

HRDAP evaluation assessment



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Index

Index	2
1. Executive summary	2
1. About the report	5
2. Methodology	6
Positionality	7
Research limitations	7
3. Analysis	7
4.1 HRDAP Operating environment	7
4.2 HRDAP Quantitative Analysis	8
4.3 Thematic analysis: Selection, Course Structure, Follow Up, Sustainability, Emerging Topics and Unintended Effects	10
4.4 Narrative analysis: Motivation, perception of the course ex post, applicability, and unique HRDAP added value	15
4. Results and most significant changes	17
5.1 Results per variable	17
5.2 Results per level of analysis	22
5. Recommendations and conclusions	24
6.1 Keep, fix, try (2 pages) - divided by themes and emerging topics	24
6.2 Conclusions	27

1. Executive summary

This external evaluation examines ISHR's Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme (HRDAP), a flagship initiative designed to equip human rights defenders (HRDs) to use international and UN human rights mechanisms strategically. Our objective was to assess the programme's pertinence, coherence, accessibility, applicability and influence, and to offer practical recommendations that consolidate its distinctive contribution while addressing areas that limit scale and consistency. The evaluation recognises HRDAP's dual value: a rigorous, practice-oriented curriculum and an enabling environment that strengthens defenders' agency, confidence and networks.

HRDAP has evolved substantially since 2014 in response to global shifts (COVID-19, increased digital learning, rising surveillance) and ISHR's own institutional development. **Its current 70-hour hybrid format blends online learning with in-person Geneva immersion** to help HRDs "integrate the international human rights system into their work at the national level; and engage in lobbying and advocacy at the UN." The programme has become a leading training model and is consistently cited as transformative, enhancing credibility and creating entry points that are difficult to replicate elsewhere. This report is intended to enhance the trajectory of HRDAP, gathering relevant data, engaging with different stakeholders and honouring defenders' experiences by translating their insights into actionable improvements.

We used a mixed-methods approach in four phases: desk research (ISHR strategies; HRDAP foundational and operational documents; selection processes; training materials; internal evaluations; participant surveys; ISHR Academy content; benchmarking); fieldwork (an online survey of alumni from 2014–2024; semi-structured interviews with alumni, staff and partners; direct observation of the 2025 cohort in Geneva, including a facilitated "Keep–Fix–Try" exercise); multi-method analysis (quantitative patterning; qualitative thematic and narrative analysis; a "most significant change" lens); and reporting. Throughout, we applied a strong ethical framework (confidentiality, voluntary participation, inclusive formats) and a duty-of-care approach.

Our positionality informed every stage through five pillars—human rights; feminist and intersectional analysis; decolonial approaches to knowledge; duty of care and safeguarding; and evidence-led learning—so that the design, analysis and voice of defenders remained central. It was undertaken by a multidisciplinary team comprised by Francisca Stuardo, a feminist Latina researcher–evaluator with 15+ years working alongside HRDs across Latin America, Africa and Asia, and Daniel Barrera, a civic-space and protection advisor with 20+ years' experience in high-risk contexts.

Research limitations shaped both data collection and interpretation. Gaps in historic data (particularly pre-2018), uneven survey and interview responsiveness, and timing and language constraints reduced breadth. A planned LGBTQI+ alumni focus group did not proceed due to availability and capacity. We mitigated these constraints through triangulation across sources and the Geneva observation.

On pertinence, HRDAP remains highly relevant to defenders' needs in shrinking civic spaces. Over 67% of surveyed participants found the course very engaging, and the programme has adapted responsibly—from intensive in-person to a structured hybrid model—while keeping its aims stable. Iterative changes (open calls replacing close referrals, subgranting to widen access and follow-up, flexible assignments, coach-supported advocacy design, and space for cross-cutting themes like

communications and fundraising) show sensitivity to context and ethics. Beyond explicit objectives, HRDAP reliably builds agency, resilience, trust and “advocacy literacy,” enabling participants to read rooms, hold diverse viewpoints and steer complex advocacy. Remaining gaps include sharpening the target participant profile to maximise strategic UN use and systematising follow-up. Credibility and donor appeal underscore pertinence, with diversified funding recognising HRDAP’s role in overcoming structural barriers to equitable UN participation.

On coherence, The programme’s core pathway—skills, practice, collectiveness—has stayed coherent despite annual adjustments, and methods/outputs are visible and trackable, which donors and diplomatic stakeholders value. Staff evidence points to internal consistency across cohorts, but unevenness appears at delivery edges: coaching coordination, emergency responses, selection and follow-up can vary with team bandwidth and priorities. Limited institutional data (especially for early cohorts) hinders longitudinal comparisons, so proxies (stable donor support, surging applications, UN actor engagement) help signal steadiness. The central tension is healthy: institutionalise enough (processes, standards) to raise and stabilise impact, without diluting the praised flexibility that lets HRDAP seize real-time opportunities

On accessibility, HRDAP has moved from networked selection to open calls and a flexible hybrid model, pairing this with scholarships/subgrants (83% requesting full support), a user-friendly Academy, regional/thematic coaching and pre-recorded sessions. Yet barriers persist: language (English as a second language) vs. interpretation/translation costs, low-bandwidth constraints and competing home/work duties that create fatigue. Additionally, acceptance was less than 2% in 2025, and integration pathways for high-quality near-miss candidates are inexistent. Physical and digital accessibility need strengthening (screen-reader materials, accessible venues), and restrictive visas increasingly threaten participation and budgets. Even so, HRDAP continues to facilitate concrete entry points to UN mechanisms for those aligned with session priorities.

On applicability, Alumni widely apply HRDAP learning, with over 80% reported using UN Human Rights mechanisms within 6–12 months with advocacy roadmaps guiding sustained links to UN actors, diplomats and coalitions. The cohort’s informal community of practice multiplies use through cascade trainings, regional initiatives and peer exchanges, while Geneva familiarity expands civil society access points. Application varies by context—shrinking civic space, exile or personal circumstances can slow translation into local change—and schedule frictions (advocacy windows vs course sessions) sometimes force trade-offs during the Geneva stage. High demand and limited places raise scalability questions (replication, cascade, or participant growth). Overall applicability is strong across technical, psychosocial and collective dimensions, but lasting impact depends on sustained follow-up and complementary support.

On influence, HRDAP makes an opaque UN architecture navigable, yielding mutual systemic gains: defenders gain skills, credibility and access; UN actors and states gain accountability, richer perspectives and trusted relationships. Geneva immersion is the strongest influence driver, converting proximity into tangible outcomes, while ISHR networks enable joint advocacy (such as mandate renewals) and cascade effects. Moreover, representation has broadened—LGBTQI+, indigenous, environmental defenders—embedding historically marginalised groups’ agendas in global discussions. Constraints remain: limited follow-up/regional training keeps structural change concentrated among a smaller alumni set; repression, surveillance, ECOSOC hurdles and thin diplomatic bandwidth curb downstream results; and organisational backing strongly conditions sustained influence. Despite these challenges, HRDAP’s influence is significant and multi-layered; the

forward task is scaling and sustaining these gains so individual empowerment consistently aggregates into durable systemic change.

Five priority recommendations consolidate the changes above into a practical agenda.

1. **Strengthen selection and governance:** publish the selection bases and a transparent, weighted matrix of eligibility and prioritisation, agree an “ideal candidate” profile that secures geographic and thematic balance and ongoing UN windows, and introduce due-diligence checks through trusted networks. Use thresholds to create a pipeline—those below the acceptance score can still access ISHR Academy content or be invited into relevant advocacy moments—while sharing recruitment processes external colleagues for feedback.
2. **Consolidate curriculum and delivery quality:** Refine the division of labour between online (theoretical grounding, discussion groups, individual assessments and cross-cutting sessions) and in-person (group assessments, hands-on advocacy, roadmap presentations); schedule platform updates on Sundays; include more online modules to free time in Geneva for advocacy purposes; and keep short refreshers during the in-person week to cement learning.
3. **Elevate coaching, wellbeing and safeguarding:** Coordinate coaches to widen access to UN opportunities across the cohort; train ISHR coaches in soft skills (group dynamics, conflict management), knowledge facilitation and crisis management; explicitly expand the code of conduct to address misconduct (harassment, theft, extortion and other red lines); and integrate a stronger digital-security and secure-advocacy backbone so participants can protect themselves and their constituencies in hostile environments. Partnerships with specialist organisations can bolster wellbeing support and risk assessment.
4. **Invest in alumni, partnerships and scale:** Establish a formal alumni platform with regional/thematic hubs seeking to boost peer-to-peer exchanges; pilot alumni refresher workshops to maintain skills and address emerging topics (climate change, AI, business and human rights), reducing Geneva dependency; prepare former HRDAPers as facilitators through a light training hub and explore agreements with universities and diplomatic academies for funding, co-delivery and replication. Where appropriate, offer paid training products for organisations seeking to engage the UN, with scholarships and donation pathways to preserve equity.
5. **Embed follow-up, evidence and sustainability:** define a follow-up model with short-, mid- and long-term outcomes and the strategies and resources required to achieve them; systematise longitudinal evaluation (baseline, endline and one-year checks) to track change; and streamline a wider training strategy with interconnected modules to avoid HRDAP becoming a one-off event. Maintain a diverse funding base across the short, medium and long term; continue to protect Geneva presence for advocacy exposure; and sustain a cohort composition that ensures meaningful exchanges among women, LGBTQI+, indigenous, rural and other marginalised defenders from a broad geographic and thematic spectrum.

These recommendations aim to build over an already consolidated ground, with outstanding impact on defenders trajectories and systemic changes, attuned with the organisational mission and strategic priorities. HRDAP is, indeed, a flagship and unique course, praised by peers and other members of the ecosystem, trusted and reputed due to its technical and ethical standards.

1. About the report

This report presents the results of an external evaluation of the Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme (HRDAP), ISHR's flagship initiative focused on enhancing the skills of activists working with international and UN human rights mechanisms. Over the past decade, this program has fostered a diverse community of defenders addressing a variety of issues—from women's rights and climate justice to the protection of civic space—who are eager to amplify their voices and expand their networks of solidarity. The evaluation was commissioned not only to evaluate the programme's **pertinence, coherence, accessibility, applicability and influence**, but also to reflect on its growth and significance for participants.

Since 2014, **HRDAP has undergone significant evolution, adapting to changing global circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of digital learning**, as well as ISHR's own institutional development. Currently, the programme has a 70-hour hybrid format aiming to equip human rights defenders (HRDs) "with the knowledge and skills to integrate the international human rights system into their work at the national level in a strategic manner; as well as providing an opportunity to engage in lobbying and advocacy activities at the UN".

Reflecting on the past provides an opportunity to celebrate successes, acknowledge challenges, and identify future directions. **The findings shared in this report are primarily intended for ISHR staff and leadership, who will utilise them for strategic planning**, as well as for donors and partners who support the programme. At the same time, the report aims to honour the experiences and testimonies of the defenders.

2. Methodology

The evaluation took a mixed-methods approach, aiming to capture the multifaceted impact of HRDAP while also reflecting the diverse perspectives of those involved in the program. This process unfolded in four key phases: desk research, field data collection, data analysis, and final reporting.

Desk research laid the groundwork by reviewing ISHR's strategic framework, foundational and operational documents of HRDAP, participant selection processes, training materials, internal evaluations, participant surveys, and content from the ISHR Academy. This stage helped identify key variables, gaps in coherence, and themes to explore in the subsequent phases.

Field data collection broadened the evidence base using several complementary tools. An online survey was sent out to former HRDAP participants from 2014 to 2024, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data on their motivations, experiences, and long-term outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including alums, ISHR staff, and external partners, to gain deeper insights into the programme's relevance, effectiveness, and added value compared to similar initiatives. Additionally, a visit to Geneva during the 2025 training provided an opportunity for direct observation of facilitation, participant engagement, and learning dynamics, as well as an in-person workshop with the cohort.

These methods collectively ensured that voices from different relationships to the program were included and supported triangulation across multiple data sources. Although we planned a

thematic focus with LGBTQI+ group former participants, it ultimately didn't take place due to a lack of fellow HRDAPers' capacity/willingness to join.

In our data analysis, **we combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques to achieve a well-rounded perspective.** We carefully processed survey responses to spot patterns and correlations between the characteristics of participants and their learning outcomes.

The qualitative insights from interviews and observations were analysed thematically and narratively, shedding light on alignments, tensions, and some unexpected findings. We incorporated the "most significant change" approach to focus on how participants define success. During the Geneva training stage, we implemented a "Keep, Fix, Try" exercise to foster recommendations that came directly from the participants, as well as a means to organise the recommendations.

Throughout the evaluation process, we consistently maintained high ethical standards at every stage of the research. We paid special attention to protecting confidentiality, ensuring that participation was voluntary, and adopting practices that were inclusive and accessible. **Our methodology was influenced by a human rights, feminist, intersectional, and decolonial lens,** which acknowledged the agency of human rights defenders and aimed to prevent any extractive or hierarchical dynamics.

This combination of methods allowed us to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of HRDAP's path, its contributions to enhancing defenders' advocacy, and the areas where the program can continue to develop.

Positionality

This evaluation was conducted by two independent consultants, whose distinct professional and personal backgrounds significantly influenced both the design and interpretation of the findings. **Francisca Stuardo** is a feminist Latina researcher and evaluator with over 15 years of experience working alongside human rights and environmental defenders in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Her approach is rooted in participatory and feminist methodologies, emphasising agency, intersectionality, and the avoidance of extractive practices. **Daniel Barrera** is a civic space and protection advisor with over 20 years of experience supporting human rights defenders and civil society organisations in high-risk contexts, combining policy analysis, theory of change reconstruction, and participatory security assessments.

Together, **we approached this evaluation with a set of guiding principles:** a **human rights lens** that centres on the agency of defenders; a **feminist and intersectional perspective** that is mindful of gendered and structural inequalities; a commitment to **ensuring the safety and confidentiality** of participants; and a **decolonial viewpoint** that recognises diverse ways of producing and sharing knowledge. These positionalities influenced the choice of methods, the interpretation of evidence, and the presentation of defenders' voices throughout the report.

Research limitations

The **research process encountered several limitations** that shaped our data collection and analysis. We struggled with an **outdated database and a lack of available data,** which made it hard to illustrate trends over time (mainly, before 2018). There was also a delicate balance between maintaining our independence and expanding our data reach.

For the interviews, **we relied on referrals from the ISHR team**, but some HRDAP participants didn't respond, which limited the diversity of insights we could gather. **The focus group also faced its share of challenges**, including scheduling issues and participants not attending, which ultimately led to the cancellation of the activity. **On a broader scale, timing, availability, language barriers, and the willingness of former HRDAPers had a substantial impact** on the researchers' capacity to form a wide and representative perspective of the participants' assessment of the program.

3. Analysis

4.1 HRDAP Operating environment

Before examining the report, it is essential to outline the operating environment in which human rights defenders carry out their duties. **HRDs operate within a constrained civic space globally, with reduced access to resources and greater barriers to reaching the UN**—particularly concerning visa permits and the complex, ever-changing channels within the system. Many organisations struggle with insufficient data production due to limited capacity or sourcing issues, along with a lack of local and national personnel capable of navigating the UN's structural obstacles to participate meaningfully.

Meanwhile, **the UN ecosystem tends to prioritise data over stories, creating an imbalance for advocates trying to make their case**; it has intricate channels and constant changes. Consequently, interviewees, especially those from CSOs, emphasise the urgent need for training, such as that offered by HRDAP, to gain insider knowledge essential for fulfilling their roles within this ecosystem.

From theory to practice

Many challenges faced by defenders and contributors to the UN Human Rights landscape arise from translating principles into practice. Firstly, **the colonial legacy endures**, as emphasised by participants, raising concerns about who truly speaks on behalf of people suffering the consequences of regressive practices—or against HR principles.

Furthermore, although **human rights movements strive towards intersectionality, participants recognised the difficulties in building coalitions and consolidating agendas and advocacy priorities**. A fundamental tension exists between cross-cutting issues and group-specific concerns, making it harder to advocate for intersectional approaches within a compartmentalised system.

Overall, there is a **significant need for training and knowledge transfer activities to support the increasing number of people using the UN HR system, thereby promoting sustainable change**.

Institutional changes

It is worth noting that the course has undergone consistent changes over time, in addition to the organisational evolution. **ISHR has expanded its budget, resulting in increased programme execution, staff members, and outreach**. All these changes have created space and capacity to strengthen and formalise HRDAP, investing in technology to develop an online course, as well as to fund participants and operational costs involved in HRDAP. **This programme has become the ISHR flagship initiative, but it is also becoming more resource-intensive**.

4.2 HRDAP Quantitative Analysis

We had 47 former HRDAP participants take part in our online survey, and their responses painted a vibrant picture of diversity across various regions and thematic areas. **It is worth noting that none of the questions in the survey were compulsory, and therefore, the response rate varied between inquiries.** Furthermore, most of the respondents came from cohorts between 2021 and 2024. As mentioned earlier, data loss of contact details may explain the low answer rate.

The majority of respondents identified as women (56.5%), followed by men (30.4%), and a smaller group of non-binary individuals (4.3%). **Most participants were affiliated with non-governmental organisations (70.2%),** while others were involved with community-based organisations (14.9%) and international organisations (8.5%). Regarding thematic areas, **the strongest representation came from those focused on women's rights, environmental issues and LGBTI+ rights.**

On average, **these respondents brought approximately 12 years of professional experience** in human rights work, demonstrating that HRDAP attracts and supports both mid-career and highly experienced defenders. Regarding their motivations, **professional development (78%) and personal interest (51.2%)** were especially significant when applying, and most respondents reported having prior experience engaging with UN mechanisms (68.3%).

Over 90% of respondents reported that the programme — particularly remarks on highlighted activities, such as the elevator pitch exercises and access to the UN — helped them navigate the UN system with greater confidence. In addition, **nearly 70% stated that they had contributed to institutional or policy changes after completing the programme.**

The feedback from the survey shows that **HRDAP has had a significant and enduring impact on the professional and personal development of its participants.** A large majority found the course to be **highly relevant to their advocacy efforts**, with many reporting results such as improved advocacy skills, greater confidence in engaging with UN mechanisms, and new opportunities, including securing new professional roles or the chance to train others. Notably, **many participants also reported feeling safer and more at ease, highlighting HRDAP's contribution to building resilience alongside technical skills.**

However, the survey also highlighted barriers that hinder participants' meaningful engagement. Even though **only 35% of participants declared they faced an obstacle**, they primarily pointed to language, as English is not the predominant language in many countries of the Majority World. **Additionally, security concerns with the consequences of public speaking** in highly restrictive contexts may affect the ability of HRDs to participate. More structurally, defenders' workload, caring responsibilities, and personal situations — mainly during COVID-19 — affected their interaction throughout the course.

Lastly, **a large majority of fellow HRDAPers (81.2%) have not participated in any initiatives with their cohorts after completing the course,** and there is variation in data regarding institutional follow-up. While some participants have maintained long-term relationships with ISHR — accessing joint initiatives, facilitating liaison with UN officials, and receiving recommendations for other programmes — others have had no contact at all.

4.3 Qualitative analysis

The survey findings quickly align with the evidence collected from the case studies. **Both sources emphasise HRDAP's important role in boosting confidence, providing defenders with practical advocacy tools, and encouraging long-term professional growth.** For instance, the case studies supported the survey's evidence of a "ripple effect," where alumni not only applied what they learned from HRDAP to their own advocacy but also took the initiative to train and mentor their peers. Likewise, the positive impact on defenders' perceptions of safety and resilience, as measured in the survey, was reflected in the personal testimonies shared.

Where **differences do emerge, they tend to focus less on the primary outcomes and more on the conditions necessary for maintaining engagement.** While the survey highlighted barriers like limited follow-up support and resource constraints in utilising UN mechanisms, the case studies provided more nuanced insights into how these challenges manifest in practice. This combination of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth offers a balanced view: HRDAP has a clear and consistent impact, although sustainability and structural barriers remain crucial areas that require attention.

4.3 Thematic analysis: Selection, Course Structure, Follow Up, Sustainability, Emerging Topics and Unintended Effects

Selection:

Insights mainly come from staff interviews and historical reviews. Overall, there is concern within the institution about the selection process, mainly due to the staff time and costs involved in revising an exponential number of profiles each year. An extra layer of operational complexity is the funding and quotas that might be necessary to meet donor requirements. Additionally, institutional priorities play a role, as there is a preference for those who will better align with the ISHR strategy.

The **balance required to incorporate accountability, efficiency, diversity, and inclusion** into the selection process is delicate and challenging to achieve, despite ongoing efforts by project coordinators to improve the process. Practices such as moving from closed calls to colleagues and networks to open calls for defenders have made the process more inclusive, but they have also led to a higher number of applicants.

Furthermore, **concerns arise regarding the clarity of the profile and the selection variables, as well as their specific weights, during the review stage of the profile.** The **objectives are sufficiently open to avoid a rigid definition, but there is a need to refine the expected profile** to balance the programme's expected outcomes and the defenders' ability to navigate it. Internal debates continue over the ideal participant profile, balancing the target of grassroots defenders with practical needs to achieve a more substantial impact on their practice. This feature includes considerations such as language barriers, adapting to fast-paced environments, and the goal for defenders to lead their groups with new skills.

Once the team has carried out the preliminary selection, **there is a perceived need for streamlined due diligence to identify any potential risks or undermining factors that may affect candidates.** This point is particularly relevant considering the ratio of defenders accepted during the process.

Lastly, due to the limited number of selected profiles, concerns have arisen among staff regarding the threshold system, which excludes many high-quality applicants from HRDAP. **The lack of follow-up**

during evaluations and interviews highlights the need to streamline a system for HRDAP fellow profiles to integrate into the broader ISHR community in other roles.

Course Structure - Format:

The course has evolved, adjusting both its format and content to meet the needs of defenders, taking into account contextual factors and internal resources. **The course has transitioned towards a 12-week hybrid intensive programme**, combining online and in-person activities. **It has been identified as the most successful and effective way** to access a large amount of data and tools within a relatively short timeframe.

There is agreement that the **sweet spot is a combination of online activities that allow flexible learning journeys** (including theoretical classes, pre-recorded videos, self-assessments) and **in-person training, mainly focused on sharing practical tools**, exposure to people from the UN HR sphere, group work, and peer learning.

The course is appreciated for its diverse format, which includes a variety of activities that balance lectures with guided conversations (led by coaches), peer learning, practical exercises (such as the advocacy roadmap), group assessments, and insights from experts (sessions featuring UN representatives, Civil society organisations, and diplomatic bodies), which allow participants to touch upon different topics, embedding a critical mindset. **It also employs multiple methods of sharing information**, from traditional PowerPoint presentations to workshops, group discussions, speed dating, and events. **Presentations, however, can benefit from a unified and more structured, yet compelling, design.**

Fellow HRDAPers greatly appreciate the flexibility during the online stage, which allows them to balance this course with prior responsibilities, workload, and caregiving duties. Conversely, the in-person setting offers limited opportunities for HRDs to respond to real-time situations. The HRDAP structure, particularly the in-person component, **manages the challenges of organising multiple modules reliant on speakers within a busy agenda and the interest of HRDs in maintaining interaction**, often leading to numerous last-minute calls. Staff value having clear guidelines and regular check-in meetings to ensure that the course can adapt to real-time needs.

In summary, these different formats are complementary and mutually reinforcing, accommodating various learning styles, fostering inclusivity and diversity, and reducing the burden on participants. However, **there are binding constraints due to the capacity required to complete this project**, making it challenging to implement any further increases in staff capacity, improvements to the website, or extending in-person participation.

Course Structure - Content:

The sessions are based on a **blend of technical knowledge, experience, and the practical application of Human Rights principles** in real-life situations. Additionally, there is an emphasis on soft, broad skills — such as communication and fundraising — and active participation from HRDs. **External speakers commend the course quality, which is highly regarded for its practical approach to UN mechanisms** and provides a unique opportunity for a diverse group of defenders to gather in Geneva, significantly enhancing their engagement in international processes.

In fact, external stakeholders sense there is a growing call to move beyond technical know-how, linking local issues to international discussions, which sometimes inspires diplomats and strengthens organisational advocacy strategies. HRDAP has been a key space to hear directly from different

geographies and thematic approaches. ISHR partners agree that **the programme encourages meaningful conversations with UN officials, funders, and NGOs, helping to build trust and establish practical connections.**

On the other hand, **participants appreciate the opportunity to connect with UN HR ecosystem members beyond ISHR staff.** They value panellists providing expert insights, as well as sharing their experiences and knowledge about the UN HR system, while also equipping participants with the tools and skills necessary to conduct advocacy successfully. However, there is an imbalance in engagement depending on the topics covered by the programme. For example, a module on photography in 2025 did not receive the same response from HRDs, mainly because they felt it was outside the scope and lacked practicality.

Moreover, HRDAP is a highly regarded programme within the UN HR ecosystem, and therefore, high standards are expected of its participants. **Stakeholders often highlight the programme's esteemed reputation and its ability to enhance participants' skills and understanding,** while also fostering valuable exchanges across different regions and topics.

Overall, **satisfaction with the course contents remains very high.** Some of them describe it as life-changing, impactful, rich, and coherent with the programme's objectives. The balance between theory and practice consistently emerges as one of the programme's strengths. There is a strong appreciation for the advocacy roadmaps, the special procedures workshop, and advocacy practice.

ISHR support and follow-up:

ISHR staff are one of the most distinctive features of the course. Participants praise their commitment to foster a safe learning environment.

Facilitation is considered adequate because it achieves the objectives while maintaining a balance between flexibility and accountability. The sessions varied in their facilitation styles but were generally tailored to the needs of the participants and the nature of the content. It was, in some cases, unidirectional (lectures or specialists sharing their experience). In contrast, in others, it included external speakers (panels, roundtables, speed dating) or workshops where participants led the discussion (advocacy roadmaps). However, **participants are more likely to engage in facilitation when it is plural or conversational,** as they can contribute to the topics by sharing their experiences, raising concerns, or making remarks.

Coaches serve as a bridging component and a crucial feature to ensure the programme's success, as they contribute to addressing the nuances that enable a tailored approach for participants during the course. There is consensus that coaches serve as enablers for defenders to navigate the UN landscape and programme requirements. Internal discussions among ISHR staff **highlight the lack of prior training for coaches,** as well as the significant time the role demands, making it challenging to balance with other responsibilities.

Engagement during the program is vibrant, but maintaining that momentum after the program can be a challenge, especially with limited structured follow-up. Alums are increasingly becoming a vocal group of advocates, leveraging UN mechanisms, and their involvement is even more impactful when tied back to national and regional issues.

Nevertheless, **follow-up becomes less structured and streamlined.** Relationships between ISHR and participants are mainly formed in response to needs, leaving the organisation in a reactive position.

From following up on a policy or delivering a statement to building joint donor applications, there is a strong influence on the alignment between parties to achieve these outputs. However, these engagements are often unplanned and tend to be reactive rather than fostering the institutional mission with the insight that fellow HRDAPers may bring. **There are growing discussions about formalising follow-up**, particularly due to the interest from fellow HRDAPers, who see the space as an opportunity for networking, cross-dissemination, international solidarity, and ongoing learning.

From the participants' standpoint, they consistently emphasise the value of building and maintaining an alum network. There is a desire for lifelong connections, solidarity, cross-dissemination, peer exchanges to refine advocacy strategies and collective care beyond the course. **Alums see potential to respond collectively to threats and uphold political commitment.**

Sustainability:

HRDAP has become ISHR's flagship initiative, but it is also becoming increasingly resource-intensive. In some cases, it has even been equated to the overarching training strategy.

There is a **significant concern about innovation and how to make the programme more aligned with the needs of the defenders** as well as with institutional values and ISHR's mission. However, the institutional costs of making this sustainable, in terms of workloads, the need for more coordination, the staff time and funds involved, pose difficulties to further implement changes.

Internal management workload is substantial (visas, travel, hybrid coordination, per diems, receipts, budgeting, running a 24/7 Signal group), requiring careful anticipation and planning, with ongoing challenges in managing it alongside other priorities. **Additionally, coaching is a demanding role that involves prioritising support from staff for at least a quarter per year**, requiring constant decision-making and coordination. While participants are keen on having more support like this earlier, staff recognise the difficulties in allocating additional resources.

The involvement of staff is crucial, **but discussions have arisen about whether it is a healthy institutional practice to rely on specific people for certain topics**, as this might create vulnerability and burnout among staff.

Other staff **tensions exist regarding how and where to expand the current model's effectiveness and impact.** For some, it involves replicating this model; for others, it is about increasing the cascade effect or even scaling up the number of participants. **There is no clear answer, but there is a shared intention to make training more cost-effective.**

Lack of follow-up also hampers sustainability, as data and information on the progress of defenders are lost once they graduate from HRDAP. Despite positive examples (SOGI, Climate, African systems integration), engagement remains uneven: interactions are not strategically integrated into the broader planning, and opportunities to enhance impact rely heavily on individual relationships.

Funding has been a growing binding constraint, since it determines the priorities and the capacity for ISHR to implement or scale the impact of this programme. For instance, every adaptation (tools, strategies, and the number of defenders in Geneva each year) has a direct effect on organisational costs. On the other hand, there have been debates about whether it is practical to charge application fees, considering the nature of applicants, even when scholarships are available.

In addition, contextual barriers include difficulties in obtaining visas and confirming the availability of external stakeholders to meet with defenders, which impose additional points of pressure.

Emerging Topics:

This training has proved its transformative capacity to establish a global advocacy platform. Still, some topics have arisen during the analysis.

First, there are **growing concerns about the staff's capacity to manage unexpected or critical situations**. A recent crisis during the 2025 cohort highlighted the need to anticipate potential issues with participants and develop a way to address them by improving coordination, decreasing discretion and personal bias and increasing the number of protocols in place. Participants questioned the manner in which the decision was communicated to them. So far, it is highly reliant on the ability of staff members to juggle the tension between confidentiality and transparency when informing decisions to fellow HRDAP participants. **There is a need to advance communication, establish clear red lines, and develop internal crisis management guidelines, ensuring accountability to overcome some of these challenges.**

There are also concerns about the ability to choose engaging external stakeholders, due to the decrease in diplomatic body members in strategic jurisdictions. Participants observed uneven engagement and sensitivity towards the defenders' agendas.

Participants have also valued well-being and risk assessment as key aspects of the course, requesting more space to prioritise this area during training. Internal discussions have addressed this topic, but there are contested positions on whether to increase activities and modules to strengthen implementation, which may lead to inconsistent delivery due to a lack of specialised professionals. Along the same lines, participants **have requested that HRDAP be complemented with other areas of training, such as public relations, media exposure, and curriculum development** features, to be integrated into the course. There is no agreement on this regard.

Well-being also depends on external factors, such as the **operating environment and increasing restrictions on the work HRDs perform**. Due diligence becomes even more critical to identify suitable profiles for recruitment, as some attempts have been made to instrumentalise HRDAP — especially the Geneva piece — for other purposes. Furthermore, attendants face **growing risks in terms of public exposure, with potential backlashes and reprisals once they return to their domestic sphere**.

Regardless of the programmatic aspects, **participants have also suggested improving balance and strategic time use by** better allocating the theoretical and complementary modules during the online track and expanding experiential learning and advocacy during the in-person stage.

Furthermore, **operational discussions have become more focused on reducing environmental costs during training**. Staff have considered adopting digital tools as a means to reduce their carbon footprint. Participants have highlighted the importance of infrastructure, given the rising temperatures in Geneva. However, there have been no responses or documented strategies for implementing environmentally friendly solutions.

Unintended Effects:

The Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme (HRDAP) was created with a clear set of aims and objectives. However, as the programme has evolved, several unintended effects have emerged—many of which reinforce ISHR's broader theory of change while also exposing new tensions and opportunities that extend beyond the original course design.

One of the most significant unintended consequences is the psychosocial impact of the programme. Defenders have declared that training has contributed to breaking the cycle of urgency, acquiring a more strategic mindset to react to ongoing human rights violations. Coaches have shifted from technical advisors to trusted confidants, supporting defenders in pursuing their goals in a safe space where vulnerability and resilience are intertwined. **For participants, this environment often provides a refuge from hostile national contexts, alleviating the isolation, increasing their confidence and sparking a renewed sense of hope.** Staff commitment, despite heavy workloads, is a defining feature of HRDAP, contributing to a culture of solidarity and care.

Similarly, **ISHR staff state that they boost intrinsic motivation when sharing time and defenders' stories during HRDAP.** Despite the workload, this programme offers them the chance to stay connected with the organisational mission, strengthening their commitment to the cause. **However, it also highlights a tension: staff emotional involvement, while inspiring, risks burnout and can blur professional boundaries.** Addressing this tension requires the institutionalisation of wellbeing protocols and more straightforward safeguarding guidelines, ensuring care does not slip into paternalism.

This motivation also applies to the UN Human Rights ecosystem. **HRDAP signifies institutional backing** for partner organisations and diplomatic entities. **Participating in Geneva, under ISHR's banner, has symbolic value that goes beyond technical training.** The prestige associated with ISHR boosts defenders' credibility at home and increases their influence in national advocacy. In fact, **former HRDAP participants have observed that they have gained a more public profile,** with new skills and the ability to navigate the landscape, becoming pioneers in engaging the UN system on behalf of the groups they represent.

Another dimension of effects — as described by interviews and confirmed by quantitative data — depends on **the use of HRDAP skills and knowledge.** There have been multiple documented practices, including adapting lessons into training materials, guides, and organisational strategies for their communities. **This cascade effect was not an explicit objective but demonstrates the programme's applicability** at the collective level and amplifies ISHR's systemic ambition.

Beyond knowledge, **HRDAP has evolved into a space for robust solidarity networks and a platform for continued professional growth.** Defenders reassure and reinforce their commitment when sharing with peers, often reporting a renewed sense of trust—not only in themselves but also in colleagues, and sometimes even in the UN system. Meeting peers, hearing personal stories, and building solidarity were as impactful as technical skills. Moreover, for many participants, HRDAP has become an entry point, leading to career opportunities, increased visibility, and safer advocacy spaces, as indicated in the testimonies of former HRDAP participants.

4.4 Narrative analysis: Motivation, perception of the course ex post, applicability, and unique HRDAP added value

Both survey respondents and interviewed former participants agree that the desire to pursue professional development alongside personal interests influenced their decision to apply to the programme. For human rights defenders, professional and personal aspects are closely connected, as

their practice is often rooted in their core values. **For most applicants, the credibility of ISHR and of the programme itself was decisive in validating their investment of time and energy.**

The programme's objectives are clear: to strengthen defenders' expertise, influence international mechanisms, and foster a diverse and supportive community of practice. **Yet, testimonies show that HRDAP has delivered impacts well beyond these objectives, shaping motivation, confidence, and networks** in ways that reinforce ISHR's broader theory of change: defenders who are equipped, connected, supported, and influential.

Despite personal reasons for applying, **a common thread among participants is: the desire to become better equipped to access and navigate the UN system with practical tools and actionable strategies.** More concretely, for several fellows, **HRDAP represented their first opportunity to engage with the UN system, even if they presented scepticism about the system's effectiveness,** illustrating its unique role as an entry point into international advocacy and to help them acquire the practical knowledge to make informed advocacy choices.

Other highlighted ex-ante motivations stem from personal experiences of injustice and the desire to transform inequitable environments, as well as the chance to connect with like-minded individuals.

This motivation is significant because of the effort required to participate, despite previous commitments, travel, caring responsibilities, the predominance of English, and other factors that hinder involvement. Still, **participants consistently describe HRDAP as a transformative learning journey that links technical knowledge with lived experience and solidarity.** They report that the programme encourages critical participation—not just absorbing information but also questioning power structures and challenging assumptions about international mechanisms.

The course environment is described as safe, respectful, and non-judgmental, where curiosity fuels engagement and learning. There is room for critical analysis, questioning structures and engaging in respectful disagreement, putting collective care first.

The human dimension adds depth. At the individual level, testimonies concur that defenders found their genuine voice and felt the endorsement to speak in the name of other marginalised people. Participants also form bonds that blur professional boundaries, generating both solidarity and a sense of collective responsibility.

Once the programme is completed, **there is a consensus that HRDAP is a transformative experience, linking knowledge with action and fostering a global community of human rights defenders.** Expressions of gratitude repeated over the years, serving as a stepping stone to a more comprehensive roadmap for driving change.

In practice, human rights defenders apply their knowledge using different strategies and approaches. Although not all of them become active members of the UN HR landscape, statistics indicate that **the vast majority influence change within their circles after graduating from HRDAP.**

Participants left feeling more confident, less isolated, and more agentive, as well as more aware of the situations of defenders globally. Some noted that frustration with the UN's complexity was transformed into motivation, leading to more realistic expectations and ultimately resulting in a decrease in burnout.

Moreover, defenders **improved their ability to structure arguments, adopt diplomatic language, and engage with mechanisms, as well as an increase in depth of geographical and thematic**

developments. This knowledge cascades into communities and networks, multiplying HRDAP's reach. Several defenders trained colleagues or integrated advocacy roadmaps into organisational strategies.

Consulted defenders agree that this transformation permeates the system and is sustained over time. In fact, many participants reported they remain in touch with staff members, receiving periodic updates, subgrants, invitations to webinars, and access to resource materials, as well as joint funding application opportunities. **These touchpoints helped defenders remain informed, connected, and supported in their advocacy.**

Others state they have received little or no post-training engagement. This inconsistency highlights a tension between HRDAP's goal to achieve long-term impact and the resource or structural limitations affecting alum involvement.

After this cycle of recruitment, participation during the course and ex post support, human rights defenders find unique features in HRDAP. **This programme offers a rare chance to combine technical knowledge, practical application, real-time advocacy, and "a human connection", building solidarity networks that reduce isolation, foster relationships, and support defenders throughout their advocacy journeys.**

The **most significant changes in discourse** stem from the journey of incipient and non-expert users of the UN Human Rights system as they become engaged, well-equipped, and strategic leaders in their communities, inspiring lasting change. In some cases, they have become the UN's point of liaison — submitting information, organising consultations, and creating coalitions —and have joined organisations accessing the Geneva landscape or used the UN's human rights principles and mechanisms to enact equitable domestic policies (such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act - AGOA).

Through this blend of technical capacity, solidarity, and visibility, HRDAP emerges as a **transformative space where defenders strengthen their advocacy strategies, expand their networks, and reinforce their role as influential actors** within the international human rights system. At the same time, HRDAP becomes a **fundamental tool for human rights defenders to bolster the civic space** in the particular contexts of the participants.

4. Results and most significant changes

5.1 Results per variable

On Pertinence:

Overall, the programme is highly pertinent for defenders—over 67% of surveyed participants found the course to be very engaging— sometimes at the expense of institutional capacity. In many of the interviews and evaluation reviews, a recurrent topic has been the need to shift the programme to meet new contextual needs, indicating a sensitivity to the landscape as well as an ethical and moral obligation towards defenders.

It has demonstrated this commitment through its **strong alignment with HRD's evolving needs, its adaptability to different situations and changes in the operating environment** (such as during COVID-19). The most prominent example is the transition from an intensive in-person format to a

more structured hybrid setup. **Even if objectives have remained consistent, practice has evolved to cover the changing needs of defenders and the considerations of staff.**

There is a **clear trend towards increasing inclusivity in the programme management cycle, supported by ongoing revisions and adjustments to better reflect the participants' needs and respond to changes** in the operating environment, promoting a systemic and interdisciplinary approach. The outcome of this project management cycle, with an emphasis on evaluation, has been reflected in improved selection (from close calls to open applications), subgranting to enhance participation and follow-up, transition towards flexible course assignments, coaches supporting the advocacy design, and time for cross-cutting sustainability-related topics, such as communications and fundraising.

As a result, the programme has continuously aimed to enhance the agency, resilience, and trust of defenders, even beyond its stated objectives. There is an underlying dimension that goes beyond the explicit aims, fostering defenders' ability to "read the room", engage with diverse viewpoints, and lead large, multi-layered advocacy initiatives. Additionally, the component of "building relationships" is embedded in HRDAP and reinforced during the in-person stage, a feature highlighted by external stakeholders, who emphasise the importance of going beyond just technical training and fostering broader global connections.

All these strategies are well-aligned with providing practical tools for advocacy, even though there are still challenges in defining the target participant—to maximise the effect on the strategic use of the UN system—and streamlining a proper follow-up system for participants.

The credibility and reputation of the programme stand as a testament to its pertinence to a landscape that requires more trained personnel to overcome the structural barriers that the UN faces in participating equitably and effectively. Therefore, this flagship initiative has become appealing to donors, with various streams of funding, from institutional financing (which primarily covers staff costs) to more flexible ways of directing funds to HRDAP, such as supporting individual defenders or some participants.

On Consistency:

The programme has demonstrated strong consistency between its goals, methodologies, and outputs, particularly in terms of capacity building, engagement with UN mechanisms, and collectiveness. In addition, there is consistent input from donors and other stakeholders (UN officials, diplomatic body members) that allows this programme to function accordingly. **There is sufficient evidence from staff to support internal consistency between cohorts, but not necessarily between HRDAPers.**

Despite the annual adjustments in the programme, the core of it remains. There is room and flexibility in methodologies and outputs, but goals remain as the starting point for HRDAP to function. The methods and outputs are easy to track, making the programme appealing to external stakeholders, such as donors or members of diplomatic bodies.

However, while outputs are clear (the training, its phases, activities and the facilitation guides and materials needed), there is a perception among staff that there is a lack of consistency in coaching, responses to emergencies, selection, and follow-up, which heavily depends on the team's skill set and priorities. There are no perceived concrete methodologies in place (despite the advances), creating a tension between the number of outputs delivered and the lack of structure or strategic guidance (beyond outputs) to reflect on these topics.

For instance, there is insufficient institutional data to evaluate consistency over time, particularly with initial cohorts. However, consistency from donors, the increasing number of applications, and engagement by UN officials can serve as proxies for these factors.

There is an **additional tension between the need to institutionalise and streamline as much as possible to increase impact and the need to leave room for discretion** to avoid losing praised flexibility.

On Accessibility:

The programme has evolved from a closed, network-based selection process to open calls and a hybrid, flexible model, demonstrating a commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

Nevertheless, staff thoroughly understand the systemic barriers defenders face in completing training—including access to visas, the cost of living in Geneva, and increasingly pressing environments—and continuously seek strategies to break those cycles. Practices such as streamlining the selection process, enabling access to subgrants and scholarships (83% of applicants requested a full scholarship), creating the HRDAP Academy on a user-friendly platform, and regional/thematic coaching, flexibility in completing the virtual stage (having pre recorded sessions) are some of the most prominent features to ensure that HRDs can fully engage in the programme.

Despite these advances, barriers to full accessibility persist. **The primary identified obstacle to full engagement with the course was language, as English is not the first language for most participants.** This difficulty increases when people speak too quickly, the audio quality is poor, or there is excessive background noise. This is challenging since it requires interpretation costs, material translation, and a multi-lingual staff to implement HRDAP in more than one language.

Secondly, the success rate of applications was 2% in 2025. The threshold system omits many high-standard candidates from the process. Internal ISHR discussions have attempted to include them in regional programmes, grant partial access to the online training, etc., but there is inconsistency in the integration strategies.

An intrinsic obstacle to online applications is the difficulty of submitting them online, particularly in areas with low bandwidth. Likewise, participants have noted that home duties, phone calls, caring responsibilities, personal situations during COVID-19 and emergencies often interfere with their full participation. The intensity of the programme leaves little time for rest or balancing responsibilities, creating fatigue. This is exacerbated by the reduced time span between platform updates and classes, leaving little room for content review and revision.

Other technical barriers are internet access and platform limitations that may affect the performance of HRDAPers during training. Due to physical obstacles, recurring concerns have been raised about the lack of inclusivity in HRDAP regarding the adaptation of materials and activities. For instance, it is reported that a visually impaired person cannot fully engage with the online course and that people with physical disabilities cannot fully enjoy the in-person piece, because the space is not entirely prepared for it.

The most prominent external barrier to secure engagement is the current restrictive visa access. There have been increasing problems with defenders being banned from coming to the country. It is a matter of concern for the upcoming years due to increasing impact on budgeting (travel costs involved), logistics and more restrictions.

However, the programme aims to facilitate access to the UN Human Rights system, and this goal has been consistently met over time. Defenders have engaged with mechanisms that enable them to voice their concerns, provide statements, and more, and ISHR continues to support ongoing access whenever requested. Even if participation is contingent on priority topics during the UN sessions, those that have been included in the agenda can successfully interact with UN mechanisms.

On Applicability:

The applicability of HRDAP is reflected in the consistent efforts by alums to integrate the knowledge, skills, and strategies acquired during the programme into their ongoing advocacy. **Participants report that they continue to cultivate links with UN mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council, the UPR, treaty bodies, and Special Procedures, as well as with diplomatic representatives and NGO coalitions,** particularly through the implementation of their advocacy roadmaps.

Over 80% of surveyed alums reported applying HRDAP-acquired tools within six to twelve months after completing the programme. Examples include preparing shadow reports, submitting communications to Special Procedures, and engaging strategically in Human Rights Council sessions. This illustrates that HRDAP equips defenders not only with technical knowledge but also with practical strategies they can employ directly in their advocacy.

Nonetheless, the extent of application varies significantly. While some participants report numerous collaborations and structured partnerships, others experience sporadic or limited engagement, often due to contextual constraints such as shrinking civic space, restrictive environments, or personal circumstances, including migration and exile. **These limitations can create a gap between the short-term empowerment offered by HRDAP and its longer-term impact at the local or national level.** Still, even when defenders cannot apply strategies directly, the knowledge remains valuable as an indirect tool to influence advocacy through partners, networks, or subsequent opportunities.

The programme's collective dimension reinforces applicability: HRDAP fosters solidarity and provides a space of respite, hope, and mutual support, where participants can regroup and regain energy. Alums often cascade their knowledge through trainings, regional initiatives, and peer-to-peer exchanges, multiplying the programme's reach beyond individual beneficiaries. This community of practice, increasingly familiar with Geneva's ecosystem, expands civil society's access points and strengthens collective advocacy.

Beyond, HRDAP contributes to diversifying the voices that reach UN spaces, amplifying defenders' issues in Geneva and reinforcing the legitimacy of civil society participation. **ISHR's role as convener enhances credibility and encourages critical engagement with UN mechanisms. At the same time,** the programme feeds into and is reinforced by other networks that translate defenders' asks into tangible advocacy interventions. **After the course, defenders can frame their local struggles within international human rights frameworks, diversify their advocacy tools, and incorporate UN mechanisms into their strategies.**

Tensions remain between opportunities and programme structure—for example, when external advocacy spaces coincide with scheduled sessions—forcing participants to balance the immediate use of new knowledge with their learning process. Moreover, high demand and limited places mean that many defenders who could benefit from HRDAP cannot access it, raising questions about scalability and sustained applicability.

In this regard, **there are institutional tensions on how and where to expand the current model's effectiveness and impact.** For some people, it involves replicating this model; for others, it consists in increasing the cascade effect or scaling up the number of participants. There is no clear answer, but there is agreement that there is an intention to make training more cost-effective.

Overall, HRDAP demonstrates a strong record of applicability: it builds technical capacity, nurtures psychosocial resilience, fosters collective solidarity, and links defenders to structural advocacy opportunities. Yet, its long-term impact depends heavily on contextual factors, such as the capacity of defenders to engage in the system over time, as it is time- and resource-consuming. Still, it highlights the necessity of sustained follow-up and complementary support mechanisms to extend the applicability of HRDAP skills and knowledge over time.

On Influence:

HRDAP is consistently recognised as a transformative initiative that enhances defenders' ability to engage with the UN system and leverage it for their advocacy. The programme turns an opaque structure into an accessible and navigable system. This creates clear mutual benefits: defenders acquire skills, credibility, and entry points, while UN actors and states benefit from increased accountability, enriched perspectives, and closer relationships with civil society. Selectivity is a double-edged sword for influence purposes: a smaller cohort enables deeper engagement with UN actors, but it also limits inclusion and increases pressure to focus on a few voices.

The in-person Geneva experience remains the strongest driver of influence for HRDAP. Direct exposure to UN officials, diplomats, and sessions provides participants with invaluable first-hand knowledge of the ecosystem, while also offering rare opportunities to establish trust-based connections. Alumni report that the endorsement of a prestigious programme gives them the authority to speak openly about sensitive issues, helping overcome the intimidation that often accompanies engaging in UN spaces.

These interactions often translate into tangible advocacy outcomes—such as state commitments during UPR sessions, follow-up actions from Special Rapporteurs, and local policy shifts informed by international engagement. For example, defenders reported leveraging HRDAP skills to submit shadow reports to treaty bodies, contribute to CERD interventions on indigenous land rights in Cameroon, secure visits from Special Rapporteurs to high-risk regions and advise national coalitions on effective lobbying strategies. **Such cases illustrate how the influence of HRDAP extends beyond individual learning, shaping systemic advocacy outcomes.**

Participants highlight the nurturing role of HRDAP staff and the networks built through the course as critical in sustaining influence after the programme. Consequently, defenders have mobilised for joint advocacy, with concrete examples such as the renewal of the SOGI mandate campaign, as well as cascade trainings and regional initiatives where HRDAP alums have become reference points for their peers.

In the long run, **HRDAP has broadened representation within UN spaces,** bringing under-represented voices—such as those of LGBTQI+ defenders, indigenous peoples, and environmental activists—into global debates and embedding their issues into institutional agendas. Fellow participants have joined partner organisations or have become points of reference for the UN mobilisation in Geneva.

Nonetheless, obstacles limit the programme's impact. **A lack of follow-up and regional training restricts long-term systemic change, benefiting a small alum group.** Contextual issues, such as

shrinking civic space, exile, surveillance, and repression, hinder defenders from translating international engagement into local change. Likewise, structural barriers such as ECOSOC accreditation, cultural nuances, and limited diplomatic resources also restrict influence.

The influence of defenders also depends on their organisational support and priorities. Alums with strong institutional support can sustain their engagement and achieve a greater impact.

Despite these limitations, HRDAP's influence is significant and multidimensional. It empowers defenders to act as credible advocates, strengthens the collective presence of civil society in Geneva, and diversifies the voices shaping international human rights agendas. Alumni networks and peer-to-peer support extend their impact, creating ripple effects in visibility, protection, and advocacy reach.

Ultimately, HRDAP legitimises civil society participation within the UN system. The challenge ahead lies in scaling these gains and ensuring sustained, structural influence—so that the programme's transformative power extends beyond empowerment of individuals and contributes to systemic, lasting change.

5.2 Results per level of analysis

1. Psychosocial Impact

HRDAP provides defenders with an essential psychosocial boost in contexts where they are often isolated, threatened, or under-resourced. As a result, HRDs feel less isolated, more resilient, and legitimised in their advocacy, increasing their capacity to sustain long-term engagement despite threats and shrinking civic space. Some highlights are:

- **Confidence and Legitimacy:** Alumni consistently report greater confidence in navigating UN mechanisms, reinforced by the prestige of ISHR and the credibility that comes from participating in HRDAP. This legitimacy helps them overcome feelings of intimidation and marginalisation.
- **Resilience and Care:** The programme creates a rare "respite space" where defenders can be vulnerable, reconnect with hope, and draw energy from solidarity. This psychosocial reinforcement strengthens their determination to continue advocacy, even under hostile conditions.
- **Identity Affirmation:** For marginalised groups (e.g., LGBTQI+, women, indigenous defenders), HRDAP has been a safe and affirming space where their presence is acknowledged and recognised, whilst building their leadership and unique voice.
- **Leadership:** Several alums have become visible leaders in their regions, partly due to the self-confidence and legitimacy they gained during the programme. For many, HRDAP served as both a protective factor and a stepping stone to higher-profile roles.
- **Contested Positions on Resilience:** Although all participants stated that the training programme had an impact on their trajectories, few claimed to have not observed a significant increase in resilience or emotional openness.
- **Unintended Impact on Staff and External Stakeholders:** This feeling of hope and resilience is transmitted to staff and the people interacting with defenders, acting as a kind of "fresh air" for their regular advocacy efforts.

All these impacts are relevant since they are not explicitly documented in the theory of change or the programme objectives, becoming the most prominent impact beyond the expected effects.

2. Technical Impact

At the technical level, HRDAP equips defenders with concrete skills, knowledge, and strategies to engage with the UN system. As a result, HRDAP builds practical advocacy capacity, creating multiplier effects when alumni replicate knowledge within their organisations and regions. Some highlights are:

- **Knowledge Acquisition:** Participants learn how to prepare shadow reports, submit communications to Special Procedures, and intervene in HRC sessions. This ability extends beyond the course completion, cementing a new trajectory for fellows who become specialists over time. A highlight of knowledge is its practical nature, as it originates from practitioners rather than academics or theoretical experts.
- **Practical Application:** Over 80% of alums applied the tools and strategies within 6–12 months, demonstrating that technical knowledge translates into effective advocacy practice. They are capable of building plans with actionable steps and inputting into their peers' agendas, creating an atmosphere of expert knowledge that peaks during the in-person engagements.
- **Capacity Building and Trickle-down Effect:** Alumni feel they are equipped enough to cascade their knowledge through trainings, regional initiatives, and peer-to-peer exchanges, amplifying the reach of HRDAP. Once participants implement their advocacy roadmaps, they interact with colleagues, sharing the content and the new perspective gained during HRDAP.
- **Strategic Framing:** Defenders learn to connect local struggles to international agendas (e.g., women's land rights, environmental justice, SOGI), making advocacy more effective and visible. After completing HRDAP, defenders can translate complex issues into human rights discussions across different forums.

The technical impact is the most documented and reinforced level of effects, due to its explicit reference in the programme objectives and year planning.

3. Collective Impact

The programme fosters solidarity, peer networks, and collective action that extend far beyond the training itself. HRDAP strengthens collective power, solidarity, and the capacity of civil society to act in a coordinated manner, thereby multiplying the influence of individual defenders.

- **Communities of Practice:** Each cohort strengthens a growing global community of defenders with shared expertise in Geneva advocacy. Alumni describe HRDAP as a "lifelong network" that they turn to in times of need.
- **Trickle-down Effect:** The programme trains defenders, but the impacts extend to movements and coalitions. For example, those appointed as UN points of liaison transfer their knowledge to colleagues. In other cases, they can diversify the advocacy skillset, opening doors for underrepresented communities and vulnerable populations to speak for themselves.
- **Collective Advocacy Outcomes:** Alumni have organised joint initiatives, including the renewal of the SOGI mandate, regional campaigns, and coordinated responses to threats. There are clear examples that demonstrate the potential to increase influence and impact through more structured plans and by embedding defenders' ideas into the broader scope of ISHR's work.
- **Solidarity and Care:** The programme is valued as a collective safe space that defenders return to—both for professional collaboration and personal support in moments of attack.

4. Structural Impact

At the structural level, HRDAP contributes to diversifying representation and influencing systemic dynamics within the UN ecosystem. The course enables diversifying participation and embedding civil society voices in UN spaces. Even though systemic change is not always directly traceable to HRDAP alone, the programme clearly plays a catalytic role in strengthening accountability and enhancing the representativeness of international human rights processes.

- **Diversifying Voices:** The programme ensures that under-represented groups—LGBTQI+ defenders, indigenous peoples, women, environmental activists—gain visibility in Geneva, bringing new issues and perspectives into international debates.
- **ISHR's Reputation as a Leaver:** The endorsement given by ISHR to HRDAP participants influences the system, as networks, UN officials and diplomatic body members are more likely to interact with them, in a context of decreasing resources for civil society organisations to position their agendas. This impact extends beyond the course, as many fellow HRDAP participants have joined partner organisations or assumed relevant roles, advancing in their careers and thereby taking on a more prominent voice when using the UN HR system.
- **Influencing Agendas and Policy Changes:** Alumni have influenced UPR recommendations, generated follow-up from Special Rapporteurs, and contributed evidence to treaty bodies. Some cases have led to tangible outcomes, such as state commitments, increased international visibility for local struggles, visits by Special Rapporteurs, state reviews under the UPR, and the renewal of mandates (e.g., SOGI).
- **Systemic Challenges:** Influence is uneven and difficult to quantify. Without follow-up structures or regionalised options, long-term systemic impact is limited to a relatively small alum pool. Structural barriers (ECOSOC accreditation, cultural nuances in Geneva, restricted civic space) constrain defenders' ability to sustain influence post-HRDAP.

5. Unique Added Value

HRDAP is a distinctive course with unique strengths, blending care, capacity, and connection. It is a holistic programme that enables selected human rights defenders to thrive as advocates, contributing to broader systemic legitimacy. The global nature of cohorts imprints a diversity of views and cultural backgrounds that enrich the course, making it stand out from other similar initiatives.

In particular, exclusive access to UN mechanisms stands out as a unique feature, given participants' proximity to engage in concrete processes, which contributes to larger advocacy plans or provides opportunities to strengthen and enhance their own work.

Despite the lack of structured support, human rights defenders have found ways to stay connected, using WhatsApp groups or other means to exchange information and build solidarity networks. They maintain ties, bolster peer collaboration, and share advocacy initiatives.

The evolving nature of the course enhances the pertinence of HRDAP, adjusting the training to the changing contextual needs. Changes have transformed the training into a tailored and up-to-date resource that addresses the needs and prerogatives of human rights defenders in a changing environment.

5. Recommendations and conclusions

6.1 Keep, fix, try (2 pages) - divided by themes and emerging topics

The Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme (HRDAP) has been established as a flagship initiative, offering clear added value to human rights defenders (HRDs) worldwide. The evaluation highlights areas where the programme is powerful and should be safeguarded, aspects that require revision or reinforcement, and opportunities for innovation. Recommendations are, therefore, presented here using a Fix/Keep/Try framework, which enables a balanced appraisal and a forward-looking orientation.

1. **Streamline a Selection Process:** Currently, the selection has some initial guidelines, but it requires further clarity, publicity, and consistency over time.
 - **FIX:** Clarify eligibility and selection criteria to enhance transparency and accountability. Selection criteria should be translated into measurable variables, considering their relative weights, and ensuring all staff involved apply consistent criteria. Publish these criteria so that potential participants understand the profile evaluation matrix.
 - **FIX:** Agree on the potential "ideal candidate", ensuring there is geographic spread and thematic and opportunities to continue utilising UN Human Rights mechanisms.
 - **FIX:** Implement a due diligence process to review pre-selected profiles, using networks and allies to verify the profiles' veracity, ethics and commitment to human rights.
 - **FIX:** Streamline a selection process with different thresholds (optimal candidate, candidate with potential, candidate with low alignment, for instance), securing people below the points required to be accepted can participate in ISHR advocacy related activities.
 - **KEEP:** Secure diverse geographical and thematic participants on HRDAP cohorts, so that there are meaningful exchanges amongst fellows.
2. **Enhance Participants Management:** There are not enough guidelines and coordination strategies in place to ensure there is a standardised support for participants once they join HRDAP. The lack of structured engagement mechanisms results in inconsistent long-term impact and risks disrupting the networks established in Geneva.
 - **FIX:** Enhance coordination amongst coaches so that there is a more effective use of opportunities before the UN, granting access to more participants.
 - **FIX:** Explicit an expanded code of conduct to handle transgression, focusing on harassments, theft, extortion and other red lines.
3. **Enhance Accessibility:** Despite budget constraints, a more streamlined coordination can benefit participants, ensuring contents are displayed in a more inclusive manner.
 - **FIX:** Ensure the platform can be updated on Sundays (programme the updates), leaving more room for defenders to review the modules without competing with week-round responsibilities, particularly considering there are people across the world, with different timezones.
4. **Review HRDAP Content and Format:** Despite all the positive remarks on the content, there are some features that can be improved towards catering to operating landscape trends.
 - **FIX:** Given increased surveillance and repression, integrate stronger digital safety and secure advocacy skills.
 - **KEEP:** Balance between online and in-person modules, as well as technical, practical and cohesive building activities during the programme making an efficient use of time and potential resources on each case whilst securing its unique features. **Refine prioritisation** of theoretical ground, discussion groups, individual assessments and crosscutting sessions for the online

modules. On the other side, prioritise group assessments, hands-on advocacy and advocacy roadmap presentations for the in-person piece.

- **KEEP:** Invite external speakers to share first hand experiences on the use of UN HR system mechanisms, practices and ways of approaching authorities so that HRDs are better equipped when interacting with UN officials.
 - **KEEP:** refreshers as an effective strategy to help participants recap and reinforce what they might have forgotten, and link it to actionable work during Geneva in person stage.
 - **TRY:** Include global trend analysis (shrinking civic space, digital threats, intersectionality of struggles) to connect local to systemic challenges.
 - **TRY:** Incorporate flexible blocks for advocacy opportunities in Geneva, so that defenders can liaise with relevant stakeholders for their advocacy roadmap completion and balance out workload with wellbeing spaces.
5. **Further Train ISHR Staff:** Currently, there is too much reliance on single profiles and discretion to handle difficult situations, putting staff in pressing settings with potential of burnout.
 - **FIX:** Train coaches in soft skills, such as group management, conflict management and other relevant topics.
 - **FIX:** Create a crosscutting training for selection, facilitation and other relevant management topics so that all staff members can better support each other.
 6. **Embed Psychosocial Support:** This level of impact has not been explicit in the theory of change, and therefore, it falls out of the measurement scope.
 - **FIX:** Explicit wellbeing and psychosocial support to defenders in the course objectives and results, to shed a light on this layer of impact.
 - **KEEP:** Cultivate a safe learning environment for exchanges between defenders so that they can keep on relying on HRDAP as a space for respite.
 - **TRY:** Streamline wellbeing support, creating alliances, coalitions and institutionalising the ISHR internal capacity to address this request, considering its weight on defenders holistic experience.
 - **TRY:** Create alliances with other organisations to run modules on wellbeing and risk assessment for participants, in order to cater to increasing needs from defenders.
 7. **Strengthen Follow-up and Alum Engagement:** Despite the extensive learning gained during the course, alumni report limited opportunities for organised follow-up once training concludes. The lack of structured engagement mechanisms results in inconsistent long-term impact and risks disrupting the networks established in Geneva.
 - **FIX:** Formalise an alumni strategy, with regular updates, mentoring programmes, and targeted support for post-course advocacy, should be implemented.
 - **TRY:** Establish a formal alumni platform (regional hubs, mentorship schemes, digital community of practice). Furthermore, stimulate peer-to-peer exchanges, promoting learning sessions and guidance amongst fellow HRDAPers. An HRDAP mentoring alumni network might be useful to capture the impact of participants trajectories, mixing different cohorts, expertise areas and thematic approaches.
 - **TRY:** Pilot alumni refresher workshops to sustain knowledge, broaden skillset with regards to emerging topics (climate change, AI, business and human rights) and reduce Geneva-dependency.
 - **TRY:** Prepare facilitators (former HRDAPers) to train other groups and handle modular content and participatory strategies they can implement (examine whether to monetise this training), creating a hub to train them or building alliances with institutions.
 8. **Sustainability:** Despite great success of HRDAP, there is a pressing institutional need to ensure the return of investment for participants to join the programme will be more substantial .

- **FIX:** Create a modular curriculum pack with slide decks, exercises, checklists, and video micro-lessons mapped to each UN mechanism; multilingual and low-bandwidth access so that fellow defenders can use it to replicate and manage cascade-training.
- **KEEP:** A diverse set of funding streams that contribute in the short, mid and long run for the programme completion. Highlight unique HRDAP contribution at the psychosocial and systemic levels, balancing out the already documented technical and collective levels of impact.
- **TRY:** Systematise a monitor system to run longitudinal evaluation, tracking changes over time. Implement a baseline assessment to indicate increase in knowledge by the end of the course; and 1 year after the course completion to document variations.
- **TRY:** Plan to have interns every project cycle (or shorter stays) particularly towards the course implementation, so there is more institutional capacity in place. Guidelines, procedures, coordination meetings and development plans can enhance their contribution during the course. Diversify disciplines so that there is logistic, content and management support throughout the process.
- **TRY:** Leave a payroll for training fees, facilitating donations or requesting for scholarships upon need, instead of imposing a fixed amount for the course completion. This payroll can also bring one-time donations, enhancing flexibility budget-wise.
- **TRY:** Create agreements with universities for further funding, training (refreshers, thematic trainings, regional mechanisms) and replicating relevant modules with students and local/grassroots defenders, a balance between quality of the learning experience and accessibility.
- **TRY:** Explore selling training other organisations interested in taking part in the UN debates or create modules for diplomatic bodies/ diplomatic academies to increase meaningful engagement with HRDs.
- **TRY:** Streamline a wider training strategy, with interconnected modules and possibilities for continuous formation in order to avoid turning HRDAP into a one-stop-shop.

6.2 Conclusions

The Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme (HRDAP) is the flagship training initiative for the International Service for Human Rights, and the results reflect this level of institutional importance. The programme combines technical, practical tools with a sense of collective struggle and resilience. This is especially relevant due to the growing restriction of civil space, the shrinking of funding, and changes within the UN system, which require current guidance to maximise impact when addressing these mechanisms.

HRDAP has evolved, balancing the needs of defenders with institutional boundaries, maximising efficiency and streamlining most training tools and resources. This development has crystallised in the ISHR academy, which serves multiple modules beyond HRDAP. Additionally, the hybrid model has allowed for the imparting of knowledge and practical exercises, creating opportunities to enhance presence, put advocacy into practice, and integrate into the broader UN Human Rights ecosystem.

The course is intensive for both staff and participants, running nearly year-round. Despite the substantial effort involved, the programme is rewarding for ISHR staff, who strengthen their sense of belonging, and for HRDs, who leave with improved skills, a more detailed understanding of the operational environment in which they wish to operate, and a feeling of being part of a larger, supportive global community.

HRDAP, therefore, represents an ongoing effort to attract more human rights defenders to the UN field, embedding their lived experiences into larger movements that drive change. Examples include the SOGI mandate, the UPR submissions that have permeated the agenda and become priorities in human rights for countries, among other cases, which illustrate the added value of this reputed and respected training.

There is a "spilling effect" of HRDAP into the broader human rights ecosystem. Diplomats are influenced and moved by HRDs' concerns and documentation, increasing the likelihood of using private channels to channel defenders' requests. Other organisations depend on the quality of defenders to conduct advocacy, bringing them along on their journeys for thematic or geographically rooted causes. Finally, mechanisms are strengthened by new issues that highlight the need for change, supported by substantial evidence and sustained advocacy from local, regional, and international organisations.

There are still **pending improvements to optimise the effort versus results equation**, define the ideal candidate profile, and establish guides and publicly available information for applicants. Additionally, strategising follow-up for "off the threshold candidate" with potential for coordinated efforts, enhancing coordination and internal guidelines for training leads and coaches, implementing a thorough due diligence process to streamline crisis management, and exploring new avenues to complement HRDAP throughout time with a structured and coordinated fellowship programme are ongoing.

Finally, **further reflections and institutional debates are necessary to craft a more coherent and structured training strategy that extends beyond HRDAP** and opens the door to integrating different streams into a broader framework. Having such a framework in place can help maximise the impact of HRDAP without turning it into a one-stop shop for human rights defenders; instead, it can make it one of several pathways to join this large, committed, and sustained movement of advocates worldwide.