

Final Communiqué

7th Focal Point Meeting

Speke Resort Munyonyo Hotel, Kampala Uganda

1. **The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net)** convened its seventh Focal Points Meeting on 1 and 2 October 2024 at Speke Resort Munyonyo Hotel in Kampala, Uganda.
2. **The Focal Point Meeting** brought together a vibrant and diverse group of 50 representatives from national coalitions of human rights defenders (HRDs) and focal points from Burundi, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia (including Somaliland), Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.
3. **Memory Bandera**, Director Programs and Administration DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) welcomed participants, recognising the presence of H.E Maria Håkansson Ambassador of Sweden to Uganda, Hassan Shire, Chairperson of AfricanDefenders and Executive Director DefendDefenders, Sophie Kyagulanyi, Chairperson of DefendDefenders' Board of Directors, Kamau Ngugi, Chairperson EHAHRD-Net and the heads of national coalitions in their respective capacities.
4. **Kamau Ngugi**, Chairperson of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net), in his welcoming remarks, addressed the 7th meeting by acknowledging the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and celebrating the opportunity to convene in person. He emphasized the critical importance of the meeting, as authoritarian trends are worsening across the sub-region, citing conflicts in Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, which have severely impacted HRDs. Kamau appreciated DefendDefenders' solidarity and resilience, noting the swift response to crises and support for exiled defenders, including the prompt response to the 2024 protests in Kenya and support for exiled defenders from Sudan.
5. He commended the development of a plan of action to address ongoing challenges and encouraged members to engage with African and global human rights mechanisms. With upcoming elections in several countries, he stressed the increased risks HRDs face during electoral periods and the need for international scrutiny and support for civil society. Kamau concluded by calling for coordinated efforts to translate discussions at the meeting into concrete actions.
6. **Sophie Kyagulanyi**, the Chairperson of DefendDefenders' Board of Directors, emphasized the critical role of the meeting in highlighting emerging human rights

trends in the East and Horn of Africa and providing strategic direction for the region. She commended the leadership of Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders, and highlighted the challenging context of the sub-region, particularly during electoral cycles. Ms Kyagulanyi urged participants to assess emerging trends and progress in implementing the upcoming EHAHRD-Net Plan of Action, emphasizing the importance of a collaborative approach and constructive dialogue with state actors.

7. **Hassan Shire**, Chairperson of the Pan African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders) and Executive Director of DefendDefenders reiterated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. He acknowledged the importance of resuming in-person interactions to address critical human rights issues. Hassan Shire expressed concerns about the region's deteriorating socio-political and human rights landscape, including increased conflicts, climate impacts, and democracy backsliding.
8. He outlined the inspiring achievements under the 2021-2025 DefendDefenders' Strategic Plan, including milestones in emergency protection programs, capacity building, partnership developments, coalition building, relocation initiatives, and advocacy efforts. Notable achievements included supporting 3,221 HRDs through emergency protection support, 127 HRDs supported under Ubuntu Hub Cities, 174 HRDs supported to engage with regional and international human rights mechanisms, enhanced capacity for 2986 HRDs and establishing the Sudan Defenders Networks. Shire appreciated the leadership of Kamau Ngugi and Sophie Kyagulanyi and thanked development partners for supporting the work of African defenders/DefendDefenders. He urged participants to reflect on areas for improvement and hoped for productive discussions to inform the action plan for 2025-2028.
9. **H.E. Maria Håkansson**, Ambassador of Sweden to Uganda, expressed gratitude for the invitation in her address. She emphasized the decline of democracy and persistent violations across Africa, particularly targeting freedom of expression, including digital repression. Ambassador Håkansson further reiterated Sweden's commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights and its support to DefendDefenders and other regional organisations. She stressed the importance of preserving universal values and democracy and reaffirmed Sweden's commitment to promoting these values globally and supporting civil society.
10. **Robert Kirenga**, Executive Director of the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda, moderated a panel discussion to discuss updates on country and thematic-focused issues. Panelists included Yared Hailemariam, Executive Director of the Ethiopia Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), and Adam Musa, Executive Director of SudanDefenders, who shared their individual and country-specific experiences.
11. It was noted that **in Ethiopia**, the significant legal and institutional changes introduced in the country since 2018 were short-lived, as the conflict in the Tigray region led to a decline in civic freedoms, enforced disappearances, and other human rights abuses. Armed conflicts escalated in other areas, leading to

widespread internal displacement and increased harassment of civil society leaders, HRDs, and journalists. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are particularly vulnerable to violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) used as a weapon of war. The government's declaration of states of emergency, statements against human rights organisations and the weaponisation of legislation further hamper human rights work.

12. **In Sudan**, the conflict that erupted in 2023 has led to significant challenges for HRDs, including targeted killings, enforced disappearances, and persecution by the de facto government. Over 5 million refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. HRDs are facing food shortages, lack of access to healthcare, restrictions on freedom of expression and movement, and shutdown of media outlets. WHRDs are particularly vulnerable, facing heightened harassment and sexual violence. Communication networks have collapsed, and freedom of movement is severely restricted, making it difficult for HRDs to seek safety and protection.
13. **A second-panel** discussion on country updates, cross-border issues, cross-cutting trends, success stories and achievements in the East and Horn of Africa was convened. Panelists included **Gloria Madegwa**, Head of Programs and Strategic Partnerships at Defenders Coalition **Kenya**; **Sojoud Elgarrai**, exiled WHRD from **Sudan**; **Annie Bambe**, Présidente du Forum pour les Droits des Jeunes et Enfants au **Congo** (FODJEC); **Onesmo Olengurumwa**, National Coordinator of **Tanzania** Human Rights Defenders Coalition; and **Imane Abdikarim**, Cofounder and CEO of HiiL Law Firm **in Somalia**. They articulated various human rights issues and initiatives in different countries, highlighting the challenges faced by human rights defenders. The panel discussions led to the identification of key issues and the formulation of action plans to address them.
14. **In Kenya**, there is a severe crackdown on the rights to freedom of association and assembly, with violent state responses to protests. Strategies for protecting these freedoms include creative use of social media, civic education, and developing codes of conduct for protests. In the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, the intersection of human rights and environmental justice was discussed, emphasizing the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities and advocating for sustainable practices. **In Tanzania**, HRDs face challenges related to electoral processes, including potential restrictions on civil society gatherings and election-related violence. Developing contingency plans and separating human rights work from political affiliations are crucial during electoral periods.
15. Exiled HRDs from **Sudan** face challenges in their host communities, including isolation and lack of support systems. Initiatives to support them include psychological support, capacity-building workshops, and collaboration with local organisations. Finally, HRDs in conflict zones face severe security threats and a lack of legal protection.
16. **Tabitha Netuwa**, Senior Manager of Protection and Security Management at DefendDefenders, presented detailed progress of the EHAHRD-Net action plan and its state of implementation for further reflection and contribution.

17. **Estella Kabachwezi**, Advocacy, Research, and Communications Manager DefendDefenders moderated a panel that reviewed the progress of the action plan and outlined key issues. The panel comprised **Andrews Kananga**, Executive Director of Legal Aid Forum Rwanda; **James Bidal**, National Coordinator of South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network; and **Eulalie Nibizi**, Coordinator of Coalition Burundaise des Défenseurs des Droits de l'Homme.
18. The panel discussed various opportunities and strategies to reinforce the action plan to strengthen collaboration among human rights institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the East and Horn of Africa region. The importance of building solidarity and collaboration with networks such as law societies, psychosocial practitioners, medics, and media is emphasized, focusing on responding to issues related to fundamental freedoms. Additionally, there is a need for further collaboration with media and individual journalists, conducting thematic research studies, monitoring and evaluating advocacy strategies, and empowering grassroots HRDs. Diplo-activism, strategic engagements with the private sector, and legal protection for HRDs are also emphasized.
19. **Stanley Wobusobozi**, Senior M&E Expert at DefendDefenders, presented the reflections and findings of the mid-term evaluation of DefendDefenders' strategic plan, highlighting progress in fulfilling the set objectives in the three programme areas: protection and security management, advocacy and policy engagement, and capacity building for human rights defenders.
20. DefendDefenders was congratulated by **the participants for** making outstanding and impactful progress in the realisation of the strategy and appreciated the impact of its interventions on the lives of HRDs and their families, especially the most vulnerable groups of defenders. It was highlighted that several opportunities exist to use the data documented in the evaluation process to empower national coalitions through fundraising and aligning programming to the sub-regional strategy. **Hassan Shire**, Executive Director of DefendDefenders and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders, reaffirmed DefendDefenders' commitment to protecting human rights defenders, documenting the success stories of national coalitions, and further strengthening collaboration with national human rights institutions.
21. **Rosabella Ntanzi**, Program Manager at DefendDefenders, facilitated roundtable discussions on developing a new strategic plan for 2026 – 2030. Under the protection and security management component, notable recommendations include establishing tailor-made WHRD protection mechanisms, especially in conflict environments, training of national coalitions on Diplo-activism as a protection mechanism, guidance on the effective use of the EU protection guidelines, establishing mechanisms for early warning systems, devising means for HRDs to apply for protection for support in areas with limited or no access to the internet, enhancing the wellness and psychosocial support for HRDs, and improvement of legal protection.
22. Key recommendations for capacity building for HRDs include comprehensive digital and physical security training, effective advocacy, strategic litigation, and

handling electoral petitions. Country-specific needs assessments, scenario-building, and capacity-building programs should focus on young HRDs, leadership, and fundraising skills. Efforts must include well-being support, safe internet access, and media training for positive human rights reporting. Furthermore, training trainers and support during relocation are critical to addressing high turnover rates.

23. **Participants** further made recommendations for consolidating the activities of AfricanDefenders (Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network) emphasising continuous training on advocacy, emerging tools like Kobo Toolbox, and secure platforms for sharing sensitive information. They also called for decentralising case assessments at sub-regional levels and improving communication on AfricanDefenders' mode of function for more effective protection responses. Regional monitoring mechanisms and strategic media partnerships will counter misinformation and expose human rights abuses. Dedicated funds are needed to support exiled and internally displaced HRDs. Capacity-building programs, especially for youth HRDs, conflict to prevent recruitment into militias and sensitise law enforcement on human rights. The approach also promotes cross-regional collaboration, fosters government dialogue, explores partnerships with African private sector and diaspora HRD communities, and advocates for depoliticizing HRDs to maintain impartiality in conflict situations, as well as tapping into African philanthropy for support.
24. While conducting advocacy engagements, leveraging digital platforms to enhance the visibility of HRDs and strengthening mechanisms for strategic litigation. Additionally, conduct regional and international mapping of States' interests in the work of HRDs, follow up on recommendations derived from research reports, and continue advocacy for States to enact HRD protection legislations.
25. Based on the recommendations for the new strategic plan, action points were developed. The proposed actions cover various countries and focus on prioritizing cybersecurity and digital rights, advocating for HRD protection legislation, strengthening solidarity against repressive laws, conducting research on surveillance by telecommunication companies, advocating for judicial commissions of inquiry into killings, and exploring the use of AI to advance HRD work.
26. The actions also include preparing human rights defenders to address election-related challenges, implementing risk mitigation strategies, enhancing strategic planning and coordination at the regional level, prioritizing the well-being of HRDs, fostering collaboration with stakeholders, promoting awareness of HRD laws, and strengthening security management at both individual and organizational levels.
27. the proposed actions involve network building and strengthening, risk mitigation strategies, regional and international advocacy efforts, collaboration with NHRIs, and creating secure platforms for HRDs to exchange information. The actions also prioritize internal protection measures for HRDs, capacity-building initiatives, coordination between Fact-Finding Missions and HRDs, and ongoing regional and

international advocacy efforts. Finally, the proposed actions include reigniting networks and activities and mobilizing available in-country resources for capacity building.

28. **Walda Shaka**, Senior Program Officer at DefendDefenders, read the draft communique for the seventh focal points meeting of the EHAHRD-Net. **Kamau Ngugi**, Chairperson of the EHAHRD-Net, appreciated the detailed documentation of the proceedings and proposed a resolution to adopt the Communique.
29. During his closing remarks, **Kamau Ngugi**, Chairperson of the EHAHRD-Net, expressed his gratitude towards network members for their commitment and dedication towards the network's activities. Kamau also commended **H.E. Maria Håkansson, Sophie Kyagulanyi, and Hassan Shire** for their contributions and guidance towards the work of HRDs. He outlined network achievements and encouraged members to celebrate the milestones achieved, as presented earlier during the action plan presentation. Kamau appreciated the presence of the National Human Rights Institutions, specifically the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and urged the institution to support the work of HRDs in Ethiopia. He concluded his remarks by urging members to collaborate in implementing the decisions and the adopted action plan.
30. **Hassan Shire**, Executive Director of DefendDefenders and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders, in his concluding remarks expresses his gratitude to the participants for attending despite the urgent human rights defenders' priorities in their respective countries. He praised the efforts of each focal point in protecting, advocating for, and building the capacity of HRDs, particularly acknowledging their efforts to improve access to protection mechanisms for at-risk human rights defenders, including those in hard-to-reach areas. While acknowledging the benefits of technology in enhancing collaboration and networking, Hassan urged members to exercise caution when engaging online due to the potential negative effects of rapidly evolving digital developments. He commended the delegates for sharing their expertise and knowledge in formulating strategies to protect and promote human rights defenders effectively.
31. **Hassan Shire** emphasized prioritizing their well-being, recognizing that their work can lead to burnout and trauma. In closing, he expressed his appreciation for the network's leadership, focal points, coalitions, and Secretariat staff for their collaborative efforts and thoughtful action points aimed at advancing the network's mission.

-End

Done in Kampala, 3rd October 2024