

3. UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING THREATS



> CHAPTER 1.3 OF THE NEW PROTECTION MANUAL
UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING THREATS



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- > Identify the threats faced by HRDs.
- > Assess the likelihood of threats being carried out, using the five steps described in the NPM.



KEY MESSAGES

- > It is important to distinguish between direct threats (targeted and incidental) and indirect threats.
- > HRDs need to be able to identify patterns, sources and objectives of threats.
- > It is vital to handle the concept of “posing” a threat.
- > Threats always have a psychological effect.

THE SESSION

⚠ CHALLENGES THAT MAY ARISE DURING THE SESSION :

- A reliable threat analysis is only possible when the facts surrounding it have been clearly identified.
- Participants may struggle to identify concrete security measures to be taken on the basis of hypothetical cases, i.e. the conclusions of the threat analysis.
- Participants may argue that they do not have enough information to assess threats.
- Participants may confuse threats with security incidents.
- Participants may talk about potential threats, by which they will actually refer to risks. You will need to clarify the distinction between threat and risk (see Tips for Facilitators in section 5.2. above).
- Take into account the specific protection needs that women HRDs may have (in terms of threats, vulnerabilities and capacities, incidents, etc.).
- Take into account the particularities of any other relevant social category when assessing risk (for example, indigenous populations, LGBTI defenders, disabled defenders, etc.).

 **THE SESSION STEP BY STEP :**

Time	Acc. time	Activity	Tool / method / materials
05'		Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectives and structure of the session. 	Have the points ready on a flipchart or PowerPoint slide.
40'	45'	What is a threat? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain different types of threat. Identify threats. Explain the difference between "making" and "posing" a threat. 	Flipchart or PowerPoint slide with statements on "making vs. posing a threat". Blank flipchart. Markers. Cards. Masking tape.
60'	105'	How to assess a threat? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain the five steps involved in assessing threats. Learning activity: threat analysis. 	Flipchart (or slide) with the five steps Print-outs of cases to distribute among participants.
15'	120'	Conclusion	

TIME KEEPING: CALCULATE 140' (2 HOURS 20 MINUTES), INCLUDING A 20' BREAK

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

WHAT IS A THREAT?

 **EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF THREAT (SEE NPM, PP.39-40):**

- Direct (targeting) threat: "Stop messing around or you will end up like your colleague".
- Indirect threats (related to the HRD's work): a partner organisation has just received a death threat; during a press conference a senior Government official accused my organisation of being a bunch of guerrilla collaborators.
- Incidental threats resulting from one's presence in a conflict area.

 **IDENTIFY THREATS**

Ask participants to write down one threat they have received or heard of in the past, on a card. On a flipchart or blackboard, draw two columns, one headed "Direct Threats", and the other "Indirect Threats". Ask participants to determine whether their threat is indirect or direct and to stick it up in the corresponding column using masking tape. Ask participants why they placed their card in one column instead of the other, and engage them in a discussion about the nature of the threat on each card. This will help you to highlight the distinction between indirect and direct threats.

Briefly introduce the concept of security incidents if you find that participants confuse them with threats (See below, Tips for Facilitators).

- Participants might mistake threats for security incidents. It is important to stress that “all threats are security incidents, but not all security incidents are threats”. Threats and security incidents may have different objectives. At a minimum, an intentionally provoked security incident aims to gather information about defenders. Threats are meant to scare defenders and pressure them to abandon their work.
- Participants might talk about potential threats. But most of the time, what they will be talking about are risks. You will need to point out the difference between risks and threats and insist on the fact that a threat has to be something real and concrete. For instance, they might refer to the threat of being attacked. You should explain that this is a risk (i.e. it might happen) but that it is different from a threat, (e.g. “You will end up like your colleague if you carry on like that”). Note that in this case the would-be perpetrator clearly delivered the message that the HRD might suffer the same fate of her/his colleague who was killed or attacked.).

MAKING AND POSING A THREAT

Put up a flipchart with the following statements or project them, and discuss with the group:

- Some people who **make** threats ultimately **pose** a threat.
- Many people who **make** threats **do not pose** a threat.
- Some people who **never make** threats **do pose** a threat.

Draw out the following key elements from the discussion (some examples are provided in the **NPM**):

- A threat is only credible if it suggests that the person behind may (reasonably) be believed to have the capacity to do harm. Sometimes perpetrators try to hide their lack of capacity to act by instilling fear in HRDs. But on other occasions threats by potentially capable perpetrators have a more effective psychological component.
- To react appropriately, you need to know whether the threat can be fulfilled.

- Weighing the capacity of the potential perpetrator (the source of the threat) is important to understand whether someone actually poses a real threat. When issuing threats against HRDs, only some individuals have the intention or capacity to commit a violent act. However, some individuals can represent a serious threat without ever articulating it.
- Point out that the impact of a threat, and an individual’s reaction to it, will differ a) if the victim is reasonably sure that it is unlikely to be carried out and b) if they believe it has some basis in reality. It is very important for the psychosocial well-being of HRDs to be able to assess the feasibility of a threat.

HOW TO ASSESS A THREAT?

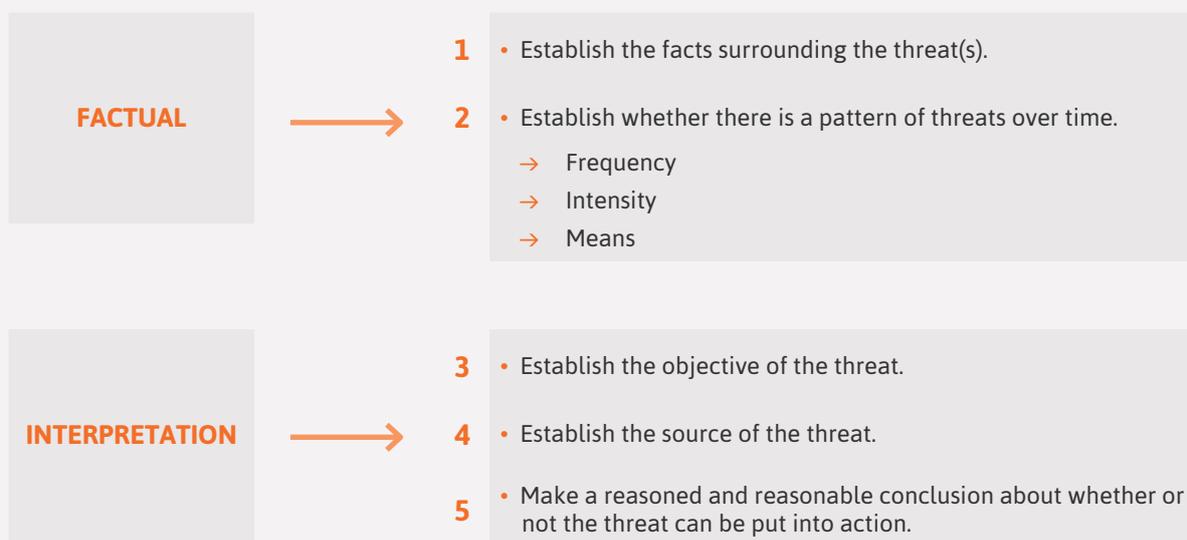
EXPLAIN THE FIVE STEPS INVOLVED IN ASSESSING THREATS

Follow the guidelines given in **NPM (pp. 41-42)**. Write the steps on a flipchart, or project them.

- The five steps are designed to guide this analysis and to ensure that the conclusions are based on a credible interpretation.
It is important to identify the facts surrounding the threats clearly if an HRD is to be able to conduct a good analysis. Indicate that the process has two phases: Phase 1 (regrouping steps 1 and 2) helps identify the facts and patterns surrounding the threats in something close to chronological order.

At this initial stage it is better not to interpret the facts, as they might point to several different causes. The proper analysis and interpretation of the facts is carried out during Phase 2 (steps 3 to 5).

- For Step 2, which involves establishing the pattern, point participants to the elements of frequency (how often have threats occurred, have they been more frequent recently, etc.?), intensity (have the threats become more severe?) and the means employed.
- The analysis evolves over time. It starts with concrete facts, which are then interpreted, before a judgement is formulated. That is, a reasonable conclusion is drawn concerning the likelihood of the threat, based on a clear identification and interpretation of the facts. Hence it is important to follow each of the steps in due order. However, the conclusions reached (step 5) are almost always hypotheses; this is so because all the information needed to reach an undeniable interpretation will never be available. Notwithstanding this, stress that when it comes to designing security measures HRDs should always take action on the basis of the worst-case scenario suggested by the conclusion they have reached. This is not a method for “guessing what might happen”, but for taking informed decisions about what to do when faced by direct threats.



THREAT ANALYSIS

Ask participants to apply the five steps using two or three fictitious cases based on real situations. Print out the examples below and distribute copies to groups of participants. Alternatively, you can use real-life examples drawn from participants' experience or contexts. If you do this, take into account that the emotional aspect of the exercise might be stronger. If the number of participants permits, divide them into small groups (about four or five people each group is ideal).

Participants should then apply the five steps for assessing threats to two different cases or, alternatively, each group can assess one case and present its analysis in the plenary.

-  → Participants might argue that they do not have enough information and that it is difficult to take concrete security measures based on hypothetical cases. However, not having enough information is information in itself. You know that you do not know. Security measures will therefore have to be designed on the basis of this lack of information and on an analysis of the worst case scenario.
- When discussing the result of the group's work on threat analysis, give guidance to ensure all facts are gathered and all possible interpretations have been taken into account. This can be a quite complex and time intensive but is a useful exercise. Some pointers are provided below to facilitate discussion

→ **CASE 1: THREAT AGAINST A FEMALE LAWYER**

A young female lawyer, with very little experience, is hired by the victim's family in a murder case where the defendant is an army officer. For a whole week after the first public hearing of the case, the lawyer receives phone calls at night, during which the caller does not speak and hangs up after a while. Several months pass and due to the sensitive nature of the case, the lawyer, although still working independently, decides to look for support from a human rights NGO. Together, the lawyer and the NGO organise a press conference to explain the case and the progress that has been made. The following night, the phone calls begin again, but this time a voice insults the lawyer ("bitch", "slut", "pig") for a few seconds and then hangs up. A few months later there is another public hearing, preceded by some media coverage over the previous days. The lawyer answers questions from the media inside the court building. One evening in the days prior to the delivery of the judgment, the lawyer receives a phone call from a man, who says: "I was next to you in court today. Next time we are so close together, you will not be so lucky". The lawyer is so scared that the following day she asks for an urgent meeting with the NGO supporting her, in order to analyse the threats.



- **Facts:** an army officer is accused of murder; first public hearing of the case; no military court; victims' lawyer receives first phone calls a week after the public hearing without caller talking; press conference; phone calls insulting the lawyer at night; second public hearing; public declarations of the lawyer on TV; last threatening phone call.
- **Patterns:** phone calls; threats received after public appearances; the "intensity" of the threats increases in a gradual but clear manner (but "intensity" is not equal to capacity to act).
- **Objective:** it was never stated! But it seems to be that the lawyer should stop working on the case.
- **Source:** the information we have indicates that the threats might come from someone who is somehow linked to the case but does not have access to information on the legal proceedings. The threats might come either from actors within the security forces who do not want the army officer to be condemned but can't run the risk of declaring it publicly, or from the army officer's family. From the pattern of the threats we can make an educated guess that whoever is making them does not have access to confidential information on the case. The author of the threats seems to get his/her information only from the media and the public appearances of the lawyer.
- **Conclusion:** we can consider this threat not to be real. The author does not pose a threat, as s/he has not demonstrated any capacity to take action on her/his threats.

→ **CASE 2: THREAT AGAINST A RURAL ACTIVIST**

- A woman activist, with extensive organisational experience, moves with her family to a rural area. After a few months, she begins helping her neighbours to strengthen the community's internal organisation to help them in their struggle for land rights. The community aims to occupy some land over which they are in dispute with a cattle rancher. Some weeks later, a senior police officer meets the woman's husband and warns him: "If you can't keep your wife at home, then make sure you control her." A few days later, the activist finds a handmade invitation to her own funeral stuck to her front door. Not long afterwards, when they return home one day, she and her husband find the front door open and broken furniture inside the house. When they wake up the next morning, they find that all their chickens have been slaughtered and that someone has left a hand-written note which reads: «You should leave your home after reading this note. Don't bother to make a fuss about it with your friends in the capital. If you decide not to leave, you will end up like your chickens. Signed: Army of the People. God, Order, Fatherland".

- **Facts:** the woman activist moves to the rural region with her family and helps people to defend their land; does the police officer give unsolicited advice or issue a threat to the husband?; first threat (invitation to her funeral); break-in to the woman's house; chickens slaughtered, property destroyed and death threat made.
- **Patterns:** there is a clear increase in the intensity of the threat in this case, from verbal to physical actions that could expose the WHRD to being attacked by the perpetrator. Note the use of symbols and the references to death as well, which are meant to scare the victim and accompany the increase in the intensity of the threat.
- **Objective:** that the woman stop her activities and leave the area.
- **Source:** in this case, it is possible to identify several possible authors, either armed thugs linked to cattle ranchers, cattle ranchers themselves, or state officials who wish to use the lands. Although it may not be clear who is behind the threats, the perpetrators have demonstrated a clear capacity to act. Note that it is not possible to say for sure whether the police officer is threatening or just doing a favour to the husband. In a sexist society, he might just be warning him that his wife's activities might get them into trouble, either because the policeman has heard something or because he is linked to the authors of the threats. It is very ambiguous, and this is why it is important not to assume that things are as they appear to be at first sight.
- **Conclusion:** the threat is real and the next step is likely to be physical harm to the activist or her family.

→ CASE 3: THREAT TARGETING A HRD'S FAMILY MEMBER

Two HRDs go to a small town on one of the regular visits they make every other month to gather information about human rights abuses. IDPs generally come down from their camp to meet with the HRDs on a previously agreed date. These visits generally last for about three days. During the first day of the visit, one IDP tells the HRDs "People have been asking about you". The HRDs decide to carry on with their work. One of the two receives a phone call on his mobile from his young daughter, Lea. The girl is quite worried because she has received an anonymous call saying that her dad has been found poisoned. At the same moment, an IDP approaches the HRDs and hands over a note that reads:

08.30: Lea at school;
13.00: Lea at home;
15.00: Lea volley ball;
17.00: Lea ????????

- **Facts:** HRDs collect information about HR abuses; IDP tells the HRDs that "people have been asking about you"; phone call from Lea (daughter) in distress after receiving bad news about her father; HRD (the father) receives note (with information of his daughter's routine).
- **Patterns:** It appears that the HRDs and their families have been tailed for a while, both in the village, close to the camp, and at home. Both Lea and the HRD have received the same kind of message.
- **Objective:** that the HRDs stop collecting information about IDP-related human rights abuses.
- **Source:** The source is clearly related to people whose interests are affected by the HRDs' activities. With the information at hand, it is hard to tell who they really are. They could be members of militias involved in HR abuses. They have shown some capacity and willingness to act (they have managed to find out where the HRDs live, their phone numbers, and their whereabouts) and they seem to know how to make sure that the HRDs get their messages.
- **Conclusion:** This threat can be considered as a warning; action will be needed to reduce vulnerabilities and increase capacities.

CONCLUSION

Close the session by having participants restate the key learning points.

Relocate this session within the whole security management process by reminding participants of the importance of understanding the context when analysing threats (refer to the concepts discussed in [Chapter 5.1](#) above).

Remind participants of the importance of analysing threats if they are to be able to make good use of the risk equation ([Chapter 5.2](#) above)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- > Van Brabant. Op. Cit. Chapter 3.2. (pp. 22-38).
- > FLD. Op. Cit. Chapter 6.
- > Comité Cerezo Mexico et al. Op. Cit. Chapter 2. (pp. 31-35).

