psychosocial approach is implicitly and explicitly included in PBI Mexico's manuals and protocols.

For example, in its *Facilitator's Guide for the Programme on Security and Protection for Human Rights Defenders*, the psychosocial and gender perspective is explicitly – and in a cross-cutting manner – integrated into all sections and chapters (PBI Mexico 2014). When explaining different areas of work, the manual details inherent psychosocial implications and how to address them.

We observed that some members of the field teams did not explicitly identify PBI's protocols and processes as including 'mental health' interventions because they were already so internalised within daily practices. For example, the security measures put in place include steps for handling emotions such as fear and terror. Many people did not correlate them with mental health, however, they are in fact just that. Many of these security measures were elaborated collectively during workshops in response to identified vulnerabilities that affect the wellbeing of PBI's members. The psychosocial approach makes people aware of these connections and promotes a broader viewpoint.

Table 2 (overleaf) describes some of the practices and protocols used by PBI Mexico.

Table 2. Practices and protocols used by PBI Mexico

Practice | Mental health workshops facilitated by external expert

Mandatory collective spaces (with full team participating)

Purpose and process

Deal with the impacts of violence and problems that members of the organisation face in their daily work.

Deal with issues agreed upon between the team and the expert.

Teams are given support in developing their coping mechanisms (on the individual level as well as for the group).

A space for developing psychosocial work within the organisation.

In PBI Mexico the workshops take place every six weeks or every two months.

Additional information

Mental health committee on each team is responsible for promoting the importance of the workshop and organizing the time for it.

Team Coordinator and mental health committee are responsible for ensuring the workshops are scheduled at regular intervals and for following up on what is agreed at them.

Practice | Self-organised workshops

Spaces organised and managed by teams to work on any issues related to mental health.

Purpose and process

Content should respond to specific needs identified by team.

Teams use existing tools, knowledge, capacities and previous experiences of each team member in order to create relevant topics that do not require facilitation from an external person.

Self-organised workshops empower the teams and allow them to take responsibility.

Format and frequency depend on each team and their specific situation.

In PBI Mexico, these workshops have covered different topics such as non-violent communication, meditation and yoga, mindfulness, prioritising workload, managing conflicts, etc.

Additional information

In PBI Mexico, people who go into the field bring to the work a wide range of capacities and training. In self-organised workshops they can share knowledge with each other.

These workshops normally strengthen cohesion.

Practice | Check-ins

Time set aside at the beginning of certain meetings (in person or virtual). Each person can comment on how they are doing and on aspects that are influencing their wellbeing; they can express their needs, concerns etc whether work-related or personal.

Purpose and process

After one workshop it became clear that the routine and workload were making it difficult to know how people on the team were actually doing (and thus their state of mind, wellbeing, possible reasons for different ways of reacting).

Excessive workloads and the dynamics of human rights work can lead to a situation in which the lack of exchange on these aspects can result in misunderstandings, friction and conflict.

Proper use of check-ins can be a useful tool for preventing conflict and burnout, and to promote mutual support.

Additional information

There should be institutional support for this practice. It is useful to include this tool in other spaces such as trainings and strategic meetings.

Given the amount of work, and in many cases the lack of practice in including aspects of wellbeing in professional meetings, there have been times when this tool has been used less than others.

Commitment and a minimum level of trust among team members is required in order to make good use of this tool.

At times when this tool is more useful for teams (in situations of high stress and emotional load), it is more difficult for them to make use of it. Accordingly it is important that mental health committees and the Team Coordinator provide additional attention at this time.

Practice | Mental health minimums

Individual commitments by all team members to practise self-care and maintain a good state of mental health during the year in the field. These minimum commitments are different for each team member and are shared with the other members of the team.

Purpose and process

Responds to the issue of burnout and helps with conflicts about different perspectives on work management and self-care.

Helpful to work on this in a group space (workshop or meeting) in order to reach a basic common vision within the team about management of self-care and prevention of burnout.

Helps team members to be clear about their needs in order to maintain a good state of mental health. Also helps the others on the team to comply with these minimums.

In or before a workshop each team member reflects on the minimum things they need to stay in a good state of mental health while working for PBI, and what actions they can take to meet those minimums.

From this reflection, each person must identify at least three things that they will commit to doing for their self-care (eg doing sport at least once a week, writing daily, going to dance class etc).

These commitments are shared in a workshop with the other team members.

Additional information

At PBI Mexico each team member is responsible for sharing and monitoring their own needs. Teams as a whole can follow up on their implementation.

If the tool is integrated into practices, it creates a situation where people take time to reflect on self-care and to become aware of what they need in order to maintain a good state of mind.

Practices | Protocols to manage and resolve conflicts

Specific protocols to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts that come up in PBI Mexico

Purpose and process

Working in a context of sociopolitical violence and on a multicultural team that lives and works together can lead to conflicts and tensions; protocols for handling and resolving these are very important.

PBI's manuals and protocols include:

- communication (non-violent);
- handling different types of conflicts that may arise within teams or between teams and other entities.

Communication and conflict resolution is part of the training that everyone receives before going to the field.

The protocols clearly present key aspects for both prevention and management of conflict.

The protocols specify different communication channels, responsibilities of the different entities (or committees or individuals) and levels of decision making.

The steps for conflict resolution are explained in the event that the two people (or entities) involved fail to reach agreement between themselves.

Additional information

Creation or modification of the protocols must be a collective process.

Teams need to familiarize themselves with and make use of the tools in place so that the protocols will work.

The psychosocial approach helps to raise awareness among team members that many tensions and conflicts are part of the impact of the repressive context.

Conflicts are not negative but instead are situations that require collective, positive coping strategies.

Practices | Rotation of certain tasks

Based on considering the mental health of the team members.

Purpose and process

In order to prevent burnout, certain tasks (i.e. those that might be burdensome or monotonous) should not always be the responsibility of the same people.

One example is being on call. This person is responsible for checking the phone and email in order to respond to emergency situations. This task is distributed fairly among the team members.

Care is taken to avoid exposing the same people to the most difficult testimonies such as the testimony of victims of torture and forced disappearance.

Care is also taken to ensure that the same people are not always doing the most difficult accompaniments, such as accompanying people at high risk and/or those who have been greatly affected by trauma, or accompaniments that require long trips in difficult conditions.

Additional information

It is the responsibility of the teams to ensure proper rotation through distribution of tasks and participation in committees.

In PBI Mexico, the Team Coordinator is responsible for monitoring this.

Workshops with the external expert can help to detect burnout. As a result specific tasks that contribute to burnout might need to be rotated.

Practice | Individual online distance support programme with therapists

An external service to support members of PBI so they can prevent and/or cope with situations or periods of stress and/or emotional pressure.

Purpose and process

This tool was created to deal with issues related to the effects of the work with PBI, such as burnout and secondary trauma.

PBI has a working agreement with the European Gestalt Therapy Association (EAGT, http://www.eagt.org), which brings together individual therapists, training institutes and national associations from more than 20 European countries.

As part of the agreement, PBI members can request individual counselling at any time throughout their service with PBI (before, during and after the volunteer year, and also for paid staff). This is offered in their native language if desired.

Members of PBI teams and PBI offices can contact the network of therapists who will then facilitate contact with a therapist who is willing to provide support via video calls with the person in need.

PBI Mexico provides information about the programme and its benefits at different stages of the training.

Additional information

It is the individual's responsibility to make use of EAGT psychologists, although the Team Coordinator and General Coordinator give occasional reminders. It is especially useful for dealing with particularly difficult situations that staff or volunteers face.

In questionnaires and interviews several people stressed the importance of this tool.

The search for similar agreements for free services could also be of interest to other human rights organisations working with people affected by human rights violations and/or in areas of violence.

There are other policies and protocols related to mental health, such as human resources policies that establish holidays and provide financial support to leave the region or the country in order to disconnect and recharge. In the development of these policies, PBI Mexico takes into account the mental health of members in the specific contexts in which they work. For example, PBI Mexico grants greater financial support to members of a team who are located in a very violent and insecure area in order to help them leave the area during the holidays so that they can disconnect from this violent context.

Policies, protocols and tools can only function when they are incorporated into the structures and practices of the organisation. They cannot simply be put into manuals and guidelines; they need regular review and follow-up. For this reason, PBI Mexico has included the monitoring of policies and protocols in the job descriptions of certain people (and committees). As a result, mental health and psychosocial aspects are given high importance in PBI Mexico since they are a defined aspect of the work. In practice, each team has a mental health committee which is in charge of checking on the wellbeing of the team and ensuring the application of the tools which are in place. They organise the workshops and are the point of contact regarding mental health issues for the Team Coordinator and the external expert.

The Team Coordinator's job description includes monitoring the application of existing mental health tools and protocols, as well as supporting the teams

and each member of the team. The Team Coordinator carries out monitoring through phone calls focused on mental health. In these calls the team and the Team Coordinator discuss the application of existing tools. There are also calls with individual team members to follow up on self-assessments.

c) Inclusion of the psychosocial approach in training for new team members

In order to guarantee the permanent inclusion of the psychosocial approach in PBI's work, it is important to include this topic in the different training and orientation cycles of all staff and volunteers. PBI Mexico raises awareness internally and facilitates knowledge about the psychosocial impact of sociopolitical violence at different levels (individual, group and social). It also provides different ways to cope with those impacts. The aim is that PBI's teams have a broader perspective and a good understanding of the link between human rights and mental health, the psychosocial approach and protection and security. The goal of this training is not only to reinforce self-care and the importance of working collectively, but also to strengthen everyone's ability to adequately accompany human rights defenders working in very difficult and adverse contexts. From a do-no-harm perspective, this work contributes directly to preventing the possible re-victimisation of people accompanied by members of PBI Mexico.

Mental health is included in the training of field volunteers; it is important that all volunteers are clear about the mechanisms and tools at their disposal. In practice, there are specific sessions in the trainings team members receive – including pre-field training – on the impacts of sociopolitical violence, on fear and stress, on conflict management and on other issues relating to the psychosocial approach.

Key lessons learned

Knowledge and consciousness of the psychosocial impacts of violence and effective coping mechanisms influence the ways that members of an organisation integrate the psychosocial approach into their human rights practice. It is of utmost importance that all members of an organisation are trained and made aware of these aspects continually, and for these to be given priority and be embedded in organisational structures, policies and processes. It is not enough to mention mental health issues in a one-off training or a periodic workshop. A psychosocial approach must be integrated into different stages of staff orientation and training, and teams need tools and protocols that help them to create an ongoing space for reflection and the implementation of agreed policies. The monitoring of mental health must be included in the job description of some staff, which means that they also need to have a minimum level of training in order to provide this type of monitoring.

It is useful to have close collaboration between different people who are responsible (internally and externally) for monitoring mental health in order to ensure greater coherence and enable more effective interventions. This helps

with the monitoring of issues identified and enables teams to address them more comprehensively.

It is extremely important to have confidentiality agreements between the teams and responsible staff, as well as between the external expert and the teams. These processes are based on trust and since the expert works with the various teams within the project, it is very important to have these agreements in place so that collaboration at different levels can function without friction or fear of misuse of information disclosed in the workshops. It is a good idea to create the confidentiality agreements collectively, ensuring transparency and clarity through explicit communication.

If psychosocial work is not given the same priority as other aspects of work, such as security, there is a great risk of the inconsistent application of policies and tools. This weakens the impact of the work and instead of working on crisis prevention and strengthening the resilience of individuals and the organisation, the focus may shift to mitigating damage.

It is important to have the commitment of staff and volunteers to accept and implement the protocols, policies and tools established by all members. When individuals do not comply this affects the teams and organisation as a whole. In the research there were several examples of how the lack of self-care and the lack of application of established tools by individuals affected the work of entire teams. It is important to prioritise activities that have to do with mental health – as well as with strengthening internal processes – as much as external work. This ensures that the importance of this work is not open to debate, since there is institutional support for it and a collective experience of its benefits.

The timing of formal psychosocial support spaces such as workshops, in addition to daily practices, greatly influences their utility and impact. In general, it is something that an organisation must evaluate according to their context and specific needs. Mental health workshops should not be too frequent or infrequent. For PBI Mexico, the workshops were held every two months. Several respondents mentioned that infrequent workshops (fewer than six a year) affected the ability of staff and volunteers to address and follow up on key issues. Workshops that are held too frequently do not give teams enough time to work internally and implement decisions made at the workshops.

We believe that it is important to offer not only group support, but also individual support if necessary. Individual sessions allow the external expert to work with affected team members individually on issues that are not appropriate to work on in a group. The expert has the possibility to follow up on important individual stress issues that a team member does not want to or cannot work on in a group setting. To ensure adequate support and effective application of tools, it is important to promote clarity about responsibilities: the individual is responsible for their self-care, but there still must be institutional policies that allow, support and promote self-care, and connect it to the other dimensions of the work.

Beyond self-care, the importance of mutual support within the team was emphasised frequently by respondents in the survey and interviews. Therefore,

the organisation must do everything possible to strengthen team cohesion. Last but not least, it is important to create a culture of respect and recognition in teams and in the organisation as a whole. Human rights work can be gratifying and at the same time arduous work, accompanied by frustrations and feelings of helplessness. Recognising the work, achievements and contributions of each member contributes to the mental health of staff and volunteers and strengthens the cohesion of the teams.

Conclusion

To integrate a psychosocial approach in an organisation requires from its members efforts which are in some ways similar to those required in integrating a gender or security perspective. Psychosocial impacts are cross-cutting, and should be considered in all areas of an organisation's work. A psychosocial approach to human rights work focuses not only on the support of individuals and organisations in developing their practice, but also draws attention to the (emotional) wellbeing of staff and volunteers, and the emotional and political dimensions of human rights work in repressive contexts. It addresses the effects of political violence and repression on mental health and organisational dynamics, while also boosting self-care and coping strategies. It, therefore, should consider different layers of intervention (individual, organisational/community, sociopolitical context) and acknowledge reciprocal effects and interconnections.

The inclusion of a psychosocial approach in a repressive context is largely linked to security and protection and vice versa. Even when good protection strategies and strict security protocols are in place, an individual or organisation cannot work effectively if they suffer from burnout and do not consider the psychosocial impact of the repression and political violence that they face. Normal reactions to burnout and political violence (such as increased irritability, exhaustion, depression etc) increase the likelihood of conflicts, which in turn impact the organisation's work, relationships within the organisation and those between the organisation and communities. By using a psychosocial approach, members of organisations can address relevant issues and identify the connections and correlations between different issues in order to work on activation, reaction and prevention strategies.[5]

In the case of PBI Mexico, a multi-year process was needed in order to achieve the full integration of a psychosocial approach; the results of the project indicate that a continuous effort is required to maintain what has been achieved. As in other areas of work such as security, constant attention is required. There are no quick fixes: it requires time, resources and continuity. This effort is rewarded by the benefits described above and helps the organisation continue its work in adverse contexts.

Such work is not the application of one tool but rather the combination and integration of various tools and methods that lead to the benefits described above. In the case of PBI Mexico, the role of the external expert who led regular workshops has been extremely important. Providing external support to professional teams on a regular basis is considered good practice in some

[5] Activation and reaction strategies refer to both protocols and systems used by PBI to identify increasing risks as an early warning system based on security monitoring and ongoing context analysis, and to streamlined or standardized protocols for reacting to emergencies (including psychosocial aspects). Such protocols are not only preventive but also reactive when necessary; they aim to manage conflict, mitigate impact and instruct team members on how to react or what steps to take in response to security incidents. The Facilitators' Guide (PBI Mexico, 2014) explains some of these protocols and strategies. Prevention strategies include those referred to in Table 2 (pp.21–24).

countries and professions. For example, in Germany, professionals (such as psychologists, social workers and so on) who work with certain groups (such as victims of violence or people with terminal illness) receive 'supervision' to address the challenges they encounter in their daily work. For NGOs, neither the concept of supervision nor psychosocial support by an outside expert is common. This case study indicates that it can bring great benefits for organisations working in very adverse contexts or for groups affected by serious human rights violations. In order to achieve greater use of these tools, a cultural shift and strong effort to raise awareness are still required. Nowadays it is a common practice of many organisations (both local and international) for workers to go to their limits and risk burnout in order to support others, without considering their own wellbeing.

We recommend that other organisations working in a context of sociopolitical violence engage external support. We also recommend that funders of human rights organisations include funding for continuous psychosocial support as standard (and not simply for one-off interventions). This funding should be a complement to the external work that is funded. From our point of view, in the current climate, funding for human rights work in contexts of violence and repression should be linked to additional funding for tools that allow organisations to cope with the impacts of their work in a healthy and sustainable way.

We are convinced that the processes of security and protection, and even more of resilience, must be rooted within the specific context where the people and organisation operates. As such, it is important to understand the underlying sociopolitical violence – the interests and strategies of the perpetrators – and the psychosocial impacts this generates at all levels. With this understanding we can strengthen coping mechanisms from a comprehensive perspective that seeks to include all the dimensions that affect an organisation's work. This allows people to develop different options and alternatives to respond in a strategic manner to the challenges identified in their specific context.

With this in mind, we consider that actions focused on emotional wellbeing are useful and important, but insufficient if implemented in isolation and unrelated to other actions aimed at strengthening organisations and their members. As mentioned above, emotional wellbeing is a part of mental health that is closely linked to (and dependent on) other aspects of mental health. In a context of sociopolitical violence, it is unlikely that a significant and sustainable improvement in the emotional wellbeing of the people affected can be achieved without also considering the aspects and dimensions mentioned above. We see a certain risk that focusing only on emotional wellbeing contributes to interpretations that certain stress reactions and emotional malaise are the consequence of a lack of self-care, strength or resilience of individuals alone. But in the context of sociopolitical violence, emotional impacts are normal and the perpetrators are responsible for this. Although each person has an individual responsibility to take care of themselves, it is extremely important to maintain clarity about the responsibility of the perpetrators and the inclusion of the context when working on coping, wellbeing and resilience.

From our perspective, both the documentation of practices and experiences, and greater exchange between organisations working on these issues, could enhance existing initiatives and positive responses to the current human rights context. Therefore, it would be beneficial if other entities also document their experiences and perspectives in this area of work as it is much less systematised than, for example, work on security and protection. We recommend donors support these efforts through the provision of necessary funding.

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