

# DEFENDING DEFENDERS

Recommendations to Strengthen and Support  
Human Rights Defenders Amid Global Realignment

June 2025



This publication is a call to action to strengthen and sustain all human rights defenders working around the globe to promote and protect human rights. Defending defenders is not just the title of this publication; it's what all of those involved in human rights work have in common, wherever their work and whatever specific issue they work on. We recognise that the name of this publication is widely inspired by projects uniting human rights defenders in different parts of the world.

Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, Human Rights Compass brings together human rights actors to analyse policy changes in real time, coordinate responses, and build the long-term resilience of the human rights community.

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# THE GLOBAL REALIGNMENT EXPOSES AND FAILS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

We are living through a period of profound [“global realignment”](#). The multilateral human rights system — once grounded in universal norms and collective protection — is fracturing under geopolitical pressure. In this context, human rights defenders (HRDs) and the civic ecosystems that sustain them are at the forefront of democratic resilience.

Human rights defenders face a convergence of threats every day, including the rise of authoritarianism, legal repression and disinformation as well as the possible withdrawal of political, diplomatic and financial support from traditional allies. The second Trump administration has accelerated this trend, [supercharging](#) aid cuts, weakening human rights diplomacy, and emboldening anti-rights actors worldwide. In Europe, this shift compounds the security recalibration triggered by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, amplifying the [inward turn of official development assistance](#) (ODA) and donor agendas.

Across this [“fractured order”](#), human rights defenders are targeted with increasing impunity. In 2024, at least 625 defenders and media workers — [one person in every 14 hours](#) - were killed or disappeared, according to UN OHCHR. Many HRDs face criminalisation, persecution (such as arbitrary detentions, lawsuits attacking public participation, known as SLAPP suits, and legal harassment), surveillance, smear campaigns and other forms of intimidation, and forced exile.

Exile improves HRDs physical security, but it does not end repression. Often, exile cuts defenders off from their constituencies and funding, while host countries struggle to provide meaningful long-term support. Women and LGBTQ HRDs, indigenous, environmental and climate activists and those working in exile on politically and publicly sensitive matters are among the most exposed and face intersectional threats.

Despite the scale of repression, the international protection architecture has so far failed to adapt. Although legal protection frameworks exist, they offer little deterrent without enforcement, accountability or systematic follow-up. UN mechanisms, such as the Special Rapporteurs who play a key role in communicating the most pressing issues on the ground, are under-resourced and increasingly constrained. Regional bodies, while closer to the ground, remain fragmented and under-funded.

Existing protection programmes tend to be reactive and short-term, and often unable to respond effectively to the needs of HRDs working outside formal legal structures. While emergency responses on the international and national level — such as protection grants and relocation schemes — remain vital for HRDs under imminent threat, greater emphasis is required on the actual prevention of such threats.

The lack of effective accountability mechanisms leads to impunity, which in turn encourages further violations. As noted in the [2019](#) and [2021 reports](#) by the UN special rapporteurs on human rights defenders, failing to investigate, prosecute, and sanction those responsible for attacks against human rights defenders — whether state, corporate, or non-state actors — perpetuates a cycle of violence, deters engagement in human rights, and erodes public trust in both the prosecutorial systems and the HRDs themselves.

Protecting human rights defenders is a moral imperative. It is also a litmus test of our collective ability to resist authoritarianism, uphold democratic values and restore the integrity of the regional mechanisms and the international system.

This policy brief offers all actors of goodwill a set of pragmatic recommendations that are grounded in international norms and anchored in the lived realities of those defending rights and democracy on the ground.

# BLUEPRINT TO STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNDER PRESSURE

## » Reinvest in Political and Diplomatic Engagement to Support Human Rights Defenders

### Recommendation:

States and multilateral organisations must consistently and publicly support human rights defenders through diplomatic and political means — both bilaterally and in multilateral for a — to counter the growing trend of disengagement.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

States are increasingly deprioritising human rights in foreign policy, and states friendly to defenders are failing to uphold their commitments to protect and support HRDs. Similarly, multilateral organisations, including the United Nations and the Council of Europe, are neglecting the importance of high-level, visible engagement with defenders. States and multilateral organisations must reaffirm their commitment to the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#) (1998), actively implement and ask for the implementation of UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 22/6](#) (2013). It calls on states to support defenders through diplomatic missions and embassies. This includes issuing public statements, integrating HRDs into bilateral dialogues, facilitating visas, attending trials and visiting HRDs in detention, providing their embassies for HRDs as safe spaces to meet and plan in environments where HRDs are under surveillance.

## » Combat Impunity for Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders

### Recommendation:

States must put an end to impunity for attacks — both lethal and non-lethal — against human rights defenders, including those committed by state agents or corporate actors. States should conduct prompt and independent investigations and prosecute the perpetrators.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Widespread impunity for violence against defenders fuels further repression and undermines the rule of law. Despite the standards set out in the UN Declaration and HRC Resolution 22/6 (see above), many states fail to investigate or prosecute crimes such as threats, killings, enforced disappearances or judicial harassment, particularly when defenders challenge economic interests or state policies. A growing body of evidence, including over [6,400 attacks globally](#) since 2015 (indigenous activists, women HRDs, land and environmental defenders are among the most targeted), highlights the urgent need for public accountability pathways.

States must ensure the effective functioning of national justice systems, including the protection of victims and witnesses, and strengthen the role of national human rights institutions (NHRIs) in overseeing accountability processes. Mechanisms, such as special investigative units and safeguards against undue influence from political or business actors are critical to push for prosecution. In parallel, non-judicial mechanisms, such as national ombudspersons or human rights commissions, should be empowered to receive complaints and recommend redress, in line with international standards.

Collaboration with international and regional bodies (the [UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders](#), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the African Commission on Human and

Peoples' Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, etc.) is essential. So too are mandatory human rights due diligence laws to ensure business actors are held to account for reprisals linked to their operations.

By ensuring accountability, states protect individual defenders but reinforce civic trust and democratic values.

## » Support Mental Health, Wellbeing and Resilience of Human Rights Defenders

### Recommendation:

States should allocate resources for long-term, stigma-free mental health and psychosocial support for human rights defenders, as an integral part of protection frameworks.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

The psychological toll of defending rights in repressive contexts is a recurring theme amongst defenders. [UN Resolution 68/181](#) (2013) specifically recognises the risks of trauma and burnout by women human rights defenders. In order to fulfil their obligations in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), states must finance and embed mental health services into existing protection programmes, including via trauma-informed support, burnout prevention, and peer-based resilience networks. By relying excessively on private donors for such activities, states are effectively neglecting the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health of a population particularly at risk, which is often due to a lack of accountability for the causes of HRDs' mental health issues.

## » Counter Disinformation and Delegitimisation by Promoting Positive Narratives

### Recommendation:

States and multilateral organisations must develop comprehensive responses to disinformation and stigmatisation targeting human rights defenders, while proactively promoting narratives that highlight their value to democratic societies.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

As noted in [UN Resolutions 49/21](#) (2022) and [76/174](#) (2021), states and multilateral organisations, alongside other societal leaders as business, political and religious leaders, have a shared responsibility to take the lead in countering harmful narratives. This goes beyond merely expressing public support; it requires providing sustainable support for rights defenders and investing in their work. This includes funding public awareness campaigns, incorporating stories that highlight the impact of HRDs into educational curricula, supporting regional advocacy initiatives that reflect the experiences of defenders and creating reporting frameworks on the impact of disinformation. Messaging should convey that the actions of human rights defenders define them, not labels, and that their work benefits entire communities.

## » Simplify Entry, Visa and Access to Asylum Procedures and Integration

### Recommendation:

States, particularly those associated with the Schengen Agreement, must ensure that migration and asylum policies allow human rights defenders to cross borders, reach safety and continue their work unimpeded.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Restrictive migration frameworks undermine the possibility for HRDs to seek refuge.

The EU Visa Code Handbook, [revised in 2024](#), includes [guidelines on visa facilitation](#) procedures for HRDs. The Schengen member states should incorporate these guidelines into the existing EU Visa Code. Building on the commitments in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, states associated to the Schengen Agreement should establish specific humanitarian corridors for human rights defenders, as well as simplified visa and relocation procedures, and dedicated resettlement pathways. Other countries deemed safe by human rights defenders in other regions should adopt similar measures – in alignment with the [UN HRC Resolution 46/4](#) (2021), which calls for the facilitation of international protection mechanisms for at-risk defenders.

## » Empower Human Rights Defenders in Exile and Protect them from Transnational Repression

### Recommendation:

States must design policies that enable human rights defenders in exile to continue their work safely. These policies should include long-term protection schemes, the regularisation of legal status, and access to funding.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Forcing into exile is a tool of repression, and transnational repression has been a [growing cause of concern](#) for HRDs. Host states must expand humanitarian protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, building on calls in the [UN HRC Resolution 40/11](#) (2019) to facilitate access to support and protection for HRDs. This should include transparent relocation mechanisms, temporary or permanent legal residence options, creating legal entities under the host country's legislation and flexible, accessible funding mechanisms for such civil society groups beyond national level registered civil society organisations.

## » Recognise, Protect and Empower Indigenous, Land and Environmental Human Rights Defenders

### Recommendation:

States and multilateral organisations must take targeted and robust measures to protect Indigenous, land and environmental human rights defenders, ensuring they are able to exercise their rights to defend land, nature, and climate justice safely and effectively.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) face [disproportionate risks](#), including criminalisation, harassment, violence, and murder, particularly in situations involving significant political and economic interests. EHRDs have very limited access to international fora. In 2024, the [UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders](#) under the Aarhus Convention [described](#) state repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience “a major threat to human rights and democracy”.

States and multilateral organisations should urgently implement the standards set out in the UN Resolution 40/11, which calls on them to take all measures necessary to ensure the rights, protection and safety of all persons, including environmental human rights defenders, who exercise, inter alia, the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.”

Multilateral organisations, in particular the secretariats of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, have a special responsibility to review their practices to facilitate the participation of environmental defenders, who are directly impacted by the consequences of the triple planetary crisis.

## » Recognise and Respond to the Needs of Women and Feminist Human Rights Defenders

### Recommendation:

States and multilateral organisations must adopt gender-sensitive protection measures that are tailored to the specific risks faced by women and feminist human rights defenders, including those who advocate for human rights of LGBTQ people.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Resolution 68/181 (see above) urges states to [acknowledge and respond](#) to the differentiated threats women human rights defenders face, including online harassment, sexual violence, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Protection frameworks must integrate intersectional risk assessments and offer women human rights defenders access to leadership roles in the design of these programmes. States should provide funding and support lines for independent feminist-led organisations, offer secure digital platforms and challenge cultural narratives that forms part of the Global Realignment and frame gender justice as subversive.

This Human Rights Compass Policy Brief is the result of a convening of over 30 leading international human rights organisations and their experts, which was held on 27 May 2025. Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, these recommendations reflect the discussions of the Human Rights Compass Convening of 27 May 2025 and additional research undertaken by Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH. The Policy Brief has been reviewed by an editorial committee composed of Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH and participants to the Convening.

Human Rights Compass serves as a platform for real-time human rights policy analysis and strategic coordination through:

- » Convening key human rights stakeholders for coordinated policy advice and action.
- » Publishing policy briefs to inform and guide advocacy.
- » Promoting principled responses to systemic challenges that undermine international human rights frameworks.

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# PRACTICAL WAYS TO STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

## » Include And Connect



### (1) Appoint an Envoy for Human Rights Defenders

Designate a dedicated government representative (e.g. from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Justice) responsible for monitoring HRD issues, coordinating responses and engaging with civil society.



### (2) Integrate Human Rights Defenders in Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues

Ensure HRDs are explicitly mentioned in international cooperation dialogues and diplomatic exchanges, both as a topic of concern and as subject matter experts providing a human rights perspective.



### (3) Involve Human Rights Defenders in Policy Development

Establish simple, recurring formats, such as consultations or roundtables, with human rights defenders when drafting laws or policies that affect rights and freedoms.



### (4) Include Human Rights Defenders into Delegations to International Events

Invite human rights defenders to join national delegations or participate in side events at UN, OSCE, or EU fora, make voices of defenders and national civil society groups be heard internationally.

## » Support



### (5) Issue Public Recognition and Support Statements for Human Rights Defenders

Regularly affirm the legitimacy and importance of human rights defenders — especially when they are under threat — through social media, press releases and speeches by high-level officials. Consider inviting at-risk human rights defenders to diplomatic functions, memorable occasions or inviting to address the legislature, thereby providing them with recognition and protection.



### (6) Attend Human Rights Defenders Trials and Monitor Judicial Proceedings

Encourage diplomats, officials, parliamentarians to attend the court proceedings of human rights defenders, support HRDs behind bars through letters, visits, publicity, public expression of solidarity.



### (7) Simplify and Fast-Track Visa and Asylum for Human Rights Defenders at Risk

Create clear contact points in embassies to respond to human rights defenders seeking refuge, with internal instructions for expedited and discreet handling of such requests.



#### **(8) Map and Publicise Protection Resources**

Maintain an accessible public list (online or via contact points) of emergency funds, shelters, support organisations and regional mechanisms to which human rights defenders can turn.

### » Be Present



#### **(9) Make it Easy for Human Rights Defenders to Contact Authorities**

Ensure human rights defenders have access to simple, confidential, and non-bureaucratic channels to report threats or request support, especially at a local level.



#### **(10) Strengthen the Role of Embassies in Host Countries**

Ask embassies to: i) maintain contact lists of local human rights defenders; ii) organise regular private meetings or safe spaces; iii) discreetly raise protection issues with local authorities and keep your capital up to date on defenders situations.



#### **(11) Monitor and Report on Human Rights Defenders Situations Systematically**

Include a short section dedicated to HRDs in annual human rights or foreign policy reports — highlighting both risks and support actions taken.



#### **(12) Brief Incoming Diplomats and Officials on Human Rights Defenders**

Include HRD protection in the induction materials for new diplomats, officials of various rank, judges, legal clerks, police officers, etc. Building awareness increases capacity at no additional cost.

### » Celebrate



#### **(13) Translate and Disseminate UN and Regional Standards**

Ensure that key international instruments (e.g. the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) are available in national languages and accessible to civil servants, police and the public.



#### **(14) Nominate Human Rights Defenders for Awards and Recognition**

Actively propose human rights defenders as candidates for national or international human rights prizes, scholarships, or honours to boost their visibility and legitimacy.



#### **(15) Celebrate Human Rights Day, Celebrate Human Rights Defenders**

Use Human Rights Day (10 December) and other relevant recognition days, such as Earth Day, International Women's Day, Prides, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, etc., to publicly honour the work of local and international human rights defenders through events, statements and social media.



# STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



APPOINT AN ENVOY  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS



INTEGRATE HUMAN  
RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN  
DIALOGUES



INVOLVE HUMAN  
RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN  
POLICY DEVELOPMENT



INCLUDE HUMAN  
RIGHTS DEFENDERS  
INTO DELEGATIONS



ISSUE PUBLIC  
RECOGNITION AND  
SUPPORT STATEMENTS



ATTEND TRIALS AND  
MONITOR JUDICIAL  
PROCEEDINGS



WHEN FACING RISKS,  
FAST-TRACK VISA AND  
ASYLUM



MAP AND PUBLICISE  
PROTECTION  
RESOURCES



EASE CONTACTS WITH  
AUTHORITIES



STRENGTHEN ROLE OF  
EMBASSIES



REPORT SITUATIONS  
SYSTEMATICALLY



BRIEF DIPLOMATS AND  
OFFICIALS



DISSEMINATE  
STANDARDS



NOMINATE FOR  
AWARDS



CELEBRATE HUMAN  
RIGHTS DEFENDERS



HUMAN RIGHTS  
COMPASS