SHELTER THAT CARES AND EMPOWERS

Best practices in psychosocial accompaniment for human rights defenders in temporary relocation programmes

Andrea Galán Santamarina
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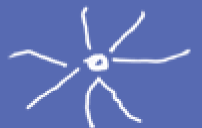
For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

Audre Lorde



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01

INTRODUCTION

Accompanying human rights defenders (HRDs or "defenders") in their struggles is a **human, professional and political challenge that carries great responsibility**. In our experience, **temporary relocation programmes** can be a **valuable tool for holistic protection**, but they can also present complex challenges. This is especially true when they aim not only to ensure the care and wellbeing of defenders but also to strengthen their capacity to pursue collective struggles.

We have been closely involved with the realities of temporary shelter for **over a decade**, beginning with our participation in the *Programa Asturiano de Atención a Víctimas de la Violencia en Colombia* (Asturian Programme for Assistance to Victims of Violence in Colombia – PAV) through our activism in the student movement at the University of Oviedo. We organised talks in each faculty, raised funds to support travel, supported mobilisation for peace and social justice in Colombia and called on the Asturian government to ensure economic dignity. At that time, the programme faced severe financial cuts and survived, despite its precarious situation, thanks to the unwavering personal and political commitment of *Soldepaz Pachakuti*, its coordinator Javier Orozco, and the steadfast support of Asturias' social and trade union networks.

In 2019, when the programme marked its 20th anniversary, we were commissioned to carry out an **evaluation of its psychosocial impact** over two decades[1]. We were able to contact and gather the perspectives of 46 of the 119 individuals who had participated in the programme up to that point, gaining an deeper insight into the enormous, challenging, and invaluable work involved in its management and coordination. One of the primary recommendations from that evaluation – the systematic incorporation of professional, gender sensitive and culturally relevant psychosocial accompaniment tailored to the programme's realities – became, from the following year onward and with the support of ProtectDefenders.eu, an **ongoing professional endeavour**. It remains, to this day, a deeply stimulating and rewarding challenge.

The first step was to define a **theoretical framework** to approach this challenge. From the outset of our involvement in the PAV, and especially in the process of researching and developing this guide, we adopted a **psychosocial approach** rooted in Liberation Social Psychology[2] as the **epistemological foundation** of our work. The experiences of numerous therapists and support teams working with individuals in contexts of political violence over recent decades have shown the need for approaches that do not decontextualise their reactions or psychological problems, that understand the social dimensions of their experiences, and that demonstrate a political commitment to their struggles, in order to establish an adequate bond.[3] Consequently, the hegemonic theoretical frameworks of Western clinical psychology have proven to be of limited relevance when applied to work with individuals and communities who are victims of human rights violations.

Despite having a clear theoretical and political framework, this task initially felt isolating and confusing, as there were **few practical references** on how to develop psychosocial accompaniment or support **in the context of temporary relocation programmes**. In this regard, the recommendations that emerged from the 2018 meeting on *Challenges and proposals for strengthening temporary relocation programmes and cooperation policies for protection in Spain*, highlighted several important considerations. Among them was the need to "develop shared tools and standards of accompaniment, psychosocial care, self-care, communication and public presence, based on experience and shared approaches to protection, an intersectional feminist perspective and cultural relevance"[4]". Shortly afterwards, in 2019, the *Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk*[5], were published, representing the first attempt to systematise and guide work in this area. These were developed through the collective experience of a diverse and wide-ranging group of academics and practitioners working with HRDs.

"Approaches [are needed] that do not decontextualise their reactions or psychological problems, that understand the social dimensions of their experiences, and that demonstrate a political commitment to their struggles."

That same year also saw the publication of *Temporary Shelter and Relocation Initiatives: Perspectives of Managers and Participants*,[6] which addresses issues related to wellbeing and psychosocial support in temporary relocation programmes, drawing on the valuable perspectives of individuals who have participated in a range of such initiatives.

These publications have been extremely useful, providing a decisive impetus for integrating wellbeing and psychosocial support into temporary relocation programmes. In recent years, all such programmes have incorporated this component, to the point that it has become a **priority for the institutions and organisations that fund these initiatives** worldwide. Beyond these publications, another fundamental factor has been the **growing network activity** developed by these programmes at the local, regional and international levels. This collaborative effort has also involved practitioners working in psychosocial and wellbeing fields, facilitating an exchange of best practices, experiences and shared challenges. Through this collective learning, we have been able to engage with the work of colleagues and gradually move forward together. This process transformed the initial sense of isolation and confusion into shared learning.

Six years after the publication of the Barcelona Guidelines, we continue to believe in the need to seek “opportunit[ies] to develop and improve our practice while recognising our individual and collective limitations,” as well as to encourage “conversation between and collaboration amongst all those involved in a relocation initiative,” as stated in the guidelines. Integrating and expanding on these foundations implies recognising, from the outset, that **each shelter programme operates within its own specific context and realities**, with differing possibilities for change and improvement. These programmes pursue multiple objectives, which are prioritized differently in each case, and involve a wide range of actors. For this reason, it is neither realistic nor achievable to propose a single quality standard applicable to all programmes.

What is possible and, in our view, useful is to gather, organise and share with this community of practice that forms the ecosystem of temporary relocation programmes, those experiences that have proven effective in facilitating shelters focused on the wellbeing, care and empowerment of human rights defenders and their collective struggles. To this end, this guide offers a **systematisation** of what we refer to, with epistemological humility, as “**best practices**” grounded in a psychosocial approach.

This guide’s main goal is to be **useful to all those involved in these programmes**. The central thesis advanced, based on the theoretical and practical framework outlined above, is the need to **mainstream the psychosocial approach** across all phases and actors involved. We believe that **all those involved in shelter provide accompaniment** and, therefore, integrating a psychosocial or wellbeing-centred approach involves much more than simply having professionals dedicated to providing psychological support. From this perspective, support is understood not as the exclusive responsibility of mental health professionals, but as a collective process in which all actions contribute to repairing the harm caused by political violence. Accordingly, **we distinguish between psychosocial accompaniment**, which is carried out by everyone involved in the programme, and **specialised psychosocial support**, which is provided by psychology practitioners, therapists, and trauma specialists who focus on promoting wellbeing and the emotional and psychological impacts of political violence.

Finally, we consider the framework of the **2030 Agenda** to be relevant to the development of this guide. Within this framework, psychosocial accompaniment plays a key and necessary role in ensuring the different types of sustainability (environmental, social and economic) that guide implementation of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. This is because it directly affects the wellbeing of individuals on the front line of defending human rights who are temporarily relocated outside their usual environment, ensuring the continuity of their work under improved conditions. Strengthening the shelter processes for these people, as well as safeguarding the wellbeing of those working in these programmes, is essential to guarantee their holistic protection, thus contributing to multiple SDGs: by supporting the recovery of those who have experienced various types of violence and human rights violations, it addresses mental health and emotional wellbeing (SDG 3); by strengthening autonomy and capacity building, taking into account ethnicity and gender, it contributes to reducing inequalities (SDG 10); by preparing participants as agents of change and reconciliation, it contributes to peacebuilding and reconstruction in countries of origin (SDG 16); and finally, by fostering cooperation networks between institutions, organisations and communities, it promotes a comprehensive and sustainable approach (SDG 17).

“We believe that all those involved in shelter provide accompaniment and, therefore, integrating a psychosocial or wellbeing-centred approach involves much more than simply having professionals dedicated to providing psychological support.”

02

METHODOLOGY

This guide uses a qualitative methodology based on mixed methods of data collection.

First, a **systematic literature review** was conducted on psychosocial accompaniment, temporary relocation programmes and work with human rights defenders.

Next, **interviews were conducted with 22 key actors** to obtain as comprehensive a view as possible of the field of temporary shelter for human rights defenders, incorporating the perspectives of both academics and practitioners.

In parallel, a **documentary review** was conducted of the specialised psychosocial support work carried out in the temporary relocation programme in Asturias, in which one of the guide's authors was involved over the last seven years, including through the 2019 evaluation of the programme.[1] In addition, during the process of developing this guide, psychosocial accompaniment continued to be provided to six HRDs participating in the programme, informing an ongoing process of active reflection grounded in the principles of participatory action research (PAR).

Finally, this guide draws on **collaborative work** developed in recent years through coordination initiatives among temporary relocation programmes, such as the **Pro-TEJER network**, as well as **peer-led training spaces** self-managed by professionals providing psychosocial accompaniment in temporary relocation programmes in Spain.

Using this methodology, the guide incorporates the experience of **leading organisations** working with human rights defenders such as ProtectDefenders.eu, IM-Defensoras, Aluna, EXIL Association and COS Cooperativa de salut; **leading academics** in the field of wellbeing in temporary relocation programmes, including Alice Nah, Mäik Muller, Leandro García and Patricia Bartley, as well as the operational experience of the following temporary relocation programmes:

- **Barcelona Protege a Periodistas de México** (Barcelona Protects Journalists from Mexico – PAT-P), *Tàula Per Mèxic.*
- **Asturian Programme for Assistance to Victims of Violence in Colombia (PAV),** *Soldepaz Pachakuti.*
- **Basque Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (NARE)**, ZEHAR.
- **Catalan Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (PCPDDH)**, CCAR.
- **Temporary Protection Programme for Human Rights Defenders**, Amnesty International.
- **Galicia Abriga**, *Solidaridad Internacional.*
- **Shelter City Holanda**, Justice & Peace.
- **Martin Roth Initiative (MRI) programmes**, Germany.
- **Protective Fellowship Scheme y Protective Writing Fellowship**, Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York, United Kingdom.
- **Shelter City Costa Rica**, *Fundación Acceso*.
- ***Centro de Proteção Integral* (CEPI) de Brasil**, *Justiça Global*.

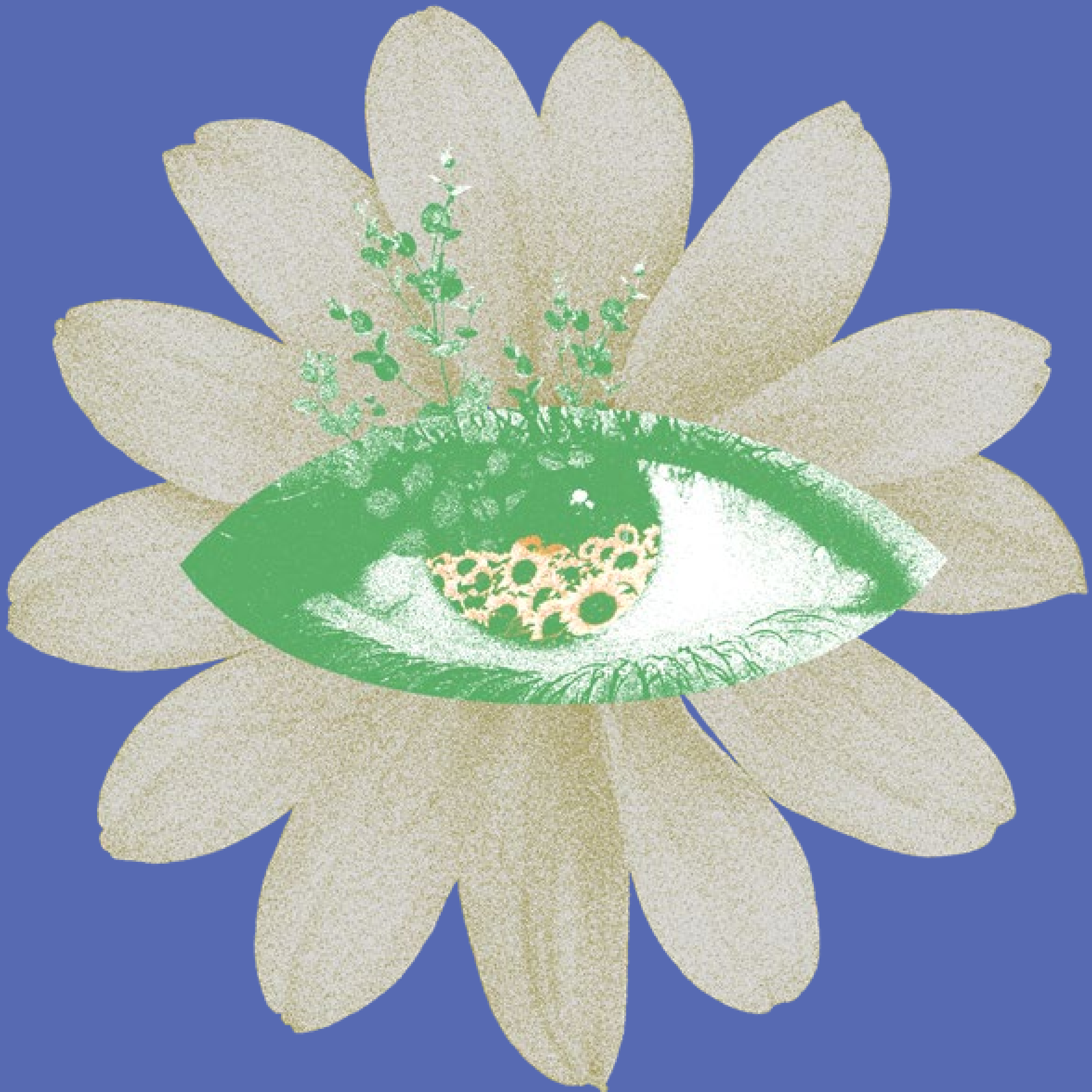
This document also identifies some **methodological limitations**. Despite efforts to gather experiences beyond the European context, most of the interviewees are Westerners, particularly from Spain, which aligns with the experience and location of the authors. This introduces a bias, framing the reflection primarily from the perspective of temporary relocation programmes developed in these territories.

Moreover, due to constraints of time and financial resources, it was not possible to directly incorporate, in a structured way, the voices of the defenders who will be supported through implementation of these best practices. While this absence does not invalidate the report's content, it constitutes a limitation that could be usefully addressed in future work using more participatory methodologies.

Finally, this research is situated within academic traditions and professional practices linked to Western psychology and epistemology frameworks. This positioning shapes the research process and may limit the integration of knowledge from non-Western contexts. Although strategies of self-reflection, critical review and dialogue with non-hegemonic perspectives were implemented, it is important to recognise that these measures do not completely eliminate the influence of the positionality from which the analysis is conducted.

Taken together, these factors influence how the phenomena addressed are problematised and interpreted, carrying the risk of reproducing epistemological hierarchies. Therefore, the results and recommendations should be understood as context-specific interpretations. Future work could move towards collaborative, intercultural or decolonial methodologies that broaden the spectrum of voices and epistemologies represented in the production of knowledge.

03 KEY ELEMENTS OF TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES



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3.1. ¿WHO ARE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

When referring to **human rights defenders,** the **Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**,[7] adopted on 9 December 1998 by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, is the key reference. This document was the first international instrument to recognise the defence of human rights as a right in itself and to acknowledge the work carried out by individuals and groups to eliminate violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms worldwide. Since its adoption, the term human rights defender has gained increasing prominence, replacing other terms such as human rights "activist", "professional", "actor" or "monitor".

In 2004, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) sought to provide a clearer and more specific definition of the term in Fact Sheet No. 29:[8]

"To be a human rights defender, a person can act to address any human right (or rights) on behalf of individuals or groups. Human rights defenders seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realization of economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights defenders address any human rights concerns."

This document clarifies that a human rights defender **can be anyone**, regardless of gender, age or origin. No professional qualifications are required, nor is it necessary for the human rights activity to be carried out in an employment context.

Despite its broad acceptance, this definition has certain **shortcomings** that warrant consideration. On the one hand, its wide scope creates ambiguity and leaves room for arbitrary and self-serving interpretations by states. On the other hand, some of the criteria it establishes (accepting the universality of human rights, acting within their conceptual framework and doing so through peaceful means) do not resolve this ambiguity and can be manipulated to exclude or discredit certain actors.[9]

In other contexts, organisations or reports, **more restrictive definitions** than the internationally recognised UN definition are adopted, limiting the concept of human rights defenders to those who belong to social organisations, work in the field of civil and political rights or carry out this work on a paid basis.[10] This conceptual narrowing not only hinders self-recognition as a defender, but can also be used politically to render the work of certain groups invisible or criminalise it, even affecting how attacks against and killings of defenders are recorded, contributing to disparities in reported figures.

From the perspective of **Feminist Holistic Protection** developed by the Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (*IM-Defensoras*),[11] it is equally important to may not identify as human rights defenders, yet actively defend rights from their territories, bodies and communities. It is therefore necessary to adopt a **broad approach** that avoids confining defenders to rigid categories. However, this concept is used intentionally because it enables access to the international protection framework that obliges states and other actors to respect and guarantee security.

Accordingly, in this guide, we use the notion of "human rights defender" (hereinafter also referred to as "defenders") as a **political and strategic** concept. This approach integrates institutional, critical and feminist perspectives to understand that being a human rights defender is not a closed category, but a dynamic, plural and situated process.

3.2. WHAT IS POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

From a psychosocial perspective, **political or socio-political violence** refers to violence used to **impose or protect political, economic or ideological interests**, both by the state or state actors and by non-state actors acting on behalf of certain powerful groups. Its purpose is to control the population, suppress dissent and maintain the established order. From an intersectional perspective, such violence is understood to **interact with other forms of structural violence**, such as patriarchal, racist or class-based violence, thereby reinforcing mechanisms of domination.[12]

Political repression is understood as the intentional and targeted use of this violence against human rights defenders and organised social and community sectors. Its main objective is to **fracture the social fabric in order to weaken collective struggles** and undermine their capacity for advocacy and resistance. A defining feature of this form of violence is the use of fear and psychological terror as an instrument of **social control**, seeking to paralyse, isolate and dismantle individuals and their collectives.

The **specific threats** faced by human rights defenders are **multifaceted**: physical, psychological, economic and social. Furthermore, this violence is directed not only at the defenders themselves, but also at their friends, family, social and organisational environments, exacerbating their vulnerability.[13]

Examples of these practices include surveillance, monitoring and interception of communications; stigmatisation; investigation and criminalisation;arrest and detention; death threats; attempted kidnapping or assault; the use of sexual violence and selective killings.

This violence tends to follow a **common pattern** that unfolds in four stages.[14] First, defenders are **ignored**, their work is made invisible and their complaints are disregarded, so that their voices go unheard. When their work begins to gain visibility, they are **stigmatised** through media campaigns and official discourse that seek to delegitimise them, presenting them as confrontational, violent or enemies of development. Then there is a move towards **criminalisation**, using the law arbitrarily to intimidate, prosecute or imprison them without due process, with the aim of inhibiting their action and generating fear in their communities. Finally, if defenders persist in their work, many face the most extreme phase: **elimination**, which can culminate in the killing of defenders or those close to them, often covered up by the media or presented as ordinary crimes. This systematic process seeks to silence, neutralise and destroy human rights work, spreading fear throughout the communities that support it. These four stages do not always follow a linear or sequential pattern. In many contexts, killings or serious attacks may occur without the previous stages having been completed. Rather, these stages should be understood as possible dynamics, requiring a specific, contextualised and individualised analysis of each case.

The **forms of violence** perpetrated against defenders and their consequences are shaped by factors such as **gender, ethnic origin, religion, social class, geographical location or sexual orientation**, making it essential to adopt an **intersectional approach** when analysing the threats faced by each defender. In this regard, women defenders, ethnic (indigenous or Afro-descendant) leaders, peasants, trade unionists and LGBTIQ+ individuals are currently the groups most at risk.[15]

"The specific threats faced by human rights defenders are multifaceted: physical, psychological, economic and social."

3.3. WHAT THREATS DO DEFENDERS FACE?

Human rights defenders are a fundamental pillar of the international human rights system, playing an essential role in the pursuit of more just societies. Yet across all regions of the world, their work is frequently obstructed, making defending human rights a **high-risk** activity.[16]

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders refers to the **obligations of states and the role and responsibilities of non-state actors**. As the primary duty bearer, the state has a duty to ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their work in a safe environment.[17] At the same time, other non-state actors, such as businesses, also have a responsibility to promote and respect the rights of these individuals.

In recent years, **the international context has deteriorated significantly**, both in terms of the protection and realisation of human rights in general, and the guarantees for the work of human rights defenders in particular. Violence, judicial and administrative repression, killings, and adoption of legislation restricting their activities are increasing in many countries.

Despite the challenges involved in obtaining fully accurate data, numerous reports document the scale of violence directed against social leaders, human rights defenders, their families and their broader social and organisational environments. According to the global analysis published by Front Line Defenders in 2025, at least **324 human rights defenders were killed in 2024** in 32 countries. **Colombia** leads these figures with 157 killings, followed – at a considerable distance – by **Mexico** (32), **Guatemala** (29) and **Palestine** (22).[18]

According to the 2025 edition of **Amnesty International**'s annual report, *The State of the World's Human Rights*, the global human rights landscape is marked by a persistent pattern of violations of international humanitarian law in ongoing armed conflicts. The report draws particular attention to the brutal genocide perpetrated by Israel in Gaza, the repression of dissent in many countries, discrimination, economic and climate injustices, and the misuse of technology to infringe on human rights. It documents **human rights concerns during 2024 in 150 countries**. Amnesty International also highlights the role played by the governments of the most powerful states and the business interests behind what appears to be an **effort to dismantle the so-called "rules-based world order"** that emerged from the post–World War II consensus following the Nazi Holocaust. The organisation warns of a **global trend** towards authoritarian practices – an alarming regression that risks deepening in the years ahead.[19]

Similarly, **Human Rights Watch**, in its **World Report 2025**, underlines that developments over the previous year demonstrate that **liberal democracies are not always reliable champions of human rights** at home or abroad. At the domestic level, a growing number of European governments have invoked the economic crisis and security concerns as pretexts to restrict rights, especially those of migrants and refugees, while failing to take effective measures to advance economic and social rights. At the international level, the report points to a lack of political resolve to confront abuses and uphold democratic norms.

"As the primary duty bearer, the state has a duty to ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their work in a safe environment... [O]ther non-state actors, such as businesses, also have a responsibility to promote and respect the rights of these individuals."

Now more than ever, the importance of defending international human rights standards and democratic institutions is evident, in the face of the craven unwillingness of these governments. The Human Rights Watch report emphasises that the **responsibility to protect** human rights lies with both governments and civil society and notes the challenge – and opportunity – of our time: "[W]hen rights are protected, humanity flourishes. When they are denied, the cost is measured not in abstract principles but in human lives."[20]

This global deterioration in the human rights situation has **increased the demand for protection mechanisms, without a corresponding increase in available resources**. Many budgets that previously supported these initiatives are being redirected towards migration control and defence policies. This shift not only limits protection possibilities but also heightens the risks faced by defenders who are forced to leave their countries of origin. This is particularly significant given that many HRDs are forced into displacement, exile or migration (through both regular and irregular channels), or are on lists of applicants for international protection in various countries.

The universal values of **solidarity** and **cooperation** that underpin these protection strategies are under threat. Safe regions and countries are increasingly scarce, and the **political will** needed to develop programmes that guarantee not only the lives of human rights defenders, but also safe and humane migration pathways, is **declining**.

"[M]any human rights defenders are forced into displacement, exile or migration (through both regular and irregular channels), or are on lists of applicants for international protection in various countries."

3.4. WHAT PROTECTION MECHANISMS EXIST?

Within the international human rights system, a **multi-level protection regime**[21], has been developed, providing an analytical framework for the various protection strategies aimed at guaranteeing the safety of human rights defenders and the continuity of their work in contexts of violence, repression and criminalisation. This regime comprises **mechanisms operating at different levels**: local, national, regional and international, which interact and reinforce each other. Coordination across these levels is essential to provide a comprehensive, sustainable and coherent response to the threats faced by those defending human rights.

At the **local and organisational** level, protection strategies include security protocols, self-protection measures and community-based rapid response networks. In contexts marked by persistent violence, human rights defenders, their organisations and communities have had to develop their **own collective protection strategies** in response to the lack of state guarantees. For many communities, especially indigenous peoples, confronting violence is not new, but a historical constant. Over time, these communities have built strong social fabrics and their own forms of justice, which have endured despite repressive policies and armed conflicts. Examples include Indigenous Guards, Cimarrón Guards and Peasant Guards, Peace Communities, Peasant Reserve Zones and Humanitarian Zones established in Colombia, as well as diverse forms of protection and self-defence developed by indigenous communities in Mexico and Guatemala.

These self-protection structures, grounded in collective action and autonomy, **not only protect the lives of defenders, but also preserve their territories, culture and organisational capacity in the face of repression.**

"In contexts marked by persistent violence, human rights defenders, their organisations and communities have had to develop their own collective protection strategies in response to the lack of state guarantees."

At the **national and regional** levels, there are institutional mechanisms, state responsibility, and networks linking civil society organisations. While states bear the primary responsibility for protecting human rights defenders, they often fail to fully comply with this duty and, in many cases, are themselves perpetrators of violence.

In recent years, civil-society-led protection **networks and strategies** have been strengthened. Initiatives such as *Somos Defensores* in Colombia and the regional Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (*IM-Defensoras*) have developed mechanisms for urgent action, public denunciation, and temporary relocation, integrating a **feminist and self-care** approach that recognises the specific forms of violence faced by women defenders and values collective healing as an essential dimension of protection.

At the **international** level, some of the **strategies that have been recognised as effective** include international accompaniment, regular contact and visits, urgent appeals, public statements, periodic reporting on the human rights situation, trial monitoring, emergency financial support, the establishment of international civil society organisations and networks, and the creation of temporary shelter or **relocation programmes**.[22] The current UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, recognises temporary relocation programmes as "**best practice**" and welcomes the growing number of such mechanismss.[23]

3.5. TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES: CONCEPT AND MODELS

Temporary shelter or **relocation programmes** are initiatives that offer **safe stays** to defenders outside zones of risk. These programmes **generally last no longer than two years** and in some cases extend to the defenders' **immediate family members**.

The main objective of these programmes is to **enhance the safety and wellbeing** of human rights defenders through activities aimed at protection, self-care and denouncing human rights violations in their countries of origin.[4] They should be understood as part of a broader **holistic protection** strategy, activated as a last resort when local and national protection measures have proved insufficient.

By their very nature, these programmes have an **immediate effect on the protection of the life** and physical integrity of those at risk, by removing them from sources of threat and offering them a safe environment where they can rest, recover and strengthen capacities. They contribute to **expanding protection strategies and individual and collective self-care practices** with a view to return. They also **strengthen organisational processes** by fostering new international support networks, raising awareness of their struggles and promoting their political advocacy. **Host societies also benefit** from these initiatives, drawing on exchanges of experiences, testimonies and knowledge of human rights defenders.

In the words of the Special Rapporteur: [22]

"Structured relocation initiatives that allow defenders to continue their work while away, help them to forge links with host communities, provide support for their families and allow for flexibility in their duration of stay help defenders to manage the uncertainty, isolation and challenges of relocating elsewhere."

Although these programmes share a common inspiration and goal, which is to express international solidarity with human rights defenders in a practical way, the diversity and range of these programmes is very broad, depending on various factors. [6],[24]

One key factor is the **nature of the managing organisation**, which directly influences how a programme operates. Some programmes are jointly managed by the state and civil society actors, while others operate independently. In both cases, there is usually some degree of institutional collaboration, particularly in areas such as funding, visa issuance, or support from local authorities.

Another important factor is the **programme's duration**, which can be short-term (three months or less) or extend to one or two years, depending on the host country's immigration laws and the specific objectives of shelter.

The **target profile** also varies: some programmes are open to any human rights defender, while others are aimed at specific groups, such as women defenders, journalists, academics or activists from a particular region or country. This depends, to a large extent, on the objectives of the coordinating organisation, local context and the priorities of the programme's donors.

Regarding the **selection process**, some programmes operate through open, public calls for applications, allowing anyone who meets certain requirements to apply.

Others select participants based on recommendations from partner entities or selection committees involving specific organisations from the defenders' countries of origin or the host society. Some programmes issue calls at fixed intervals (e.g., annually or biannually), which facilitates planning, while others receive applications on an ongoing basis, enabling faster responses in emergencies, albeit with a greater administrative burden. Some programmes combine both approaches.

The programme's **objectives** are another key factor shaping its design and operation. For example, initiatives may aim to provide spaces for rest and recovery, offer protection from serious threats, strengthen support networks and international solidarity, promote advocacy and public reporting, or provide specialised training. While many programmes combine several of these objectives, some focus on a single goal (e.g. rest and recovery).

These objectives shape the **type of support** offered by the programme. This can range from basic accompaniment aimed at rest and recovery to opportunities to participate in training, public advocacy or collaboration with local organisations. In material terms, programmes usually cover travel, accommodation and basic services, including health coverage, as well as living expenses and allowances. In some cases, this financial support also extends to leisure or sports activities. Most programmes currently offer psychological and psychosocial support, and some provide complementary care such as nutritional guidance, physiotherapy or alternative therapies. The level of financial support varies considerably between programmes: while some cover only essential needs, others provide additional funding for cultural activities, training, family support or financial assistance upon the defender's return.

The **type of shelter** can be individual, family or organisational. Although including families in the relocation process involves logistical and administrative challenges, it helps to make programmes more gender-sensitive, as many women defenders face greater barriers to participation if they have to leave their children or relatives behind. Some programmes offer the option of providing shelter to several members of the same organisation, promoting collective shelter arrangements. Another important consideration is the type of accommodation offered, which may be an individual space where defenders can live alone or with their family, or a shared space with other hosted defenders.

All these variations depend largely on the programme's financial resources and the sustainability of each initiative.

Figure 1. Characteristics of temporary relocation programmes

Characteristic	Options
Nature of the managing organisation	• Joint management by the state and civil society vs. independent (NGO, foundation, university, professional association, etc.) • Sole activity of the organisation vs. one of several activities it undertakes
Duration	• Short (maximum 3 months) vs longer-term (e.g. 6 months, 1 year)
Target profile	• Open to any human rights defender vs. aimed at a specific group (women, type of leadership, country or region, profession, etc.)
Selection process	• Open or public call vs. closed or selective • Single-periodic call vs. continuous application process
Objetives	• Rest and self-care • Emergency relocation in the event of a serious threat • Advocacy and public reporting • Establishment of support networks • Training
Type of shelter	• Individual vs family vs organisational • Individual vs shared accommodation
Support offered	• Travel, accommodation and basic services • Health services • Living expenses, allowances, leisure, sport • Psychological-psychosocial support • Training and capacity building • Other services: nutrition, physiotherapy, alternative therapies, etc.

3.6. CURRENT STATUS OF TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES

Around the world, there are initiatives that provide support and address the need for temporary relocation for human rights defenders who are threatened or whose lives are at risk. Recognising the diversity that characterises such programmes, the following are some relevant and representative examples from different regions. This is not an exhaustive list but an illustrative selection intended to provide a general overview of the main existing approaches.

At the **international level**, one of the defining features of temporary relocation initiatives is networking. The two main **networks of cities** and **regional entities** involved in these programmes are ICORN and Shelter Cities.

The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN),[1] established in Stavanger, Norway, in 2006, brings together **83 member cities and regions in 19 countries around the world. They offer long-term temporary residences to writers, artists and journalists at risk**, many of whom can be considered human rights defenders due to the nature of their work. **Shelter City**[2] was founded in 2012 by Justice & Peace Netherlands as a practical and accessible way to support human rights defenders at risk.

1 https://www.icorn.org/

2 https://sheltercity.org/

Conditions vary depending on the host city and institution. The network is a growing global movement of cities, organisations and committed citizens and currently has 27 participating cities in the Netherlands, Georgia, Tanzania, Benin, Costa Rica, Nepal, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Uruguay. It has already supported more than 1,000 defenders – including journalists, academics and LGBTQ+ activists – by offering safe temporary stays to rest, expand their community networks and exchange knowledge and practices before returning to their territories.

On the **African continent**, the **Ubuntu Hub Cities**[3] initiative, managed by the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network (PAHRDN, also known as "AfricanDefenders"), operates in eight strategically selected cities. Local partners provide individualised support and follow-up to relocated defenders. The initiative offers financial support, the possibility of hosting family members, psychological support and assistance with integration into the host society. The main objective is to ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of individuals during relocation, while allowing them to continue their human rights work.

In **Asia**, there has been a major push in recent years to launch temporary relocation projects, largely through the **Forum Asia**[4] Initiative. Shelters have been established in Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan, offering relocation to individuals engaged in non-violent human rights work who face urgent risks due to their activities. Applicants must have exhausted all ordinary protection resources in their country and be endorsed by a Forum Asia member or partner organisation. These programmes offer six-month stays, covering living expenses and travel costs, and include a work plan tailored to the profile of the individual hosted. Psycho-emotional support is provided with the aim of ensuring that, at the end of the relocation period, the defender can resume their work with strengthened skills, networks and visibility.

3 https://africandefenders.org/what-we-do/hub-cities/

4 https://forum-asia.org/what-we-do/

In the **Americas**, initiatives include a programme by the Government of **Canada**, in collaboration with UNHCR, Front Line Defenders and ProtectDefenders.eu. This programme facilitates relocation procedures for individuals selected by these organisations and grants permanent residence. Canadian civil society organisations participate in the integration and supporting process. Given its longer-term nature, this programme is not designed for emergency situations.

In **Brazil**, the ***Centro de Protección Integral*** (Centre for Integral Protection – CEPI),[5] a project run by Justiça Global, provides temporary relocation and shelter for human rights defenders working in Latin America who face life-threatening risks, emergencies, or extreme stress due to their work.

Other initiatives on the continent include ***casas de respiro*** (respite houses) or ***casas de cuidado y sanación*** (care and healing houses). They generally offer short stays designed to promote individual and collective healing and self-care. One example is **Casa La Serena** in Oaxaca, Mexico, launched in 2016 by the Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (*IM-Defensoras*). It provides 10-day individual, collective or organisational stays for women defenders from Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mexico. *IM-Defensoras* currently operates two safe houses (*La Marianela* in El Salvador and *El Abrazo* in Mexico), two respite houses (*La Siguata* in Honduras and *La Serena* in Mexico) and a network of safe spaces for high-risk women in need of refuge. During their stays, defenders engage in intensive reflection on their lives and struggles.

"In Spain, there are currently 10 temporary relocation programmes, including some of the longest-running and most influential in this field at European level."

5 https://www.global.org.br/cepi/

In **Europe**, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has identified **temporary relocation initiatives in 18 Member States**, implemented either by states themselves or led by cities, academic institutions or civil society. Several of these states have comprehensive initiatives for accommodating human rights defenders. Czechia, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain host defenders from around the world; Lithuania and Poland focus on defenders from Central Asia, Belarus, Russia and the South Caucasus; Finland and Sweden have programmes for artists at risk worldwide; and Estonia and Latvia have recently created a specific visa issuance mechanism for defenders from Belarus or Russia.[25]

The duration of these programmes varies **between one month and two years**. Some offer the possibility of **family hosting**, renewal of residence permits or the possibility of applying for international protection, while others do not. Most provide financial, housing and psychological support during the stay.

Civil society organisations play a central role in temporary relocation programmes. Their collaboration with funding bodies and local authorities is key to the selection of candidates in countries of origin, as well as to management, support and adaptation during the shelter period. Notable examples of European programmes managed by civil society organisations include:

- **Artists at risk** is run by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Perpetuum Mobile, based in Finland since 2013, and draws on a global network of artistic institutions, NGOs, etc., to relocate and fund artists at risk.
- **The Hamburg Foundation** hosts politically persecuted individuals for one year, aiming to integrate them into a network of German and international opinion leaders in the politics, the media and civil society.
- **French Programme for the Urgent Aid and Reception of Scientists in Exile (PAUSE)** is aimed at researchers and scientists. It is managed by the Collège de France and the Chancellery of the Universities of Paris.

- **Reception and Respite Programme (RÉPIT)** run by the Paris Bar is aimed at lawyers at risk.

At the institutional level, the European Union (EU) launched **ProtectDefenders.eu**[6] as a support mechanism for human rights defenders, funded by the European Commission. It is run by a consortium of 12 human rights NGOs and coordinated by a secretariat based in Brussels. It provides urgent assistance and practical support to human rights defenders in danger and their families, funds local support mechanisms and temporary shelter, provides training and case monitoring, and promotes coordination among organisations working in the field of human rights. ProtectDefenders.eu also coordinates the **European Union Temporary Relocation Platform (EUTRP)**[7], a body that brings together 108 entities working to support human rights defenders seeking temporary shelter or who have been temporarily relocated. These include NGOs, universities and other educational institutions, national, regional and local governments and European institutions.

In **Spain**, there are currently **10 temporary relocation programmes**, including some of the longest-running and most influential in this field at European level. Table 1 provides more detailed information on these programmes. In recent years, however, changes in institutional priorities have led to the discontinuation of several previously existing initiatives.[26]

At the same time, new programmes have emerged thanks to the efforts of solidarity organisations, institutional collaboration, accumulated experience and networking. The **Pro-TEJER** network brings together most of the programmes currently in operation and aims to improve and strengthen them by exchanging meaningful and practical experiences, developing common strategies with institutions and collectively addressing challenges and objectives.

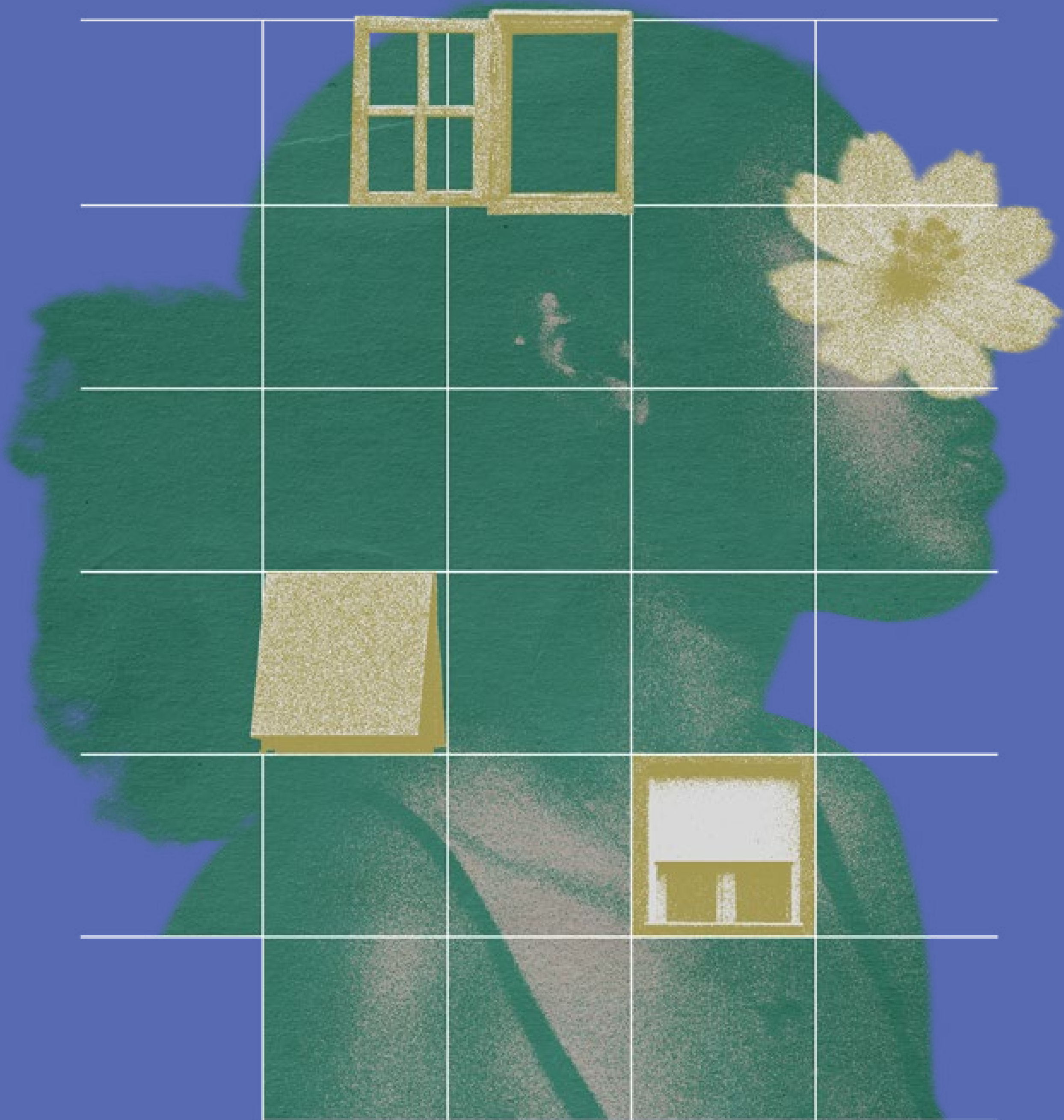
6 http://ProtectDefenders.eu

7 https://eutrp.eu/

Programa	Inicio	Organización	Duración	Datos relevantes
Amnesty International Temporary Protection Programme for Human Rights Defenders	1998	Amnesty International	Up to 1 year	Longest-running programme. Open to HRDs from different countries. Has hosted more than 96 individuals to date. Possibility of applying for international protection at the end of the stay. Family members may also be accommodated.
Asturian Programme for Assistance to Victims of Violence in Colombia	2001	*Soldepaz Pachakuti*	6 months	Aimed at HRDs from Colombia. Has hosted 152 individuals to date. Includes an annual human rights verification delegation that visits the areas of origin of hosted individuals.
Basque Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (NARE)	2011	ZEHAR	6 months	Open to HRDs from any country. Possibility of accommodating family members. Includes a human rights verification delegation that visits the areas of origin of hosted individuals.
Escriptor Acollit (Writer in Residence)	2006	PEN-Catalá	2 years	Aimed at at-risk writers and their families.
Catalan Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (PCPDDH)	2009	CCAR	6 months	Open to HRDs from different countries. Includes a human rights verification delegation. Possibility of family accommodation.
Barcelona Protects Journalists from Mexico (PAT-P)	2016	*Taula per Mexic*	6 months	Aimed at Mexican journalists facing threats due to their work.
Burgos con Colombia	2024	University of Burgos	6 months	Aimed at HRDs from Colombia.
Galicia Abriga	2024	*Solidaridad Internacional*	3 months	Aimed at women HRDs from Central America and Africa whose organisations are supported by Galician development cooperation.
Casa de Respiro	2013	DEFENRED	1 month	Located in Madrid's Sierra Norte. Space for rest and self-care. Not exclusively aimed at individuals at high risk of violence.
Basoa	2021	Self-managed by an assembly of activists	Variable stays	Aimed at migrants, refugees, human rights defenders, and activists, regardless of origin.

Table 1. Characteristics of temporary relocation programmes for human rights defenders in Spain in 2025.

04 MAINSTREAMING A PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH IN TEMPORARY SHELTER



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4.1. FUNDAMENTALS OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH IN TEMPORARY SHELTER

4.1.1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH?

The **psychosocial approach** can be defined as an interdisciplinary perspective that focuses on the **relationship between the individual** (thoughts, emotions, behaviours, personality, life history) and the social context (relationships, family, community, culture, institutions, etc.). This entails a critical examination of the suffering experienced by individuals and groups, as well as a theoretical pluralism that includes, in particular, discourses traditionally excluded from Western and academic psychology. [27] The **objective** of this approach is to accompany individuals and communities in addressing the **emotional and psychological consequences of unjust situations**, while **strengthening** their capacity for action, **resistance**, and **autonomy**, enabling them to rebuild their life plans and transform the conditions that gave rise to these injustices. [2, 3]

In defining this approach, this guide draws on theoretical developments that emerged in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, within a specific historical and socio-political context marked by struggles against military dictatorships and processes of anti-colonial liberation.

One of the key figures in the development of Liberation Social Psychology was **Ignacio Martín-Baró**. A psychologist and Jesuit priest, he was a professor of Social Psychology at the Central American University of El Salvador and carried out his work in the context of the country's civil war. He was murdered in 1989 by the Salvadoran army.

Martín-Baró argued that **physical and mental health cannot be reduced to individual wellbeing** but must be understood as a process that is continuously constructed in a social and historical context. While recognising physical illness, psychological difficulties, and the presence of social conflict in every community, he emphasised that these are not merely private matters but also **political responsibilities of society and the state**. This underscores the importance of identifying and analysing the socio-economic factors that cause them, in order to transform them and guarantee fairer living conditions for the population.[28][29] His work remains highly relevant today and has been further expanded by numerous academics, organisations and activists who continue to deepen and develop this approach. [30][31][32][33][34][35]

Although these early theoretical developments were primarily articulated within the framework of Liberation Psychology, this guide understands the psychosocial approach as a perspective that builds on those foundational contributions while expanding upon them through **insights from other critical schools of thought**. Incorporating approaches such as intersectional feminism, [36][37][38][39], the biopsychosocial model[40], anti-racism[41], anti-colonialism [42][43][44], popular education,[45] and participatory action research (PAR),[46] enables **a more accurate analysis taking into account systems of oppression** that restrict the exercise of human rights.

4.1.2 WHAT IS PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT?

Psychosocial accompaniment is a practical application of this approach. It involves a **set of processes aimed at addressing the impacts of political violence, oppression and human rights violations**. It seeks to strengthen the autonomy, resilience and capacity for action of individuals and communities, while promoting the transformation of the social and structural conditions that give rise to these situations, from an ethical and committed perspective.

This guide deliberately uses the **term accompaniment** rather than others that may be employed in discussing psychosocial issues, in order to **reinforce the idea of horizontality** that underpins the approach itself. As explained by the Mexican organisation Aluna, a leading reference in the field of psychosocial accompaniment: [3]

"Accompaniment is not intervention. It moves the accompanying person away from the position of power and knowledge of an expert, which would render the other person a passive recipient of action. Accompaniment tends towards autonomy and freedom, which means standing alongside others, recognising them as socio-historical and political subjects, with their own resources and worldviews, and with the capacity to shape their own projects and build towards the future."

Psychosocial accompaniment has several **fundamental pillars**:

- **Person-centred approach.** Prioritise the active participation of people in their own process, ensuring that they retain a sense of control over their lives and environment. Accompaniment respects the autonomy of individuals and communities – their time, capacities and decisions – while avoiding impositions, hierarchical relationships and situations of uncertainty or misinformation that generate helplessness or despair.
- **Focus on the situation rather than on victimhood.** The suffering of those accompanied must be understood as arising from human rights violations rooted in social and political contexts. This prevents revictimisation by ensuring individuals are not reduced solely to their status as victims.
- **Resilient perspective.** Recognise individuals as active agents with their own coping and resilience strategies, rather than as passive victims of rights violations. Accompaniment focuses on identifying and strengthening these capacities, avoiding narratives of powerlessness or irreversible harm, thereby preventing revictimisation.
- **Dignity and rights-based approach.** It is essential to adopt a perspective that recognises the loss of rights as unjust – something to which the individual was entitled has been denied – avoiding a paternalistic approach. Reparation is understood as social justice, promoting a more horizontal relationship.
- **Transformative purpose.** The ultimate goal of all psychosocial action should be to empower individuals and communities so that they can maintain or rebuild life projects and challenge the conditions that undermine their rights.
- **Non-pathologisation.** Reactions to traumatic situations should not be treated as pathologies or reduced to clinical diagnosis but understood in relation to the political violence that causes them.
- **Holistic approach to health.** The psychosocial approach involves holistic health care that considers its multidimensional nature. Through the interconnection of various areas of knowledge and disciplines, the different dimensions must be addressed: emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, economic and social.
- **Adaptation to cultural context.** The impacts of human rights violations and how they are expressed and addressed vary greatly across cultural contexts. A decolonial and anti-racist perspective ensures that accompaniment respects the logic and coping mechanisms of each individual and community.

This is key to avoiding pathologising the impacts or invalidating coping mechanisms from a Western or hegemonic perspective to health.

- **Horizontal, critical and non-neutral positioning.** It is necessary to reflect on the role of accompanying persons. The relationship must be based on equality and respect, recognising the capacity to decide and act, without imposing hierarchies or exercising any form of superiority. Accompaniment implies making an active ethical commitment, taking the side of the oppressed, defending human rights and supporting resistance and autonomy in the face of injustice.
- **Guaranteeing the "Do No Harm" principle.** It is important to be aware that any accompaniment process can have both positive and negative impacts on individuals. "Do No Harm" is an ethical and methodological approach that seeks to ensure that external interventions minimise harm and avoid exacerbating existing conflict**s.**
- **Networking.** Effective accompaniment depends on alliances with other individuals, communities and organisations. It is therefore essential to foster spaces and processes for collaboration, exchange of experiences and coordination with other actors involved.

In order to ensure that psychosocial accompaniment respects these fundamental pillars, it is important to understand the interactions and **power dynamics** that arise during accompaniment. **Three key concepts** help frame this understanding: locus of enunciation, transference and countertransference.

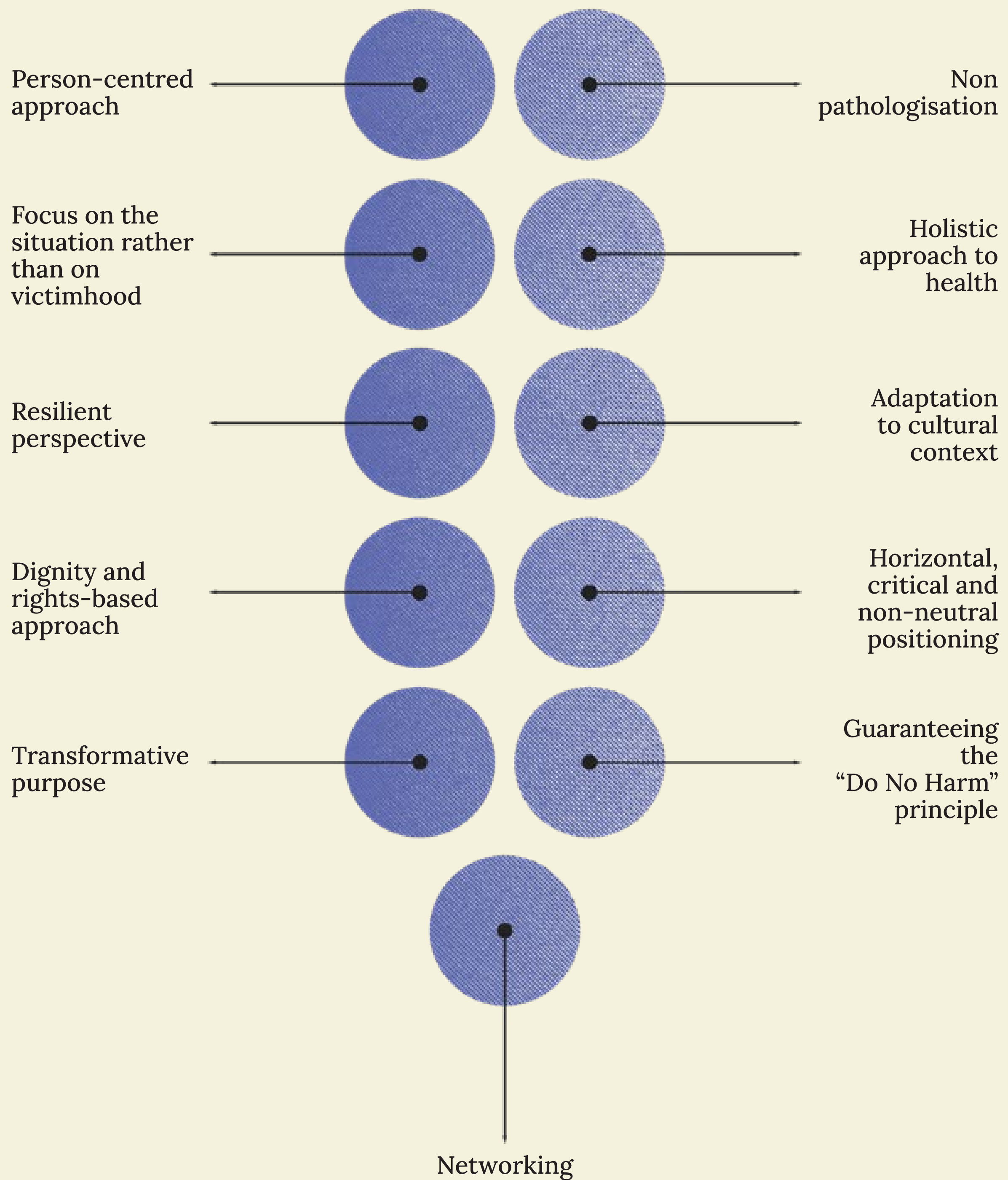
Locus of enunciation: Drawn from the work of feminist, decolonial and anti-racist intellectuals and activists,[47] this concept refers to an ethical stance that recognises that all individuals speak and act from a specific position, marked by personal history, social status and the political, cultural, economic, racial or institutional contexts that shape them. Awareness of this positionality means understanding that all these factors influence how we interpret, accompany and relate to human rights defenders.

The concepts of **transference and countertransference**,[48] although derived from psychoanalysis, are used here to explain phenomena common to any accompaniment relationship.

Transference: This concept refers to the feelings, expectations or fears that the person accompanied projects onto the accompanying person, influenced by their personal history and the locus of enunciation of both parties. For example, a defender who has suffered sexual violence perpetrated by men may perceive a male accompanying person as potentially threatening, despite being in a safe space and being able to rationalise it as such.

Countertransference: This refers to the emotional reactions of the accompanying person towards the person accompanied, influenced by their own prior experiences and position in the world. For example, an accompanying person in the process of grieving, who accompanies a defender who is also grieving, may experience feelings of rejection or, conversely, respond with over-involvement.

Figure 2. Fundamental pillars of psychosocial accompaniment



4.1.3 WHO PROVIDES ACCOMPANIMENT? PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT VS. SPECIALISED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

From a psychosocial perspective, **everyone involved in a temporary relocation programme plays a role in accompanying human rights defenders**. From institutional decisions about programme resources to everyday actions in informal settings, actions can either support the wellbeing of those receiving shelter or, conversely, exacerbate the harm they have suffered. Every interaction has the potential to be restorative, making **care a collective responsibility** embedded throughout the shelter process. [49][5]

For this reason, it is necessary to **mainstream the psychosocial approach** across all phases (before, during and after the shelter period), areas (coordination, housing, leisure, health, advocacy, specialised psychosocial support, etc.) and **people involved** in temporary relocation programmes.

Currently, most temporary relocation programmes have **specialised psychosocial support services**. These services are provided by psychology practitioners, therapists, or other professionals trained in mental health and trauma, focusing on the emotional and psychological effects of political violence. While grounded in the same principles as psychosocial accompaniment (respect, horizontality, non-pathologisation, rights-based approach, etc.), it goes a step further, offering **therapeutic, clinical or emotional support spaces** adapted to the needs of each individual and the particularities of the programme.

The goal is not only to alleviate distress or prevent further impacts, but also to **facilitate trauma processing, strengthen personal and collective resources, and accompany processes of healing and redress, and meaning-making** that integrate lived experiences into a broader life and political trajectory.

In this guide, we use the concept of "**psychosocial accompaniment**" in a broad, cross-cutting sense to refer to the set of daily, institutional and relational actions that contribute to the wellbeing and reparation of human rights defenders. We use "**specialised psychosocial support**" to refer to a more focused, in-depth process, developed by professionals specifically trained for this purpose.

Accompaniment from a psychosocial perspective **also requires caring for accompanying persons**. Continuous exposure to stories of political violence can have a profound impact. Caring for accompanying persons is not a secondary concern but an **essential condition for sustaining a response aligned with the principles of the psychosocial approach**.

4.1.4 CARE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

We understand the care approach as a central pillar of psychosocial support in temporary relocation programmes. This perspective is far removed from individualistic approaches to care; rather, it emerges from the collective work of Latin American feminists who, tired of the sustained violence they suffer as human rights defenders, considered it essential to change models of activism: "We questioned the sacrificial models of activism, and we wanted to search together for ways of placing care at the centre of our political action." This gave rise to the **Feminist Holistic Protection** approach, developed by the Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (*IM-Defensoras*).[11] More recently, Shelter City Netherlands has developed the concept of "**activist care**" as a practical response to the open question posed by the Barcelona Guidelines on how to operationalise the integration of wellbeing into programme design. Shelter City Netherlands considers activist care as the **deliberate cultivation of collective practices that allow movements to endure without weakening their bonds**, meanings and imaginative capacities that make change possible.[50]

These approaches suggest that protection cannot be understood solely as physical shelter from immediate risks, but rather as a **holistic practice that places life and dignity at the centre of political action**. They also foreground collective, cultural and relational practices that already exist among defenders, in their organisations and community knowledge, but which often remain invisible.

This perspective introduces the concept of "**expanded risk**", which identifies not only threats and attacks as indicators of risk, but also conditions linked to wellbeing, such as exhaustion, stress, emotional, psychosocial and energy-related impacts, as integral elements of the risks faced by defenders. [51]

> "From a feminist ethical perspective, self-care and collective care express the premise that the personal is political, recognising that caring for oneself and others is a transgressive and deeply political act"

From this standpoint, care is recognised as both a **right and a vital necessity**, as well as a foundational principle of the just world that defenders seek to build. As this perspective emphasises, no one survives without the daily support of those who feed, nurture and heal us, nor without the common goods that make life possible: water, crops, forests. In this sense, **collective care** sustains struggles over time and ensures that defenders are not silenced by the violence they face.

This approach also acknowledges spiritual and ancestral dimensions of protection, recognising that the defence of life is nourished by the historical wisdom of peoples who have resisted dispossession and violence.

Beyond the individual, care is understood as an **act of justice** that reconnects people with the web of life, buen vivir (living well), and collective wellbeing. It becomes a **political strategy** that challenges the sacrificial logic of activism and serves as an essential practice for confronting violence and subverting the capitalist, racist and patriarchal systems that sustain it.

From a feminist ethical perspective, self-care and collective care express the premise that the **personal is political**, recognising that caring for oneself and others is a transgressive and deeply political act. Care ceases to be secondary and becomes a central pillar for sustaining resistance, ensuring the continuity of movements and the construction of a more just world.

This perspective is key for psychosocial accompaniment in temporary relocation programmes, as it shifts the paradigm from a security-based approach centred on control to one grounded in care.

4.1.5 TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE: TRAUMA, PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAUMA AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Human rights defenders are often exposed to **traumatic experiences**, either through direct exposure in contexts of **political violence**, or by learning about them through the stories and accompaniment of other victims.

In the 1990s, the **trauma-informed care (TIC)** approach[52] emerged, proposing forms of accompaniment based on a deep understanding of how trauma impacts the body, emotions, mind, and relationships. This approach involves **anticipating how traumatic experiences may influence each stage of accompaniment** and establishing coordinated and sensitive responses to these needs. It involves a profound change in the way we relate, moving from asking "What's wrong with you?" (which centres symptoms and individual deficits) to "What happened to you?" (which foregrounds lived experience and context). This shift enables support providers to move away from practices that, although unintentionally, can reproduce harm, towards forms of accompaniment that prevent it and foster genuine processes of reparation.

The **integration of TIC alongside a psychosocial approach** in temporary relocation programmes, across all policies, procedures and practices, while avoiding dynamics that may reactivate harm, contributes to guaranteeing greater physical, emotional and psychological safety, both for defenders in shelter and for those who accompany them.

In the medical, psychological and psychosocial fields, especially from a Western perspective, **trauma** is understood as **harm** caused by extreme experiences that threaten an individual's physical or psychological integrity, overwhelming their coping mechanisms.[53][3]

> "[T]he trauma-informed care (TIC) approach... propos[es] forms of accompaniment based on a deep understanding of how trauma impacts the body, emotions, mind, and relationships."

In some indigenous or Afro-descendant cultures, trauma is not seen so much as a wound, but rather as a rupture in the balance with nature, ancestors, or the community.[53] From a **decolonial perspective**, it is essential to recognise and take these conceptions into account, as they will have implications for how accompaniment should be provided. People need practices and solutions that are consistent with how they interpret the origins of trauma.

Trauma is often experienced with a sense of chaos and confusion, making it difficult to recall the entire experience clearly, sometimes resulting in disordered accounts. Such experiences also bring with them feelings of unreality, horror, and bewilderment, which often make it seem impossible to put into words what happened and what was felt, making it difficult to tell others about it. Another characteristic of traumatic experiences is that they often undermine the foundations of personal security and the sense of control over one's own life, because what happened – or the way it happened – was unexpected. Personal identity is also affected: being a victim and survivor of a traumatic experience leaves a mark that determines how individuals understand themselves and how they function in their social relationships thereafter.[54][55]

While the above refers to traumatic experience from an individual perspective, in contexts of political violence this understanding of trauma is insufficient, since the harm transcends the individual and affects entire families, organisations or communities. We therefore refer to **psychosocial trauma**,[55][56] understood as trauma whose origin and persistence lie in social, historical and community conditions. Its effects go beyond the individual to manifest in groups and communities, producing a breakdown in value systems, beliefs and collective references related to security and identity. It can be experienced among people who share the same territory, but also in ethnic, social, gender or other groups in which shared feelings of threat, fear, loss or uprooting are generated.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that trauma is not limited to those who directly suffer or witness political violence. It can also affect those who accompany victims in the processes of truth, memory, justice, or reparation. Listening empathetically to painful narratives, imagining what others have endured, or holding space for their suffering, requires a significant emotional and physical investment that can have repercussions. This phenomenon is known as **vicarious trauma** and it represents a real risk for accompanying persons. A temporary relocation programme that operates within the TIC framework should have tools to recognise and address this, as a key element of holistic care in temporary shelter.

Figure 3. Key concepts related to trauma

Concept	Definition
Traumatic experience	An event that threatens a person's physical or psychological integrity, usually associated with feelings of chaos, confusion, horror, bewilderment and a breakdown in foundations of personal security.
Trauma	Harm caused by extreme experiences that threaten a person's physical or psychological integrity, overwhelming their coping mechanisms.
Psychosocial trauma	Trauma that transcends the individual, whose origins and persistence lie in social, historical and community conditions. It affects communities or groups, disrupting values, beliefs and collective references related to security.
Vicarious trauma	The emotional and physical impact suffered by those who accompany individuals affected by traumatic experiences, resulting from prolonged empathic exposure to the suffering of others.

4.2. UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS TO IMPROVE ACCOMPANIMENT

4.2.1 IMPACTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders, due to the nature of their work, may be exposed to a range of **psychosocial risk factors**.[57][58] These include:

- **Dual role:** Many HRDs lead collective processes in which they accompany victims of human rights violations, while often being victims themselves. This can mean that they prioritise caring for others and neglect their own wellbeing. This often poses a barrier to accessing psychosocial health services.

- **Self-imposed demands associated with leadership role:** Many defenders feel that, because they occupy visible positions and are role models for their communities, they cannot show fatigue, fear or emotional distress, because they fear that doing so will be interpreted as weakness or lack of capacity, which could affect the group. This often leads to what is sometimes referred to as 'the superhero syndrome, an emotional and behavioural pattern in which individuals feel that they must always remain strong, solve everything themselves and never show vulnerability. As a result, they may experience guilt at the thought of stopping or taking time to care for themselves.

- **Work overload:** Heavy workloads often make it impossible to take a break and often lead to high levels of frustration at not seeing results in the face of the considerable demands of their organisations and communities.

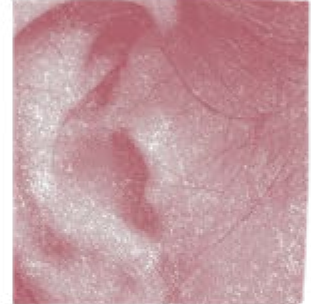
- **Ambiguous recognition and social prestige:** In some spaces, defenders are regarded as courageous and deeply committed individuals, while in others their work is delegitimised and associated with illegality, exaggeration or even irrationality. This social tension can affect how defenders perceive themselves and increase the pressure they experience in their leadership roles.

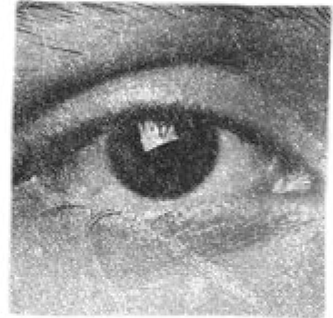
Traumatic experiences resulting from political violence therefore generate a range of **emotional, mental, physical, relational, social and spiritual impacts**. From a psychosocial perspective, these reactions are understood as normal responses to abnormal situations.[2]

These effects should not be understood as signs of weakness or illness, but rather as **mechanisms of adaptation and defence** that enable people to survive extreme situations. The psychosocial impacts or consequences of such violence may manifest at different levels: **individual, family and socio-community**.

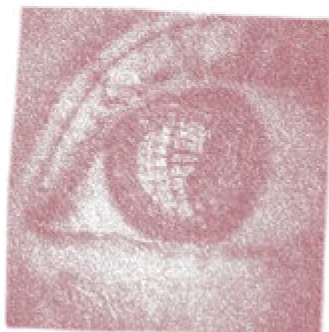
It is important to remember that **traumatic experiences do not affect everyone in the same way**. The way in which trauma is experienced and expressed depends largely on the cultural background, personal history and social conditions of each individual and community.

Although some clinical categories included in diagnostic manuals, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), may be useful in certain moments and contexts, this guide does not conceptualise the impacts of trauma from this perspective. It is understood that when accompanying defenders from diverse cultural and socio-political contexts, it is essential to **avoid homogeneous approaches that pathologise** impacts or invalidate coping mechanisms. For this reason, the guide seeks to avoid reproducing the biases inherent in a Western and hegemonic understanding of health and wellbeing. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, although this guide seeks to integrate a critical perspective, as discussed above, the backgrounds of its authors inevitably mean that the impacts described here are, to some extent, categorised and organised from a **Western perspective**.





Recognising these responses is essential to **better understand the reactions that defenders may experience**. This makes it possible to adapt perspectives, interpretations and accompaniment to their needs and, when necessary, to carry out **psychoeducation** work with them to help them recognise their own responses as part of a natural coping process.



INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS

The main impacts at the individual level are outlined below. They are grouped into different categories for explanatory purposes, although some may fit into more than one category:

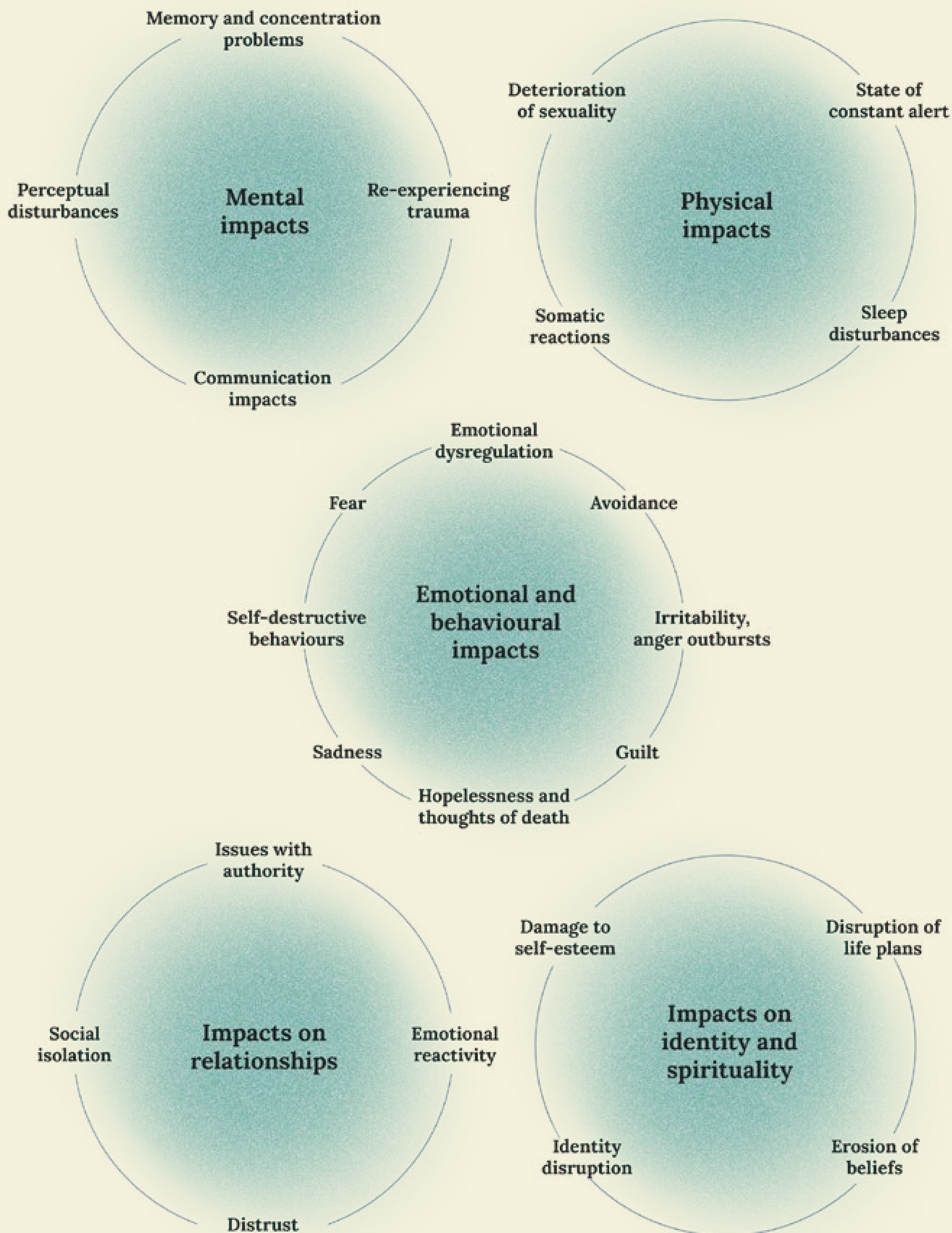
Emotional and behavioural impacts: related to effects on emotions and how they are managed.

- **Emotional dysregulation:** After traumatic experiences, the nervous system can become caught between states of hypervigilance and disconnection, making it difficult to remain calm or express emotions in a balanced way. This can lead to overwhelming emotions or, conversely, emotional numbness. [59][60]
- **Fear:** Fear protects against new threats, but in contexts of ongoing violence it can become generalised and permanent,[61] maintaining the individual in a state of hypervigilance and affecting memory, sleep and the ability to cope with everyday situations.
- **Sadness:** This is a common reaction to loss and helps initiate reconstruction processes. However, when it persists or intensifies due to new losses, it can lead to feelings of hopelessness and lack of meaning in life.
- **Hopelessness and thoughts of death:** Political violence can create a feeling of a hopeless future and a lack of control over one's life. When suffering is extreme, suicidal thoughts may arise as an attempt to end the pain.
- **Guilt:** Many people feel responsible for not having acted differently during traumatic events. Among women, gender norms often intensify these feelings of guilt. Although guilt arises as a way of making sense of what has happened, it can eventually become self-imposed pressure and internal punishment.
- **Irritability, anger outbursts and aggressive behaviour:** The accumulated tension and anger resulting from traumatic experiences can lead to disproportionate reactions, outbursts of anger or aggressive behaviour in everyday situations.
- **Avoidance:** In order to avoid reliving painful experiences, an individual may avoid talking about, thinking about or approaching anything related to the trauma. Although this is a protective response, it can lead to isolation, strained relationships and difficulties accessing useful support.
- **Self-destructive behaviours:** These are risky or harmful actions (such as substance use, self-harm, engaging in activities without properly assessing the risks) that seek to alleviate pain or regain a sense of control, but ultimately endanger life.

Mental impacts: related to thoughts and other basic cognitive processes such as memory, attention and perception.

- **Memory and concentration problems:** Trauma and prolonged stress keep the mind focused on detecting threats or processing pain, leading to forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, and problems retaining new information.
- **Impacts on communication and narrative:** Accounts of experiences may become fragmented, unclear or incomplete; or, conversely, very long or repetitive, reflecting the mind's effort to organise painful experiences.

FIGURE 4. MAP OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE



- **Re-experiencing trauma:** Individuals may relive trauma through intrusive memories, flashbacks or nightmares, accompanied by intense emotional and physical reactions to stimuli that remind them of the experience.

- **Perceptual disturbances:** As a protective response to extreme pain, individuals may experience a sense of unreality or disconnection from their body (dissociative episodes). In severe cases, perceptual distortions such as hallucinations may occur.

Physical impacts: manifest in the body and affect physical wellbeing.

- **State of constant alert:** The body remains in perpetual tension, always prepared to respond to danger. This makes it difficult to relax and produces a heightened startle response and a continuous sense of threat.

- **Sleep disturbances:** Hypervigilance, worry, nightmares or night terrors make it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. Hypersomnia may also occur.

- **Somatic reactions:** Emotional suffering can lead to physical discomfort with no clear medical cause (pain, gastritis, fatigue, sweating, breathing difficulties, tachycardia, etc.).

- **Deterioration of sexuality:** Stress can reduce sexual desire and make intimacy difficult. When sexual violence has occurred, the impact is often more profound.

Impacts on identity and spirituality: related to effects on one's own identity, meaning or purpose in life, and values and beliefs.

- **Damage to self-esteem:** Violence can lead to feelings of worthlessness and a loss of confidence in one's abilities.

- **Identity disruption:** Loss, exile and interrupted life plans can cause identity crises, particularly among indigenous, peasant and Afro-descendant defenders separated from their territory and culture. This may lead to a fixation on the role of victim.

- **Erosion of beliefs and worldview:** Violence undermine fundamental beliefs about security, justice, religion or life's meaning, making the world seem hostile and unpredictable.

- **Disruption of life plans:** Interruption of family, professional, or collective plans can make it difficult to envision the future, generating uncertainty.

Impacts on relationships: related to effects on interpersonal bonds.

- **Distrust:** After experiencing harm caused by others, it can be difficult to trust again. Initially this has a protective function but may later lead to isolation and challenges in building support networks.

- **Social isolation:** Fear, mistrust, or exhaustion may cause individuals to withdraw from friends, family, or community spaces.

- **Emotional reactivity:** Individuals may respond strongly to situations reminiscent of trauma (especially those involving exclusion, injustice or control). Situations may be interpreted as threats, leading to defensive or aggressive reactions and hindering healthy relationships.

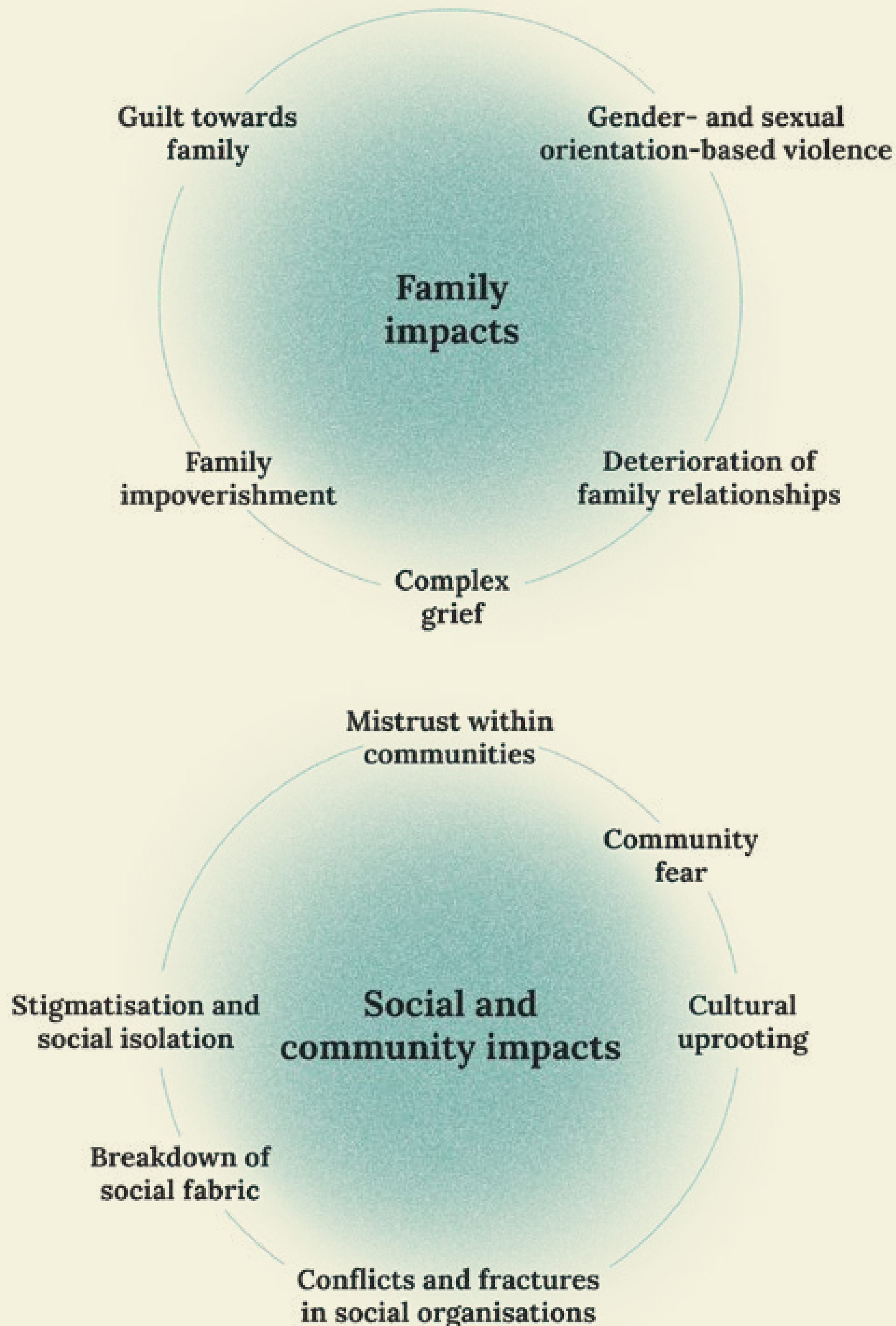
- **Issues with authority:** Past abuse of power may create tension or mistrust toward authority figures, complicating acceptance of leadership and collaborative decision-making within groups.

FAMILY IMPACTS

Below are some of the impacts of political violence at the family level, understood broadly to include defenders' significant relationships, not necessarily limited to blood ties.

- **Deterioration of family relationships:** Stress, fear and lack of time affect daily life together: conflicts increase, emotional expression becomes difficult, and often interpersonal ties are broken, or distancing occurs to protect the family, leading to loneliness.
- **Family impoverishment:** Persecution can result in job loss, barriers to employment, or forced displacement. Many defenders use their own resources to support their work, which can create precarious economic conditions and financial strain.
- **Guilt towards family:** Defenders often feel guilty about the risks their work poses to loved ones, particularly if they lack support. Being separated from children or unable to be present for family life is a major source of distress.
- **Complex grief:** Violence may result in the death or disappearance of family members. Such events generate grief that is difficult to process, often remaining unresolved and deeply affecting defenders and their families.
- **Gender- and sexual orientation-based violence:** Political violence can exacerbate domestic violence due to gender stereotypes. LGBTIAQ+ defenders may suffer rejection or expulsion from their families, increasing their vulnerability.

FIGURE 5. MAP OF FAMILY, SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE



IMPACTOS SOCIOCOMUNITARIOS

Political violence not only affects individuals and families, but also profoundly alters community life, eroding trust and social cohesion, solidarity and belonging that sustain the social fabric. Some of the most significant impacts observed across different contexts include:

- **Community fear:** Persecution of defenders also affects those around them. Harassment targeting organisations or communities creates insecurity and discourages participation in political or community activities.
- **Mistrust within communities:** Sustained violence and repression undermine trust among neighbours, colleagues and community members. Communication becomes more difficult, and speaking out or acting publicly may be risky.
- **Stigmatisation and social isolation:** In many contexts, those who denounce injustice are portrayed as problematic or dangerous. This can erode trust in community leadership and lead to the rejection or isolation of defenders.
- **Breakdown of social fabric and community disorganisation:** Prolonged violence weakens support networks and divides communities. Sometimes such divisions are deliberately encouraged, undermining collective organisation and slowing processes of remembrance, reparation and social reconstruction.
- **Conflicts and fractures in social organisations:** Fear, exhaustion and collective trauma generate tensions and fractures within organisations. These are further aggravated by patriarchal and racist dynamics that can lead to harassment, power imbalances or discrimination, leaving women and racialised people without safe spaces to express themselves.
- **Cultural uprooting and deterioration of collective identities:** Loss of territory or forced displacement disrupts spaces for community life, weakening cultural identity and generating shared feelings of sadness, humiliation and despair.

4.2.2 IMPACTS OF THE TEMPORARY SHELTER PROCESS ON DEFENDERS

The **shelter process itself can have a range of impacts** that need to be considered in order **to better understand and adequately accompany defenders participating in these programmes**. These impacts depend on the personal circumstances and contexts of the defenders, as well as the characteristics of the programme, such as its duration, shelter conditions, cultural context, support for return, possibility of extending the stay or even choosing not to return, etc.

Based on the experience of several programmes, some impacts can be identified as occurring more frequently at particular moments during the shelter process (such as sleep difficulties at the beginning of the stay or concerns about returning at the end). However, **the wide diversity of programme models makes it impossible to establish a definitive list of impacts that follow a uniform sequence**. It is therefore useful for each programme to observe and assess whether certain impacts tend to recur at specific stages, and to analyse its own context in order to identify and prevent those that arise within its particular experience. This can help programmes anticipate potential challenges and improve accompaniment.

The following section presents a selection of the **most common** impacts identified through networking processes, a literature review and interviews conducted for this report:

- **Sleep difficulties:** this is often one of the **first impacts to appear** and can significantly affect the wellbeing of defenders at the beginning of their stay. Many arrive with **pre-existing sleep problems**, which are often exacerbated in stressful and unfamiliar situations, such as entering a temporary relocation programme. **Changes in schedules, routines and habits**, including lower levels of daily activity, can make it difficult to get adequate rest. It is also common for **stress** to lead to unhealthy habits such as alcohol consumption, a sedentary lifestyle or isolation, which further deteriorate sleep quality. In addition, **information overload** about the situation in the country of origin, concern for communities, feelings of guilt, uncertainty and ongoing responsibilities managed remotely all contribute to increased stress and can exacerbate sleep problems, especially when there is a **significant time difference** with the country of origin.
- **Health impacts:** In many cases, defenders arrive at shelter programmes with a range of health needs that should be identified and addressed from the outset. Many have **neglected their health** for extended periods due to the risks, persecution or forced displacement they have experienced. In addition, when stress levels decrease and security conditions improve, **physical symptoms** may emerge that had previously gone unnoticed or been ignored, as well as **somatic symptoms** related to emotional distress. As a result, defenders may require different types of **treatment**, including outpatient care, specialist medical follow-up and specific medication.
- **Culture shock:** Another immediate impact that hosted individuals may experience is culture shock. This can be influenced by **multiple factors** such as language, schedules, forms of communication, food, difficulties practising spirituality, differences in worldview, or the transition from a rural to an urban environment. Coping with these differences often generates **severe stress**, which can affect concentration and thus hinder language learning, understanding of how the programme and the host country's administrative systems operate, and access to basic services such as healthcare and transport, further intensifying the experience of culture shock.

- **Migratory grief:** It is common for elements of so-called migratory grief to appear.[62] Unlike grief caused by death, this grief involves several **simultaneous losses** (culture, environment, language, social status, emotional ties, etc.); it is **partial**, as what has been lost does not disappear completely, but continues to exist at a distance; it is **recurring**, as it may be reactivated at different moments, such as during festivities or when receiving news from the country of origin; and it is **ambiguous**, as it is not always easy to identify exactly what has been lost or how to process that loss. **Seven main types of grief** are usually identified within this concept: (1) for family and loved ones; (2) for language; (3) for culture; (4) for land and landscape; (5) for social status; (6) for community belonging; and (7) for security and the future. All of these dimensions may **come into play in the context of temporary shelter**. The temporary nature of shelter programmes, uncertainty regarding immigration status and the possibility of return, as well as the traumatic and violent experiences that led to participation in the shelter programme, add further layers of complexity and ambiguity. Although it does not necessarily involve pathological grief, it is nevertheless a profound experience that can **affect the identity, relationships, and psychological wellbeing** of those receiving shelter.

- **Unmet or shifting expectations:** temporary relocation programmes **generate a wide range of expectations** among those who are selected and hosted, and these expectations may evolve throughout their stay. Factors such as the potential benefits in terms of risk reduction, international visibility and impact, opportunities to build personal and organisational connections and support networks, the role played by host institutions or the media, economic conditions, the possibility of return or applying for international protection may all shape the expectations of those receiving shelter. Failure to meet these expectations can lead to **demotivation or frustration**.

- **Guilt:** Feelings of guilt are **common** among defenders, and the temporary shelter process can intensify them. Time off and distance from risk create space for self-reflection and the processing of traumatic experiences, which may trigger strong feelings of guilt related to **past events**. In addition, being in a safe environment while families, organisations or communities remain exposed to high levels of risk generates particularly painful feelings of guilt, as many defenders feel that they are **abandoning their people** or that they do not deserve protection. Separation from family members, children and tensions with partners often accentuate these emotions. These feelings may become even more acute when defenders receive **important news**, such as the killing or death of close friends or colleagues. In such moments, guilt may deepen because they are unable to provide support or participate in mourning rituals. At their most intense, these emotions may lead some defenders to consider interrupting the shelter programme and returning to their country of origin.

- **Inability to disconnect:** In many cases, defenders are unable to **step back from their responsibilities** in relation to work, organisations or families. They often have difficulties responding to tensions, demands, needs or misunderstandings of those around them, especially in cases of **separation from partners and children** or when, for security reasons, their participation in the temporary relocation programme cannot be disclosed to everyone in their social circle. This means that the possibility of disconnecting and resting during the shelter period can become very limited and **makes it difficult to adapt** and take advantage of the possibilities and support that the shelter context can offer.

- **Difficulties in social interaction**: Social life is another area significantly affected by the shelter process, as it often radically transforms people's everyday relational and social dynamics. Motivation to socialise among defenders **can vary** greatly: some are eager to form new personal, not just political, connections, while others may reject socialising or find it unstimulating or unnecessary.

This may be due to **various factors**, such as language when it is a barrier to communication, emotional state, the temporary nature of the shelter programme, the availability of spaces and activities that facilitate interaction, or the host country's culture of social interaction. In some extreme cases, persistently low motivation to socialise throughout the shelter process can lead to **sedentary lifestyles and social isolation**.

- **Overexposure, revictimisation and retraumatisation**: In many cases, those receiving shelter express a desire to raise awareness of their struggle and continue their human rights work during their stay, taking advantage of the opportunity to do so from a safe environment and with greater international visibility. However, an agenda that does not respond to their needs can lead to **overexposure**, which is exhausting and draining. In some cases, defenders are asked to repeatedly recount the risks that forced them to leave their territory. While this can be a useful strategy for raising awareness of their cause and receiving solidarity, it can also result in **revictimisation** by reducing the person to the role of "victim." In other cases, **retraumatisation** may occur, i.e. the reactivation of past trauma when the current situation requires recalling or reproducing it in some way, leading to an increase in the emotional, physical or cognitive symptoms associated with the original traumatic experience.

- **Imbalances in power relations and managing the "victim/survivor" role**: Shelter programmes create spaces, both internal and external, in which participants are often presented as victims of human rights violations or political violence. Many defenders identify with the **role of victim**, as a legitimate and necessary political position for denouncing violations and seeking truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. In other cases, on the contrary, individuals may **refuse to see themselves as vulnerable**, making it difficult for them to recognise that they need or deserve any kind of support, including specialised psychosocial support. Both a constant and, in some cases, essentialised identification with the role of victim and total rejection of any form of support can create **challenges** for the wellbeing of those receiving shelter and for the programme itself.

  These dynamics may manifest through **imbalances in power relations**: some individuals may adopt submissive attitudes and express continuous gratitude, while others may display mistrust, defensiveness or even aggression towards individuals perceived as holding authority or institutional power. **Confusion may also arise between accompaniment and control**, along with difficulties in exercising or recognising authority and leadership within the programme. This can generate tensions with staff or conflicts in shared living arrangements. These dynamics are linked to the **difficulties in managing the impacts of trauma**, which directly influence how interpersonal bonds are established during the shelter process.

- **Conflicts in shared living arrangements**: In many programmes, those receiving shelter must live alongside other defenders, which can present a number of **significant challenges**. While any shared living situation between people who do not previously know one another involves challenges, the complexity is greater in this context. This is because the **arrangement is not chosen**, and it brings together individuals who have experienced **traumatic events** and who have **highly diverse** cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, sexual identities, leadership levels, political standpoints, etc. In this context, shared living spaces can become environments where the effects of trauma and structural inequalities come to the fore.

  Some defenders may need quiet and solitude, while others feel a constant need to talk and let off steam. These differing needs can lead to discomfort or misunderstandings. **Cultural differences and varying worldviews** also shape coexistence, as participants may have different ways of communicating, expressing emotions, relating to authority, and organising daily life. Uneven **adherence to programme**

rules and possible ideological differences may further intensify tensions. **Mistrust** can make it difficult to form bonds and generate suspicion among participants. In addition, **dynamics of comparison or competition** may arise – for example around perceived levels of risk, public recognition, attention received, or leadership roles – which can lead to rivalries or feelings of injustice. Finally, problems may also arise in cohabitation linked to the **reproduction of patriarchal roles, racist behaviour or discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTIAQ+** people. All of these factors can give rise to tensions and, on occasions, serious conflicts that create dilemmas for accompanying persons and the programme organisation, requiring complex responses..

- **Exposure to further violence**: Although temporary shelter reduces risk faced in the country of origin, it can also expose participants to other types of violence. **Sexist and racist violence**, in its many forms, can occur anywhere in the world and in virtually any setting. The **programme itself** may reproduce some of these forms of violence by action or omission, for example, if it occurs among participants and is not adequately addressed. **Other spaces**, such as healthcare facilities, appointments with police authorities, airports, public demonstrations, or even everyday life in public spaces, can be unsafe, especially for women defenders, LGBTIAQ+ persons, persons with disabilities or racialised persons.

- **Variation in risk levels and uncertainty about return**: In many cases, temporary relocation programmes **succeed in reducing the risks** faced by defenders they host. However, this is **not always the case** during the shelter period. Threats or attacks on defenders or their families and organisational environments may continue. Furthermore, risk levels do not depend solely on a defenders' individual actions, but in most cases derive from being the visible head of collective actions to denounce abuses, which usually continue during their absence. This may affect the level of risk faced by defenders and their close ties, and in some cases may increase or give rise to new threats. In other situations, participation in a shelter programme may **aggravate the risk situation**, due to surveillance, digital security failures, or publication of sensitive information in the media or on social networks – for example about where defenders are staying and with whom, when and where they will return, where they are travelling during the programme, with whom they are in contact, etc. All of these factors have implications for the level of risk faced by defenders and their close ties. They may make it difficult or even impossible to return to the country of origin after the temporary shelter period, in some cases requiring them to apply for international protection. **Other factors** can further complicate the post-shelter period, including significant changes in relationships or family situations, loss of employment during the shelter period and/or economic hardship upon return, weakening of ties with communities or organisations, or deterioration of support networks in the country of origin. Facing life scenarios that differ from those imagined prior to joining the programme generates profound **uncertainty** that can affect emotional wellbeing and shape the experience of the shelter period.

4.2.3 IMPACTS ON ACCOMPANYING PERSONS

In order to effectively mainstream the **psychosocial approach** and the **trauma-informed care** (TIC) framework, it is essential to consider another equally important dimension of temporary relocation programmes: **the impacts on accompanying persons**. This group includes the administrative staff of the managing organisations, programme coordinators, programme staff, accompanying volunteers and staff providing specialised psychosocial support.

Accompanying persons are exposed to a series of **psychosocial risk factors** arising from the context and characteristics of temporary relocation programmes.[5]. These include:

- **Over-involvement and difficulties setting boundaries.** High emotional involvement with the individuals receiving shelter can make it difficult to disconnect when necessary and increase the risk of burnout. Accompanying individuals in situations of extreme vulnerability can also lead to comparisons between one's own circumstances and those of the accompanied person, which may minimise one's own discomfort or generate feelings of guilt. This can foster dynamics such as "**hero syndrome**", in which individuals feel they must always be able to cope with everything and never show weakness. The combination of political commitment, human empathy and emotional bonds can blur the boundaries between personal and professional life, especially when individuals hold a dual role (for example, as both activist and professional) or when roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined.
- **Precarious working conditions and structural overload**. Working conditions in the third sector and development NGOs do not always guarantee adequate salaries, rest periods, stability, sufficient resources or healthy working environments.

In addition, the nature of accompaniment involves handling emergencies, legal procedures, logistical arrangements and day-to-day support, which generate a high workload and considerable pressure, especially when resources are scarce.

- **Limited scope of intervention**. While all human rights work operates within limits, in the case of temporary relocation programmes these limits are inherent: they are short-term, targeted forms of support that cannot transform the structural causes of the violence affecting defenders, their families or communities.
- **Constant emotional exposure**. Accompanying persons in shelter programmes are repeatedly exposed to situations and testimonies of human suffering, violence or loss.
- **Unpredictable context**. Institutional changes, uncertainty and shifting conditions in countries of origin of those receiving shelter create a volatile working environment. This makes planning difficult and can generate a feeling of lack of control.
- **Lack of specific training**. Sometimes teams lack specialised training in certain areas (such as the socio-political or cultural contexts of a country; trauma; psychosocial approach; crisis management; etc.). This can leave accompanying persons with greater emotional exposure and fewer tools.
- **Vulnerability of those receiving shelter and cultural differences**. In the case of many of those accompanied, these characteristics can lead to reactions of violence, rejection, mistrust, communication difficulties, misunderstandings, poor coordination, etc. towards accompanying persons.

Accompanying human rights defenders in temporary relocation programmes can therefore have a wide range of impacts on accompanying persons. These impacts can be distinguished at the individual and collective levels.

Individual impacts

For explanatory purposes, we can distinguish between two categories of impacts based on their origin: [63] those related to working and organisational conditions, and those arising from constant exposure to human suffering.

In relation to **working conditions, professional exhaustion, or "burnout"** syndrome, refers to a set of effects that emerge as a chronic response to prolonged work-related stress, particularly under conditions of overload and lack of control. Some of the most common impacts include:

- **Frustration and helplessness**: Individuals often experience a sense of helplessness when it becomes clear that structural violence persists, affecting family members or colleagues of those receiving shelter during their stay, or the defenders themselves upon their return. The metaphor of "emptying the ocean with a teaspoon" aptly captures this feeling, reflecting the intense sense of responsibility and the perception of never being able to do enough.
- **Emotional and ethical overload**: Constantly managing emergencies and making sensitive decisions can be overwhelming, particularly when the boundaries between personal and professional life become blurred. This may result in taking on commitments beyond one's capacity, putting personal wellbeing at risk.
- **Irritability and emotional reactivity**: Accumulated stress can manifest as irritability, anger or low tolerance for frustration, especially when faced with unexpected changes, misunderstandings or conflicts with the defenders themselves. These reactions are often exacerbated by insufficient material and training resources.
- **Physical and cognitive exhaustion**: Common symptoms include extreme fatigue, headaches, gastrointestinal problems, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances. Difficulties concentrating, making decisions, or maintaining mental clarity may also occur.

- **Disinterest in work, sadness, and pessimism**: Structural constraints can generate feelings of sadness, emptiness, or a loss of meaning in one's work, affecting motivation and future outlook. This can lead to apathy towards tasks or a noticeable decline in involvement and performance. This is not a lack of commitment, but rather a survival mechanism in the face of an unsustainable situation.
- **Deterioration of professional self-esteem**: The accumulation of difficulties, the sense of "not being able to do everything" or the perception of failing in some aspect of accompaniment can generate insecurity, self-doubt and undervaluing of the work achieved.

Impacts arising from **constant exposure to human suffering** can be categorised into two main types:

- **Compassion fatigue.** Emotional exhaustion derived from repeatedly listening to or witnessing the suffering of defenders, not necessarily due to having directly heard traumatic stories. Common symptoms include:
    - Onset of sadness or emotional heaviness after accompanying defenders.
    - Feelings of guilt for not being able to do more.
    - Aversion or reluctance towards hearing difficult stories again.
    - Difficulty disconnecting outside of work, or conversely, emotional detachment and impulsive decision-making.
    - Changes in sleep patterns or appetite.
- **Vicarious trauma**. This refers to the impact of repeatedly listening to others' traumatic experiences, leading to symptoms similar to those of direct trauma, such as re-experiencing, hypervigilance, dissociation, avoidance or profound shifts in worldview. For further details, see Section 4.1.5. *Trauma-informed care and Section 4.2.1. Impacts of political violence on defenders.*

  Vicarious trauma differs from compassion fatigue in that it stems specifically from exposure to traumatic experiences of others. Furthermore, unlike burnout or compassion fatigue, which develop over time, vicarious trauma can appear suddenly and abruptly, and is usually related to a particular event, for example, hearing the account of a woman HRD who has survived sexual violence.

Impacts on work teams

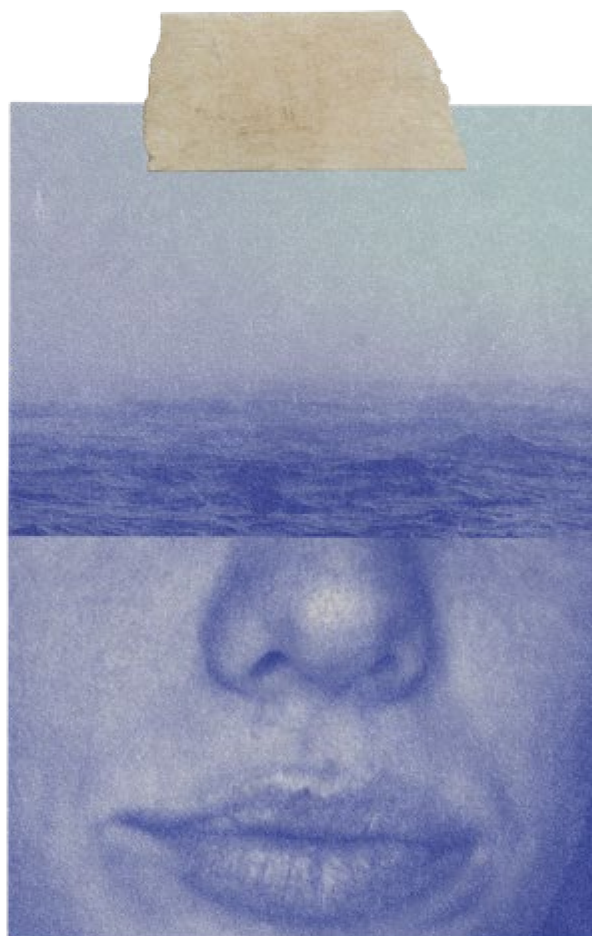
At the collective level, accompanying defenders can produce several impacts that affect team dynamics:

- **Normalisation of burnout and team turnover**. When the entire team is exhausted, discomfort becomes "part of the job", leading to a culture that justifies lack of rest and romanticises overwork. As a result, internal care and supervision mechanisms are not prioritised, warning signs are ignored, and those who feel exhausted or in need of a break are made to feel guilty. This situation of prioritising the urgency and suffering of others and not recognising one's own discomfort can continue over time until a more serious crisis arises at the individual level (sick leave, resignation, etc.). Sustained burnout can lead to resignations, high turnover, difficulties retaining trained personnel, undermining the continuity of the work and requiring constant restarting of training processes.

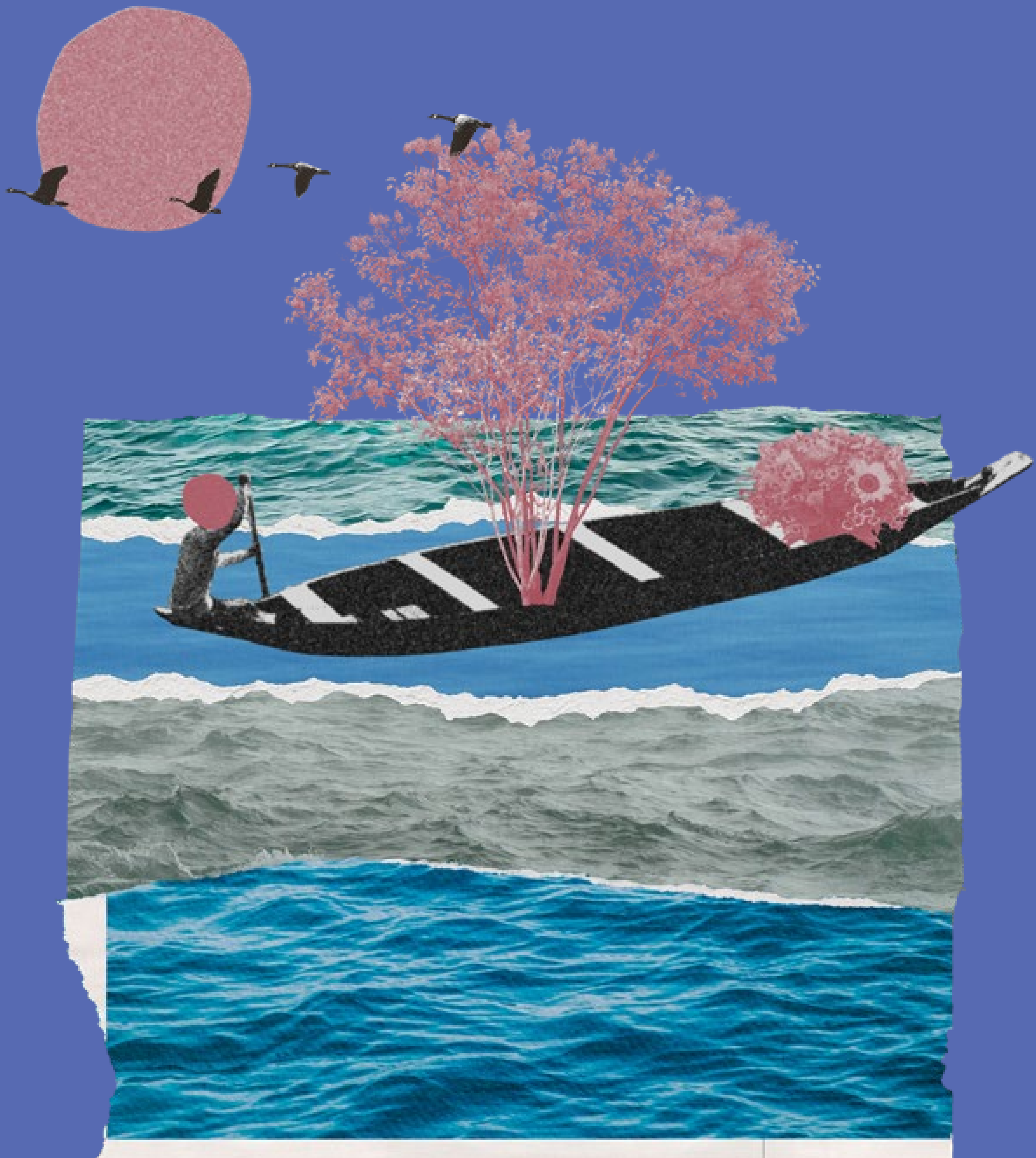
- **Tensions, conflicts and internal polarisation**. Emotional overload generated by accompanying defenders, coupled with the political violence that organisations managing the programmes may also suffer, among other risk factors, can cause tensions. These may manifest as disputes over tasks or responsibilities, mutual recriminations, loss of confidence in other people's abilities, projects that move forward without internal coherence, or blaming individuals for mistakes. Teams may split into factions between those who do more emotional work and those who do operational work; experienced staff versus newcomers; staff prioritising care versus those prioritising productivity. Such divisions erode cohesion, increase psychosocial risks at work and compromise the quality of the accompaniment provided.

- **Reproduction of internal oppressive dynamics**. Staff attrition can cause teams to inadvertently reproduce logics similar to those defenders have suffered, replicating the very forms of power, exclusion, or silencing that accompaniment is intended to avoid. Examples include vertical decision-making, failure to listen, minimisation of discomfort, invalidation of rest needs, and gender or racial inequalities within the team.

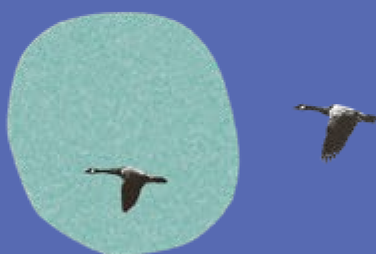
- **Loss of political meaning of the work**. Routine, bureaucracy, and stress can dilute the purpose that unites the team, rendering work mechanical, reducing creativity and critical reflection, and diminishing the ability to situate each action within the framework of human rights protection and defence. This diminishes collective motivation and negatively affects the quality of accompaniment.



05 BEST PRACTICES IN TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES: A PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH



“Best practice is understood as any action, decision or strategy in a temporary relocation programme that enhances the wellbeing, dignity and reparation processes of human rights defenders, acknowledging both the impacts of trauma and the political and collective dimensions of the violence experienced. Such practices contribute to transforming relationship dynamics, approaches to care and the exercise of power within these programmes.”



This section presents a series of best practices from a psychosocial perspective. From this standpoint, best practice is understood as any action, decision or strategy in a temporary relocation programme that enhances the wellbeing, dignity and reparation processes of human rights defenders, acknowledging both the impacts of trauma and the political and collective dimensions of the violence experienced. Such practices contribute to transforming relationship dynamics, approaches to care and the exercise of power within these programmes.

Each best practice is structured into two parts. The first offers a general explanation of why it is considered a best practice from a psychosocial perspective. The second provides practical examples, informed by the literature review, interviews conducted and the authors’ own experience.

In line with the framework for mainstreaming the psychosocial approach outlined in the first part of this guide, every decision (institutional, financial, organisational, routine, or symbolic), at every stage of the programme (before, during, and after the shelter period), and by every actor involved, can contribute either to reparation or, conversely, to reproducing and exacerbating harm. Accordingly, the “best practices” presented in this section are broadly aimed at all individuals and entities involved in accompaniment, regardless of their specific roles. At the same time, depending on the responsibilities of each actor, certain practices require particular attention from financing institutions and funding organisations, programme managers, coordination teams, specialised psychosocial support providers, volunteers, and other actors.

The section begins with a set of best practices that, by their nature, are of general application. They address theoretical, methodological and logistical dimensions of the programmes. It then includes a dedicated section on care of accompanying persons, an issue consistently emphasised in both the specialised literature and interviews. Best practices are then structured according to the different phases of the shelter process. Within each phase, a subsection also highlights specific best practices related to specialised psychosocial support.

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5.1

GENERAL PRACTICES

The best practices outlined in this section are key to integrating a psychosocial approach in temporary relocation programmes in general, regardless of the specific phase of the shelter process. They provide a structural foundation for approaches that place care and the empowerment of individuals and their organisations at the centre of accompaniment practices.

Situated and individualised temporary shelter processes

Best practice

To ensure that temporary shelter processes, particularly those implemented in countries in the Global North, do not reproduce colonial power dynamics or structural violence, it is important, as a starting point, to **recognise the role and position of those providing shelter**. Furthermore, greater **personalisation and individualisation** of the shelter process help place the individual at the centre throughout.

Practical examples

Key considerations identified by programmes include:

- Involving the **organisations** to which the defenders to be hosted belong, from the outset of the development and establishment of the programme.
- Recognising that the temporary relocation of a human rights defender who is at risk or in need of respite or rest, is not an isolated event, but rather a **stage** within a broader context of resistance, struggle and collective protection.
- Understanding the **role the temporary shelter process may play** in the life trajectory and human rights work of each individual and their group.
- Avoiding framing temporary shelter initiatives as a **means of "saving"** defenders, instead recognising that they form part of a broader network of struggle and collective protection.
- Creating **spaces for internal reflection** to analyse and make proposals – together with defenders – on how to transform paternalistic practices and dynamics, unconscious forms of structural oppression, such as the constant expectation of "gratitude", especially at institutional events, in favour of more respectful and horizontal forms of accompaniment.
- Providing **shelter within cultural and linguistic environments that are geographically and culturally as close as possible**. This may involve working with development NGOs or groups in the host country that are aware of the realities and struggles of the individuals receiving shelter, in order to minimise cultural and social shock. Current models increasingly favour more regional reception approaches, designed locally and located in culturally proximate contexts.
- Considering various **specific needs** in order to personalise shelter, including those related to gender, racialisation, sexual orientation, whether the individual is travelling with a partner or family members, mental health needs, previous experiences of violence, etc.
- Making a conscious effort to **manage expectations** at all stages of the process.

Guaranteed core functions

Best practice

The research carried out for this guide identified a set of core functions necessary to ensure a **dignified shelter process** that that places the **individuals** hosted at the centre, while also taking **care of accompanying persons**. These functions may be assigned to different roles depending on the specificities of each programme.

Practical examples

The following core functions should be covered by programmes to ensure the adequacy of the shelter process:

- **Funding and institutional support**: Funding organisations offer financial and material resources (housing, cooperation from public officials, etc.) and play a key role in procedures such as visa applications, residence permits, access to public healthcare services, and providing political support.
- **Management and administration**: This encompasses travel logistics, management of financial and institutional resources, disbursement and monitoring of funds allocated to those receiving shelter, and maintenance of accommodation. These responsibilities are generally undertaken by the managing organisation.
- **Coordination**: Responsibilities include managing applications, selection processes, travel arrangements, schedules and advocacy. These functions are usually handled by a coordination role dedicated fully or partially to these duties.
- **Mentoring or day-to-day accompaniment**: This encompasses assistance with routine procedures, establishing networks, facilitating access to medical or legal resources, and identifying opportunities for training and leisure activities. These responsibilities may be undertaken by the coordination team, by a designated person, or through tailored mentoring programmes involving volunteers. It is considered best practice for accompanying persons not to manage financial resources.
- **Specialised psychosocial support**: This promotes wellbeing as a policy strategy through individual or group sessions, and provides guidance to programme team on emotional aspects, crisis management, adjustment of schedules, communal living, and public exposure. This support may be delivered by external professionals or by members of the programme team.
- **Risk analysis and holistic protection**: This includes risk analysis and decision-making before, during and after the shelter period. It may be conducted by specialised professionals from either the country of origin or the host country. In some cases, these responsibilities are carried out by the coordination team. Some programmes also provide digital security guidance.
- **Management of communal living**: This involves organisation of the rules and dynamics for shared living arrangements, as well as mediation and conflict resolution. These functions are particularly important in group shelter settings and may be carried out by a specific staff member or by the coordination team. They should not be undertaken by those responsible for managing financial resources or by specialised psychosocial support staff, although the latter may provide advice.

- **Legal support:** This includes guidance on documentation, visa processes and legal matters that may arise during the shelter period. Such support may be provided by external experts or staff from the managing organisation.
- **Health support:** This may include public or private services, as well as external professionals providing holistic health support (such as nutritionists or physiotherapists), depending on the context of the programme.
- **Community support:** This involves establishing and reinforcing local networks, connecting those receiving shelter with trade unions, human rights organisations, youth or student groups, and educational institutions, including universities, which can provide spaces for learning, expression, and participation. Facilitating this community support may be the responsibility of the coordination team, volunteers, or an activist or collective specifically linked to each defender, depending on their profile, or an organised network of collectives.

Minimum training requirements for accompanying persons

Best practice

Individuals involved in these programmes should have a set of **competencies and training**, both professional and political, to ensure that defenders receive caring and supportive shelter, facilitating the development of personal and political connections while helping to prevent retraumatisation and mitigate the impacts associated with culture shock and migratory grief.

Practical examples

Key aspects identified by programmes include:

- **Personal and political commitment** to the defence of human rights and the work of human rights defenders. In addition, activist experience and a strong understanding of the impact of political violence, particularly for coordinators and those providing psychosocial support, can facilitate interpersonal relationships, build trust, and ensure more effective engagement with defenders.
- Proficiency in the **language** used by those receiving shelter, with interpretation or translation provided when this is not possible.
- Staff members from the countries of origin of those receiving shelter, or who possess **sufficient knowledge of the social, cultural and political context** of those countries. Some programmes have also identified the need for **cultural mediators** when this knowledge cannot be ensured through existing programme staff or volunteers.
- Training in **feminism, anti-racism, psychosocial approaches, trauma-informed care and activist care**, among other areas. The aim is to ensure that all individuals involved in accompaniment understand the impacts of socio-political, patriarchal and racist violence, as well as psychosocial trauma, enabling them to engage respectfully throughout the entire shelter process.

Financial and logistical resources for dignified shelter

Best practice

Providing caring and supportive shelter requires **designing programmes to ensure that shelter is only offered when safe and dignified conditions can be guaranteed**. In some cases, programmes may not have sufficient resources of their own, making it necessary to seek support from other institutions not yet involved (regional, local, etc.) or from specialised funding organisations that may be able to contribute (such as ProtectDefenders.eu, Front Line Defenders, Urgent Action Fund, etc.).

Practical examples

The following are some of the issues that need to be addressed during and after the stay to ensure a dignified shelter process:

- Sufficient **staffing levels** to carry out the functions required by a temporary relocation programme, as described above.
- **Advance payment of expenses** to ensure arrival, including travel for completing administrative procedures, associated fees, and transportation to the airport.
- **Round-trip travel tickets.**
- **Access to healthcare**, covered through travel insurance, specific health insurance, and/or registration in the public health system of the host country.
- **Adequate weekly or monthly financial support** to cover the defenders' day-to-day needs, including specific allocations for family support in cases where defenders have dependants (children or other family members).
- Coverage of **additional costs,** such as local transportation, travel, accommodation during trips, daily allowances, and leisure or sports activities.
- Adequate **accommodation** ensuring privacy, safety, and rest.
- **Access to additional resources** to allow adjustments in shared living arrangements in response to unforeseen situations during the shelter period, such as the deterioration of a defender's physical or mental health.
- Resources to ensure **safe return**, including financial support for the defender upon return and, where necessary, support for family relocation within the country of origin if the high-risk situation persists.

Institutional support promoting safety and recognition

Best practice

In addition to the financial and logistical support already mentioned, **national, regional and local institutions** – across both executive and legislative branches of **host societies** – play a crucial role in two key areas that place care at the centre of shelter: **recognition and safety**.

The shelter process can sometimes lead to a sense of **disconnection from identity** as a community reference, feelings of guilt associated with "abandoning" collective struggles for rights, or impacts on self-concept and self-esteem due to a perceived "**loss of status**". In their home context, defenders may be widely recognised and valued, whereas in the host society they may lack the same recognition.

In other cases, a defender's **self-esteem may be affected** due to a social and institutional context that **fails to acknowledge** their work or actively contributes to the political violence and risks they face.

Practical examples

When institutions organise welcome and farewell events, public evaluations of the shelter period, or other public gatherings, meetings, etc., with media coverage and formal protocols, they can contribute positively to the wellbeing of defenders. Such actions **can validate and legitimise their messages, recognise their status as social leaders,** and help give **political meaning to the shelter process**.

Additionally, facilitating administrative procedures, including by providing guarantees to reduce pre-arrival uncertainty, issuing official statements regarding risk upon return, coordinating bilateral actions with the country of origin, or including institutional representatives in human rights verification delegations in the hosted individuals' territories of origin, are **protective measures enhance defenders' safety and potentially contributing to reducing risk**.

Flexibility in duration of stay

Best practice

One area where there is considerable **variation** is the duration of the shelter period, which can range from a few days to several years.

According to interviews with various individuals and programme representatives, short stays of **under three months** usually focus on rest and healing retreats, and this duration is generally sufficient for such purposes.

Three-month programmes are common due to the legal limitations imposed by the migration policies of many countries. This duration may be adequate for individuals seeking short respite, while balancing family or professional obligations. However, this timeframe may limit the level of protection for defenders who need more time to plan a safe return or to wait for changes in the political or security context of their home territories.

Six-month stays may provide a more adequate period for recovery, strategic reflection and risk assessment. Nevertheless, longer stays may also disrupt professional, academic or family commitments, particularly for women defenders, student leaders or those without guaranteed employment upon their return.

Longer-term programmes are usually associated with specific professional roles (journalists, writers, etc.) and involve profound life changes. These programmes generally include provision for family relocation.

Beyond these general patterns, the duration of shelter required by each individual is not uniform. In addition, the support that a programme can offer primarily depends on the available **financial resources. Migration policies** and challenges related to **visa** procedures also represent significant barriers in this regard.

Practical examples

All programmes concur that ideally, the **duration of stay should be adapted to the individual needs** of each defender. However, due to restrictions from funding institutions and limited financial and human resources, most programmes are only able to offer fixed shelter periods.

Some programmes allow for the stay to be **extended or shortened** by a few months. Many also consider supporting applications for **international protection** in the host country.

Where duration cannot be adapted, it is considered best practice to **select individuals whose circumstances and needs align with the characteristics of the shelter offered**.

Possibility of hosting family members

Best practice

Many programmes do not offer the possibility of hosting family members in shelters, primarily due to insufficient resources. However, providing this option is considered a best practice from a gender perspective, as it **reduces barriers to access**, particularly for **women defenders** with dependent children, especially infants. It also helps alleviate worry or guilt associated with family separation (especially in longer-term programmes), which is often a major source of distress.

This approach facilitates defenders' adaptation during the shelter period. While the positive impacts on the families of hosted individuals are well recognised, it is also important to note the potential for challenges regarding interpersonal relationships or communal living arrangements.

Practical examples

Best practices identified by shelter programmes regarding hosting family members include:

- Adopt a **broad, non-normative, non-Eurocentric approach to the concept of family and parenting practices**.

- Draw on **specialised psychosocial guidance during the family selection process** to assess factors such as the needs of minors (emotional, educational, or relational), the appropriateness of hosting partners, etc.
- Some programmes that do not host family members still **allow or fund temporary visits**. There are also examples where pets have been accommodated, recognising the potential benefits for the defender's wellbeing.
- Ensure the **privacy and autonomy of the family unit** within dedicated spaces, minimising disruption to family dynamics.
- Extend **accompaniment** and offer access to **specialised psychosocial support to hosted families** to take account of the impacts they may have suffered due to political violence, migratory grief, reduced parental presence due to human rights work, as well as relationship/family challenges during the shelter period. In some cases, **psychosocial support** may also be **extended to family members who are not physically hosted**, as part of holistic care to enhance the hosted defender's wellbeing.
- Assess the potential benefits, harms and implications of hosting **school-age children or adolescents**. Many programmes do not align with school timetables and calendars, which can lead to disruptions in learning cycles. For adolescents in particular, leaving a familiar learning and social environment, adjusting to a different context for a temporary period, and then returning can entail significant emotional efforts and impacts.
- Some programmes provide **educational support**, enrolling children in local schools, in collaboration with these institutions. Other programmes maintain enrolment in the country of origin, while funding supplementary tuition, as well as age-appropriate leisure and social activities.

5.2

CARE FOR ACCOMPANYING PERSONS

This section presents best practices aimed at ensuring the care and wellbeing of those who accompany human rights defenders in temporary relocation programmes. These practices are cross-cutting and relevant throughout all phases of the programme.

Care as a core focus of the managing organisation

Best practice

Placing care at the centre of the programme management is essential for enabling all other actions. This approach fosters **caring and sustainable processes** benefiting both the team and hosted individuals.

Practical examples

Adopting a care policy that goes beyond isolated activities and is instead a cross-cutting and central element of an organisation's operations means **integrating physical, emotional and relational wellbeing into every aspect and decision of the institution**. This ensures safe working environments and management practices that prioritise health and the sustainability of collective work.

Some programmes implement a **care plan** that includes realistic work schedules, creation of internal spaces for support and respite, preventive mediation systems, and access to specialised individual support for staff members' physical and psychosocial health.

Decent working conditions and clearly defined roles

Best practice

Decent working conditions and a well-structured organisation with clearly defined roles help **reduce, workload and emotional fatigue**, while also establishing **boundaries between personal and professional life**. Protecting staff mental health and fostering a safe, stable working environment improves the quality of accompaniment provided to hosted individuals.

Practical examples

During the research process, the most commonly cited issues in this area were:

- Ensuring job **stability** and adequate **remuneration** to cover all costs associated with professional responsibilities.
- **Maintaining sufficient staffing levels** to cover all essential functions without overlaps or accumulation of responsibilities in a single role.
- **Establishing clearly defined work schedules**, with advance notice, including designated breaks and holidays.
- Ensuring a **clear division of tasks**, specifying each professional's responsibilities and availability, both within the team and in relation to hosted defenders, to provide a safe and predictable environment.
- Maintaining a **flexible organisational structure** that allows delegation and redistribution of tasks as needed. Some programmes rotate certain responsibilities, such as **planning emergency shifts**.

- Developing a **well-defined emergency protocol in collaboration with defenders** to delineate roles and responsibilities. Establish a rotation schedule for emergency duties and overtime to prevent staff overload.
- Implementing **compensation measures** for overtime necessitated by emergencies or peak workloads.
- Guaranteeing the **right to disconnect, both physically and digitally**. This means providing technical resources that enable effective separation, such as work mobile phones.
- Listening to and addressing the needs or complaints of hosted individuals with openness, while maintaining **professional distance** when necessary, recognising that some issues cannot be resolved, and sharing responsibility collectively with the team.
- Recognising **rest and self-care** as essential conditions for sustainable operations.
- Developing the ability to **recognise early signs of overload**, ask for support, and prevent burnout.

Ongoing internal coordination and communication

Best practice

Strengthening team coordination is a protective measure to promote programme staff wellbeing. This approach enhances both capacity and sense of agency in managing daily tasks and resolving potential crises or challenges inherent to communal living, thereby improving programme efficiency.

Practical examples

Strategies used by programmes include:

- Promoting **teamwork** and multidisciplinary collaboration with clear roles and ongoing communication.
- Advance planning **of regular meetings among all stakeholders** (funders, management, coordination team, specialised psychosocial support and volunteers), **adjusted to the different phases** of the programme.
- Facilitating **direct and fluid communication** with external professionals who frequently work with the programme, including nutritionists, physiotherapists, yoga instructors and therapists.
- Establishing **clear and secure communication channels** – such as a group chat on Signal – to share relevant daily information.
- Holding **coordination** meetings or **group sessions between specialised psychosocial support staff and programme staff accompanying** defenders on a daily basis, fostering the exchange of relevant information to improve overall performance.

- Accompanying persons may identify elements that contribute to specialised psychosocial support efforts, while specialised professionals can offer insights on the needs and challenges faced by defenders, foster intercultural understanding, help staff avoid taking defenders' reactions personally, and manage expectations. This approach promotes appropriate daily accompaniment practices and minimises the impact on accompanying persons. In some programmes, defenders sign informed consent forms, allowing selective information sharing.
- Promoting i**nformal team-building spaces**, such as outdoor, cultural or artistic activities, shared meals, etc.

Group spaces for emotional release and debriefing

Best practice

Facilitating opportunities for group emotional release and debriefings, either self-managed or guided by specialised professionals, enables teams to **address the emotional impacts of accompaniment**, prevent overload, burnout and vicarious trauma. This practice also contributes to **group trust-building**.

Practical examples

Some programmes provide these spaces **informally**, integrating them into coordination meetings or daily work routines. However, without dedicated, **regular settings, daily operational demands can overshadow the team's needs. To address this, some programmes schedule regular group emotional release sessions led by internal or external specialised staff**. These sessions are not intended for technical supervision, but rather to offer team members a space to share feelings about their work, express fears, doubts, exhaustion and concerns, exchange collective insights, and reflect on significant experiences in accompaniment.

Access to specialised psychosocial support

Best practice

All those working in temporary relocation programmes, regardless of their role, can benefit from access to external specialised psychosocial support. This serves as a **preventive measure** against the **psychosocial risks** inherent in accompaniment work, and the **impacts** it can generate. Such support not only improves wellbeing, but also enhances the sustainability and smooth operation of programmes.

In addition, individuals working in the programmes can be "**role models**" for hosted individuals. Therefore, openly acknowledging and seeking support when needed is important for destigmatising mental and emotional struggles within human rights environments.

Practical examples

Some programmes operate a **health fund** for individuals who work or collaborate with the programme, which can include access to a range of services, such as individual psychotherapy sessions.

In others, programme **teams** or individuals providing psychosocial support undertake preventive work and offer emotional support and guidance, while facilitating group workshops or internal training. Such approaches contribute to team cohesion, communication, a shared understanding of challenges and more coordinated accompaniment.

Best practice

Offering regular, programme-specific training opportunities is a key component of caring for accompanying persons. Such training **strengthens the team's capacity** to provide safe, trauma-informed support. It also helps individuals to **recognise and manage their own emotional responses**, thereby reducing the risk of burnout and promoting professional and personal wellbeing.

Training to strengthen accompaniment and prevent secondary impacts

Practical examples

Some programmes organise regular **training sessions**. In-person sessions foster opportunities for provide an opportunity for personal exchange and connection. In other cases, to improve accessibility and support work-life balance, training is offered online or through asynchronous formats.

Training areas identified by the programmes as particularly useful for work teams include: understanding the socio-political contexts in the countries of origin of hosted defenders; the psychosocial approach; the trauma-informed care approach; digital security; psychological first aid (PFA); group facilitation; burnout prevention; managing expectations among hosted defenders; and critical reflection on, and transformation of, organisational practices and power relations.

External supervision of accompaniment

Best practice

Supervision by external experts offers a safe **space for accompanying persons to reflect on programme realities**, with critical distance, ensuring a clear distinction between personal experiences and the situations accompanied. This approach facilitates more thoughtful decision-making, improves the quality of accompaniment, and reduces the risk of emotional exhaustion. Additionally, it enables accompanying persons to recognise that many reactions from hosted defenders are expressions of trauma rather than personal attacks, promoting more empathetic and sustainable engagement.

Practical examples

Some programmes organise **regular group supervision sessions** involving the entire team. These sessions may address topics such as challenges arising during the accompaniment process; reflection on internal processes; analysis of holistic protection or risk factors prior to return, etc.

In other cases, programmes also offer specific supervision based on area or role. For example, those involved in specialised psychosocial support may receive supervision from another professional with expertise in the field. Several experiences also highlight the value of **peer supervision among shelter programmes**, through regular meetings or ad hoc initiatives to address emergency situations.

Clearly defined and shared response protocols

Best practice

During the shelter period, various **crisis situations** may arise, including sexist or racist incidents, whether internal or external, or the death or serious illness of someone close to the defender in the country of origin. These situations **require clear responses, with each team member understanding their role**. Establishing collective response protocols for such situations **facilitates the work of accompanying persons** by ensuring proper coordination, minimising confusion and improvisation, reducing stress and emotional strain, and promoting consistency in joint actions.

Practical examples

Many programmes have prevention and response protocols for situations of **gender-based violence or sexual assault**, either occurring within the programme itself or involving external actors. Most programmes also have protocols outlining the types of **breaches** that may occur within the programme and how to respond to them, such as a participant's wish to withdraw or serious violations of basic rules. Other commonly established protocols address the management of **health emergencies** or situations involving **racist or LGTBIQ-phobic violence**. In all cases, it is important to document these protocols **in writing and ensure that they are accessible and clearly communicated**.

Programme networks

Best practice

Networking contributes to the care and wellbeing of accompanying persons in temporary relocation programmes for several reasons. First, it helps give **meaning and purpose to their work by breaking the emotional isolation** and reinforcing the sense of being part of something larger. Second, while each programme is different, many experiences and challenges are shared. This **common ground** creates opportunities to develop **joint advocacy strategies** when engaging with institutions, with greater chances of success. Third, the possibility of **sharing resources, requesting support, organising exchanges, and developing joint activities or training** can facilitate the work of accompanying persons, building on prior knowledge, efforts and trust.

Practical examples

All of those interviewed for this guide emphasised that building networks among programmes is **one of the most important strategies for psychosocial care and wellbeing**.

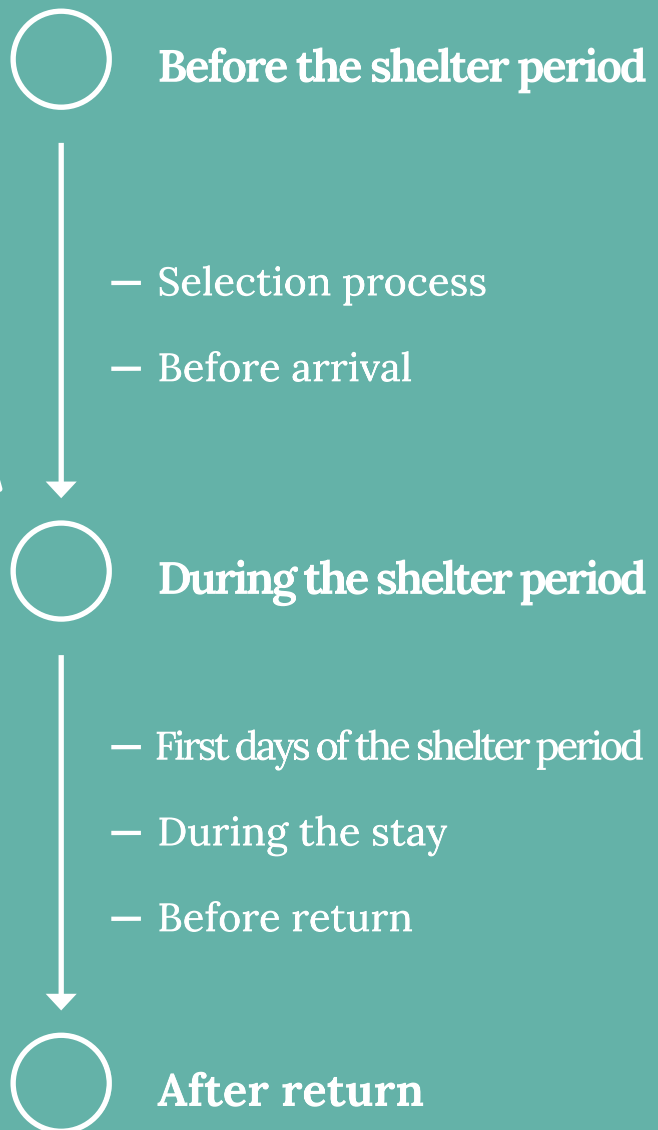
Several networks have been established at different levels: the ProTEJER network in Spain, the EUTRP at European level, and the Ubuntu Hub Cities network in Africa. Programmes organisationally linked to networks such as Shelter City or ICORN already place this networking approach at the core of their work. **Networking and exchange among professionals providing specialised psychosocial support** are particularly valuable, sharing questions, best practices, experiences, challenges and training opportunities, across programmes operating within the same geographical or cultural context, as well as at a general level, especially given the limited theoretical and practical references available in this area.

5.3

PHASE SPECIFIC PRACTICES

This section outlines key best practices at each phase of temporary relocation programmes: before the shelter period, during the shelter period, and after return.

PHASES OF TEMPORARY SHELTER



5.3.1

BEFORE THE SHELTER PERIOD

SELECTION PROCESS

Clearly communicated calls for applications

Best practice

Calls for applications should be clear and provide detailed information about the main aspects of shelter, including duration, rights, responsibilities and limitations, so that organisations and defenders can make informed decisions.

Practical examples

All programmes provide **written documentation** outlining the conditions of the shelter programme, such as duration, financial support, objectives of shelter, and other key elements. The way this information is distributed varies depending on the programme's specificities.

Some programmes issue **open calls** through trusted organisations or networks in the countries of origin of potential participants. Others publish open calls on their websites, making them accessible to any individual or organisation that meets the eligibility criteria.

In some cases, **calls for applications** are issued on a periodic basis (once or twice a year), with information circulated during the application period. Other programmes operate **on a rolling basis**, filling places as they become available, or **in response to risk situations**. In these cases, information must be available year-round. Some programmes combine both approaches, issuing periodic calls while also accepting urgent applications when necessary.

Selection processes coordinated with organisations

Best practice

It is essential to maintain **close coordination with organisations in the country of origin** during the selection process. This coordination helps ensure that cases are identified in a more context-sensitive and relevant way, reliable information is gathered about prospective participants, and selection criteria genuinely reflect the needs of individuals and their communities. At the same time, it reinforces shared responsibility in decision-making and helps ensure that hosted individuals have the necessary organisational backing to strengthen their capacities during their stay. Without this coordination, tensions or misunderstandings may arise, potentially limiting accompaniment before departure, during stay and upon return, or even leading to mistrust and a breakdown in the relationship between the defender and their organisation.

Practical examples

Some programmes rely on **organisations in the country of origin** to nominate and select candidates for each call. Programmes targeting a specific country often establish diverse and representative selection committees to reflect the broader organisational landscape and avoid affinity bias.

In other cases, an **intermediary** – who may also serve as a risk analyst in the country of origin – coordinates the submission of applications in close collaboration with local organisations.

Other programmes rely on **organisations in the host country** that have established relationships of trust and collaboration with applicant organisations and provide much of the accompaniment. In some cases, these organisations also propose and select candidates. There are also entities and networks in various countries that select and manage their own cases.

Selection criteria vary widely across programmes, often emphasising factors such as nationality, gender, prior collaboration, risk profile, ethnic or gender diversity, or professional background (e.g., artistic or journalistic work). It is crucial to establish clear, agreed, objective criteria. Programmes that use pre-selection questionnaires based on these criteria are better able to make selection decisions better aligned with both the programme's capacities and the needs of the individual.

All stakeholders agree on the importance of **close coordination between entities** and establishing **trust** with applicants. These organisations act as a first filter, understanding the local context, the applicant's work and track record, and the real risks faced by the individuals they propose. They also handle sensitive data and can provide **verifiable, documented information**. In some cases, **cross-checking** strategies are applied to mitigate the risk of infiltration or to more accurately assess the risks faced and needs of the applicant.

Selection processes with a psychosocial approach

Best practice

Integrating a psychosocial approach into the selection process enables a more comprehensive risk assessment by introducing the concept of **expanded risk**. This approach helps identify an individual's emotional and relational resources and situation, as well as the potential impact of temporary relocation on their personal, family, community, and organisational life. Applying a psychosocial perspective contributes to **more sustainable, responsible selection decisions that prioritise the wellbeing** of human rights defenders and their communities.

Practical examples

Some programmes include **questions in the application forms** on psychosocial health (previous accompaniment, specific needs such as medication, personal, work and family situation, etc.). In other programmes, specialised psychosocial support professionals participate directly in the selection committees. In programmes **offering shelter to families**, it is important to involve professionals specialising in family accompaniment.

Having **prior information on expanded risk** factors allows programmes to select candidates better aligned with the programme's capacity and available resources. It also enables them to prepare appropriate psychosocial support in advance, for example by matching participants with therapists suited to their needs. Some selection committees also include **former participants**, whose first-hand experience can greatly inform and facilitate decision-making.

5.3.1 BEFORE THE SHELTER PERIOD

BEFORE ARRIVAL

Clear points of contact and secure commu-nication channels

Best practice

Before arrival, it is important to designate **a point of contact** who can respond to questions or be reached in case of any issues. This helps defenders navigate the process and reduces the risk of confusion and/or loss of information. **Communication channels should be as secure and accessible as possible**, ensuring sensitive information can be exchanged.

Practical examples

Programmes typically designate a **contact person** to act as a liaison between the programme and defenders. In some cases, prior to their, arrival, defenders are introduced to the volunteers who will accompany them in their daily activities, or to their professional mentors, allowing them to ask questions about the accompaniment proposed.

Many programmes rely on secure channels, such as **Signal**. When defenders are unable to use these tools or are unfamiliar with them, brief training is offered or the minimum necessary sensitive information is requested before arrival, with further guidance and training provided once the defender reaches the host location.

Adminis-trative ac-compani-ment

Best practice

To minimise stress, prevent potential retraumatisation, and reduce **barriers to access** associated with pre-arrival administrative procedures, programmes should ensure personalised support for those to be hosted.

Practical examples

This accompaniment may include:

» Providing **written** information outlining the steps to be followed.

» Establishing a **clear and accessible channel for administrative questions**.

» Ensuring **proactive contact and follow-up** by the designated contact person.

» **Offering specific financial assistance** to cover travel costs or administrative fees.

» Providing support with administrative procedures related to **obtaining leave** from the workplaces of the individuals to be hosted.

» Recommending and assisting with the arrangement of **power of attorney** for a trusted person in the country of origin, allowing procedures to be completed remotely if necessary.

Clear programme objectives and expectation management

Best practice

Even when an individual has submitted a fully-informed application, it remains essential to **clearly communicate** – prior to their arrival in the host country – on the programme's objectives, the support available, and the limits. This helps ensure a positive shelter experience and minimises the risk of misunderstandings.

Practical examples

Some programmes provide this information in **writing**, so that applicants can review the commitments, potential benefits and risks associated with their stay. Others organise a preliminary **phone or video call** to discuss expectations, clarify objectives, and help adjust the stay realistically to the individual's needs.

Basic information about arrival and stay

Best practice

To help the individual prepare **materially, physically and emotionally** for shelter, it is essential that they receive clear information about their arrival and key aspects of daily life.

Practical examples

La información básica identificada como esencial incluye:

- **Climate** at the shelter location.
- **Packing** recommendations.
- Amount and frequency of **financial support**.
- **Accommodation** characteristics.
- Type of **healthcare** and Access to medicines and specialized treatments.
- **Reception logistics** and airport/station pick-up.
- **Welcome plan and schedule** for the first few days.

Defining a public profile and internal preparation for shelter

Best practice

Before arrival, the programme should define a **preliminary public profile** of the defender. This helps **plan their stay** more strategically, aligning with the needs of both the individual and their organisation. This profile enables the programme to identify networks, groups or spaces that may be of interest to the defender; determine which volunteers are best suited to accompany them; identify relevant training opportunities; and anticipate specific needs, such as translation, cultural orientation, or adjustments required to meet health or mobility needs.

Practical examples

Some programmes prepare this profile in collaboration with the defender to be hosted, either through a **video call** or written information. In some cases, **organisation priorities and needs** connected to the defender's stay are also incorporated. In some cases, the profile is shared internally or with organisations supporting the programme. Where security conditions allow, the defender's profile may also be **shared via emai**l in advance to facilitate initial contact.

Preparing a safety plan

Best practice

Return preparation should begin even before the programme starts, through discussions with defenders and their organisations about concerns, risks and realistic possibilities for return. Initiating this dialogue early allows more time to plan protection measures, activate actions from the country of origin, and prevent abrupt or unprepared departures. Early planning **strengthens security, supports informed decision-making, and promotes wellbeing** after the programme has ended, while reducing feelings of guilt or overexposure. It also reinforces organisational capacity, and improves the support the organisation can provide throughout the stay.

Practical examples

Some programmes have **risk analysts and holistic protection professionals**, who begin their assessments before the defender's arrival, identifying necessary support measures at this early stage, such as supporting documentation or invitation letters for entry into the host country. It is also useful to **evaluate the benefits and potential risks of public visibility** from the outset.

Specialised psychosocial support before the shelter period

Best practice

Specialised psychosocial support for human rights defenders should begin as early as possible. This can help them **address any outstanding matters** in their country of origin, organise the **delegation of responsibilities**, manage **communication with family and close contacts** regarding their absence, and start **building relationships**.

Practical examples

In some programmes, **psychosocial support** professionals reach out to selected individuals **before their arrival**.

In addition to **email or phone** contact, they may hold one or more **online sessions** to provide basic information, address questions or concerns, and help participants finalise matters related to work, family, studies, or their home territory. This early support helps defenders to focus on the process ahead and make the most of the resources and opportunities available. It also helps build trust, prepares the ground for in-person support, and allows assessment of specific needs – such as insomnia, anxiety, fear, or guilt – as well as expectations or wishes that the selected defender may have before travelling.

In some cases, logistical or security constraints make this practice impossible. In such situations, programmes may use **online surveys** to identify psychosocial needs and help tailor the shelter process to the individual as much as possible.

5.3.2

DURING THE SHELTER PERIOD

FIRST DAYS

Welcoming and basic care

Best practice

Providing a caring welcome and reception in these first moments is crucial and can shape the rest of the stay. The goal is to ensure that the **hosted individual feels like the central focus of the process**. Achieving this requires time, active listening, dedication, and strong involvement from programme staff and the coordinating team, whose role is essential.

Practical examples

Some actions identified as useful in the first days to support wellbeing and a sense of care include:

- **Greeting** defenders upon arrival at the airport/station and escorting them to their accommodation.
- If the schedule and condition of defenders allow, organising a **welcome meal** with those who collected them on arrival, to foster initial bonding and a sense of a safe environment.
- **Purchasing basic** food and hygiene items in preparation of their arrival.
- Providing access to a local **phone number and internet** to facilitate communication.
- **Preparing accommodation** including any necessary renovations or improvements, **showing them the space and explaining how to use facilities** (washing machine, hot water, heating and/or fans, Wi-Fi, TV, etc.). Providing written instructions in a language and form they understand helps promote autonomy.

Clear and accessible practical information

Best practice

All basic information necessary to support the **navigation, autonomy, and safety** of hosted defenders during the first days of shelter should be provided in a clear, accessible and understandable form. It is important to recognise that information provided, especially in the initial moments, may not be fully retained due to the emotional and physical vulnerability that may be experienced upon arrival.

For this reason, information should be **repeated** as often as necessary and provided **in writing** in a language defenders understand. They should also be reassured that they can ask any questions as often as they like.

Practical examples

Examples of important information to share at this stage include:

- General information about the **city** and specific details about the area where defenders are hosted. For cultural immersion, it is useful to take a walk around the neighbourhood to identify essential services, such as supermarkets, shops where they can buy food from their home country, health facilities,

communication centres, gyms, laundrettes, places of worship, markets, restaurants, bars, safe places to go at night, etc.). It is also useful to show them how to reach the offices of the shelter organisation and other relevant entities, and point out key city landmarks. Providing a **physical or digital map with this information** is helpful. Some programmes provide **guides or dossiers with this information**, along with cultural aspects of daily life.

- Information on how public **transportation** works with a travel card for immediate use.
- Access to a **bank account** and bank card, with information on use.
- **Assistance with basic daily tasks**: grocery shopping and basic cleaning and food products available in the hosting location, accompanying them on public transport, to the bank or health centre, etc.
- Written **list of essential phone numbers**, including staff contacts and emergency services (e.g., police, medical emergencies, gender violence and hate crime helplines). Offer to help to add them to their mobile phones and provide guidance on when to use each service.
- Information on the range of **services and support** available, including health care, specialised psychosocial support, and leisure activities. Accompany them to these services if necessary.

Introductions and clearly defined roles within the programme

Best practice

It is important to **introduce** the defender to all staff involved in the programme and **clearly explain** each member's **roles and responsibilities**, so they know whom to approach for different needs. Facilitating meetings with those who will be most closely involved in the accompaniment process is also essential, helping to build trust, provide guidance, and foster a sense of support from the outset.

Practical examples

In some programmes, **informal activities** are organised during the first few days – such as home visits, shared meals, or recreational activities – to introduce the team, foster connections, and create a welcoming atmosphere. Other programmes hold a **structured meeting facilitated by specialised psychosocial support professionals**, where staff and defenders are introduced. This session can provide an overview of key contacts, points of reference, and spaces defenders will encounter, as well as information on when the schedule will become busier. As noted above, it is important to **limit the amount of information provided at the start**, ensuring it is clear, manageable, and easy to absorb.

Communication and agreed commitments, boundaries and protocols

Best practice

Informing hosted individuals about their commitments, rights, and responsibilities during the first few days is key to clarifying uncertainties and preventing future misunderstandings. These **commitments** should be communicated before selection. When, participants arrive – and are no longer under pressure – it is important to review them and provide an opportunity to address any questions. Additionally, having clear operating protocols in place and sharing them with participants helps build trust in the programme by demonstrating a safe and professional framework.

Practical examples

All programmes begin by **outlining the commitments**, rights, responsibilities, and limits associated with the shelter process.

Many require residents to **sign** documents formalising these agreements, which provide a framework for addressing any breaches by either party.

Most programmes emphasise including **minimum standards of good conduct** – rules that should not be taken for granted – as well as **confidentiality agreements** governing the use of information during the shelter process, whether related to the organisation, accompanying individuals, or the hosted individual's public profile.

In some programmes, **protocols** are explained verbally at the outset to ensure defenders are aware of them if needed. In other cases, protocols include **specific actions**, such as interviews with specialised professionals as preventive measures to assess the situation of women or couples hosted, workshops on preventing gender-based violence, or targeted sessions for men to understand cultural codes related to gender roles in the hosting context.

Rest and adjustment before starting public activities

Best practice

It is important **not to overload** defenders' **schedules** during the initial phase of their stay. They may experience sleep disturbances, particularly if there is a significant time difference with their country of origin, and may begin to feel the effects of culture shock. The priority during this period is to allow them to **rest and gradually become familiar with life in the place of shelter**.

Practical examples

Some programmes delay public events until after the **second week or even the first month** of the shelter period as a protective measure. In some cases, defenders may request a **more active schedule** from the outset.

During this stage, many programmes focus on creating **spaces for daily interaction unrelated to violence**, such as shared meals at the shelter, informal conversations, laughter, and other activities outside advocacy work. Establishing a relaxed, home-like atmosphere helps relationships develop naturally and not be solely shaped by the pressures of the process.

These early moments are also valuable for **preventing culture shock** and providing **context** about the host country's culture, politics, social norms, customs, traditions, festivities, etc. Some programmes offer **induction workshops** to share this information and promote group cohesion.

In all cases, it is important to **adapt to the needs and pace** of each hosted individual. At this stage, attention to **sleep hygiene** is often a priority.

Speciali-sed psy-chosocial support in the early stages

Best practice

During this initial phase, psychosocial support can take the form of an **introduction explaining the objectives of the process**. The manner in which this support is presented is extremely important.

Practical examples

Strategies that have proven useful include:

» **Clearly defining the type of support** participants will receive – including location, frequency, and objectives – while exploring alternative options tailored to their psychological and cultural needs.

» Presenting **psychosocial support as a political tool** that helps ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of their activism.

» **Avoiding clinical** or pathologising **language**, focusing instead on basic psychoeducation.

» Framing **wellbeing as an integral component of safety**.

» Emphasising the importance of **collective care** within human rights movements, not only self-care.

» Conducting a wellbeing **assessment** using context-appropriate tools to identify key psychological needs.

» **Facilitating informal gatherings** designed for introductions and relationship-building, such as shared meals, walks, outdoor activities and activities in natural spaces.

» Where possible, holding an initial **group workshop** to foster emotional openness, provide a collective perspective on psychosocial support, and promote trust, group cohesion, recognition as equals, and mutual understanding.

5.3.2

DURING THE SHELTER PERIOD

DURING THE STAY

Appropriate linguistic adaptation

Best practice

The language of the host country is a key factor, as it **directly affects the adaptation process**. Experiences such as culture shock, migratory grief, and the ability to socialise or build personal and political support networks are largely influenced by proficiency in the local language.

Practical examples

In programmes where the host society's language differs from that of the country of origin, it is important to provide **guided language immersion** and ensure access to **language classes**. This may include facilitating the support of interpreter, who can also serve as valuable cultural mediators. Some programmes organise **language tandems or exchange activities**, which support both language learning and the creation of social spaces and support networks for defenders during their stay.

Access to leisure and rest

Best practice

Leisure and rest are essential components of shelter programmes, as many defenders arrive exhausted or in need of recovery from traumatic experiences. Programmes should provide access to **activities that are flexible and tailored** to each participant's rhythms and ways of resting.

Practical examples

Experience from various programmes shows that promoting **autonomy in managing schedules**, offering **flexibility around programme obligations**, and ensuring privacy in living spaces significantly support rest.

Establishing **agreements on temporary disconnection or delegation of responsibilities** with organisations in the country of origin can further enhance the restorative potential of the shelter period. It is also considered best practice to **cover costs for sports and leisure activities** for hosted individuals.

Physical activity – whether at the gym, cycling, running, swimming, yoga, playing football or basketball, or walking in natural spaces – plays a **vital** role in maintaining **health and wellbeing** during the stay. Many defenders lack the time or resources to engage in these activities. The shelter period offers an ideal opportunity to incorporate such **self-care strategies**, with the goal of **continuing them after returning home**.

Most programmes offer a range of **leisure activities** and provide **information** to help defenders access existing options in the shelter location. In some programmes, promoting these activities individually is part of the **responsibilities** of specific staff or volunteers, supporting access to available local offerings.

Some programmes also offer **short retreats**, either individually or in groups, to allow for deeper rest.

Facilitating **travel** to significant or **meaningful sites**, or to visit family and friends in other areas or countries, is also recognised as beneficial for wellbeing and gives a sense of personal purpose to the stay.

Organising and encouraging **other activities** – such as preparing traditional meals together, reading, writing, visiting museums, or engaging in artistic expression in any formats – can foster disconnection, creativity, and emotional processing, while also providing a sense of home and connection.

Careful management of schedule and public exposure

Best practice

For individuals who have experienced trauma, it is particularly important to create a shelter environment that allows them to feel as much control over their lives as possible. **A sense of agency over daily routines** and activities during their stay is essential. While a reasonable level of activity can help structure the shelter experience and provide new experiences, ideas, and connections, a public **schedule that does not align with their needs can be counterproductive**. It may lead to boredom or feelings of uselessness if the activities are perceived as insufficient; exhaustion, fear, or insecurity from being exposed to situations they did not choose; emotional fatigue or revictimisation if they are repeatedly asked to recount the circumstances that led to their departure; or even increased risk to themselves, their family, or their organisation if sensitive information is shared in unsafe settings. The level of **public exposure must be carefully evaluated** to protect defenders' psychosocial wellbeing.

Practical examples

It is highly recommended to actively involve defenders in designing their advocacy schedule **collaboratively**, ensuring it is tailored to their **needs**. **Ongoing, careful communication** is essential, as some individuals may clearly express their preferences, while others may find this more challenging.

Scheduling should also be adapted to each defender's specific profile to maximise impact for their organizations, communities, or collective processes. This approach helps reduce feelings of isolation, disconnection, powerlessness, or guilt.

The **degree of public exposure must be adapted based on risk assessments** to avoid uncontrolled exposure.

Decisions on exposure should be made **collaboratively** with the defender, ensuring they have all the necessary information to make informed choices about appearance in photographs or social media posts, participation in public events, press coverage, use of pseudonyms, etc.

Some programmes conduct **specific risk assessments** before and after visibility-raising activities. Others consult with **specialised psychosocial support professionals** to gain insight into an individual's emotional state and better evaluate whether participation in certain events is appropriate.

Updated security plan

Best practice

Preparation for return should continue throughout the entire stay. To this end, it is important to build on the work started before the defender's arrival or, if no prior planning has been done, to begin it during the shelter period. This helps foster a sense of control and security.

Practical examples

Some programmes develop a **holistic security plan** to continuously monitor the risk situation in the country of origin, anticipate potential threats, and establish specific strategies to address them. These strategies may include limiting public exposure, managing the defender's public profile, advising on safe social media use, or making remote decisions related to their organisation or family.

In programmes with **professionals specialising in risk analysis, holistic protection, or digital security**, case monitoring is conducted continuously. In other programmes, trained staff – sometimes supported by professionals providing specialised psychosocial support – carry out this individualised monitoring, drawing on their expertise and the necessary information to ensure the defender's safety.

Accompaniment at meetings and public events

Best practice

Careful preparation and close accompaniment are recommended to ensure successful meetings during the shelter period. This approach helps strengthen defenders' self-esteem and confidence.

Practical examples

It is essential that hosted individuals are informed about **who they will meet**, the role of the organisation or institution, and that they have the option to be accompanied if needed.

Some programmes provide support from **staff specialised in political communication** to help defenders prepare the information they wish to convey at meetings and events.

Only realistic and relevant objectives should be considered, avoiding any expectations that are unattainable. Developing public speaking and body language skills is also important to deliver clear and structured presentations, particularly when linguistic or cultural barriers exist.

After each event, participants should conduct a **joint evaluation** to share impressions, identify lessons learned, plan next steps, and highlight contacts and opportunities that the defender can integrate into their ongoing work.

Coordination and follow-up meetings

Best practice

Regular follow-up is essential to ensure that the stay meets the defender's needs. During these meetings, it is important to pay attention not only to what is expressed but also to what may be left unsaid due to discomfort or a desire not to burden the team. **Attentive and proactive accompaniment** allows for timely adjustments, helping to prevent overload and ensuring that the shelter stay remains aligned with the defender's wellbeing and goals.

Practical examples

In some programmes, these meetings are held **weekly in groups**, providing participants with a regular space to discuss topics such as work reports, scheduling and activity planning, and adjustment to communal living. These group sessions are complemented by individual meetings.

In other programmes, meetings may take place **monthly** or follow a **structured schedule** that includes an initial, intermediate, and final meeting, particularly for stays of three months or less.

The **frequency and format** of meetings depend on the programme's duration, the roles of the team, and available resources.

Regardless of the approach, it is essential to allow defenders to request **additional meetings** whenever they need to adjust aspects of their shelter experience or raise specific concerns.

Facilitating training of defenders

Best practice

Providing training for defenders during the shelter period is considered a best practice for two key reasons: it helps them **develop their personal, technical, and political skills**, and it enhances their **sense of purpose** and overall **psychosocial wellbeing**.

Practical examples

Some programmes have a**rrangements with schools, universities, or professional institutions**, allowing hosted individuals to enrol in training courses, master's programmes, or language classes. Others facilitate and fund **training opportunities chosen by the defender upon arrival**. Internal training or short courses are also often offered on topics such as digital security, the history and socio-political context of the host country, human rights work, etc.

In some programmes, **mentoring** is provided by professionals in the resident's field – particularly in shelters hosting artists, writers, or journalists – offering guidance and support as they pursue their cultural or artistic work in the host society.

All programmes agree that, in order to plan effectively and offer training tailored to each individual, it is essential to consider the **programme's duration, language barriers, and the specific training needs and interests** of each resident.

Building support networks in the host society

Best practice

One of the **key benefits of temporary shelter** for the personal and political empowerment of defenders is its ability to foster and sustain support networks across different areas and levels. On a **personal** level, meaningful interactions with programme staff or volunteers, connections with other activists, and opportunities to meet people in the host country who share common interests – such as work, sports, or music – help prevent isolation, culture shock, and migratory grief, while enhancing psychosocial wellbeing. At a **political** level, sharing experiences and raising awareness of their struggles in various social and institutional settings, as well as meeting with organisations in the host country on behalf of their own organisations to establish agreements or secure support, strengthens advocacy and protection capacities. It also increases the perceived value of the shelter programme and can help reduce risks upon returning home.

Practical examples

Most programmes **actively facilitate connections** between hosted individuals and relevant activists, organisations, and institutions. In many cases, defenders are enabled to travel within the host country or to other countries, which can strengthen protection strategies and expand their network.

Specific activities may include introductory and welcome meetings with support groups or other relevant community organisations. These events publicly recognise defenders' work and can lead to new activities, contacts, and connections. Meetings may also be arranged with local authorities (mayors, councillors, etc.), cooperation and human rights agencies, trade unions, professionals, universities, artists, or fellow activists in their field, allowing defenders to share their work in professional, community, or academic settings of interest.

Programmes often facilitate early social connections, after which hosted individuals are encouraged to exercise **autonomy** in managing their own work schedules and contacts.

Contacts with **local media** are often promoted to increase visibility and impact.

Best practice also encourages **exchanges between programmes** in the same country or region, particularly when stays overlap. This facilitates link-building, joint training, networking between programmes, and the creation of regional activist networks.

In some programmes, hosted individuals act **collectively as a political group**, producing their own publications such as magazines, press releases, social media content, or engaging in advocacy in the host country to denounce situations in their home country. This strengthens group cohesion, enhances their perceived sense of purpose, and supports the development of wider support networks.

In some cases, **coordinators** establish contacts and networks; in others, **volunteers** or designated **community support** individuals take on this role. In these cases, it is important for **activists** to share their culture, knowledge, and time as a form of solidarity.

These **roles** often extend beyond accompaniment for advocacy to include daily accompaniment and participation in leisure, cultural, protest, religious, and sporting activities of interest. This not only contributes to **adjustment and wellbeing**, but also helps to **expand personal networks** and foster new connections.

Guided communal living

Best practice

In many shelter programmes, the decision to provide shared accommodation is often influenced by available financial resources. However, this model can offer **significant benefits**, including enhancing emotional wellbeing, preventing loneliness and isolation, providing peer support, and creating spaces for defenders to connect. At the same time, communal living can give rise to **challenges or tensions**, particularly in stressful contexts, due to cultural, generational, or gender differences, or complex personal dynamics. Such conflicts can disrupt group harmony and have notable emotional impacts. For this reason, communal living requires deliberate and structured support.

Practical examples

Some programmes have identified practices that promote harmonious communal living, including:

- Designating staff **points of contact** for communal living issues while avoiding unnecessary interference.
- Creating a **communal living guide** with basic initial guidelines, which can serve as a foundation for more detailed agreements.
- Prioritising **single-gender living arrangements** where possible, as a general preventive measure against patriarchal dynamics or gender-based violence.
- Granting residents **autonomy** to manage accommodation as their home during their stay.
- Establishing **clear rules and boundaries** collaboratively at the outset of co-living. This can be done in an initial meeting guided by a designated staff member, where tasks, responsibilities, schedules, and basic rules of respect are agreed. When there are multiple units, specific agreements for each co-living unit have proven useful. These agreements should be written and explicitly state that sexist, racist, LGBTQ-phobic, or other forms of violence and disrespect are not tolerated.
- Referring to agreed **codes of conduct** in cases of non-compliance or discomfort.
- Reiterating operational **protocols**, available support and possible consequences for exceeding established limits.
- Holding **regular group and individual meetings** to discuss community life, anticipate difficulties, address issues early, encourage respectful communication, and resolve conflicts through dialogue.

- Providing **designated support staff** to facilitate mediation when necessary.
- **Responding urgently to serious conflicts**. Situations involving physical, verbal, or psychological violence should trigger immediate intervention in line with protocols already communicated to defenders.
- Considering additional measures in **serious or recurring cases**, such as relocating residents or reporting issues to the organisations that nominated defenders.

Access to holistic health services

Best practice

It is essential that defenders have access to adequate health services during their stay, both to manage pre-existing conditions and to address any new health issues that may arise. Barriers such as administrative status, long waiting lists, language differences, or cultural factors can limit access to local healthcare. For this reason, programmes should provide mechanisms to ensure **emergency care**, **continuity of ongoing treatments**, and, when needed, **specialised diagnosis and follow-up**.

Practical examples

Depending on context, some programmes prioritise access to **public health services**, providing training and fostering close collaboration with healthcare personnel so they can better understand the specific needs of defenders and manage cases effectively.

Other programmes complement or replace this approach with **private services, health cooperatives, or independent professionals** who apply psychosocial and cross-cultural approaches, ensuring care that is culturally appropriate and delivered within a reasonable timeframe.

Health support services offered in various programmes include physiotherapy, nutrition, endocrinology, and gynaecology. In some cases, **non-conventional approaches** are also incorporated – such as art therapy, therapeutic writing, dance therapy, traditional healing practices, traditional Chinese medicine, or holistic medicine – which have proven helpful for specific needs or profiles. It is considered best practice to maintain a comprehensive, up-to-date list of professionals and resources to provide prompt and appropriate care for any situation.

Some programmes also recommend keeping a **basic first aid kit** in accommodation, stocked with items such as gauze, plasters, antiseptic, a digital thermometer, and round-tipped scissors, along with supplies for common physical ailments, including oral rehydration solution, digestive or soothing teas and infusions, hot and cold packs, and a range of menstrual products.

Speciali-sed psy-chosocial support during shelter

Support can be provided on an **individual basis, in groups, or through a combination of both**. Access to all formats is beneficial, as each contributes different elements to the therapeutic process. In some cases, group support may not be appropriate due to the nature of the trauma experienced, conflicts within the group, or differences in the length of each defender's stay. Conversely, individual support may not align with certain cultural worldviews or personal preferences.

Psychosocial support professionals may also, at times, assist with practical daily matters or coordinate access to health and psychosocial services.

The **type and format of support** will depend on **who** is providing it – whether they are part of the programme team, an external professional, or an intermediary responsible for coordinating care among different specialists.

Below are some of the key aspects identified as relevant to this type of support, along with associated best practices:

Clarifying confidentiality

Best practice

Many defenders may be cautious about psychosocial support due to distrust or fears about the misuse of sensitive information. It is therefore essential that those providing support establish a **clear, secure framework of confidentiality** from the outset. In group settings, particular care should be taken to ensure that all participants understand the sensitive nature of what is shared and formally commit to respecting mutual confidentiality.

Practical examples

In some programmes, participants sign an **informed consent** form before sessions begin, outlining key aspects related to confidentiality. In others, these agreements are established **verbally**. In all cases, it is crucial to **address this issue** before initiating any support process.

Framing the psychosocial support process

Best practice

When providing psychosocial support to defenders who have experienced trauma, it is essential to establish clear agreements from the outset regarding **timing, spaces, and activities** that form part of the specialised support process. This helps ensure a sense of control and supports practical aspects.

Practical examples

It is recommended to establish a clear **schedule for sessions**. The **frequency** will depend on individual needs and the structure of each programme. In some cases, sessions begin on a **weekly or fortnightly** basis and gradually become less frequent as the stay progresses, sometimes increasing again toward the end of the stay. Some programmes report offering two sessions per week in exceptional cases.

It is also important to define **where** sessions will take place and **how long** they will last. Some programmes use **external spaces** or work with professionals who have their own **clinics** where sessions are conducted. This offers a dedicated, protected therapeutic setting, separate from the community and political life of the programme. In some cases, sessions may also be held outdoors.

In other programmes, sessions take place in defenders' **accommodation**. While this can facilitate access and help build trust early on, it may create challenges in maintaining clear role boundaries. In any case, when sessions are held in the home, an **appropriate**, **private space** must be ensured. In most programmes, individual sessions **last** between one and two hours, while group sessions typically run for at least two hours.

Establishing the therapeutic relationship

Best practice

Building a relationship of trust between defenders and psychosocial support providers is essential to the **effectiveness** of the therapeutic process.

Practical examples

Several strategies have been identified as helpful in strengthening this relationship:

- Ensuring that support professionals have **experience in human rights activism**, with particular awareness of the **cultural and socio-political context of defenders' countries of origin**. A shared sense of purpose, common values, and **team spirit** foster trust and connection.
- Creating **informal spaces** for interaction, such as having coffee before sessions or sharing a meal, etc.
- Introducing the professionals who will provide psychosocial support through the **programme's coordination team**, so that this support is understood as a core component of the programme. This can also help to ensure that **trust** placed in the programme **extends** to these professionals. In some cases, it may be useful for programme coordinators to participate in an initial group psychosocial support session.
- Establishing **early contact** with psychosocial support professionals, especially before the defenders' arrival.
- Sharing **positive experiences** from previously hosted individuals.
- Recognising that **personal characteristics** of psychosocial support professionals – such as gender, race, language, sexual orientation, or gender identity –when shared with defenders, may in some cases facilitate the development of trust.
- Ensuring that **basic needs are met** and that hosted individuals receive an **adequate allowance** to enable a dignified stay and allow them to fulfil responsibilities in their country of origin. This helps create the conditions for defenders to engage more fully in self-care and reflective processes.

Cultural relevance

Best practice

Religious beliefs, political views, cultural practices, and prior experiences can influence **defenders' openness to certain therapeutic approaches**. It is therefore important to offer a diverse range of methodologies, allowing each person to choose the option that best aligns with their cultural background, beliefs, and current life circumstances.

Ejemplo de aplicación

Some programmes also offer **alternative approaches** to psychosocial support and wellbeing, which may feel more culturally relevant than individual psychotherapy sessions. These can include art therapy, therapeutic writing, and body-based practices such as dance, breathing exercises, and movement-based therapies.

Process flexibility

Best practice

Support should be **adapted** to the evolving pace of each individual's process, recognising when to remain close and when to step back in order to respect privacy. This requires assessing whether the circumstances are emotionally safe for the person to open up, or whether certain protective mechanisms need to be maintained.

Practical examples

Recovery processes are rarely linear; they often involve phases of progress and regression. Psychosocial support staff must therefore have a **clear understanding of their role** and maintain an ethical, respectful presence throughout.

It is essential to have the **capacity to remain grounded amid the emotional and political complexity** that defenders may experience, while fully respecting their decision not to engage in support – or to discontinue it – at any point during the shelter period.

Offering alternatives can also be helpful, such as referral to professionals specialising in specific areas (e.g. LGBTQI+ issues or gender-based violence), or proposing more informal encounters that are not structured therapeutic sessions, such as meeting for coffee or going for a walk.

Realistic and achievable objectives

Best practice

Psychosocial support during the shelter period should focus on realistic goals that reflect the limited duration of the stay. It is unlikely that deep-seated trauma or the structural causes of distress can be fully addressed in this timeframe. However, meaningful support can still be provided for specific processes. The role of psychosocial professionals is not to make decisions on behalf of defenders, but to **accompany their decision-making and emotional processing within a safe and empathetic space**.

Clarifying expectations about what the psychosocial support space can and cannot offer is essential in order to define, together with each defender, achievable objectives for the duration of the stay.

Practical examples

Psychosocial support – whether individual or group-based – may include the following objectives:

» **Providing a safe space for empathetic and engaged listening.**

» **Supporting the adaptation process during the shelter stay.** This includes acknowledging the discomfort associated with cultural uprooting and migratory grief, creating supportive spaces, and promoting strategies to reduce feelings of disconnection, isolation and culture shock. It may also involve supporting the regulation of basic needs such as sleep hygiene, contact with their country of origin, nutrition, and engagement in sports and leisure activities.

» **Integrating self-care and collective care as political and protection strategies.** This can involve:

- Understanding self-care and collective care as essential political and organisational tools for sustaining collective processes.
- Recognising the relationship between care and holistic protection, and how safety is strengthened through strategies that prevent burnout and promote physical, emotional, material and spiritual wellbeing.
- Developing self-care and collective care tools tailored to each person and their context.

» **Exploring the causes and consequences of the impacts of political violence.** This may involve reframing personal histories by:

- Contextualising the harm: identifying its causes, intent and consequences within the framework of power structures.
- Moving beyond a purely individual understanding of harm: recognising that the experience is not only an individual issue, but above all structural and social.
- Externalising responsibility: removing blame from victims and holding perpetrators accountable, clearly distinguishing between victim and perpetrator, and affirming that responsibility always lies with those who commit the violence.
- Making sense of experiences: developing awareness of the violence and abuse endured.
- Depathologising the impacts of violence and politicising traumatic experiences to better understand and cope with them.
- Supporting the safe recognition and expression of emotions.

» **Providing support during crises that arise during the shelter stay.** This may involve creating spaces for emotional release and support in response to critical situations, whether related to new threats in the country of origin, risks to family members or colleagues, relationship difficulties, or conflicts within the shelter programme.

» **Coordinating with the wider programme team.** Psychosocial professionals may offer guidance and counselling to other team members when needed and, in some cases, provide internal training to strengthen the overall approach of the temporary relocation programme.

Group workspaces

Best practice

Group work can play a vital therapeutic role in contexts of political violence. When organised and facilitated as part of specialised psychosocial support, these spaces enable participants to **share experiences, exchange tools, recognise their collective knowledge, and strengthen resilience** through mutual support. They foster a sense of belonging and support positive coexistence in shared shelter settings. Group spaces also help build relationships by **acknowledging the wisdom and prior care practices** that defenders already bring with them. The format, themes and frequency of sessions will depend on factors such as participants' arrival and departure dates, their emotional state, whether they share a language, culture or country of origin, and other socio-demographic characteristics.

Practical examples

Not all programmes include group work as part of specialised psychosocial support. Those that do highlight several key considerations:

» Participation should always be **voluntary**.

» Some programmes organise workshops throughout the stay, with **varying frequency**, across the three phases of the programme (arrival, stay and preparation for return), held weekly or monthly, or arranged on an ad hoc basis according to emerging needs.

» Themes should be defined through participatory processes. Common **themes** include context analysis of each region, which helps foster **mutual recognition and group validation; self-care, activist care and collective care** as political tools; **psychoeducation** on the impacts of political violence; **relaxation techniques and body-based practices**; managing **fear, guilt, grief** and related experiences.

» While some programmes conduct this work **internally** with their own group of hosted individuals, others facilitate **joint meetings or training sessions** with defenders hosted by different programmes within the same country, even if they have not previously met.

- Some initiatives organise **activist retreats or group respite** stays in natural settings. In these spaces, activities are co-created with the defenders and may include collective memory and healing practices, Theatre of the Oppressed, or other rituals.
- The **methodologies** used in these workshops vary, but they should always be participatory and trauma-informed, prioritising practical content.
- It can also be useful to provide participants with **self-care manuals or short guides** summarising topics addressed in group sessions, along with additional materials they can use in their home contexts after return.

5.3.2

DURING THE SHELTER

BEFORE RETURN

Evaluation of the stay and individualised return planning

Best practice

Before return, the programme should anticipate and **plan the process through an individualised and participatory approach** with the defender, with structured accompaniment that allows for the exploration of different scenarios. In this way, realistic plans can be developed that reduce uncertainty and strengthen informed decision-making.

Shelter programmes allow human rights defenders to temporarily leave contexts of risk and reinforce their protection capacities, but they do not have the mandate or resources to transform the structural security conditions in their home territories. In many cases, **risks remain or even increase**, preventing defenders from returning – posing a challenge for programmes, which often lack the resources or sustainable alternatives to support them in such situations.

Practical examples

Many programmes conduct **evaluation processes** at this stage. These processes involve not only the defenders themselves but also funding partners, support groups, and organisations in the country of origin. They are used to assess psychosocial impacts and identify necessary adjustments to the programme, with the goal of improving the experience of defenders. Evaluations should avoid extractive dynamics and instead foster mutual learning while recognising the knowledge and expertise of participants.

Programmes that engage **external supervisors** – professionals specialising in risk analysis and holistic protection – offer targeted support in developing **safe return plans** and identifying the most suitable alternatives. In other cases, **internal programme professionals** conduct these analyses directly with defenders.

In all instances, return planning should be conducted **in a participatory manner with the defender and coordinated with organisations in the country of origin** to develop security and protection strategies for the return.

Some programmes use the final days of the stay for **public evaluations, such as farewell events** with funders, partner organisations, or institutions, as well as **specific meetings** with those that may play a role in supporting protection after the defender's return. **Informal farewells** with key individuals and organisations actively involved in the shelter process are also recognised as beneficial, as they help consolidate personal and political support networks in preparation for return.

When **return is impossible** due to high levels of risk, best practices include **extending the shelter period** to allow time to adjust safe return plans, connect with **other temporary relocation programmes or emergency resources**, and support the defender in applying for international protection in the host country.

Specialised psycho-social support before return

Best practice

The period leading up to return often brings high levels of **anxiety, uncertainty, and emotional reactivation** for defenders. For this reason, psychosocial support should focus on preparing them emotionally for different possible scenarios, strengthening coping strategies, and reducing the psychological impact of returning to unsafe contexts.

Practical examples

In some programmes, psychosocial support at this stage focuses on providing a space for emotional processing, helping defenders reflect on their experiences and integrate the tools they have acquired or regained during their stay. Practices that are likely to be particularly useful after their return – such as sleep hygiene, physical activity, self-care routines, collective care, boundary-setting, and maintaining exercise – are reinforced, with the goal of equipping them with practical resources they can apply independently.

These support spaces are primarily **individual**, though some programmes also offer **group closing sessions**, which participants often find valuable and positive.

In addition, according to the experience of some programmes, a key task in this phase is supporting the development of a **Life Plan** as part of the broader Safe Return Plan. This helps anticipate potential scenarios in terms of security as well as emotional, relational, professional, and organisational aspects. Key **elements** of the Life Plan typically include:

- **Professional** aspects: assessing whether defenders can resume their previous employment, or addressing situations where they may have lost their job or become unemployed during the shelter period.
- **Organisational** aspects: planning the resumption of activist work within their organisations. Defenders may experience feelings of judgment, displacement, or lack of support during their absence. Processes of shifting priorities, strategic life changes, or decisions to step back from certain forms of activism may also arise. Anticipating these challenges helps strengthen coping strategies upon return.
- **Personal, family and relational** aspects: evaluating the state of relationships with family, partners, and friends. Conflicts, misunderstandings, or strained relationships may have emerged during the time away. Issues related to partners and children often have the greatest impact during the shelter stay or upon return.

It is also important to accompany the **sense of loss associated with leaving a safe and peaceful environment**, where bonds and attachments have been formed. This support should acknowledge and hold space for these ambivalent feelings, allowing defenders to process emotions without pressure, while always respecting their autonomy.

5.3.3
AFTER THE SHELTER PERIOD

The **return** process itself is considered a **best practice when it is carefully planned**. Planning should begin from the moment of selection and throughout the shelter stay, aiming to **strengthen ongoing processes in the country of origin** while minimising potential negative impacts. Internal evaluation processes are also essential during this stage.

Follow-up of shelter participants

Best practice

Although shelter programmes have limited capacity for long-term follow-up after a return, they should **continue to provide accompaniment** during the first few months. This helps reduce feelings of isolation and eases the transition back to their home context. Maintaining contact from a distance can enhance their sense of security and serve as a **protective factor for wellbeing**. At the same time, it is essential to communicate clearly about the programme's limits and the support it can realistically provide after the stay, avoiding expectations that cannot be met.

Practical examples

Follow-up **methods** vary by programme. Some maintain **group chats**, others make **regular, structured contact** to monitor the defenders' situation, and some assign **dedicated contact persons** who can offer guidance in the event of changes in risk, respond to threats or attacks, or assist with referrals to networks and organisations that can provide additional support.

Field visits to verify the human rights situation in the hosted person's area of origin

Best practice

Best practices in this area include human rights verification visits or delegations to the home regions of defenders. **Involving institutions and organisations from the host society** enhances the impact of these visits, making it a key task for programmes to ensure a representative and relevant group of participants. This approach acts as a form of "**reverse shelter**", **strengthening connections between the two communities**. Organisations in the visited regions often express their appreciation to those representing the host society, while participants gain a firsthand understanding of the realities faced by those who received shelter, fostering personal connections with the programme and increasing social and political awareness.

Practical examples

Programmes that implement this practice highlight several key factors for success:

- Visit the **regions or areas where those who received shelter** previously lived, engaging with them in their own environment whenever possible.
- Include a **diverse representation of the organisational network**, and representatives from the institutions and public authorities of the host society in the delegation.

» Engage in **dialogue and advocacy with local institutions** to raise awareness of the concerns of those who received shelter and to make the support they receive visible.

» Prepare **reports, documents, and advocacy materials for social media or local press** in the host society, as well as **public reports** that can be submitted to various institutional, diplomatic, social, or legislative bodies, detailing findings, alerts or concerns, and recommendations.

Guaranteeing financial and logistical support

Best practice

Providing financial support at the end of the shelter stay is essential to reduce **uncertainty**, prevent situations of **vulnerability**, and promote a **safe and stable return**.

Practical examples

Some programmes provide a **financial contribution at the end** of the stay, typically calculated to cover the first three months after return. Others offer specific funding to support **entrepreneurship, training** initiatives in the country of origin, or to cover **local, individual, or family relocation expenses** upon return. It is also considered best practice to advise defenders on additional **funding sources, grants, and organisations** they can approach after returning, thereby expanding their options for economic sustainability and strengthening their organisations.

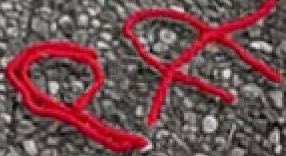
Continuing specialised psychosocial support upon return

Best practice

Psychosocial support should not end abruptly at the conclusion of the shelter period. Maintaining an **accessible support channel** allows defenders to continue practicing self-care, apply the tools gained during their stay, and better manage the emotional and organisational challenges of returning home. This support can also help them share wellbeing practices within their communities and organisations, thereby strengthening collective protection. While not all programmes provide this, there is broad agreement that offering it upon request or as needed is highly beneficial.

Practical examples

Some programmes offer a **set number of follow-up sessions** or support for a **defined period**, typically ranging from one to six months. It is important, however, to keep an **open channel** so defenders can request support as needed. In other cases, programmes maintain pre-established partnerships with **organisations in the country of origin** to continue psychosocial support, coordinating referrals to ensure continuity once the hosted individual has returned.



06

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the outset, the goal of this work has always been to be genuinely **useful**. As members of the **community of practitioners involved in providing temporary shelter for human rights defenders**, we shared an awareness of the need for practical tools to guide our processes. Thanks to the support of the Directorate-General for the 2030 Agenda of the Principality of Asturias, that need has taken concrete shape in this guide.

All of the content in this guide draws on the **theoretical and practical knowledge accumulated by our community**. It is based on articles, manuals, documents, hundreds of contributions from dozens of colleagues, and our own experiences. The main challenge was to organise, systematise, and assemble these many small pieces into a coherent "puzzle" of shared knowledge, while taking into account the vast diversity across programmes. We believe we have approached this demanding and rewarding task with both rigour and commitment. This guide is by no means a closed proposal. Rather, it is a starting point – **an invitation to continue dialogue, collaboration, and the ongoing exchange of learning and experience**.

Within temporary relocation programmes and among defenders themselves, there is unanimous recognition of the **importance** of mainstreaming wellbeing into all aspects of these programmes. In most cases, our work with defenders has produced sufficient evidence of the need to advance in this direction. Ensuring wellbeing requires **integrating a psychosocial approach**, and it is within this framework that we have structured the guide.

Beyond theoretical or practical differences in interpreting the concept of wellbeing, there is **consensus** on several key points: the **importance of understanding the cultural and political context** of defenders; the **impacts of political violence**; **care** for **accompanying persons**; the role of temporary shelter from **decolonial, anti-racist and feminist perspectives**; and the need for the **gradual transformation** of shelter programmes to adapt to these realities.

Recommendations

The **recommendations** in this guide are a**ddressed to everyone involved in temporary relocation programmes**. They invite programmes to review current practices from a psychosocial perspective, strengthen those that already prioritise the care and empowerment of hosted individuals, and transform those that have potential to evolve in this direction. At the same time, it is vital to give proper attention to the wellbeing of those who accompany and facilitate the shelter process. Promoting networking in this area is essential.

Each programme can assess, within its own capacity and structure, where **improvements** are possible, while adapting the examples of best practice presented here to its specific context.

For **professionals providing specialised psychosocial support**, we recommend adopting approaches that are non-pathologising and non-Eurocentric, while recognising the complexity of the contexts in which defenders operate and maintaining a strong political commitment to their struggles. Networking and participatory action research within this field are also key.

For **host societies**, we recommend fostering social support networks rooted in empathy and international solidarity. Many of the best practices outlined in this guide call for and depend on the engagement of civil society organisations, public officials, trade unions, activists, and new connections that give meaning and generate opportunities for mutual learning and exchange within these programmes.

For the **academic sphere**, we encourage further study of best practices using practical tools, the online exchange of knowledge and experience, and participatory approaches that meaningfully involve defenders in the research process.

For **funding institutions and organisations**, we recommend providing financial and institutional support for continuous improvement, the development of practices grounded in a psychosocial approach, and initiatives that promote training and applied research to create shared tools.

For **states, governments, and companies**, the main recommendation is to respect and uphold human rights. Where this is not fully achievable, they should facilitate and promote initiatives that strengthen human rights protection, such as the right to asylum or temporary relocation programmetemporary relocation programmes.

07

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Selected websites containing **resource libraries** related to providing accompaniment to human rights defenders, which may be highly useful:

- Shelter City: https://sheltercity.org/resources/
- Human Right Resilience Programme: https://www.hrresilience.org/
- Protect Defenders.eu: https://protectdefenders.eu/news-and-resources/#resources
- Protection International: https://www.protectioninternational.org/tools/research-publications/
- Human Rights Defender Hub del CAHR: https://www.hrdhub.org/

A selection of useful **handbooks and guides**, organised by topic, related to the main themes of this guide:

Psychological first aid and active listening:

- Protection International. (2022). *Hablemos sobre Primeros auxilios psicosociales para y desde mujeres defensoras*. Avaiable at (in Spanish): https://www.protection-international.org/researchpublications/cartilla-hablemos-sobre-primeros-auxilios-psicosociales-para-y-desde-mujeres-defensoras/
- PNUD (2022). *Guía de Primeros Auxilios Psicológicos* (PAP) *a personas en situación de movilidad humana*. Avaiable at (in Spanish): https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-01/Guia%20de%20Primeros%20Auxilios%20Psicológicos_Integra.pdf
- World Health Organisation, War Trauma Foundation and World Vision (2012). *Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers. WHO: Geneva*. Available at: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/8af49662-0dc0-419b-bec3-fc7d1bcf7096/content
- Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP) (2004). *Técnicas de escucha responsable*. Available at (in Spanish): https://ecapguatemala.org.gt/tecnicas-del-escucha-responsable/

Self-care and wellbeing for defenders and accompanying persons:

- Kane, P. (2005). *Capacitar Emergency Response Tool Kit*. Capacitar International. Available at: https://capacitar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Spanish-EmKit-.pdf
- Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres A.C. (CEDEHM) and Capacitar International (2018). *Manual de autocuidado para personas defensoras de derechos humanos*. Available at (in Spanish): https://cedehm.org.mx/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/04-Manual-autocuidado-para-personas-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-1.pdf
- FrontLine Defenders (2022). *¿Por qué el bienestar es político? Acciones prácticas para contribuir al fortalecimiento del bienestar en la defensa de los derechos humanos a partir de la mirada de las personas defensoras de América Latina*. Available at (in Spanish): https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/guia_para_el_fortalecimiento_del_bienestar_fld.pdf
- Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (2014).*Travesías para Pensar y Actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado de defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Mesoamérica*. Available at (in Spanish): https://im-defensoras.org/public/fo41p3ldg62jditad0gc6v0uqsfr/223570458-TRAVESIAS-PARA-PENSAR-Y-ACTUAR-EXPERIENCIAS-DE-AUTOCUIDADO-DE-DEFENSORAS-DE-DERECHOS-HUMANOS-EN-MESOAMERICA.pdf
- Human Rights Resilience Project (2025). *The activist wellbeing recipes of care and resistance from defenders in the Philippines, Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, Zambia, Myanmar, Thailand, Palestine, India, Turkey, Yemen and more*. Available at: https://www.hrresilience.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/The-Activist-Wellbeing-Cookbook_FINAL.pdf
- Otra Escuela y Broederlijk Delen (2020). *Cuidar para transformar. Pongámonos en sintonía: hacia una cultura de los cuidados. Available at* (in Spanish): https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393254422_Cuidar_para_Transformar_-_Cuidado_de_Si
- Forum Asia (2020). *Psychosocial Well-being for Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines*. Available at: https://magph.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PH-Well-being-Booklet-v2-1-1.pdf
- Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equidad Oaxaca AC, Casa La Serena and Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) (2022). *Compendium of Self-Care and Healing Tools*. Available at:: https://im-defensoras.org/en/public/5vl4xe3qfq45jlc6fd4fktagacu0/compendio%20herramientas%20english.pdf
- Centro feminista de estudios y asesoría (CFEMEA) (2016). *Buen vivir para la militancia feminista. Metodologías y experiencias de autocuidado. Available at onos en sintonía: hacia una cultura de los cuidados*. Available at (in Spanish): https://universidadefeminista.org.br/cfemea/buen-vivir-para-la-militancia-feminista-metodologias-y-experiencias-de-autocuidado-y-cuidado-entre-mujeres-activistas/
- Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights together with Front Line and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2008). *Insiste Persiste Resiste Existe*. Available at: https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/23-Insiste-Persiste-Resiste-Existe_ENG.pdf

- Protection International (2022). *Cuaderno Gestáltico para el trabajo de Protección con Defensoras de Derechos Humanos.* Available at (in Spanish): https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/cuaderno_gestaltico.pdf
- Inuka Kenya Ni Sisi! Ltd. (2025). *Towards Care, Healing and Resilience: A Toolkit for Building a Wellness Ecosystem for Civic Actors in East Africa.* Available at (in Spanish): https://nisisikenya.org/documents/towards-care-healing-and-resilience-a-toolkit-for-building-a-wellness-ecosystem-for-civic-actors-in-east-africa-2-3998

Integrating the expanded risk perspective:

- Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) (2022). *Between fresh water and the tides. Ten years building and learning about care and healing among women human rights defenders and their collectivities.*https://im-defensoras.org/en/2023/06/between-fresh-water-and-the-tides-ten-years-building-and-learning-about-care-and-healing-among-women-human-rights-defenders-and-their-collectivities/
- Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) (2022). *The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010–2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica.* Available at: https://im-defensoras.org/en/public/bk47ny9bauamefv2megzyrofq38o/IMD-ThePactToCare-ENG-Dec2022.pdf
- Santiago, I. y Vallies, V. (2021). *Claves para incluir el componente psicosocial en un plan de protección.* Curso online "Herramientas de protección integral para activistas y defensoras/es de derechos humanos. PBI y Mundubat. Available at (in Spanish): https://www.pbi-ee.org/sites/pbi-ee.org/files/semana_10_componentepsicosocial.pdf
- Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial (2021). *Risk Assessment in Human Rights Defense Methodological Guide from the Psychosocial Approach.* México. Available at: https://536db96f-7878-40e0-8ceb-7224890ce49c.usrfiles.com/ugd/536db9_df1a32c6369c4f9a93579907d708e1cb.pdf
- Calala Fondo de Mujeres (2022). *Digital security and feminist holistic protection as part of temporary relocation programmes for human rights defenders.* Available at: https://calala.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Seguridad-Digital-y-Protección-Integral-Feminista_DEF.pdf

Integrating the psychosocial approach:

- Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial (2024). *Keys to Psychosocial Accompaniment Second Edition. Main Booklet; Force Disappearance; Forced Displacement; Torture (including sexual torture); Arbitrary Detention.* Available at: https://www.alunapsicosocial.org/single-post/2019/05/28/keys-towards-psychosocial-accompaniment
- Protection International (2021). *The psychosocial approach applied to the protection of human rights defenders.* Available at: https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Psychosocial-Approach-Applied-to-the-Protection-of-Human-Rights-Defenders_EN.pdf
- OMCT (2022). "Who in their right mind wants to put up with this?" Resilience Strategies for a Sustainable Human Rights Movement. Available at: https://www.omct.org/site-resources/legacy/Resilience-strategies_Guide_EN.pdf

- Código DH (2024). *Juntxs somos más fuertes. Guía de acompañamiento psicosocial.* Available at (in Spanish): https://codigodh.org/2024/11/23/presentacion-de-la-guia-de-acompanamiento-psicosocial-juntxs-somos-mas-fuertes/
- Elías, L., Rodríguez, S., Fraile, E., Galan, A., Neyra, G. (2024). *Hacia una comunicación psicosocial. Guía para integrar la perspectiva psicosocial en procesos comunicativos vinculados con vulneraciones de derechos*. Available at (in Spanish): https://biblioteca.plataformavoluntariado.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/guia-comunicacion-psicosocial.pdf
- Martín Beristáin, C. (2007). *Manual sobre perspectiva psicosocial en la investigación de derechos humanos*. Available at (in Spanish): https://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.eus/pdfs/108?locale=es

Integrating trauma-informed care:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2023). *Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach*. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005. Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available at: https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/programs/problemsolving/docs/traumainformedapproach.pdf
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- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Treatment Improvement Protocol* (TIP) *Series* 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4801. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available at: https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4816.pdf

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