

Human and Digital Security Threats



Background

The phenomenon of closing civic space not only restricts the daily work of civil society organizations but can often translate into harassment and assault. Extra-legal retribution by the state or state-affiliated agencies can range from threatening phone messages to a more extreme instance of physical or sexual assault, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, violent retaliation against peaceful assemblies, torture, and killings.⁹ The risk of physical harm is higher when civil society organizations and human rights defenders express opinions or disseminate information exposing government failures, weaknesses, or malpractice.¹⁰ In many cases, civil society organizations react by self-censoring, relocating, or scaling back their activities out of fear.

Digital security is another major concern for transparency, accountability, and participation grantees. Civil society organizations face the same information security threats as governments and those in the private sector; in fact, civil society organizations, governments, and private sector actors alike may face threats from the same perpetrators.¹¹ Threats to digital security could take the form of passive monitoring (e.g. government tracking of organizations' metadata) and remote intrusion (e.g. targeted malware attacks).

As a result, more organizations use digital monitoring tools to protect their information. These tools have become cheaper and thereby more accessible to the general public, making them also vulnerable to abuse. Advancements in technology

and increasing cybersecurity threats make it especially challenging for small, underfunded civil society organizations to keep up.

Funders seeking to support grantees experiencing such difficulties have a number of options. International donors and grantmakers can contribute funding, tools, and knowledge to help prevent grantee vulnerability.

Strategies

- **Provide emergency response quick-action assistance (Funder):** Funders use rapid response funding for grantees in crises as an increasingly common avenue of support. For example, [Solidaire's model](#) of rapid response funding is a “nimble way to fund opportunities that might otherwise not have access to resources because they are too new, too small, or too urgent.”¹² Funding may be for operations in crises or uprisings, or for creative and entrepreneurial ideas. Emergency support may also come in the form of legal defense, advocacy, or public awareness activities about persecutions.
- **Shift staff or operations (Grantee):** The vast majority of human-rights-focused organizations in Egypt opted to relocate following the revolution.¹³ When evaluating if relocating is the best recourse, the grantee must consider both legal and nonlegal factors. These include political climate, distance from country of origin, regulatory requirements, requirements for start-up capital, and laws on giving and receiving donations.¹⁴ For those activists who cannot relocate their organizations in an emergency, there are options. [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) allocates grants for human rights defenders under urgent threat to temporarily relocate within their country or abroad. During the relocation period, defenders are able to rest, seek rehabilitation, build their capacities through training, expand their international network of contacts, pursue their human rights work from a secure location, and prepare their safe return.¹⁵
 - **Assess the level of grantee's digital security risk (Funder):** Funder assessments of a grantee's vulnerability to digital attack allows grantees to proactively resolve any weak spots before they are exploited. However, these often require outside expertise and coordination among funders. After an assessment, a CSO may need to improve its digital security policies and practices or change its technological infrastructure. A best practice to improve funder coordination on this issue involves hiring IT personnel or outside organizations that can

provide assistance to multiple grantees. Doing so can ensure that all grantees are protected against the same kinds of attacks and allow for collective anticipation of further threats.¹⁶ The [Engine Room](#), [Front Line Defenders](#), and [Tactical Tech](#) all offer expertise in this domain. Another key resource is the [Digital Security and Grantcraft Guide: An Introductory Guide for Funders](#), which provides practical tips and tactics for funders to support grantees in mitigating digital security threats.

- **Use a preventative strategy: Shift operations toward service delivery or enterprise model (Funder/Grantee):** Another funder-driven response to threats to a grantee's physical person or property involves supporting modifications to the grantee model or mission over time. In a common restructuring approach, the grantee shifts operations toward a service delivery, livelihoods, or social enterprise model. Ethiopian civil society provides some insight into how this strategy works in practice. According to Saskia Brechenmacher of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 70 percent of development organizations and 44 percent of human rights organizations in the country have recently changed their organizational mandates to preserve access to foreign funding.¹⁷
- Another strategy is CSOs may provide goods or services to people who are willing to buy from them, instead of a commercial store, to express their support for a particular mission. [Oxfam](#) and [Greenpeace](#) run programs of this kind to provide ethically sourced materials, from water jugs and schoolbooks to goats and green energy. It could also fund its work through modest commissions on payments or goods, with occasional grants or donations from third parties.¹⁸
- **Fund psychological support and counseling (Funder):** Human rights organizations and networks have begun to realize the importance of psychological support for defenders, especially in the wake of harassment or physical assault. For example, as a part of its efforts to fight for natural resource justice, the Guatemalan nongovernmental organization (NGO) [Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala](#) has provided psychological counseling services to defenders since 2004. Likewise, [the Southern Africa Litigation Center](#) includes psychological services among its offerings.

Tools



- **Protective technologies (Funder):** Protective technologies or software that prevents hacking—such as encryption methods and off-site data storage—can preserve the integrity of the grantee’s work in a crisis. Software licenses should be encouraged and funded. Civil society organizations often use pirated software and operating systems to reduce cost. Doing so makes them more vulnerable to a range of digital security breaches. The nonprofit [TechSoup](#) provides a network of NGOs and civil society and donor organizations technical support and tools to ensure grantees stay legally compliant and gain access to digital tools. TechSoup services include grants management products that track donations and engagement history between donor and grantee. It also provides a host of other innovative software and collaborative platforms. This service can help prevent future threats to physical safety and protect international funding streams.
- **Link to online legal protection (Funder):** Legal knowledge can help grantees improve their compliance with local laws and regulations that states often use to legitimize their attacks. Such help can come via in-country partners. The web platform and innovative crowdsourcing method [Movements.org](#) connects in-country partners with advice and support for compliance with local laws.¹⁹
- **Informal and direct mechanisms for communication during crises (Funder/Grantee):** It comes as no surprise that grantees are more vulnerable during crises such as political turmoil and during key moments in the grant reporting cycle, when financial information can be hacked. The Ariadne Network is one of many groups advocating for the use of texts or personal

phone calls, rather than formal reporting structures, to deliver key information. Amnesty International has taken this idea further with its [Panic Button](#), a peer-to-peer mobile app alert that allows activists to prepare for attacks, coordinate with networks, and stay safe.

- **Training in resilience, security planning, and related skills and capacities (Funder):** Protection International provides e-learning courses to train groups in security and protection management. Front Line Defenders also offers risk analysis and protection training, including a practical manual called *Workbook on Security*. Africans Rising, a Pan-African movement of people and organizations, brings together African NGOs and citizens to express solidarity with those under threat. The 2017 Africans Rising conference—held in Arusha, Tanzania—brought together 272 activist leaders from across Africa. Attendees included grassroots communities, faith-based movements, women, youth, students, farmworkers, and trade unions. They called for protection for human rights defenders and greater government accountability to African youth.²⁰

Actor	Responses	Examples/Explanations	Key Resources (Reports or Organizations)
Funder	Provide emergency response quick-action assistance	Solidaire’s rapid response funding for crises	Lifeline: Embattled CSO Assistance Fund Solidaire
Grantee	Shift staff or operations	Many NGOs in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Russia opted to operate remotely rather than scale back or reorient their missions and operations	Civil Society Under Assault: Repression and Responses in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia

<p>Grantee</p>	<p>Use a preventative strategy: Shift operations toward service delivery or enterprise model</p>	<p>Oxfam and Greenpeace offer programs where goods and services are provided to those willing to buy from them directly, providing access to ethically-sourced materials and a way for people to express their support for the CSO's mission.</p> <p>In Ethiopia, 70 percent of development organizations and 44 percent of human rights organizations restructured their organizational mandates to remain eligible for foreign funding.</p>	<p>Greenpeace</p> <p>Oxfam</p> <p>ProtectDefenders.eu</p>
<p>Funder</p>	<p>Assess the level of grantee's digital security risk</p>	<p>Hire an IT personnel or outside organizations that can provide assistance to multiple grantees. Doing so can ensure that all grantees</p>	<p>Digital Security and Grantcraft Guide: An Introductory Guide for Funders</p> <p>Engine Room</p>

		are protected against the same kinds of attacks and allow for collective anticipation of further threats	Front Line Defenders Tactical Technology Collective
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Funder	Fund psychological support and counselling	The NGO Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala has provided psychological counselling since 2004	Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Trust Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala
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Funder	Provide protective technologies	<p>TechSoup provides compliance, backup solutions, firewall software, other security solutions</p> <p>Electronic Frontier Foundation's Surveillance Self-Defense guide provides an overview of encryption, hacking, and metadata</p>	Access Now Electronic Frontier Foundation Tactical Technology Collective TechSoup For additional resources, see Annex I.
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		<p>Access Now's Digital Security Helpline provides a secure communications channel and links activists and NGOs to services, tools, and other resources</p> <p>The Tactical Technology Collective provides digital security training to NGOs</p>	
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Funder	Link grantees to online legal protection	Movements.org: a new web platform for crowdsourcing legal assistance and other support to human rights defenders	Movements
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Funder/Grantee	Create informal and formal mechanisms for communication during crises	<p>Use text, email, phone calls, or in-person conversations during crises and to discuss formal reports for grants</p> <p>Amnesty International's peer-to-peer</p>	Ariadne Network
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		activist mobile app alert, Panic Button	
Funder	Train in resilience and security planning, and related skills and capacities	<p>Protection International, an arm of ProtectDefender s.eu based in Brussels, offers a comprehensive resource for best practices in protecting human rights defenders</p> <p>ProtectDefender s.eu offers telephone and Skype hotlines and a secure email for urgent matters</p> <p>Africans Rising, a Pan-African movement, brings together African NGOs and citizens to express solidarity with those under threat. The 2017 Africans Rising conference—held</p>	<p>Agir Ensemble pour les Droits de l'Homme</p> <p>Freedom House</p> <p>Frontline Defenders: The Front Line Defenders Workbook on Security</p> <p>Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders</p> <p>Open Briefing</p> <p>Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights</p> <p>Similar global resources are listed in Annex II.</p>

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