

FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

MAIN CHALLENGES FACED BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACROSS AFRICA



Conference on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders - African Experiences

6th and 7th of May 2025

eLankidetza – Basque Agency for Cooperation and Solidarity

CONFERENCE ON THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

AFRICAN EXPERIENCES

6th and 7th of May 2025
Vitoria–Gasteiz, Basque Country

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1. Introduction and framework for the conference

Human rights defenders (HRD) across Africa face an increasingly challenging environment in their efforts to promote and protect human rights. While their work is critical for advancing justice, equality, peace and a healthy environment, HRDs operate in contexts where they are often targeted with threats, harassment, and violence.

Based on its commitment to human rights and international solidarity, in recent years eLankidetz has been accompanying individuals, organisations and networks of HRDs in an attempt to contribute to guaranteeing safer living and working spaces, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. While it has also supported several initiatives in Africa, it is both crucial and urgent to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation of HRDs in the continent.

In this context, the **Conference on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders – African Experiences** this 6 and 7 May 2025 will provide African HRDs a space to share their lived experiences, highlight the challenges they face, and explore concrete solutions for expanding civic space, strengthening legal protections, and increasing recognition of their legitimacy. The discussion will address key challenges for HRDs across Africa, from the closure of democratic spaces, or the imposition of ultra-conservative social values, to the violence of armed conflicts, including the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources without the consent of the affected communities.

Special attention will be given to women HRDs and SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) defenders, who face heightened risks, ensuring that protection frameworks are inclusive and responsive to their specific vulnerabilities. Additionally, existing regional, national, and grassroots protection mechanisms will be examined, assessing their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement.

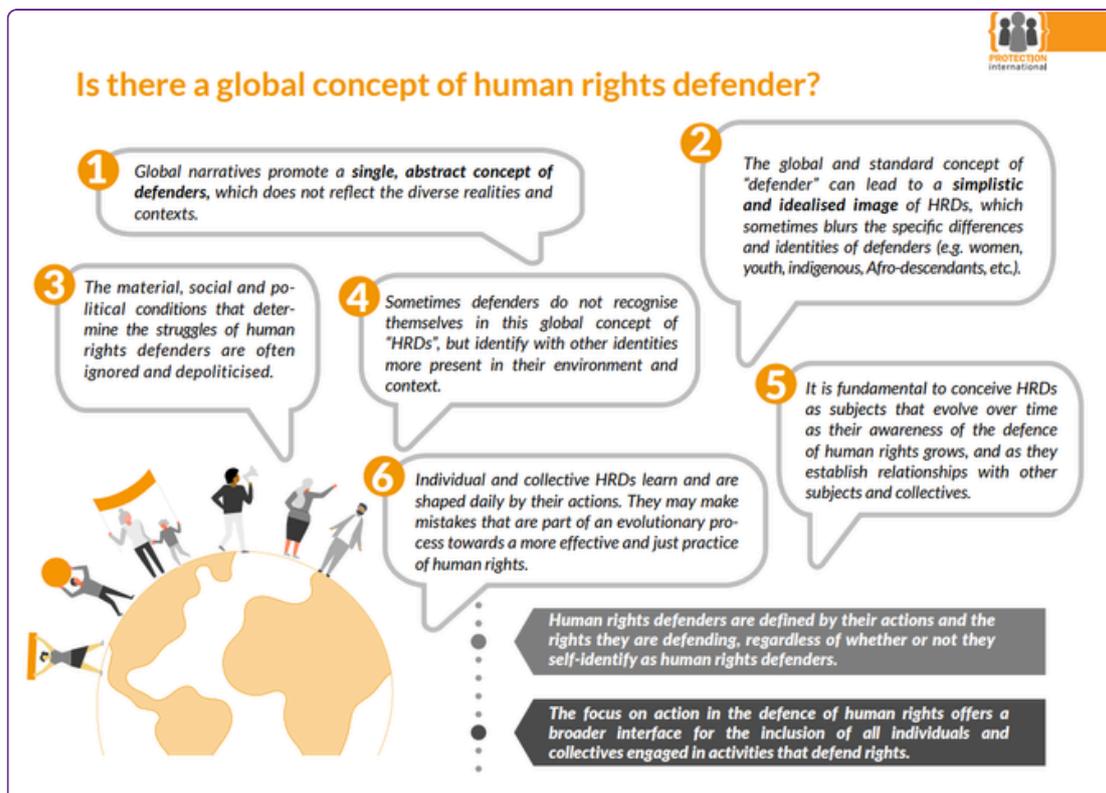
By fostering dialogue, collaboration, and strategic action, this conference will serve as a paramount step toward strengthening the safety, resilience, and legitimacy of HRDs across the continent, while shaping policies that truly reflect their needs and realities.

2. About human rights defenders

Human rights defender is a term used to describe people who, individually or with others, take action to promote or protect human rights. HRDs are identified above all by what they do, and the term can therefore best be explained by describing their actions and some of the contexts they work in.

HRDs' work is legal and legitimated by the civil society they represent. Every day around the world hundreds of human rights defenders are exposed to political violence due to their defence of the rights of others. Risking their own physical and mental integrity, they strive to bring an end to impunity of human rights violations and to promote social justice and peace.

In 1998 the United National General Assembly approved the **Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** (hereafter the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders). In other words, fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and after twenty years of negotiations on a draft declaration on human rights defenders, the United Nations finally recognised what is a reality: that thousands of people were promoting and contributing to the protection of human rights throughout the world. This is an inclusive Declaration that honours the amount and variety of people engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights.



Source: [The right to defend human rights from a critical approach](#), Protection International (August 2021)

3. A comprehensive approach to the protection of human rights defenders

Protection International aims to enable and protect the free exercise of the right to defend human rights. To achieve this, it promotes a comprehensive approach to the protection of HRDs. The approach is multifaceted, interdisciplinary and ever evolving. There are a few core elements that constitute the foundation for protection interventions at the local, regional and international levels:



Right to defend human rights: promoting a rights-based approach to the protection of HRDs, seeing them as subjects of rights, rather than objects of protection.



Collective protection: promoting collective strategies that strengthen the group and allow for more sustainable protection practices that go beyond individual security measures.



Protection networks: promoting the strengthening of internal and external solidarity networks among HRD groups and communities so that they are better positioned to confront threats and attacks.



Psychosocial approach: understanding that care and protection are indivisible. This means that protection strategies should address the individual and collective emotional impacts that HRDs experience as part of their struggles and processes, as well as integrate strategies for individual and collective well-being as a part of protection.

4. General context and human rights violations suffered by human rights defenders in different African countries

African HRDs frequently face harassment and intimidation from both state and non-state (legal and illegal) actors. This includes threats, surveillance, and arbitrary detention, which undermine their ability to work effectively. In several countries, defenders have been abducted and detained, exemplifying discriminatory targeting of independent voices. Similarly, environmental activists opposing natural resource extraction projects have faced arbitrary arrests and intimidation.

HRDs face physical violence and killings in contexts where they challenge powerful interests. The assassination of prominent HRDs like Thulani Maseko in **Eswatini**, and journalist Martinez Zogo in **Cameroon**, who was abducted, tortured, and killed – both in early 2023, underscore the lethal risks HRDs face when championing for democratic reforms, and fighting against corruption and nepotism.

The rise of authoritarianism in some African states has led to restrictive measures targeting civil society organisations, media, and HRDs. The shrinking of civic space includes censorship, financial scrutiny and limitation on access to funding, restrictive legislation that curtails the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, the right to protest and peaceful demonstrations. Restrictive NGO laws and bureaucratic hurdles create an environment hostile to civil society.

According to the 2024 CIVICUS Monitor report, the state of civic space in Africa remains predominantly obstructed, repressed, or closed. The most prevalent civic space violations include the detention and attacks on journalists, detention of HRDs and protesters, and censorship. Only the island nations of **Cabo Verde** and **São Tomé e Príncipe** maintain open civic spaces, while **Botswana** and **Liberia** have shown improvements, moving from obstructed to narrowed classifications. Over the past year, several countries have experienced significant declines in civic freedoms. Fundamental freedoms have been severely curtailed in **Burkina Faso**, following the September 2022 military coup and adoption of emergency laws, favouring the suspension of media outlets and arbitrary detention of HRDs, journalists, and opposition figures. In **Kenya**, the government has employed brutal crackdowns in response to nationwide protests in mid-2023, and again in mid-2024, against proposed tax hikes and rising living costs, resulting in several deaths and arrests.

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Furthermore State-led criminalisation of HRDs and their movements and collectives – through restrictive laws and politically motivated prosecutions – is a recurring issue across the continent. In countries such as the **DRC** and **Kenya**, HRDs have been targeted with fabricated charges, such as treason or terrorism, as a means to delegitimise their work and stifle dissent. For example, in **DRC**, several pro-democracy and opposition activists have been arrested during peaceful rallies organised to draw attention to the security crisis in the conflict-ridden province of **North-Kivu**. In late 2022, a military court of appeal in Goma sentenced King Mwamisyö of the civil society *Movement for Change* (Lucha), to five years in prison for “contempt of the army” after using his social media posts to criticise military and police authorities for failure to protect the people and complicity in the commission of human rights violations.

The case above exemplifies the rise of digital activism in Africa, where many HRDs resort to mobilise global awareness and engage in online advocacy. This shift has led to new challenges, including digital security threats and cyber harassment. As a **recent study among HRDs in Zimbabwe and Uganda**, the intimidation effect of increased state surveillance with sophisticated tracking tools has chilled the HRDs’ exercise of their right to freedom of expression, manifested through self-censorship, and their right to freedom of assembly and association by an unwillingness to engage with, or to be perceived as associated with, certain people.

Violent attacks against HRDs are particularly prevalent in conflict zones. More recently, the escalation of violence in the eastern **DRC**, marked by the M23 armed group's resurgence with alleged support from Rwandan forces, has significantly endangered HRDs operating in the region. Since the M23's capture of Goma (capital of North Kivu province) on 27 January 2025, the rebels seized control of Bukavu (capital of South Kivu province), further undermining the Congolese government’s authority in the region. HRDs have faced heightened threats, including intimidation, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Many of them have fled the region, making it more difficult to document abuses and assist affected communities. Meanwhile, the ongoing conflict in **Sudan**, particularly between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, has had broad regional implications, further exacerbating instability across **Central and East Africa**. The conflict has triggered mass displacement, with thousands of Sudanese refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries. This influx has placed additional strain on humanitarian resources, making it even more difficult for HRDs to operate effectively. In **Ethiopia**, ongoing armed conflicts and state-of-emergency measures have resulted in serious human rights violations, including physical and online surveillance, harassment, and threats against HRDs, journalists, and opposition members.

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HRDs who expose harmful business practices, such as environmental degradation, land grabbing, or labour rights violations, are often subject to targeted threats and violence. Companies, particularly those in extractive industries, sometimes collude with state actors or with illegal armed groups to suppress dissent. Such HRDs who focus on these issues face lawsuits, defamation campaigns, and physical attacks, making it one of the most dangerous areas of advocacy. In **Nigeria**, HRDs in the Niger Delta denouncing oil pollution and environmental destruction of farmland face harassment, legal persecution, and violence. In the **DRC**, environmental defenders opposing illegal mining, deforestation, and oil exploration in protected areas, such as Virunga National Park, have been killed, arbitrarily detained, and subjected to threats from both armed groups and state security forces. In **Kenya**, indigenous activists advocating for land rights, face forced evictions, criminalisation, and police violence, often in the context of tourism and conservation projects. In **Uganda** and **Tanzania**, land and environmental defenders protesting large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, have faced significant repression, intimidation and arbitrary detention.

5. Defending the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ and people with disabilities

Women HRDs and vulnerable groups of human rights activists also face challenges across Africa, particularly in conflict zones and countries with repressive laws. In regions like the **DRC**, **Sudan**, and the **Sahel**, women HRDs frequently encounter gender-based violence, online misogynistic attacks, and community stigmatisation, especially when advocating for gender equality and peacebuilding. As Protection International's recent report featuring testimonies from several women HRDs in **Nigeria**, attacks are exacerbated by "*militarised masculinity*" or "*virilisation*", a concept that underscores the dominance of male-centred, aggressive approaches to conflict resolution, and societal control. In such contexts, women HRDs play a vital role in deconstructing these harmful gender norms by promoting alternative, non-violent approaches to peacebuilding that emphasize collaboration, justice, and equality.

Similarly, LGBTIQ+ and sexual orientation and gender identity and expression defenders face heightened persecution in countries that have enacted anti-homosexuality laws, such as **Uganda** and **Ghana**, where advocacy for LGBTIQ+ rights is increasingly criminalised and considered an "*agenda of the West*".

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HRDs in these contexts are often targeted with arrests, violence, and public harassment, making their work especially dangerous. The recent defunding of diversity, inclusion and equity programmes with the freezing of USAID activities has affected many programmes supporting HRDs and civil society organisations fighting for the rights of the LGBTIQ+ population in **several African countries**. Cuts announced in institutional funding from European governments are sure to deepen the crisis and sense of insecurity and increase the possible risks faced by a highly discriminated and persecuted population of HRDs.

HRDs with disabilities face unique challenges that make their work even more difficult and dangerous. In addition to the risks faced by all HRDs—such as harassment, intimidation, and violence—they must also navigate physical inaccessibility, social stigma, and a lack of tailored protection mechanisms. These barriers not only increase their vulnerability to threats but also limit their ability to seek support and participate fully in advocacy efforts. According to **Protection International's Guide on HRDs with Disabilities (2024)**, many HRD protection programmes fail to account for the specific needs of defenders with disabilities. Safe houses, emergency relocation programmes, and digital protection tools are often inaccessible, leaving them without adequate support in times of crisis. In some cases, HRDs with disabilities are deliberately targeted, as attackers perceive them as easier to silence due to physical or social limitations.

A recent development in disability rights provides a new opportunity to strengthen protection for HRDs with disabilities. In 2024, the **African Disability Protocol (ADP)** became legally binding across Africa, marking a significant step toward ensuring equal rights and protections for people with disabilities. The protocol, adopted by the ACHPR, explicitly calls for protection from harmful practices, discrimination, and violence, which could serve as an important tool for advocating stronger safeguards for HRDs with disabilities.

6. Protection mechanisms for human rights defenders in Africa

6.1. International and regional protection mechanisms

Besides the international mechanisms and procedures, such as those established by the United Nations, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs, the African continent has set up a regional mechanism for the protection of human rights anchored in the **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights** of 1981. The Charter establishes the normative framework for human rights protection on the continent and is overseen by key institutions within the **African Union**. In terms of the protection and promotion of human rights, the main mechanism is the **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights** (ACHPR), which was established in 1987. Based in Banjul, the Gambia, the ACHPR has special rapporteurs and working groups, which focus on different issues.

The **Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals in Africa** is the mandate playing a critical role in monitoring attacks against HRDs and advocating for their protection. Currently held by Prof. Rémy Ngoy Lumbu, the Special Rapporteur has the mandate to:



Seek, receive, examine and act upon information about human rights defenders in Africa.



Submit reports at every ordinary session of the ACHPR.



Cooperate and engage in dialogue with Member States, National Human Rights Institutions, relevant intergovernmental bodies, international and regional mechanisms of protection of human rights defenders and other stakeholders.



Develop and recommend effective strategies to better protect human rights defenders and follow up on his/her recommendations.



Raise awareness and promote the implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in Africa.

In early 2024, the Special Rapporteur presented a **zero draft Declaration on the Promotion of the Role of Human Rights Defenders and their Protection in Africa** to the ACHPR. This document caters for the specific needs of HRDs in Africa, by defining who HRDs are, outlines their rights, and specifies state obligations towards them. This declaration reminds that the primary responsibility and duty to respect, promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms lies with the State, while emphasizing that non-State stakeholders, including transnational corporations and other business enterprises and non-state armed groups, also have a responsibility to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons, including HRDs. It also underlines the duty of States to support the creation of independent national human rights institutions according to the **Marrakech Declaration** (2018), and to adopt measures to ensure that HRDs in Africa can operate in a safe and conducive environment, without fear of acts of violence, threat, intimidation, reprisal, discrimination, oppression and harassment, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance, reprisals. The ACHPR is preparing a new draft based on the feedback received from experts and civil society organisations last year.

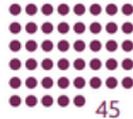
The **African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights** (AfCHPR) ensures the protection of human and peoples' rights in Africa by ruling on human rights violations and providing binding judgments. Created in 2004 and based in Arusha, Tanzania, it complements the functions of the ACHPR the African Court. While only 34 states have ratified the protocol establishing the African Court, only eight of them have accepted its jurisdiction to hear cases from individuals and NGOs, limiting its impact: **Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Malawi, Niger and Tunisia**.

In general, the regional human rights mechanisms remain under-resourced and lack enforcement power. To be effective, these must be accompanied by political will, adequate funding, and active collaboration with civil society.

6.2. National protection mechanisms

Beyond these protection mechanisms, there has been a proliferation of national, state-led initiatives, aimed at protecting HRDs, beginning with the adoption of a national law to protect HRDs in **Ivory Coast** in 2014, and the most recent one in the **DRC** in 2023. While some African states have made strides in adopting such public policies in the past ten years, such as **Niger** in 2022, implementation often remains weak. In the case of **Mali** and **Burkina Faso**, which had adopted national laws in the previous decade, the processes have been abandoned. These challenges are further compounded by the deep transformations in the geopolitical landscape of the **Sahel**, which have driven a significant pushback against the human rights agenda, weakening institutional commitments and narrowing the space for HRDs to operate safely and effectively.

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Region	No. of countries	Countries with an enacted policy	Countries with debates in progress	Countries with stalled or abandoned processes
AFRICA	 22 of 54	Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, the Democratic Republic of the Congo ⁵	Benin, Cameroun, the Central African Republic, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia	Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Guinea, Mali
AMERICAS	 10 of 33	Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru	Chile, Paraguay ⁶	El Salvador, Uruguay
ASIA	 10 of 45	Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan	Georgia, Kazakhstan, Philippines, Thailand	Afghanistan, India, Kuwait
EUROPE	 3 of 46 ⁷	0	Greece, Moldova	Albania
GLOBAL TOTAL	 45	 12	 23	 10

Source: [The Worldwide Growth of National Policies for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders: A current overview and the challenges ahead](#), Protection International (August 2022)

As in the case of Latin America, where HRD protection mechanisms and legislations exist since longer, the African initiatives share **a common denominator in the implementation gap**. Even though there are mechanisms and laws in place, defenders continue to be targeted and attacked with high levels of impunity. For instance, it was almost seven years after the adoption of the HRD protection law, that the government of **Ivory Coast** adopted an inter-ministerial order in 2021, creating a *Committee for the Protection of HRDs*, i.e. a protection mechanism coordinating the actions of five ministries and government bodies.

In **DRC**, legislation seems to be more a declaration of intent by the state authorities than an effective way to protect HRDs and their right to defend human rights. Subnational legislation had been adopted with two provincial edicts in **South and North Kivu** provinces, before a national law was finally adopted in June 2023 to protect HRDs. However, this legal instrument presents several challenges, such as the imposition of administrative obligations on HRDs (e.g. mandatory registration and annual activity reporting, which could be used to monitor and potentially suppress their activities); the law falls short of a definition of protection which can help address with an intersectional lens the particular needs and contexts in which HRDs work; while it includes more provisions detailing the obligations of HRDs than their rights, potentially facilitating their criminalisation.

Closing the implementation gap and effectively protecting HRDs requires political will. Politicians and government officials must recognise the role that human rights defenders play in building democratic and more just societies.

7. Civil society initiatives to protect human rights defenders in Africa

To fill the gaps identified above, African civil society has been proactive in developing strategies that promote solidarity within the countries and at a sub-regional level. There are also examples of national initiatives, such as the case of the *Y'en a marre* movement in Senegal, which created the **Résidence Karibu** in 2024, as a temporary shelter for HRDs and militants at risk from all over the continent.

7.1. National coalitions

Networks and coalitions at a national level, such as in **Ivory Coast, Kenya** and **Nigeria**, to name a few, include HRDs and their civil society organisations at the grassroots level and across the country. Such nationally based networks can play an important role both in terms of channelling resources from international donors and partners to build capacities of civil society organisations, and in advocating for the adoption, and monitoring, of HRD protection public policies for their right to defend human rights. Also, these networks keep an eye on restrictive legislation and seek to mobilize its members to repeal or modify it.

These national coalitions and networks strengthen their capacity through the links with **African regional networks**, which can monitor the situation of HRDs and trends regarding attacks to their work.

7.2. African regional networks

The creation of African regional networks is a unique configuration in the world. While their resources are limited, and coordination among a diverse base of members and needs, these networks provide platforms for mutual support, resource sharing, coordinated advocacy among HRDs and even temporary relocation for those at risk.¹

¹ African Defenders network coordinates the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative, which is a city-based relocation initiative for human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk across Africa (Tunis, Praia, Abidjan, Accra, Kampala, Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town). See <https://africandefenders.org/what-we-do/hub-cities/>. Another initiative for temporary relocation in Africa is run by Shelter City, with two cities in Benin and Tanzania. See <https://sheltercity.org/>.

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There are currently five regional coalitions, which coordinate actions through the pan-African network called **African Defenders**:



The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, also known as Defend Defenders, includes members from Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti.



The Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale (REDHAC) brings together HRDs from Central African countries: Cameroun, Chad, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea and Congo Brazzaville.



The West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN/ROADDH) provides a platform for HRDs and civil society organisations from Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.



In North Africa, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies reunites HRDs from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria, Sudan and Libya.



The Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network (SAHRDN) connects defenders from Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa and Botswana.

8. Final considerations

The protection of human rights defenders in Africa remains a pressing challenge that requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach. The discussions over these two days will underscore key issues that must be addressed to ensure the safety and recognition of HRDs across the continent.

The protection of HRDs in Africa requires urgent and concrete action. While legal and institutional frameworks exist, their implementation remains inconsistent, making it essential to strengthen enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Community-based protection networks play a crucial role in ensuring HRD safety, highlighting the need to support grassroots initiatives and international collaboration. Protection strategies must also be adapted to the heightened risks faced by women HRDs, LGBTIQ+ activists, and HRDs with disabilities. As restrictive laws and political persecution continue to criminalise their work, advocacy efforts must focus on securing fair legal protections and repealing harmful legislation. Finally, sustainable support—through funding, technical assistance, and long-term international solidarity—is key to ensuring the continued protection of HRDs across the continent.

By fostering dialogue, collaboration and strategic action, this conference will serve as a crucial step toward strengthening the safety, resilience, and legitimacy of HRDs across the continent, while shaping policies that truly reflect their needs and realities. This is a starting point for reinforced collaboration among HRDs, institutions, and civil society actors to build a safer and more enabling environment for human rights defenders in Africa. Building bridges between Basque and African cooperation and solidarity agents is precisely a central goal of the conference, with the aim of strengthening connections that promote mutual understanding and the exchange of knowledge and experience. In fostering such collaborations, joint initiatives are expected to emerge that address shared challenges and contribute to the long-term protection of human rights defenders, ultimately advancing human rights in both regions.

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