

F. Reliability of sources and validity of information

Ideally, all data collected, even if they constitute contextual information, shall be checked and verified.

This means that HROs have to:

- Assess the credibility and reliability of every **source of information**;
- Evaluate carefully all **information** for its relevance, accuracy, validity, completeness and meaning, to ensure the quality of any subsequent analysis.

1 Reliability and credibility of sources of information

Every source of information should not be automatically dismissed or accepted by HROs, but rather **be evaluated independently for its reliability** (i.e., trustworthiness) **and credibility** (i.e., capability of being believed). In fact, even a biased source may have important and relevant information, while a trusted source may unknowingly provide inaccurate information or a mistaken analysis.

To evaluate a source of information properly, HROs should **find out the origin of the information and how their contact came to possess it**, as very often the contact may have received it from someone else. The closer HROs get to the original source of information, the better they can assess its validity or accuracy.

Evaluating a source also implies an **assessment over time of how reliable a contact is in passing on original information without adding a personal interpretation**.

HROs should also try to understand the **motivation of a particular contact to provide information**, since it could have an effect on how the field presence will use the information received and deal with the contact in the future. Especially when the information is unsolicited, HROs should look for the reasons why the contact is sharing the information with them and be aware of any expectations the contact may have on the use of such data. This is crucial to ensure that contacts are not trying to further their own purposes in a way that may compromise the analysis and information gathering by the field presence.

HROs should be aware that there is always a risk that institutions and individuals across the political spectrum will try to manipulate the field presence through the information they pass on or withhold. Sometimes reports of human rights violations may be exaggerated because a group feels isolated and is acutely in need of support. In other cases, information from one organization or group may be intended to delegitimize another.

The more nuanced the mapping that the field presence undertakes of the different actors and organizations and their objectives and motivations, the easier it will be to recognize attempts at manipulation and misinformation.



In developing and using contacts, HROs should:

- Assess their perspective and competence;
- Identify (ideally) at least some contacts who have the least apparent bias vis-à-vis the issue at hand (for example, a personal political agenda, strong cultural beliefs), although it is sometimes impossible for good reason;
- In their evaluation of contacts, understand and compensate for any bias;
- Identify sources from different political, ethnic, religious and other groups – even if they are known to be biased – since it contributes to the perception that the HROs and the field presence are impartial.

2 Relevance and validity of the information gathered

HROs should ensure that the validity and relevance of the **information gathered** are tested: this means developing at least **a prima facie analysis of the information, based on the degree of relevance** (i.e., importance), **veracity** (i.e., truth), **accuracy** (i.e., precision) and the **methodology used to gather it**.

A commonly applied test of *validity* is to **assess whether the information is logical in itself or to compare it with other known facts**, according to the commonly applied principle that **information should be consistent with material collected from at least three independent sources**.

Validity can also be assessed by the **degree to which a particular piece of information fits in with other materials which have been amassed**. Hence, HROs must consider not only the specific piece of information gathered, but also their sense of whether all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle put together actually yield a credible story.

In their analysis of information, HROs should be careful to distinguish between the validity of the information and the credibility of the source. Even a credible source can provide inaccurate information and vice versa.

G. Conclusion

Often, information gathering efforts will seem to fall short – there is always a great deal more out there to be learned. A field presence cannot devote all its time to gathering general contextual and broad-based information or it would fail to take action to improve the human rights situation in the country.

The value of gathering information is in guiding and strengthening the impact of corrective action and empowerment. Nevertheless, insufficient or biased information will lead to poor analysis, mistaken strategies and ineffective action. It is a constant dilemma and challenge for the field presence and for HROs to strike a balance so that the human resources devoted to information gathering are sufficient to produce good analysis and strategy, but not so excessive as to inhibit or substitute for corrective action and empowerment activities.