

**Claiming Spaces: Tactical Tools for Burundian Human Rights Defenders
Mbarara, Uganda, 4-6 November 2024
Final Communiqué**

1. DefendDefenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project), in collaboration with the Burundian Human Rights Defenders Coalition (CBDDH), organised the 14th edition of its annual workshop, “Claiming Spaces: Tactical Tools for Human Rights Defenders,” from 4 to 6 November 2024 in Mbarara, Uganda. As the CBDDH is celebrating its tenth anniversary, this edition was dedicated to Burundi.
2. The opening ceremony was facilitated by **Ms. Memory Bandera**, Director of Programs and Administration at DefendDefenders. Ms. Bandera welcomed participants and noted that Claiming Spaces was a moment of celebration as well as DefendDefenders’ annual flagship event, held on a rotating basis across the countries covered by its mandate.
3. Before opening the workshop, **Mr. Joseph Bikanda**, Coordinator of AfricanDefenders, invited each participant to introduce themselves and reminded them of the safety instructions and the working environment.
4. In her welcoming remarks, **Ms. Eulalie Nibizi**, Executive Director and Coordinator of the CBDDH, expressed her gratitude to DefendDefenders for its support to the Coalition. She asked the audience to observe a minute of silence in memory of the Burundian human rights defenders (HRDs) who have been killed in Burundi. She then provided a brief overview of the country’s human rights situation. While the CBDDH was launched in Bujumbura in 2014, most Burundian HRDs are now in exile. This edition of Claiming Spaces was therefore held outside the country. In conclusion, she invited all participants to take advantage of the training and tools offered over the three days.
5. In his opening address, **Mr. Pierre Claver Mbonimpa**, President of the Burundian Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained Persons (APRODH) and one of Burundi’s leading HRDs, recalled that when the CBDDH was created, there were only ten member associations. There are now more. Unfortunately, he added, HRDs are forced to be outside the country, as they are in exile for fear of persecution. He highlighted a positive development, however: human rights associations now include more young people. Mr. Mbonimpa concluded his speech by wishing HRDs much courage and resilience.
6. In a video message, **Mr. Vital Nshimirimana**, President of CBDDH, recalled the human rights crisis that followed the third term of the late President Pierre Nkurunziza. This crisis continues to produce adverse effects in Burundi, and the country faces many challenges. Among them, an unprecedented level of poverty, the manipulation of the upcoming electoral cycle, and the influence of the *Imbonerakure*

militia. Despite the crisis, Burundian HRDs have secured successes thanks to both their resilience and the support provided by DefendDefenders under the leadership of Mr. Hassan Shire.

7. Inviting **Mr. Hassan Shire**, Executive Director of DefendDefenders and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders, to deliver his opening remarks, **Ms. Bandera** recalled that **Mr. Shire** was behind the creation of the first mechanism for the protection of HRDs in Africa, DefendDefenders, after carrying out a study which precisely pointed out the absence of such a mechanism, at the time.
8. At the outset, **Mr. Shire** highlighted that the 2024 edition of Claiming Spaces echoed the creation of the CBDDH, ten years ago in Bujumbura. He paid tribute to the resilience of HRDs and Burundian civil society following the assassination of Ernest Manirumva, Vice-President of the Observatory for the Fight against Corruption and Economic Embezzlement (OLUCOME). With the 2015 crisis, HRDs were forced to go into exile. Noting that exile is not a choice, he highlighted that HRDs did not remain passive; rather, they resisted, learned, and grew. Thanks to their resilience, Burundi remains in the international spotlight for its systematic human rights violations. He wondered how to ensure sustainable peace and security – what could be the trigger that would put Burundi’s democracy, which was promising at the time, back on track? This question should be the driving force behind our reflections about the future of Burundi.
9. **Mr. Shire** expressed the wish that the next edition of Claiming Spaces dedicated to Burundi will take place in the country. Concluding his speech, **Mr. Shire** invited the participants to celebrate the CBDDH’s tenth anniversary. A group photo followed a ceremony during which a cake was cut.
10. At the resumption of work, **Mr. Jérémie Nkuzimana**, DefendDefenders’ Technical Adviser to the CBDDH, presented the results of the CBDDH evaluation. Mr. Nkuzimana presented the main conclusions of his evaluation, the strengths of the coalition and the challenges it faces, as well as the priority avenues for the future.
11. A **roundtable discussion** on the state of civic space in Burundi was then held, providing a comprehensive picture of the situation, ten years after the launch of the CBDDH and nine years after the start of the crisis, triggered in 2015 by former President Pierre Nkurunziza’s bid to run for a controversial third term. The panel discussion was moderated by **Mr. Nicolas Agostini**, DefendDefenders’ Representative to the United Nations. Panelists included **Ms. Eulalie Nibizi**, Executive Director and Coordinator of the CBDDH, **Ms. Anitha Gateretse**, Coordinator of Activities at ACAT-Burundi, Mr. Gordien Niyungeko, Executive Secretary of the Forum for Conscience and Development (FOCODE), and **Mr. Gervais Nibigira**, Vice-President and Program Coordinator at SOS-Torture/Burundi.
12. **Ms. Eulalie Nibizi** started her intervention by recalling the genesis of the current situation in Burundi. Starting from the crisis that began in 2015, she discussed the path of exile that many HRDs were forced to take. She then addressed the repression

of HRDs and criminalization of their work (through arbitrary arrests, detentions and prosecutions), the situation of HRDs in exile, including those in refugee camps, the weakness of Burundian institutions, in particular the National Human Rights Commission (CNIDH) and the authorities' behavior towards HRDs. Finally, she discussed the Burundian government's contempt for the international human rights protection system and its lack of cooperation with UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Burundi.

13. **Mr. Gordien Niyungeko** provided an overview of the situation of civic space in Burundi. He began by proposing a definition of “civic space.” He then discussed the repressive laws (press law, association law, etc.) and restrictions on freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, the increasing pressure on political parties, civil society organisations and the media, and the vaguely defined offences (“undermining the internal security of the State,” “rebellion,” etc.) contained in the country’s legislation and used to silence opposition and civil society voices. Finally, he mentioned the violations committed by the police, security and intelligence services, and the *Imbonerakure* (the youth militia of the ruling CNDD-FDD party). He concluded by denouncing the lack of protection for refugees repatriated to the country.
14. After these two presentations, which addressed the situation of HRDs and civic space, **Mr. Gervais Nibigira** focused his intervention on the 2025 and 2027 elections. The central issue pertained to the political, socio-economic, and regional context in which preparations for the 2025 legislative and 2027 presidential elections are taking place. He thus addressed the major challenges to the holding of democratic, free, and transparent elections (including the problematic provisions of the electoral code, the composition of the electoral commission (CENI), and the obstacles related to the financing of political parties, resulting in the absence of genuine political competition) as well as the impact of the situation of civic space on the political context. He also mentioned the importance of upholding the Arusha Agreement and the role of civil society in exile and in the country during this pre-election period.
15. Finally, **Ms. Anitha Gateretse** discussed the advocacy carried out in relation to Burundi since 2015, both at the international level and at the regional and national levels. Starting from the definitions (of advocacy and lobbying) and from the importance of advocacy to influence political decision-making, she discussed the challenges (notably the decline in the international attention dedicated to Burundi), the importance of data collection to support advocacy, the successes to be celebrated, and the limitations and gaps. As for the victories, she mentioned the work of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (2016-2021) and Special Rapporteur on Burundi (2021-present). She invited HRDs to dedicate efforts not only to UN advocacy but also to regional advocacy, notably at the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). **Mr. Agostini** complemented her points by saluting the involvement of Burundian HRDs, highlighting the recent success at the 57th session of the UN Human Rights Council, where Burundian civil society’s massive presence made it possible to both extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and increase international attention to Burundi.

16. A plenary discussion followed, allowing the panelists' interventions to be supplemented.
17. The afternoon was dedicated to a session on strengthening resilience and well-being, facilitated by **Mr. Karis Moses Oteba**, Senior Protection and Well-being lead at DefendDefenders. Using relaxation techniques and group exercises, Mr. Oteba provided participants with tools to strengthen inner well-being and calm.
18. From 5 to 6 November 2024, Burundian HRDs participated in **capacity-building workshops** focusing on: (i) physical and digital safety; (ii) resource mobilisation; and (iii) monitoring, documentation and reporting on human rights violations. These workshops took the form of small group work. Participants spent time learning from the trainings, sharing experiences and best practices, and building stronger networks.
19. At the end of these three days, **Mr. Bikanda** summarised the timeline of events and the capacity-building workshops. He invited several participants to present their feedback on the various workshops. Regarding resource mobilisation, participants highlighted the additional skills they acquired in terms of fundraising. Regarding monitoring, documentation and reporting on violations, they stressed the importance of the methodology and basic principles of monitoring to produce high quality work. Finally, regarding physical and digital safety, they highlighted the expertise of DefendDefenders staff and the benefits of networking and solidarity among HRDs. The speakers also expressed their gratitude to DefendDefenders for organising this workshop, as well as to the CBDDH for its support over the years.
20. **Mr. Agostini** read the draft Final Communiqué on Claiming Spaces 2024, which was adopted by acclamation.
21. In his closing remarks, **Mr. Shire** shared his thoughts on the importance of this annual workshop. He summed up the three days in three words: "Finding each other." He also expressed his appreciation for the positive feedback and commended the staff of DefendDefenders and CBDDH for their unwavering commitment, which made the event possible.
22. In conclusion, **Mr. Shire** commended **Ms. Nibizi** for her long-standing commitment and thanked all HRDs for their active involvement over the past three days, asking them to take their initiatives forward. He pledged DefendDefenders' continued support to Burundian HRDs.
23. Finally, in recognition the crucial work carried out by exceptional HRDs, a ceremony was held to reward them. The following laureates were honoured:
 - **Mr. Pierre Claver Mbonimpa**, for his fight for the rule of law and human rights in Burundi and for keeping the flame of the CBDDH alive.
 - **Mr. Vital Nshimirimana**, for his continued commitment to the CBDDH so it continues to fulfil its mission toward Burundian HRDs, despite the difficult context.

- **Ms. Eulalie Nibizi**, for her commitment to Burundian HRDs and her tireless work in this regard.
- **Mr. Alexandre Niyungeko**, for his work in promoting CBDDH communications and for keeping the flame of the CBDDH alive.
- **Ms. Sonia Ndikumasabo**, in recognition of her commitment and for keeping the flame of the CBDDH alive.

DefendDefenders' staff were also honoured for their unwavering support for Burundian HRDs and the CBDDH. They are **Mr. Hassan Shire**, Executive Director (and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders), **Ms. Memory Bandera**, Directors of Programs and Administration, **Mr. Nicolas Agostini**, Representative to the UN, **Ms. Tabitha Netuwa**, Senior Manager, Protection and Security Management Department, and **Mr. Joseph Bikanda**, Coordinator of AfricanDefenders.

24. **Mr. Mbonimpa** invited all participants in Claiming Spaces 2024 to become members of the Coalition today.
25. Claiming Spaces 2024 concluded on 6 November with the presentation of certificates to all participants, acknowledging their active participation over the past three days.

Done in Mbarara, Uganda on 6 November 2024.