

Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme 2026 (HRDAP26): **Description**

Mandatory distance learning course: 13 April – 8 June 2026 (part-time)

In-person course: 10–20 June 2026 (full-time)¹

Please read the information below before completing the online application form, which can be found [here](#).

Applications must be submitted before midnight in Geneva on Thursday 15 January 2026 and will **ONLY be considered if 2 recommendation letters have been attached to the application form.**

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1) Programme description

Human rights defenders (HRDs) play a vital role in pushing for sustainable human rights improvements. A free and vibrant civil society is essential to ensure States, businesses and other non-State actors respect, protect and fulfil all human rights for all and to hold them to account when they fail to do so.

The [International Service for Human Rights](#) (ISHR) conducts regular training courses on the use of the main human rights mechanisms offered by the United Nations (UN), including the Human Rights Council (HRC), the Special Procedures (SPs), the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Treaty Bodies. The annual [Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme](#), (HRDAP) equips HRDs with the knowledge and skills to integrate the system into their existing work at the national level in a strategic manner. The programme also provides an opportunity for participants to engage in lobbying and advocacy activities at the UN with the aim to effect change back home.

HRDAP selection will be based on focused thematic area, and for 2026, the chosen themes are: Democratic backsliding and racial justice.

¹ Please note that these dates can be subject to change. In case of insufficient funding secured, the course can also be held 100% online.

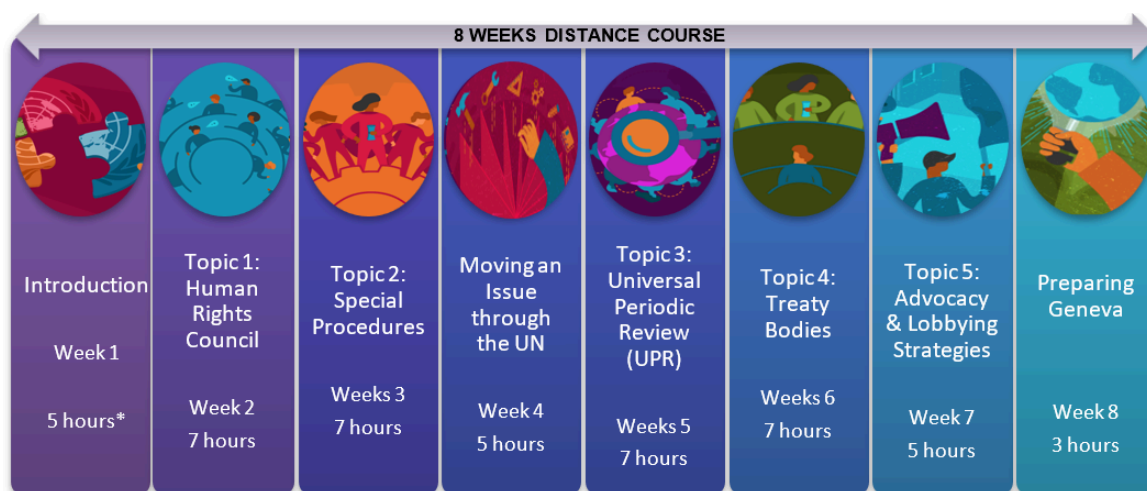
If you wish to discover the outcomes of HRDAP25 and see what participants did, click [here](#).

2) Hybrid Learning Course (online, 13 April – 8 June and in-person 10 - 20 June 2026)

The HRDAP Hybrid Learning Course allows activists to benefit from tailored, long-term advocacy coaching and support, enabling them to develop their knowledge and skills, as well as an “Advocacy Roadmap”, to make strategic use of the international human rights system in their national advocacy strategies.

The HRDAP programme consists of the following elements:

- a) A **8-week distance learning course** to support participants to consolidate existing knowledge and develop advocacy objectives, which includes access to:
 - ✓ The [HRDAP Platform](#), where you can access interactive learning materials including **e-learning courses on each key UN human rights mechanism** (the Human Rights Council; the Special Procedures; the Universal Periodic Review; the Treaty Bodies) and on **advocacy strategies**.
 - ✓ Interactive learning materials and case studies on the [ISHR Academy](#)
 - ✓ Live Questions and Answers and practical sessions with human rights experts.
 - ✓ Other tools and resources to support defenders’ advocacy work.



**Approximate number of study hours*

- b) An intensive **in-person training of 10 days** to finalise the personalised advocacy roadmap, enhance knowledge, skills, attitude and confidence, which will include:
 - ✓ **Refreshers** on each UN Human Rights Mechanisms.
 - ✓ **Additional sessions** on how to address reprisals, crafting effective narratives at the UN, how to implement UN recommendations at the domestic level and wellbeing.
 - ✓ Case-studies scenarios to practise **real-life situations and submissions**.
 - ✓ **Workshops** on how to engage and act as human rights defenders to influence outcomes of the Human Right Council sessions and other UN fora.
 - ✓ Exclusive sessions with **diplomats, experts, NGOs and UN Mandates holders**.
 - ✓ **Sharing** stories of good practices.



All along the course, defenders will:

- c) **Receive continuous advocacy support and personalised coaching**, focusing on ways to use international human rights mechanisms effectively and to influence outcomes:
 - ✓ Receive **individual support** from ISHR's Training and Advocacy Support Manager, throughout the duration of the course.
 - ✓ Each participant will receive **individual and group coaching** sessions with a dedicated ISHR staff, through regular meetings held via videoconference and in-person as well.
 - ✓ Complete individual assignments in order to develop the "Advocacy Roadmap" (concrete advocacy objectives as a part of a **theory of change**) and receive individual **feedback** and **coaching** on each submission from their coach.
- d) Be part of a **global community** of human rights defenders:
 - ✓ Meet and work with other defenders from around the world, and exchange with others in discussions on the **HRDAP secured discussion space**, meet each other during **live webinars and in person course**.
 - ✓ Receive **weekly news** informing defenders of what's coming up and learn more about other defenders taking part in the course.
 - ✓ Integrate **ISHR's Alumni Network** – with regular updates on advocacy opportunities, calls to action, and other key communication related to the international human rights space.

The methodology used is an **interactive one and participants-centred**. We encourage co-construction, participation and debates through our sessions and strive to be practical to fit the realities of human rights defenders.

3) Objectives

The objectives of the course fall into the following three broad categories:

- a) **Supporting human rights defenders:**
 - Develop human rights defenders' advocacy skills and expertise;
 - Enhance the ability of human rights defenders to engage strategically with the [Human Rights Council](#) and other international human rights mechanisms, as well as to develop diplomatic and civil society networks;
 - Share tools and knowledge, which human rights defenders can use to ensure their voice is central in international human rights decision-making;
 - Explore and compare the benefits of engagement with the Human Rights Council, the Special Procedures, the UPR and the Treaty Bodies, and examine how advocates can use them to bolster their work at the national level;
 - Develop strategies and lobbying techniques to increase the potential of human rights defenders' national and regional advocacy work.

- Improve the quality of NGO participation at the UN, with a view to exert a greater influence on human rights foreign policy;
 - Develop advocacy strategies for specific issues, and to ensure follow-up and action on the Human Rights Council's resolutions;
 - Increase human rights defenders' understanding of the short, mid and longer-term opportunities provided by human rights mechanisms in Geneva;
- b) **Influencing the substantive outcomes of international human rights mechanisms** in a positive manner, including [Human Rights Council](#) resolutions and the work of UN thematic and country specific human rights experts (the Special Procedures).
- c) **Creating a peer-learning & solidarity group of human rights defenders** working on a diverse range of issues, identifying best practice in advocating for human rights change, and exchanging lessons and experiences in conducting international advocacy.

4) Participants profile and selection criteria (thematics for 2026)

This programme is directed at **experienced human rights defenders in non-governmental organisations**, preferably grassroots organisations, who have existing advocacy experience at the national level and some prior knowledge of the international human rights system. For this programme we can't consider applicants representing the United Nations, diplomats, and National Human Rights Institutions. Participants must have 18 years at the date of application.

In 2026, we will select human rights defenders working on **democratic backsliding and racial justice**.

Defenders working in contexts of democratic backsliding

This theme is for human rights defenders working in democratic countries where authoritarian practices are gaining ground. We particularly welcome applications from defenders who are:

- pushing back against repressive laws, attacks on free expression, or restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly and association
- documenting abuses linked to police and military violence, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, or harassment
- fighting for justice, transparency, and the rule of law, and refusing to let democratic institutions be dismantled without accountability.

Defenders working on racial justice

This thematic is for defenders working to dismantle systemic racism and build societies rooted in equality and dignity. We will select applications from defenders focusing on **anti-racism**, exclusion and **police violence**, including anti-Black racism as experienced through legacies of colonialism and the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans, Indigenous (including **Afro-Indigenous**) communities working on historical injustice and reparations, as well as defenders of **migrants** and asylum seekers. We also welcome applications from mothers working for accountability for their children, victims of police violence.

Final decisions regarding participants will be based upon the following criteria:

- Match between applicants' area of work/expertise and the themes mentioned above.
- Match between applicants' area of work/expertise and the opportunities provided by the 62nd and 63rd sessions of the [Human Rights Council](#), as well as other UN mechanisms;

- Applicants' knowledge of human rights and their experience and willingness to engage with the UN human rights system and integrate it effectively into domestic level advocacy in a sustainable manner;
- Applicants' experience of carrying out advocacy at the national and/or regional level;
- Applicants' advocacy responsibilities and role within their organisation;
- The potential for a strategic and sustainable partnership between ISHR and the applicants' organisation;
- Whether applicants or their organisations have been recommended by a strategic partner;
- Applicant's general access to UN spaces and funding: we will favour organisations which lacks of funding to carrying out their objectives;
- Applicant from country/working on topic that is under-represented at the Human Rights Council;
- Applicants' willingness to contribute to peer education in a diverse group of participants;
- Applicants' demonstrated commitment to the principles of human rights, including the principles of universality and non-discrimination;
- Communication, language and organisational skills;
- The consideration will be given to overall gender balance, themes, and geographic representation.

The course will be carried out in English. ISHR cannot provide translation. While we are exploring some possibilities of having more opportunities in several languages to be more inclusive, we would like participants to be managing the English language in a way that they can communicate efficiently to demonstrate their advocacy objectives.

5) Course requirements

In order to complete HRDAP and receive a certification, participants will be required to:

- Complete approximately **7 hours of work per week**, which includes completing pre-reading resources, such as ISHR Academy modules and e-learnings.
- Take **part actively and consistently** in live webinars, Q&A sessions and forum discussions held online.
- Be present and **actively participate during the in-person session** and prepare in advance necessary requirements.
- Attend and participate in individual and group **coaching** sessions, which will be held via videoconference and in-person.
- Develop and submit a set of personal advocacy objectives by submitting short **individual assignments** every 2 weeks, as well as a **final submission** at the end of the course which will outline the defender's "Advocacy Roadmap" (i.e theory of change).
- Prepare some advocacy tools/documents to support advocacy activities in Geneva.

As a great portion of the course will take place remotely, through online learning and communication platforms, participants will need to have a **stable internet connection** throughout the duration of the course. To benefit fully from the course, we highly recommend following online courses and webinars sessions on a laptop or computer, when it is possible to do so, rather than on a mobile. **Please indicate in your application form if you anticipate having internet connectivity/computer issues, and what solutions could help resolve these.** ISHR will evaluate and consider avenues to provide additional support. Finally, we strongly encourage **participants' organisations to adhere and support their commitment** to the programme, providing them with time and arrange schedules related to workload, to ensure they live a successful and impactful learning experience, which will in turn, benefit the organisation.

Defenders will receive a **certificate** of completion on the condition that they participate actively throughout the course and submit their assignments on time.

6) Application process

By midnight Geneva time on **Thursday 15 January 2026** each applicant must:

- Submit a completed application form available [here](#) (take some time to read carefully the requirements and collect information you need, maybe save your answer in a Google doc or Word document for instance);
- Attach 2 letters of recommendation to your application form (preferably in English, but we also accept Arabic, French or Spanish): those letters shall be signed and submitted in PDF format. The recommendations shall come from 2 different organisations and dated 2025.

The Smartsheet application form will indicate to you if your application has been submitted with success, and we encourage you to tick the box at the end of the '**send me a copy of my responses**' and or prepare in a separate document to save your work.

We receive many applications each year and we could only select around 12 participants. This means that we cannot accept many worthy candidates. Your understanding is highly appreciated. **Applications will ONLY be considered if the 2 letters have been attached to the application.** Applicants who might need special assistance and reasonable accommodation are invited to contact us.

7) Cost

The tuition fee is 1000 Swiss Francs (CHF), and the average cost of travel, accommodation, meals, per diem and programme logistics administration is approximately 3000 CHF for the 10 days period.

The number and composition of the programme highly depends on ISHR total secured scholarships. We encourage you to seek third party funding to bear the cost mentioned. **Participants who are unable to meet those costs are invited to request a full or partial scholarship** (detailed at the end of the application form). We acknowledge the diversity of funding from participants and try to support as much as possible.

Full scholarships cover the whole cost of 4000 CHF, whilst partial scholarships may cover either the 1000 CHF tuition fee. Scholarships will be attributed at ISHR's discretion, based on your need assessment.

Finally, participants may need to secure funding to ensure **stable and reliable internet access and connectivity** throughout the duration of the distance learning course.

8) Timeline

Applications will be considered on a rolling basis and will close at **midnight Geneva time on Thursday 15 January 2026**. Participants will be advised in February on whether they have been selected and we will be kept informed on the different steps.

Successful applicants will be contacted to confirm their participation in HRDAP26 and asked to complete a short pre-training survey, as well as signing a Term of Reference. They must ensure availability to organise with us logistical arrangements for their venue in June 2026 including visas, insurance etc.

Please direct any questions relating to the programme or on the application process to training@ishr.ch.