



Human rights.

For everyone.

Everywhere.

WITHOUT
DISCRIMINATION

WITHOUT
DOUBLE
STANDARDS

ANNUAL REPORT 2024 FOR YEAR ENDING 31 DEC 2023

 International Service
for Human Rights



On the occasion of ISHR's 40th anniversary, this annual report is dedicated to Adrien-Claude Zoller, ISHR's founding director, human rights defender and visionary. On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the death in Chinese custody of woman human rights defender Cao Shunli, the report is also dedicated to all those defenders who have been the victims of deadly reprisals for their work to promote justice and accountability. Together, we will never forget and never be silenced.

 International Service
for Human Rights

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Annual Report 2024

For year ending 31 December 2023

**Human Rights.
For Everyone. Everywhere.
Without Discrimination.
Without Double Standards.**

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Message from chairperson and director



A compass to navigate crises and conflicts

Effectively realising **human rights for everyone, everywhere is the pathway to free, fair and just communities and a more peaceful and sustainable world**. This must remain our north star as we face the multiple and worsening crises and conflicts around the world.

We face a global climate emergency.

We witness atrocity crimes being perpetrated with apparent impunity, from Afghanistan to Sudan, Palestine to Ukraine, and Nicaragua to Xinjiang.

We confront rising populism and propaganda, with artificial intelligence misused to fuel disinformation and discrimination, and democracy facing a 'make-or-break year' in 2024, with over 70 national elections.




Vrinda Grover

Chair of the ISHR Board



Philip Lynch

Executive Director



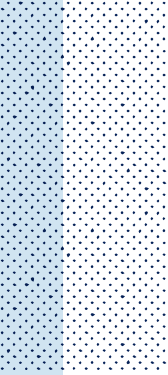
Each of these crises and conflicts is complex, yet they are also interconnected in four fundamental ways.

First, **repression and rights violations are among the root causes of all these crises and conflicts.** The failure of governments and unscrupulous corporations to respect the right to a healthy environment is fueling climate change. Institutionalised discrimination, subjugation and persecution of women and girls in Afghanistan is a root cause of the humanitarian emergency in the country. The ongoing conflict in Gaza is fundamentally rooted in the denial of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and return, as well as Israeli policies and practices of occupation and apartheid.

Second, **respect for human rights, and accountability for violations, is essential to address and resolve these crises and conflicts.** Respect for rights is an indispensable step on the pathway to free, fair and just communities and a more peaceful world. A just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energies requires respect for the land and cultural rights of Indigenous peoples, as well as attention to the gendered impacts of the climate crisis. A safe and enabling environment for civil society, including access to foreign funds and resources, is a critical factor contributing to representative and accountable governments. Respect for the rights of Palestinians and Ukrainians to self-determination and territorial integrity, as well as accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by State and non-State actors, are preconditions to peace and justice in all countries involved in those conflicts.

Third, very few States, if any, have been prepared to **treat human rights as paramount and apply human rights standards in a principled, consistent way** to each crisis and conflict. Many European States opened their doors to refugees from Ukraine while simultaneously militarising their borders against those crossing the Mediterranean fleeing from conflicts in Africa, including in Ethiopia and Sudan. Many African States and countries that are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation have expressed their solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza while also remaining silent or outright refusing to condemn atrocity crimes faced by Uyghur and Turkic Muslim communities in Xinjiang. For many Western States, Russian attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine amount to war crimes, while in Gaza they have systematically been characterised as Israeli 'self-defence'. **The selective and inconsistent application of international human rights law undermines the integrity of the framework,** as well as the credibility, legitimacy and influence of States and other actors who engage in such double standards.

Fourth and finally, **the work of human rights defenders at the national level, as well as their engagement and advocacy at the international level, is essential to address and resolve each of these conflicts and crises.** Defenders prevent rights violations, document abuses, promote accountability, and propose solutions that are grounded in community priorities and needs. Indigenous rights defenders carry the knowledge that is necessary to live sustainably and to respect and protect the environment. Digital rights activists are pushing for rights-based regulation of artificial



intelligence to ensure that humanity benefits from its innovations and efficiencies. Whistleblowers are exposing government wrongdoing and corporate misfeasance, working to safeguard democracy, while corporate accountability activists are campaigning for an international treaty on business and human rights. Women human rights defenders from Afghanistan are leading the campaign to hold the Taliban accountable for the crime of gender apartheid, while also ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches the most vulnerable populations. In Sudan, women defenders are leading peace movements and protests at the local level, as well as international advocacy, which was instrumental in the establishment of a UN investigative mechanism, further adding to the pressure on the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces to end the war. **Despite the challenges, complexities and uncertainties we collectively face, we remain convinced that, with international human rights laws and standards providing a compass, human rights defenders can chart a course to a more peaceful, just and inclusive world.**

Working with defenders to uphold international law

We are proud of ISHR's track record in consistently applying human rights principles in diverse situations. We are indebted to the partners – and particularly the defenders, affected communities, and victims and survivors of violations – who have worked with us to uphold, and held us accountable to, these principles over the last year.

Together with national civil society partners and based on objective criteria, we successfully campaigned to defeat Russia's bid for election to the Human Rights Council. Burundi and China, against whom we also campaigned based on objective criteria, received the lowest number of votes of any candidates on the African and Asian slates, respectively.

Together with Black-led organisations and the families and representatives of African and Afro-descendant people killed by police, we coordinated civil society and affected community engagement with missions by UN experts on racial justice to the United States and Brazil. With our support, the experts heard testimonies from more than 150 community members in both countries.

Together with civil society partners working on the human rights and humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly the Gaza Strip, we developed **eleven key calls** to protect civilians and address root causes of violence and conflict. We also coordinated a coalition of over 170 organisations demanding that States providing arms and other forms of military assistance to Israel adhere to their legal obligations and act urgently to prevent atrocity crimes, including genocide.



And together with human rights defenders from Sudan and Nicaragua, we advocated successfully to establish and strengthen international mechanisms to investigate and promote accountability for gross human rights violations in those countries. 'Hopes in justice are revived today for thousands of Sudanese women and victims of conflict-related sexual violence,' a Sudanese woman human rights defender, who requested to remain unnamed, told ISHR. 'Nicaraguan authorities have reached new extremes in their efforts to suppress all dissent, but today, the international community sent a clear message: perpetrators at all levels will eventually be held accountable,' said [Olga Valle](#) from Urnas Abiertas of the Colectivo 46/2, of which ISHR is a founding member.

A progressive agenda

Despite the challenging times, exacerbated by declining funding for international human rights advocacy and organisations by some States and foundations, ISHR continues to pursue a positive and forward looking agenda.

We're pleased that in 2023 the [Democratic Republic of Congo enacted a specific national law on the protection of defenders](#), the culmination of years of work by ISHR and national partners. With this development, the DRC joins the ranks of countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mongolia, where we have worked alongside national partners to strengthen legal frameworks for defenders and establish specific defender protection laws, and where we will continue to work to ensure effective implementation.

In the area of women's rights, **we are working with defenders from Afghanistan and Iran, together with international legal experts, to push for the explicit recognition and codification of the atrocity crime of gender apartheid.** This would fill an international protection gap for women and girls, as well as impose responsibilities on third States and non-State actors to take concrete steps to prevent and end gender apartheid.

With 2023 marking the [25th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), we are coordinating a broad coalition to develop an authoritative baseline document of international and regional jurisprudence in relation to the protection of defenders, which will be launched in 2024.

And throughout 2024 we'll continue allying with Black-led organisations to promote racial justice, with feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations to resist anti-rights narratives and movements, with corporate accountability activists to strengthen laws on business and human rights, and with Global South defenders to ensure that key multilateral fora are relevant, accessible and responsive to them.



Power in coalition

Reflecting on our collective wins over 2023, we identified one golden thread: human rights defenders working in dynamic coalitions, movements and networks to strategically leverage international law and mechanisms to contribute to positive change.

With 2023 marking both the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and 2024 marking ISHR's own 40th anniversary, it is apt to recall that **the work of defenders and the integrity of the international framework are essential to the realisation of human rights on the ground.**

The promise of the Universal Declaration will only be fulfilled when we work in coalition to ensure that defenders are protected and that standards are consistently respected and applied.

In solidarity with defenders, and with you.



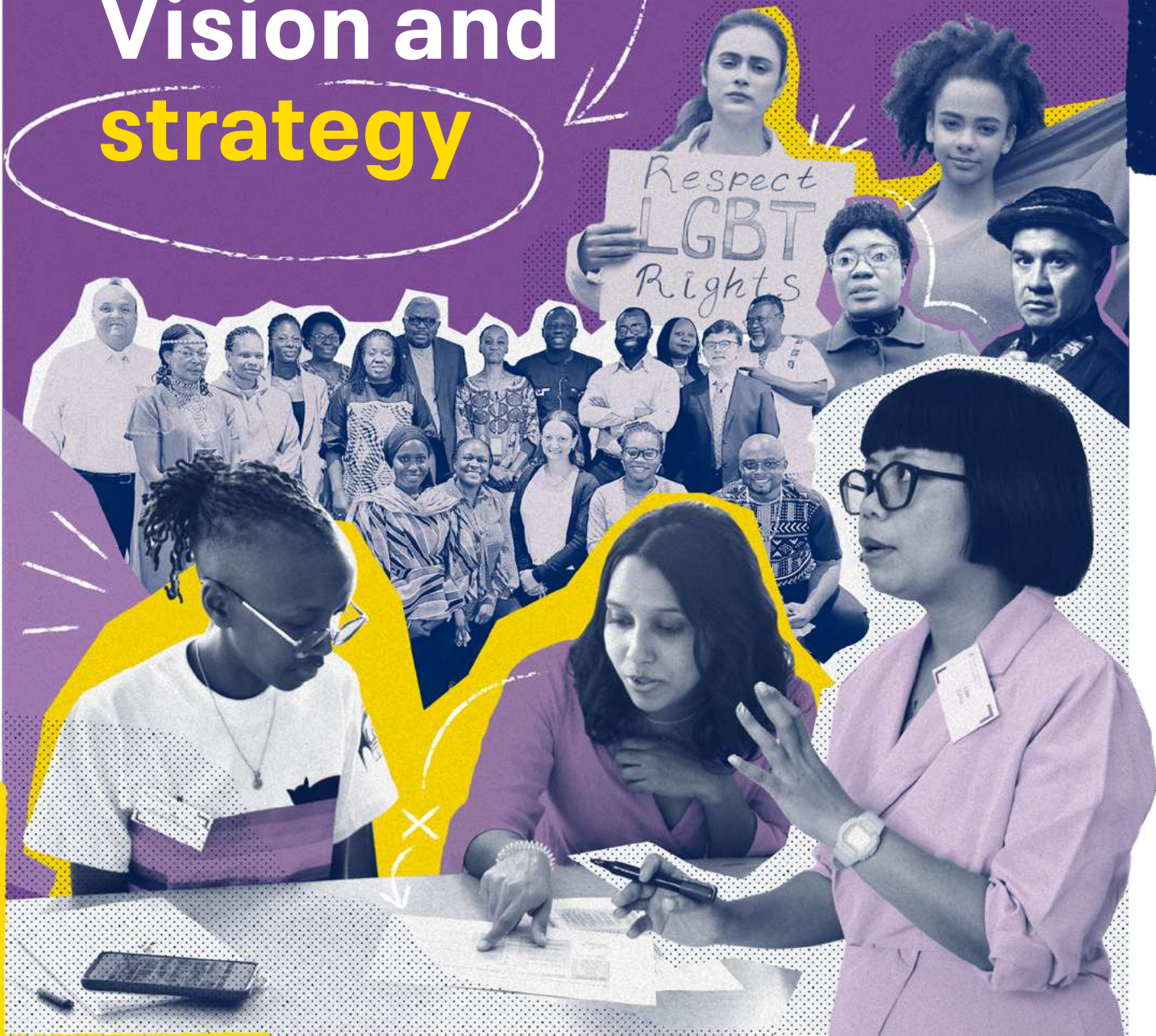
'[The Universal Declaration of Human Rights] has had a transformative impact on people and communities worldwide, informing and inspiring the development of national laws and policies, underpinning the demands of social movements and civil society actors, providing an important tool for advocates, and enshrining universal values that unite humanity and set out the conditions for all persons to live with dignity.'

Phil Lynch, ISHR Executive Director
quoted in [Swissinfo](#), 6 March 2023



MADE PLEDGES TO PROTECT AND SUPPORT DEFENDERS IN LINE WITH ISHR RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Vision and strategy





Solidarity and support for human rights defenders

Our mission and legacy

Human rights defenders are essential agents of progress and positive change. **Their work is vital** for gender justice, racial justice, environmental justice, political justice and economic justice. **Their work confronts** and challenges power, privilege and prejudice. For this, they are frequently exposed to threats and attacks from governments, corporations and other actors. **Their work contributes** to good governance and accountability at the local, national and international levels.



1,098

NUMBER OF DEFENDERS TO WHOM ISHR PROVIDED TRAINING OR ADVOCACY SUPPORT IN 2023



FROM 62 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

+4%



For the past four decades, ISHR has remained dedicated to its mission of serving, supporting and standing in solidarity with human rights defenders.

40 years ago, the first defenders supported by ISHR included the parents of detained anti-apartheid activists in South Africa and anti-colonial independence activists from East Timor.

30 years ago, in 1993, ISHR led the successful campaign to enable national and regional-level organisations to obtain accreditation to the UN and participate in UN bodies and processes – a status previously available only to international NGOs. Over this period, we also played an instrumental role in the negotiation of the **landmark Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**.

Around 20 years ago, in 2007, ISHR co-facilitated the development of the **Yogyakarta Principles on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**. These Principles have since been instrumental in contributing to legal and policy developments to protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and those who defend them in countries from India to the UK, and from Switzerland to Nepal.

10 years ago, ISHR worked with defenders and experts to develop an **authoritative model national law on the protection of human rights defenders**, which has subsequently shaped specific protection laws, policies, and mechanisms in more than six countries across three continents, from Côte d'Ivoire to Mongolia.

Over the past decade, ISHR has been committed to leveraging our access, networks, and influence

to support and significantly **increase the direct engagement and enhance the active participation of Global South, anti-racism, feminist and queer human rights defenders at the UN**. We have sought to ensure that they can speak with their own voices, share their own expertise, articulate their own experiences and demands, and shape an international human rights discourse that is effective and meaningful to them.



INCREASE IN NUMBER OF VISITORS TO ISHR ACADEMY BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FROM:

- + 728% Burkina Faso**
- + 270% Azerbaijan**
- + 242% Madagascar**
- + 197% Palestine**
- + 151% Taiwan**
- + 134% Guatemala**
- + 106% Mexico**
- + 100% El Salvador**

These increases reflect the increased reliance of human rights defenders on the international human rights system, particularly those working in restrictive, repressive or deteriorating environments.

40 years of impact

While the countries and contexts may have changed, the essence of ISHR – providing solidarity and support to defenders and working with them to achieve change – has remained constant over 40 years. Here are just some of our key milestones!



2007

ISHR coordinates the development of the **Yogyakarta Principles on sexual orientation and gender identity**, strengthening legal recognition and protection of the rights of LGBT people worldwide and leading to progressive changes in law and policy in countries including Australia, India, Nepal, Switzerland, the UK and many others.

1984

ISHR supports anti-apartheid defenders from South Africa and independence activists from Timor-Leste to seek justice at the UN and commences work to develop an **international declaration on human rights defenders**.

1988

ISHR publishes first **Human Rights Monitor**, connecting human rights defenders on the ground with international human rights systems and developments.

2006

ISHR contributes to the establishment of a new global peak body for human rights issues, the **UN Human Rights Council**, ensuring that it is relevant and accessible to civil society organisations and victims of violations worldwide.



2011

ISHR's sustained advocacy on the issue of reprisals and intimidation faced by human rights defenders leads to the adoption of a landmark **UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning and strengthening protections against reprisals**.

2016

ISHR spearheads the development of an influential **Model National Law on Human Rights Defenders**, endorsed by 28 of the world's leading human rights lawyers and experts, subsequently contributing significantly to the adoption of defender laws in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mongolia and Niger, among others.



1993

ISHR facilitates global civil society engagement with the **Second World Conference on Human Rights**, which leads to the strengthening of women's rights, the affirmation of universal rights, the adoption of the **Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action** and the establishment of the **Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**.



2003

ISHR leads a successful campaign for the appointment of a **Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders** by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

1998

After 14 years of ISHR's advocacy and negotiation, the **UN General Assembly adopts the landmark Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**, enshrining the right to defend rights and to communicate and cooperate with the UN.

Would you like to help shape our next 40 years?
Make your voice heard by answering this short survey!



2019

ISHR secures adoption of first ever **UN resolution on environmental human rights defenders** and launches an interactive online academy to build the capacities, networks and influence of defenders.



2021

Together with the families and representatives of Black people killed by police violence, ISHR secures the establishment of a global mechanism on **racial justice in the context of law enforcement**.

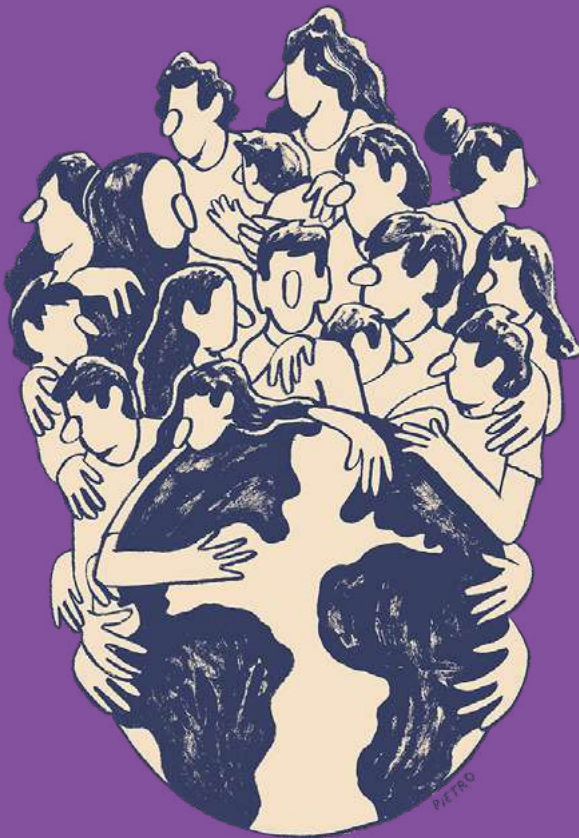


2023

ISHR conducts the first hybrid edition of its flagship **Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme**, and provides training and advocacy support to over 1000 defenders from more than 60 countries.

Our goals for change

Supported by our Theory of Change, ISHR works to ensure that:



1 **Human rights defenders are equipped, connected, supported and influential.**

We provide defenders with tools, capacities and networks to use international and regional human rights laws and systems to contribute to human rights progress. We build and support powerful coalitions for human rights change.

2 **States, businesses and other non-State actors respect and protect human rights defenders.**

We monitor, mobilise, advocate and litigate to ensure that States and businesses consult, respect and protect defenders, and are held accountable for violations and abuses against them.

3 **Human rights laws and mechanisms are accessible, responsive and effective.**

We conduct research, provide advice, and undertake advocacy and litigation to ensure that international and regional human rights laws and mechanisms are accessible to defenders, responsive to their demands, and effective in promoting rights and accountability.





Who we serve and support

ISHR supports and acts in solidarity with human rights defenders in their work for freedom, dignity, equality, justice and other fundamental values at the international, regional and national levels. We undertake this work with and through other non-governmental organisations, networks and coalitions.

We are deeply informed by the situation, protection needs and priorities of defenders. We work with them in partnerships that are long-term, committed, respectful, empowering and which recognise and honour their knowledge and expertise.

ISHR's programmes provide support and solidarity to defenders working on the following issues, which we recognise as intersectional and interdependent:

* Equality, dignity and non-discrimination

Through this programme, ISHR provides solidarity and support to women human rights defenders and defenders working on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. We also support anti-racism and migrant and refugee rights defenders.

* Environmental justice and sustainability

Through this programme, ISHR provides solidarity and support to defenders working on issues of environmental justice, corporate responsibility and accountability, and sustainable and inclusive development. We seek to ensure that businesses and other non-State actors are effectively regulated with respect to human rights and defenders, consult and become positive advocates for defenders, take action to respect and contribute to the protection of defenders, refrain from actions that restrict or violate their rights, and are held accountable when they fail to do so.

* International accountability

Through this programme, we provide solidarity and support to defenders working in highly restrictive or repressive environments, and undertake advocacy and litigation to ensure that defenders are safe and free. We promote both State and non-State accountability for widespread and systematic threats, attacks, restrictions and reprisals against defenders, including through the establishment of international investigative and accountability mechanisms. In recent years, this programme has supported defenders working in relation to countries such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Burundi, China, Egypt, Nicaragua, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Venezuela.

* Transparency and the rule of law

Through this programme, we provide solidarity and support to defenders working in deteriorating environments where there is a need to safeguard democratic institutions and accountability mechanisms, as well as those working in environments where there is an opportunity to strengthen human rights defenders protection laws and mechanisms.



Our tactics



In each of our programmes, we use a range of integrated tactics, developed and implemented in partnership with defenders. Our activities include:

- Training, capacity development, strategic advice, advocacy support and fellowships for human rights defenders
- Legislative and policy research, advocacy and advice
- Strategic litigation and amicus curiae interventions
- Narrative development, campaigning and mobilisation
- Coalition building and coordination, including acting as secretariat for the [UN Antiracism Coalition](#), co-convenor of the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders, and facilitator of a diverse range of ad hoc coalitions built for specific campaigns or advocacy objectives, such as with respect to the establishment or renewal of international monitoring and reporting mechanisms on Venezuela, Nicaragua and LGBTIQ+ rights

We recognise that ISHR holds a privileged position within the international human rights system. With our main offices in Geneva and New York, we have significant systems expertise, as well as strong relationships, access and influence with key decision-makers, including high-level government officials and diplomats, senior UN officials and experts, and international media. Our commitment is to use this privilege to enhance the access and influence of human rights defenders, while simultaneously pushing to reform the system to redistribute power and ensure that frontline defenders, affected communities and victims of violations have direct access and influence.

A values-driven organisation

We are **principled** and **passionate** about human rights.

We are deeply **connected** and act in **collaboration** and **solidarity** with human rights defenders.

We develop and work in **partnerships** and **coalitions** that are long-term, committed, respectful and empowering.

We seek to learn and **expand** our human rights knowledge and **share** our human rights expertise.

And we promote **equality, inclusivity, diversity, transparency** and **accountability**, both internally and externally.

DISCOVER MORE

We are dedicated to our mission, inspired by the defenders we serve, and committed to working with our partners to achieve our shared vision. To learn more and to support this vision, see www.ishr.ch/about-us/strategy.



Goals and impact



Goal and impact:

Supporting human rights defenders

Our 2023 Goal

Human rights defenders are equipped, connected, supported and influential



What we achieved



Through our human rights defender support programme – which includes training online and offline, advice and advocacy support, facilitating access to high-level policy and decision-makers, and civil society strategisation, coordination and coalition building – we:

- ★ provided defenders with the tools, capacities, networks and narratives necessary to engage and influence international, regional and national mechanisms and actors
- ★ provided defenders with solidarity and stronger networks of influence, protection and support
- ★ advocated on behalf of defenders who were deprived of liberty, subject to reprisals or other grave violations in pursuit of justice and accountability

NUMBER OF PEOPLE ACCESSING INFORMATION AND SUPPORT THROUGH THE ISHR ACADEMY IN 2023



18,171

VISITORS
(+6%)



3,154

RESOURCES
DOWNLOADED

Select highlights



Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme

Philippines

In January 2023, we celebrated the **dismissal of perjury charges against ten human rights defenders** from the Philippines following more than three years of judicial harassment and persecution. Together with other NGO partners, ISHR undertook advocacy and helped mobilise international actors, including governments and UN experts, to increase pressure to achieve this victory.

In June 2023, ISHR was privileged to host a diverse group of defenders for the residential component of our intensive three month **Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme (HRDAP)**, building on two months of intensive online training and coaching. **The defenders worked on issues including racial justice, environmental justice, women's rights, rights of LGBTIQ+ people and corporate accountability.** They came from countries including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, South Sudan, Libya, Madagascar, the Bahamas, Angola, South Africa, Zambia, Palestine, Tunisia, Indonesia and Kenya.

While in Geneva, **they were supported and able to develop advocacy strategies and to engage with experts, diplomats and decision-makers from all regions and from across the UN human rights system. Importantly, the defenders were also able to share experiences and expertise and build strong networks and solidarity between themselves,** as well as with international and regional NGOs in Geneva.

100% of participants reported that they were extremely satisfied or very satisfied with the programme, with one defender writing: *'Thank you all for the love, encouragement, dedication and committed efforts that all the ISHR team has shown both during the online learning and the in-person experience. This is a life-changing opportunity.'*

ISHR Academy

With a continued high demand for online training and strategic advocacy support, we further scaled up the **ISHR Academy**. The Academy is an interactive, online platform to build the capacity and skills of defenders to leverage the UN human rights system to contribute to national level change. During 2023, **the Academy received over 18,000 visits from defenders from all regions, who downloaded over 3,000 resources.**

 ISHR Academy



In total, ISHR provided training and advocacy support to **1,098** human rights defenders from **62** countries from all regions, the highest number in ISHR's 40 year history!

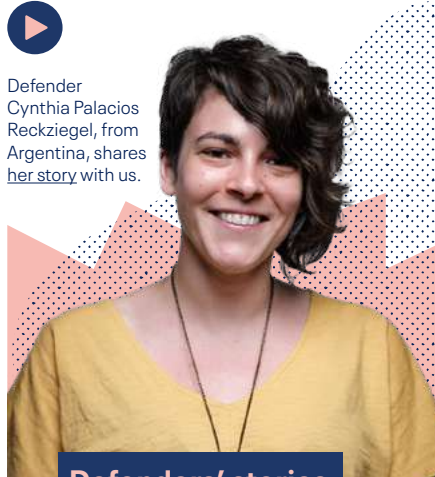
Algeria

In December 2023, again following sustained advocacy and mobilisation, we welcomed the **acquittal on trumped up terrorism charges of three prominent Algerian human rights defenders**, Jamila Loukil, Kaddour Chouicha and Said Boudour. All three defenders have vowed to continue their work towards a democratic and inclusive Algeria. For our part, we will continue to support their work and advocate for their unconditional freedom and safety, as well as that of many other unjustly imprisoned human rights defenders. We join the High Commissioner in calling on all governments to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through an **'amnesty, pardon or simply release of all those detained for exercising their rights'**.

▶ Defender Kaddour Chouicha, from Algeria, shares his story with us.



Defender Cynthia Palacios Reckziegel, from Argentina, shares her story with us.



Defenders' stories

Throughout the year, we continued to **centre defenders in our work**, with the vast majority of ISHR statements at the UN being delivered by national-level defenders and victims of violations. ISHR works to ensure that international bodies and processes are accessible and responsive to human rights defenders and that they have the tools, resources and networks necessary to **tell their own stories** and articulate their own demands. In 2023, **we supported more than 35 defenders to address the UN Human Rights Council directly in ISHR's name!**

Women defenders

Among many others, ISHR was privileged to work with Emirati woman human rights defender **Jenan Almarzooqi** to urge the UAE to release political prisoners, as well as **Sophie Luo Shengchun**, Chinese woman human rights defender and wife of detained lawyer Ding Jiayi, **calling on China to end the abuse of national security laws to persecute defenders**. ISHR is proud to have supported sexual and reproductive rights advocate **Vanessa Mendoza Cortes** for over four years in the ultimately successful campaign to secure the dismissal of unjust defamation charges brought against her in response to her calls at the UN for Andorra to end its total abortion ban.



Sophie Luo Shengchun, Chinese woman human rights defender and wife of detained lawyer Ding Jiayi.

UN Antiracism Coalition

We played a key role in building, coordinating and resourcing a diversity of coalitions with human rights defenders at their centre, including the **UN Antiracism Coalition** (UNARC) which works to combat systemic racism and achieve racial justice. **Together with Black-led organisations and the families and representatives of African and Afro-descendant people killed by police, we coordinated civil society and supported the engagement of affected communities with UN experts' missions on racial justice to the United States and Brazil.** With our support, the experts heard testimonies from more than 150 community members in both countries. *'In all the cities we went to, we heard dozens of heart-breaking testimonies on how victims do not get justice or redress. This is not new, and it's unacceptable,'* said Tracie Keese, a UN expert on racial justice and law enforcement. *'This is a systemic issue that calls for a systemic response. All actors involved, including police departments and police unions, must join forces to combat the prevailing impunity.'*



Building solidarity

ISHR also seeks to build solidarity across human rights movements and between diverse groups of defenders, both through HRDAP as well as innovative initiatives such as **coordinating the first ever visit of Hong Kong and Uyghur activists to meet with civil society and government officials in Argentina, Brazil and Chile.** In another first, **together with Freedom House, we provided a week of training and advocacy support to young diaspora activists from the Uyghur region, Tibet, and Hong Kong.** Aged between 19 and 28 years, these young activists came together for the first time at the UN to build solidarity and develop strategies to meaningfully engage their host governments and international institutions. Their objective is to hold the Chinese government accountable for its ongoing abuses against their communities inside China, as well as for acts of transnational repression outside Chinese borders. *'Our generation will never be silenced and will continue to advocate for the rights of our people. It's time for the United Nations to stand with us,'* the young activists said in a joint statement at the conclusion of the programme.



'This is my first time learning about UN mechanisms and this really helped me to improve my advocacy work. I cannot believe that I was in those buildings and could participate! It is accessible to everyone.'

Kabir Qurban,
Director at Free Uyghur Now

In depth

40 years supporting defenders and strengthening the human rights movement

Since its creation, ISHR has been a pioneer in [providing support](#) to thousands of human rights defenders and organisations globally, recognising that for many of them, the United Nations system is a crucial platform to defend the rights of their communities, promote justice and push for accountability. In 1984, led by the needs of our allies and partners, we crafted the first [in-person trainings](#) to accompany grassroots organisations to access the UN human rights system in a strategic manner, using a tailored and practical approach to support defenders working on issues from combating apartheid in South Africa to realising the right to self-determination in Timor-Leste. **The Geneva Training Course helped shape and build the capacity of the global human rights movement and, in 1994, ISHR trained its 1000th defender, making the organisation the go-to place for capacity-development towards UN advocacy.**

Building on this expertise, in 2014 the [Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme](#) (HRDAP) was launched, providing structured engagement with all key UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council, the Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review and the UN Treaty Bodies, as well as a transversal approach to advocacy and campaigns. The programme was [welcomed by our audiences](#) and has been constantly enhanced with new developments in adult pedagogy, blended-learning methodologies, and a willingness to support a wide range of defenders to create more solidarity among movements. In 2023, the training started its first hybrid version, combining online and



offline activities to enable defenders to continue their vital work on the ground. In line with this evolution, the open and free e-learning space [ISHR Academy](#), the first of its kind, was launched in 2018 and has since enabled more than 80,000 people to seek knowledge on how to engage with key mechanisms, in English, French and Spanish.

Additionally, since the 1990s, ISHR has organised in-country trainings and workshops to better address the protection needs of defenders all over the world, such as an [annual training](#) on the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, along with [ACDHRS](#). **Our training programmes are hugely popular, with HRDAP receiving an average of more than 300 applications every year from all world regions for only 16 participants.** Previous HRDAPers include UN experts (e.g. the current and former Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly), Ministers (e.g. the former Minister of human rights of Mali), the leaders of many international, regional and national human rights NGOs (e.g. DefendDefenders, Conectas, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights) and award-winning human rights defenders such as [Olga Karach](#) from Belarus.

With your support, ISHR will continue to provide training resources, adapted to the needs of the defenders and co-construct the capacity-development programmes with and for them in a time where the work of many defenders is being challenged in existential ways.





1 Human rights defenders are the lifeblood of human rights

Former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, once called human rights defenders the lifeblood of human rights. *'They are the promoters of change,'* she said. *'The people who ring the alarm bell about abuse'*

She is right in at least two ways.

Human rights defenders are the lifeblood of human rights because, even as a vast majority of governments take a selective and inconsistent approach to human rights principles and situations, **defenders affirm that all human rights are universal and inalienable; that they are indivisible; interdependent and interrelated.**

Defenders affirm that the right to self-determination applies to people in Ukraine and Palestine, alike. They promote the right to non-discrimination for persons of African descent in the US and LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda, alike.

They demand that the right to know and practice one's own culture be respected for Aboriginal communities in Australia and Uyghur communities in Xinjiang, alike.

Human rights defenders are also the lifeblood of human rights because **defending and advocating for human rights is integral to realising human rights, particularly the human rights of individuals and groups who have been subject to various and intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression.**



'Across the world, human rights defenders are lights in the darkness. They are changing lives: Fighting, educating, and holding power to account, to make human rights a living, breathing reality.'

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres,
15 December 2023

Goal and impact:

Protecting rights and promoting accountability

Our 2023 Goal

States, businesses and other non-State actors respect and protect human rights defenders



What we achieved

- ★ We worked to ensure that States and businesses respect and protect defenders and fulfil their human rights obligations at the international, regional and national levels, including through legislative and policy action.
- ★ Our unparalleled experience at the UN and with regional bodies allowed us to rapidly and strategically use those mechanisms to prevent violations and attacks against defenders and pursue justice and accountability where they occurred.
- ★ We worked with local partners to advocate for national implementation of international and regional human rights standards on the protection of defenders and an enabling environment for their work. Our deep partnerships with grassroots defenders, and our track record of principled cooperation with governments and human rights institutions, uniquely positioned us to advise and support national-level implementation.
- ★ Through our values- and hope-based communications and narratives, we positively influenced public and political attitudes, behaviours, laws and policies in relation to defenders and countered stigmatisation and smears against them.

Select highlights

Gaza Strip

Together with civil society partners working on the human rights and humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly the Gaza Strip, we developed eleven key calls to protect civilians, prevent genocide, and address root causes of violence and conflict. We also coordinated a coalition of over 170 organisations demanding that States providing arms and other forms of military assistance to Israel adhere to their legal obligations and act urgently to prevent further atrocity crimes, including by imposing a two-way arms embargo on Israel.

Accountability for international crimes/Nicaragua

ISHR is deeply committed to taking a principled and consistent approach to all human rights situations, supporting defenders to seek accountability for international crimes. In line with this approach, **we built coalitions and worked with and supported defenders to establish, renew or strengthen investigative and accountability mechanisms in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Russia and Sudan, among others.**

In a **significant win**, the mechanism on **Nicaragua** was extended for two years with a strengthened focus on Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, reprisals, and political prisoners. This success followed the sustained advocacy of Nicaraguan and international civil society organisations through the Colectivo 46/2 coalition, of which ISHR is a founding member. Each of these international mechanisms contributes to documenting violations, amplifying the voices and experiences of victims and survivors, laying the groundwork for future criminal prosecutions, and providing a roadmap of recommendations for State and non-State actors to respect and protect human rights.



‘[Civilians in Gaza face] a human rights apocalypse, with indiscriminate, disproportionate, and wide-area bombing with heavy artillery shelling depriving them of all the necessities of life [...]. An immediate and unconditional ceasefire is essential to avoid tens of thousands of further civilian deaths and to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid.’

Phil Lynch, ISHR Executive Director quoted in The Lancet, 16 December 2023



Democratic Republic of Congo

After several years working in partnership with local civil society organisations, **we finally secured a human rights defender protection law in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the first such country in Central Africa!**

We are now working to ensure the law's effective implementation, together with that of defender laws that have previously been secured in countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mongolia and Niger. Welcoming the adoption of the DRC law, ISHR partner Justin Bahirwe, lawyer and Coordinator of SOS-IJM, said: *'The struggle of several years has come to an end. The DRC becomes the fifth African country to specifically protect defenders on its territory, and we hope that this will enable defenders to feel a little safer in the country.'*



Burkina Faso/Tanzania

In Burkina Faso, ISHR worked with the national human rights institution and local civil society partners to develop an **Action Plan to strengthen protection and support for defenders**, even while the State seeks to address issues of terrorism and extremism. Meanwhile, our work with the Tanzanian Human Rights Defenders Coalition has led to the development and adoption of a **civil-society led draft policy on defenders**, which national civil society is now pursuing with government ministers and officials.

Interactive world map on legislative protection

Globally, our **interactive world map on legislative protection** enables both advocates and policy makers to easily ascertain where national instruments have been developed for the protection of defenders, including the compatibility of such protections with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Model Law for the promotion and protection of defenders. It also contains information about guidelines developed for diplomatic missions, such as the new guidelines adopted by Finland in 2023.



'We need to ensure that Afghan women remain at the centre of any discussion and any decision related to their country by international bodies. Their access and genuine participation cannot be neglected.'

Pooja Patel, ISHR Deputy Executive Director quoted in 'Inside Geneva', 10 January 2023.



Ending gender apartheid in Afghanistan

Over the last two years, ISHR has worked with women human rights defenders from Afghanistan, as well as with international legal experts, to frame the situation facing women and girls in Afghanistan as one of gender apartheid. This framing is **essential to recognise the institutionalised nature and gravity of the repression and discrimination women and girls face in the country, to maintain the pariah status of the Taliban and resist their normalisation in international relations, and to pressure both State and non-State actors to take concrete steps to end the violations and pursue accountability.**

Since the commencement of the campaign, the gender apartheid framing has been adopted by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, among others. There is now a concerted push to explicitly recognise and codify the crime of gender apartheid – a current gap in international criminal law and the protection of women and girls – in a new treaty on Crimes against Humanity currently being negotiated by governments at the UN.

“

‘This extreme situation of institutionalised gender-based discrimination in Afghanistan is unparalleled anywhere in the world. These appalling human rights violations mask other underlying manifestations of gender-based discrimination that precede the rule by the Taliban and are deeply engrained in society, made invisible and even normalised. If we are to eliminate discrimination and break cycles of violence, gender justice requires a holistic understanding as to why such violations are committed. These acts do not occur in isolation. We recommend that the international community develop further normative standards and tools to address the broader phenomenon of gender apartheid as an institutionalised system of discrimination, segregation, humiliation and exclusion of women and girls.’

Joint report of the **UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Afghanistan**



'More than 10 UN Special Rapporteurs have asked China for access to meet victims and truly document what is happening and, despite [Beijing's] big speeches on international cooperation and openness, they have never responded positively to these requests.'

Raphaël Viana David, Programme Manager for China & Latin America quoted in Café da Manhã, 29 May 2023



In China, our comprehensive programme aims to **build pressure for human rights reform** by supporting detained and disappeared defenders and their families like Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan, campaigning for the repeal of restrictive laws and policies like the draconian 'Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location' regime, and training new generations of defenders. Throughout 2023 we also worked with Chinese human rights defenders to **secure strong recommendations from UN committees** and States both on the human rights situation in China as well as China's extraterritorial human rights impacts, and to resource and support Chinese civil society engagement with the Universal Periodic Review process.

Effective narratives

With public recognition and support for defenders being an essential element contributing to their protection and an enabling environment for their work, **we continued to develop and support sectoral uptake of effective narratives on human rights defenders, including by influential actors such as the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and through coalitions such as Vuka!** We also continued to disseminate the principles of effective narratives via in-person and online workshops with defenders, including through our e-learning module.

Corporate accountability



Together with the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and the B-Team, ISHR continued to promote corporate action to respect and protect defenders and pursue corporate accountability for abuses against them, including through the **Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders**. In 2023, Unilever became the latest major company to adopt a company policy and principles on human rights defenders, drawing extensively on work previously undertaken by BizNet on the shared interest of companies and civil society in free and open operating environments. While welcoming the adoption of such policies, ISHR also continues to engage in the development of a binding treaty on business and human rights with specific provisions to recognise and protect defenders.



INCREASE IN **USE OF ISHR INFORMATION PRODUCTS** BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FROM:

- + **300%** Sao Tomé & Principe
- + **186%** Cape Verde
- + **150%** Eritrea
- + **128%** Dominican Republic
- + **117%** Djibouti
- + **100%** Tuvalu

These increases reflect the relevance and accessibility of ISHR's online resources in multiple languages.

Declaration+25



As part of activities to celebrate the **25th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**, to raise awareness of the Declaration, along with a coalition of 16 organisations we held events and developed resources, including an **e-learning tool**. We also consulted over 500 human rights defenders to help guide the development of a civil society-led document collating international and regional jurisprudence on defenders, evolutions of human rights movements, and defenders' needs. Following adoption at a high-level experts' meeting in April, **the Declaration+25** to be launched this year will provide an authoritative legal baseline for the protection of defenders.



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NUMBER OF NEWS ITEMS QUOTING OR CITING ISHR IN 2023

INCLUDING MENTIONS BY AFP, REUTERS, THE GUARDIAN, THE LANCET, THE BBC, THE HINDU, FOLHA DE S. PAULO, AND THE NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG.

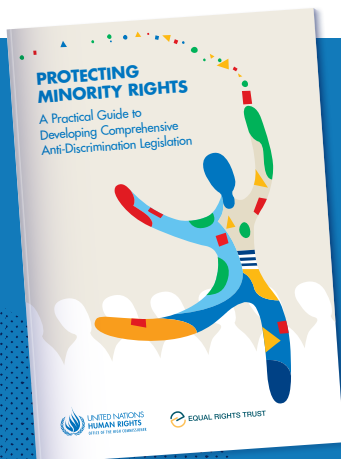


IN SEVEN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES



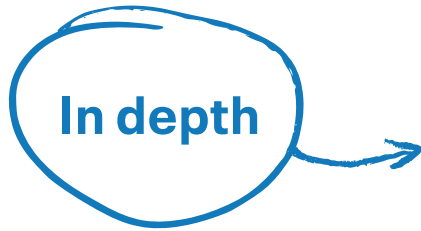
Yogyakarta Principles/Nepal

Demonstrating the enduring relevance and impact of ISHR's work to develop the authoritative [Yogyakarta Principles](#) on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics in 2006, as well as the complementary Yogyakarta Principles +10 in 2017, in 2023 **the Supreme Court of Nepal** relied on the principles to recognise and uphold the rights of same-sex spouses.



Anti-discrimination legislation

Following inputs and advocacy from ISHR, the **UN Human Rights Office** released a **major new guidance** on developing comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation which urges States to specifically prohibit discrimination on the grounds of a person's status as a human rights defender, among other grounds. This important development is consistent with ISHR advocacy and emerging jurisprudence that international law prohibits discrimination against human rights defenders.



Accountability priorities at the Human Rights Council in 2024

Where expert UN mechanisms make findings of continuing atrocity crimes, the situation should engage both the Human Rights Council's prevention and accountability mandates. In that context, ISHR greatly regrets the failure of the Council to renew accountability mandates on Libya (in March 2023) and Ethiopia (in October 2023), both in circumstances where international fact finding missions have warned of ongoing and further atrocity crimes. These situations, together with that of Yemen, should be back on the Council agenda in 2024.

Based on objective criteria, including evidence of crimes against humanity and widespread repression of human rights defenders, ISHR also regrets the failure of States to take any collective action on ongoing grave situations in [Egypt](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), among others in 2023. These situations must be addressed and the subject of collective action in 2024.

Eighteen months on from the release of a landmark UN Human Rights Office report on the [human rights crisis in Xinjiang](#), ISHR continues to strategise and advocate for States and the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, to follow up on the report in a sustained and principled way. This is particularly important given the finding that the conditions remain for possible crimes against humanity in China to continue and persist.

The Council should also exercise its prevention mandate in relation to India, where we witness a rise in violence against religious minorities and Dalits,

fuelled by Hindu nationalist leaders. This is occurring in the context of erosion of the rule of law and independence of the judiciary, as well as the ongoing criminalisation, harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and journalists using abusive national security laws.



ISHR deeply regrets the lack of meaningful action or attention at the Council to the issue of [migrant deaths and ill-treatment at land borders and at sea](#), an issue implicating many EU member States but also a global concern. The Missing Migrants Project recorded

55,980 reported deaths of people in migration worldwide from 2014 to May 2023, a number widely understood to be a significant underestimate. During 2024, ISHR will continue to call on the Human Rights Council to take appropriate action by establishing an independent international monitoring mechanism to investigate these violations, including root causes of violations in the governance of international migration, and contribute to accountability and redress for victims and their families.

Finally, as the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Gaza continues to unfold, ISHR will support meaningful action at the Council – as well as bodies such as the General Assembly, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court – to promote accountability for all atrocity crimes committed by Israel and by Palestinian armed groups, and to address root causes of violations, including denial of the right to self-determination and return of the Palestinian people, settler colonialism and apartheid.



INCREASE IN ISHR ONLINE MEDIA ACTIVITY SINCE 2022

FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS



23,756
+1.4%



TWITTER FOLLOWERS

ENGLISH

32,190
+5%

CHINESE

8,465
+22%

SPANISH

974
+10%

FRENCH

647
+7%

INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS



1,578
+33%

LINKEDIN FOLLOWERS



13,228
+70%

SESSIONS ON WWW.ISHR.CH



222,998
-39%

YOUTUBE VIEWS



42,305
+95%

#Right2defend RIGHTS

Celebrating 25 years
of the Declaration on Human
Rights Defenders

2 The right to defend rights

We all have the right - and the responsibility - to defend human rights. This was the revolutionary idea behind the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly exactly 50 years after that same body adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By affirming the right to defend rights, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders firmly established a key human rights principle, and recognised the reality that without human rights defenders, the promise of the Universal Declaration would remain empty and unfulfilled.

Thanks to the work and strategic litigation of ISHR and others, this is now firmly established in jurisprudence, with Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures recognising that the work of defenders is so integral to the realisation of rights, that threats and attacks against defenders may amount to violations of the rights they advocate for and defend.



Thus, for example, threats against environmental human rights defenders may amount to a violation of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Similarly, shutting down a protest against arbitrary evictions or unlawful demolitions may not only amount to violation of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, but a violation of the rights to adequate housing and to freedom from arbitrary interference with the home.

But the Declaration also went further than enshrining the fundamental right to defend rights. It also elaborated existing binding international human rights law as it applies to human rights defenders, including for example, **the right of human rights defenders and their organisations to access resources, including from so called 'foreign sources', as well as the right to communicate and cooperate with international bodies, free from any form of intimidation or reprisal.**

Goal and impact:

Strengthening human rights laws and systems

Our 2023 Goal

Human rights laws and mechanisms are accessible, responsive and effective



What we achieved

Our deep understanding of the needs and priorities of defenders, our expert policy research and advocacy, and our access to high-level decision-makers and diplomats within the UN and regional systems, combined to make those systems more accessible, effective and protective for defenders and victims. Our work contributed significantly to ensure that:

- ★ human rights mechanisms are accessible and safe, with policies and processes to enable meaningful participation for defenders online and offline
- ★ human rights mechanisms are effective and fit for purpose, respond to the calls and demands of defenders, and establish appropriate mechanisms and mandates to promote accountability and justice
- ★ cases of intimidation and reprisals are properly investigated and perpetrators held accountable.

13

STATES SPEAKING OUT ON INDIVIDUAL CASES OF REPRISALS

80

STATES JOINING FORCES AT THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY TO CONDEMN REPRISALS

Select highlights



#EndReprisals

Our 2023 campaign to #EndReprisals was a significant success, with a record number of States, thirteen, speaking out to pursue **accountability for individual cases of reprisals in ten different countries**. This included a significant number of cases advocated for by ISHR. Additionally, following ISHR advocacy, at least one case of reprisals was raised publicly during the General Assembly in New York for the first time, raising the political cost for perpetrators.

Landmark General Assembly resolution

We worked closely with Norway and partners to secure a **significant resolution at the General Assembly recognising that the work of defenders is integral to the realisation of universal rights**. The resolution included strengthened language on women human rights defenders, defenders in conflict and post conflict situations and children defending human rights; as well as on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and defenders' work to develop new human rights ideas.



UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders' mandate renewal at HRC52

The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders is integral to their protection and recognition globally. It gathers and responds to information on the situation of defenders around the world, engages constructively with governments and non-State actors and provides expert recommendations to promote the effective implementation of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In 2023, **ISHR led a coalition of over 170 NGOs advocating for the renewal of this vital mandate, leading in April 2023 to its consensus renewal at the Human Rights Council with co-sponsorship from over 70 States.**



'With this vote, States have acted in line with General Assembly resolution 60/251 and stopped Russia's brazen attempt to undermine the international human rights system.'

Madeleine Sinclair,
Co-Director of ISHR's New York Office, as quoted in *Le Temps*,
10 October 2023



UN accreditation for NGOs

Our systemic advocacy and individualised advice continued to help NGOs to obtain accreditation and access to the UN. Writing after their UN accreditation **was finally granted after 15 years of strategic advocacy**, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) said, *'We would like to thank all those who have bravely spoken out on our behalf throughout the years, including UN experts and officials, members of the European Parliament, EU officials and human rights defenders. We would like to thank the IDSN International Associates who have supported us in accessing the UN human rights spaces in the last 15 years, while our accreditation was withheld. Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to the International Service for Human Rights, that has supported us in this process for so many years and never gave up on fighting our corner.'*

Human Rights Council elections

For many defenders and victims, the UN Human Rights Council provides a powerful platform to expose violations, seek justice, shape policy, and contribute to national level change. For the Council to fulfil these functions, its membership composition matters. For this reason, ISHR coordinated with civil society partners at the national and international levels to **campaign against candidate States which were responsible for atrocity crimes, widespread civil society repression and reprisals against human rights defenders**. In 2023, three candidate States fulfilled all three of these criteria: **Russia, China and Burundi**.

Following an intensive campaign in New York, Geneva and at capital level, **ISHR and partners were able to secure the defeat of Russia**, while China and Burundi received the lowest number of votes among their regional groups. This outcome helps contribute to the legitimacy of the Council and ensure its accessibility and effectiveness for human rights defenders and victims of violations. Our ongoing work on Human Rights Council elections, including through **candidate scorecards** and a **candidate pledging event** convened jointly with Amnesty International, helps to increase transparency, promote accountability, strengthen the commitments, pledges and actions of various candidates, and improve the Council's composition.



Civil society participation

Meaningful civil society participation is a cornerstone of an effective United Nations. Without adequate consultation, decisions on issues relating to participation and procedure will be taken without full consideration of all key stakeholders, to the detriment of the UN's effectiveness. Throughout the year, **ISHR engaged closely with the President and Bureau of the Human Rights Council to ensure that initiatives to make the Council more 'efficient' do not restrict civil society access** and thereby result in a Council which is less effective. Building on our efforts for more than 30 years, **we also worked to safeguard and provide national-level activists with direct access to the Council**, ensuring their rightful seat at a key human rights decision-making table.

African Commission on Human & Peoples' Rights

Throughout 2023, ISHR also actively engaged with the African Commission on Human & Peoples' Rights, both on substantive human rights issues, as well as for the purpose of ensuring that this vital regional body **remains accessible to NGOs, strengthens protections against reprisals, and develops an instrument to increase public participation and protect environmental human rights defenders**. Together with the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, ISHR also supported NGO engagement with the Commission through the provision of training and resources ahead of the Forum on the Participation of NGOs and the sessions of the Commission.



'Unfortunately, most member States that seek election to the Committee on NGOs act as gatekeepers looking to block certain civil society groups rather than facilitate their participation in the UN.'

Maithili Pai, UN Advocate for ISHR, quoted in Swissinfo, 1 March 2023



RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY ISHR

73%

TAKEN UP BY STATES IN THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW, WITH EACH ISHR RECOMMENDATION MADE BY AN AVERAGE OF 8 STATES



In depth

Record number of States speak out on cases of reprisals against human rights defenders

High-level political support and public advocacy can show solidarity with defenders and help ensure their safety and freedom. **Responding to ISHR's campaign to #EndReprisals, a record thirteen States spoke out to condemn individual cases and situations of reprisals against those cooperating with the UN.**

Among them, Luxembourg, in a joint statement with Belgium and the Netherlands, publicly addressed the situations of the Bangladeshi organisation Odhikar and its members Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan, together with the cases of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain, and Félix Alejandro Maradiaga, Anibal Toruño and Vilma Núñez de Escorcía of the Nicaraguan group Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos. They also included in their statement mentions of Belarussian NGO Viasna and defenders Ibrahim Metwally Hegazy in Egypt, Jiang Tianyong in China and Armel Niyongere, Lambert Nigarura, Dieudonné Bashirahishize and Vital Nshimirimana from Burundi.

Germany's representative also raised the case of Viasna, as well as those of Chinese defenders Gui Minhai, Ilham Tohti, Li Qiaochu, Li Yuhan, Yu Wensheng and his wife Xu Yan, and of Egyptian activists Alaa Abd el-Fattah and Alaa El-Din El-Adly.

The United States cited the targeting of civil society organisations under Hong Kong's sweeping 'National Security Law', a case included in [ISHR's 2023 campaign](#). They also included in their statement the harassment of the legal team defending the jailed pro-democracy media figure Jimmy Lai.

Pakistan cited the cases of Kashmiri activists Khurram Parvez and Irfan Mehraj, cases which ISHR also raised in face-to-face [meetings with the UN Secretary-General](#).

Liechtenstein and Czechia also raised the case of Viasna before denouncing legislative measures to criminalise assistance to and cooperation with international bodies in Belarus and Russia. The Russian measures were also mentioned by the representative of Lithuania, speaking on behalf of Poland and Ukraine.

Denmark cited the case of [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#), arbitrarily detained in Bahrain.

The United Kingdom also cited the case of Sebastien Lai, the son of Jimmy Lai from Hong Kong, as well as the case of Anexa Alfred Cunningham from Nicaragua in relation to which ISHR submitted a [petition to the Secretary-General](#) to have her case included in the report. The UK also addressed the situation of the NGO Viasna and trade unionist Alexander Yaroshuk from Belarus and the lawyers Armel Niyongere, Lambert Nigarura, Dieudonné Bashirahishize and Vital Nshimirimana from Burundi.

Anexa Alfred Cunningham shares her story with us.



#Right2defend RIGHTS

Celebrating 25 years
of the Declaration on Human
Rights Defenders

3 Threats facing human rights defenders

25 years on from the adoption of the Declaration, it is an important development that a number of States have taken action to strengthen their national legal frameworks for the protection of defenders, including by enacting the Declaration at the domestic level and adopting specific national human rights defender protection laws and mechanisms. Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, the DRC, Mongolia and Mexico are among the States that have taken this positive step.

Other States, including Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Ireland and Canada have adopted human rights defender guidelines, providing guidance to their embassies and diplomats about the protection of at-risk defenders abroad.

At the same time, **various countries have passed laws which further restrict the rights of human rights defenders**, such as the anti-LGBT law in **Uganda** that restricts advocacy for LGBT communities. Defenders at the national level resist, challenge and seek to repeal laws which restrict their rights.



But much remains to be done. Despite their vital work for gender justice, women human rights defenders like Neda Parwan and Zholia Parsi in Afghanistan and Narges Mohammadi **in Iran face systemic discrimination and arbitrary detention.**

Despite their vital work for racial justice, anti-racism activists like Assa Traoré face **judicial harassment in France**, and Marielle Franco was **assassinated in 2018 in Brazil.**

Despite their vital work for political justice, activists like Abdulhadi Al Khawaja in Bahrain and Ahmed Mansoor, Maryam al-Balushi and Amina al-Abduli **in the UAE face detention, torture and ill-treatment.**

Despite their vital work for reproductive justice, defenders like Justyna Wydrzyńska **in Poland face spurious legal charges and criminalisation.**

And despite their vital work for environmental justice, environmental and land rights defenders like Sukhgerel Dugersuren **in Mongolia and Trinh Ba Phuong in VietNam face persecution and worse.**

Our team

Board



Vrinda Grover

Chair
India

Indian lawyer and human rights defender, successfully litigating landmark cases on women's rights, police accountability, freedom of the press and sexual minorities.



Bruno Stagno Ugarte

Vice-Chair
Costa Rica

Chief Advocacy Officer with Human Rights Watch; previously Executive Director of Security Council Report, and Foreign Minister of Costa Rica.



Jean-Claude Erné

Treasurer
Switzerland

Equity Partner at Banque Pictet and Head of Pictet Wealth Management in Switzerland; lawyer admitted to the Geneva Bar.



Shaharzar Akbar

Member
Afghanistan

Woman human rights defender, Executive Director of Rawadari and former Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AT ISHR

60%
OF BOARD MEMBERS

75%
OF EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

89%
OF DIRECTORS' GROUP



Oleksandra Matviichuk

Member*
Ukraine

Human rights lawyer and head of the Ukraine Centre for Civil Liberties, conferred with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022; Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

* Elected by AGM for a first term in June 2023



Alice Mogwe

Member*
Botswana

Director of Ditshwanelo (the Botswana Centre for Human Rights); President of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH); former Chairperson of the Southern Africa Trust.

* Retired December 2023 following end of second term



Heba Morayef

Member
Egypt

MENA Regional Director with Amnesty International; former Egypt Director at Human Rights Watch and Associate Director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

Staff



**Taaka
Awori**

Member*
Uganda

Founder and CEO of Busara Africa, a Pan-African leadership development firm, and Chair of the African Women's Development Fund.

*Co-opted for a first term in December 2023



**Jamil
Dakwar**

Member*
United States

Director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Human Rights Program, leading ACLU advocacy at the UN and before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

*Elected by AGM for a first term in June 2023



**Mona
Sabella**

Member
Palestine

Human rights defender coordinating global efforts on corporate accountability at ESCR-Net; former International Advocacy Officer with Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.



**Miroslaw
Wyrzykowski**

Member
Poland

Chair of the Human Rights Department, Faculty of Law and Administration, University of Warsaw; former judge of the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland.



**Nada
Awad**

**HRC Advocacy
Coordinator**



**Lamar
Bailey**

**UN Antiracism
Coalition Manager**



**Marianne
Bertrand**

**Campaign &
Mobilisation Manager**
[@MariBertl](#)



**Salomé
Boucif**

**Training and
Advocacy Support
Manager**
[@Salome_ISHR](#)



**Marina
Dailly**

**Deputy
Executive Director
(Operations)**



**Christine
Do Phan**

**Communications
Director**
[@Christine_ISHR](#)



**Elise
Golay**

**Campaign
& Mobilisation
Manager**
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**Eva
Homolkova**

**Senior Fundraising
& Grants Manager**



**Salma
El Hosseiny**

**Senior Programme
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**Samira
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Human Resources
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**Diya Lavinia
Jugessur**

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**Fabiana
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Rights Council)
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**Lee
Chung Lun**

Programme Officer
(China)



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Communications
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**Muhindo
Makunya Trésor**

Legal & Advocacy
Officer (Africa)
[@TMakunya](#)



**Eleanor
Openshaw**

Programme Director
[@EleanorOpenshaw](#)



**Maithili
Pai**

UN Advocate (New
York) & elected Staff
Representative to
the ISHR Board
[@MaithiliPai](#)



**Pooja
Patel**

Deputy
Executive Director
(Programmes
& Advocacy)
[@Pooja_ISHR](#)



**Francisco
Pérez**

Communications
& Media Manager
[@FranciscoJPGz](#)



**Ulises
Quero**

Programme Manager
(Business, Land
& Environment)



**Antsa
Rakotonanahary**

Senior Finance
Coordinator

Staff



**Nicolas
Rapin**

Fundraising
& Grants Officer
@rapin_nicolas



**Nayara Khaly
Silva Sanfo**

UN Antiracism
Coalition Coordinator



**Marco Barbosa
Santos**

Office & Programme
Support Assistant



**Madeleine
Sinclair**

New York Office
Director & Legal
Counsel
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**Javier Urizar
Montes de Oca**

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**Raphaël Viana
David**

Programme Manager
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**Diego
Villanueva**

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Programme Support
Manager
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**Clément
Nyaletsossi
Voule**

Senior Advisor



**Jelena
Zaric**

Finance Manager

Fellows and interns

Irina Agapova

Wipada Baccam

Charlotte Giang Beuret

Jessica Biewers

José David Enriquez

Alaitasune Love Geiger

Kirill Gorlov

Emily Hammerslough

Isabel Hershey

Tanya Llamon

Kristel Martin

Hortense Minishi

Nadia Nibaruta

Jesselina Rana

Clélia Da Silva

Socorro Topete

Anusika Vinasithamby

*The names of some Human Rights
Defender Fellows have been omitted
for security reasons.*

Our supporters

Thank you!

The generous contributions of our donors sustain our work to support human rights defenders, strengthen human rights systems and achieve human rights change. They provide hope and make change happen!

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- The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Norway – Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Organisation internationale de la Francophonie
- Switzerland – Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
- United Kingdom – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- United States – Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights & Labor and Mission to the United Nations in Geneva)
- Ville de Genève - Délégation Genève ville solidaire

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- Ford Foundation
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Up to \$100

Ahmad Alnashashibi, Christine Do Phan, Christine Frinchaboy, Nadeem Khawaja, David and Judith Lynch, Rosemary McCreery, Vincent Ploton, Lorraine Potts.

Pro bono contributions

During 2023, ISHR worked with some of the world's leading law firms and counsel on a pro bono basis, enabling us to leverage substantial legal expertise and resources. We also benefited from support from a number of leading universities.

- Ashurst
- Arnold & Porter
- Brick Court Chambers (UK) – Jennifer MacLeod
- DLA Piper
- Essex Court Chambers (UK) – Ben Juratowitch KC, Alison Macdonald KC, Naomi Hart, Amy Sander
- Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer
- King & Spalding
- Sedlex Avocats
- Shearman & Sterling
- University of Michigan

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Good governance

ISHR is deeply committed to principles of **good governance, transparency and accountability**.

In 2023, ISHR’s finances and financial management and reporting systems were independently audited by Beau HLB. The management letter contained no new recommendations.

The ISHR Board met on four occasions during 2023, with an average attendance of 62% (down from 72% in 2022) per meeting, addressing issues including the external environment, governance, strategy, policy, risk,

holistic security, human resources and staff wellbeing, programmatic outcomes and impacts, evaluations and learnings, and fundraising and financial resource management.

The Board also convened two in-depth discussions to inform ISHR priorities and programmes, the first regarding strategies to strengthen the legal recognition and protection of human rights defenders, and the second focused on narrative and legal initiatives to recognise and codify the international atrocity crime of gender apartheid.

ISHR is committed to addressing all forms of discrimination and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, both internally and through our programmatic support to women human rights defenders, defenders of LGBTIQ+ rights, and anti-racism defenders, among others.

There were no reported breaches of ISHR's Anti-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity Policy in 2023. ISHR continued to monitor and ensure effective implementation of its Code of Conduct, taking remedial action in one case.

Of ISHR's Board members, six of ten are women, including the Chair. The composition of ISHR's Board reflects organisational values of diversity and representation, with members from the Asia-Pacific, Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, North America, and Western and Eastern Europe. Their work as human rights defenders across various sectors – NGOs, National Human Rights Institutions, academia, government, courts and private sector – brings diverse experience and expertise to ISHR.

Three of four members of ISHR's Executive Leadership Team are women, while eight of nine members of the Directors' Group are women. ISHR's Executive Director is a member of the International Gender Champions initiative.

ISHR's Working Group on Non-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion, which reports directly to the ISHR Board as well as the Executive Director, continued to monitor and make recommendations on ways to better address discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion. In 2023, this included implementing recommendations

from an independent assessment of ISHR's policies and practices on diversity, equity and inclusion; convening whole-of-organisation conversations on becoming an anti-racist organisation; updating recruitment policies; and implementing a mandatory staff training programme on non-discrimination. Together with the Human Resources Manager and Executive Leadership Team, the Working Group is also developing a disability inclusion policy and a competencies framework for various positions and levels within the organisation, designed to enhance transparency, fairness and equity in recruitment and promotion, as well as to assist in identifying gaps and development needs.

We consider that holistic security and a focus on wellbeing are paramount to the safety and sustainability of defenders and their work, as well as that of ISHR staff.

Throughout 2023, ISHR continued to implement our Holistic Security Policy as well as advice and recommendations from our Working Group on Digital Security. For 2024, we have engaged a new external IT service provider, InterHyve, to further strengthen our digital security practices and update our IT infrastructure. We have also established an Artificial Intelligence Working Group to develop an organisational policy on our use of, and safeguards regarding, artificial intelligence.

We continued to implement our organisational Wellbeing Policy under the leadership of the Wellbeing Working Group. We organised online and in-person activities to reinforce team building and wellbeing, including end-of-year festivities and regular wellbeing check-ins among staff.



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ISHR's 2023 staff strategy retreat included dedicated sessions on wellbeing, empowering staff management, effective communications, and conflict management and resolution.

In her December 2023 report to the ISHR Board, ISHR's Staff Representative noted: appreciation for the overall positive and inclusive work environment, as well as a productive and energising staff strategy retreat; improvements in various organisational processes and collaboration; improvements in planning and workload management; and the need to maintain organisational and individual capacity to respond to human rights emergencies and crises.

In 2023, the working group also circulated a survey to measure the wellbeing among staff (75% participated). The analysis, which will enable us to update the wellbeing policy in 2024, will be available soon.

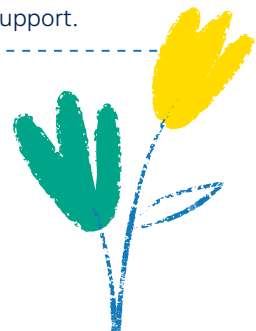
We are committed to climate justice and to a healthy and sustainable environment. We stand with and support environmental human rights defenders. ISHR also recognises that it has a responsibility to the environment beyond legal and regulatory requirements.

In 2023, we continued to implement our Environmental Policy, setting out our commitment to promote biodiversity and a healthy and sustainable environment, reduce our environmental impact, and continually improve our environmental performance.

With the pandemic precipitating a period of digital innovation at ISHR, and with the continued evolution of hybrid work practices, we have considerably reduced both staff and partner emissions associated with our activities, particularly through a reduction in air travel, over a three year rolling period.

As a member since 2020, last year ISHR continued to actively participate in the 2050Today initiative, a Geneva climate action forum bringing together permanent missions, international organisations, academia, private and civil society entities, to tackle climate change by measurably reducing emissions through collective and customised projects. ISHR has been part of the mobility, food and biodiversity working groups.

ISHR's Strategic Framework 2021-25 identifies defenders working on issues of environmental justice and sustainability as a priority group for support.



#Right2defend RIGHTS

Celebrating 25 years
of the Declaration on Human
Rights Defenders

4 Government action to recognise and protect defenders

Together with a coalition of 16 other NGOs, ISHR used the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Declaration to call on States to make five key pledges on the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.

1. **States should publicly recognise the vital role of human rights defenders.** Authorities should actively promote defenders' work and achievements, so that we know them not just for the threats they face but for their invaluable contributions to freedom, justice, equality and accountability.
2. **States should recognise and address the intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression that many defenders face** and ensure their protection and meaningful participation in all relevant policy and decision-making processes.



3. In genuine partnership with independent civil society actors, **States should develop and implement national laws, policies and mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders.** They should also repeal or amend laws and policies which restrict and criminalise defenders.
4. **States should refrain from any form of intimidation or reprisals against defenders** in association with their engagement with the UN and other regional mechanisms. They should take a clear and public position against intimidation and reprisals, including by calling out and holding to account other States that commit such acts.
5. **States should ensure that all threats and attacks against human rights defenders are the subject of prompt, impartial and independent investigation.** Perpetrators must be held accountable, and effective remedies provided both to address the harms to the individual and to address any systemic or structural factors contributing to such threats or attacks.

Financial statements

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Profit and loss statement for year ended 31 December 2023

INCOME	2023 CHF	2022 CHF
REVENUE – CORE		
Governmental agencies	1,321,021	923,106
Trusts and foundations	411,080	514,910
Individual and corporate donors	19,273	78,156
Other revenue	44,865	84,646
Total core grants	1,796,239	1,600,818
REVENUE – EARMARKED		
Governmental agencies	1,403,327	1,336,284
Trusts and foundations	641,807	768,807
Intergovernmental agencies	14,082	0
Special contributions and consultancy	40,382	27,736
Total earmarked grants	2,099,598	2,132,827
TOTAL INCOME	3,895,836	3,733,645
COSTS		
Personnel cost GVA	2,753,486	2,634,027
GENERAL EXPENDITURE		
Missions, travel, accommodation	442,333	351,102
Publications, translations, outreach	88,383	166,385
Office and operating costs	317,113	272,162
Financial charges, audit fees	67,146	29,503
Governance and strategy	47,720	48,097
New York costs	169,691	221,597
TOTAL COSTS	3,885,872	3,722,874
END OF YEAR RESULT	9,965	10,772

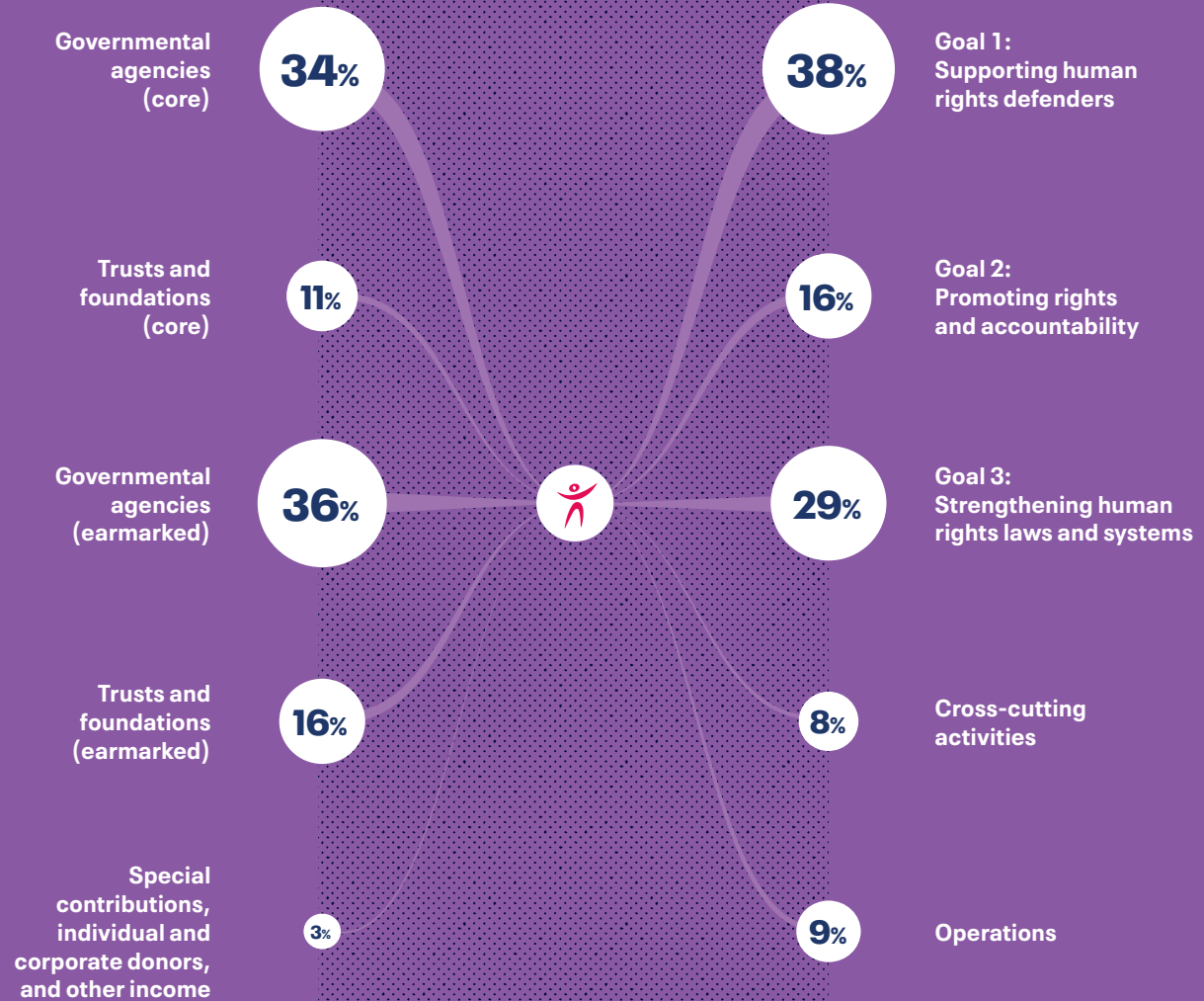
This is an extract of ISHR's audited financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2023. For a complete version, please contact Marina Dailly at m.dailly@ishr.ch

Balance sheet at 31 December 2023

ASSETS	2023 CHF	2022 CHF
CURRENT ASSETS		
Petty cash	610	402
Bank accounts and special bank accounts	971,833	1,015,995
Sub-Total	972,443	1,016,397
Debtors	44,540	55,746
Withholding tax	-	-
DEFERRED AND ACCRUED ASSETS		
Deferred expenses	-	-
Grants receivable – Governmental and intergovernmental	984,299	1,134,736
Grants receivable – Non-governmental	405,976	456,215
Total deferred and accrued assets	1,390,275	1,590,951
TOTAL ASSETS	2,407,257	2,663,093
LIABILITIES AND RESERVES		
LIABILITIES		
Current liabilities	122,545	108,173
Provisions	26,600	2,729
Sub-total	149,145	110,902
Deferred grants	1,553,100	1,857,144
Total liabilities	1,702,245	1,968,046
RESERVES		
Reserve funds	695,048	684,276
Income (deficit) for the year	9,965	10,771
Total reserves	705,012	695,048
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND RESERVES	2,407,257	2,663,093

Income by source

Total CHF
3,895,836



Expenditure by category

Total CHF
3,885,872

Defenders' hopes and visions

Over the last four decades, we've heard and amplified the voices of thousands of defenders tirelessly working on diverse issues across the world. Despite their differences, these brave individuals share a fundamental belief: a better world is achievable when people and communities come together to defend rights, and they are committed to making that vision a reality. Here are some key insights they've shared with us!



'Our impact may be large, may be small, and may be nothing. But we must try. It is our duty to the dispossessed and it is the right of civil society.' (2014)



Cao Shunli*
China

'We would like to create more space for people... to be themselves.' (2019)



Olga Karach
Belarus

'I hope to live in that better world, a just and humane society in harmony with nature and climate, before I come to the end of my days.' (2020)



Leon Dulce
Philippines

'...we finally had the Declaration that defenders deserve... and we went on to strongly support the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders... ISHR continues to do that today.' (2014)



Adrien-Claude Zoller
Switzerland,
ISHR Founder

'There would be peace in the desert countries like Libya or Tunisia. (...) We would live as one. There would be no more discrimination.' (2023)



Moses von Kallon
Sierra Leone

'In the future, I see that justice becomes a reality for every person or family who has been a victim of violence...that we have a more equitable society, that discrimination, hate speech and injustices no longer exist.' (2021)



Donovan Ortega
Mexico



* Ten years ago, Chinese woman human rights defender Cao Shunli was a victim of deadly reprisals for engaging with the United Nations.

'Creating school systems that are really inclusive of LGBTI people: this is something that I'm really passionate about.' (2016)



'I hope (...) to see more legal reforms and concrete actions (...) to change mentalities, the social norms, and to work towards a true inclusion regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.' (2023)



'To promote respect for sexual diversity is important. I really hope to promote social projects based on respect for LGBTI people.' (2021)



'As human rights defenders, we always hope to have a better life for all.' (2017)



'I've realised how our support, our struggle can change things for the betterment of our country...that is the driving force that keeps me going.' (2018)



'(the achievement I'm most proud of is...) when I have seen that Indigenous people don't fear a judge... a businessman...when an Indigenous individual knows their rights and can claim them well.' (2021)

'I see a world where women, children and minorities live a dignified life ... because women (frontline) defenders like me contribute significantly to end gross human rights abuses and create safe spaces for women and children.' (2020)



'You are always stronger working together in a network, and if each element of the network is more capable and works together - you are even stronger.' (2015)



'One day... someday, we will not have to live in fear of survival.' (2017)



Human rights artists

"The future of human rights must be hopeful. When we only show the abuses, people start to believe that we live in a world of crisis with no alternative. We believe that the image of human rights needs to be reimagined so we can bring more people on board".

This is the mission of Reimagining Human Rights, an amazing project by Fine Acts, in partnership with hope-based comms. Together, they are building the largest collection of free, evergreen, hopeful visual content around human rights, for activists and nonprofits around the world to use in their campaigns.



Pati Matsushita

p. 03, 44



Pietro Soldi

p. 14



Olga Mrozek

p. 33



Anina Takeff

p. 40, 49



Shirien Creates

p. 46



Asis Percales

p. 52, 53

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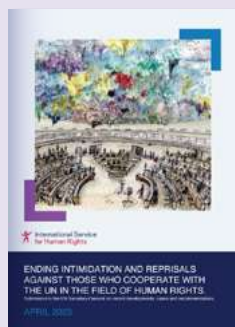
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* Original artwork adapted by Magda Castría.

New resources

In 2023, ISHR published a number of resources supporting all people who defend, promote and protect human rights. A selection can be seen below:



Reprisals: ISHR documents cases of reprisals in 23 countries

EN | ISHR's 2023 submission demonstrates the need for the UN and States to do more to prevent and ensure accountability for intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders and others cooperating or seeking to cooperate with the UN and its human rights mechanisms.



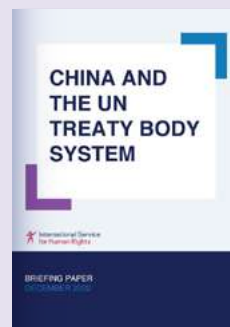
Ten practical steps to advance corporate respect for human rights defenders

EN | FR | ESP | CN | ISHR has developed a simple list of ten concrete actions the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights says businesses should take to respect human rights defenders and adhere to the UN Guiding Principles.



China, human rights and corporate activities in Latin America

EN | ESP | CN | This report submitted to the UN explores 14 business ventures in Latin America in which companies and banks under China's jurisdiction have not complied with international human rights, labour and environmental standards.



China and the UN Treaty Body System

EN | CN | In this briefing paper, ISHR looks at the powerful role of China over the UN human rights treaty bodies, identifying the ways in which China deploys influence, from an official discourse that consistently focuses on restricting their scope of work to direct threats to independent NGOs who wish to engage with the UN experts.



Simple Guide to the UN Treaty Bodies

EN | TR | Updated in December 2022, this guide provides an overview of the UN human rights treaty body system and the different ways human rights defenders can make use of it to further their human rights causes.

See the complete listing available at

<https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/>

An illustration featuring two stylized figures holding a white banner. The figure on the left is a woman with glasses and a blue cap, wearing a black t-shirt with a globe icon. The figure on the right is a woman wearing a red hijab and a black top. They are holding a white banner with blue text. Below the banner is a blue globe with a dotted texture. The background consists of purple and blue wavy shapes, and there are several stylized flowers in red, purple, and pink. The overall style is modern and colorful.

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