

## **ACTIVIST TRAINING MANUAL: FIELD INVESTIGATIONS**

### **The aims of this chapter**

This chapter of the training manual is designed to provide an overview and introduction to some of the issues that arise when embarking on field research. It should be read in conjunction with the other sections of the Manual: field research can be an essential and integral aspect of your overall strategy.

This chapter is divided into seven key sections:

### **Section 1. The value of field research**

### **Section 2. Logistics & planning**

- 2.1 Preliminary planning
- 2.2 Documentation (visas, permits, permissions)
- 2.3 Equipment (comms, safety, medical)
- 2.4 Planning comms security
- 2.5 COVID-19 precautions

### **Section 3. What to document and why**

### **Section 4. Personal safety and risk assessment**

- 4.1 The fundamentals
- 4.2 Avoiding/diffusing conflict in sensitive areas
- 4.3 Filming in sensitive locations
- 4.4 Driving

### **Section 5. Ethics and accuracy**

- 5.1 Informed consent and protection of sources
- 5.2 Verification and accuracy

### **Section 6. Evidence gathering techniques**

### **Section 7. Data security**

## SECTION 1. THE VALUE OF FIELD RESEARCH

Field research is an extremely valuable way to gather new information and documentation – helping to make your issue strong and credible. It is one way to bring your issue to life and reflect the reality, in situ, of how problems are affecting people and the environment.

So much information is now available on the internet that there can be a temptation to limit research to existing publications, but in doing so researchers are missing a highly valuable source of new information, facts, ideas and opinions.

■ Be prepared for each trip to raise new ideas, suggestions and locations that you may want to cover in the future. As your strategy unfolds you will probably have to make return trips to gather new information and keep your message up-to-date.

Local people close to the source of a problem, workers, government employees and others (NGOs, experts etc) can all provide essential information upon which you can base a campaign. Field research can, in many situations, be the best – sometimes the only – way to gather new visual materials (film and photos) that provide evidence of a problem and bring your issue to life.

### **Planning**

Your field research should be well-planned:

- Why do you believe the research to be necessary?
- What information do you want to gather/what are you trying to illustrate?
- How can you use this information and how will it fit into your overall campaign strategy?
- Have you agreed a budget for your field research?
- Have your colleagues and collaborators been consulted and lent their support to your field plans?
- How much time will the field work take and who will do it - remember that it can be very difficult to get exactly the right materials in one or even several field trips. Can you return to the same location or make additional trips to new locations over an extended period of time?

## SECTION 2: LOGISTICS & PLANNING

### 2.1 Preliminary planning

- What are your campaign objectives? What is the issue that you want to document/raise awareness for/expose?
- Map out your story: who, what, where, when, why? How will you document and present the answers to each of these questions?
- What information is already available to you? Desk-based and background research is key - collect news articles, clippings, reports, public/government statistics, other resources on the issue that you want to cover so that you have a firm knowledge base and background understanding for the subsequent investigation.
- How can you use other data (such as trade or sales data) to better understand the issue, individuals and organisations you are investigating? Is there other publicly available data that could be useful e.g. Google Earth, UN Comtrade, Global Forest Watch, Exact Earth?
- Has the issue already been documented by other organisations or news outlets in the past? Have you spoken to them to learn about their experiences operating in the area/sector? Note: Are there safety/security concerns to factor in when discussing the topic with other individuals or organisations?
- Do you need to identify a local partner organisation or fixer who will assist you with the investigation?
- Define the scope of your investigation, with outputs listed in order of likelihood of documentation/obtaining evidence and risk, taking into account security risks including potential threats (police, military, authorities) and situational risks (working in hostile environments, on boats).

OUTPUT	LIKELIHOOD OF DOCUMENTATION	RISKS

- With the assistance of your local partners or “fixer”, map out key locations for collecting footage, photographs, activities, or testimony relevant to your investigation and campaign objectives.

- When considering locations, it is important to consider: distances and travel time between locations, access (are these locations publicly accessible? Do you need permission? Are they within sensitive areas that might restrict your presence there or filming/use of drones and other equipment such as GPS?).
- Carefully plan your schedule to ensure that you can 1) collect necessary material/evidence to complete your objectives, 2) feasibly and safely travel between locations, 3) leave sensible time buffers that allow you to accommodate unexpected events or diversions.
- Carefully plan out your budget based on your predicted schedule, logistics and living costs. You should include contingency funds to accommodate additional accommodation, fuel, boat rental, etc.

## **2.2 Documentation (visas, permits, permissions)**

- For investigative work, you may wish to forgo requesting permissions or permits to avoid scrutiny from authorities. This should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- If you are working *with* the government or if it would not raise suspicion, it may be advantageous to obtain official permissions and filming permits. In some cases it may be necessary (e.g. refugee camps, restricted areas).
- If necessary, make sure you obtain permits and permissions well in advance. Always carry a copy of your ID, permits (if you have them) and travel/health insurance.
- Check for special permissions necessary for drones or specialist camera equipment - For instance, are drones legal where you are going? You might risk having the equipment confiscated if you do not have the correct permissions.

## **2.3 Equipment (comms, safety, medical)**

- Make sure you have comms and medical kit with you and easily accessible at all times.
- Make sure you have reliable mobile connectivity either through a local SIM card or roaming package. Check well in advance how easy it is to get a local SIM card. For instance in certain countries it is very difficult for non-residents to even acquire a local SIM card.
- Make sure that someone knows where you are and has contact details for you while in the field. This should include information about your daily itinerary, what town you are staying in and what hotel you are in.
- See box on safety at sea

### **Safety at sea**

- Make sure you have a life jacket, fully stocked at-sea grab bag, trauma pack and fully charged satphone (if you're going out beyond mobile range) or EPIRB.
- Check the weather at regular intervals before you set out and agree full and comprehensive at-sea check in protocols (see risk assessment).
- Ensure the boat is sea-worthy and in good working order (preferably with an independent fuel line and backup engine).
- Make sure the captain is competent, knows the area well and is not under the influence of alcohol. Ask the captain to wear the kill cord.
- Be sure to take a hat or protection from the elements if you plan on staying at sea for prolonged periods of time. Stay hydrated.

### **2.4 Planning comms security (proton mail, signal etc)**

- Always use secure, end-to-end encrypted comms.
- Password protect your laptop and all sensitive documents. In the event your laptop is confiscated, what is accessible?
- Who knows where you are? Make sure you have completed a full risk assessment and have adequate check in procedures in place.
- You may want to turn on location sharing on your phone (or via WhatsApp) so someone can monitor you.

### **2.5 COVID-19 precautions**

- Determine well in advance whether or not you are able to travel to the intended country, region or province due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.
- Determine whether or not there are quarantine protocols for arriving passengers and whether these are blanket protocols or selective depending on country of origin.
- Determine whether or not there are domestic travel restrictions for foreigners due to COVID-19 lockdowns. At the time of writing (June 2020) many countries around the world had introduced domestic travel restrictions for foreigners to prevent inter-regional or inter-provincial transmission of the virus.
- Ensure you have sufficient and appropriate/required personal protection equipment (PPE) for travel or operations in certain countries. For example, several countries have mandated that members of the public wear face coverings.

Establish investigation protocols for limiting potential exposure to the virus both for yourself, your team, your local partners or fixers and potential interviewees or informants. These might include:

1. Wearing a face covering when interacting with people;
2. Not shaking hands with other people;
3. Meeting people in outdoors, open environments;
4. Staying at least 1.5m away from other people;
5. Ensuring you, your team and local partners/fixers exercise hygiene practices to limit virus exposure and transmission.
6. Not sharing water bottles, open containers, food items with other people;
7. Minimising the sharing of equipment amongst members of the team;

### SECTION 3: WHAT TO DOCUMENT AND WHY

Understanding what to document and the evidence required to run a successful investigation is critical. Again, consider who, what, where, when, why? You need evidence of wrongdoing to build your campaign, and this can take many forms:

- First-hand documentation of an incident (potentially but not necessarily criminal) taking place (e.g. a trawler fishing illegally in a protected area, dangerous pesticides being used by untrained labourers, rainforest being cleared)
- Testimony from key actors: victims or their families, witnesses, experts
- Second-hand documentary evidence - did witnesses or victims have documentation on their phones? Video, photos, audio, location data?
- Photographic evidence gathered after the fact, such as documentation of victim injuries, environmental impacts (chemical spill, damaged reef, cleared forest, etc)
- Physical evidence, such as samples from waterways or soil, damaged nets, etc
- Documents - in most cases, there is a paper trail. Can you access police reports, government records, registration documents, company information, etc?
- Open source evidence, such as media reports, social media posts, reports from other organisations (NGOs for example) governmental bodies or academic institutions.
- Evidence of trade links to companies and states to which resources are ultimately sold. This could range from documents issued by the company, government or ports or photographs of containers (including their identifying code) that resources are being loaded onto.

Throughout the process, meticulous note-taking is critical. Be sure to record dates, locations (especially GPS coordinates if you are in isolated, rural environments), names and details of contacts. You can say these aloud before takes if you are shooting video. Try to expand on field notes in a subsequent trip report as quickly as possible after you return from the investigation so that the information is still fresh in your mind.

Remember that by documenting an incident or issue, you are potentially putting yourself, the people you film or photograph, and the distributor(s) at risk if their identities are revealed. Consider this at every stage of your investigation.

## SECTION 4: PERSONAL SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT

### 4.1 The fundamentals

Ensure you fill out a risk assessment form in full well in advance of the investigation. This includes sections on local contact numbers and relevant authorities where applicable.

Plan your emergency protocols to establish:

- 1) What time is your daily check-in time? And with who?
- 2) What message platform will you use to relay this message? Is it secure and reliable?
- 3) Who knows where you are? Do they know your route and who you are with?
- 4) What is the procedure if you miss the check-in? Who do they call and in what order?

### 4.1 Avoiding/diffusing conflict in sensitive areas

- Be vigilant and try to continuously 'read' situations and environments while you are in the field and act accordingly - the safety of you, your sources and your team are the priority.
- Note the presence and position of law enforcement, security guards, CCTV, and unusually inquisitive/suspicious/hostile individuals.
- Keep cameras and other equipment hidden as much as possible. Avoid openly photographing law enforcement, military personnel or other potentially hostile targets.
- Get your shots and get out - don't hang around for longer than you need to.
- In closed areas such as ports, note entry and exit points as well as additional escape routes.
- Brief your driver to park in an easy to find spot, to face in the direction of the exit, and **to stay near the car** in order to leave hastily if necessary.
- Brief your fixer/local associate to read situations continuously and to notify you **immediately** if they sense hostility or suspicion. Make sure that your fixer stays close to you when inside sensitive areas so that they can quickly notify you of potential dangers.

## Filming in sensitive locations

If you're planning to shoot in a sensitive location (e.g. port, processing facility, company HQ, palm oil refinery, etc) or you're concerned about looking suspicious, think carefully about ways in which you can avoid attracting attention.

- Can you shoot covertly, maybe from inside a car or from a distance? Tinted windows are useful. A tripod can be setup from the back seat if you are using a long lens
- Can you pass as a tourist? Using an SLR will attract less attention. Shoot everything (not just the fish/vessel/person you're interested in) to avoid suspicion. What are you wearing? Do you look like a tourist?
- Can you use a drone to get the shot? If there is adequate background noise on the ground, get low to capture detail (the noise of the drone will be obscured). Hover at a safe altitude and allow the action to continue through the shot (i.e. you do not need to be moving all the time)

## Driving

Travelling by road is inherently dangerous and should be taken seriously. If you are renting a car, specify that:

- 1) the car has seat belts **for all passengers**,
- 2) the car is of sufficient quality and reliability,
- 3) car has tinted windows (if necessary),
- 4) the driver has a valid driving license and either she/he or the car is properly insured,
- 5) the driver is **sensible** and **trusted**.

The driver should not use the phone while driving. If he/she needs to make a call, you should stop. **All** passengers should wear seatbelts.

## SECTION 5: ETHICS AND ACCURACY

### 4.2 Informed consent and protection of sources

Your first priority is to ensure that sources will not come to any harm because they have interacted with you. Before you begin a recorded interview, explain to your sources who you are, what your objectives are and what you will be using the information they give you for. This is **informed consent**.

Before shooting an interview, offer your source anonymity (obscure face, distort voice) and ask them to read and sign a release form if they're comfortable with the terms. If the



interviewee is unable to read or write you can record you or your translator reading the release form to them and asking them to articulate their responses verbally.

If you are filming an anonymous interview:

1. Be sure that you have sufficiently protected the interviewee's identity. Do they have jewellery, tattoos, scars or injuries that might reveal their identity?
2. Be sure that there are no clues in the background of your interview shot that might reveal the interviewee's identity. This could include signposts, local landmarks or vehicle registration details. This applies to supplementary footage that you might collect before or after the interview - If in doubt, leave it out.

### **4.3 Verification and accuracy**

The assertions you make in your final outputs (reports, films, briefings) need to be accurate and based on firm evidence that you can cite. Don't allow your conception of what the story *should* or *would* be to steer your conclusions. Be prepared to let the evidence guide and change the story.

Try to corroborate allegations made by victims or witnesses with others who might have been present. For example, if a fisher alleges that they were assaulted while working, can you track down other crew members on board who might be able to substantiate this claim and add details?

Is your evidence robust under scrutiny? Those you are accusing may seek to discredit you or your data. Are there ways you can anticipate these responses and counter them? E.g. using a geo-tagged camera to show that the crime you witnessed took place where you allege.

#### **Prove your 'facts'**

When presenting your research consider what makes information a 'fact'. How do you really know that an event or problem is occurring. For example, what proof is there that fish species are declining or that a particular company, individual or agency is responsible for this decline?

Check your facts and be able to back them up with credible referenced sources, visual and other evidence.

Interviews (see below) and personal accounts should be verified with more than one source if possible and appropriate. Just because someone tells you something is true, doesn't mean that it is necessarily true or correct.

Before your information is published request colleagues and independent authoritative sources to review it critically and question how you know that your 'facts' are really facts. Try to be objective – what would other people think about your information?

Take time to discuss with colleagues the questions that may be posed to you when your information is published. What additional information would a journalist, a government official, agency staff or other NGOs want to know. How would you convince them that your information is reliable?

▣ Unreasonable bias in your published materials will undermine your credibility with your potential supporters, be it government, international agencies, the public and NGOs.

## SECTION 6: EVIDENCE GATHERING TECHNIQUES

### Interviews

**You must always make sure everyone you interview can and is giving you informed consent – if you are not sure, take time, explain, listen and follow a set procedure. If in doubt you cannot use the material.**

Interviews are essential to any authoritative and substantiated report or film. However, interviewing someone is not a simple process and getting it right can be difficult.

The key to good interviews is knowing what information you are seeking – what added value will your interviews give to your campaign? Be prepared – note down some initial questions and consider the objective of the interview. Who are you meeting and what is it that you want to find out from them? Do you want to talk generally about an issue and note the statements of interest, or do you have a particular question that you want answered?

Think on your feet – you may only have one chance to interview the person and you must carefully listen to and consider their answer. Does it spark another range of issues that you need to pursue?

Think how you can coax more information out of your interviewee and how to deal with negative answers. For example, they may not know who owns a company that is causing problems, but have they tried to find out and is there a reason why the information is unavailable?

### Conducting interviews

Before beginning your interview, ensure that the interviewee is fully aware of why you are interviewing them and where you will use the information. It is one thing to talk casually to

someone about their situation, it is quite another to publish their names and information in a public document or video without their consent.

Make your interviewee feel relaxed and let the conversation flow as naturally as possible – stick with it, a 30-minute filmed interview may have a few seconds or minutes of useful information. But, be clear in your objective, stick to the subject and return to it if necessary. Try not to ask ‘leading questions’ – the interview should be guided by you – but take care not to put words into your interviewee’s mouth – **you want to establish what they think or know, not what they think you may want to hear.**

Most interviews can be recorded using a field notebook but it can be far easier – particularly for lengthy interviews or where you want a visual or audio record – to use a voice recorder or a video camera. Collecting spoken words with visual images is one of the most valuable tools for a researcher. They lend interest and can provide crucial evidence and first-hand accounts of relevant issues. Having a taped interview can be invaluable in refuting contrary claims – they are more valuable than written accounts alone.

Remember that unless you need to protect anonymity, whenever you record an interview you should start by asking the person their name, who they are and where the interview is taking place. You can also say a few words to your camera or tape recorder to note locations, events and other relevant information – your audio or video record can be an invaluable means to personalise the issue and gain publicity and support.

▣ Immediately after conducting the interview, always check your notes, or film to check you have what you want – this can save time and money!

▣ REMEMBER whenever you record an interview you should start by asking the person their name, who they are and where the interview is taking place. **BE SURE TO PROTECT ANONYMITY WHENEVER THERE IS RISK OR CONCERN.**

### **Gathering authoritative information – check your sources**

Who can you trust? Why do you trust them? Unless you need to protect their identity, try and establish your interviewee’s credentials – why are you interviewing them rather than someone else. Try to include brief details such as:

- How long they have lived or worked in the area?
- What is their position in a company, the government or community?

## **Eyewitness documentation**

There may be time when sources are able to provide documentation of their own to assist your investigation and support their claims. Be sceptical - where was the documentation sourced from? What is the source's motivation in handing it over to you? Can you verify it (e.g. if it is visual documentation, can you access the metadata)? Can you tell if it has been edited or doctored in any way?

## **Location scouting and preparation**

Map out investigation locations prior to arrival so that you have a good idea of where key target locations and entry and exit points are. These will make it easier to achieve investigation goals and objectives as well as keep you safe.

Use Google Maps or other services to establish vantage points and shooting locations. Do you have line of sight from across a river for example that might be safer or less exposed?

As part of investigation preparation, discuss with your fixer or translator whether or not you require a cover story that can divert suspicion if people ask questions about your presence. Could you pose as researchers or students for example?

Try to keep your cover story as believable and as close to the truth as possible so as to hold up against scrutiny or interrogation. Be sure to go over this cover story with the fixer/translator and **full** team well in advance of your arrival into the sensitive location.

## **Vehicular Surveillance:**

Before beginning surveillance operations ensure that the car is fully fuelled and there are adequate provisions for long drives. You may not be able to stop once the surveillance operation begins.

If you are following a target don't get boxed in - keep your distance during surveillance operations (and at least one car's length apart when stationary so you can pull away if necessary). If a target stops by the side of the road or pulls into a facility and you are too close to stop at a reasonable distance, **do not stop immediately near to the target**. Continue driving at a normal speed and then turn around when safe to do so/when out of view.

Take photos as appropriate during the surveillance operation so that you can log and 'timestamp' the target's journey; i.e. following a truck from a port to a factory.

You can also deploy remote trackers that can be attached to metallic surfaces. These are useful for tracking multiple targets at the same time, especially if you have limited personnel resources, or if you are tracking targets over large distances. Attach trackers as discreetly as possible (i.e. in light fixtures/under truck fenders or bumpers noting however, that enclosed locations on vehicles might restrict the strength of the tracker signal).

**Only use trackers if it is absolutely safe to do so** (i.e. at night and when the target vehicle is unoccupied). **NB:** Remote trackers often require local SIM cards which may stop working if targets travel across country borders, beyond coastal GPRS towers.

### Counter-surveillance

Be vigilant and keep a close eye on your surroundings and potential threats or vehicles that may be following you. Get to know the local area using maps, Google Maps, and other services so that you can identify potential exit or escape routes.

There are a range of tactics to check if someone is tailing you; increase your speed, slow down, take 3 right turns, 'stall' at a green light, stop suddenly by the side of the road. If you suspect someone is following you:

- 1) follow your emergency contact protocols
- 2) note down the vehicle/driver description and number plate and communicate this to your emergency contact - **do not take a photo** of the suspect vehicle unless you are certain they will not see the camera
- 3) abort the immediate investigation
- 4) drive to a local police station if you suspect the threat to be 3rd party and not law enforcement
- 5) do not drive back to your hotel unless the situation has changed or if you are **absolutely certain** you are no longer being followed.

### SECTION 7: DATA SECURITY

Data security is critical for protecting sources and ensuring the integrity of your footage and stills.

- Backup cards from all cameras at the end of every day in the correct format
- Always backup to two hard drives where possible



- Make sure hard drives are password protected
- Backup from card to drive every time to avoid corrupt files being duplicated (i.e. don't copy from one drive to another)
- Split the drives between locations if possible