



PERSPECTIVES 2

Creating Common NGO Security Terminology: A Comparative Study

Anna Dick

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PERSPECTIVES

Papers presented under “Perspectives” introduce original contributions and points of view on risk and security management of non-profit aid organisations. They are not necessarily commissioned or authored by SMI, nor necessarily represent the point of view of SMI, but are issued by SMI as interesting contributions to the debate on risk and security management of non-profit aid organisations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Dick graduated from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health with a master’s degree in public health and a concentration on humanitarian assistance in May 2010. Her interest in NGO security began while working with a development program operating in Iraq, where she helped draft and implement security plans for the organization. Since then, she has worked with refugee and internally displaced populations in Uganda and Lebanon and continues to be interested in NGO security and its importance to enabling the delivery of aid.

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CONTENTS

I	INTRODUCTION	4
	Mortality and morbidity among aid workers	4
	Other Implications of Security Incidents	5
	Uses of the Common Security Terminology: Internal and External Reporting	6
	Creating Common Security Terminology for NGOs	6
II	METHODS	7
III	PROPOSED NGO SECURITY COMMON TERMINOLOGY	8
	Security Concepts	8
	1 Security	9
	2 Safety	10
	3 Risk	10
	4 Incident	11
	5 Critical Incident	13
	6 Crisis	13
	7-8-9 Threats	14
	Field Operations Related	15
	10 Evacuation	15
	11 Relocation	16
	12 Hibernation	16
	Seizure of Staff	17
	13 Detention	17
	14 Abduction	18
	15 Kidnapping	19
	16-17 Hostage Situation	19
	18 Arrest	20
	Malevolent Acts	20
	19 Theft	20
	20-21 Robbery / Armed Robbery	21
	22 Harassment	22
	23 Assault	22
	24 Ambush	23
	25 Roadblock	23
	26 Extortion	24
IV	RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCERNS	25
V	CONCLUSION	26
	ENDNOTES	27



I. INTRODUCTION

The security of humanitarian workers is intimately linked to their need and ability to access beneficiary populations. Without safe and secure access, assistance and protection to beneficiary populations are hampered, and organization's staff, assets and reputations, as well as donor investments, are put at risk.

The nature of humanitarian work is changing. Aid workers increasingly find themselves in the middle of internal conflicts or in failed or fragile states, where more and more they are targeted in the course of their operations. Additionally, military forces often are now present with humanitarian organizations in the same space.¹ Accordingly, the understanding by local populations that international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are neutral actors is decreasing, which is making NGO workers targets in conflict zones.² Published studies as well as anecdotal information suggest that operating in unstable areas is leading to more deaths and injuries due to intentional violence against the staff of NGOs.³

Security standards have vastly improved in the past decade, although some room for improvement remains. One of the hurdles to improving NGO security is that there are no commonly-accepted definitions for security terms. This impedes incident reporting and makes security management more difficult. The project reviews security terminology as it is used in NGO security documents, provides a methodology for reviewing the terms, and offers proposed definitions for common security terms. The primary goal of this project is to offer proposed definitions for security terms which will serve as a starting point for discussion within the NGO security sector about the terms, with the ultimate goal that standardized definitions agreed upon by the NGO security community will be determined which will improve communication and understanding about security.

Mortality and Morbidity Among Aid Workers

The security of staff working in unstable locations has become a public health problem and impacts the operations of many NGOs. While relatively few studies explore the morbidity and mortality associated with humanitarian work, the evidence suggests that increasing levels of intentional violence where humanitarian organizations operate has contributed to higher rates of mortality, injury, and morbidity among aid workers over the past two decades. In 2000, Sheik *et al.* noted that the nature of humanitarian relief work had changed since the end of the Cold War, as the conflict areas where most organizations currently operate are areas of insecurity due to internal disputes rather than, as earlier, conflicts between states. Consequently, NGO staff find themselves working in more chaotic and weakened areas.⁴ The Sheik study also found that between 1985 and 1998, there were 375 confirmed deaths of aid workers. Intentional violence, defined as incidents involving guns and other weapons, accounted for approximately 70% of deaths among aid workers while motor vehicle accidents made up 17% of deaths, unintentional violence accounted for 7% of deaths, and natural causes and disease were responsible for 8% of deaths. Additionally,



approximately one-third of the deaths occurred within the first 90 days of an individual reaching the field post, with nearly 20% dying within the first 30 days.⁵ These statistics highlight the importance of explaining security and appropriate measures before reaching the field and immediately once individuals have reached their field posts.

Stoddard *et al.* reviewed incident data for the period between 1997 and 2005 provided by 46 NGOs, 10 UN aid organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and some local chapters of the Red Cross/Red Crescent. The study found that there was a 110% increase in ambushes between the first half to the second half of the study and a 28% decrease in kidnappings for the same time. The study notes that these trends occurred while there was 77% overall increase in the number of aid personnel (specifically 91% increase at NGOs and 54% increase in UN workers).⁶

A study by Rowley *et al.*, used a surveillance system to regularly collect information from the headquarters of organizations about serious incidents that led to hospitalization, medical evacuation, or death among the NGO's staff. The study identified a baseline risk of violence-related deaths, medical evacuations, and hospitalizations as six per 10,000 aid worker person-years. Approximately one-half of the cases of intentional violence were deadly for the aid worker. The Rowley study found that among participating NGOs, for the period between September 2002 and December 2005, intentional violence accounted for 55% of deaths, while accidents ranked third at 15% (second was coincidental illness, unrelated to security matters, with 27%).⁷ While there was insufficient data on local staff, the evidence suggests that they may face different risks than do expatriate staff. The definitions described in this project will be informative for all staff and help facilitate communication among all levels of the organization.

Other Implications of Security Incidents

Security incidents affect more than just the health of the individual or persons involved – the organization is also greatly affected. The Generic Security Guide for Humanitarian Organizations, by the European Commission for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), notes that in addition to a moral obligation to protect the lives of their staff, organizations are also interested in protecting their assets.⁸ Additionally, from the organization's perspective, managing security events can be quite expensive, and staff turnover due to stress from security events can be quite costly when new hires have to be trained. Also, a security incident may force the organization to limit or suspend operations in an area, leaving the populations being assisted without needed support.

As is well-understood by the NGO community, security is essential if staff and organizations are to be able to effectively carry out programs and provide assistance to those in need.⁹ A field office must be able to communicate relevant information about security incidents to the country or headquarters office so that security and risk assessments of the current operating situation on the ground remains up to date. Accordingly, facilitating a strong understanding of security through clearly defined security terminology is important from the perspective of the organization, donors, host



governments, academia, insurance and other stakeholders.

Uses of the Common Security Terminology: Internal and External Reporting

The definitions of the security terms described in this project are intended to facilitate communication about security issues among staff within an organization as well as between organizations. This proposed common security terminology, it is hoped, will strengthen incident reporting, helping organizations more accurately determine when their operations should be revised due to security concerns, and fostering more effective discussions among organizations to help protect aid workers.

Incident reporting is a basic element of managing security and monitoring situation awareness. NGOs recognize the importance of involving all staff in security management. It follows that all must have a common understanding of the associated terminology so they can communicate effectively. Yet, as Koenraad Van Brabant discussed in “Mainstreaming the Organizational Management of Safety and Security,” one of the problems with NGO security management is that while safety and security documents are a key part of NGO security management, often security incidents are mentioned but not defined, and if events are defined, the definition is often not the same across organizations.¹⁰ One study found that there were some internal reporting discrepancies even within one country office for one NGO.¹¹ Without clear definitions, staff may find it more difficult to assess when to report a particular event. As a result, security incidents or near misses may be overlooked or unrecorded. Additionally, some security documents would mention two related or similar incidents such as kidnapping and abduction, but would not make clear whether they described the same conduct. Other documents used different terms interchangeably (*e.g.*, abduction and kidnapping), even if the terms were defined elsewhere in the documents. The lack of consistency in the use of terms is problematic, but can be easily remedied.

The security documents of many organizations discuss the importance of sharing security information with other entities operating in the same location. Sharing information about security incidents with other agencies on the ground makes them aware of existing and possible threats and helps them maintain security and safety for their staff and operations, and failing to share information about security events can increase the risk for aid workers.^{12,13}

Creating Common Security Terminology for NGOs

In response to the increase in security incidents over the past decade, some NGOs have implemented quality security management systems, and many others are attempting to do so. InterAction, an association of many international NGOs developed a minimum operating security standards (MOSS), approved in 2006, which all member organizations must meet to be part of the association. The MOSS standards can be steps toward standardization and improvement of organizational security management, this proposed common security terminology is a step towards further improvement as it is a starting point for discussion of common terminology for the NGO security sector.



The definitions proposed in this '*Security Terminology Project*' are meant to facilitate communication about security events across organizations. Defining commonly used terms in NGO security will have benefits for internal NGO reports and will also benefit information sharing across NGOs. Ultimately, this should lead to better security management and lower mortality and morbidity among aid workers due to security incidents.

II. METHODS

This study, the '*Security Terminology Project*', was organized through the Center for Refugee and Disaster Relief (CRDR) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH).

This work continues a longstanding interest at the CRDR in aid worker security as related to occupational health and impact on delivery of humanitarian assistance programs.¹⁴

The research was conducted with the assistance of the European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), and InterAction's Security Advisory Group (SAG), both of which are associations of international NGOs. Several members of EISF and SAG groups voluntarily submitted relevant security documents from their organizations for review. Additionally, several organizations that had previously submitted security documents and consented to their review for a separate study associated with the JHSPH also agreed to participate in this research. Security documents from a total of 32 organizations were reviewed. Security policies, manuals, and guides are generally sensitive documents within an organization. For this study, complete anonymity was maintained and no security documents were or will be further disseminated.

The terms selected – with the assistance of contacts at EISF and SAG – are each described individually in the next section. Each term was searched for within each security document submitted. The exact wording used to define a term was copied and collated with the definitions of the same term used by other guides. Finally, all of the definitions for each term were reviewed and one most appropriate and complete definition was drafted, or if no modifications were needed, it was simply selected from the definitions reviewed. The recommended definitions of common security terms, to be used for further discussion within the NGO security community are presented in boxes under the heading '*Security Terminology Project*'.

For comparison with the NGO sector understanding of each selected security term, the dictionary definition for each term from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary¹⁵ is also presented.

Additionally, relevant risk management terms defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) are included with the security terminology presented below. The ISO is a network of standards institutions from around the world that brings public, private, and government



institutions together to create sector-wide standards. Two ISO guides focus on risk management concepts, Guide 73, “Risk management – Vocabulary”¹⁶ defines terms related to risk, including risk management, communications, identification, assessment, analysis, evaluation, monitoring and measurement. Guide 73 accompanies the ISO 31000 “Risk Management Principles & Guidelines,” which elaborates on the concepts of risk management.¹⁷ Relevant definitions published in ISO’s Guide 73 are presented with the definitions reported through this project, as they may be useful in the ensuing discussion of these security terms.

The overall method for the project was similar to a literature review. The intention of searching for terms within the documents was to see how the words are used, even though only specific definitions were used for analysis. This is one method that the NGO security community may use to facilitate discussion with the aim of reaching agreement on definitions of terms in the future. The proposed common NGO security terminology is presented here as a starting point for NGOs to discuss and refine the terms to best suit the sector’s needs.

III. PROPOSED NGO SECURITY COMMON TERMINOLOGY

The following is an analysis of the terms reviewed in the proposed “Common Security Terminology for NGOs.” The terms are grouped into the following categories: security concepts, field operations-related, seizure of staff, and malevolent acts. The general terms address basic concepts related to NGO security. The terms within the field operations section address evacuation and other similar actions that affect operations in a certain area. Staff detention terms examine various ways staff may be held by external actors. The malevolent acts section examines the definitions for terms related to types of incidents and crimes that may commonly affect NGOs. After a short discussion of how each term is defined in the security documents included in the review, the proposed definition for the term in the NGO security context is presented. The definition from the [Oxford Concise English Dictionary](#) is also presented, although any unrelated secondary meanings for terms are omitted. Finally, where applicable, any relevant definitions from the ISO Guide 73 “Risk management – Vocabulary” are also presented.

SECURITY CONCEPTS

It is useful to preface the discussion of security and safety below with some remarks on violence, and by extension a violent incident. Violence may be defined as *“the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a likelihood to result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.”*¹⁸ For our purposes it is pertinent to note that violence involves ‘physical force or power’ and that its use is ‘intentional’ and aimed at a target. Violence has a focus, be it oneself or another. Obviously, it would be going too far to argue that only direct physical force is violent and indirect is not. We thus, take violent acts to refer



to both direct and indirect acts and/or events using force or power that are intentional – as opposed to accidental or independent of volition. We argue that security refers to threats that are violent by nature, and that safety refers to non-violent threats.

Thus, considering both safety and security, a definition of Safety and Security Management could be:

the study, practice and measures taken with the aim to reduce threats to NGO staff and assets to a level that is as low as reasonably practical while the staff access vulnerable populations for humanitarian purposes.

1. Security

The security of staff, resources, and programs is crucial to NGOs. However, only seven of 32 organizations defined the term “security.” Some defined it simply as the state of being free from injury or danger and facing no risk to individuals or resources/assets. Another more focused definition described security as the protection of humanitarian personnel and assets from violence and theft; and the organization contrasted security with safety, which it described as related to threats posed by natural hazards or health. This differentiation between safety and security as related to natural hazards or health was discussed by Van Brabant in “Operational Security Management in Violent Environments.”¹⁹ Additionally, the Venro Minimum Standards regarding Staff Security in Humanitarian Aid notes that security is concerned with issues regarding protection against violent acts.²⁰

The dictionary definition of security focuses on protection from criminal activity, which is relevant to the NGO sector. However, because the risks in each context where NGOs operate differ greatly and can change quickly, it is helpful to introduce the concept of decreasing a risk to a level that is “as low as reasonably practical” or ALARP. ALARP is often used in the context of security, and for the purposes of NGO security, it allows for the consideration of how risks vary by locales and how the available means to mitigate the risks also varies by locale.

Although a common theme among the NGO sector definitions of “security” involves the concept of being free from violent threats, it may be useful to revise the definition to acknowledge that most risks will never be completely eliminated and that security is related to the work done by NGO staff in the context of delivering humanitarian services. The proposed definition of ‘security management’ below reflects the concept that risks may be mitigated to a practical level rather than eliminated entirely and also includes the stipulation that safety and security is related to staff accessing vulnerable populations to provide humanitarian services.

Security Terminology Project

Security: a level of violent threats that is as low as reasonably practical to enable staff to access vulnerable populations for humanitarian purposes.



Dictionary

Security: (1) the state of being or feeling secure; (2) the safety of a state or organization against criminal activity such as terrorism.

Secure: (1) fixed or fastened so as not to give way, become loose, or be lost; (2) certain to remain safe and unthreatened; protected against attack or other criminal activity; (3) feeling free from fear or anxiety.

2. Safety

Interestingly, the dictionary definition did not focus on accidents or natural and non-violent causes of injury, and unlike some of the NGO definitions of security, does not specifically refer to criminal activity. Nevertheless, Van Brabant and many NGOs distinguish between safety and security based on the criminality of the threat or danger. Safety was commonly described in comparison with security. A total of six organizations defined “safety.” Van Brabant discusses safety as related to the context of protection from accidents and hazards resulting from nature or non-violent events.²¹ Two organizations also related safety to the concept of not being injured or killed due to poor safety guidelines.

Analogous to our discussion above regarding security, we suggest safety relates to non-violent threats.

Security Terminology Project

Safety: a level of non-violent threats that is as low as reasonably practical to enable staff to access vulnerable populations for humanitarian purposes.

Dictionary

Safety: (1) the condition of being safe; denoting something designed to prevent injury or damage.

Safe: (1) protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost; not causing or leading to harm or injury; affording security or protection.

3. Risk

Risk was defined by 14 organizations. Although it was defined by almost half of the organizations, there was tremendous variability in the definitions, and thus it is particularly important for the NGO security sector to discuss and refine the term’s definition. Some organizations chose to define risk simply as the probability of being faced with a threat and the potential impact of the



threat if it materialized. This definition uses the common formula that risk is the product of threat and vulnerability. A risk was also described as a source of danger of loss or misfortune. Most organizations described risk in the specific context of a risk assessment, where the likelihood and potential impact of a risk was described in a given location and situation. In comparison to the dictionary definition, the NGO definition focuses more on the likelihood and potential impact of a risk. While the Guide 73 definition reflects the uncertainty surrounding risks, it does not imply a negative context described by the NGOs and the dictionary definitions. In general, there was much variation across organizations about the definition of “risk,” and this term in particular would benefit from further discussion among the NGO security sector.

Security Terminology Project

Risk: the uncertainty of the likelihood and impact of encountering a threat while pursuing objectives.

Dictionary

Risk: (1) a situation involving exposure to danger; the possibility that something unpleasant will happen; (2) a person or thing causing a risk or regarded in relation to risk: *a fire risk.*

Guide 73

Risk: effect of uncertainty on objectives.

Notes: an effect is a deviation from the expected – positive and/or negative

4. Incident

Almost all organizations described the importance of incident reporting. While some listed many events they would classify as reportable incidents, nine provided a specific definition. Most of the definitions were rather brief, describing an incident as jeopardizing the safety or security of a staff member, the dependant of a staff member, or organization property; another also mentioned the organization reputation as potentially harmed by an event. Other organizations focused more on violence, describing incidents as events which threaten humanitarian staff or assets with violence or theft, or result in actual violence or theft against them. The most general definition described an incident as any fact or event that a staff member thinks could affect his/her personal or organizational security. The most complete definition combined many of the concepts described individually by different organizations, describing an incident as related to any of the following: (1) an event that compromises staff safety, (2) threat or injury staff, (3) any third



party injury or harm in the course of the organization’s activities, or (4) theft, damage, or risk to organization property or belongings.

One organization noted that because individuals will have different perceptions of what constitutes a security incident, it is important to decide as a team what qualifies as a significant incident for the specific context and location in which the team operates. Most organizations also described the importance of reporting “near misses” for incidents, because these can help demonstrate the need for a change in the overall security situation.

The dictionary definition also focuses on the (potentially) violent nature of an incident. The definition of an “event” in the ISO Guide 73 points out that an event can include one or more occurrences. The Guide 73 also defines a near miss as an incident, which is relevant to the NGO security sector because it is important to track near misses. Near misses, however, may warrant a separate classification. This may be a useful area of discussion among the NGO security community.

Security Terminology Project

Incident: any event(s) or near miss(es) of an event(s) where (i) staff safety or security is compromised, (ii) there is a threat (violent or otherwise) to staff or staff are injured or killed; (iii) any dependant or other third party is injured or harmed in the course of the organization’s activities, or (iv) organization property or belongings are stolen, damaged, or put at risk.

Dictionary

Incident: (1) an event or occurrence; an instance of something happening; a violent event, such as an assault or skirmish.

Guide 73

Event: occurrence or change of a particular set of circumstances.

- Note 1: An event can be one or more occurrences, and can have several causes.
- Note 2: An event can consist of something not happening.
- Note 3: An event can sometimes be referred to as an “incident” or “accident.”
- Note 4: An event without consequences can also be referred to as a “near miss”, “incident”, “near hit”, or close call.



5. Critical Incident

Several organizations mentioned “serious” or “critical” incidents, and noted that they required immediate incident reports and often a rapid intervention from headquarters. Others simply listed critical events that were generally related to hostage taking or kidnapping, violent attacks against a staff member, or situations where the life of a staff member or someone close to him/her was being or had been threatened. It is important to differentiate between a critical incident and a “normal” incident. While both are types of incidents and reflect a safety or security breach, it seems that the key component of a critical incident is that it requires the rapid input from higher-level organizational staff, such as appropriate individuals at headquarters. Additionally, one organization noted that “serious” incidents require a full investigation by a suitable person not connected with the incident, but that deciding which incidents should be investigated is at the discretion of each organization. The dictionary definition of “critical” focuses on the crisis aspect, and the level of input and immediacy necessary for responding; this highlights the crisis nature of critical incidents in the NGO sector.

Security Terminology Project

Critical Incident: a breach of the safety or security of organization staff, dependants, third party individuals in the course of the organization’s work, or an organization’s property which disrupts normal, routine operations and which requires a response other than routine management or procedures.

The response may require additional (possibly continued) input from specialist and/or higher-level management (likely at the headquarters level).

Dictionary

Critical: (of a situation or problem) at a point of crisis; extremely ill and at risk of death; having a decisive importance in the success or failure of something.

6. Crisis

Several organizations mentioned that a crisis management team should be assembled to handle critical incidents when they occurred. Most organizations did not define a critical incident. Instead, they usually mentioned by way of example that a crisis management team would be assembled if a staff member were kidnapped or abducted. Although only two organizations described a crisis in this context, and only four organizations defined crisis at all, most organizations understood a crisis situation to be related to an ongoing, direct threat to the life of a staff member. This understanding is similar to the dictionary definition, which reflects the



extreme danger associated with incidents that rise to the level of a crisis.

Security Terminology Project

Crisis: an event or incident when staff (and/or assets) which disrupts normal, routine operations.

..

Dictionary

Crisis: (1) a time of intense difficulty or danger.

7, 8, 9. Threats

The term “threat” was described by most organizations. Six organizations specifically defined the term but did not elaborate. However, most NGOs also described specific types of threats. Seven NGOs identified threats in three different categories: crime, direct threats, and indirect threats. Crimes are committed for malicious, financial, or personal reasons and affect organizations and/or their staff. Direct threats occur when staff or assets are intended targets of harm for various reasons, including political, economic, ethic, religious, or other personal reasons. An indirect threat occurs when actions taken by a belligerent individual or group affects the organization, but the organization itself is not the intended target of the actions. One organization classified indirect, or non-targeted, threats as inherent threats. Overall, many threats are present in the environment where NGOs operate.

The dictionary definition of threat reflects the likelihood of damage resulting from some person or thing in the environment. The third definition of “direct” describes the specific targeting of something without the involvement of intermediaries, which is relevant to the definition of “direct threat” in the NGO context.

Security Terminology Project

Threat: a danger (or potential act) in the operating environment that may result in harm or injury to staff, loss of or damage to agency property or to an agency program.

Direct threat: where the organization and/or specific staff are the intended target of the potential act/threat.

Indirect threat: where the organization and/or specific staff are not the intended target of a threat, but may nevertheless be indirectly affected.



Dictionary

Threat: (1) a statement of an intention to inflict injury, damage, or other hostile action as retribution. (2) a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger; the possibility of trouble or danger.

Direct: (1) going from one place to another without changing direction or stopping;(2) straightforward, frank; (3) without intervening factors or intermediaries.

Indirect: (1) not direct.

Guide 73

Hazard: source of potential harm.

- Note: Hazard can be a risk source.

**FIELD OPERATIONS
RELATED**

10. Evacuation

Many organizations described evacuation, and 13 defined the term. Most simply noted that it is the withdrawal of staff (usually expatriate, but sometimes also national staff) across an international border and the related halt of program operations. Most organizations also clearly described that evacuations occur in situations of unacceptable and imminent danger, when the security situation in a given area of operation has worsened and the limits of acceptable risk have been reached. Two organizations described evacuation as possibly occurring within a country, but because “relocation” addresses in-country movement of staff and assets, “evacuation” is perhaps best used to describe the movement of staff across international borders due to escalating security problems. Unless there is an emergency, an evacuation generally requires much planning and occurs in phases, with less-essential staff being evacuated before essential personnel. The evacuation of staff also consequently leads to program suspension. The dictionary definition of evacuation does not reflect the detail of an international border crossing specific to the NGO community, but does focus on moving from a dangerous situation to a safer area.

Security Terminology Project

Evacuation: the withdrawal of staff across an international border when the maximum level of acceptable risk has been surpassed, usually because of an imminent danger to operations. Evacuation also involves program suspension.



Dictionary

Evacuate: (1) remove from place of danger to a safer place; leave (a dangerous place).

11. Relocation

Relocation is an alternative to evacuation, but differs in that staff move to a more secure location within the country and thus do not cross international borders. After relocation, an organization may decide to continue operations from the safer site, but this decision will depend on the policy of the organization and other contextual issues. Nine organizations defined relocation. Although eight of them described “relocation” as transferring staff from an insecure location to a safer one within the same country, one organization, rather than using “evacuation,” differentiated between internal and external relocation. For this organization, “internal relocation” reflected the movement of staff and dependents from an unstable location to a more secure area within the same country; “external relocation” was the withdrawal of internationally recruited staff and dependants from the insecure location across international borders. As “evacuation” is a more widely accepted term for withdrawal across an international border, “relocation” is best used to describe movements within a country. Additionally, one organization used the term “withdrawal” instead of “relocation.”

The dictionary definition of “relocate” focuses on moving to a new place and re-establishing daily operations in the new location. This is not particularly applicable to the NGO security context, although an organization may on occasion choose to restart operations in a new location, depending on the situation.

Security Terminology Project

Relocation: the physical withdrawal of staff and possibly assets from one area where conditions are insecure, to another area where it is safe within the same country.

Dictionary

Relocate: move to a new place and establish one’s home or business there.

12. Hibernation

Eleven organizations defined hibernation. Hibernation was most commonly described as an alternative to relocation and evacuation when they are not possible for security reasons. Hibernation involves staff (generally expatriate



and relocated individuals) remaining in specific sites, usually offices or residences, for security reasons. Local employees may be able to return to their homes, or may need to stay with the hibernating teams. Hibernation also involves stopping work for a considerable amount of time and keeping a low profile in anticipation that the external danger will subside or that evacuation/relocation may become possible in the future. It is important to ensure that sufficient supplies are available for the duration of the hibernation. While the dictionary definition of hibernation focuses on entities in nature which become dormant, the general idea behind hibernation in the NGO context is similar – to lie low and stop work for a period while the environment is more difficult than usual.

Several organizations described the term “suspension” in connection with hibernation by several organizations. Generally it was used to explain a longer period of hibernation. Additionally, some organizations defined suspension as temporarily stopping work on a program.

Security Terminology Project

Hibernation: staying in a relatively secure structure and location while keeping a low profile in the midst of a danger zone because relocation/evacuation is not possible and program operations cannot continue.

Dictionary

Hibernate: (of an animal or plant) spend the winter in a dormant state.

SEIZURE OF STAFF

13. Detention

Four organizations defined the term “detention” in their security documents. Generally, the definitions were extremely similar, and focused on an individual or a group being held against their will by another individual or group without an intention of harm and without a clear precondition for release. One organization noted that detentions were common at security checkpoints and another noted that there are many possible reasons for a detention, including general unhappiness with an agency or its programs.

The primary dictionary definition of “detention” does not imply that an official actor is holding a person or group. Because NGOs often operate in areas where the government may not be in control, it is important to use a definition that includes non-official actors as potential persons who potentially may capture and hold individuals.

Also important is the focus of the definition of detention on “being held,” particularly in comparison to terms described later in which captors make specific demands as conditions for release.



Security Terminology Project

Detention: a person or group is held against his/her/their will by another individual or group which does not intend to harm the detainee(s) and has not set any clear precondition for release.

Dictionary

Detention: (1) the action or state of detaining or being detained.

Detain: (1) to keep (someone) from proceeding by holding them back or making claims on their attention. (2) to keep (someone) in official custody.

Detainee: a person held in custody, especially for political reasons.

14. Abduction

Five organizations defined abduction, and all described an individual or a group being taken involuntarily but without demands being made. Three organizations classified kidnappings and hostage situations as abductions until demands are made. One organization noted that local staff are often most at risk of abduction, but did not explain why. In some cases, organizations did not define any terminology related to detentions, but the security manuals in discussing kidnapping described the “abduction” as the immediate period after staff are seized. This is consistent with the other descriptions of an abduction as not involving any demand by captors.

The dictionary definition of abduction focuses on the physically taking someone (away), which is in contrast to “detention,” which focuses on a person being held for a period of time. The abduction precedes the detention.

Security Terminology Project

Abduction: a person or group is forcibly taken against his/her/their will illegally but no demands are made. The abductors may intend to cause harm or force the abductees to do something for their benefit.

Dictionary

Abduct: take (someone) away illegally by force or deception.



15. Kidnapping

While most organizations discussed kidnapping and what to do if a staff member was kidnapped, only four organizations defined the term. “Kidnapping” is generally used to gaining money or other concessions, called a “ransom.” A kidnapping differs from a hostage situation because the demands are for money, goods, or services. One organization noted that it is difficult to determine if an incident should be classified as a detention, kidnapping, or hostage situation until demands have been made. The dictionary definition of “kidnap” does not include the element of threatening harm to obtain the ransom, but does include the financial incentives behind holding a person.

Security Terminology Project

Kidnapping: situation where a person or group is taken and then threatened with harm with the aim of coercing money, goods, or services from either the individuals or those associated with them (including employers, friends, relatives) in exchange for the safe release of those kidnapped.

Dictionary

Kidnap: abduct and hold captive, typically to obtain a ransom.

16, 17. Hostage Situation

Five organizations defined the term “hostage” or “hostage situation.” Three of the organizations used the same definition, and all described a person held involuntarily by an individual or group seeking to have certain demands met (usually by an employing organization, family, authorities, or other associated relevant group) as a condition for release of the hostage. The conditions for the release of a hostage were often described to include: the publicizing of a political cause, the release of the hostage in exchange for political prisoners or other hostages, or the evasion of prosecution by criminals when their activities have been discovered by authorities. One organization also noted that hostage-taking can be a method for gaining leverage in separate negotiations during violent situations. The dictionary definition and NGO understanding of a hostage are similar and reflect the concept that release is contingent on fulfillment of a certain condition.

Security Terminology Project

Hostage situation: where a person or group is held with his/her/their safety and subsequent release dependent on the fulfillment of certain conditions (usually political goals) defined by the captors.



Dictionary

Hostage: a person seized or held as security for the fulfillment of a condition.

18. Arrest

Three organizations defined an arrest. All described the arresting individual as someone acting under authority of the state. Additionally, two noted that an arrest is related to a criminal offense or infraction, and one noted that an arrest may be related to leverage for securing demands, even if the arrest is through a government office. Interestingly, two noted that an arrest is a detention, which depending on the definition of “arrest” can be inconsistent with the above-described definition of “detention” where no demands are made. One organization noted that an arrest is usually easily resolved, although conditions for the arrested individual are often poor. The dictionary definition mentions the legal authority of the arresting officer as a key aspect of the definition, which differentiates the term from detention and abduction.

Security Terminology Project

Arrest: The seizure of a person whether or not by physical force by someone acting under legal authority of the state body or officials (police, secret services, etc.) in connection with a crime or offence (which may or may not have actually be committed by the seized individual) and where the person is not free to leave.

Dictionary

Arrest: (1) seize (someone) by legal authority and take them into custody

MALEVOLENT ACTS

19. Theft

Two organizations defined theft, both using the same definition (listed below). One organization also noted that it was a nonviolent crime and another described theft as one of the most common crimes against their organization, as they are seen as a source of money and valuable goods in the low-income locations where they operate. The dictionary definition of “theft” is very similar to the NGO security understanding of the term.

Security Terminology Project

Theft: taking and appropriating property without the consent of its owner or any lawful authority.



Dictionary

Theft: the action or crime of stealing.

Steal: take (something) without permission or legal right and without intending to return it.

**20, 21.
Robbery/Armed
Robbery**

Three organizations defined a robbery, and one of those organizations used the definition for “theft” described above as their definition for robbery. Additionally, two organizations specifically defined “armed robbery,” which they simply described as a robbery by a person armed with a dangerous or deadly weapon, even though neither organization defined “robbery.” One organization noted that as a consequence of the proliferation of weapons in many conflict zones where they operate, most robberies affecting the organization do involve dangerous weapons. Additionally, the organization noted that robberies, particularly by armed gangs or individuals, are generally planned in advance, and thus can be deterred through hardening of the target (through the use of guards, security gates, and other measures).

The definition of “armed” in the dictionary focuses on firearms but in the security context, the potential use of other weapons such as machetes, may appropriately be the basis for classifying a robbery as an “armed” robbery. The idea of robbery as different from a theft is that a robbery involves taking property by force is reflected both in the NGO definition and the dictionary definition.

Security Terminology Project

Robbery: the unlawful taking of the property of another individual or group by the use of violence or intimidation.

Armed robbery: the unlawful taking of the property of another individual or group by the use of violence or intimidation with a dangerous or deadly weapon.

Dictionary

Robbery: the action of robbing a person or place.

Rob: (1) take property unlawfully from (a person or place) by force or threat of force

Armed: (1) equipped with or involving a firearm or firearms.



22. Harassment

Harassment was most commonly described in the context of sexual harassment. Three organizations described harassment generally. Two organizations used the same definition, which focused on the harassment as any verbal or physical conduct directed at a person for some reason (such as race, religion, nationality, or to interfere with a person's work), with the goal of causing distress. The third definition noted that harassment often includes persistent attacks and criticism. Harassment is often continued for an extended period, but can be a one-time event. The dictionary definition of harassment is much more succinct, but like the security definition, focuses on the concept of interfering with a person's activities, although it implies that harassment is ongoing by using the word "constant."

Security Terminology Project

Harassment: any unwanted and offensive conduct (verbal or physical) directed at a person with the intent of causing distress; the conduct is directed at a person for some reason, often due to a person's race, religion, nationality, gender, or to interfere with his/her/their work or activities. Harassment may be a one-time event but often consists of persistent attacks.

Dictionary

Harass: (1) torment by subjecting to constant interference or intimidation.

23. Assault

Many organizations described a sexual assault and noted that all individuals are potential victims; this is an important and serious type of assault, but it is not the only risk. Defining an assault more generally is helpful to identifying and minimizing all forms of the offence. Two organizations defined "assault." The security and dictionary definitions are similar, and focus on the violent and physical nature of the attack.

Security Terminology Project

Assault: any attempted or successful physical attack or use of violence against a person to cause harm or do bodily injury to the victim.

Dictionary

Assault: (1) a violent attack; an act that threatens physical harm to a person, whether or not actual harm is done.



24. Ambush

Six organizations defined ambush, and two others described it in terms of vehicle-related attacks only. All descriptions and definitions described a sudden attack made by an individual or persons from a concealed position. The dictionary definition and security definition both describe the element of surprise but the security definition also defines the objectives of an ambush.

Security Terminology Project

Ambush: a sudden attack against a person or vehicle made from a concealed position, attackers' intentions may be to rob, threaten, or kill their target.

Dictionary

Ambush: (n) a surprise attack by people lying in wait in a concealed position; (v) an attack from a concealed position.

25. Roadblock

Three organizations defined the term roadblock. Each had a different definition. One organization suggested that checkpoints and roadblocks were the same thing, as they are both manned positions on the road designed to monitor and control movement in a certain area. The other two organizations that defined roadblock ascribed a more malicious intent to roadblocks, describing the purpose of a roadblock as a means to prevent escape or passage along a road or to force a vehicle to stop in order to attack or rob it. The dictionary definition of "roadblock" suggests an entirely state-controlled purpose and does not imply malicious intent. Although the term checkpoint was not analyzed in this project, the dictionary definition suggests a checkpoint is related more to routine security rather than to full inspections, which may be required at roadblocks.

Security Terminology Project

Roadblock: a barricade or other obstruction set up to restrict or prevent movement along a road, with the primary purpose of attacking or robbing passing vehicles.

Dictionary

Roadblock: a barrier put across a road by the police or army to stop and examine traffic.

Checkpoint: a barrier or manned entrance, typically at a border, where security checks are carried out on travelers.



26. Extortion

Only one organization defined extortion. Another organization listed it as a reportable incident, but did not define the term. Both the dictionary definition and security definition describe obtaining something by threat, but does not specify what is being obtained.

Security Terminology Project

Extortion: demanding money, goods or services from a person by threat.

Dictionary

Extort: obtain by force, threats, or other unfair means.



IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCERNS

Providing a framework and starting point for standardizing NGO security terminology are the main goals of this project. While the terms defined here represent one step, there are other simple steps that organizations can take to minimize confusion about security terminology. As seen above, not all organizations share a common understanding of each term. Security documents for several organizations often use undefined words such as “hostage-taking” and “kidnapping” interchangeably. This may make the text flow slightly more smoothly, but precision is lost if terms that can and sometimes do have different definitions are used interchangeably. Even if an organization did define terms in one document, it sometimes implied other definitions for the same term in different security documents. Lack of consistent definitions creates confusion among the organization’s staff and impairs their effective comparison and analysis of the different situations confronting them. While much progress has been made to standardize security across organizations, it would also be useful for this research to encourage all organizations to use consistent terminology, as this would foster more accurate comparisons and analysis over the full range of circumstances in which humanitarian workers operate. Ideally, terms with different definitions would not be used interchangeably and definitions would be consistent for each term across all NGO security documents.

This project can be used as a starting point for discussion of terminology among the NGO security community. Ultimately, the goal of this project is improve staff understanding of security and to facilitate communication about security related concepts and issues, with the goal of strengthening security management and improving staff safety and security. For a common security terminology to take hold, the terms must be discussed and refined by the NGO security community. The NGO security sector is invited to discuss and refine the definitions presented in this paper as well as to add or remove terms as appropriate. This can be done through groups such as SAG and EISF, through a working group at the Humanitarian Action Summit, or through one of the many other NGO security conferences and workshops.

Proposed definitions described in this project are a step towards streamlining communication about NGO security management, as pointed out in ISO’s Guide 73 “Risk management – Vocabulary,” translating these proposed definitions into other languages presents a problem. Some English words simply do not have a suitable equivalent in other languages. For example, the Guide 73 notes that the word “likelihood” in English has no direct equivalent in some other languages. Instead, the ISO used a word that best back-translates to English as “probability.” In English, “probability” is associated with a specific mathematical meaning. Therefore, while the definitions presented here can be used to help create uniformity in security terminology among organizations that primarily use English to communicate about security, translating these definitions may not be simple.



This project is meant to serve as a sample method for identifying appropriate NGO security terminology from the existing definitions used within the sector and to propose a common security.

V. CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, the context in which NGOs operate has become less secure. Evidence suggests that more aid workers are being killed or injured in the course of their work due to intentional violence. This is a public health problem and an institutional problem for NGOs. Whatever the trends, improvement in aid worker safety and security would improve the delivery of humanitarian aid. Without sound security systems, these organizations are unable to operate in areas where they are needed and the intended beneficiaries of their programs suffer. Improving security management through this proposed common security terminology for NGOs can be one step towards further improving the great strides that have been made in security management in the NGO sector over the past decade.

This project offers proposed definitions for these terms, and those working in the NGO security sector are encouraged to comment and refine the definitions presented, through organizations such as SAG and EISF, or through working groups and other discussions at security conferences. Once adopted, a common security terminology will facilitate understanding and communication about security incidents, which will improve incident reporting within and across organizations. Ultimately, this improved security management should foster improvement in the safety and security of aid workers, and decrease the mortality and morbidity associated with their valuable work.



ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE SECURITY MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE

The Security Management Initiative (SMI) was created to address the challenges in security and risk management faced by non-profit and international organizations in hazardous environments by providing authoritative research, policy development, training and advisory services. Through these products and services, SMI aims to enhance the capacity of non-profit and international agencies to improve risk and security management in hostile environments, reduce the human and program costs for agencies and their staff operating under extreme workplace hazards, and promote a robust security management culture among mid- to senior level professionals of aid agencies.



7bis Avenue de la Paix
P.O. Box 1295
CH-1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Phone: + 41 (0)22 906 1600
Fax: + 41 (0)22 906 1649
E-mail: info.smi@gcsp.ch
Website: www.security-management-initiative.org



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