
The Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk

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**The guidelines are available in multiple languages at
*hrdhub.org/wellbeing***



Introduction

1. According to the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,¹ the right and responsibility to defend human rights belongs to us all. We are human rights defenders when we promote and strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, whether we do so individually or with others. In the words of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders: “Human rights defenders do not heroically stand in front of or apart from the rest of us; they are each of us and among us, they are ourselves, our parents, our siblings, our neighbours, our friends and colleagues, and our children”.² Human rights defenders come from diverse backgrounds and can include artists, teachers, journalists, therapists, writers, lawyers, trade unionists, indigenous communities, LGBTIQ+ persons, families of the disappeared, civil servants, parliamentarians, judges, and workers in non-governmental organisations.
2. Defending human rights involves challenging powerful interests and – all too often – suffering the risk of your own human rights being violated. We are alarmed that defenders in a growing number of countries face a range of threats and attacks by State and non-State actors. Since the adoption of the Declaration, thousands of defenders have lost their lives in the defence of human rights.³ Many more have had their freedoms restricted and their voices suppressed; they have suffered surveillance, criminalisation and stigmatisation. As human rights defenders ourselves, we demand that States and all other actors publicly commit to ensuring that our colleagues have their rights respected, protected and fulfilled, and that those responsible for human rights violations and abuses are brought to justice.
3. In response to the challenges faced by human rights defenders, State and non-State actors have developed a range of measures for their protection. Amongst these, is the practice of temporary international relocation, whereby a defender spends a period of time abroad, often as a measure of last resort, for their protection. The United Nations Special Rapporteur has recognised these initiatives as good practice⁴ and the number and size of these initiatives have increased significantly in recent years.⁵ A growing number of relocation initiatives are linked together and seek to develop this practice collectively. Although these initiatives may focus on specific types of defenders, regions

¹ United Nations General Assembly, “Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” United Nations Document Number A/RES/53/144 (9 December 1998) (the “Declaration on Human Rights Defenders”).

² United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, “Report to the United Nations General Assembly on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders” United Nations Document Number A/73/215 (23 July 2018) at ¶ 5.

³ See the HRD Memorial Project (www.hrdmemorial.org).

⁴ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, “Report to the United Nations Human Rights Council on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders” United Nations Document Number A/HRC/31/55 (1 February 2016) at ¶ 72 et seq.

⁵ Martin Jones, Alice Nah, and Patricia Bartley “Introduction” in Maik Muller, ed. *Temporary Shelter and Relocation Initiatives: Perspectives of Managers and Participants* (Martin Roth Initiative, 2019) at 10.

of origin, or particular human rights activities of defenders, they share a common focus on the protection of human rights defenders at risk.

4. A key concern of the developing community of practice is wellbeing in relocation. Human rights defenders are often exposed to extraordinarily high levels of stress and trauma because of the nature of their activities and because of the threats and attacks against them. We recognise the importance of supporting human rights defenders in dealing with challenges to their wellbeing such as burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, stress, anxiety, and depression, and associated feelings such as guilt, shame, and isolation – while they are on relocation as well as when they return home. Relocation initiatives need to incorporate a broad understanding of wellbeing, not only of defenders but also of other individuals involved in and affected by relocation.
5. The wellbeing of human rights defenders is a critical but often neglected issue in human rights movements. Deeply committed to their causes, human rights defenders often persevere despite challenges, risks, and personal suffering. Wellbeing – especially of themselves – is often deprioritised. Human rights defenders often find it difficult to talk about their own mental and emotional wellbeing; the very language used in relation to this topic can result in disengagement. Stigma, biases and misconceptions about mental health in their societies – held by themselves and others – may further impede efforts to strengthen their wellbeing. The Guidelines are located within the bigger project of ensuring not only the wellbeing of defenders but that our human rights movements become communities of mutual care.
6. Understandings and beliefs concerning the concept of wellbeing are diverse and informed by religious, cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds. In the Guidelines, ‘wellbeing’ can be understood to encompass mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health, as well as healthy relationships with others and with the environment.
7. The Guidelines are based on the findings of a collaborative research project through which we interviewed over 100 human rights defenders, relocation coordinators, wellbeing support providers, and other protection actors from all regions of the world about the wellbeing of human rights defenders in temporary international relocation initiatives.⁶ We came together in Barcelona in June 2019 to reflect upon research findings from this project and to develop the Guidelines for our community of practice.⁷

⁶Martin Jones, Alice Nah, and Tallulah Lines, *Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk*, Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 8, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York, available at hrdhub.org.

⁷A list of participants at this meeting is provided in Appendix A.

8. The Guidelines are aspirational; we seek an opportunity to further develop and improve our practice while recognising our individual and collective limitations. Not all relocation initiatives will be able to adopt all of the recommendations; it may take some time to identify and mobilise resources and build institutional support for recommended practices. Some recommendations may not be appropriate for the local context or for particular defenders served by the initiative. The responsibility for reflecting upon and implementing the Guidelines falls on everyone implementing a relocation initiative. The Guidelines seek to spark a conversation between and collaboration amongst all those involved in a relocation initiative.
9. The Guidelines articulate shared principles about our collective approach to wellbeing and provide guidance on good practices for coordinators of temporary international relocation initiatives,⁸ wellbeing support providers,⁹ and other supporters of human rights defenders in these initiatives. While these practices must be contextualised within the broader challenges facing human rights defenders and wellbeing, they must also recognise two key core aspects of such initiatives: their limited duration and their international nature. Defenders are in relocation initiatives for a time limited period, ranging from a few weeks to several years. All temporary international relocation initiatives remove defenders from their country of risk to another country, whether in the same region or further away. These defining features necessarily inform and constrain the practices addressed in the Guidelines.¹⁰

General Principles

10. Human rights defenders are diverse. Some participants within relocation initiatives have had decades of experience of activism while others have had less. Some may not self-identify as human rights defenders, preferring instead to refer to themselves in alternative ways, such as by their professional or creative identities. The individuality of defenders needs to be recognised, including their needs, abilities, and desires. Their socially-constructed identities – such as gender, religion, race, class, or sexual orientation – intersect and affect their experiences of risk, security, and protection in societies too often marked by inequality, discrimination, patriarchy and histories of colonialism.

⁸“Coordinators” of temporary international relocation initiatives are those individuals involved in the development and fundraising, design, recruitment for and operation of the initiatives and can include front-line staff dealing with defenders, volunteers involved in the operation of the initiative, and others involved in decision making concerning the initiative.

⁹“Wellbeing support providers” are those providing physical, psychological, spiritual, or psychiatric support to human rights defenders in relocation to address their wellbeing (sometimes also referred to as mental health professionals or therapists, including doctors, nurses, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists, but also including individuals and groups who would not locate themselves within contemporary medical health care systems or bio-medical approaches, including coaches, healers, and practitioners of alternative therapies and traditional medicine).

¹⁰While the temporary and international nature of these relocation initiatives defines them and is our focus, the Guidelines may be useful in other contexts. Our discussions in Barcelona benefited from input from a number of intranational relocation initiatives which face many of the same challenges.

The socio-political histories of the places where they conduct their activism matter, as do their collective identities. The Guidelines recognise the diversity, individuality, and intersectional identities of human rights defenders.

11. The way that wellbeing is framed to human rights defenders matters. Reluctance amongst human rights defenders to engage in self-care can result from feelings of guilt for focusing on themselves while others suffer; concerns about social stigma surrounding mental health; the difficulties of creating boundaries around their activities in the face of overwhelming demands from others; and, cultures of human rights practice that valorise dedication and self-sacrifice. Some strategies that might help defenders to focus on their own wellbeing include approaching it as an issue of the sustainability or effectiveness of activism over the longer-term; framing it as an essential part of their security; recognising wellbeing practices as a political strategy; and, drawing attention to the importance of collective care within human rights movements, not just self-care.
12. Wellbeing support in relocation should recognise the perseverance and accomplishments of defenders. Their defence of human rights has provided them with a sense of purpose, and for most, has strengthened their resolve and resilience. Therefore, they should be encouraged to be active participants in the relocation process and wellbeing activities, rather than the objects of them.
13. Unequal power relationships, real or perceived, exist between defenders, coordinators and wellbeing support providers within temporary international relocation initiatives. Factors such as the gender, age, ethnicity, religion and class of defenders, coordinators, and wellbeing support providers affect how they relate to each other. Attention needs to be paid to these unequal power relations so that defenders have control over their participation in wellbeing activities and therapeutic processes and are able to communicate what works for them, what doesn't, and why. While coordinators are well placed to provide general care to defenders, wellbeing activities and support should be provided by individuals not directly involved in the management of relocation initiatives.
14. It is critical for coordinators and wellbeing support providers to understand the political, social and cultural contexts that human rights defenders come from and operate in, especially the types of violence and repressive tactics that defenders are subject to, and why defenders continue to do what they do in the face of these challenges. It is also important to seek to understand the individual defender, in particular their concerns and connections to colleagues and families. This enables coordinators and wellbeing support providers to better understand the perspectives of defenders and the potential effects of their proposed interventions.

15. Coordinators may feel overwhelmed by the emotional and ethical demands of supporting defenders in relocation. Coordinators, especially when they work alone, often struggle to draw boundaries in their support to defenders. Relocation initiatives should support the wellbeing of staff, in particular of coordinators and others directly responding to the wellbeing needs of defenders, including volunteers. Team, group and community-based management of relocation can improve the wellbeing of all involved. Coordinators of relocation can also model good practices in addressing wellbeing, including by recognising their own struggles with wellbeing and seeking support for themselves.

Guidelines for coordinators of temporary international relocation initiatives

16. The primary concern of temporary international relocation initiatives is the wellbeing of defenders. The design, operation and evaluation of these initiatives should be based on this goal. Defenders need to feel safe and secure while on relocation. This can be particularly challenging when the place of relocation is close to the country where the defender is threatened, or when defenders are concerned about online or physical surveillance or the presence of informants where they live.
17. Defenders facing challenges to their wellbeing should not be denied access to participation in temporary international relocation initiatives unfairly. Selection procedures should, wherever possible, be able to accommodate delays due to wellbeing issues and consider interventions before arrival to support the participation in relocation of defenders at risk. Particular consideration should be given to allowing family members to participate in relocation or visits to, or by, family members during relocation.
18. The political, social, and cultural contexts where defenders are relocated can be starkly different from their contexts at home. It can be challenging for defenders to navigate a range of ordinary changes in daily life – such as food, housing, transport, the cost of living, cross-cultural communication, and social expectations. In the initial stages of relocation, coordinators could seek to mitigate the detrimental impact that relocation can have on the wellbeing of defenders, for example, by connecting defenders with other participants of relocation initiatives nearby, fostering connections with local communities, organising language training, allowing time for settlement in the scheduling of programming, and having a gentle but open discussion about the challenges of relocation.
19. Defenders in relocation may experience racism, sexism, xenophobia and other types of discrimination and harassment that exacerbate their insecurity. These acts may not always be visible to coordinators, and defenders may also seek to dismiss or minimise

the significance of such acts. Coordinators could seek to foster an environment in which such acts can be rendered visible, discussed, and acted upon, including by supporting a diverse community of support for defenders. Most relocation initiatives foster feelings of solidarity and support of human rights defenders by local host communities. However, underlying prejudices, exclusions and silences can also exist in the communities, and must be openly examined, discussed and acted upon. Coordinators should also be aware of the structural racism present (but sometimes invisible) in the institutions and organisations that defenders interact with.

20. Wellbeing includes the physical health of defenders. Defenders in relocation may have neglected their physical health for long periods of time and may require medical treatment for chronic, and even potentially life-threatening conditions. Relocation initiatives should make available medical care for defenders, including, at least, emergency medical coverage, but ideally, general diagnostic medical services as well.
21. Existing local health services and resources for wellbeing are often inadequate for defenders on relocation. The temporary immigration status of defenders, long waiting lists, the language of service delivery, and cultural assumptions may pose significant barriers for defenders in accessing health facilities. In some cases, private health services may be the only accessible option for defenders in relocation. Where financial costs may be a barrier to access, coordinators should ensure that fundraising for the initiative reduces this barrier as much as possible.
22. The development of local resources and activities to support the wellbeing of defenders in advance of their relocation is helpful. These may include referral mechanisms for local wellbeing support providers; friendship groups for defenders; access to arts or sports facilities and nutrition programmes; networking opportunities with civil society groups; psychoeducation; and, other activities that nurture defenders physically, mentally, spiritually, socially, culturally, and politically. In developing approaches to wellbeing it is also important to consider approaches aimed at collective care, including strengthening networks; addressing harmful organisational cultures; and, drawing upon lived experience and traditional knowledge.
23. In cultures which value heroic acts and selflessness, defenders can resist or find it difficult to talk about their wellbeing. It is important to be aware of how aspects of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, class and ability, intersect to exacerbate this. Some genders may be less willing to articulate what they suffer and why; some may be more accustomed to caring for others rather than themselves, or not having their wellbeing concerns listened to. Defenders can benefit from activities that sensitise them to the common challenges that human rights defenders around the world experience. Coordinators of relocation initiatives should develop wellbeing plans with each defender early into their relocation. The programme of activities for each defender in relocation should be developed to support their wellbeing and be sufficiently flexible as to accommodate the wellbeing needs of individual defenders.

24. Accommodation arrangements and financial support for defenders during relocation should enable their wellbeing. Wherever possible, defenders should be involved in decisions concerning their accommodation. In some cases, the best option will be housing defenders with other defenders to enable social support; in other cases, it will be necessary to provide separate accommodation to facilitate recovery. Accommodation arrangements should be sufficiently flexible as to support the individual wellbeing needs of defenders; initiatives should seek and allocate sufficient resources to the often time-consuming process of arranging appropriate accommodation. Similarly, the allowances given to defenders should enable them to cover all their expenses and care obligations. More often than not, defenders send remittances to support their families. Meagre allowances can result in maladaptive behaviours such as defenders eating poor food or going without basic necessities to save money to remit home.
25. Programming during relocation should recognise that some defenders may arrive exhausted and that they need time for rest and relaxation for their rehabilitation. The best programming, particularly at the start of relocation, may be little programming, allowing defenders free time to wander, sleep, partake in cultural activities, create, and otherwise recuperate. However, most defenders benefit from a reasonable level of activities, providing structure and a source of new experiences and ideas. Programming during relocation should, wherever possible, support contact with and enable a sense of contribution to the communities that defenders are from; this can help to mitigate defenders' feelings of isolation and support the possibility of future return.
26. The possibility of return at the end of relocation often prompts anxiety and uncertainty. Planning and preparation for return, logistically and psychologically, should begin early in the relocation. Defenders benefit from support to formulate realistic plans about their future after relocation, exploring possibilities for return, extension of their stay, a further period of relocation elsewhere, and asylum.
27. The attention paid to wellbeing during relocation should not stop with the end of relocation. Defenders returning from relocation should have feasible pathways to sustainable wellbeing; defenders returning from relocation can also bring to their communities new approaches to wellbeing developed during relocation.
28. Where defenders are moving between relocation initiatives, it can be helpful for coordinators to share information with the consent of the defender; and for coordinators and the defender to develop a plan to support the wellbeing of the defender during the transition, including ensuring the continuity of any wellbeing support and other core aspects of care, including financial support.
29. Reflection upon the appropriateness and effectiveness of wellbeing activities for defenders should occur regularly among coordinators, support providers and the defenders. Defenders often feel conflicted and hesitant when asked to evaluate

programming, particularly in relation to wellbeing activities. Processes of reflection and evaluation should create space for full and open discussion, including by involving independent individuals (other than coordinators and wellbeing support providers associated with the initiative), conducting these discussions away from the site of relocation, and/or doing so after the end of relocation.

Guidelines for wellbeing support providers

30. A wide range of individuals may be involved in addressing the wellbeing of defenders during relocation. Some of these individuals may belong to professional organisations and have particular professional duties that govern when and how they can support wellbeing; others may have self-driven ethical duties grounded in their personal experiences. The limitations on the therapeutic activities of all individuals involved in the wellbeing of defenders need to be discussed openly in advance with coordinators and clearly communicated to defenders.
31. Support for wellbeing should begin as early as possible during (or even before) relocation. Early surveys of wellbeing can be a useful tool for identifying issues and monitoring progress during relocation and during particular wellbeing interventions.
32. Defenders often do not know where to go for wellbeing support and may be unaware of the variety of wellbeing support activities that are possible and available for them. Flexibility in the choice of therapeutic methods enables defenders to choose the ones that are suitable for them. It is important for wellbeing support providers to keep an open mind about different therapeutic methods. They could also develop networks with other wellbeing support providers who use different methods, so that they can enable defenders to explore the efficacy of a variety of interventions for themselves.
33. The political, social, cultural and religious beliefs of wellbeing support providers – and how they resonate (or not) with the beliefs of defenders – matters. Wellbeing support providers must be sensitive not only to the intersectional identities of defenders, but also to their own intersectional identities, and how their own background, outlook and professional training impact on the support they provide to defenders.
34. Trust of the wellbeing support provider is a significant factor in the efficacy of therapeutic interventions. Human rights defenders often struggle with trust, concerned that what they may reveal about their activism during therapy will have dire consequences if confidentiality is breached. Wellbeing support providers can be perceived as threatening if their political positions differ from defenders', or are unclear. A deeper sense of trust and rapport can often be developed if the wellbeing support provider has extensive knowledge or personal experience of human rights activism.

35. Wellbeing support providers must be clear from the outset about the extent of confidentiality that can be promised. Wellbeing support providers engaging in group interventions must ensure that all participants recognise the sensitivity of information communicated by fellow participants during these sessions and undertake to maintain confidentiality.
36. The use of interpreters during wellbeing support activities raises similar issues of trust. A lack of trust or other problems with interpretation can undermine the therapeutic process. If interpretation continues to be problematic, it might be better for the defender to be referred to another wellbeing service provider fluent in the relevant language, or to use wellbeing interventions that do not require high levels of language fluency.
37. It is important to be aware of the negative consequences to human rights defenders of mistakes and poor practices. Defenders have found it damaging when well-intentioned wellbeing support providers question their activism, judge their actions negatively, or tell them to cease in their activism because of the potentially negative consequences of these actions on their wellbeing. Other forms of poor practice include over-reliance on medication; wrong diagnoses and treatment; and breaches of confidentiality.
38. Defenders' religious beliefs, politics, culture, identity, understandings of health and wellbeing, and past experience influence their openness to therapeutic methods. These factors vary between defenders and can lead them to resist some therapeutic methods and to embrace others. Some defenders may consider some approaches to be culturally unfamiliar, or to have religious elements that cause them discomfort. Defenders in different contexts have found different approaches helpful, including bodywork therapies, talk therapies, therapies focused on arts, creative expression, and spirituality and interventions focusing on how human rights defenders work with others in groups and organisations.
39. Access to wellbeing interventions is a key issue. The financial cost of wellbeing support and the lack of competent wellbeing support providers who understand the situation of human rights defenders can be significant barriers during and after relocation. In many cases, human rights defenders are unable to afford wellbeing support after they return home. They are more likely to continue practicing wellbeing interventions that are affordable and available, particularly those they can do themselves with minimal support. Wellbeing support providers should consider the sustainability of wellbeing activities after relocation when developing resources and activities during relocation, exploring options such as continuing support by teleconference, and connecting defenders to other wellbeing support providers for continuity of care.

40. Working with defenders can also result in wellbeing support providers experiencing exhaustion, burnout, and secondary trauma. Professional supervision, the support of other wellbeing support providers, and the recognition of one's own limitations, can mitigate some of these negative effects. It is critical for wellbeing support providers to consider their own wellbeing and model good wellbeing practices as they provide support to defenders.

As a community of practice, we have jointly developed and created the Guidelines based upon our collaborative research and our shared reflections on our experiences.

We commit to making every possible effort to implement the Guidelines into our practice of temporary international relocation and our wellbeing activities, as coordinators of relocation, wellbeing support providers and others working to enable human rights defenders at risk.

In solidarity with each other and with all human rights defenders.

Barcelona, June 2019.

Appendix A: Participants in the Drafting of the Guidelines

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