

Learning events: How to improve the wellbeing and protection of human rights defenders?



Support to human
right defenders



Self-protection and
self-care



Digital security

An illustration of a laptop and a smartphone, representing digital technology, set within a yellow circular background.

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MESOAMERICAN INITIATIVE
of women
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

JUSTICE  PEACE
Local justice on a global scale

SHELTER
CITY
NETWORK

FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



“Wellbeing is about self-care and about feeling secure”

**- INEZ DE BOER
Coordinator PBI The Netherlands**

“How can I take care of others when I cannot take care of myself?”

- YAMILETH, IM-Defensoras

Peace Brigades International

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is an international NGO with over 35 years of experience in seeking justice and peace, supporting and standing in solidarity with threatened human rights defenders (HRDs) across the world. Our aim is to protect and support these brave individuals and organisations; strengthen their physical, digital and political security; and enhance their wellbeing. We adapt our approach to both the changing global context and the various constraints human rights defenders and organisations that support them encounter.

“I believe that without PBI’s accompaniment I would not be here today”

- LORENA CABNAL
Red de Sanadoras del Feminismo Comunitario de Iximulew

pbi
making space for peace



“PBI can offer a very important accompaniment. It would be this guardian angel that would be watching over and in the event that things go wrong there would be somebody to give visibility to the issue”

- NAOMI BARASA,
Amnesty international Kenya

PBI Accompanies HRDs who Defend...



Civil and Political Rights 55%



Gender and Sexual Rights 7%



Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 17%



Land and Environmental Rights 21%

Working partnership for the protection and wellbeing of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Latin America

This project offers protection and support to WHRDs through a joint effort of PBI and the local WHRDs network IM-Defensoras. Our aim is to implement effective protection strategies, while at the same time engaging in a joint learning process to improve protection and support activities. These 'best practices' are shared with relevant stakeholders. A psychosocial and gender perspective lies at the core of these practices. This project is carried out in Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, from 2017 to 2020.

IM-Defensoras

The Mesoamerican initiative for women human rights defenders (IM-Defensoras) seeks to design alternative strategies to the protection of WHRDs in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Their aim is to strengthen and connect women change-makers in order to facilitate their work, while at the same time promoting a safe and equal environment. This organisation started its work in 2010 as a result of the increasing violence against WHRDs in the Mesoamerican region.



Network of Temporary Relocation Initiatives for HRDs: Shelter Cities

PBI The Netherlands has been an active member of the Shelter City network since 2015. This initiative, which is coordinated by Justice and Peace, aims to protect human rights defenders (HRDs) who are being threatened because of the work they do. HRDs from different places around the world can qualify for a stay of three months in one of the 'Shelter Cities'. The program organises different activities that enable them to continue their role as change-makers in their home countries. In addition, this initiative applies a strong psycho-social focus during their stay. PBI The Netherlands is responsible for organising and implementing this project in the city of Utrecht.



“Meetings were organised with a range of European authorities and organisations according to the particular needs of each defender”

**- SANDRA ALARCÓN
Human Rights Centre**

PBI encourages reflection on protection, wellbeing, and temporary relocation initiatives

As a result of PBI's participation in these initiatives, this organisation has promoted the creation of different spaces in which experiences and strategies focused on the protection and wellbeing of defenders could be exchanged. A good example are [the two regional conferences](#) in Latin America, which were organised in cooperation with IM-defensoras. In addition, PBI supported the organisation of two events in Europe. The first event addressed how self-protection and self-care practices can be improved. The second event incorporated this discussion in relation to the growing temporary international relocation initiatives.

First workshop in Europe: Self-care, Self-protection and Digital Security for HRD's

Within the framework of the 20th anniversary of UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, PBI The Netherlands organised a learning event in Brussels. The main purpose of this reunion was to discuss more in-depth on how to provide support to HRDs in ways that favor self-protection and self-care practices. There was also a special focus on digital security. Different organisations were invited to this workshop: Justice & Peace, Protect Defenders, Friends of the Earth, Front Line Defenders, Oxfam Novib, and Global Witness. In addition, 13 HRDs, who received accompaniment from PBI, were invited to participate in this event. Finally, representatives of different PBI groups were also present during this meeting.

In order to provide an introduction to self-care and self-protection, representatives of IM-Defensoras shared their experiences surrounding their own approach to these issues, which is also known as the '*Integral and Feminist Protection Approach*'. After a thorough introduction to this topic, the participants were divided into small groups to enable a space in which individual experiences concerning these issues could be shared. The discussions that emerged from these interactions led to the following conclusions:

- **More inclusion of grassroots organizations**

Funding should be more accessible for grassroots organisations.

Donors could dedicate a certain amount of the budget to grassroots organisations. This funding should be accessible for those who do not have the capacity to deal with complicated application and reporting procedures.

The obligation of giving references cannot always be fulfilled because it contains security risks. When asking for references, (digital) security should always be taken into account.

Learn more about
HRDs activities in
Brussels

<http://bit.ly/2VGIJNQ>



Participants in activities in
Brussels, Belgium

- **The use of a broad definition of risks**

Besides the security risks, HRDs face many risks as a result of their human rights works. This includes, but is not limited to: the risk of a burn-out, the risk of health problems, the risk of resistance in own community, the risk of living and working in a hostile environment.

There should be a better understanding of the circumstances that HRDs are working in. They are often part of a vulnerable group themselves (e.g. LGBTI) and face a lot of difficulties to carry out their work. In many cases, HRDs do not earn anything or very little. Consequently, they often have a second job next to their human rights work. In addition, they also have the responsibility to take care of their families.

Programs supporting HRDs should, therefore, include opportunities and programs for self-care, psycho-social support, health insurance and/or support for their families.

Programs supporting HRDs should pay more attention to after-care. For example, what happens to the HRD when he/she returns to his/her place after being in a shelter city?

- **Prevention should be included**

Besides the programs supporting HRDs in cases of high risks, attention should also be paid to the prevention of these risks. Here is important to take into account a broad definition of risk.

The need for self-care of HRDs is underestimated. They are so used to work for others that they often to take care of themselves. This should be part of the work of each HRD, and of those supporting them.

- **More flexibility**

HRDs work in an ever-changing environment. Programs supporting them should allow flexibility to respond correctly to the changing environment.

Support for self-care of HRDs should be able to be used in a flexible way to respond to the needs of the HRDs. A good example is IM-Defensoras who have a budget line of 10% of the total budget that can be dedicated to self-care activities.



Today, when we were participating in the session, I felt it was a workshop that could change lives

**- INDIRA GHALE
Change Action Nepal
(CAN)**

Second Workshop: The Wellbeing of HRDs and Temporary International Relocation Initiatives (TIRIs)

During the International Shelter City Workshop 2019, which was initiated by Justice and Peace, PBI The Netherlands supported the organisation of an event focused on the importance of the wellbeing of (W)HRDs. This workshop counted with the participation of (W)HRDs and multiple organisations working on temporary relocation initiatives across the world.

Three different speakers presented their perspectives on 'wellbeing'. First, PBI The Netherlands put an emphasis on the strategies used during its short term relocation programs, also known as 'Speakers Tours'. During these tours, HRDs travel to EU countries, the USA or Canada to engage in advocacy activities during 2 to 4 weeks. At the same time, attention is given to the care of HRDs. This organisation highlighted the importance of having a fixed budget for wellbeing during relocation programs. *'Wellbeing is about self-care and about feeling secure'*.

Moreover, PBI The Netherlands announced the development of detailed guidelines on how to accompany (W)HRDs. These guidelines were the result of a joint effort of (W)HRDs and PBI. They have as main focus to provide guidance on how to protect and support defenders before, during and after a relocation program. In addition, they offer recommendations for the organisations that provide temporary shelter for HRDs. Attention is also given to the organisations of HRDs that are left behind during the relocation programs and continue doing their work under difficult circumstances. More information about the 'Speakers Tours' guidelines can be found at www.peacebrigades.nl/projecten/

Watch here the video about the self-care workshop of PBI and IM-Defensoras

<https://bit.ly/35CUHNC>



"The care of WHRDs should take place in a collective"

**YAMILETH,
IM-Defensoras**



Just as with the previous event, IM-Defensoras was among the speakers and shared its integral approach for the protection of HRDs, which also included relocation strategies. These relocation initiatives can be found in Mexico, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. Additionally, it addressed the importance of wellbeing strategies during these programs. They argued that these programs should tackle health issues, psychosocial impacts and provide protection training. As IM-Defensoras stated: *how can HRDs take care of others if they do not take care of themselves?* In relation to this issue, this organisation shared three takeaways:

1. The majority of HRDs prefer to be relocated within the country they find themselves active.
2. It is important to pay attention to the post-relocation period: what happens after relocation takes place?
3. The care of HRDs should take place in a collective sphere.

Finally, Justice and Peace shared the findings of a research project that shed more light on the beliefs, norms, and barriers to improving the wellbeing of HRDs during relocation programs. As a result of this research, the [Barcelona Guidelines on the Wellbeing and Temporary Relocation of HRDs](#) were formulated. These guidelines were shared with the participants of the workshop.

Throughout the event, participants shared their own views on the wellbeing of HRDs, leading to different insights on this topic. This led to the following conclusions:



- **Gender approach to wellbeing strategies**

HRDs suffer aggressions as a result of the work that they do. However, differences between the aggressions that men, as well as women rights defenders, have to endure. This should be taken into account in the strategies aimed at improving the wellbeing of HRDs. In the case of WHRDs, relocation also involves their children. As such, organisations like IM-Defensoras have a strong focus on the emotional dimension of WHRDs.

- **HRDs are not always eager to share their emotions**

There are cases in which HRDs are not eager to share their emotions, regardless of their gender. In such cases, creating strategies focusing on the body, instead of the emotions, could be supportive of the aim of improving the wellbeing of HRDs. By connecting with their bodies, they do not have to speak about how they feel. In light of this, it is important to think beyond traditional therapy.

- **The meaning of wellbeing**

What wellbeing means might vary per context. As such, strategies to improve the wellbeing of HRDs should have a culturally sensitive approach. In some cases, psychology might be regarded as too western.

- **Psychological help**

The use of the term 'psycho-social support' or 'wellbeing support' can be more effective than referring to psychological help. In addition, group sessions can have a greater impact on HRDs when sharing their experiences. The opportunity for individual sessions should, nevertheless, never be excluded from the program. If psychological sessions are part of the program, it is important to define objectives at the beginning of the therapies.

- **Including wellbeing in day-to-day activities**

Relocation programs should provide alternatives to traditional wellbeing therapies. Examples are theatre, writing, painting or trips to enhance integrations among others HRDs that are participating in relocation programs.





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