

# STRATEGY 2030

International Service  
for Human Rights

Supporting defenders.  
Realising rights.





## ISHR 2026 -2030

For over 40 years ISHR has worked with human rights defenders (HRDs) to promote freedom, dignity, equality and justice. We have partnered with them to strengthen human rights laws, systems, networks and narratives. Over the next decade the work of defenders, supported by ISHR, will be critical to reverse rising authoritarianism, combat the accelerating climate crisis, prevent regress in the areas of women's rights and LGBTI rights, address systemic racism and discrimination, adequately regulate new and emerging technologies, and promote accountability for widespread atrocity crimes, among other challenges.

This Strategic Framework is designed to ensure that human rights defenders and the international

human rights movement and system are equipped to respond to these challenges. It will ensure that ISHR's work is relevant, responsive, effective, efficient, impactful and sustainable, and that our partnerships are equitable, powerful and influential.

In developing this Framework, we consulted more than 800 human rights defenders working in diverse contexts and on diverse issues. The strategy is also informed by key intelligence and insights gathered over the period 2021-25 from 5 staff strategy retreats, 9 Board and expert panel discussions, over 10 programme and campaign evaluations, a 40th anniversary survey with key stakeholders, and an intensive 3-month process of internal and external reflection on 12 key strategic questions.

## ISHR STRATEGY IN A SENTENCE

Because the work of human rights defenders is integral to the realisation of all human rights (why), ISHR partners with defenders (who) through capacity development, advocacy and litigation (how) at the UN and at regional and national levels (where) to **ensure defenders are protected and supported** (Goal 1) to **participate safely and effectively in credible and responsive systems** (Goal 2) to **seek justice and accountability** (Goal 3) (what for).

# VISION

Our vision is a world where everyone can freely and safely defend their rights and the rights of others, ensuring human rights for all.

# CORE PROPOSITIONS AND DRIVERS

The following propositions, each founded on extensive evidence and experience, underpin ISHR's work. ISHR's strategic goals and objectives respond to these drivers.

**01**

Respect for human rights, multilateral cooperation and accountability for violations are essential for peace, justice, security, good governance, sustainable development and a healthy planet.

**02**

The work of human rights defenders is essential for the realisation of all human rights, particularly those of people and communities subject to various and intersecting forms of discrimination.

**03**

The participation of human rights defenders in policy development, decision-making and governance contributes to more fair, just, inclusive, equitable, accountable, sustainable and rights-respecting processes and outcomes.

**04**

Many human rights defenders face violence, risks and repression in their home country or country of exile, including while travelling, and including from State, business and other non-State actors.

**05**

Violations against human rights defenders imperil the realisation of all human rights.

**06**

Accountability for grave violations is necessary to protect defenders, provide justice for victims, and prevent and deter further violations.

**07**

Strong, accessible and responsive laws, policies and mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels, developed and universally applied in conformity with international human rights principles, are essential to protect human rights defenders and enable their vital work. International mechanisms can be used by defenders to expose injustice, enhance protection, promote accountability, garner solidarity and increase pressure for national change.

**08**

Human rights laws, policies and mechanisms face unprecedented threat and erosion and must be protected, strengthened and adequately resourced.

**09**

Effective narratives and public statements and support for human rights defenders can contribute to their freedom, protection, and a safe and enabling environment for their work.

**10**

The health and sustainability of the human rights ecosystem require support for, and coordination between, human rights defenders and organisations working on diverse issues at the local, national, regional and international levels.



# HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' PRIORITIES AND NEEDS

Consultations with more than 800 human rights defenders in the development of this strategy identified the following priorities and needs:

Enhanced recognition and protection of the fundamental and enabling **right to defend human rights**.

**Comprehensive protection** for human rights defenders and their families and communities.

**Accountability for violations and abuses** against human rights defenders.

The enactment and effective implementation of human rights laws at the national level, including **specific national laws and mechanisms** on the protection of HRDs that recognise their essential work and that **address root causes** of threats and risks against them.

The reform or **repeal of laws and policies** which restrict or criminalise the right to defend rights.

The right and resources to **meaningfully participate** in all relevant governance, policy and decision-making processes, particularly for historically marginalised groups and affected communities.

The establishment and **effective operation of national institutions** and mechanisms to uphold democracy and promote transparency, accountability and the rule of law.

Stronger laws and policies to **regulate the human rights impacts of business enterprises** and financial institutions, including through a binding international instrument with specific provisions on the protection of HRDs.

The establishment and maintenance of an accessible, relevant, responsive, financially sustainable and **effective international human rights system**, capable of achieving accountability for widespread and systematic violations, particularly atrocity crimes.

Increased awareness and **knowledge of international, regional and national frameworks protecting defenders**.

Increased understanding and **support for the work of HRDs**, including **public advocacy by high-level officials** and decision-makers in support of HRDs.

Diverse, cross-sectorial, intersectional and **influential coalitions**, as well as **increased solidarity and coordination** within the human rights movement and **more equitable partnerships** between international and regional NGOs and frontline HRDs.

A summary of the context in which this Strategic Framework was developed is set out as an "Annex" on page 24, including as to:

Enhanced **support for human rights defenders in exile**, as well as effective measures to combat transnational repression.

- challenges and key issues affecting human rights defenders
- challenges and key issues affecting international human rights law and institutions
- opportunities and imperatives for international human rights advocacy and organisations.

# MISSION

We work in solidarity with human rights defenders to achieve freedom, dignity, equality and justice, and partner with them to strengthen human rights laws, systems, networks and narratives.

# STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

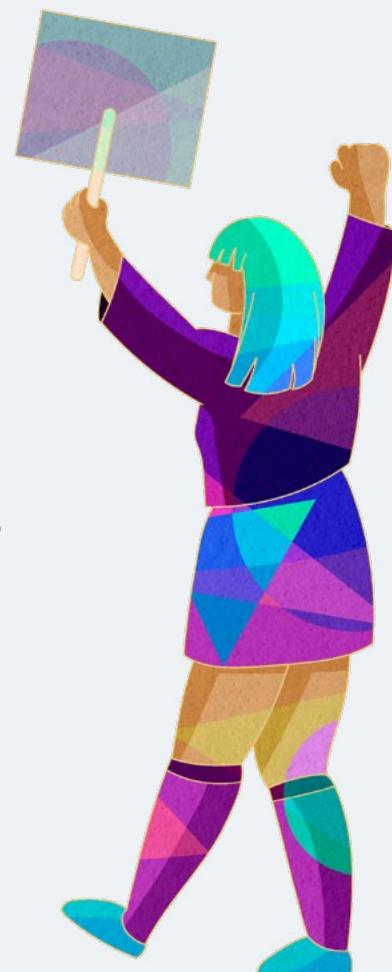
---

1

**All persons can exercise the right to defend human rights safely and freely.**

2

**Human rights defenders have access, capacity and resources to participate safely and effectively in key bodies and processes.**



3

**Human rights defenders can seek justice and accountability.**

Strategic Goal

1

**All persons can exercise the right to defend human rights safely and freely.**



## OBJECTIVES

- **1.1.** HRDs are provided with support and solidarity when they are subject to threats, attacks, discrimination, racism, restrictions or reprisals for exercising the right to defend human rights.
- **1.2.** States take legal, institutional and administrative measures to recognise, protect and enable all persons to defend human rights without discrimination, and repeal laws, policies and measures which restrict or criminalise the exercise of this right.
- **1.3.** International and regional bodies and mechanisms develop and safeguard norms, standards and narratives to recognise, promote and protect the right to defend human rights.
- **1.4.** Business enterprises respect the right to defend human rights, develop and effectively implement policies to respect HRDs, meaningfully consult with HRDs as an aspect of robust human rights and environmental due diligence, and adopt zero tolerance for threats, restrictions or attacks against HRDs.

## Strategic Goal

2

**Human rights defenders have access, capacity and resources to participate safely and effectively in key bodies and processes.**



## OBJECTIVES

- **2.1.** HRDs have the tools, capacities, resources, platforms, networks and narratives they need to engage and influence international, regional and national mechanisms and actors, including business enterprises and other non-State actors.
- **2.2.** International and regional bodies and mechanisms develop and implement policies and processes for the safe and effective participation of HRDs and to prevent and address acts of intimidation and reprisal, and States actively support this.
- **2.3.** Civil society organisations and movements working to support defenders or strengthen the international human rights system enhance their coordination, collaboration, innovation, efficiency and impact.

Strategic Goal

3

**Human rights defenders  
can seek justice and  
accountability.**

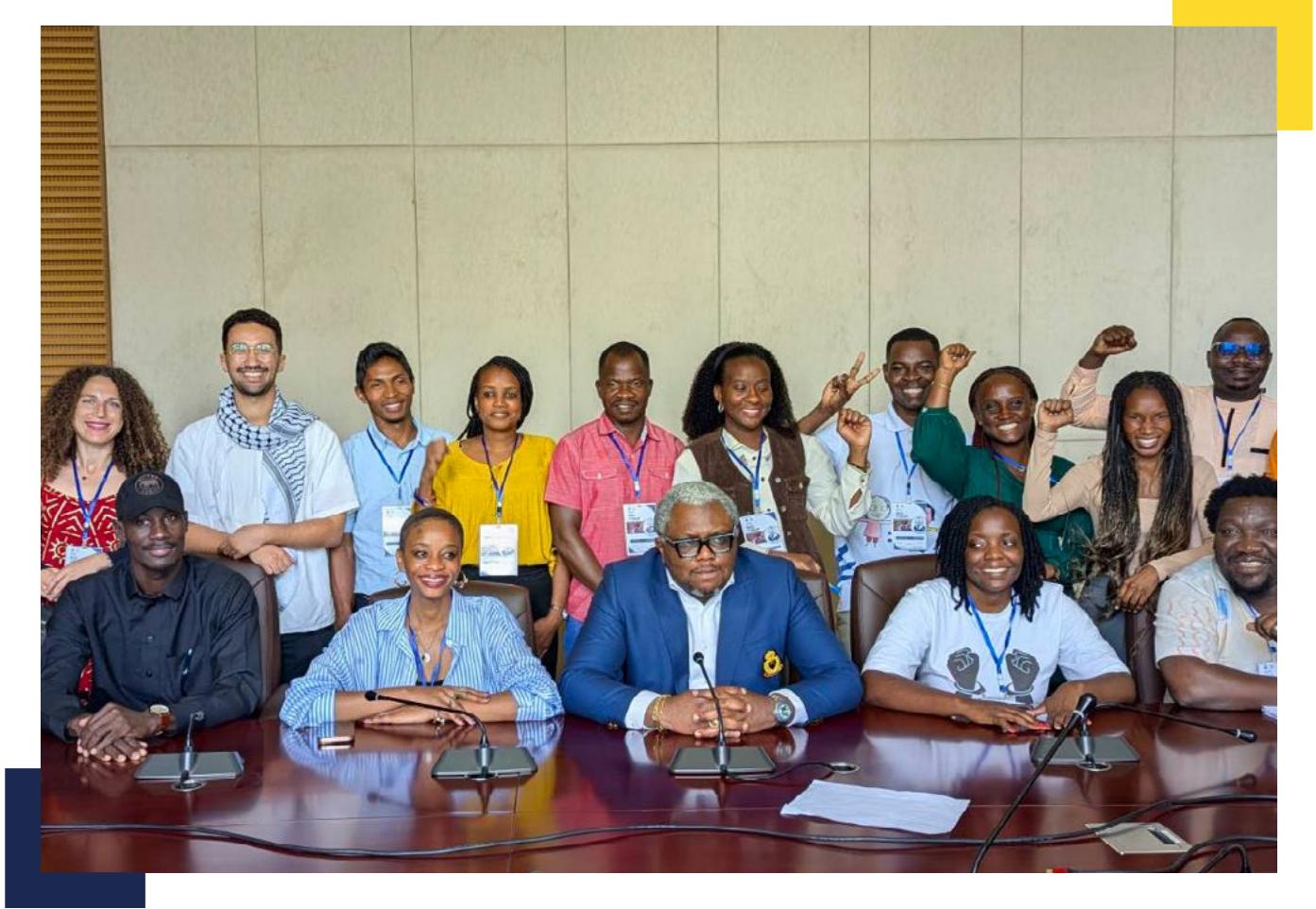


## OBJECTIVES

- **3.1.** States establish, maintain and actively support an international human rights system that is credible, adequately resourced and responsive to HRDs' demands for justice and accountability.
- **3.2.** International and regional bodies adopt mandates, establish mechanisms and take actions to prevent and address grave violations and abuses and their root causes.
- **3.3.** State actors, business enterprises and other non-State actors are held accountable for grave violations and abuses, particularly against HRDs.



**Strengthen  
the human  
rights pillar  
of the UN!**



How we partner and who we support.

## PRIORITIES, PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRAMMES

We apply the following **cross-cutting principles and prioritisation criteria** across all programmes and activities:

- ISHR **centres human rights defenders** in all aspects of our work, co-constructing, consulting, supporting and partnering with them to share their experience, expertise, demands and recommendations for justice.
- ISHR gives particular priority to **human rights defenders at heightened risk** and those working on the most **grave and urgent situations**.
- ISHR is **driven by impact**, focusing our resources, capacities, expertise and passion where we can make the most significant, distinctive and SMART contributions to human rights progress or accountability.
- ISHR is deeply committed to **partnership principles** of solidarity, equity, accountability, trust, learning and respect, as well as principles of **active participation** and **local ownership**.

- ISHR identifies **opportunities for collaboration**, coordination and partnership with other stakeholders, enhancing efficiencies and leveraging our distinctive but complementary capacities, networks and expertise.
- ISHR only works on **country situations** in consultation and partnership with defenders from that country or region, whether they remain in the country or in exile, and only works on **thematic issues** in consultation and partnership with defenders with relevant lived experience.
- ISHR undertakes **comprehensive assessments of risk**, adopting a 'do no harm' approach with defenders, and identifying, preventing and mitigating risks to ISHR, including physical, digital, financial, legal, reputational and other risks.
- ISHR considers **opportunities and opportunity costs**, including opportunities to enhance ISHR's reputation, relationships, influence and impact, and considering what would happen but for ISHR's engagement or intervention.
- ISHR is committed to **sustainability**, applying our human and financial resources efficiently, accountably, and in responsible and sustainable ways. The **fundability** and resourcing of programmes and activities is a critical consideration in this regard. The principles that guide our pursuit of funds and resources include: values alignment, independence, flexibility, predictability, sustainability, risk, growth prospects, and management and administration costs.

“

I'm truly proud of ISHR's campaign – not only because they highlighted my story and my work, but because they made human rights defenders the voice of their message. This shows who they really are: genuine defenders standing with those at risk. Human rights defenders share qualities that inspire me every day: courage, persistence, solidarity, and an unwavering commitment to justice. These qualities define ISHR's team – a team that truly feels like my second home.'

**Basma Mostafa**

Egyptian journalist and woman human rights defender



**Guided by these principles, ISHR has established the following programme clusters, which we recognise as intersectional and interdependent. Across all clusters, we support defenders through a gender-responsive and intersectional approach, prioritising support for those who are underrepresented in regional and international fora.**



### **Equality and non-discrimination**

We provide solidarity and support to, and advocate for the protection of, defenders working on issues of patriarchy, racism and other forms of systemic oppression. This includes: women human rights defenders, defenders working on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, and defenders working on issues of racial justice and systemic discrimination, including migrant and refugee rights defenders.



### **Corporate accountability, land and environmental justice**

We provide solidarity and support to, and advocate for the protection of, defenders working on issues of environmental and climate justice, land and Indigenous Peoples' rights, corporate accountability, and sustainable development. We also support defenders working on environmental degradation, intergenerational harm and evictions, as well as other grave and widespread violations of economic, social and cultural rights.



## Rule of law

We provide solidarity and support to, and advocate for the protection of, defenders working to safeguard and strengthen civic space, democratic institutions and accountability mechanisms. We develop and strengthen legal frameworks and jurisprudence for the protection of human rights defenders.



## International accountability

We provide solidarity and support to, and advocate for the protection of, defenders working to promote international accountability for grave violations and atrocity crimes, including widespread and systematic threats, attacks, restrictions and reprisals against defenders, online or offline. This includes defenders who are forced into exile and/or subject to acts of transnational repression. We understand accountability to include and contribute to prevention, recognition and solidarity with victims and survivors, condemnation and costs for perpetrators, criminal justice, and addressing root causes.

## Systems strengthening

We work with defenders and other key stakeholders to build, maintain and strengthen credible, responsive and adequately resourced human rights systems at the international and regional levels. This includes ensuring that international and regional bodies and mechanisms develop, strengthen and implement policies and processes for the safe and effective participation of HRDs and to prevent and address acts of intimidation and reprisal. It also includes promoting the universal and principled application of human rights law and standards without discrimination, particularly in respect of atrocity crimes and other grave and systematic violations. We also promote complementarity between UN human rights mechanisms and bodies.

What we do.

# TACTICS

---

We use a range of integrated tactics, developed and implemented in partnership with a vast network of defenders supported over the last 40 years. Our tactics are underpinned by research, analysis and meaningful consultation with human rights defenders and affected communities.

## Capacity strengthening and advocacy support

ISHR co-creates the tools and strengthens the capacities of defenders to engage and influence international, regional and national human rights mechanisms, as well as State and non-State actors. This includes training both online and in person at the international, regional and national levels. We also provide strategic advocacy advice and accompaniment, networking support, and fellowships for human rights defenders.

The ISHR Academy provides defenders with extensive tools to engage effectively with the UN and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), while our Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme Alumni Network ensures that our support for defenders is sustained and institutionalised at the national level, and that defenders working in diverse contexts share strategies, solidarity and learnings. ISHR also collaborates with existing partners or allies for ad-hoc capacity development initiatives.

## Coalition building and coordination

ISHR builds, coordinates, resources and supports diverse, intersectional and multi-sectorial coalitions and networks to strengthen the recognition and protection of HRDs, support and advance their work for justice and accountability, enhance solidarity, and promote a credible, responsive and adequately resourced human rights system.

ISHR plays a distinctive role in coalition building and coordination among civil society engaging

with the UN, including on issues of UN reform and strengthening, civil society access and participation, preventing and addressing reprisals against those who cooperate with the system, and various forms of systemic discrimination.

ISHR also promotes and facilitates exchange and partnerships between defenders working on diverse issues and in diverse contexts.

## International and regional advocacy

ISHR engages and advocates with diplomats and decision-makers from all regions, as well as with human rights experts, to strengthen the recognition and protection of HRDs, promote the principled and consistent application of international human rights law and standards, safeguard and expand civil society access and participation, and establish mandates and mechanisms to promote accountability for grave human rights violations. We also conduct and publish research on these issues.

Additionally, ISHR facilitates and supports the access of frontline HRDs to high-level officials, experts and decision-makers. With our main offices in Geneva and New York, we have significant UN 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, international media and business enterprises. We have a permanent presence in Africa and over 25 years' experience at the ACHPR, including as a convenor of the NGO Forum. We also have experience in the Inter-American system and in various

environmental bodies and processes, including the Escazú Agreement.

At both the international and regional levels we are committed to using our experience and expertise to enhance the access and influence of defenders, while also pushing to reform systems, and ensure that frontline defenders, victims and affected communities have direct access and influence.

## Normative development

ISHR works with HRDs, diplomats, and international and regional mechanisms and experts to develop and strengthen international and regional laws and standards on the protection of HRDs and on issues affecting them, including systemic discrimination, transnational repression, and intimidation and reprisals.

The Declaration +25, developed by ISHR in partnership with 17 other NGOs and endorsed by 37 leading human rights experts and the UN Human Rights Council, provides comprehensive and authoritative guidance on binding international law as it applies to HRDs.

## National law and policy reform

ISHR undertakes significant research and advocacy, and provides expertise and advice to civil society, national authorities and national human rights institutions, to develop, strengthen and ensure the effective implementation of laws, policies and mechanisms on the protection of human rights defenders and on issues affecting them.

We promote conformity of national laws and policies with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the Declaration +25 and the Model National Law on HRDs.

We also work with defenders to secure the repeal or reform of national laws and policies which restrict or criminalise their vital work.

## Strategic litigation and amicus curiae interventions

ISHR engages in strategic litigation and advocacy at the international, regional and national levels to strengthen legal recognition and protection of the right to defend human rights, promote accountability for grave violations and abuses against defenders, and provide justice for affected communities, in line with the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Declaration +25.

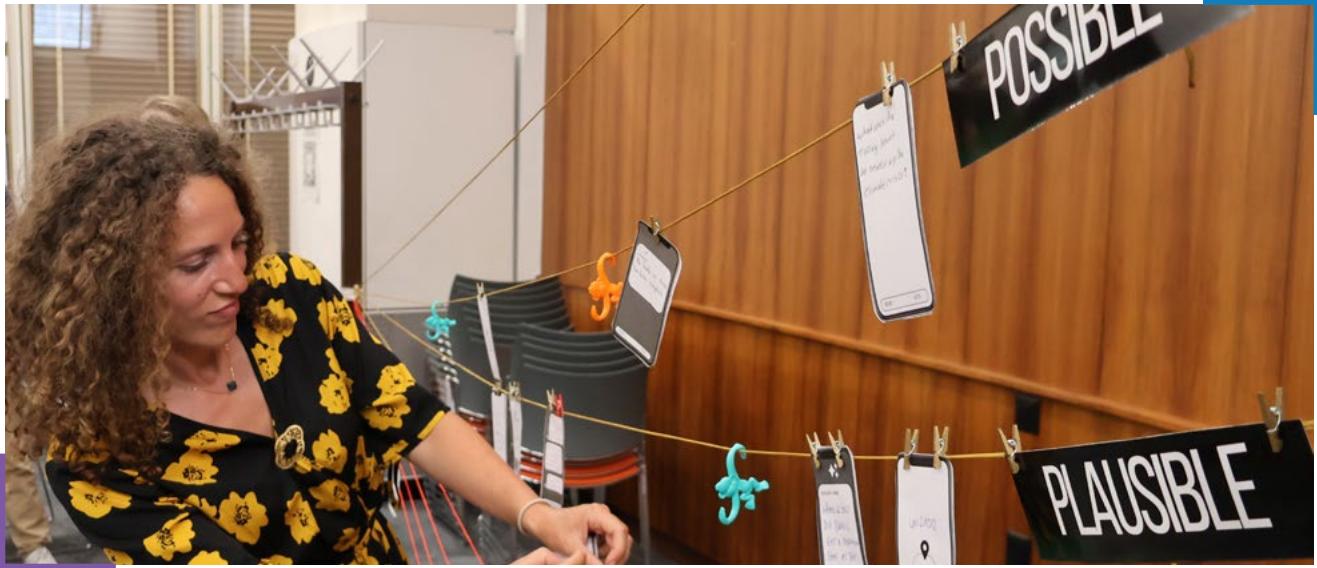
## Narrative development, campaigning and mobilisation

Through our values- and hope-based communications and campaigns, ISHR positively influences attitudes, behaviours, laws and policies on defenders, counters stigmatisation and smears against them, and expresses solidarity with defenders and their communities. We engage and mobilise a diverse range of actors to prevent and redress restrictions and repression against defenders.

Our communications and campaigns also promote respect and support for human rights, the rule of law and multilateral cooperation, recognising that they are foundational to peace, justice, security and sustainable development. We foreground and amplify the voices, experiences and expertise of defenders and affected communities.

We are a 'go to' organisation for the international media on issues related to human rights defenders, and international human rights law and mechanisms.





How we do it

## ORGANISATIONAL ENABLERS AND DEVELOPMENT

ISHR has identified the following values, systems, practices and capabilities that we need to build and maintain to achieve our strategic goals.

### 01 Values

ISHR is a values-driven organisation, committed to practising and projecting our values consistently, both internally and externally. These values include:

#### → Solidarity

We are defender-centered, existing to serve and support HRDs. We give primacy to the lived experience, expertise and demands of frontline HRDs and affected communities, consulting them and working with them in respectful, collaborative and participatory partnerships.

#### → Integrity

We are trusted and respected by diverse actors from all regions. We apply human

rights law in a progressive, principled and consistent manner, without discrimination, addressing all situations on their merits. Our positions and advocacy are grounded in human rights law and evidence.

#### → Equity

We practice and advance principles of equality, non-discrimination, diversity, inclusion and antiracism in our workplace, and through our partnerships, programmes and advocacy.

#### → Sustainability

We are committed to the wellbeing, security, resilience and sustainability of ourselves, our activism, our organisation, our partnerships and the planet.

## 02 Good governance

The ISHR Board is responsible for the overall strategy, governance and sustainability of the organisation.

The Board is comprised of a diverse group of outstanding individuals united by a deep commitment to human rights and ISHR values. Board members bring extensive experience from civil society, government, international organisations, the judiciary, national human rights institutions, academia, philanthropy and business.

The Board works collegially to provide ISHR with strategic leadership, executive oversight, policy guidance, organisational development support, and to ensure prudential and accountable management.

Board members also contribute individually to ISHR in accordance with their capacities.

ISHR's elected Staff Representative to the Board ensures that the interests and concerns of staff are represented and contributes to managerial transparency and accountability.

ISHR's Executive Leadership Team – the members of which bring significant and diverse expertise and lived and professional experience – adopt a shared feminist approach to leadership. They have overall responsibility for the ISHR Secretariat, staff and organisational wellbeing and sustainability, and the development and implementation of organisational policy.

## 03 People and teamwork

The ISHR staff team – which includes employees, consultants, fellows and interns – is responsible for the implementation of this Strategic Framework.

ISHR staff are diverse, deeply committed to human rights and ISHR values, and work in a strategic, innovative, effective, efficient, accountable and sustainable way.

ISHR's structure and working methods – including clusters, working groups and focal points – contribute to organisational agility, collaboration, learning and development. Within the parameters of this Strategic Framework,

ISHR staff thrive with a high level of autonomy, responsibility, trust and support.

ISHR's Competency Framework ensures that we have the human resource capacities and capabilities necessary to fulfil our mission, while contributing to transparency, fairness and equity in recruitment and promotion.

## 04 Diversity, equity and inclusion

Diversity in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics, disability, religion or belief, language, national and ethnic origin, economic and social status, age and professional background enrich the Board, staff and organisation. We practice and project values of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

ISHR's commitment to gender, racial and other forms of diversity among the ISHR Board and Executive Leadership Team reflect our understanding that diverse expertise and lived experiences contribute to better leadership and decision-making.

ISHR's Board-mandated Working Group on Non-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion monitors, reports and provides advice to better address discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion, both internally and through our programmes and partnerships.

## 05 Wellbeing and holistic security

Holistic security and a focus on wellbeing are paramount to the safety and sustainability of the human rights defenders we support, as well as of ISHR staff and the organisation itself. We practise self-care, collective care and solidarity. We nurture passions, and celebrate the small victories that mark the path to any major human rights success. Our Wellbeing Policy and Working Group promote a multidimensional approach to wellbeing, encompassing interconnected emotional, physical, social, psychological and occupational domains.

ISHR policies, practices and working groups on holistic security and digital security, as well as an organisational risk management register, contribute to identifying, preventing, mitigating and remedying risks.



## 06 Learning and evaluation

ISHR's planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) structures and processes are designed to make our programmes more relevant, efficient and effective. They enable real-time monitoring and adaptation, identify and address opportunities, risks and challenges, facilitate prioritisation and workload management, monitor and measure progress and impact, and ensure we continually learn and improve.

To measure changes we work with results frameworks that use a range of short-, medium- and long-term qualitative and quantitative indicators, giving due weight to the perceptions and experiences of human rights defenders. We also commission independent audits and evaluations to assess and enhance the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of our projects and programmes.

## 07 Innovation and technology

ISHR is committed to innovation and experimentation. We test, take calculated risks, scale successful projects, and learn from discrepancies and failures. We develop and use technology to expand access to services and safeguard against the ways in which technology can exacerbate risks, discrimination and a digital divide.

ISHR uses a range of digital tools and technologies to support defenders and enable greater efficiency, coordination and collaboration within ISHR. Our Digital Security Working Group provides advice to promote good digital security and hygiene among ISHR staff and partners, while our Artificial Intelligence Working Group provides guidance and safeguards on using artificial intelligence. Technological innovation increases ISHR's efficiency and programmatic reach and reduces our environmental impact, while programmatic innovation ensures that we respond to new and emerging situations, priorities and needs for defenders.

We also advocate to ensure that technologies and modalities used by international and regional human rights bodies enhance rather than restrict civil society access and participation, particularly for defenders and communities subject to various forms of discrimination and marginalisation.



## 08 Financial sustainability

Through a whole-of-organisation approach, ISHR will acquire and prudentially manage the financial resources necessary to implement this Strategic Framework, and to ensure the agility, effectiveness and sustainability of the organisation.

In accordance with our fundraising strategy, ISHR will diversify our income streams. We aim to retain existing donors, cultivate new donors, and develop new partnerships and consortia. We will increase our pool of supporters, including private and high-net wealth donors. We will explore income generation opportunities, including through consultancy services and the monetisation of assets and expertise, such as the ISHR Academy or trainings. We will access and leverage extensive pro bono legal services and explore other opportunities for corporate contributions and support, including through innovative models. We will explore opportunities to build an institutional or sectoral endowment.

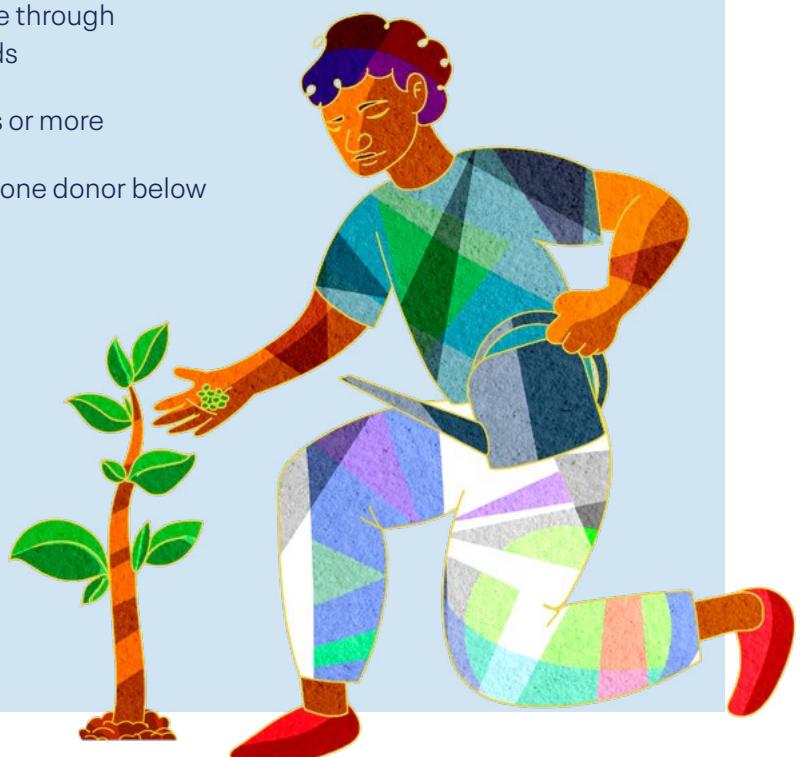
We will also pursue opportunities for further collaboration and coordination between Geneva-based and HRD-focused human rights organisations, enhancing efficiency, building individual and collective capacities, reducing duplication, leveraging economies of scale, ensuring sustainability and driving impact.

The due diligence principles and considerations that guide our pursuit of new funding opportunities and partnerships include: values alignment, independence, flexibility, predictability, sustainability, risk, growth prospects, and management and administration costs.

ISHR acquires and manages funds in compliance with Swiss and international accounting standards. We have adopted the following financial health targets:

- Maintain reserves at 15-25% of annual operating expenses
- Secure core funds to account for at least 40% of total income
- Secure at least 50% of income through predictable or multi-year funds
- Maintain liquidity at 6 months or more
- Maintain dependency on any one donor below 20% of total income

These targets aim to ensure that the organisation remains independent, agile, responsive and sustainable.





# ANNEX

---

## Context

The context in which this Strategic Framework was developed was informed by consultation with more than 800 human rights defenders working in diverse contexts and on diverse issues, as well as by key intelligence and insights gathered over the period 2021-25 through staff strategy retreats, Board and expert panel discussions, programme and campaign evaluations, and surveys and in-depth discussions with key stakeholders.

## Challenges and key issues affecting human rights defenders

The contexts in which many human rights defenders operate are characterised by:

- **armed conflict**, including grave violations such as the unlawful use of force, targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and violation of the right to self-determination
- widespread **impunity for grave human rights violations and atrocity crimes**, including genocide
- a **climate and environmental crisis**, leading to extreme weather events, food and water scarcity, economic shocks, conflict over land and resources, worsening inequalities, and mass displacement and movement of people
- rising **populism, nationalism and authoritarianism**, as well as a declining faith in democracy
- an increased sense of **disenfranchisement and exclusion among certain population groups**, and the fueling and **mobilisation of resentment** by anti-rights actors, often through campaigns funded and supported by economic elites
- **attacks on the rule of law** at the international, regional and national levels, and the **erosion of democratic and accountability mechanisms**, including an independent judiciary
- rapidly rising **militarism and securitisation**, and a massive increase in military spending, often directly linked with declining political and financial investment in humanitarian aid and development
- a **massive reduction in foreign aid** on the part of many States, precipitating a **human rights funding crisis**
- **apartheid, systemic racism**, ethno-nationalism, xenophobia and widespread intolerance and discrimination against migrants and refugees
- increasing polarisation, fueled by largely unregulated and **unaccountable technology giants**, as well as **corporate-controlled and profit-driven media outlets**
- continued patriarchy, sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination, and a rise in **anti-gender and anti-rights narratives** and movements, increasingly adopted and legitimised by political actors
- religious and other fundamentalisms and extremisms

- capitalism, extractivism, **economic injustice and increasing inequalities**, with economic models and systems – including international financial institutions – that perpetuate inequalities and power imbalances, and that privilege profits over people and a healthy environment
- increased **corporate influence and capture**, as well as the increased privatisation of public goods and services
- unregulated or inadequately regulated businesses and technologies, including digital technologies, **artificial intelligence** and algorithms which contribute to polarisation
- **restrictive legal environments** and frameworks, with most HRDs operating in environments that are closed, repressed or restricted
- an increase in the number of **HRDs and movements forced into exile**
- **lack of access to resources**, associated both with a funding decline and restrictions on access to foreign funding.

Within these contexts, the key risks and restrictions confronting many human rights defenders include:

- **criminalisation and judicial harassment** targeting exercise of the right to defend rights, including through Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and the misuse of laws and measures on national security and counter-terrorism
- **stigmatisation and delegitimisation**, both online and offline
- **online violence**, harassment, surveillance, stalking and threats, including technology facilitated gender-based violence
- **arbitrary detention and ill-treatment** in detention
- enforced **disappearances**, and extrajudicial **executions**
- **physical threats** and attacks, including sexual and gender-based violence
- restrictions and **criminalisation of freedom of expression**, both online and offline, particularly against those calling for accountability for atrocity crimes
- **restrictions on freedom of association and assembly**, including violence against peaceful protesters
- **restrictions on freedom of movement**, including through travel bans and visa denials
- **reprisals** for cooperating with human rights, justice and accountability bodies at the national, regional and international levels
- increasing **threats and attacks against the families and communities** of HRDs

- stress, burnout, trauma and **lack of holistic protection** or support
- acts of **transnational repression**, ranging from extrajudicial killings to unlawful extradition.

Certain groups of defenders – including women HRDs, Indigenous HRDs, antiracism HRDs, migrant HRDs, queer and gender-diverse HRDs, and HRDs promoting the right to self-determination – face **specific, multiple and intersecting forms of violence and discrimination**.

Perpetrators of these risks, restrictions, threats and attacks include State actors, as well as non-State actors such as business enterprises, religious groups, and paramilitary and other fundamentalist and extremist groups.

## Challenges and key issues affecting international human rights law and institutions

International human rights law and institutions are at a critical juncture, characterised by:

- selectivity, double standards and the **inconsistent application of human rights law** and standards by States from all regions
- widespread **impunity for grave human rights violations**, including atrocity crimes
- a **retreat from multilateralism** and **attacks against multilateral human rights institutions** and justice mechanisms
- chronic and worsening **underfunding of the international human rights system** and movement
- **conflicts and crises with increasingly global dimensions**
- a **failure to act on early warning signs**, including attacks on civil society, to prevent worsening violations, or to sustain attention to ongoing situations as new crises emerge
- flagrant **disregard for international law and the UN Charter**, including by permanent members of the Security Council
- acts of intimidation, **reprisals and even sanctions** against those cooperating with international and regional human rights and justice mechanisms, as well as against the mechanisms themselves
- the co-optation and **instrumentalisation of international law** and institutions by some States, as well as anti-gender and anti-rights actors and movements
- emerging **normative gaps**, including with respect to the regulation and accountability of business enterprises and new and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence
- **multipolarisation**, with a rise in influence and a decline in efforts to promote accountability of States considered to be geopolitically important.

## Opportunities and imperatives for international human rights advocacy and organisations

In this context, it is imperative that all relevant actors, including ISHR:

- apply international human rights and humanitarian law in a progressive, principled, consistent and non-discriminatory way
- uphold the universality and interdependence of human rights
- promote respect for human rights as foundational to peace, justice, security and development at the national, regional and international levels
- promote a multilateral human rights system that is inclusive, accessible, adequately resourced and responsive for civil society actors and victims and survivors of violations and abuses, informed by their needs
- promote accountability and address impunity, including by naming perpetrators, exposing their interests and agendas, and accurately labelling their crimes
- address root causes of violations, including repression and impunity, as well as the ongoing legacies of patriarchy, occupation, colonialism and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans
- defend the framework from erosion or instrumentalisation by anti-rights and anti-gender movements, as well as by States acting in their narrow perceived self-interest
- defend international justice and accountability mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, respecting the binding nature of their orders and condemning threats and sanctions against such institutions or those who cooperate with them
- adopt a human rights-based approach to address the various planetary crises (including climate change, pollution and loss of biodiversity), as well as new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, while not neglecting enduring human rights issues such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and torture
- be agile, efficient, effective and networked
- innovate, collaborate and work together in diverse and powerful cross-regional and cross-sectorial coalitions.

## 3 things you can do now to support HRDs:

1

**Share the stories of human rights defenders to amplify their experiences, calls and expertise!**

2

**Subscribe to our email list and keep informed when we need your help to take specific action for HRDs.**

3

**Make a donation. Every contribution supports our vital work with human rights defenders!**



**Donate now!**



**International Service  
for Human Rights**

For more information about our work or any of the issues covered in this publication, please visit our website: [www.ishr.ch](http://www.ishr.ch) or contact us: [information@ishr.ch](mailto:information@ishr.ch)



@ishr.ch



International Service  
for Human Rights



@ISHRglobal



@ISHRglobal



@ISHRglobal



@ISHRglobal

### GENEVA OFFICE

Rue de Varembé 1, 5th floor, P.O. Box 16,  
CH-1211 Geneva 20 CIC, Switzerland

### NEW YORK OFFICE

777 UN Plaza, 7th floor, New York,  
NY 10017, USA