



Vulnerability Assessment

Training module for NGOs operating in Conflict Zones and High-Crime Areas

Produced for the OFDA/InterAction PVO Security Task Force

By

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Module Information

Goal

Improve your ability to understand the most likely threats *your NGO*—as opposed to all NGOs—will face in an area, and provide insight into how to reduce the threats you may face.

Measurable learning objectives

After completing this module, you will be able to:

- Articulate the link between threats and vulnerability.
- List five of the eight factors affecting your vulnerability.

Key Learning Points

Every NGO in an area faces the same threats—the possibility that someone will harm NGO personnel, or steal or damage NGO property, through purposeful, often-violent action.

But not all NGOs are equally vulnerable to those threats. Vulnerability—the likelihood of encountering threatening incidents and having them result in harm to *your* NGO personnel or loss of property—differs among NGOs because vulnerability is based upon several factors:

- location of NGO staff and property,
- exposure of NGO personnel and property
- value of NGO property
- impact of NGO programs
- adoption of appropriate security measures
- compliance of staff with security measures
- staff interpersonal skills
- image of staff and programs.

Vulnerability assessment—the analysis of how you may face different threats than other NGOs—is an adjunct to threat assessment.

- Threat assessment helps you identify the most likely threats faced by all NGOs; vulnerability assessment helps you refine that list to those your NGO will likely face. Better understanding which threats your NGO will face, in turn, allows you to better identify security measures to protect you from those specific threats.
- Focusing on vulnerability assessments highlight the roles of staff behavior and programming in your security. Unlike the threat environment, you can influence both these factors.

Vulnerability Assessment

The concept of “vulnerability” is a cross-cutting issue in this course. This module draws upon other modules to provide you with a broad review of the concept of vulnerability and the factors affecting it—mostly before you learn about them individually in other modules.

The purpose of this module is to improve your ability to broadly assess your vulnerabilities. This module has two parts.

- The first section outlines the concepts and principles surrounding vulnerability.
- The second section discusses the factors affecting your vulnerability.

Concepts and principles

Threats and vulnerability

Every NGO in an area faces the same threat environment. As described in the Threat Assessment module, threats are the possibility that someone will harm NGO personnel, or steal or damage NGO property—through purposeful, often-violent action.

There are three broad categories of threats:

- threats to personnel, such as assault and rape
- threats to property (defined here as NGO cash, equipment, vehicles, personal property and relief items), such as burglary or pilferage
- threats directed against property, but which may harm personnel, such as car-jacking.
- These threats emanate from three types of causes.
- Crime/banditry—Actions by persons with malicious, financial or personal motivations (such as robbery) not connected with larger political or military efforts
- Direct threats—Actions taken by a belligerent (usually to aid in a political or military effort) for which NGOs are the intended target (such as robbing a food aid convoy)
- Indirect threats—Actions taken by a belligerent for which the local population or other belligerents are the intended target, but NGOs are unintentionally affected, such as NGOs hitting a landmine on a road. (This may be called “getting caught in the cross-fire,” though gunfire is only one such type of threat.)

But not all NGOs are equally vulnerable to the same threat environment.

- Vulnerability is the likelihood of your NGO encountering threatening incidents and having them result in harm to NGO personnel or loss of property.
- The vulnerability of NGOs differs because it is based on several factors that often differ by NGOs: location and exposure of NGO staff and property, value of NGO property, impact of NGO programs, adoption of appropriate security measures, staff compliance with security measures, staff interpersonal skills, and image of staff and programs.

Objectives of vulnerability assessments

Vulnerability assessment—the analysis of how you may face different threats than other NGOs—helps you better identify the most likely threats you will face, thereby assisting you in adopting appropriate security measures.

- As described in the Threat Assessment module, threat assessment helps you identify the most likely threats NGOs will face (the threat environment).
- Vulnerability assessment helps you identify whether your NGO will face the same threats as others.
- Combining threat and vulnerability assessments helps you identify the most likely types of threats your NGO will face, which, in turn, allows you to identify security measures that will protect you from the specific threats, and avoid adopting unnecessary security measures that have significant “costs” (money, or diversion of staff time, effort and focus).

Put simply: Your risk = threat x vulnerability.

Vulnerability assessments also highlight the roles of staff behavior and programming in affecting your security. Although you cannot influence the threat environment, you can influence your staff behavior and programming, both of which affect many of the factors influencing your vulnerability.

- Staff behavior may affect compliance of staff with security measures, reflect staff interpersonal skills, and have an impact on the image of your staff and programs.
- Programming may affect your location, the value of your NGO’s property, impact of your programs, and the exposure of your staff and property.

Conducting vulnerability assessments

Vulnerability assessment, therefore can be used as an adjunct to threat assessment. This can be done in two ways.

- Adopt appropriate security measures. Start with the results of your threat assessment—the threats faced by all NGOs. Then assess your vulnerability by using the information in this module, and use that assessment to modify the results of your threat assessment, better identifying the threats your NGO is most likely to encounter (more, fewer, or different threats than other NGOs). Develop security measures based upon your new assessment.
- Reduce your vulnerability. Beyond adopting appropriate security measures, you can use your vulnerability assessment to identify ways to change your NGOs behavior and programming to affect the factors affecting your vulnerability.

Be sure to differentiate between threats and vulnerabilities. To avoid confusion, clearly differentiate between factors affecting the threat environment and those affecting your vulnerabilities are as follows.

- The threat environment affects all NGOs equally, and cannot be affected by NGOs.
- Vulnerability usually differs by NGOs, and can be influenced.

Factors affecting vulnerability

Eight basic factors affect your vulnerability. But their applicability may differ depending on the cause of threat you are facing: you are facing—crime/banditry, direct threats (being targeted by a belligerent), or indirect threats (unintentional victim, caught in the cross-fire).

- Some of the factors affect your vulnerability in all three situations, such as the location of your staff and property.
- Other factors have an impact only in certain types of situations. The value of your property, for example, matters when faced with a crime/banditry threat, but not with an indirect one (e.g., getting caught in the crossfire, artillery barrage, or mined areas).

1. Location

In an area or country in which threats vary significantly, your vulnerability may differ from that of other NGOs due to the specific locations of your staff and property.

While a threat assessment may make generalizations about threats in a general area or country, those generalizations may not be applicable to you because of the specific location of threats. Specific factors to consider when comparing your vulnerability to other NGOs include the following:

- Are you in a specific location (province, city, district) that is safer or more dangerous than other NGOs?
- Are your staff or programs in a specific, dangerous area for a short time (e.g., traveling through or on assessments and monitoring missions)?
- Are you fully cognizant of the reach of criminals or belligerents from dangerous areas into safer ones (e.g., roaming gangs or bandits, bombing raids)?
- Are you fully cognizant about how a conflict may change quickly, making relatively safe locations more dangerous?

Application. All three causes of threats.

2. Exposure of staff and property

Your NGO's vulnerability is partially dependent on its exposure—the extent to an NGO's staff and property are in dangerous locations and/or unprotected. The specific factors affecting exposure (compared to that of other NGOs) are as follows:

- Number of staff and amount of property in dangerous locations
- Amount of time staff and property are in vehicles/convoys, which tends to be more dangerous than at sites
- Protection of sites (offices, residences, warehouses, service distribution points), such as though more effective barriers (fences, walls), access procedures, or guards.
- Protection during movement, such as through varying routes and time, or convoy escorts.
- **Application.** Varies by cause of threat.
- If the threat is *indirect* (getting caught in the cross-fire), then reducing exposure will probably help you.

- If the threat is *crime/banditry*, reducing your exposure may help if those threatening you (1) threaten everyone—the local population and expatriates alike, and/or (2) protective measures are effective (which may not be the cause against well-armed criminals or bandits).
- If the threat is being directly *targeted* by belligerents, some protective measures may make you less vulnerable—with three possible exceptions: (1) protective measures may be ineffective against well-armed belligerents determined to threaten you, as seen in Rwanda and Chechnya; (2) depending on the situation, protective measures that decrease your interaction with the populace may alienate you more from them, and increase your vulnerability, as discussed in the module on image, acceptance and reciprocity; and (3) depending on the situation, protective measures that associate you with one side in a conflict (e.g., military escorts) could increase your vulnerability (also as discussed in the Image, Acceptance and Reciprocity module).

3. Value of property

NGOs with more valuable property may be more vulnerable. NGOs have valuable property—cash, equipment, vehicles, personal property, and relief aid. In any situation, these items are a potential target of criminals. If you are operating in a conflict zone, belligerents may target NGO property to support their military efforts.

- Stolen cash can be used to purchase military equipment and supplies (e.g., weapons, ammunition, vehicles, fuel, radios, food)
- Some NGO property can be sold or bartered (e.g., four-wheel drive vehicles, radios, medicine, valuable foodstuffs)
- Some NGO property has military value to NGOs (e.g., four-wheel drive vehicles, radios, fuel).

In some instances, NGOs have tried to address this problem in several ways:

- Using lower-value vehicles in cities (where Land Rovers may not be needed)
- Providing aid that is less valuable (e.g., cheaper foodstuffs, lower quantities of foodstuffs at a time)
- Using delivery means that may be less susceptible to diversion or pilferage (e.g., sea, river/canal, air, shipping containers, using local trucking firms with good local relations).

Application. Crime/banditry and direct threats (targeted by belligerents).

4. Impact of programs

NGOs whose programs have an impact on different groups or (even minimally) benefit one of the belligerents in a conflict may be more vulnerable than others. Although the impact of aid on conflict situations may sometimes be overstated, there is no doubt that most aid programs benefit some groups more than others. Being aware of this helps you better understand your vulnerability.

The most commonly cited situation is this: Belligerents use roadblocks and ambushes to divert aid and provide it to their military forces and the population supporting them.

But, as described in the Threat Assessment module, even if they do not divert your aid, they may threaten you if your aid supports their opponent. This may be the case with food aid

provided to *vulnerable, civilian populations in areas occupied by one of the belligerents* because of the ways it may affect military efforts.

- Aid may find its way to belligerents if they steal it from civilians, civilians are compelled (taxed) to provide some of it to them, and/or the civilians support the belligerents cause and provide it willingly.
- Aid may relieve pressure on the belligerent's public administration (a rebel organization or government) to provide for the population.
- Aid may allow belligerents to spend fewer resources providing for civilians and more buying military equipment and supplies.
- Aid may relieve pressure on a besieged town.
- Aid can be used by belligerents (usually a government) as part of a strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population.
- Aid can be used to assist the government in a strategy to depopulate the countryside (regroupment, camps, hamlets), making it into a "free-fire zone," and denying rebels support, recruits, and cover of local villages.
- Aid can help refugees or displaced persons become permanent residents in an area in which they are not welcome.

Application. Direct threats (targeted by belligerents).

5. Adoption of appropriate security measures

NGOs who adopt appropriate security measures are usually less vulnerable than those who do not. While this may seem obvious, it is not obvious how to judge what measures are appropriate. The first step is in thinking of measures as a combination of two things:

- Security strategy—general concept of security, such as a mix of protection and pursuing acceptance—to guide development of a detailed security plan.
- Security plan—set of standard operating procedures, contingency plans, and information required to implement them—to enable staff to act effectively to prevent and mitigate the effects of security problems in a manner appropriate to the agency.

Within the context of a security strategy and plan, consider the following factors (discussed in the Security Planning module) which may affect your vulnerability compared to that of other NGOs.

- Is your strategy appropriate given (1) your agency's mission, mandate (if you have one), principles and policies, (2) the situation, and (3) the most likely threats faced by your NGO? Have you carefully considered the causes of the threats?
- Is your Security Plan complete? Does it include the appropriate procedures (site management, vehicle movement/convoys, etc.), contingency plans (evacuations, medical evacuations, death, etc.), and supporting information (contact numbers, etc.)
- Do the procedures and contingency plans in your Security Plan reflect and support your security strategy, or undermine it?
- Are the procedures in your Security Plan appropriate given the most likely threats?
- Is the Plan updated regularly and when the situation, threats, or your programs change?

Application. All three causes of threats.

6. Compliance with security measures

Even assuming your NGO adopts appropriate security measures, your vulnerability is still dependent upon whether the staff consistently complies with them. NGOs usually adopt a wide a variety of measures, from broad policy (such as prohibiting soldiers or armed persons to ride in vehicles) to minute procedures (how to call for help using a radio). Assuming these measures are appropriate, your NGO is more vulnerable than others if your staff does not comply with the measures (see section above). As discussed in the Security Planning module, key factors for consideration include the following:

- Are the measures written clearly in your Security Plan?
- Is the Plan disseminated to all staff? Are new employees provided a copy, and encouraged to review it?
- Do staff understand the measures?
- Is implementation of the Plan supported or undermined by other aspects of your organization—orientation, education, training, equipment, funds, time, and organizational culture (e.g., risk-taking propensity)?

Application. All three causes of threats.

7. Staff interpersonal skills

The interpersonal skills of your staff can affect your NGO's vulnerability by helping you avoid incidents and mitigate their impact if they occur. As described in the module on interpersonal skills, such skills affect security in important ways.

- Interpersonal skills can mitigate the impact of incidents by allowing NGOs to react appropriately. While the section above on compliance with security measures views reacting to incidents from the perspective of procedures, it is also possible to view reacting to incidents from the perspective of interpersonal skills and behavior. When confronted with an incident (e.g., roadblock, angry mob), your skills and behavior can either escalate the incident or de-escalate it, depending in part on your skills in dealing with stressful situation and negotiating effectively.
- Second, your skills and behavior with regard to team-building and developing relationships can help prevent incidents from occurring (through sharing information and ensuring buy-in to security measures) and mitigate the impact of incidents (through mutual support of team members).

Application. From the perspective of reacting to incidents, interpersonal skills are most important when facing crime/banditry and direct threats (targeted by belligerents)—except when the types of incidents are those not allowing for any interpersonal interaction (e.g., ambushes, bombing, some assaults).

8. Image of staff and programs

Your vulnerability is partially dependent on the image of your NGO. As discussed in the Image, Acceptance, and Reciprocity module, every NGO has an “image”—the perception of the local population, authorities, and belligerents toward your NGO's staff and programs.

This image matters. What you say and do, how you appear, and the shape and impact of your programs influences the opinions of the local population: Will they accept your presence and roles, or be resentful toward you?

While image may not be the *sole* cause of significant security incidents, acceptance or resentment of your staff and programs can influence security in important ways.

- It increases or decreases the predisposition of criminals and belligerents to target you.
- It makes the local population more or less likely to help ensure that you do not face security incidents (such as by extending societal constraints on criminal activities to you, and forewarning you of danger)
- It makes the local population more or less likely to help you when you are faced with security incidents (such as by helping you recover stolen property).

Image problems are often founded in the mistaken beliefs that people understand the objectives of your operations, claiming impartiality is sufficient to convince people of it, and consciously portrayed verbal messages (e.g., statements) are more important than sub-conscious non-verbal ones. To help understand whether you are vulnerable because of image problems, consider the following:

- Appearance and behavior. Does your staff's appearance and behavior lead people to believe the staff is wealthy or loose about sex? Do your discussions with officials and others lead people to conclude you are naive and ignorant of the history and situation, and thus easily manipulated?
- Staff composition. Is your staff from an appropriate mix of national, ethnic, political, religious, class, rural-urban, and gender groups—in both numbers and seniority—from the perspective of being respected and seen as impartial?
- Programs. Are your programs perceived as helping one particular ethnic group and belligerent, aiding only some sectors of society (e.g., assisting refugees but not the local population or internally displaced persons), changing the ways in which groups have access to resources (e.g., supporting education only for girls), or altering power structures (e.g., using merchants and suppliers aligned with one group)? (The issue of how your programs are perceived is different from whether they actually have an impact on the conflict.)
- Headquarters. Does your headquarters location portray implicit support for one side in a conflict, or association with some agencies (e.g., near a UN headquarters)?
- History. Do people misinterpret repeated assessments as broken promises? Do they resent your withdrawing when the security situation worsened?

Another way of assessing vulnerability due to image problems is to look for evidence of how you are portrayed in the press or local discussions—as agents of Western imperialism, intelligence agents, cultural imperialists, proselytizers, enemy sympathizers, or smugglers.

Application. Crime/banditry and direct threats (targeted by belligerents). But even in those circumstances, trying to change your individual NGO's image may have only a limited effect on your vulnerability.

- You may be unable to differentiate your staff and programs from other NGOs, and the local population will simply view all NGOs as the same.
- Belligerents may be terrorizing the local population, and so they may not be able to significantly change the views of the belligerents about your NGO.

Vulnerability Assessment

- NGO resources may be vital to the war efforts of belligerents, in which case you may be targeted no matter what they believe.

Glossary

Crime/banditry: Actions by persons with malicious, financial or personal motivations (such as robbery) not connected with larger political or military efforts

Direct threats: Actions taken by a belligerent (usually to aid in a political or military effort) for which NGOs are the intended target (such as robbing a food aid convoy)

Exposure: Extent to which an NGO's staff and property are in dangerous locations and/or unprotected

Image: Perception of the local population, authorities, and belligerents toward the agency's staff and programs

Indirect threats: Actions taken by a belligerent for which the local population or other belligerents are the intended target, but NGOs are unintentionally affected, such as NGOs hitting a landmine on a road.

Security plan: Set of standard operating procedures, contingency plans, and information required to implement them to enable staff to act effectively to prevent and mitigate the effects of security problems in a manner appropriate to the agency.

Security strategy: General concept of security used to guide development of a security plan.

Threats: Possibility that someone will harm NGO personnel, or steal or damage NGO property—through purposeful, often-violent action.

Vulnerability: Likelihood of your NGO encountering threatening incidents and having them result in harm to NGO personnel or loss of property.

Vulnerability assessment: Analysis of how you may face different threats than other NGOs.

Bibliography

This module summarized information from the following modules:

- Image, Acceptance, and Reciprocity
- Security Concept
- Threat Assessment
- Security Planning
- Interpersonal skills.

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Vulnerability Assessment

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