

# Emergency Healthcare in Insecure Settings



**READY to go**  
Mobile Guide

Learn how to implement appropriate security risk management measures to protect healthcare responders and communities during a public health emergency.



## Security Challenges

# Security Challenges in Public Health Emergencies

When communicable or infectious disease outbreaks occur, national public healthcare workers and sometimes international health actors are involved in the response which can place a major strain on local health resources and facilities. When a public health emergency occurs in insecure settings or conflict-affected areas, there can also be critical security challenges that impact healthcare workers, communities receiving health services, and local facilities. These security challenges can jeopardize the effectiveness of the health response and negatively impact the control of the disease.

- Insecurity due to ongoing conflict and the presence of non-state armed groups.
- Community resistance due to mistrust of the response and response actors.
- Heightened risk of attacks on healthcare workers.
- Insecurity in the form of arson attacks on healthcare facilities.



# Security Risk Management

Security risk management refers to the day-to-day management of security risks. Effective security risk management can address operational challenges that impede healthcare responders' access to communities in need. Public health emergency actors are encouraged to follow a security risk management process to improve the overall effectiveness of the response. This process includes identifying risks and implementing mitigation measures to ensure the security of healthcare workers and safe access to affected communities.

## Analyze the Context

Perform a contextual analysis and map the actors in the operational area.

## Assess Risks

Conduct a risk assessment to identify potential risks response actors may face in the operational area.

## Identify Risk Management Measures

Determine risk management measures to mitigate identified risks that will:

- **Prevent risks from occurring** by planning both the health intervention and an effective security risk strategy.
- **Reduce the likelihood of risks occurring** by anticipating security challenges and ensuring good communication.
- **Reduce the impact should an event occur** by providing care and support to healthcare workers and their families.

## Develop a Security Plan

Perform a contextual analysis and map the actors in the operational area.

## Manage Security Incident Information

Implement a security incident information management system in which security incidents are reported, analyzed, and used to inform and improve security risk management measures.



# Security Strategies in Public Health Emergencies

When a public health emergency occurs in insecure environments, health actors are encouraged to adopt an ACCEPTANCE approach or strategy to security which is employed in complex humanitarian emergencies.

**Acceptance** is a risk management strategy that aims at reducing threats posed by external actors through the building of relationships with local communities and other stakeholders to gain their **consent** for healthcare interventions.

It is critical that health responders adapt their security strategy appropriately to the specific context and are aware that their behavior and approach will impact future efforts to develop community acceptance.

An acceptance approach will:

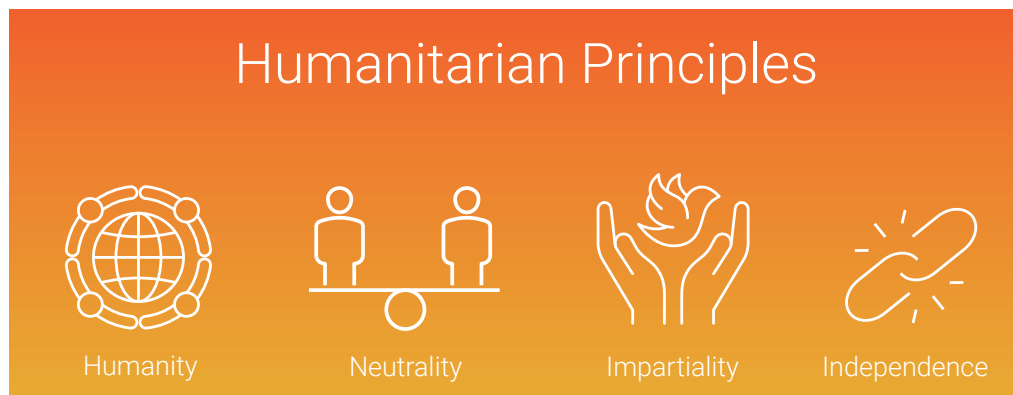
- Build a safe operating environment.
- Foster local trust and ownership of the response.
- Gain the approval, consent, and cooperation of communities, local authorities, and other stakeholders.
- Increase healthcare responders' access to affected communities.
- Effectively manage staff security.



# Applying Humanitarian Principles in the Health Response

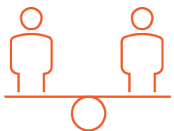
The international medical profession is constantly improving protocols for preventing and managing dangerous communicable diseases. When public healthcare responders apply these protocols in insecure environments, it is critical that they frame the response according to core humanitarian principles and adapt operations appropriately for territories where state authority is limited.

By adhering to core humanitarian principles during the health response, healthcare workers will reassure local communities about the purpose of response activities and obtain community and other stakeholders' acceptance of their presence in the area. Failure to do so can negatively impact other humanitarian efforts in the area and compromise staff and civilian security.



## **Humanity**

Alleviate human suffering wherever it is found; protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.



## **Neutrality**

Do not favor any side in an armed conflict or other dispute.



## **Impartiality**

Provide interventions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination.



## **Independence**

Be autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives of actors in the operating area.





## Non-State Actors

### Security Challenges with Non-State Actors

The presence of non-state armed groups in the operating areas of a public health emergency response can present critical security challenges, including increased tension, violence, and attacks on civilians, healthcare workers, and medical facilities. Boundaries between armed groups can be fluid and motives for attacks are not always clear. These heightened security challenges create access difficulties to affected communities, place healthcare workers at risk, and impact the effectiveness of the health response.

#### Understanding Armed Groups

During the health response, armed groups and non-state actors may:

- Feel threatened by the sudden presence of public health workers and respond with violence.
- Have economic interests to sustain themselves that conflict with health response activities.
- Experience increased tension and competition with other armed groups that is triggered by the presence of outside healthcare workers.
- Have strong ties to local communities and share perceptions that the health crisis was artificially created to profit elites.

#### Anticipating Insecurity

During the health response, armed groups, soldiers, and non-state actors may commit:

- Criminal acts (example: looting medical equipment and medicine to supply the medical needs of armed groups).
- Attacks on civilians and healthcare facilities (example: attacks targeting a whole town result in attacks on healthcare workers and looting of healthcare facilities).
- Attacks directly targeting healthcare workers or facilities (examples: burning down of facilities, abducting, killing healthcare workers).

# Security Strategies for Non-State Actors

Public health emergency actors working in areas where non-state actors are present are encouraged to adopt an **acceptance-based security strategy**, whenever possible.

An acceptance approach can:

- Facilitate access to communities.
- Encourage non-state armed groups to accept the presence and work of healthcare responders.
- Advocate for armed groups to provide constructive support.
- Encourage non-state armed groups to intervene with local communities on behalf of response actors.



# Security Risk Management Measures for Non-state Actors

Health actors are encouraged to consider the following when developing acceptance-based security risk measures to address threats from non-state armed groups during a public health emergency.

## **Develop Acceptance**

- Adhere to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
- Develop strategic partnerships and coordinate with other actors with experience in the area.
- Be aware of how public health emergency activities are perceived by different non-state armed groups and adopt a strategy to proactively influence these perceptions.
- Avoid directly involving armed groups/actors who are not perceived as neutral in the health response.
- Be aware of actions that may appear biased towards one group that could aggravate a volatile situation.
- Avoid actions that could be perceived as profiting from the delivery of healthcare services.
- Avoid using armed escorts in contexts where this could create distrust and lead to increased security risks.
- If non-state actor groups are included on designated 'terrorist group lists', consult with relevant state authorities on how to maintain neutrality and independence to avoid prosecution for 'aiding terrorist networks'.

## **Promote Effective Communication**

- Clearly define and communicate the vision, objectives, and priorities of the health intervention to armed groups.
- Be transparent about funding sources.
- Ensure that the response teams include staff who are able to communicate and negotiate with armed groups.
- Maintain transparency and open dialogue with non-state armed groups to reassure them that healthcare workers are not spying or trying to undermine their authority in the area, especially with multiple rival groups.
- Practice effective outreach and communication to ensure public health messages are adhered to by armed groups.

## **Learn from Security Incidents**

Use a security incident information management system to record and learn from security incidents involving armed groups. This will provide insight and support ongoing context analysis and risk assessments to inform future engagement with armed groups in the area. Share information and key findings with other response efforts and actors in the area.





## Community Relations

### Security Challenges in Communities

Public health emergency interventions depend on the active participation and cooperation of the community. Communities in insecure settings or affected by conflict can be very distrustful and resist public health interventions in ways that can create security challenges for both the community and healthcare workers. These challenges will consequently limit the overall effectiveness of the health response.

- ✓ Widespread community mistrust and resistance to outside help can hinder efforts to contain the spread of the disease.
- ✓ Misinformation can cause resistance and acts of aggression against healthcare workers.  
Common views may include:
  - Treatments or vaccinations are dangerous.
  - The outbreak was fabricated to further destabilize the region.
  - Response activities are designed to benefit particular groups such as business-owning local elites.
- ✓ Communities are resentful when the emergency response:
  - Enforces social distancing measures that interfere with caring for the sick or traditional burial rites for the deceased.
  - Reduces access to primary healthcare for children, pregnant women, or people with chronic illnesses.
- ✓ Fearful and stressed community members may threaten or assault healthcare staff.
- ✓ Intimidation, threats, and violence against healthcare workers can increase during periods of intensified intervention efforts following a surge in reported cases.
- ✓ Violence and threats affect healthcare staff wellbeing and their ability to provide care. This can also result in staff shortages.



## Security Strategies for Communities

Local communities can be transformed into proactive partners in a public health emergency response. Health actors need to adapt their response efforts to effectively navigate through the complexities of different communities with diverse customs, circumstances, and experiences with prolonged conflict and poverty.

During a public health emergency, it is essential to adopt an **acceptance approach** that places a strong focus on the local community as an active response partner. Approval, acceptance, and consent from the community will improve access and ensure the security of healthcare workers and community members receiving care.



# Security Risk Management Measures for Communities

In a public health emergency, health actors are encouraged to consider the following community engagement activities when developing their security plans and implementing security measures.

- ✓ Adapt the health response intervention to the community.
- ✓ Hold focus groups and information meetings where local communities can express their opinions and concerns. Use their feedback to inform programmatic and security risk management decisions.
- ✓ Engage local leaders as key intermediaries in the response.
- ✓ Adapt local rituals and cultural norms, especially regarding burials, to the needs of the health response in a way that will help communities grieve and avoid additional trauma.
- ✓ Train response staff to effectively conduct community outreach and communicate using non-specialized language to build acceptance of and trust in health actors' work.
- ✓ Adapt information campaigns to local linguistic and social contexts.
- ✓ In areas affected by conflict, avoid using terminology such as 'fighting' and 'combatting' disease.
- ✓ Keep messages consistent and communicate them clearly.



## Attacks on Healthcare Workers

### Security Challenges for Healthcare Workers

During a public health emergency response in secure environments, there can be a heightened risk of serious harm to healthcare workers such as abductions, killings, and sexual violence. Abductions and killings often occur while individuals travel to and from intervention sites, at healthcare facilities, or during wider assaults on the area. Fear of abductions and killings affects healthcare workers' mental health and wellbeing and increases their levels of stress at work.

The exact reasons for abductions and killings will vary, however, some may be motivated by community or other stakeholders' mistrust of and resentment towards response actors, or are part of a larger strategy to undermine response activities for political, economic, or other reasons.





# Security Risk Management Measures for Healthcare Workers

Responding to an abduction, killing, or the sexual violence of healthcare workers is a very sensitive and complex process that requires professional intervention and the involvement of experienced and trained individuals. Health actors should be aware that each incident will be different and will require a unique response. When a public health emergency occurs in insecure environments, response actors should include the risk of attacks on healthcare workers in the form of abductions, killings, and sexual violence in their security plans and take the following steps, as appropriate.

## Preventing and Preparing for Attacks

- Conduct a contextual analysis and map local actors to understand the risk of abduction, killing, or sexual violence and who may be a target.
- Develop a crisis management plan that clarifies the crisis management structure, policies, and procedures to be followed in the event and aftermath of an attack or incident. Include specific policies on how to respond to sexual violence and abuse.
- Assemble a crisis or incident management team to coordinate and provide emergency medical care and psychological support for affected staff and patients in the event of an attack.
- Assign responsibilities and train staff to contact and liaise with family members of affected individuals, coordinate the relocation and/or evacuation of staff, manage media and communications, and oversee any issues relating to the incident.
- Build positive relationships with local stakeholders to prevent violent attacks and obtain their support following an attack or incident. For example, soliciting their help to find abducted healthcare workers or identify perpetrators.

## Responding to Incidents

- Manage an incident continuously from the initial response to the incident's resolution and closure.
- Oversee post-incident activities including medical and psychological support for survivors and their families, and processes of investigation.
- **Abductions:** Seek professional advice.
- **Killings or murder:** Ensure appropriate follow-up investigation and legal action.
- **Sexual violence and abuse:**
  - Ensure survivors receive immediate medical response within 24 hours and other key procedures within 72 hours.
  - Be aware that reporting sexual violence can be deeply distressing for survivors.
  - Ensure survivors have control over key decisions throughout the process.
  - Provide survivor-centered support to survivors who may face shame and stigma after the incident.





## Arson Attacks

### Security Strategies for Arson Attacks

In certain parts of the world, arson attacks are a common security threat for health facilities and staff during a public health emergency. The exact reasons for arson attacks on health facilities are unclear, but they can sometimes be caused by community members' or other stakeholders' mistrust of and resentment towards response actors, or are part of a larger strategy by particular stakeholders to undermine response activities for political, economic, or other reasons.

Preventing such attacks requires effective communication and engagement with potential perpetrators, including local communities and non-state armed groups. When this type of interaction may not be possible, health actors are encouraged to:

- Adopt an acceptance approach and engage in activities that will improve local community and other stakeholder acceptance of and consent to healthcare responders' presence and work.
- Implement protection measures to reduce the vulnerability of health centers and other response facilities to arson attacks.



# Security Risk Management Measures for Arson Attacks

In areas with heightened risks of arson attacks, public health emergency actors are encouraged to develop security plans and implement security measures to prepare for and respond to arson attacks on health facilities.

- ✓ Conduct a contextual analysis and map local actors to determine the risk of attacks on health facilities in the area.
- ✓ Develop a crisis management plan that clarifies the crisis management structure, policies, and procedures to be followed in the event and aftermath of an arson attack.
- ✓ Assemble a crisis or incident management team to coordinate and provide emergency medical care and psychological support for affected staff and patients in the event of an attack.
- ✓ Assign responsibilities and train staff to contact and liaise with family members of affected individuals, coordinate the relocation and/or evacuation of staff, manage media and communications, and oversee any issues relating to the incident.
- ✓ Appoint a fire warden(s) to develop and implement an evacuation plan.
- ✓ Identify an appropriate and secure alternative location to house patients and staff.
- ✓ Consider taking out insurance policies for arson and fire damage.
- ✓ Conduct regular inspection, monitoring, and maintenance of the site and fire extinguishing system.
- ✓ Carry out fire evacuation and equipment training for staff, including regular drills for accessing primary and secondary safe areas.
- ✓ Provide first-aid supplies to treat burns and train staff on how to use these supplies.
- ✓ Engage and manage relations with local agencies (fire fighters, security forces) to better understand their capacity for intervention.
- ✓ Assess the impact of the organization's withdrawal following a severe attack. Develop an appropriate and secure exit strategy for program closure or temporary withdrawal following a severe arson attack.