

2024

ANNUAL REPORT



BRIDGING THE GAP!

Enhanced resilience and safety of HRDs.

FOREWORD

The year 2024 witnessed a deteriorating political and human rights climate, with the war in Sudan, police violence in Kenya, ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and political instability in the Sahel intensifying threats against human rights defenders (HRDs). Despite the risks, the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (DefendDefenders) and the Pan African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders) remained steadfast in providing HRDs with essential protection support, supported amplifying of their voices, and enhancing their capacity to navigate the environments.

Our protection efforts were central to our work as HRDs faced heightened threats. DefendDefenders provided a total of 643 protection grants (493 emergency grants and 150 direct assists under the Ubuntu Hub Cities Initiative). AfricanDefenders strengthened partnerships with the Elisabeth-Selbert-Initiative, the Shelter Cities Initiative, and the University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights to facilitate the relocation and protection of HRDs at risk.

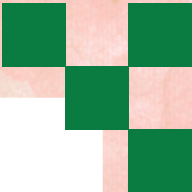
On the advocacy front, we remained committed to ensuring that HRDs had a voice at regional, and international levels. At the UN Human Rights Council, we advocated for the renewal of critical mandates, including the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan and the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea. Additionally, we launched the report *Is the Tide Turning?* which analyses African states' voting patterns on human rights resolutions to inform and shape future advocacy strategies.

At ACHPR, we facilitated HRDs' participation in the 79th and 81st ordinary sessions, organized side events, and engaged with civil society organisations. Our involvement in the African Electoral Justice Network underscored our commitment to promoting fair and transparent electoral processes. Additionally, we facilitated a benchmarking trip for ACHPR Commissioners to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, fostering inter-regional collaboration on human rights protection. We conducted solidarity missions to Kenya and Senegal, standing with indigenous women HRDs, grassroots defenders, and civil society leaders. We also co-hosted a global consultation with outgoing and incoming UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, addressing emerging threats to civic space and climate justice activism.

We strengthened national HRD coalitions across the East and Horn of Africa, reinforcing networks for collective advocacy and protection. Our 7th Focal Point Meeting brought together members of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network to assess civic space trends, evaluate our 2021-2025 Action Plan, and strategise for the 2026-2030 period. As part of this gathering, we also convened an inter-mechanism dialogue between HRDs, the Chairperson of the ACHPR, and the Chairperson of the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances to enhance HRDs engagement with the special mechanisms.

To sustain HRDs' resilience, we prioritised capacity-building, equipping them with tools to navigate an increasingly hostile environment. Over the year, we trained 990 HRDs through more than 62 workshops on physical security, digital security, wellbeing, monitoring and documentation, Kobo Toolbox, and resource mobilisation. The year concluded with the launch of our annual thematic report, *Rocky Ground and Shifting Sands: Human Rights Defenders Working in the Context of Elections in East Africa*, offering insights into the challenges HRDs face in electoral contexts in Burundi, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.





I would like to thank all our development partners for their unwavering support in navigating an increasingly complex human rights landscape. Your commitment has been instrumental in enhancing the safety and capacities of HRDs in the region, ensuring they can continue standing up for justice despite the risks. As we reflect on 2024, we reaffirm our mission and move forward into 2025 with renewed dedication to protecting HRDs and strengthening their resilience.

In Solidarity,



Hassan Shire
Executive Director, DefendDefenders and Chairperson, AfricanDefenders



TABLE OF CONTENTS

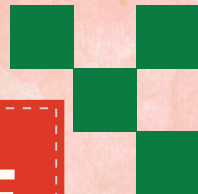
Forward	I
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations	IV
Summary 2024 Performance	1
2024 in Pictures	2
1. CIVIC SPACE AND HRD CONTEXT	3
2. ENHANCED SAFETY AND SECURITY FOR HRDS AT RISK	8
2.1 Better Access to Emergency and Medium-Term Ubuntu Protection Support	8
2.2 Strengthened Partnerships for Protection Services	10
2.3 Enhanced Resilience and HRD Wellbeing	11
3. STRENGTHENED POLICY INFLUENCE AND ADVOCACY FOR HRD SAFETY	13
3.1 Accelerated Advocacy Engagements at the UN Human Rights Council	13
3.2 Accelerated Advocacy Engagements at the ACHPR	15
3.3 High Level Engagements	16
3.4 Other Advocacy Partnerships and Collaboration	18
3.5 Amplified HRD Visibility and Profiles for protection	19
3.6 Research and Publications	21
4. BOLSTERED HRD CAPACITY AND ACCESS TO TOOLS FOR CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT IN HUMAN RIGHTS WORK	22
4.1 Boosted Technical and Institutional Capacity of Sub-Regional Networks National Coalitions & HRD Organisations	23
4.2 Increased capacity for Individual HRDs	24
4.3 Strengthened HRD Organisational Capacity and Safety	25
4.4 Claiming Spaces	25
5. ACCENTUATED DEFENDERS' INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR EFFECTIVE HRD PROTECTION	27
5.1 Increased organisational compliance, efficiency, and effectiveness	27
5.2 Improved financial management systems and operational efficiency	27
5.3 Better risk management systems, and timely risk detection and mitigation	29
5.4 Strengthened Governance, Leadership, and Organisational Oversight	29
5.5 A Motivated, Engaged, and Performing Workforce	30
5.6 A Diversified and Sustainable Resource Envelop	32
5.7 Improved Programme Quality, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning	33
5.8 Better Profiles, Visibility, and Communication for HRD Safety and Protection	33
5.8.1 WHRDs Campaigns	33
5.8.2 Celebrating International Human Rights Day	34
5.8.3 Media Engagements	35
5.8.4 A synopsis on strategic themes	35
6. STORIES OF CHANGE	39
7. OUR 2024 TEAM	40





LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
AU	African Union
CHRSS	Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan
CIHRS	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CTDs	Conventional Travel Documents
CHRDs	Child Human Rights Defenders
DWAG	Darfur Women Action Group
EAWHRDN	The East African Women Human Rights Defenders Network
ED	Executive Director
EHRDC	Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center
EHRDs	Environmental Human Rights Defenders
ERA	Environmental Rights Agreement
EU	European Union
FEHRD-NET	Frontline Environmental Human Rights Defenders Network in Tanzania
FFM	Fact Finding Mission
FIA	Financial Intelligence Authority
FoAA	Freedom of peaceful Assembly and Association
GBV	Gender Based Violence
HRC	Human Rights Council
HRD	Human Rights Defender
HURICAP	Human Rights Capacity-Building Programme
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IPHR	International Partnership for Human Rights
L&A	Lobby and Advocacy
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MTR	Mid-term Review
NHRI	National Human Rights Institutions
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OHCHR-EARO	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - East Africa Regional Office
PSEAH	Prevention from Sexual Exploitation Abuse and Harassment
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SCC	Strengthening Civil Courage
SIDA	The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
ToT	Training of Trainers
TRHDC	Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition
UN	United Nations
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UN HRD	United Nations Human Rights Defenders
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHRD	Woman Human Rights Defender
WPHF	United Nations Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund



SUMMARY 2024 PERFORMANCE

643

Provided protection grants for HRDs benefiting 2701 people

177

Improved mental wellbeing for HRDs

Engaged in **5**
advocacy sessions
at ACHPR & UNHRC

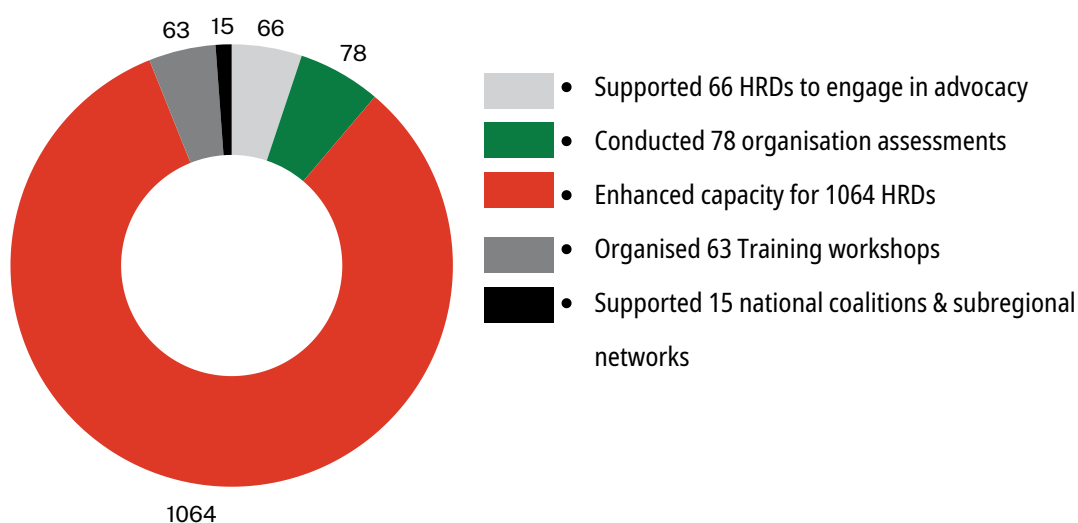
ISSUED

15

statements at ACHPR & UNHRC



**PROFILED 12
HRDS**



2024 IN PICTURES



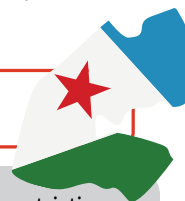
1. CIVIC SPACE AND HRD CONTEXT

Human rights defenders (HRDs) including civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to experience significant challenges to organize, participate in country specific affairs and realize fundamental freedoms and human rights. The East and Horn of Africa sub-region has faced significant human rights challenges, including constraints on civic space, freedom of expression, and ongoing conflict and violence in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan. The sub-region also witnessed widespread harassment, intimidation, and attacks on human rights defenders and organisations. In Kenya, authorities unduly restricted citizens' rights to free assembly and expression, targeting independent organisations and media outlets with vague, overbroad legal provisions. During the reporting period, the most at risk HRDs were repeatedly attacked in Burundi, Kenya, and Uganda. Additionally, environmental HRDs faced acute risks in Tanzania and Uganda.



BURUNDI

Burundi's human rights situation continued to deteriorate. There were reports of increased kidnappings, enforced disappearances, attacks on journalists and HRDs, restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, and harassment of the opposition and dissenting voices. Independent media outlets like Iwacu faced legal harassment and were targeted with violence from unknown assailants, who stoned their offices for several hours. While authorities released journalist Floriane Irangabiye following a presidential pardon, journalist Sandra Muhoza remained in arbitrary detention. The alleged perpetrators of these violations are government officials, members of the security services, in particular the police and the National Intelligence Service (SNR), and members of the youth league of the CNDD-FDD party, known as the Imbonerakure.



Djibouti & Eritrea

Djibouti continues to impose significant restrictions on civic space, as evidenced by its ranking of 161 out of 180 countries in the 2024 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index. The ranking reflects a challenging environment for journalists, operating within the country.

Eritrea remains the most closed states in the sub-region. The country ranked 180 out of 180 countries in the 2024 RSF Press Freedom Index, highlighting its restrictive environments. On 11 July 2024, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on Eritrea, extending the Special Rapporteur's mandate. This decision aims to address severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in Eritrea, a positive step towards increased international scrutiny and support for human rights in Eritrea.



Kenya

Kenya's President Ruto announced the commencement of the Public Benefit Organisations Act, 2013 which provides a comprehensive and transparent framework for the registration and regulation of civil society groups, replacing an older more restrictive legislation. However, serious human rights violations were reported in the same period, including excessive use of force by police. In June 2024, police violently dispersed protests on a proposed Tax Bill using tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets, and live ammunition, resulting in at least 21 deaths and 336 injuries. Over 300 protesters, including HRDs and journalists, were arrested and arbitrarily detained. Additionally, protestors were forcefully disappearing creating fear and uncertainty among citizens. Extrajudicial killings remain a serious issue, with numerous dismembered bodies found. Femicide rates also surged.



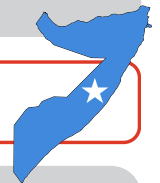
Ethiopia

The human rights situation in Ethiopia remains dire, with millions of citizens denied justice amid ongoing fighting and widespread abuses. In Oromia, the conflict between government forces and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) led to extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and severe displacement, particularly in Western Oromia, where civilians face restricted access to essential services like healthcare and education. Despite these widespread violations, there is no significant progress towards accountability, particularly in the Amhara region, where the latest armed conflict has continued for a year with ongoing human rights abuses. Although the state of emergency officially ended in June 2023, the Ethiopian government has made no substantial progress in ensuring accountability for widespread violations. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has documented atrocities, including civilian deaths from airstrikes and attacks by armed groups in regions such as Oromia, Sidama, and Southern Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government has intensified its crackdown on civic space, consistently banned demonstrations and assemblies. At least ten journalists and civil society members have been forced to flee due to detentions, which has become a common practice against HRDs, with around 200 journalists arrested since 2019.



Rwanda

Rwanda conducted its presidential and parliamentary elections on 15 July 2024 in a restrictive environment. The country re-elected President Paul Kagame with over 99% of the votes. Authorities barred opposition figures from participating, including Diane Rwigara of the People Salvation Movement. The political opposition continues to face severe restrictions to their right to freedom of association, along with threats, arbitrary detention, prosecution on trumped-up charges, killings, and enforced disappearances. Independent civil society and the media also face attacks, intimidation, harassment, and reprisals for their work.



Somalia

Somalia faces a dire humanitarian crisis worsened by climate change, inter-clan fighting, persistent human rights abuses, and ongoing conflict. Al Shabaab, an extremist group, continues to control large swathes of territory and commit severe human rights violations, including frequent attacks on civilians. Gender-based violence (GBV) has surged, affecting displaced women and girls with increased rates of femicide. Journalists face constant threats from both state and non-state actors, encounter harassment, arrests, and attacks.



South Sudan

South Sudan continued to grapple with a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by extreme food insecurity, economic decline, ongoing conflict, disease outbreaks, repercussions of the Sudan conflict and severe restrictions to civic space. By September 2024, flooding affected over 710,000 people across 30 of 78 counties.

Threats against HRDs and journalists have intensified. On 3 July 2024, Parliament passed a bill that retained Sections 54 and 55 of the National Security Service Act. The Bill grants the National Security Service (NSS) broad powers to arrest and detain individuals without a warrant. This development raises fears of arbitrary arrests and repression of opposition and independent voices. South Sudan now ranks 136 in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, which reflects ongoing intimidation and censorship. On 16 September 2024, the Transitional Government of National Unity postponed the elections by 24 months. This decision prompted criticism and led the government to crack down on dissenting voices.



Sudan

The armed conflict in Sudan continues, with both parties, namely the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), committing grave violations, some of which amount to crimes under international law. In September 2024, the UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) for Sudan reported that it had “reasonable grounds to believe” that both the SAF and RSF have committed war crimes, and that the RSF committed crimes against humanity, in the form of ethnic-based atrocities against the Massalit and non-Arab civilians in Darfur. Over the past six months, Sudan continued to face a severe humanitarian crisis with over 10.8 million people displaced. Food insecurity affects over 25.6 million people, with more than five million facing starvation. Health facilities are largely non-functional, exacerbating the spread of diseases like cholera and malaria with more than 144 medical facilities closed. Both parties have blocked humanitarian aid, which prevented essential supplies from reaching those in need, worsening the crisis and left millions, especially children and women, without food, medical care, and other necessities. Reports highlight severe violations against children, including killings, recruitment and use in combat, and conflict related sexual violence. Women and children, who make up over half of the displaced population, are particularly vulnerable, suffering from malnutrition, lack of access to necessities and disease.



Tanzania

Ahead of Tanzania's 2024 local government and 2025 general elections, the government intensified its crackdown on civic space. Authorities arrested Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA) party members, including opposition leader Tundu Lissu, and detained 375 supporters, obstructing their activities. The forced relocation of over 82,000 Maasai from the Ngorongoro conservation area continues, with severe restrictions on their movement and access to essential services. Despite Tanzania's significant leap in the World Press Freedom Index, rising to 97 from 143 in 2023 and leading East Africa, the operating environment for HRDs remains challenging. Journalists and activists continue to face intimidation and arrests for exposing sensitive information. The right to freedom of expression is affected, with live metrics showing restrictions on X (formerly Twitter) by main internet providers.

Egypt



Egypt faced a multifaceted crisis, with soaring economic challenges worsening living conditions, ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, and the mass arrest and unlawful deportation of Sudanese refugees after imposing visa restrictions on them. Consequently, many Egyptians have taken to social media and peaceful protests to express their anguish. However, those voicing their concerns have faced arbitrary detentions and arrests. Similarly, pro-Palestine protesters standing in solidarity have been violently disrupted despite the government positioning itself as a key actor in restoring peace in the conflict in Gaza. Reports indicate that some protesters were stopped, searched, and had their homes raided a few hours later. The violent crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly is exacerbated by the recent law that empowers the military to act as an internal security and judicial institution whenever the President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi deems it necessary.



Uganda

Uganda witnessed severe human rights violations, contraction in civic space and a crackdown on dissent, with environmental defenders, political activists, and media professionals persistently targeted. Authorities responded to protests with excessive force, including the use of tear gas, resulting in many injuries and arrests. Protestors and critics against corruption and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project faced violence and numerous arrests. Authorities intimidated opposition leaders, and journalists faced heightened repression, with several arrests. On 16 July 2024, the president signed into law the NGO Act 2024, dissolving the NGO Bureau and reverting its functions to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which could have an impact on the operations of civil society. For the rest of Africa, Civic Space is overly pressed, with growing economic challenges, political landscapes marred with authoritarian regimes and widespread human rights violations leading to social fragmentation, severely impacting the lives of immigrants and refugees. While some countries stride toward democratic governance in the past six months, like South Africa that decriminalised defamation, a Namibia, high court struck down provisions in various laws criminalizing same-sex acts. The Gambia upheld a law criminalizing female genital mutilation despite calls to have it repealed being made. While others continue to experience a worrying increase in restrictions in civic space. AfricanDefenders has documented 174 cases of violations against human rights defenders, artists HRDs, and journalists in desk research covering January to June 2024.



Tunisia



In Tunisia, as many gear up for its first election since President Kais Saied's consolidation of authority in 2021, Tunisian authorities have tightened the reins with extravagant shows of force in the arrest of civil society actors, human rights lawyers and journalists. In early May, Tunisian authorities carried out mass arrests and investigations of several former staff or members of organizations including Sherifa Riah and Saadia Mosbeh amongst many others over unclear accusations under the anti-terrorism and money laundering law for their roles supporting sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers. This followed President Kais' statement regarding 'criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic' of the country, to make Tunisia another African country. The authorities in May raided the headquarters of the Tunisian Bar Association, arresting a lawyer who had criticized the President's statements. Journalists covering the arrest were also detained and sentenced for allegedly spreading false news. This wave of arrests has not been limited to civil society actors and critics; opposition leaders and potential candidates announcing their intention to run for office have also been targeted. Similarly in Algeria, with elections only a few months away, civil society continues to be repressed, with state interference in organizational activities, indicating the repression of freedom of association and assembly. These actions signal a troubling erosion of democratic principles in both Tunisia and Algeria, raising serious concerns about the upcoming elections and human rights in the sub-region.

Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger



The year 2024 reveals widespread violations against press freedoms and critical voices particularly in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. The alarming escalation of these violations has been compounded by Mali's decree instructing all media to cease covering political parties' activities following the suspension of activities of political parties and associations countrywide. The Malian military government dissolved associations that were vocal in the criticism of the junta's governance. In Burkina Faso, critical voices are being conscripted in the military to silence them. These actions underscore the region's deteriorating political climate and severe threats to press freedoms, freedom of association and democratic principles.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe police arrested 80 democracy activists, who had gathered peacefully at the home of opposition politician Jameson Timba. Despite the private nature of the gathering, police responded violently, resulting in injuries and citing the event as unauthorized. The authorities' violent response to a peaceful assembly highlights a troubling disregard for civil liberties and democratic principles in Zimbabwe. Similarly in Angola, a lawyer representing others was placed under house arrest on the same day he was due to appear. In Togo, citizens cast their ballots in April amidst escalating human rights abuses against dissenting voices and what some describe as an institutional coup. On April 19, a new constitution was adopted in a second reading by a National Assembly composed entirely of ruling party representatives. This new constitution eliminates direct universal suffrage for electing the President of the Republic. In Madagascar, a member of parliament Marie Jeanne d'Arc Masy Goulamaly was arbitrarily placed under house arrest, accused of organizing protests after she complained of electoral irregularities.



It has been over a year since the brutal killing of human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko, yet the Kingdom of eSwatini has shown no progress towards accountability or justice. Instead, authorities have harassed and intimidated his widowed wife, Tanele Maseko, even insinuating that she is exploiting his death for personal gain. Thulani Maseko's case adds to a growing list of HRDs who have been killed for their work, with justice and accountability remaining elusive.



Equatorial Guinea

Civic space in Equatorial Guinea remains severely restricted as evidenced by the arrest of an HRD on trumped up charges of arson following online advocacy for political prisoners highlights the government's intolerance towards dissent and use of social media for activism underscoring the ongoing limitations to freedom of expression. In Chad, journalists and HRDs encounter grave risks, notably by the murder of a journalist and the subsequent arbitrary detention of an HRD critical of government policies.

The state's actions, including arbitrary arrests and harassment of activists, and lack of accountability demonstrate a hostile environment for free speech and advocacy. The systematic repression, violent crackdowns, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly highlight an alarming trend towards authoritarianism. These actions not only threaten the fundamental rights of citizens and HRDs but also undermine the principles of democracy and rule of law in the region. Urgent attention and intervention are needed to address these violations and protect the rights of those advocating for justice and democracy across the continent.

2.

ENHANCED SAFETY AND SECURITY FOR HRDS AT RISK



2.1

BETTER ACCESS TO HRD PROTECTION SUPPORT

DefendDefenders enhanced access to emergency protection for HRDs at imminent risk. In 2024, a total of 1,573 requests for protection were received from the most-at-risk human rights defenders across the region. Of these, 643 HRDs requests were directly supported with protection grants across 28 African countries. The HRDs support ranged from education grants, legal services, medical assistance, equipment replacement, relocation, economic empowerment grants, living costs and psychosocial support among others. In addition, a total of 293 HRDs were jointly supported through the referral pathway while 609 requests did not meet the protection criteria or our mandate. It's important to note that most of the cases that didn't meet the criteria were from Afghanistan. Relatedly, 15 requests were withdrawn by HRDs while by the end of the reporting period, at least 13 requests were still under verification and follow-up. Further, protection interventions indirectly reached 779 beneficiaries.



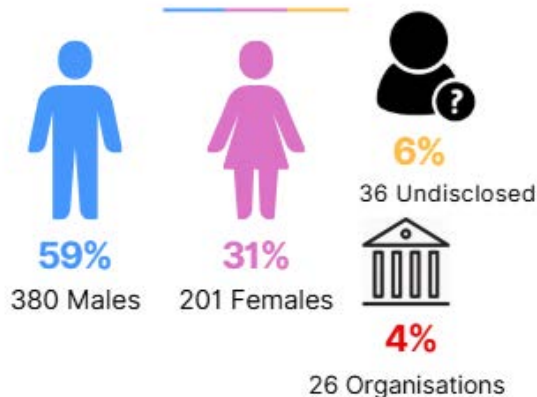
Number of HRDs supported by country

Uganda-228
Sudan-138
Zimbabwe-102
Somalia-46
Burundi-22
DRC-20
South Sudan-14
Kenya-14
Ethiopia-12
Tanzania-9
Eswatini-7
Burkina Faso-6
Ghana-3
Mauritania-3
Mozambique-3

South Africa-2
Egypt-2
Senegal-2
Nigeria-1
Cameroon-1
Liberia-1
Lesotho-1
Togo-1
Cote D'Ivoire-1
Angola-1
Rwanda-1
Eritrea-1
Algeria-1

Africa

HRDs and Organisations supported



HRDs supported	Males	Females	Organisations	Undisclosed	Total
Emergency Protection	287	155	23	28	493
Ubuntu Hub Cities	93	46	03	08	150
Total	380	201	26	36	643

HRD TESTIMONIES & VOICES

“Our organisation, which focuses on raising awareness about women's rights and empowering them, is grateful to the support received from DefendDefenders... The protection grant we received for GBV HRD survivors helped evacuate them and provide economic empowerment so they could start small businesses for instance, we established a bakery in Kampala, which provides Sudanese bread so that the Sudanese community can have a taste of home here

Aida Musa-
HRD, Director- Sudanese Women for Peace and Development Association (S.W.P.D.A)



“I am grateful for the protection grant we received from DefendDefenders, which helped establish our organisation, and the support provided during the setup process. We have also been able to establish a resource youth centre for Sudanese in the Kinyadongo refugee camps, all thanks to DefendDefenders

Zamzam Khater-
HRD, Together for Peace and Development Organisations (T.P.D.O)



“

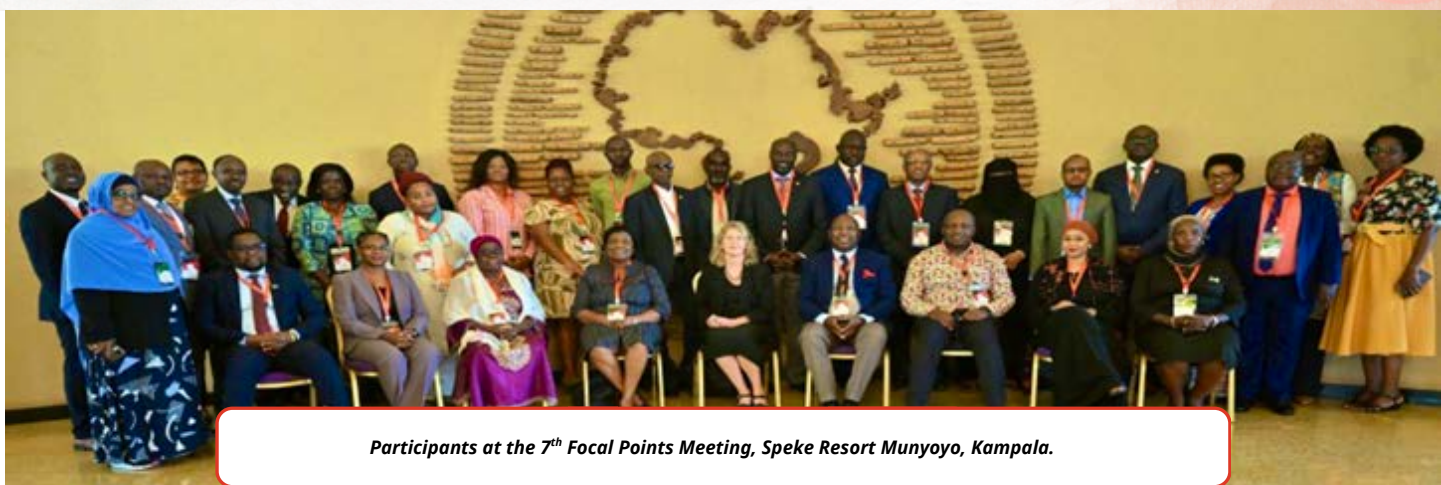
“We are happy to report that through your initiative and support, EACRN has been able to put in place security measures that have continued to ensure that we implement our programs efficiently. I want to recognize and appreciate the recent digital security audit that your team led by Samuel Eibu offered to our secretariat. It was a great opportunity to learn and share knowledge on digital security. The entire secretariat is grateful for the equipment gifted to them by Defend Defenders. The equipment, which includes an HP laptop, a Samsung Galaxy A55, 2 anti-viruses, 2external hard disks, and a wireless firewall router, will go a long way in improving our internal security and operational measures.” - Benedict Omillo, Executive Director, The Eastern Africa Child Rights Network.

”



2.2

STRENGTHENED PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROTECTION SERVICES.



Participants at the 7th Focal Points Meeting, Speke Resort Munyoyo, Kampala.

DefendDefenders strengthened protection mechanisms by fostering collaboration on issues affecting HRDs including those working in exile. We hosted a virtual meeting on regional developments impacting civic space and a joint campaign on violations against journalists. Additionally, DefendDefenders held a legal consultative and empowerment meeting for newly exiled Sudanese HRDs in Uganda reaching 25 HRDs with vital legal knowledge. Relatedly we facilitated exiled Sudanese HRDs to meet with the Dutch Ambassador in Kampala to share impact of the war on HRD work

We supported a consultative meeting with a delegation from the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and SudanDefenders coalition. In collaboration with International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) in Brussels, we brought together exiled HRDs from Africa, Asia and Europe to discuss the long-term sustainability of exiled HRDs, the continuation of their work while in exile and advocacy within the European Union institutions. DefendDefenders/ AfricanDefenders contributed a section on socio-economic integration program for HRDs in the comprehensive manual developed to guide exiled HRDs on continuing their crucial work. A Protection Working Group meeting organised in Kenya in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for East Africa, focused on strengthening protection support for HRDs to aid sustainability of HRDs exiled.

DefendDefenders also hosted 83 HRDs & protection service providers (36 females, 47 males) to the 4th Annual Protection and Service Providers' Dialogue for exiled human rights defenders in Uganda.

At the regional level, DefendDefenders, organized a consultative meeting for 45 HRDs generating a joint action plan with recommendations to counter anti-rights forces. Focal persons from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania were identified to ensure effective follow-up on the recommendations. Additionally, DefendDefenders/ AfricanDefenders participated in the UN Human Rights Podcast where networking and coalitions were celebrated as the best tool for the protection of HRDs. The Ubuntu Hub Cities Annual Coordinators' Workshop in Ghana attended by 20 participants discussed crisis management frameworks, social and economic integration, and stress management strategies for relocated HRDs.

DefendDefenders participated in the World Movement for Democracy 12th Global Assembly in Johannesburg, South Africa, a platform to celebrate democratic achievements and resilience, foster peer learning, and build solidarity. On the sidelines of the assembly, DefendDefenders/AfricanDefenders delegation met with HRD beneficiaries of the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative in South Africa to dialogue and foster a sense of solidarity. AfricanDefenders, engaged with the University of Western Cape on the pilot program launched in 2023 where universities act as protection sites for HRDs at risk. We sought to partner with the university to complement the work of our Hub cities initiative.

We participated in the 7th Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Summit during which our E.D Hassan Shire delivered a keynote address that underscored the significance of solidarity and shared experiences in advancing human rights. On the summit's second day, AfricanDefenders and DefendDefenders established a partnership with the University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights by signing a benchmarking memorandum of understanding. This collaboration is designed to enhance the protection of human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists.

Further, AfricanDefenders also participated in the European Union Temporary Relocation Platform in Berlin, focusing on HRD sustainability and psychosocial support for relocation platforms. Regional advocacy efforts included discussions on the safety of journalists, diplomatic engagements with the Norwegian Embassy on most at risk HRDs in Uganda, a risk assessment for grassroot HRDs and CSOs in northern Uganda, and a symposium at Wits University to combat repression in Africa. Collaborative efforts continued with Justice & Peace Netherlands on fundraising initiatives.

2.3 ENHANCED RESILIENCE AND HRD WELLBEING



Human rights defenders continue to operate in a challenging context contributing to burnout, anxiety, depression, among other mental health problems. In 2024, "I was psychologically unwell when I came, but through the sessions, I have been healed." - Training participant.

We contributed to enhanced capacity of human rights defenders in wellbeing strategies for resilience and continued delivery on their HRD work reaching a total of 177 HRDs (94 males , 83 females). These benefited from a training of trainers (ToT) in Psychological First Aid in northern Uganda (West Nile, Lango and Acholi). Expanding these efforts in the region, a well-being training camp in Karamoja provided HRDs with a space to understand stress, its impact on the body, and strategies for managing it through self-care.

Participants explored stress symptoms and engaged in stress management techniques, including artistic expressions as both therapy and an advocacy tool. They took part in art therapy, music, dance and body movement therapy, and environmental therapy. Similarly, well-being and self-care trainings for exiled Sudanese HRDs and members of SudanDefenders emphasized holistic approaches to mental health, safety and security. Further to this, Burundian HRDs benefited from both a dedicated well-being training and a session during the Annual Claiming Spaces event, reinforcing strategies for stress management and self-care. Somali HRDs also engaged in a holistic training to learn skills and techniques to manage stress.

“

"I was psychologically unwell when I came, but through the sessions, I have been healed." - Training participant.

”

Collectively, these interventions were provided as a way of ensuring HRDs could sustain their activism without compromising their health



HRC55-Geneva, Switzerland



NGO Forum at ACHPR81-Gambia



HRC57-Geneva, Switzerland



ACHPR81- Banjul, Gambia



Strategic meetings with CSOs, Media, bloggers and Government officials -Senegal & Burkina Faso

3.

STRENGTHENED POLICY INFLUENCE AND ADVOCACY FOR HRD SAFETY

3.1

ACCELERATED ADVOCACY ENGAGEMENTS AT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

DefendDefenders continued to play a leading role at the UNHRC. Ahead of each regular session, we drafted and coordinated civil society letters/calls on countries in the East and Horn of Africa and laid the groundwork for advocacy by liaising with state representatives (both at the Ambassador and at the expert levels) and UN officials and independent experts. We led advocacy with HRDs from the countries concerned, making sure their voices are heard and taken into account by decision-makers.

Our Executive Director, Hassan Shire, participated in the “High-Level Segment” that took place at the opening of the 55th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC55), in February 2024, and met with state dignitaries and UN officials, including the Secretary-General, António Guterres. Following our sustained advocacy before and during the session, on 3rd April 2024 the HRC renewed the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (CHRSS). In the run-up to the session, AfricanDefenders alongside 90 other CSOs urged the Council to extend the mandate of the CHRSS in a letter released on 20 February 2024. The letter emphasized the crucial role of CHRSS as the sole remaining mechanism charged with gathering and documenting evidence of violations to ensure accountability, underscoring the devolving human rights situation in the country rife with localized and intercommunal conflict, violence, and impunity. DefendDefenders supported 2 South Sudanese HRDs (1 male, 1 female) to participate in the session.

At the end of HRC55, we inaugurated a new practice by publishing a “one-pager” on the session’s outcomes and takeaways from an African perspective. The one-pager¹ for HRC55 was released on social media, shared with networks, and made available on our website, through the “Reflections on HRC55” page.²

We highlighted the grave violations committed in Eritrea at HRC56 (18 June-12 July 2024)³. We coordinated advocacy initiatives, including a letter released in May 2024, with a call for a strengthened Council resolution on Eritrea, although the resolution adopted remains below our expectations. We contributed to maintaining international scrutiny of Eritrea; and enhanced the country’s profile, after years of Eritrea slipping down the list of HRC priorities. With an HRD, we met with states and experts to outline the role of the Council in addressing the situation.

We complemented Eritrea-focused advocacy with a high-level side event on the Addis Ababa Roadmap. The Addis Ababa Roadmap on cooperation between the special procedures of the HRC and the special mechanisms of the ACHPR provides a guiding framework to encourage experts of the two systems to strengthen cooperation and highlights specific actions to build synergies, develop joint action, and ensure systematic information sharing. In line with the role, the Roadmap can play in enhancing joint responses to crises, with the Special Rapporteur (SR) on Eritrea, we organised an event focused on the country. It brought together the SR, Dr. Mohamed Babiker, a member of the ACHPR, Hon. Commissioner Dr. Litha Musyimi-Ogana, Clément Voulé, the former UN SR on freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and a WHRD.

At HRC56, we also launched a comprehensive, evidence-based report, “Is the Tide Turning?” This groundbreaking report analyses voting patterns on Africa-focused resolutions since the Council’s creation, in 2006. Finally, DefendDefenders led a large group of NGOs that pushed for the extension of the mandate of the Fact Finding Mission on Sudan. We proposed a mandate extension at HRC56, instead of the initially expected HRC57 (October 2024). At the Council’s 57th session (HRC57, 9 September-11 October 2024),⁴ DefendDefenders focused on Sudan, Burundi, Somalia, and Uganda. In the lead-up to the session, we collaborated with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to draft and release a Q&A document emphasizing the value of the FFM for Sudan. This was a flexible and innovative advocacy tool, adapted to our objectives and to states’ needs. During HRC57, we also supported a Sudanese HRD and helped coordinate a large group of Sudanese HRDs who were in Geneva to support the FFM. The strong resolution adopted by the HRC extended the mandate of the FFM. The voting result (23 in favour, 12 against) shows the international community’s commitment to fighting impunity for the crimes committed by all parties to Sudan’s conflict, and the positive vote by two African states sends a strong message that without accountability, the Sudan crisis cannot be solved.

On Burundi, we led 40 NGOs in calling for the extension of the Special Rapporteur’s mandate, recognising its importance as the country approaches elections. The SR’s mandate is the only international mechanism to independently monitor and report on Burundi’s situation. During the session, we coordinated advocacy by a large group of Burundian HRDs and held a side event with Burundian HRDs and the SR, Fortuné Gaetan Zongo. The new resolution enables the international community to keep a spotlight on Burundi’s human rights situation despite the country being elected a member of the HRC (for the term 2024-2026).

Regarding Somalia, we pushed for the extension of the Independent Expert’s (IE) mandate to ensure ongoing scrutiny of the human rights situation. We also continued to stress the need for scrutiny in the foreseeable future, as Somalia’s government is pushing to discontinue the IE’s mandate. Finally, we conducted engagements on Uganda, in particular with the UN Human Rights Office and special procedures, to build partners’ capacity to engage with the UN human rights system.

SIDE EVENTS



55th

At the end, we hosted a side event with HRDs and a member of the CHRSS on the needed interventions in the country to ensure a safe, free and fair vote. The side event recorded high participation, including by the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of South Sudan in Geneva, for the first time in seven years. The engagement was positive and provided a platform for reporting, dialogue, and advocacy for enhanced attention to the country.



56th

In partnership with the OHCHR, Special Procedures and the ACHPR, DefendDefenders organized a side event on strengthening collaboration between the African human rights system and the UN human rights system, focusing on the Addis Ababa Roadmap (see above). Panelists included Hon. Dr. Litha Musyimi-Ogana, an ACHPR Commissioner, and Dr Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker- UN Special Rapporteur (SR) on the human rights situation in Eritrea. This side event elevated the profile of Eritrea, which had gradually declined in priority at the HRC over the years.



57th

DefendDefenders hosted a side event in Geneva featuring the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, Mr. Fortuné Gaetan Zongo, alongside HRDs. The event came at a critical juncture as Burundi approaches two successive electoral periods in 2025 and 2027. During this side event, the Special Rapporteur presented his analysis of the human rights situation in Burundi and engaged in dialogue with HRDs, who articulated their expectations from the Council and the international community.

3.2

ACCELERATED ADVOCACY ENGAGEMENTS AT THE ACHPR

Along the sidelines of the 79th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) in Banjul, Gambia, AfricanDefenders convened 14 (8 males, 6 females) HRDs from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria from May 27 – 31, 2024 in a workshop aimed to empower HRDs from North Africa by enhancing their access to the African human rights system through improved dialogue, fostering collaborative partnerships between civil society and the ACHPR. Sessions during the workshop focused on deepening participants' understanding of the African human rights system and the foundational principles of engagement, and offering a step-by-step approach to effective advocacy, campaigns, and the implementation of human rights decisions and instruments. Throughout the event, HRDs expressed the need to explore opportunities to complement their existing advocacy efforts at the UN and national levels.



"Attending the ACHPR was an opportunity for me to learn more about the work of the commission. Before attending the NGO forum, if you had asked me how the judges were appointed, I honestly wouldn't have an answer. I am now able to tell the role of the ACHPR and more confident in speaking to other HRDs about it." - Pimer Peace, WHRD



"During the year, we were also supported by your team led by Comrade Joseph Bikanda, Susan and Walda to participate at the 81st Session of ACHPR as well as the NGO Forum in Banjul, together with a representative from our sister organization from the South - CRNSA. I would like to state that this was a great learning experience in advancing human rights advocacy on the continent. We were able to draw lessons for the child rights CSO Forum and the ACERWC sessions too, especially in the advancement of the Child Human Rights Defenders (CHRDs) agenda." - Benedict Omillo, Executive Director, The Eastern Africa Child Rights Network.



We facilitated a total of 47 HRDs (23 males, 24 females) from Uganda, Ethiopia, Burundi, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, Angola, Benin, Nigeria, Egypt, Libya, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tunisia to engage with the NGO Forum and at the 81st Ordinary Session of the African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights. From 13-15 October 2024, DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders with its delegates actively participated in the various panel discussions held at the NGO Forum, whose theme centered around the African Union's 2024 theme, "The Year of Education: Educate an African Fit for the 21st Century-Building Resilient Education System for Increased Access to Inclusive, Lifelong, Quality and Relevant Learning in Africa."

Moreover Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders, participated in a high-level panel on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, emphasizing the Addis Ababa Road Map, a collaborative initiative by the ACHPR and UNHRC.

Moreover, we submitted 7 oral statements and organized 11 side events, 3 of them country specific on Kenya and Uganda, and the other 8 addressed various topics such as strategies to combat digital repression in Africa, the promotion of environmental rights and the civil society landscape in North Africa.

During the session, the ACHPR adopted different country specific resolutions, they renewed the mandate of the Joint Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, a resolution on the situation of environmental human rights defenders in Uganda was adopted, as well as a resolution aimed to address Mozambique's recurring violence in the current pre- and post-electoral instability. Additionally, AfricanDefenders partnered with other organizations to host Declaration +25, reflecting on the impact of the HRD Declaration over the past 25 years and emphasizing the need for greater awareness of its protections among HRDs.



We maintained our momentum by engaging and providing a space for HRDs to interact with high-level human rights representatives to highlight key human rights issues, situations of concern and priorities.

UN Mechanisms

HRC55 High level Segment

- During the meeting with the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, our Executive Director Hassan Shire raised the situation of human rights defenders in Africa, human rights mainstreaming in the work of UN country teams, and the need for the whole UN system to regularly consult with HRDs. With NGO partners, we also discussed Sudan, South Sudan, civil society space at the UN, and international crises & threats to multilateralism.

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association (FoAA)

- In April we co-hosted a transformative global consultation in Kampala, which brought together key figures in the field of human rights advocacy. We were honored to welcome Clément Voule, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and his successor, Gina Romero. This event, which drew 46 participants (21 males, 25 females), highlighted the progress achieved, the challenges encountered, and the emerging threats to these fundamental freedoms. Together, we identified effective strategies to bolster support for climate justice activists and vibrant social movements. The insights and strategies developed during this consultation have already been presented in a Report to the UN General Assembly.
- In July AfricanDefenders Secretariat, met with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association. The discussions focused on contextual updates from Africa provided by AfricanDefenders' Coordinator and exploration of potential avenues for effective collaboration with her mandate.
- From 30 September to 4 October 2024, DefendDefenders conducted advocacy on Uganda by supporting Patience Kwizera, Advocacy and Networking officer of the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (NCHRD-U). She met with UN officials and special procedures regarding human rights developments in Uganda, as well as with selected states, while also building the capacity of NCHRD-U to engage with UN human rights mechanisms.

African Union-European Union Civil Society Dialogue

- In January DefendDefenders E.D and AfricanDefenders' Chairperson Hassan Shire participated in preliminary discussions between CSOs and the delegation from both the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) ahead of the 19th African Union-European Union Human Rights Dialogue. H.E. Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, and H.E. Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for human rights participated in the dialogue. On 24th January, DefendDefenders was then represented by the E.D in the regular AU-EU human rights Dialogue in Addis Ababa where discussions were held under the theme "Safeguarding the Rights to Peace and to Education in Africa and Europe."

Consultative meetings with the Chairperson of the ACHPR

HRDs from North Africa

- In May, HRDs from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria engaged in an interactive dialogue with Hon. Remy Ngoy Lumbu, the ACHPR Chairperson and Special Rapporteur on HRDs. In this session, participants extensively discussed their different country contexts, highlighting cases of HRD violations. Hon. Remy acknowledged that the minimal engagement of North African CSOs with regional human rights bodies limits their ability to address certain issues due to insufficient credible information. He encouraged participants to proactively engage with the ACHPR, especially his mandate on HRDs, and committed to supporting their organisations in acquiring observer status to facilitate easier engagement.

Kenya

- Following the violent repression experienced by protesters during the #RejectFinanceBill demonstrations. To address the concerns of CSOs and HRDs, AfricanDefenders hosted a virtual consultation on in August, with Prof. Remy Ngoy Lumbu, the Chairperson of the ACHPR, alongside various Kenyan CSOs. The Chairperson requested that the concerns and recommendations be documented and shared with his office for further dissemination to relevant commissions.

In addition to the engagements, we made Advocacy statements to amplify HRD voices and call on decision makers to foster an enabling environment for human rights defenders.

ADVOCACY STATEMENTS			
21 February 2024	11 March 2024	28 March 2024	28 March 2024
AfricanDefenders joined 11 other civil society organizations (CSOs) and national human rights institutions (NHRIs) in calling for a more meaningful <u>civil society</u> engagement in the nominations and selection of the African Union's (AU) members that would foster transparent, inclusive and participatory nomination and selection processes during the elections in the ACHPR.	AfricanDefenders and Committee for Justice (CFJ) petitioned the ACHPR to protect Egyptian human rights defender Ahmed Salem, Director of the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights, from threats following the foundation's report on Egypt's construction of a fortified wall along the Gaza border. They <u>called</u> the ACHPR's Special Rapporteur to pressure the Egyptian government to stop targeting Salem and the foundation's staff.	The AfricanDefenders joined over 300 global entities in advocating for a treaty addressing crimes against humanity. The <u>initiative</u> led by the International Law Commission urged states to use the April 2024 session of the UN Sixth Committee to advance the Draft Articles on Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Humanity, developed toward treaty negotiations at the UN General Assembly's 79th Session.	AfricanDefenders and SouthernDefenders issued a <u>statement</u> in solidarity with Tanele Maseko, following the harassment and intimidation she and her family faced by Eswatini authorities after Tanele received a Human Rights Award on her late husband's behalf.
4 April 2024	8 May 2024	9 May 2024	April – June 2024
AfricanDefenders added its voice to the urgent plea from several Algerian civil society and international organizations calling for the immediate release of individuals arbitrarily imprisoned for promoting an open civic space on 4 April 2024.	AfricanDefenders joined 79 NGOs, led by the Egyptian Front for Human Rights, in an urgent appeal calling for the immediate release of activist Mohamed Adel. The appeal highlighted the denial of medical care and threats of transfer to a notoriously inhumane detention facility following his request for better conditions.	AfricanDefenders, along with 27 other civil society groups, condemned President Saeid's xenophobic remarks about sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. They also demanded the immediate release of Sherifa Riahi, a member of AfricanDefenders' steering committee, and other detained activists, while calling for an end to escalating attacks on civil society and human rights defenders in the country.	AfricanDefenders wrote a letter to the Chairperson of ACHPR calling for the release of all activists and journalists detained. In collaboration with the Committee for Justice. AfricanDefenders also sent an urgent appeal to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders calling for action and solidarity in regard to the situation of HRDs in Tunisia.

STATEMENTS AT ACHPR81

1. NGO Forum statement
2. Statement on human rights situation
3. Statement Extractive Industries, Environment and Human Rights Violations in Africa
4. Statement on Women Human Rights Defenders
5. Statement on Exiled human rights defenders
6. Statement on Freedom of Expression and access to information for Africa
7. Statement on Human Rights Defenders

3.4

OTHER ADVOCACY PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

We facilitated the chairperson of the ACHPR-Hon. Rémy Ngoy Lumbu to participate in the Africa Electoral Justice Network meeting in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe leading to the adoption of the network's constitutive statute, marking establishment of a Pan African knowledge hub for electoral justice across region.

In Senegal, amidst the backdrop of political crisis following the postponement of the presidential elections, AfricanDefenders conducted strategic meetings to dialogue with prominent CSO leaders including bloggers (African League of Bloggers and Web-Activists for Democracy -AfricTivistes⁵) and media professionals in the country. At the meetings, Hassan Shire applauded the resilience of HRDs in fighting for the subsistence of democratic principles and upholding press freedom in the face of undemocratic governance. Further, he affirmed his reassurance of a reactive protection support mechanism for HRDs and facilitating their access to both regional and international mechanisms mandated to protect human rights. In Burkina Faso, similar meetings were conducted with select Burkinabe HRDs to provide technical support on how to navigate the current operating context. Further, under the theme, "Democracy, Youth and Technology", DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders participated in a panel discussion on democratic values within the African context in collaboration with Yiaga Africa, The Carter Center and Accountability Lab-Zambia. During this meeting, 3 beneficiaries of the Ubuntu Hub Cities Initiative from Senegal, Zimbabwe and Liberia testified about the work of DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders therefore raising the profile of our protection mechanism.

Other notable engagements included our participation at the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) inaugural meeting through which we provided input to inform the roadmap on key areas of focus for the Working Group. Additionally, AfricanDefenders, in collaboration with the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, supported the convening of the Inter-Mechanism dialogue in Washington D.C between Commissioners and Secretariats of the ACHPR and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The discussions centered around advancing collaboration between the two mechanisms following their last in-person meeting in April 2023. Notably we strengthened collaboration with the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) and enhanced their capacity to engage with human rights mechanisms. Specifically, the UHRC Chairperson, Hon. Mariam Wangadya engaged with ACHPR members and special mechanisms, while some staff received training on technology, cyber security, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Finally, in collaboration with the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-Asia) and Defenders Coalition Kenya, we hosted a workshop in Nairobi which provided a space for digital practitioners, online activists, social movement members and HRDs from Africa and Asia to network, promote solidarity, and peer exchange in addressing digital repression faced by HRDs.

3.5

AMPLIFIED HRD VISIBILITY AND PROFILES FOR PROTECTION

DefendDefenders recognised (W)HRDs, amplifying and drawing more attention to their outstanding work. The 12 (W)HRDs (4 males, 8 females) were drawn from Uganda (3), Tanzania, Somalia (2), Sudan (2), Burundi (2), Kenya and Eritrea whose work and activism shed important light on the different human rights struggles in their respective countries.



January 2024

Pamela Angwech Judith

"If we don't protect the environment, our land will be degraded, rainy seasons will begin to change which will affect food production and bring back hunger."



February 2024

Aida Musa

"DD introduced us to networks of fellow refugees and other exiled HRDs. These have become a major source of solidarity – we realized that our plight is shared."



March 2024

Leon Ntakiyiruta

"The journey might be long but eventually, justice wins. On my part, I will always be grateful to organisations like DD which supported that difficult part of my journey."



April 2024

Apollo Mukasa

"I refused to be defined by my circumstances. Instead, I was driven by a deep-seated determination to advocate for change and empower individuals facing similar struggles."



May 2024

Asmahan Abulsala

"We are focused on supporting as many women as possible to get involved in public affairs."



June 2024

Elizabeth Chyrum

"There have been many challenging moments, but the resilience and courage of the people I advocate for continually inspire me."



July 2024

Peter Michael Madeleka

"To be a human rights defender is not an easy task. One has to sacrifice his or her life."



August 2024

Iman Ahmed Abdikarim

"14 years old and pregnant - she was a child carrying another child, without a home or support, and that deeply affected me. This case served as a poignant reminder of the importance of defending the rights of the most vulnerable, especially children."



September 2024

Daniel Ngendakumana

"I focus on patriotism because it is crucial to awaken the spirit of today's and tomorrow's leaders."



October 2024

Peace Monica Pimer

"Together, we can create a safer, more supportive environment for HRDs and safeguard both human rights and the planet for future generations."



Rachael Mwikali

"Our movement is about solidarity for all—across communities. We must continue pushing for systemic change, not just for ourselves, but for future generations."



Somaia Musa Adam Haran

"Completing education for girls is vital because it is the pathway to social, economic, political, and cultural empowerment."

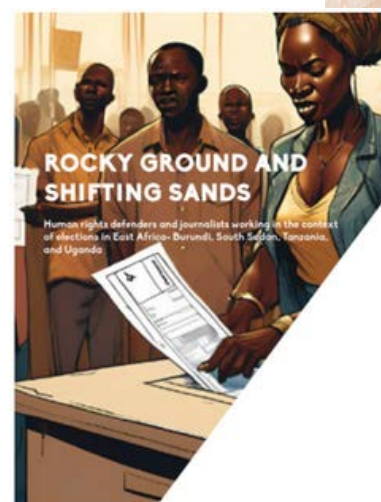
3.6

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS



DefendDefenders launched a twin report titled; Is the Tide Turning? How States Vote on Africa-Focused Resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council. The report examines among others: (i) how states vote on resolutions on African countries; (ii) whether factors or determinants of vote can be identified; (iii) why resolutions are put to a vote, as opposed to being adopted by consensus; (iv) what kind of initiatives states support/oppose the most; (v) whether the behaviour of different groups of states differs; and (vi) whether evolutions can be identified. The report was well received by diplomats, including Ambassadors, as the first ever comprehensive analysis of states' voting records and patterns on Africa-focused resolutions.

Likewise, we published Rocky Ground and Shifting Sands, examining upcoming elections in Burundi, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, highlighting the challenges and risks faced by HRDs, especially those working on the electoral processes, pro-democracy activists, journalists, political parties (mostly those in opposition), and local communities in these nations. We continued to bring light to the most pressing human rights issues in the East and Horn of Africa sub-region through our Biannual Reports for the periods October 2023 – April 2024 and May 2024 -October 2024. These reports were submitted ahead of the 79th and 81st ordinary sessions of the ACHPR. Ahead of the Universal Periodic Review of Ethiopia and Kenya, we facilitated a joint submission of 2 reports. For Ethiopia, the authors examine the Government of Ethiopia's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society, HRDs and journalists. In regard to Kenya, the report evaluates the Government of Kenya's implementation of recommendations received and accepted during the third UPR cycle, in 2020. The report assesses Kenya's international human rights obligations to foster a safe and supportive environment for HRDs including civil society.



4.

BOLSTERED HRD CAPACITY AND ACCESS TO TOOLS FOR CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT IN HUMAN RIGHTS WORK.



Holistic security management training- Mogadishu, Somalia



Physical and Digital security training- Karamoja, Uganda



Digital security Training-Tanzania



Resource Mobilisation training-Mbale, Uganda



SafeSister training-Uganda



Fixup support-Masindi, Uganda

4.1

BOOSTED TECHNICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF SUB-REGIONAL NETWORKS, NATIONAL COALITIONS & HRD ORGANISATIONS



Uganda UPR -MTR, Kampala, Uganda

DefendDefenders strengthened the technical capacity of sub-regional networks, national coalitions and organizations across the region. Through various initiatives, we facilitated knowledge-sharing and provided support to human rights defenders (HRDs) and their organisations to effectively engage in advocacy, provide emergency protection and enhance organizational management. Focus was on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, where DefendDefenders supported the National Coalition for Human Rights Defenders - Uganda in organizing workshops and validation meetings attracting 50 HRDs. Additionally, DefendDefenders facilitated the validation of the Civil Society Organization Universal Periodic Review (CSO-UPR) report, ensuring transparency and accountability in Uganda's human rights Uganda UPR -MTR, Kampala, Uganda commitments.

DefendDefenders strengthened partnerships by organizing a learning visit between the Somali Coalition and the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) allowing for an exchange of best practices related to governance structures, emergency protection procedures, and advocacy engagement. Furthermore, DefendDefenders played a crucial role in supporting the EHRDC to effectively utilize reporting mechanisms under the African and UN human rights systems. We also collaborated with CIVICUS and EHRDC to co-author Ethiopia's UPR shadow report.



Uganda UPR -MTR, Kampala, Uganda

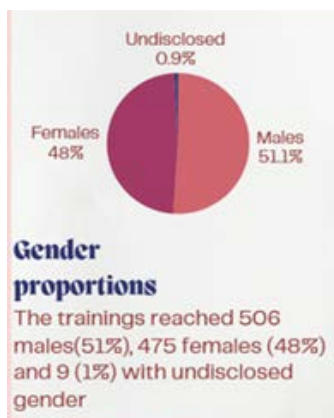


SudanDefenders' Office Opening- Kampala, Uganda Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) also benefited from targeted interventions. DefendDefenders, in partnership with key stakeholders, organized a webinar on the "Guide and Guidelines on the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa." This virtual briefing increased awareness of the specific risks faced by WHRDs and highlighted protection strategies in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 10, and 16. The East African Women Human Rights Defenders Network (EAWHRDN) further strengthened its organizational capacity through an annual general meeting that fostered meaningful dialogue and the launch of a strategic plan for 2025-2029. Similarly, SudanDefenders advanced its governance structures with DefendDefenders' support, including hosting a mid-year review and launching its coalition offices in Uganda, providing a safe space for to coordinate efforts towards exiled Sudanese HRDs.

Additional initiatives included facilitation of the engagement of the Kutakesa-Angolan Human Rights Defenders Movement with key international human rights bodies such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association and Assembly, Ms. Gina Romero, and the Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Prof. Remy Lumbu Ngoy. Further still, we conducted engagements to revitalize the Somalia's Human Rights Defenders Network, providing technical and logistical support to the

SSHRDN and the Cairo Institution for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) respectively. DefendDefenders also played a key role in high-level advocacy efforts, supporting individual HRDs from Uganda, Burundi, and Sudan in strategic meetings with UN officials and independent experts. Moreover, through the Weaving and Resilience Initiative, DefendDefenders facilitated capacity-strengthening for the NCHRD-U, DCK and THRDC ensuring better protection mechanisms and collaboration. The Focal Points meeting of EHAHRD-Net further reinforced regional coordination, allowing representatives from 12 countries to discuss emerging human rights trends and strategic directions.

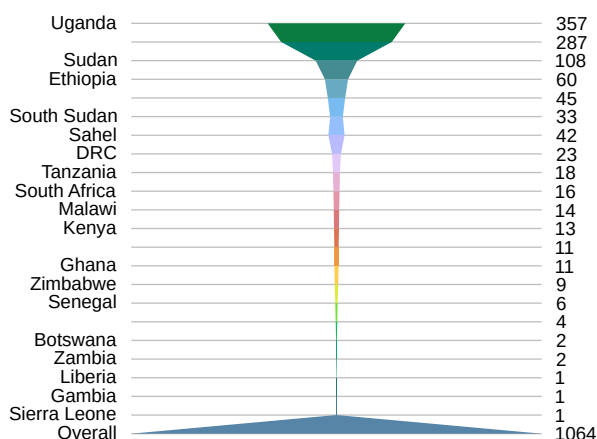
4.2 INCREASED CAPACITY FOR INDIVIDUAL HRDS



Under the capacity building program, we strengthened the capacity of 1064 HRDs through 63 training workshops and continued to play a leading role in strengthening the work of individual HRDs, existing national coalitions and networks. This was made possible through collaborations from all departments, especially the technology team and the protection and security management team as detailed below.

These trainings equipped HRDs with essential knowledge and skills to navigate security risks, reinforcing their capacities in the face of emerging threats. Beyond the security management training sessions, the training teams supported the development of security plans for both individual HRDs and their organizations, ensuring that participants can ably assess their risks and identify mitigation measures for continued delivery on their human rights work.

“The training on project proposal development enabled us to streamline the process of proposal writing. We wrote a proposal requesting funds to complete the multipurpose training hall and we were able to get 40 million in August last year from Civil Rights Defenders. We were also able to write to Frontline Defenders and we were given a grant of 26 million in December 2023 for the protection of WHRDs and building a database for WHRDs in Bunyoro submission plus document their challenges.” – Benon Tusingwire, Executive Director, NAVODA. To reinforce learning and sustain the impact of the trainings, follow-ups were also conducted to provide continuous support to HRDs in the development and implementation of their security plans. These engagements allowed HRDs to strengthen their understanding of key concepts, and address any challenges encountered in practice.



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“The training on project proposal development enabled us to streamline the process of proposal writing. We wrote a proposal requesting funds to complete the multipurpose training hall and we were able to get 40 million in August last year from Civil Rights Defenders. We were also able to write to Frontline Defenders and we were given a grant of 26 million in December 2023 for the protection of WHRDs and building a database for WHRDs in Bunyoro submission plus document their challenges.” – Benon Tusingwire, Executive Director, NAVODA

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OVERALL = 1064

4.3

STRENGTHENED HRD ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY AND SAFETY

We enhanced the capacity of HRD organizations and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across the African continent through organizational needs and security assessments for 78 HRD organizations and Civil Society Organisations in Uganda. The purpose was to: assess challenges faced by grassroots HRDs; identify key hotspots of security and safety concerns of community based HRDs, and identify gaps in the community-based HRD work and protection across the country.

Additionally, we conducted 39 HRD organizations audits in Uganda, South Africa, Sudan, Kenya, and Tanzania using the SAFETAG framework. The digital security audit focused on identifying digital security weaknesses of the organizations and appropriate fixups to reduce digital security risks. Finally, we provided support to 38 organizations including but not limited to procuring and installation of laptops, installation of standard applications, antivirus software and operating system (Microsoft), enabling password management applications and encryption protocols, providing external hard drives and WIFI routers as identified and stated in the audit reports respectively. For example, DefendDefenders used the SAFETAG framework to assess the digital security weaknesses of Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG) an organisation that works on democracy and governance rights. Because of the upcoming 2026 elections in the country, DefendDefenders sought to enhance the digital security of CCG by providing support in form of a digital security audit that provided the findings and a risk reduction plan in form of fix-up that the organisation utilised to reduce its digital security risks and create a safe working environment.

“

“Before, we had never engaged in such an exercise, we would only receive basic support from our IT consultant such as installation of new antivirus, networking printers and technical fixing. So, we didn't really know how bad it was for us in terms of digital security. For instance, we didn't know that giving our WIFI password to someone could be risky as they would use it to hack the system. The risks we knew were quite basic and we needed that critical eye. So, with this activity, it was mind blowing and eye opening. It helped us to understand that if you don't change your password regularly that is a problem. And even things like using my personal laptop for work or even sharing it with a colleague poses a security risk for the organisation in case it is stolen. Since this exercise I have actually stopped using my personal laptop at work and my colleague received a laptop from DefendDefenders including back-up drives and power back up devices to be utilized by the organization.”

Ms. Judith Atim, the head of programs at CCG, says this on the benefit of the security audit and Fix-up

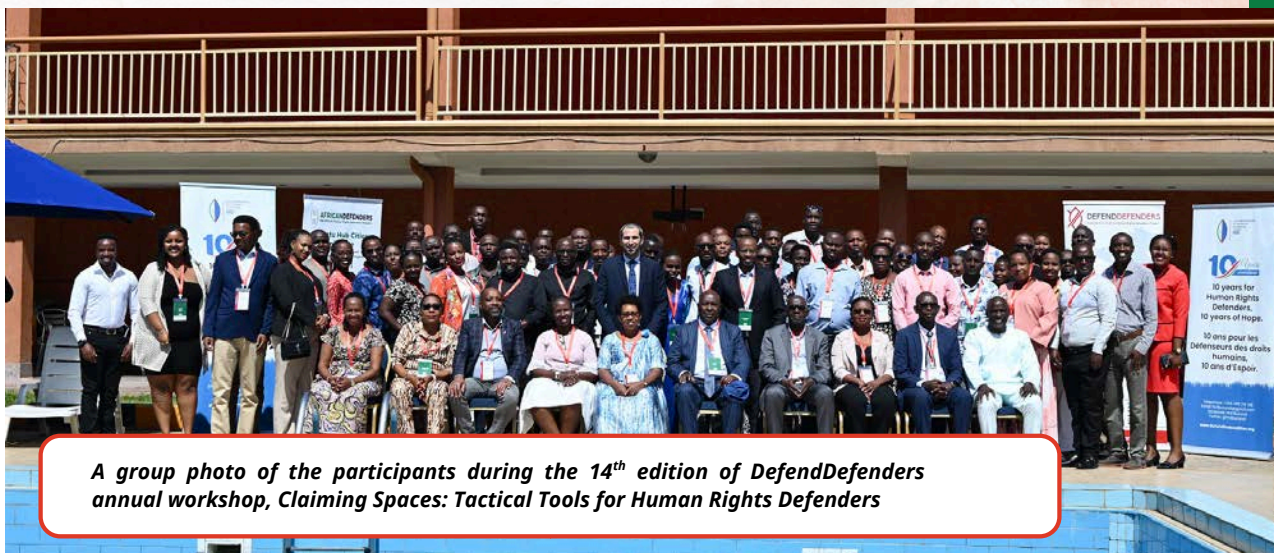
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4.4

CLAIMING SPACES

DefendDefenders, in collaboration with the Burundian Human Rights Defenders Coalition (CBDDH), held the 14th edition of its annual capacity building event, “Claiming Spaces: Tactical Tools for Human Rights Defenders”, from November 4-6, 2024, in Mbarara, Uganda. This edition marked the CBDDH's 10th anniversary and was dedicated to Burundi, highlighting the resilience of Burundian HRDs in exile. The event enhanced capacity for 74 HRDs reflected on the challenges and successes of Burundian HRDs. A roundtable discussion analyzed the state of civic space in Burundi, with panelists addressing repression, restrictive laws, electoral challenges, and advocacy efforts at the international level. The discussions emphasized the role of HRDs in sustaining international attention on Burundi's human rights situation despite continued persecution.





A group photo of the participants during the 14th edition of DefendDefenders annual workshop, Claiming Spaces: Tactical Tools for Human Rights Defenders

The capacity-building sessions focused on physical and digital safety, resource mobilization, and monitoring, documentation, and reporting of human rights violations. Participants highlighted the skills gained, particularly in fundraising, security, and advocacy strategies. The event concluded with an award ceremony recognizing outstanding HRDs for their dedication and contributions to the CBDDH. DefendDefenders reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Burundian HRDs, and all participants received certificates in recognition of their engagement. Claiming Spaces 2024 ended on a note of solidarity and encouragement for continued efforts in advancing human rights in Burundi.



Hassan Shire, Executive Director, DefendDefenders delivers welcome remarks at the opening of Claiming Spaces event on November 4, 2024, at Hotel Triangle, Mbarara, Uganda.



Panel discussion on the state of civic space in Burundi at Claiming Spaces on 4th November 2024 at Hotel Triangle, Mbarara, Uganda

ACCENTUATED DEFENDDEFENDERS' INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR EFFECTIVE HRD PROTECTION

5.1 Increased organisational compliance, efficiency, and effectiveness.

We continued to make efforts to ensure that all required running software on devices for staff are up to date. Microsoft Dynamics 365 was deployed within the organization's digital ecosystem. This application will enhance adherence to compliance requirements for industry standards and regulations so that DefendDefenders can protect sensitive data and meet regulatory requirements.

The capacity-building initiatives in the year also supported the outcomes on increasing compliance, by equipping staff with the skills needed for consistent implementation of DefendDefenders' systems and processes including a Prevention from Sexual Exploitation Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH), the SEAH policy was subsequently disseminated to staff to reinforce the knowledge shared and ensure consistent application.

5.2 Improved financial management systems and operational efficiency.

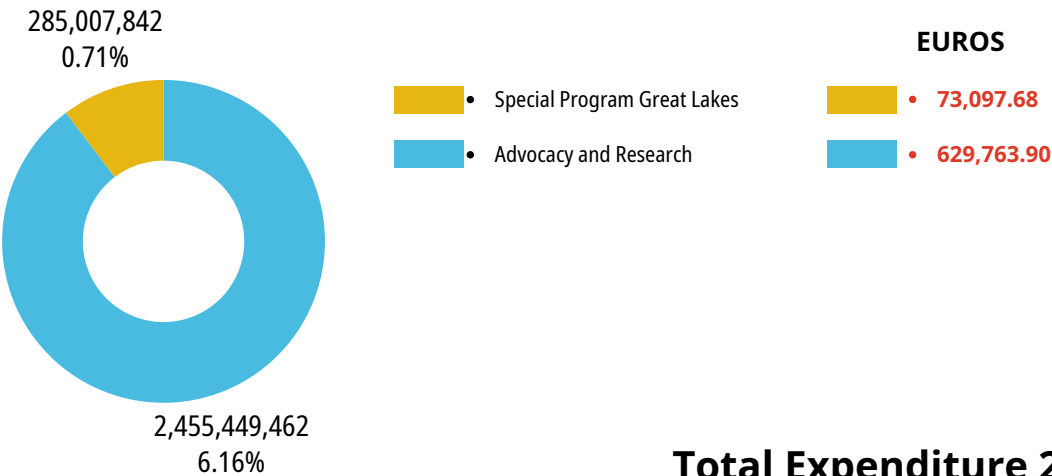
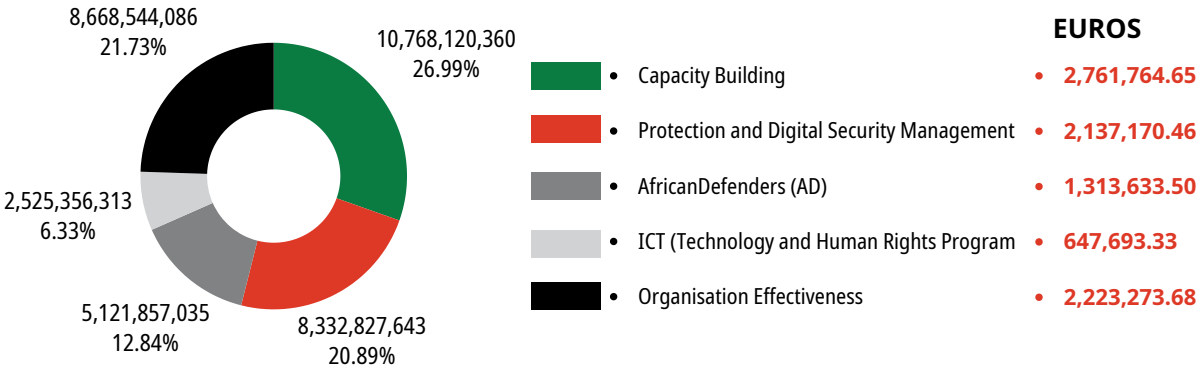
DefendDefenders maintained operational efficiency with an better and more timely staff and partner accountabilities. This was aided by the introduction of a financial tracker for submission of accountabilities and requisitions. Additionally, we renewed the Quickbooks accounting software subscription to remain compliant and enhance security of financial data. DefendDefenders was able to conduct all the internal and external project audits aimed at improving efficiency. In 2024, we organized a training on compliance with FIA as a measure to enhance compliance with the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) regulations including filing annual reports. This was through a training in Anti-Money Laundering, counter terrorism and proliferation financing for staff conducted in August 2024 by the FIA. Additionally, DefendDefenders continued to implement a program led budget to improve operational efficiency and maximise benefits for HRDs as per the summary below:

Total Income 2024

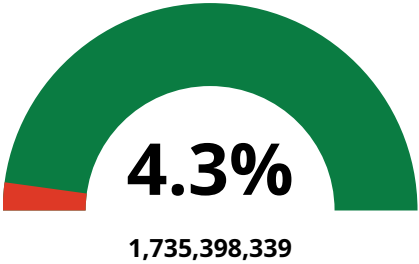
Ugx 39,892,561,080

Euro 10,231,485.27

%age Expenditure to Income

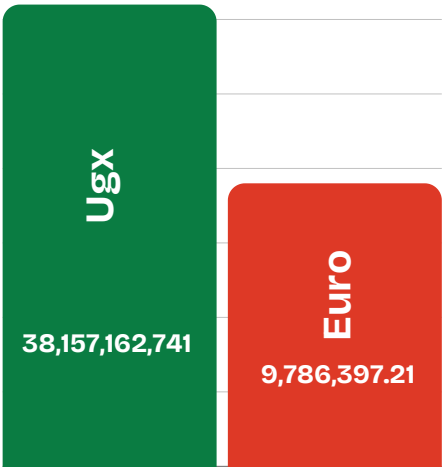


Balance C/f to



Percentage Balance C/f

Total Expenditure 2024



5.3

Better risk management systems, and timely risk detection and mitigation.

DefendDefenders continued to rollout quarterly internal audits as a risk management strategy. Management continued to monitor institution-wide risks, including program related risks against the complex operating environment in the East and Horn Sub-region and across the African continent to institute measures to mitigate the likelihood of occurrence and impact. This monitoring exercise is done every two months. The Board of Directors continued to provide oversight on risk management, reviewing and signing on audit reports and advising management during visits and meetings. Additionally external audits for specific project as well as institutional audits were carried out. DefendDefenders developed a new risk assessment and management matrix to efficiently detect risk and mitigate the risks in the strongly changing context.

5.4

Strengthened Governance, Leadership, and Organisational Oversight.

DefendDefenders maintained strong governance practices with the Board providing an oversight role on management operations. The Board held 4 quarterly meetings to reflect on our milestones, key challenges and discuss the strategic direction looking at final year of the Strategy 2021-2025. DefendDefenders also convened the Advisory Council as the 7th Focal Points Meeting of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-N) at Speke Resort Munyonyo, Kampala, Uganda, on October 1–2, 2024. The Focal Points meeting was graced by H.E. Maria Håkansson, Ambassador of Sweden to Uganda. The meeting focused civic space and country updates, cross-border issues, and emerging trends, with testimonies from Ethiopia and Sudan standing out as symbols of hope for the continent. Hassan Shire, the Executive Director DefendDefenders and Chairperson AfricanDefenders emphasized the importance of these countries' democratic progress and youth- and women-led movements in shaping greater freedoms. Additionally, the EHAHRD-NET's performance was presented with a panel discussion on observations, recommendations, and the way forward. Participants reflected on the findings of the mid-term evaluation of DefendDefenders' Strategy and engaged in discussions to shape the next strategy for 2026–2030. Country-specific action points, the Munyonyo Declaration and a roadmap for implementing the new strategy, were generated reinforcing the commitment to strengthening human rights protection across the region. The event was attended by a total of 79 HRDs (35 males, 24 females)



Participants at the 7th Focal Points Meeting, Speke Resort Munyonyo, Kampala.

5.5

A Motivated, Engaged, and Performing Workforce



DefendDefenders remained committed to maintaining a highly motivated and well-equipped team of staff. In June, DefendDefenders held its mid-year staff retreat to reflect on the work and build synergy for the rest of the year. To crown off the year we held our annual staff retreat in November attended by 53 staff (30 females, 23 males). The team reflected on the annual progress, planning for the next period and strategic conversations to guide the development of the Strategy 2026-2030. During the opening session, the staff benefitted from presentations by 2 guest speakers, Marcel Clement Akpovo from the regional representative, UN office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, East Africa Regional Office and Musa Gassama from UN Office of OHCHR, Director Human Rights Division and Representative on the OHCHR in South Sudan. They highlighted key milestones in the advancement of human rights, challenges faced, and emerging trends that will shape the landscape in the years to come. Additionally, they delved into the history of DefendDefenders, recounting its founding journey, the driving forces behind its establishment, and its role in safeguarding human rights defenders. The discussion underscored the importance of continued collaboration and strategic advocacy to strengthen human rights protection efforts.



From left to right: Mr Marcel Clement Akopovo, Mr. Hassan Shire, and Mr. Musa Gassama

In the year, DefendDefenders did farewell to 6 staff, as well as welcomed 6 new staff members and interns, with several staff members were promoted as indicated below.

Promotions			
S/N	Name	Former position	New position
1	Rosabella Ntanzu	Ag. Program Manger	Program Manager
2	Walda Keza	Program Officer	Senior Program Officer
3	Zainah Nakato	Administrative Associate	Administrative Executive
4	Okudo Kateu Raphael	Office Messenger	Senior Office Messenger
5	Christabell Nephertiti	Consultant	Program Assistant
6	Shamim Nakato	Welfare Assistant	Procurement Associate
7	Kikaawa Nantume Eva	Fellow	Technology Associate
8	Juliana Nambuya	Fellow	Capacity Building Assistant

New staff/ Interns		
1	Spencer Marume	Business Development and Fundraising Officer - CHARM
2	Kikaawa Nantume Eva	Fellow - DDTech
3	Abdikani Hassan	ICT Compliance and Audit Officer -DDTech
4	Emmanuel Nkengurutse	Intern - AfricanDefenders
5	Jane Nakanwagi	Welfare Intern
6	Rita Kanya Mbabazi	Communications Officer

As we concluded the year, staff received awards including the best two employees of the year, Proscovia Nyamutono – Snr Finance Officer and Okudo Kateu Raphael – Snr Office Messenger who received the prestigious award of the year 2024 for their outstanding performance. Relatedly, the management recognised and awarded the efforts of the staff who have served for five and ten years at DefendDefenders respectively. These included

S/N	Name	Position	Award
1	Karis Moses Oteba	Senior Protection Officer	Ten Years
2	Nakabugo Daphne	Data & Web Campaign Lead	Five years
3	Gentrix Barasa	Communication Associate	Five years
4	Okudo Kateu Raphael	Senior Office Messenger	Five years

As part of the accountability and engagement of key funding stakeholders, DefendDefenders held the 7th Annual Development Partners' meeting to discuss our progress and feedback regarding the strategy 2021-2025, budget performance and mechanisms to enhance collaboration with donors and partners. The meeting was attended by representatives of: the Kingdom of the Netherlands Embassy, EWMI, Bread for the World, Kingdom of Netherlands Embassy in Sudan, National Endowment for Democracy, Embassy of Ireland in Uganda, UN Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund, Save The Children, and Royal Norwegian Embassy - Tanzania.



Representatives of Development Partners, DD Board Members and Management Team

Additionally, DefendDefenders maintained a robust relationship with key funding partners and donors. This entailed holding strategic meetings with development partners such as SIDA at their regional office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Bread for the World in Berlin, Elisabeth Selbert Initiative, Iceland, EWMI and Danish Embassy among others. We received calls for proposals and prepared 10[1] project proposal documents and successfully closing 7 projects. While 7 projects closed, we secured 5 new grants from the Norwegian Embassy in Tanzania, USAID, Irene M. Staehelin Foundation (IMS), Elisabeth Selbert Initiative (ESI) and Danish Embassy in Uganda to advance the protection agenda for HRDs. DefendDefenders therefore maintained support from the following partners and donors in 2024:

[1] A total of 10 proposals were submitted to: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Finland (1), Norwegian Embassy (2), Canada Fund for Local initiatives (1), Danish Embassy, the Open Technology Fund (OTF), Swedish Arts Council, Democracy International for a grant with a focus on Burkina Faso, European Union embassy in Bujumbura for a project focusing on Burundi and a joint submission to the European Union for a grant on Ethiopia.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Belgium Ministry of Development Cooperation | 15 . Open Society Foundation- Africa |
| 2. Brot fur die Welt (Bread for the World) | 16. Open Technology Fund |
| 3. CHARM with SIDA funds | 17. Royal Danish Embassy in Uganda |
| 4. CIVICUS | 18. Save the Children |
| 5. Elisabeth Selbert Initiative | 19. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (core funding) |
| 6. European Commission through ProtectDefenders.eu | 20. UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund |
| 7. Ford Foundation | 21. Embassy of Ireland in Uganda |
| 8. Irene M. Staehelin (IMS) Foundation | 22. Embassy of Iceland in Kampala |
| 9. Kingdom of Netherlands Embassy in Uganda | 23. Democracy International - Uganda |
| 10. Kingdom of Netherlands Embassy in South Sudan | 24. Democracy International - Burkina Faso |
| 11. Kingdom of Netherlands Embassy in Sudan | 25. Norwegian Embassy in Tanzania |
| 12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Netherlands through SCC Alliance | 26. USAID |
| 13. National Endowment for Democracy | 27. Meta (Facebook) |
| 14. Open Society Foundation | |

5.7

Improved Programme Quality, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.

DefendDefenders sustained its commitment to better programme quality, foster accountability and learning through generation and submission of over 20 grants reports. We enhanced M&E capacity for 12 staff of Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center. We rolled out outcome harvesting processes for the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) programme in (7) seven countries including Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Sahel (Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali). Similarly, we conducted monitoring visits to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and interacted with HRDs to understand how our support had contributed to their safety and continued engagement in HR work.



The feedback from the M&E visits was incorporated back into the respective projects for improvement. We completed an external endline evaluation for the project supported by Bread for the World, and the findings contributed to our reflection, learning and successor project design. To enhance aid transparency, we published data for two projects on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) platform. Likewise, the M&E Expert attended the IATI members assembly in Columbia and Kenya to collaborate on data for learning including the IATI Members and Community Exchange, enhancing knowledge-sharing and collaboration. Additionally, engaged in consultations on the development of the new strategy 2026-2030. A final Strategy is expected to be ready by March 2025. Finally, we documented stories of change to capture the personal experiences and impact of our support towards the Sudanese WHRDs.

5.8

Better Profiles, Visibility, and Communication for HRD Safety and Protection

5.8.1 WHRDs Campaigns

DefendDefenders executed its annual [#SheDefends](#) campaign to commemorate International Women's Day, highlighting the outstanding work women human rights defenders do in their communities, against deep-rooted social and institutional challenges, and stigma. The campaign challenged stakeholders to rise to the occasion to ensure that WHRDs are protected as they continue their work.

#DefendersStories



AfricanDefenders started the year off, with a spotlight on a WHRD from Eswatini. The story highlights the defender's journey maneuvering severe attacks and reprisals faced by her husband which ultimately claimed his life, in January 2023.

In June, DefendDefenders executed a Wellbeing and Refugee held a week-long wellbeing campaign with the goal of enhancing self-care practices that empower HRDs. Additionally, a two-day Refugee campaign was held and highlighted the challenges encountered by exiled HRDs, aligning with the UN's World Refugee Theme for 2024- "Solidarity with refugees"



During the 16 days of activism, DefendDefenders carried out a campaign under the theme "Her Fight, Our Rights," featuring a Conversations with Defenders podcast series with Ambassador Hughes Chantry of Belgium and Ambassador Fredique Quespeil of the Netherlands. The campaign also highlighted the work of WHRDs through the SafeSisters program, showcasing their efforts to protect women's rights within their communities. This initiative amplified the voices of HRDs, raising awareness of the challenges they face while emphasizing the importance of solidarity and ongoing action in the fight for women's rights and gender equality, especially during the campaign.



5.8.2 Celebrating International Human Rights Day

On December 10, we commemorated the International Human Rights Day under the theme "Our rights, our future, right now" which serves as a powerful call for reflection on the impact of our work. The theme challenged us to critically assess how we measure success and whether our efforts lead to meaningful solutions for global challenges. Additionally, it encouraged us to counter negative stereotypes surrounding human rights work and to mobilize and reinvigorate the global human rights movement. These reflections ensure that our efforts remain focused, impactful, and responsive to the urgent need for change



5.8.3 Media Engagements



To mark International Human Rights Day, DefendDefenders published an article on December 10, in the Daily Monitor, reflecting on the evolution of the United Nations Human Rights Defenders (UNHRD) Declaration since its adoption in 1998. The article highlighted the importance of protecting and promoting human rights, focusing on the role of human rights defenders and the need for ongoing support and protection in light of evolving global challenges. As part of the 25th anniversary of the Declaration, DefendDefenders and 17 other organizations initiated a project to revisit and enhance the UNHRD Declaration. This effort resulted in Declaration + 25, adopted in Bangkok, which supplements the original Declaration with updated parameters for protecting HRDs. The updated document emphasizes the need for a safer environment for HRDs, calls for the end of stigmatization and criminalization of HRDs, and includes protections for digital and psychosocial risks. It also stresses the protection of HRDs and their communities during conflict and post-conflict settings.

5.8.4 A synopsis on strategic themes

a) Disability rights

DefendDefenders continued to make deliberate efforts to engage with Persons living with Disabilities (PWDs) in program implementation. For instance, a comprehensive security assessment was conducted, benefiting 7 women-led disability rights organizations in Mbale and Busia districts. Tailored recommendations were shared with each organization to address the identified gaps and mitigate further risks and threats. Additionally, we supported 1 female disability rights defender from Ethiopia to attend a two-day workshop in Kenya, celebrating women defenders with disabilities and their work. The event brought together WHRDs from Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda to foster networking, solidarity, and knowledge-sharing.

b) Gender and Women Human Rights Defenders

In 2024, DefendDefenders continued to support engagements that promote women's rights and foster gender mainstreaming across programs. This included convening the Annual general Meeting of the EAWHRDN in partnership with OHCHR (East Africa Regional office) bringing together 30 WHRDs to dialogue on issues pertaining to the guidelines on the protection of WHRDs in Africa and also launch their strategic plan 2025-2029. We also ran a month-long campaign ahead of International Women's Day to highlight outstanding work WHRDs conduct in their communities, against deep-rooted social and institutional challenges and stigma. AfricanDefenders virtually participated in a workshop on protection mechanisms for WHRDs in Cameroon and held sessions on digital rights and social media guidelines for WHRDs. Additionally, under the United Nations Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), DefendDefenders continued to support the documentation of success stories for WHRDs that were beneficiaries of the emergency protection intervention under the project. DefendDefenders also supported 7 WHRDs to attend the 2nd edition of the WHRDs Convention that took place in Accra, Ghana where they benefitted from conversations around achievements and experiences of WHRDs on the continent.



Launch of the EAWHRDN's Strategic Plan

c) Environment and Climate Change

The research on the “State of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Tanzania, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo” was translated into French, so that it could be disseminated to reach a wider audience. Another key milestone was our participation in a meeting with the Environmental Rights Agreement Working Group. This platform was instrumental in providing updates on ongoing case studies across various sub-regions, contributing valuable insights toward the development of a comprehensive continental environmental rights agreement framework. More to this, 1 WHRD from Uganda was supported to attend the 81st ACHPR session to foster partnerships to safeguard environmental justice. AfricanDefenders also participated in the monthly meeting of the Environmental Rights Agreement (ERA) working group. During the discussions, it was noted that the Open Society Fund had invited the working group coordinators to submit a proposal for a five-year program aimed at strengthening the Environmental Rights Agreement, with a focus on institutional development. As part of our ongoing commitment to supporting Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), we expressed interest in joining the technical support team to contribute to this initiative.

6.

STORIES OF CHANGE

Story #1: From Activism to Exile



At 26 years of age, a vibrant woman human rights defender whose work in democracy, women's rights and legal support has contributed to the growing movement for democracy and human rights in Sudan. This has exposed her to personal threats from state and non-state actors. She narrates.

“As a member of the resistance committees in my area, we were continuously questioned, accused of receiving funds from external parties, and even accused of being allies to the military by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) soldiers who were controlling the area where I lived in Southern Khartoum. We were also aware that the RSF soldiers were tracking people who uploaded information on Meta (formerly Facebook) and then raiding their homes. Between October and November 2023, the RSF soldiers raided my house and took my phone and laptop.”

Amidst all that, the RSF soldiers continued to intimidate my colleagues and I by demanding our support on social media. When these threats persisted, my family and I left Khartoum and went to White Nile State where I began to work with shelter centres that provide support for internally displaced people (IDPs). The threats continued through the neighborhood youth aligned with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), vowing to invade White Nile State if we did not support them online. When the war broke out and the RSF invaded Al Jazirah State, the work that I was doing on documenting human rights violations was disrupted because I lost communication with my contacts. For 9 months, my family and I struggled to survive in White Nile State until someone from my network sent me the link to the DefendDefenders grant's application. Because of the internet cut offs, I had to travel to the borders of South Sudan to find connectivity and complete my application process. In February 2024, I finally received a grant, which I used to pay for a visa and a ticket to relocate, where I stayed for about 3 weeks. I then used the rest of the funds to cater for my relocation to another country and rent a house in the city for two months, during which time I registered as a refugee. I also sent some of the grant money back to my family in Sudan. This grant had a big impact on my mental health. I didn't feel safe at all in Khartoum or White Nile states. I also couldn't work. Since I left Sudan, I feel safer and generally better about my wellbeing. Regarding work, I can now go back to documenting human rights violations in my country. I want to thank DefendDefenders and WPHF for this grant. It has made a huge difference in my life."

Story #2: Struggle and triumph against military intimidation.

A 50 year old, WHRD has been involved in a number of action groups conducting activism and advocacy focusing on women's rights in Sudan. Because of her dedication to this work, criticism and threats are not new. In 2021, after the coup, while she served as one of the leading advocates for a prominent action group, she was summoned by the military investigation unit for questioning, together with other political leaders. She was warned during the questioning to stop issuing public statements (about democracy and regime change) that seemed to incite the public. The threats continued as she kept receiving phone calls from the military investigation unit whose intention was to let her know that she was being watched. She had this to say about the impact of these threats.

“

"Before the coup, we were working with a great sense of freedom. Afterwards, we started feeling that everyone around us could be an informant. This seriously affected our work. Since I was the one writing the statements of the action group, I became very afraid of how this would impact me, my children, and my husband. I had to change the way I work and went back to raising awareness among women."

”

Relatedly, in April 2023 when the war broke out, she and other WHRDs began to organize a public protest to express their disapproval of the conflict. When the head of security and intelligence in Blue Nile state got news of this, he summoned her to his office. She was interrogated for three hours; and was accused of receiving funds from 'external powers.' She was then ordered to stop organizing the protest. This incident made her understand that they were being watched and that the security forces would continue intimidating them. With this realization, she was catalyzed to prioritize the well-being of her children. She explored through her connections until a colleague of hers sent her the link to a protection grant application. She was supported and as she asserts.



“

"In March, I received a grant which I utilized to relocate myself and the children to another country where they have been able to continue their education. This support made me feel much safer and at peace, allowing me to continue my work without being overly anxious about the impact of my activism on my family. I am utterly grateful to DefendDefenders for their support as it made me feel heard. DefendDefenders understands our situation and empathizes with us."

Story #3: Championing Sexual Reproductive Health Rights: Hope Nalumansi story of Resilience!

Hope, is a young ardent woman human rights defender (WHRD) working in Busia as a Project Coordinator for the Joint Advocacy for Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (JAS) program at the Women With a Mission (WWM). Through this organisation, she advocates for the rights of the most vulnerable in her community, including women and female sex workers. Despite the good her work brings, Hope faces adversity with constant encounters of threats and intimidation from those in authority meant to protect her. Some of the perpetrators of these threats are community leaders, business owners, law enforcement officials, and even political figures. Most of the time, these threats aim at silencing her and hindering her efforts. However, Hope remains resolute in educating her community about their fundamental rights and providing crucial information related to sexual and reproductive health.



Unfortunately, some of these threats have resulted in a vandalism incident at the WWM field office, where vital equipment was stolen, significantly impacting the ability of staff to continue their work. Recognizing the urgent need for support, WWM reached out to DefendDefenders for support to enable them continue working. As a response, DefendDefenders provided a laptop, to enable Hope continue her work. Furthermore, Hope's commitment to her cause led to her nomination for the "SafeSisters" training programme by DefendDefenders.

The Safe Sisters' training was relevant to Hope, as it improved Hope's capacity in digital security and safety. With this, Hope strengthened her online engagement and safety with a rollout of strong passwords to restrict unauthorized access. She also made a conscious decision to migrate from the widely used WhatsApp to Signal messaging app as a more secure. The training also boosted her confidence in proposal writing, an invaluable skill that will help her in writing funding proposals. In her own words, Hope reflects on the impact of the training, stating,

“

“My husband is amazed by the number of passwords I have for the apps on my phone, because I did not have any before the Safe Sisters' training”

”

This testimony from Hope underscores the importance of providing protection support to those who champion the rights of others. It also highlights the need for continued engagement in capacity building initiatives that ensure WHRDs are resilient and continue their vital work in a safe and secure environment.

Story #4: Advocates in Action: Strengthening Human Rights Engagements

The theme of the NGO forum and the ACHPR centered around the African Union's (AU) 2024 theme on the ongoing importance of addressing education in the broader context of human rights and development on the African continent. This theme was particularly relevant to Pimer Peace Monica who participated in both forums as a panelist and in several side events. Pimer is the founder and Executive Director of Nile Girls Forum, and reflecting on her experience, Peace found the engagement quite timely and relevant as it coincided with the organization's strategic planning process. She notes “I realized that our priority areas were not adequately aligned with those of the regional mechanism, we now have to think through our thematic areas and how they can be aligned to the priorities to the commission.” In terms of how she benefited, she highlights that her participation in the forums has provided opportunities for cross-regional collaboration and capacity enhancement in advocacy as the ACHPR was one of the spaces her organization was actively seeking to penetrate.

Story #5: Overcoming Fear and Insecurity in Conflict and Continued MRD.



Pandy (not his real name) is a human rights defender working with the Union of Families for the Search for Peace (UFARE), based in Kiwanja, in the Rutshuru territory of North Kivu, DRC. The region is perpetually scarred by conflict, with Pandy's primarily focusing on monitoring and documenting human rights violations. Pandy's life took a dramatic turn in 2021 with the outbreak of the M23 War in eastern DRC when rebels began seizing and taking control of villages and localities. The escalating violence made it impossible for him and his team to safely continue their work in areas under rebel control. Recognizing the growing danger and the urgent need to protect its staff, UFARE reached out to DefendDefenders for emergency support. Fortunately, in March 2023, Pandy and four other members of the organization were relocated from Kiwanja to Kanyabayonga in North Kivu, allowing them to continue their critical work, in a safer location. Additionally, DefendDefenders provided training in digital security, equipping him with the skills to safeguard sensitive information. Additionally, he received training in Kobo Toolbox, further strengthening his capacity to document human rights violations. In 2024, Pandy was able to continue to monitor, document, and report on human rights violations in conflict affected regions of DRC using Kobo. Pandy's dedication extends beyond his own work as he actively shares his knowledge with others, training fellow human rights defenders on how to work safely and effectively, in the most hostile environments.

“

“I would like to thank DefendDefenders for the continued assistance they provide to human rights defenders. This support is the helping hand we all need when we are down.”

”

7. OUR 2024 TEAM

Executive Directors office

- Hassan Shire - Executive Director
- Susan Ibale - Program Officer

Finance Department

- Alex Lukoye - Senior Finance Manager
- Nyamutono Proscovia Ititu - Senior Finance Officer
- Jane Ngabirano - Finance Officer
- Rebecca Kisaakye - Finance Officer
- Sandra Nakato - Finance Officer
- Daphine Katabanga - Finance Assistant

AfricanDefenders (Pan African HRD Network)

- Joseph Bikanda - Senior AfricanDefenders Coordinator
- Walda Keza Shaka - Senior Program Officer - AfricanDefenders
- Gentrix Barasa - Communications Associate - AfricanDefenders
- Christabell Nephertiti - Programs Assistant - AfricanDefenders

Advocacy, Research and Communications Department

- Estella Kabachwezi - Advocacy, Research and Communications Manager
- Nicolas Agostini - Representative to the United Nations
- Ivan Rugambwa - Communications Officer
- Fatuma Hersi - Research and Advocacy Officer
- Esther Asiimire - Communications Assistant
- Rita Kanya Mbabazi - Communications Officer
- Grace Batamuriza - Research Assistant

Great Lakes Project

- Jeremie Nkuzimana - Great Lakes Project Coordinator
- Bernard Arinaitwe - Senior Program Officer
- Nyakomi Deng - Program Officer

Programs and Administration Department

- Memory Bandera - Director of Programs and Administration
- Stanley Wobusobozi - Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Expert
- Rosabella Ntanzu - Program Manager
- Juliet Emma Namayanja - M&E Associate
- Dee Werter - Senior Program Officer
- Rebecca Kabagimu - Program Assistant
- Edith Anderu - Human Resource Officer
- Zainab Nakato - Administrative Executive
- Shamim Nakato - Procurement Associate
- Kakuru Julius - Driver
- Ambrose Katwesigye - Driver
- Denis Enapu - Driver
- Samuel Sempala - Driver
- Raphael Kateu Okudo - Senior Office Messenger
- Maria N Kaddu - Project Coordinator (CHARM-AFRICA)
- Patrick Dwan - M&E and Reporting Officer (CHARM-AFRICA)
- Joyce Kimani - Communication Officer (CHARM-AFRICA)
- Spencer Marume - Business Development and Fundraising Officer (CHARM-AFRICA)
- Victoria Nabbumba - Receptionist

Protection and Security Management Department

- Tabitha Netuwa - Senior Protection and Security Management Manager
- Karis Moses Oteba - Senior Protection Officer and Wellbeing Lead
- Janvier Hakizimana - Senior Protection Officer & Training Lead
- Majid Maali - Sudan Country Coordinator
- Anne Nakiyingi - Senior protection Associate
- Brian Bamutaze - Protection Associate
- Arinda Denise Kwizera - Protection Assistant
- Prisca Kasemire - Protection Assistant
- Juliana Nambuya - Capacity Building Assistant

Technology Department

- Mark Kiggundu - Technology Program Manager
- Samuel Eibu - IT Auditor and Incident Handler
- Immaculate Nabwire - Digital Security Training Lead
- Hillary Kahoza - Systems Administrator
- Daphne Nakabugo - Ttaala Data and Web Lead
- Joshua Ssenkozi - DefendersTech Program Officer
- Aramanzan Babyesiza - Technology Assistant
- Abdikani Hassan - ICT Compliance and Audit Officer

Thanks to the fellows, interns, and volunteers who supported our work in 2024 including: Kikaawa Eva Nantume, Emmanuel Nkengurutse, Jane Nakanwagi and Victoria Hood Giorgia.



DefendDefenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Project) seeks to strengthen the work of HRDs throughout the subregion by reducing their vulnerability to risk of persecution and by enhancing their capacity to efficiently defend human rights.

DefendDefenders is the secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, which represents thousands of members consisting of individual HRDs, human rights organisations, and national coalitions that envision a sub-region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld.



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