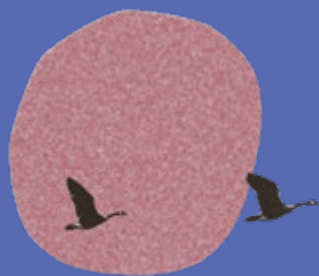


SHELTER THAT CARES AND EMPOWERS

Summary of the Guide to Best Practices in Psychosocial Accompaniment for Human Rights Defenders in Temporary Relocation Programmes

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

01

Accompanying human rights defenders in their struggles is a human, professional and political challenge that carries great responsibility. Temporary relocation programmes can be a valuable tool for holistic protection, but they can also present complex challenges, especially when they aim not only to ensure the care and wellbeing of defenders but also to strengthen their capacity to pursue collective struggles.

Each shelter programme operates within its own specific context and realities, with differing possibilities for change and improvement. Programmes pursue multiple objectives, which are prioritised differently in each case, and involve a wide range of actors. For this reason, it is not realistic to propose a single quality standard applicable to all programmes. What is possible, and useful, is to gather, organise and share with this community of practice those experiences that have proven effective in facilitating shelters focused on the wellbeing, care and empowerment of human rights defenders. To this end, this guide offers a structured consolidation of what we refer to, with epistemological humility, as “best practices” grounded in a psychosocial approach.

This document is a summary of the guide [Shelter That Cares and Empowers: Best Practices in Psychosocial Accompaniment for Human Rights Defenders in Temporary Relocation Programmes](#) (Villegas and Galán, 2025), produced for the Directorate-General for the 2030 Agenda of the Principality of Asturias, based on a systematic literature and documentary review, interviews with 22 key stakeholders and networking. Readers are invited to consult the full guide for further information on the topics covered in this summary.

Key points:



1. Temporary relocation is tool for holistic protection of human rights defenders, not merely a means of ensuring their physical safety.
2. Political violence and the relocation process itself can have psychosocial impacts on the human rights defenders concerned, which must be anticipated.
3. The psychosocial approach must be integrated across all phases and actors of the programme, not limited solely to specialised psychosocial support: everyone provides accompaniment.
4. Care is a political strategy that strengthens the sustainability of the struggles of human rights defenders.
5. The well-being of the teams providing accompaniment is an essential condition for ensuring caring, high-quality shelter.

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH IN TEMPORARY RELOCATION

02

2.1. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT?

The **psychosocial approach** is 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.). It involves a critical examination of human suffering, understanding it not as a merely individual and inevitable experience, but as a phenomenon shaped by social and political dimensions.

➤ **Political violence** refers to violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors acting on behalf of certain powerful groups to impose political, economic or ideological interests, suppress dissent and maintain the established order. It intersects with other forms of structural violence (patriarchal, racist and class-based), reinforcing mechanisms of domination.

Psychosocial accompaniment is a **practical application** of this approach, aimed at addressing the impacts of political violence and human rights violations.

The **objective** is to accompany individuals and communities in **addressing the emotional, psychological and social 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.

Psychosocial accompaniment is based on the following pillars:

- » **Person-centred approach.** Active participation is prioritised and the autonomy of individuals and communities is respected, avoiding impositions and hierarchical relationships.
- » **Situation-focused approach.** People's suffering is linked to human rights violations rooted in social and political contexts.

- » **Resilient perspective.** Individuals are regarded as active agents in the face of rights violations, with accompaniment focused on identifying and strengthening their capacities.
- » **Dignity- and rights-based approach.** The loss of rights is recognised as an injustice and reparation is addressed from the perspective of social justice.
- » **Transformative purpose.** The ultimate goal of all psychosocial action is 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.
- » **Adaptation to cultural context.** Responses to rights violations and how they are expressed vary across cultures. Accompaniment must include a decolonial and anti-racist perspective that ensures respect for the logic and coping mechanisms of each individual and community.
- » **Horizontal and critical positioning.** A relationship based on equality and respect is promoted, recognising the capacity to decide and act, without imposing hierarchies or exercising any form of superiority. Accompaniment implies making an active ethical commitment.
- » **Do No Harm.** An ethical and methodological approach that seeks to ensure that external interventions minimise harm and avoid exacerbating existing conflicts.
- » **Networking.** Collaboration, exchange of experiences and coordination with other actors involved are encouraged to increase the effectiveness of interventions.

2.2. WHAT DO PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT AND SPECIALISED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT INVOLVE IN TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES?

In the context of temporary relocation, the concept of “**psychosocial accompaniment**” is used 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. The **psychosocial approach** must therefore be applied **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. **Everyone involved in a temporary relocation programme provides accompaniment.**

Every decision and interaction, whether formal or informal, has the potential to contribute to reparation or exacerbate harm, making care a collective responsibility throughout the shelter process.

“**Specialised psychosocial support**” refers to a more focused, in-depth process, developed by **professionals with specific training** in mental health and trauma. Although it is grounded in the same principles as psychosocial accompaniment, it incorporates **therapeutic, clinical or emotional support spaces** whose aim is not limited to alleviating distress or preventing further impacts, rather it seeks, within the possibilities offered by temporary relocation, to **facilitate trauma processing, strengthen personal and collective resources and accompany reparation processes** that integrate lived experiences into a broader life and political trajectory.

2.3. RECOGNISING CARE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

In addition to the psychosocial perspective, the **care as a political strategy** approach is essential to temporary relocation programmes. **Feminist Holistic Protection**, developed by IM-Defensoras, integrates this perspective into protection in contexts of political violence. This perspective introduces the concept of “**expanded risk**” which defines risk beyond direct threats and attacks to also include conditions of well-being, exhaustion, stress, and emotional, familial and psychosocial impacts. **Individual and collective care** are therefore political strategies that not only promote well-being but are also **key to the sustainability of activism.**

Given that for many defenders, rest is perceived as a privilege in the contexts they face, **temporary relocation programmes** play a particularly important role in **promoting critical reflection on care as a basic necessity for sustaining political action.** Encouraging human rights defenders to view the shelter process in this light helps them make the most of the experience and develop a commitment to self-care and collective care as a prerequisite for the longevity of their struggles.



2.4. INTEGRATING TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Human rights defenders are often **exposed to traumatic experiences**, either because they have experienced them first-hand in contexts of political violence, or because they have encountered them through the accounts of, and accompaniment provided to, other victims.

The Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) approach proposes forms of accompaniment based on a **deep understanding of how trauma impacts** the body, emotions, mind, and relationships.

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

Some key concepts of this approach are:



- **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.

UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS TO IMPROVE ACCOMPANIMENT

03

3.1. PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Traumatic experiences resulting from political violence generate a range of psychosocial impacts or consequences that manifest **at different levels**: individual, family and social/community. These effects should **not be understood as signs of weakness or illness**, but rather as coping and defence mechanisms that enable people to survive extreme situations. From a psychosocial perspective, these reactions are understood as **normal responses to abnormal situations**.



AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Traumatic experiences cause emotional, cognitive, physical and identity-related disturbances such as: a **state of constant alertness**, **insomnia**, **re-experiencing** of trauma, **avoidance**, **dissociation** and other perceptual disturbances; **fear**, **sadness**, **anger**, **guilt**, **hopelessness** and even **suicidal ideation**; **irritability** and **aggressive** or self-destructive behaviours (such as substance misuse); **distrust and social isolation**; **memory problems**, **concentration issues** and **difficulties constructing coherent narratives** about the experience. Furthermore, **somatic symptoms** with no apparent medical cause and **deterioration in sexuality** may occur. Added to this are the impact on **self-esteem** and the breakdown of **identity** and **core beliefs** regarding safety, justice and the meaning of life, which may lead to organising *identity* around the experience of **victimisation**, with a loss of agency and difficulty looking towards the future.



AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

Impacts manifest in **deterioration of relationships**, an increase in **conflicts** and **estrangement** driven by fear; **impoverishment** resulting from persecution, job loss caused by stigmatisation or forced displacement. They are also linked to **feelings of guilt** towards family, particularly regarding parenting and absence; **complex grief** over the death or disappearance of loved ones. Another effect is the **escalation of gender-based and sexual orientation-based violence within the family environment**.



AT THE SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

Violence generates **collective fear**, **distrust** and a **decline in political and community participation**; **stigmatisation** and **isolation** of defenders; **breakdown of the social fabric** and **weakening of support networks**, sometimes deliberately promoted to fragment collective organisation. **Within social organisations**, **conflicts** emerge, compounded by trauma, exhaustion and patriarchal or racist dynamics. Added to this is the **cultural uprooting** caused by the loss of territory or displacement, which affects community identity and gives rise to **shared feelings of sadness, humiliation and despair**.

3.2 IMPACTS OF THE SHELTER PROCESS

While temporary relocation programmes have proven to be an effective tool for improving the safety and well-being of human rights defenders, **the shelter process itself can have negative impacts** which must be taken into account in order to better understand and adequately accompany human rights defenders in these programmes. These impacts **depend on the defenders' personal and contextual circumstances**, as well as on the **characteristics of the programme**, such as its duration, shelter conditions, cultural context, support for return, the possibility of extending the stay or even not returning, etc.

Defenders often face **sleep difficulties** at the outset, exacerbated by changes in routine, stress, an overload of information about the situation in their country of origin, time differences, the burden of ongoing responsibilities managed remotely, and concern for their families and communities; these difficulties can be intensified by **unhealthy habits** such as alcohol consumption, a sedentary lifestyle, or isolation. Many also arrive with **unmet medical needs** due to the risks they faced. Improved conditions during their stay may reveal physical and emotional symptoms requiring attention.

Added to this is the **culture shock** caused by differences in language, schedules, diet, communication, spirituality or worldview, and the **migratory grief** involving multiple, partial and ambiguous losses (family, language, culture, territory, status, community, security and future), a process complicated by the temporary nature of the programme, migration uncertainty, the conditions (or impossibility of) return, and traumatic past experiences, all of which affect identity, relationships and well-being. **Expectations** regarding risk reduction, international advocacy, networks, economic conditions or international protection may not be met, leading to **frustration and demotivation**.

Rest and distance can, in turn, intensify feelings of **guilt** about being safe while those close to them remain at risk, being separated from family, or not being present at important events; at the same time, the **difficulty in detaching from work and family responsibilities** while away hinders adaptation and well-being. Social life is also affected, and language barriers and emotional state can contribute to **isolation**.

The desire to raise awareness of the struggle can lead to **exhausting overexposure**, and repeated accounts of traumatic experiences can result in **re-victimisation or re-traumatisation**. Constant identification with the role of victim or rejection of it can hinder well-being and the relationship with the programme, and **dynamics of submission, mistrust or conflict with authority figures** may emerge, associated with the trauma.

Unchosen cohabitation among diverse individuals affected by trauma can amplify tensions arising from cultural, ideological or leadership differences, as well as dynamics of competition, mistrust or the reproduction of patriarchal, racist or LGBTIAQ+ phobic attitudes.

Defenders may face new situations of sexist, racist or discriminatory **violence in the host country or within the programme itself**, particularly against women, LGBTIAQ+ people, racialised individuals or those with disabilities.

Finally, the **risk may persist, increase or change** during the shelter period due to ongoing threats, media exposure or security failures. This, together with changes in family, work or community life, can contribute to difficulties or even the impossibility of returning, generating **uncertainty** that impacts emotional well-being and shapes the stay.



3.3 IMPACTS ON ACCOMPANYING PERSONS

Accompaniment with a psychosocial approach also requires **caring for those who provide that accompaniment, as an essential condition for sustaining a shelter system that is consistent with its principles**. Constant exposure to accounts of political violence can have a profound impact and should therefore not be regarded as secondary.

Accompaniment in contexts of political violence can lead to **burnout or professional exhaustion**. This manifests as frustration and helplessness in the face of persistent structural violence and a feeling of not doing enough, which increases a sense of responsibility; emotional and ethical overload from managing emergencies and complex decisions, especially when the boundaries between personal and professional life become blurred; irritability and reactivity in response to conflicts; physical and cognitive exhaustion with extreme fatigue, physical ailments such as headaches, sleep disturbances and difficulty concentrating; disinterest, sadness and pessimism that affect performance; and a decline in professional self-esteem, with insecurity and a sense of failing in one's role in accompaniment.

Furthermore, **compassion fatigue** may develop, associated with emotional exhaustion due to repeated exposure to suffering and **vicarious trauma**, which entails the emergence of symptoms similar to those of direct trauma (re-experiencing, hypervigilance, avoidance, dissociation and changes in worldview).

At the team level, the impact can manifest as the normalisation of burnout, concealment of distress and high staff turnover; internal conflicts, polarisation and a loss of cohesion; the reproduction of oppressive dynamics (hierarchical structures, gender or racial inequalities, a failure to listen); and a loss of the political meaning of the work, affecting motivation, creativity and the quality of accompaniment.



BEST PRACTICES IN TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES: A PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH

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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.

4.1. GENERAL BEST PRACTICES

The best practices outlined in this section apply to all phases 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 personalised temporary shelter processes

To prevent relocation programmes from reproducing colonial power dynamics, it is essential to recognise the role and position of those providing shelter and to personalise the shelter process by placing the individual at the centre:

- » **Involving, from the outset, the organisations** to which the defenders receiving shelter belong.
- » **Understanding shelter as a stage** within a broader trajectory of collective resistance, not as an act of “rescue”.
- » **Internally reviewing potential paternalistic dynamics**, replacing them with more horizontal forms of accompaniment.
- » **Providing shelter in culturally and linguistically familiar environments**, involving organisations familiar with the reality of the people receiving shelter.
- » **Personalising shelter** to take account of factors including gender, racialisation, sexual orientation, family situation and mental health needs.

Guaranteed core functions

The following set of core functions are identified as those that every relocation programme should cover. These functions may be assigned to different roles depending on the specificities of each programme:

- » **Funding and institutional support:** provision of financial and material resources, and assistance with administrative procedures such as visas or residence permits.
- » **Management and administration:** travel logistics, financial management and maintenance of accommodation.
- » **Coordination:** management of applications and selection processes, travel arrangements, schedules and advocacy.
- » **Mentoring and day-to-day accompaniment:** assistance with routine procedures, access to medical or legal resources, and opportunities for training and leisure. It is best practice for accompanying persons not to manage financial resources.
- » **Specialised psychosocial support:** individual or group sessions and guidance to the programme team on emotional aspects, cohabitation and crisis management.

- » **Risk analysis and holistic protection:** assessment and decision-making before, during and after the shelter period, including digital security in some cases.
- » **Management of communal living:** organisation of rules for shared living arrangements, mediation and conflict resolution, particularly in group shelter settings.
- » **Legal support:** guidance on documentation, visa processes and legal status.
- » **Health support:** attention to holistic health through public or private services or external professionals.
- » **Community support:** creation of local networks with trade unions, human rights organisations, collectives and educational institutions in the host society.

Minimum training requirements for accompanying persons

Those participating in these programmes should have both professional training and political commitment, with the aim of providing caring shelter that prevents re-traumatisation and culture shock. The key competencies identified are:

- » **Commitment to human rights:** personal and political involvement in the defence of human rights and experience as an activist, particularly in coordination and psychosocial support roles.
- » **Knowledge of the language** of those receiving shelter, with translation/interpretation provided where this is not possible.
- » **Knowledge of the context of origin:** with staff from the defenders' countries of origin or with sufficient knowledge of their social, cultural and political situations. In some cases, cultural mediators have been used.
- » **Specific training:** feminist, anti-racist, psychosocial, trauma-informed and activist care approaches, to understand the impacts of socio-political violence and to act respectfully throughout the process.

Financial and logistical resources for dignified shelter

Dignified shelter requires ensuring safe conditions and sufficient resources, seeking additional funding where necessary (ProtectDefenders.eu, Front Line Defenders, Emergency Action Fund, etc.). Essential resources to be covered include: sufficient staffing levels for all programme functions; **pre-arrival expenses**, such as administrative procedures, fees and airport transfers; **round-trip travel** tickets; **healthcare** covered by travel insurance, private medical services or the public health system; a regular **financial allowance** for day-to-day needs, with additional funds for family support where there are dependants; **additional expenses**, such as local transportation, accommodation during travel, per diem allowances, leisure and sports activities; **accommodation** that ensures privacy, security and rest; **emergency resources** for unforeseen situations such as a deterioration in health; expenses to enable a **safe return**, such as financial support and, if the risk persists, the possibility of family relocation.



Institutional support promoting safety and recognition

Institutions in the host society play a crucial role in the **recognition** of human rights defenders as leaders, by organising public welcome events or official meetings; and in ensuring their **safety**, through bilateral negotiations, public statements and participation in verification or monitoring delegations following the return of human rights defenders to their communities of origin.

Flexibility in the duration of stay

Ideally, **the duration should be tailored to each individual**, although most programmes offer fixed periods due to financial, staffing and immigration policy constraints. Where flexibility is not possible, it is recommended to **select candidates whose needs align with the type of shelter available**.

Possibility of hosting family members

This is best practice from a gender perspective, as it **reduces barriers to access**, particularly for women defenders, and helps to alleviate the guilt associated with family separation. It involves adopting a broad understanding of the concept of family, providing psychosocial guidance during the selection process, ensuring the autonomy of the family unit, extending psychosocial support to the whole family, and providing tailored educational support.



4.2. PHASE-SPECIFIC BEST PRACTICES

This section outlines key best practices to accompany human rights defenders throughout the shelter process, at each phase of temporary relocation programmes: before the shelter period, during the shelter period, and after return.

BEFORE THE SHELTER PERIOD	DURING THE SHELTER PERIOD	AFTER RETURN
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Selection process• Before arrival	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First days• During the stay• Before return	

4.2.1. Before the shelter period

4.2.1.1. Selection process

Clearly communicated calls for applications

The programme's call for applications must be clear and provide detailed information on the basic aspects of shelter, including duration, rights, responsibilities and limitations, so that organisations and defenders can make informed decisions.

- » **Practical example:** distribution of written information packs outlining the programme's conditions.

Selection processes coordinated with organisations

Close coordination with organisations in the country of origin during the selection process helps ensure that cases are identified in a context-sensitive way, reliable information is gathered, and selection criteria genuinely reflect the needs of individuals and their communities. Furthermore, it reinforces shared responsibility in decision-making and ensures that those receiving shelter have the necessary organisational support during their stay.

- » **Practical examples:** organisations in the country of origin handle applications and selection; diverse and representative selection committees reflecting the broader organisational landscape of the country of origin; an intermediary acting as a risk analyst and coordinating in the country of origin; organisations in the host country with a history of collaboration with organisations in the country of origin.

Selection processes with a psychosocial approach

Integrating a psychosocial approach into the selection process allows for a more comprehensive risk assessment adopting an expanded risk perspective, identifying the individual's emotional and relational resources, as well as the impact that temporary relocation may have on their personal, family, community and organisational life.

- » **Practical examples:** application forms that include questions on psychosocial health; involvement of specialised psychosocial professionals in application and selection processes.

4.2.1.2. Before arrival

Clear points of contact and secure communication channels

In the period leading up to arrival, it is important for individuals to have a designated contact person to whom they can direct queries, along with a secure and accessible communication channel for the exchange of sensitive information. This facilitates management and prevents confusion or loss of information.

- » **Practical examples:** designating a contact person for pre-arrival procedures; establishing mentoring roles; using secure digital communication tools such as Signal.

Administrative accompaniment

To minimise stress, access barriers and potential re-traumatisation resulting from pre-arrival administrative procedures, the programme must ensure personalised support for each individual receiving shelter.

- » **Practical examples:** sending written information on the steps to follow; establishing a clear channel for resolving administrative queries; proactive contact and follow-up; specific financial assistance; support with administrative procedures related to obtaining leave from work; arrangement of a power of attorney.

Clear programme objectives and expectation management

Even when an individual has submitted a fully informed application, it remains essential to provide them with clear information, prior to their arrival, about the programme's objectives and the support available. This helps ensure a positive shelter experience, minimises the risk of misunderstandings and helps prevent expectation gap

- » **Practical examples:** sending written information; preliminary phone call or video call.

Basic information about arrival and stay

To enable the individual to prepare materially, physically and emotionally for shelter, it is essential that they receive the necessary information regarding their arrival and key aspects of daily life.

- » **Practical examples:** providing written information on the climate, packing advice, financial support available, accommodation details, healthcare, initial welcome, and schedule for the first few days.

Defining a public profile and internal preparation for shelter

Prior to arrival, it is recommended to draw up a preliminary, internal public profile of the human rights defender, enabling strategic planning of their stay: identifying networks, groups and areas of interest; selecting suitable volunteers; arranging relevant training; and anticipating specific support such as interpretation/translation, cultural orientation or adjustments required to meet health or mobility needs.

- » **Practical examples:** identifying the priorities and needs of the person receiving shelter and their organisation or community; emailing the profile to relevant individuals and groups in the host country.

Preparing a safety plan

Preparations for return must begin before the programme starts, through discussions with defenders and their organisations about concerns, risks and the realistic prospects of return. This allows for the planning of protection measures, the initiation of actions from the country of origin and the avoidance of abrupt or unprepared departures, contributing to safety, informed decision-making, the reduction of guilt or overexposure, and the strengthening of organisational capacity throughout the stay.

- » **Practical examples:** having risk analysts and holistic protection professionals on the programme.

Specialised psychosocial support before the shelter period

Specialised psychosocial support for defenders should begin as soon as possible. This enables support for the temporary suspension of activities in the country of origin, organising the delegation of responsibilities, managing communication with family and close contacts regarding their absence, as well as initiating the process of building relationships

- » **Practical examples:** prior contact via email, telephone or video call; conducting an online survey.

4.2.2. During the shelter period

4.2.2.1. First days

Welcoming and basic care

Providing a caring welcome and reception during these initial moments is crucial and can shape the rest of the stay. The aim is for the person receiving shelter to feel at the centre of the process.

- » **Practical examples:** greeting and collecting defenders on arrival at the airport/station; organising a welcome meal; providing a basic supply of food and hygiene products, a SIM card for the host country and internet access; preparing accommodation and explaining how to use facilities.

Clear and accessible practical information

It is recommended that all basic information facilitating the defender's orientation, autonomy and safety during the first few days of their stay be shared in a clear, accessible and understandable form.

- » **Practical examples:** verbally and in writing, provide general information about the city, how transport works, the services and support available to them during their stay, a list of telephone numbers, etc.; accompany them in basic daily activities; provide access to a bank account.

Introductions and clearly defined roles within the programme

It is important to introduce the defender to all staff involved in the programme and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each member.

- » **Practical examples:** informal settings such as meals or recreational activities; meeting facilitated by specialised psychosocial support professionals.

Communication and agreed commitments, boundaries and protocols

Inform defenders of their commitments, rights and duties, as well as existing protocols, to clarify any uncertainty and avoid subsequent misunderstandings. These commitments must be made clear prior to selection, and, after arrival, time must be allocated to clarifying any questions.

- » **Practical examples:** discussion of commitments, rights and responsibilities; written agreement; explanation of minimum standards of good conduct; confidentiality agreements; explanation of protocols for dealing with specific situations.

Rest and adjustment before starting public activities

It is important not to overload the defenders' schedule during this initial shelter period. The primary objective is to allow them to rest and familiarise themselves with life at the shelter.

- » **Practical examples:** do not schedule public events for the first two weeks or month; create spaces for daily interaction that are not focused on political violence; work to prevent culture shock through cultural induction workshops; specific work on sleep hygiene.

Specialised psychosocial support in the early stages

In this initial phase, psychosocial support can take the form of an introduction to and explanation of the process's objectives. The way in which this support is presented is of great importance.

- » **Practical examples:** define the type of support; explain psychosocial support as a political tool; avoid clinical language; position well-being as an essential part of safety; highlight the importance of collective care; carry out an initial assessment of emotional state; participate in informal spaces; hold a group workshop if the type of shelter allows.



4.2.2.2. During the stay

Appropriate linguistic adaptation

The language of the host country is a key factor that directly influences the adaptation process.

- » **Practical examples:** guided language immersion; language classes; cultural mediation; language tandems or exchanges; translation of essential documentation into the language used by defenders.

Access to leisure and rest

As many defenders arrive exhausted or in the process of recovering from traumatic experiences, the programme must facilitate access to activities that are flexible and adapted to each person's rhythms and ways of resting.

- » **Practical examples:** autonomy in managing one's schedule; offering flexibility regarding programme obligations; ensuring privacy in accommodation; agreements on temporary disconnection and delegation of responsibilities with organisations of origin; covering costs associated with sports and leisure activities; encouraging physical exercise; promoting self-care strategies during the shelter period; retreats; encouraging travel and exploring new places; providing information on potential leisure activities defenders can attend independently; organising and promoting activities such as preparing meals together, encouraging reading and artistic expression, visiting museums, etc.

Careful management of schedule and public exposure

It is essential that defenders have a sense of agency over their daily lives and the activities they will undertake during their stay. Although for most people a reasonable level of activity helps to structure their stay and offers new experiences, ideas and contacts, a public schedule that does not meet their needs can prove problematic. The level of public exposure must be assessed with particular care to protect the safety and psychosocial well-being of human rights defenders.

- » **Practical examples:** designing advocacy schedules collaboratively; ongoing, careful communication; schedules tailored to the political profile; adapting the level of exposure based on a technical risk assessment; evaluation of the emotional state by specialised psychosocial support professionals to assess the expanded risk associated with exposure.

Updated security plan

Preparations for return must continue throughout the entire stay. To this end, it is important to build on the work started prior to the defender's arrival or, if no prior planning has been done, to commence it during the shelter period.

- » **Practical examples:** building on the holistic security plan; involvement of professionals specialising in risk analysis and holistic protection.

Accompaniment at meetings and public events

To ensure effective meetings during the stay, careful preparation and close accompaniment are recommended. This helps to strengthen the defenders' self-esteem and sense of security.

- » **Practical examples:** providing basic information about and accompaniment for meetings; support from staff specialised in political communication; conducting joint evaluations after meetings and events.

Coordination and follow-up meetings

Ongoing 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.

- » **Practical examples:** weekly or regularly scheduled group and/or individual meetings; option for defenders to request additional meetings.

Facilitating training of defenders

Supporting training of defenders enhances their personal, technical and political capacities, as well as their sense of the programme's value and their psychosocial well-being.

- » **Practical examples:** agreements with schools, universities or professional bodies; scheduled internal training sessions; professional mentoring schemes; training courses chosen by defenders themselves.

Building support networks in the host society

One of the greatest potential benefits of temporary relocation programmes in terms of the personal and political empowerment of defenders lies in the opportunity to build and maintain support networks across different spheres and levels. It helps prevent isolation, culture shock and migratory grief, thereby improving psychosocial well-being. At a political level, it strengthens advocacy and protection capacities, increases the sense of the utility of relocation, and can help reduce the risks associated with return.

- » **Practical examples:** coordinator facilitating links and contacts; mentor or accompanying person, such as an activist, with a community support role; proactive efforts to connect those receiving shelter with activists, organisations and institutions; organising and funding advocacy trips; organising specific activities with the programme's support groups or other relevant organisations; liaising with the local press.

Guided communal living

In shared living arrangements, difficulties or tensions often arise. These conflicts disrupt the group's harmony and carry significant emotional implications. Communal living requires deliberate and structured support.

- » **Practical examples:** designating a point of contact for communal living issues and informing defenders; communal living guide; prioritising single-gender living arrangements; granting residents autonomy to manage accommodation as their own homes; collectively establishing clear rules and boundaries; reiterating operational protocols and available support; regular spaces to review communal living arrangements; facilitating mediation in the event of conflicts; addressing serious conflicts urgently.

Access to holistic health services

It is essential to ensure that defenders have access to adequate health services during their stay, both to continue previous treatments or follow-up with specialists, and to ensure emergency care or the diagnosis and treatment of new or previously untreated conditions, should needs arise.

- » **Practical examples:** facilitating access to public health services; access to private health services, health cooperatives or independent professionals working with psychosocial and cross-cultural approaches; compiling a list of available professionals and resources to ensure rapid responses; organising a basic first-aid kit for the accommodation.

Specialised psychosocial support during shelter

Psychosocial support can be provided on an individual or group basis, or through a combination of both. Access to all formats is beneficial, as each contributes different elements to the therapeutic process. The choice will depend on the individual's specific circumstances, their worldview, the duration of their stay, or group dynamics. The type and format also vary depending on whether the person providing the support is part of the programme team, an external professional, or whether there is an intermediary coordination role. Professionals may also take on specific roles such as day-to-day accompaniment or coordination of healthcare services.

The following key aspects of specialised psychosocial support have been identified:

- **Confidentiality:** establishing a clear and safe framework from the outset, whether through written or verbal informed consent, particularly in group interventions.
- **Framing the process:** agreeing on times, spaces and the frequency of sessions from the start. Frequency is tailored to each individual and stage of their stay; spaces may be external, outdoors or at home, always prioritising privacy.
- **Therapeutic relationship:** trust is fundamental. It is strengthened through an understanding of the defender's socio-political context, early contact, shared informal spaces, introduction by the coordination team, and personal factors relating to the professionals, such as language or gender.
- **Cultural relevance:** offering a diverse range of methodologies (including art therapy, therapeutic writing or body-based therapies) to adapt to each person's beliefs, culture and life stage.
- **Flexibility:** accompaniment must adapt to the non-linear evolution of each process, recognising when to remain close and when to step back, offering alternatives such as specialised professionals or informal meetings.
- **Realistic objectives:** tailored to the limited duration of the stay, focused on empathic listening, cultural adaptation, self-care, processing the impacts of political violence, crisis support and coordination with the team.
- **Group work:** promotes collective resilience, a sense of belonging and mutual recognition. It must be voluntary and participatory, with a trauma-informed approach and themes defined collectively, such as self-care, psychoeducation or the management of fear and grief.



4.2.2.3. Before return

Evaluation of the stay and individualised return planning

The programme must anticipate and manage the return process on an individual basis, in consultation with defenders and through structured accompaniment that allows for the exploration of different scenarios.

- » **Practical examples:** assessment processes; evaluation of the situation with professionals specialising in risk analysis from a holistic protection perspective and with knowledge of the situation in the country; networking with organisations in the country of origin; formal and informal farewell gatherings; if return is not possible, providing support by extending the duration of shelter, referring the individual to another programme or supporting an application for international protection.

Specialised psychosocial support before return

The period prior to return often generates high levels of anxiety, uncertainty and emotional reactivation among defenders. Psychosocial support can help prepare individuals emotionally for different possible scenarios, strengthen their coping capacity and reduce the psychological impact of returning to unsafe contexts.

- » **Practical examples:** developing a Safe Return Plan that addresses professional, organisational and personal/family aspects from a psychosocial perspective; individual closure sessions; group closure sessions.



4.2.3. After the shelter period

Follow-up of shelter participants

Although temporary relocation programmes have limited capacity to provide long-term follow-up after return, it is advisable to continue accompaniment during the first few months, as this helps to reduce the feeling of a lack of support and difficulties in adapting upon return.

- » **Practical examples:** group chats; regular, structured contact; available points of contact; support with institutional statements, letters of support, etc.

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

Verification Visits or Delegations on the human rights situation in the areas of origin of those hosted are a kind of “reverse shelter” initiative that strengthens ties between both societies. Their effectiveness depends on the involvement of host institutions and organisations. Participants gain a firsthand understanding of the realities faced by the individuals who received shelter, personal connections with programme and greater social and political awareness, while organisations in the visited territory express their appreciation to those representing the host society.

- » **Practical examples:** visiting regions or areas where those who received shelter previously lived; involving a diverse representation of the host society's organisational network, including institutions and governments; engaging in dialogue and advocacy with local institutions; producing public reports for advocacy on social media, in the press or in institutional settings (parliaments, public events, etc.).

Guaranteeing financial and logistical support

Providing financial support at the end of the shelter period is essential to reduce uncertainty, prevent situations of vulnerability and facilitate safe and stable return.

- » **Practical examples:** financial support at the conclusion of the shelter period; support for entrepreneurial initiatives upon return; support for training upon return; covering local relocation costs, for individuals or families, if necessary; providing information on funds, grants and organisations that can offer financial support upon return.

Continuing specialised psychosocial support on return

Having access to specialised psychosocial support on return enables defenders to maintain self-care strategies, apply the tools they have acquired during their stay, and better cope with the emotional and organisational challenges of returning. This support can also help them share well-being practices within their communities and organisations, thereby strengthening collective protection.

- » **Practical examples:** offering a set number of sessions or support for a defined period in the country of origin; providing an open channel of communication that can be adapted to needs; referral to specialist organisations in the country of origin.

4.3. BEST PRACTICES IN CARING FOR ACCOMPANYING PERSONS

This section sets out 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

It is essential that the organisation running the programme places care at the centre of its work, as this enables all other actions to take place. This promotes sustainable and caring processes, both for the team and for the people receiving shelter.

- » **Practical examples:** establishing an institutional care plan.

Decent working conditions and clearly defined roles

Decent working conditions and a structured, well-defined organisation with a clear division of tasks reduce stress, overload and emotional exhaustion, helping to establish boundaries between personal and professional life. By protecting the team's mental health and fostering a safe and stable environment, the quality of the accompaniment offered to those receiving shelter is improved.

- » **Practical examples:** job security and adequate pay; sufficient staffing levels; defined working hours; clear division of tasks; flexible organisational structure; planning of emergency on-call shifts; clear emergency criteria agreed with defenders; overtime compensation measures; the right to physical and digital disconnection; encouraging rest and self-care and the ability to recognise signs of burnout.

Ongoing internal coordination and communication

Strengthening team coordination is a protective measure to promote programme staff well-being. It enhances capacity and sense of agency in managing daily tasks and resolving potential crises or communal living issues, thereby improving programme efficiency.

- » **Practical examples:** encouraging teamwork and a multidisciplinary approach; scheduling regular meetings between the various stakeholders, adjusted to the different phases; establishing clear and secure communication channels; fostering informal spaces for sharing and team building.

Group spaces for emotional release and debriefing

Having self-managed or professionally guided group spaces for emotional release and debriefing enables teams to build group trust, process the emotional impact of accompaniment, and prevent exhaustion, burnout and vicarious trauma.

- » **Practical examples:** organising group debriefing sessions, facilitated by internal or external specialists.

Access to specialised psychosocial support

Programme staff, regardless of their role, should have access to external specialised psychosocial support to prevent the risks and impacts of this type of accompaniment. Such support improves well-being and enhances the sustainability of the programme. Furthermore, by acting as role models for those they accompany and openly acknowledging their own need for support, they help to destigmatise mental and emotional suffering in human rights defence work.

- » **Practical examples:** providing a health fund for those working on or collaborating with the programme; preventive measures delivered by the programme's own specialised psychosocial support team (counselling and emotional support, group workshops, in-house training, etc.).

Training to strengthen accompaniment and prevent secondary impacts

Providing regular spaces for training tailored to the programme's needs strengthens the team's capacity to provide safe, trauma-informed accompaniment, enables them to identify and manage their own emotional responses, thereby reducing the risk of burnout and promoting professional and personal wellbeing.

- » **Practical examples:** regular and/or specific in-house training on the socio-political contexts of origin of those receiving shelter, the psychosocial approach, the trauma-informed care approach, digital safety, psychological first aid, group facilitation, and burnout prevention.

External supervision of accompaniment

Supervision by external experts provides the team with a safe space to reflect on the programme with critical distance, separating personal experience from the situations of those accompanied. This facilitates careful decision-making, improves accompaniment, protects against emotional exhaustion and contributes to an understanding of the reactions of those receiving shelter as expressions of trauma, fostering a more empathetic and sustainable approach.

- » **Practical examples:** regular group supervision sessions; specific supervision tailored to the area or role; peer supervision among temporary relocation programmes.

Clearly defined and shared response protocols

Having defined protocols in place for potential crisis situations facilitates the team's response, avoids improvisation, reduces stress and emotional strain, and promotes consistency in joint actions.

- » **Practical examples:** drafting and updating prevention and response protocols for situations of gender-based violence or sexual assault, health emergencies, racist and LGBTIAQ+ phobic violence, and breaches that may occur within the programme and how to address them; disseminating protocols and ensuring written copies are accessible to all those involved in the shelter process.

Programme networks

Networking contributes to the care of those providing accompaniment because it breaks isolation and gives meaning to their work, by making them feel part of something bigger; it enables the development of joint advocacy strategies to engage with institutions, capitalising on shared challenges and experiences; and it facilitates the exchange of resources, training and mutual support based on prior trust and knowledge.

- » **Practical examples:** The Pro-TEJER network in Spain; the EUTRP at European level; the Ubuntu Hub Cities network at the African level; Shelter City and ICORN; networking and collaboration among professionals providing specialised psychosocial support in programmes within the same geographical or cultural context (such as the PsicoPro-TEJER coordination platform among professionals offering psychosocial support in programmes across Spain).

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

05

This guide addresses recommendations to all those involved in temporary relocation programmes, **encouraging them to review their practices from a psychosocial perspective**, strengthen existing practices, and transform those that can be improved, while prioritising the care of those receiving shelter and those who accompany them.

FOR TEMPORARY RELOCATION PROGRAMMES:

- Adapt best practices to the specific context of each programme.
- Incorporate a psychosocial approach into all phases of the programme (before, during and after return).
- Ensure that core functions are covered: funding and institutional support; management and administration; coordination; mentoring and daily accompaniment; specialised psychosocial support; risk analysis and holistic protection; management of communal living; legal support; health support; community support.
- Design selection processes in coordination with organisations of origin, incorporating psychosocial criteria.
- Tailor each relocation to the individual, taking into account gender, racialisation, family situation and health needs of each human rights defender.
- Accompany return in a planned manner, with risk assessment throughout all phases of the programme, ensuring financial, institutional and psychosocial support upon return.
- Build support networks in the host society based on international solidarity, involving civil society organisations, trade unions and institutions.
- Establish an institutional care plan for teams that includes external supervision, spaces for emotional release, training and access to specialised psychosocial support.
- Promote networking between temporary relocation programmes.

FOR FUNDERS AND INSTITUTIONS:

- Ensure that budgetary allocations cover the core requirements of programmes, enabling family reception, post-return follow-up, implementation of care plans within programmes, and applied research initiatives.
- Make funding criteria more flexible to adapt them to the actual needs and timelines of each shelter process.
- Ensure institutional recognition and support for those receiving shelter.
- Fund and support networking between programmes as a strategy for collective empowerment and optimisation of resources.
- Respect and guarantee human rights as a fundamental obligation, creating legal frameworks that protect human rights defenders.
- Facilitate flexible migration frameworks and protect the right to asylum.

FOR UNIVERSITIES, TRAINING AND RESEARCH CENTRES:

- Develop research into best practices and the exchange of knowledge through networking.
- Promote applied research on temporary relocation, building situated knowledge developed in collaboration with human rights defenders and their communities, whilst avoiding the reproduction of extractivist approaches in research.
- Include psychosocial and trauma-informed care approaches in training curricula.
- Establish collaboration agreements with relocation programmes to provide specialised training to their teams and to involve universities and training centres in accompanying those receiving shelter within the society.

SHELTER THAT CARES AND EMPOWERS



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