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Organising protests and risk assessment [tactical activity]

Guide a group of people who are planning a protest into reflecting about and addressing the risks and threats that they may face. This activity can be applied for protests that are offline or online as well as protests that have offline and online components.

Introduction

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This activity is about guiding a group of people who are planning a protest into reflecting about and addressing the risks and threats that they may face. This activity can be applied for protests that are offline or online as well as protests that have offline and online components.

This is not a protest planning activity but rather a risk assessment activity for a protest. It is assumed that before this activity is held, the group has already done some initial planning for what the protest will be about and its main strategies, tactics and activities.

Learning objectives

Through this activity, participants will learn to:

- Understand the different risks that they face in carrying out protest activities.
- Create a plan to respond to the identified risks in order to carry out a more secure protest. Who is activity for?

This activity is useful for a group of people (organisation, network, collective) who have agreed to plan a protest together.

The group should have had initial planning about their protest, so the main strategies, tactics and activities have been discussed and agreed upon prior to this activity.

Time required

This activity will take a minimum of four hours.

Resources

- A big wall where sticky notes and flip chart paper can be pinned. If there is not a well suitable for this purpose, there should be a space cleared on the floor where participants can do this work together.
- Markers.
- Sticky notes.
- Devices where discussions can be electronically documented. It is important to assign people in the group to document the discussions and make sure that if the documentation is shared, it is via secure channels.

Mechanics for a workshop for a group planning a shared protest

This activity has three main phases:

- Phase 1 is about looking at risk from the angle of organisers, supporters and adversaries as sources of threats (direct and indirect threats as well as confronting ways that the protest can fail). Phase 1 is broken down into three different exercises that are designed for the group to arrive at a shared understanding of the possible risks that their planned protest is facing.
- Phase 2 is about strategising ways to mitigate possible vulnerabilities and failures of the protest, and what roles organisers have in the mitigation plan.
- Phase 3 focuses on operationalising secure internal communications among the participants.

Phase 1: Assessing where risks can come from

This phase has a few levels of participation and interaction in order to assess where the risks for the protest may be coming from. To make the mechanics clearer, the different levels have been marked as “exercises”.

Prepare a sheet of flip chart paper for each of the following:

- **Organisers of the protest:** Groups and individuals involved in planning the protest. They also include allies.
- **Supporters:** Groups and individuals that you expect to take part or participate in the protest actions.
- **Adversaries of the protest:** Groups and individuals who will be negatively affected by this protest as well as those that support them.

- **Activities of the protest:** The planned actions for the protest and where those actions are happening. Activities can be both **online activities** and **offline activities**.

Exercise 1: Naming the who and what of the protest

Give the participants time and space to fill in each of these sheets of flip chart paper with sticky notes with their responses. Alternatively, they can also just write directly on the flip chart paper.

> **Facilitation note:** To do this in a more organised way, especially if the group is made up of more than seven people, break the participants into four groups. Each group will work on one sheet of flip chart paper first. One can start with “Organisers of the protest”, and another group can start with “Supporters of the protest”, and so on. Give them time to fill in their answers for their sheet of flip chart paper, then ask them to move to the next sheet until all groups have had time with each one. This is usually called the World Cafe methodology.

Exercise 2: Unpacking organisers, supporters and adversaries

After all the sheets of flip chart paper are filled with answers, get the participants to break out into two groups:

- Group 1 will take the flip chart paper for the organisers and supporters
- Group 2 will take the flip chart paper for the adversaries

The flip chart paper on **Activities** will be left in the common area for everyone’s reference.

Each group will have their own set of guide questions to start unpacking where the risks are in their focus areas.

For organisers and supporters, the guide questions are:

- Who among the organisers is currently facing threats? What are they? How can that impact the protest?
- Are there internal conflicts among the organisers? Tensions that we should be aware of? What might the potential impact be to the organising?
- Among the supporters that we expect, who among them have the potential to receive a lot of backlash?
- What are the threats of backlash that can be anticipated? Have there been similar protests that received backlash before? What was it?
- Where would the backlash or attacks happen? Do you know which social media spaces are especially targetted by adversaries? What might the impact of the backlash be on offline realities, during or after the protest?

For adversaries, the guide questions are:

- Who among this list of adversaries will be most active against the protest?
- Where do they congregate? Where do they congregate offline and online?
- Who are the leaders or influencers among the adversaries?
- What capacities do they have?
- What is it that they can do against the protest and those involved?
- How can the adversaries affect the planning of the protest?
- How can they disrupt the planned activities during the protest?
- What might post-protest backlash look like? How might adversaries try to disrupt the message of the protest through backlash? Who would they target? Where would this take place, and what is the role of social media in this?

> **Facilitation note:** Most protests these days will have online and offline components. The questions above are applicable to both online and offline scenarios, protests and contexts. But, if you observe that the participants are focusing too much on offline contexts, then perhaps prompt them with questions about the online contexts of their organisers, supporters, and adversaries. If they are tending to focus on the online factors, then prompt them with questions about offline contexts. Prompt them on how the online activities or events can impact on offline activities or events, and vice versa.

The group discussion should take about 45 minutes to one hour.

At the end of the group discussion, each group will share back their discussion results. For the share-back, each group should focus on the following questions:

For the organisers/supporters group:

- Who among the organisers/supporters are currently facing threats? What threats are they facing?
- What kind of backlash are you expecting the organisers and supporters to face for participating in the protest?
- Were there internal conflicts or tensions that might pose a risk to the protest, and what might those be?

For the group that worked on adversaries:

- Who among the adversaries will potentially take action to disrupt the protest?
- What kind of disruptions do you expect from them?
- How does this look different for different stages of the protest: planning, during and post?

It is also a good idea to ask the groups to be as specific in their share-backs as they can be.

Exercise 3: Reflecting on possible failure

This exercise is about surfacing some of the possible ways that the protest can fail.

After this, all the participants will be given some time to reflect on this question: **What do you NOT want to happen in this protest?**

To further unpack this big question, you might want to raise these questions to prompt the group:

- Think about your organisers and supporters – what possible negative effects can this protest have on them?
- If the protest is happening offline and online, then how can your adversaries disrupt the protest in both spaces?
- Think about the spaces of your protest activities – what do you not want to happen to them?
- Think about your protest activities – what can cause them to fail?

Ask them to reflect on the discussions they've had and the share-backs they've listened to. Ask them to write down their answers on separate sticky notes and then have them post them up on the wall after a few minutes of reflection.

Cluster the responses to come up with general themes to discuss further.

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Phase 2: Planning mitigation strategies and tactics

Exercise 1: Group work to mitigate possible vulnerabilities and failure

Based on the clusters from Exercise 3 of Phase 1, divide the participants into groups.

Each group will discuss the following questions:

- What can you do to prevent this negative outcome?
- What strategies, what approaches, what safety protocols will be required to avoid it?
- Are there different strategies for the planning stage, during the protest itself, and after?
- What will you do if this potential negative outcome becomes real? What steps will you take?
- Who should lead these strategies?

By the end of the discussion, each group should have a list of approaches and strategies as well as security protocols (rules) in relation to the negative outcome. These should be listed down on flip chart paper and/or documented electronically. Organise these according to the different stages of the protest: before, during and after. Each group will present their lists to the rest for discussion.

The role here of the trainer-facilitator is to provide feedback on the approaches and strategies, suggest improvements (if needed), and find common strategies among the groups.

Exercise 2: Discussion about roles

In the big group, have a discussion on the roles necessary to mitigate negative outcomes, adhere to security protocols, and manage secure communications – before, during and after protest activities. It would be important for the group to finalise these roles and who will fill them.

Phase 3: Communicating securely

Here, the trainer-facilitator can present options for secure communications for the group as they carry out the protest.

Then, the group can spend time installing and making sure that they are able to communicate with each other through the chosen channel.

To help you plan this, read Alternative Tools for Networking and Communications and the Mobile Safety module.

> **Security note:** One of the ways that you can exercise these tools is to make sure that the people who are documenting are able to share copies of their notes and documentation via secure communication channels.

Adjustments for a general workshop

In general, risk assessment activities are more effective when they are done with groups that have common goals, contexts and risk scenarios (i.e. organisational risk assessment interventions, or risk assessment for a network of organisations). Therefore, this activity was designed for a group of participants who are already planning to carry out a protest together and have done some initial

planning about their shared protest. But the activity can be adjusted for a more general digital security scenario of individuals from different contexts who are thinking about organising their own protests with their groups.

In order to adjust this activity for more general use, having a sample protest will be a good way to get the participants to practice this activity, and learn lessons that they can bring back to their groups/networks/collectives so that they can assess the risk of their actual protests.

Some guidelines about creating a sample protest:

- Locate the protest in reality: It is important to locate the protest in a real context, because then the sample protest will have the boundaries and parameters of an actual protest, and the participants will be able to be more specific in their analysis and their strategies. If all the participants are from the same country, then locate the protest in that country. If they are from different countries, then have a regional protest.
- Design a sample protest for an issue that resonates with the participants: This way, the protest will be familiar to the participants even though it is an imaginary one. They would have organised and/or participated in one in the past.
- State the protest demands or objectives: Make them clearly related to the issue at hand, to help with the exercise.
- Design offline and online protest activities: Make sure that when you identify the protest activities, you have a combination of online and offline tactics. Be specific about these activities – where will they happen, when will they happen, how long will these activities last?
- Base it on an actual protest: If you know of a protest that can work for the participants in your workshop, then use that as the sample protest.

The key in creating a sample protest is to try to simulate as much as you can a real protest scenario. Again, risk assessment activities are most effective with specifics.

You will also need to find ways and adjust your timing so that the participants can learn and absorb the sample protest. You can share the sample protest details before the training, but don’t assume that everyone has had time to read before the workshop. You can present the sample protest at the start of the workshop and give the participants hand-outs so that each group will have the information available to them as they go through the phases and exercises of this activity.

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