



EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

ISHR's Project Supporting African Human Rights Defenders' Engagement and Advocacy before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2023–2026)

Conducted under the Irish Aid Civil Society Fund (CSF Ref: 23-05)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACDHRS	African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies
ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
CSF	Civil Society Fund (Irish Aid)
HRD	Human Rights Defender
HRDAP	Human Rights Defenders Advocacy Programme
ISHR	International Service for Human Rights
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development / Development Assistance Committee
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PMEL	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
TOR	Terms of Reference
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This evaluation was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines specified in the Terms of Reference and the evaluators' professional standards. Participation in all interviews and consultations was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed of the purpose of the evaluation and of how their contributions would be used. All interview material is treated as confidential. In this report, contributions from interview subjects are attributed only to the category of interviewee – accompanied advocacy beneficiary, external stakeholder, or ISHR staff member – with no geographic, thematic or other identifying detail that could narrow attribution further. A small number of participants expressed willingness to be quoted by name; where direct quotations are used for illustrative impact, attribution is limited to the category of interviewee unless explicit permission was given for named attribution.

The evaluation applied particular care in handling the accounts of human rights defenders working in restrictive or repressive contexts, several of whom face genuine security risks associated with their advocacy. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely and will not be shared beyond the evaluation team.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and scope

This report presents the findings of an external evaluation of the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) project “Strengthening legal frameworks and mechanisms to enhance the recognition and protection of human rights defenders in Africa,” funded by Irish Aid under the Civil Society Fund (CSF Ref: 23-05) for the period July 2023 to June 2026. The evaluation focuses specifically on the activities supporting African human rights defenders’ (HRDs) engagement with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR): the annual advocacy training for HRDs, advocacy support and accompaniment of a small number of HRDs attending ACHPR sessions (referred to throughout as the “accompanied advocacy” component), and side events and knowledge outputs connected to those sessions. It was conducted between March and June 2026 and assessed the programme against the OECD-DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness and impact, efficiency, and sustainability, with complementarity as a cross-cutting dimension.

Key findings

Relevance. ISHR’s ACHPR-related programming is highly relevant and addresses a real gap. No other organisation provides the combination of structured training, accompanied attendance at Commission sessions, facilitation of meetings with commissioners and special rapporteurs, and sustained advocacy on HRD protection legislation at both national and regional levels.

This niche is especially significant for defenders from Francophone West and Central Africa, who a number of respondents felt are systematically under-represented at the ACHPR.

A limitation in geographic scope, particularly the exclusion of North Africa from the training and accompanied advocacy components due to Irish Aid’s country list constraints, requires attention in the next programme phase.

Effectiveness and impact. The evidence of substantive impact is strong. In the area of legislative protection, the project has contributed to HRD protection laws being adopted or significantly advanced in the DRC, Niger, Liberia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia. It is notable that the Central African Republic adopted an HRD protection law in December 2024 drawing on ISHR’s model law without direct ISHR involvement – an indicator of genuine normative influence.

At the ACHPR, training participants demonstrate sustained behaviour change confirmed by both immediate and retrospective survey data, with alumni at the 85th session (October 2025) serving as NGO Forum panel moderators, side event speakers and formal statement-givers.

ISHR’s work also has a discernible strengthening effect on the Commission itself — most clearly through its support to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and its sustained presence across full sessions, which the Special Rapporteur independently describes as “*facilitating our job*.” This institutional contribution is a by-product of the project’s focus on HRD engagement rather than the object of a dedicated workstream, but it is real and externally validated.

The launch of the free, self-paced ISHR Academy online module (May 2025) is a significant output with multiplier potential beyond the project’s immediate beneficiary group.

Efficiency. The programme is broadly well-run: selection processes are clear and timely; logistics, communications and security protocols are handled competently and praised by participants.

The structural inefficiency is staffing: the Africa programme is carried by effectively two dedicated staff members, responsible for the full scope of activities across the continent.

The 2024 training gap – when no training took place because the ACDHRS partner was unable to secure co-funding – reflects risk in the previous co-organisation model that ISHR has since resolved by taking sole ownership of training design and delivery.

Irish Aid's requirement for both an interim and a final report within weeks of each other at year-end creates an unnecessary administrative burden.

Sustainability. Long-term institutional relationships – in some cases spanning 10 to 16 years – are the programme's most durable achievement.

The ISHR Academy module, the model law, and the alumni network are lasting resources. However, post-session follow-up is the most consistently identified gap across all stakeholder groups.

An alumni engagement strategy is under development and its implementation is critical.

Complementarity. ISHR's work is complementary to, not duplicative of, other organisations in the African HRD space. Its niche on HRD protection legislation is unique on the continent. The 2025 collaboration with Frontline Defenders – integrating security expertise directly into the training programme – is a model of effective collaboration that should be continued and deepened.

Recommendations

For ISHR:

- Address staffing as a structural priority: the programme requires a third dedicated Africa programme position (R1).
- Implement the alumni engagement strategy without delay, including structured post-session debriefs and three-month follow-up (R2).
- Formalise the Frontline Defenders partnership as a standard component of all training and accompanied advocacy, including a dedicated emergency fund for crisis situations (R3).
- Develop a strategy for extending reach to North African defenders, building on the 85th session Western Sahara model (R4).
- Continue the internal restructuring that brings ISHR staff from various thematic areas into work on the Africa Programme, for example by including ACHPR work in ISHR's Systems Strengthening Cluster (R5).

For Irish Aid:

- Allow greater geographic flexibility in the country list for unforeseen crisis situations within programme mandate, through a defined contingency mechanism (R6).
- Simplify the reporting cycle: one interim report at six months, one final report at year-end. The current requirement for both an interim and a final report within weeks of each other doubles workload without added accountability value (R7).
- Ensure funding for a third Africa programme staff position is explicitly budgeted for in any grant renewal. The current staffing configuration is insufficient for the scope of deliverables (R8).

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of an external evaluation of ISHR's Irish Aid-funded project on strengthening legal frameworks and mechanisms for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders in Africa (CSF Ref: 23-05), covering the period July 2023 to June 2026. The evaluation was commissioned by ISHR in compliance with Irish Aid Civil Society Fund requirements and was conducted by Public Interest Practice, an independent South African consulting firm, between March and June 2026.

As specified in the Terms of Reference, the evaluation focuses on those project activities supporting HRDs' engagement with and advocacy before the ACHPR: the annual training, the accompanied advocacy at Commission sessions, and associated side events and knowledge outputs. While the national-level work on HRD protection laws and mechanisms and work focusing specifically on African Island nations form an essential part of the programme context – and the evaluation draws on it where relevant – its full assessment was outside the specific evaluation scope.

The report is structured as follows: background and programme context (Section 2), evaluation methodology (Section 3), findings (Section 4), a summary of interviews and consultations (Section 5), conclusions (Section 6), and recommendations (Section 7). Annexes contain the Terms of Reference, a list of documents reviewed, and a summary of stakeholders consulted.

2. BACKGROUND AND PROGRAMME CONTEXT

ISHR and its Africa programme

The International Service for Human Rights is an independent non-governmental organisation headquartered in Geneva, dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights through support to human rights defenders, advocacy at international and regional mechanisms, and the strengthening of human rights systems. ISHR has maintained an Africa programme for approximately 30 years. It was involved in the founding of the NGO Forum preceding the ACHPR's ordinary sessions and remains the only international NGO on the Forum's steering committee, a position it has held since the Forum's creation.

The project

The project "Strengthening legal frameworks and mechanisms to enhance the recognition and protection of human rights defenders in Africa" is funded by Irish Aid under the 2023 Civil Society Fund for 36 months (July 2023 to June 2026) at a total grant of EUR 750,000, co-funded by Bread for the World and supported additionally by Luxembourg and the Open Society Foundations.

The project has two objectives: strengthening legal frameworks and protection mechanisms for HRDs at the national level; and strengthening engagement with and protection of civil society through regional and international mechanisms. This evaluation focused on the second objective, specifically:

- annual training of HRDs on engagement with the ACHPR;
- advocacy support and accompaniment of a small number of HRDs at each ACHPR session (up to two per year);
- side events, statements and knowledge outputs produced in connection with ACHPR sessions.

The ACHPR context

The evaluation was conducted at a moment of institutional stress for the African Commission. Civil society participation has declined in some recent sessions, particularly those held in hybrid format.

A draft African Declaration on Human Rights Defenders is under development but is contested on questions of universal standards versus culturally framed interpretations of human rights. Anti-rights actors are increasingly present and organised within the Commission's processes.

Several of the countries targeted by the programme are governed by military juntas that have suspended constitutional processes, restricted civic space, and subjected HRDs to direct reprisals. Against this backdrop, sustained civil society engagement with the Commission is more necessary, not less.

3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Evaluation framework

The evaluation was guided by the four OECD-DAC criteria – relevance, effectiveness and impact, efficiency, and sustainability – with complementarity as a cross-cutting dimension. It was informed by contribution analysis (assessing the extent to which ISHR's interventions can reasonably be attributed as contributing causes of observed outcomes, while acknowledging the complexity of regional advocacy processes) and by advocacy pathway tracing for a sample of HRDs.

Data collection

The evaluation drew on four sources.

- **Desk review** of the project description, results frameworks (original and updated), annual reports for Years 1 and 2, training evaluation reports and retrospective survey data, Kumulika newsletters (2023–2026), session materials (concept notes, agendas, side event documentation), and the inception meeting transcript.
- **Key informant interviews:** 17 interviews were conducted across three categories – ten HRDs who participated in the accompanied advocacy component (some of whom also attended ISHR's training), two external stakeholders (the ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders; a senior staff member of Frontline Defenders who formerly served at ISHR), and five ISHR staff members, plus the inception meeting. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2026, in English, French and Portuguese, primarily by video call but with some interviews happening parallel to the NGO Forum in Banjul.
- **Retrospective participant survey:** administered to participants of the 2023 (Arusha) and 2025 (Banjul) training cohorts. 11 responses were received from a combined pool of approximately 40 participants across both cohorts.
- **Direct observation:** at the 87th session of the ACHPR and the NGO Forum (Banjul, 7–9 May 2026), including attendance at sessions, informal engagement with HRDs and Commission staff and a few formal interviews with HRDs, the Special Rapporteur on HRDs and ISHR staff.

Limitations

The retrospective survey sample is small (11 responses) and statistical inference from it should be treated with caution, though the findings are consistent with and reinforced by qualitative evidence from the interviews and the training evaluation reports. The 2024 training did not take place, limiting the direct evidence base on training to two cycles. The evaluation could not systematically assess the outcomes of remote advocacy, through written submissions and correspondence conducted by training alumni who did not attend subsequent sessions.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Relevance

The programme addresses a genuine and persistent gap in the support architecture available to African HRDs. Structured, sustained, accompanied engagement with the ACHPR – from initial capacity building through to facilitation of direct meetings with commissioners and special rapporteurs, integrated with national-level advocacy on HRD protection legislation – is not systematically provided by any other organisation working on the African continent. This finding emerges consistently and independently from interviews with all three stakeholder categories.

HRDs describe a situation in which knowledge of the ACHPR's mechanisms is unevenly distributed and largely inaccessible without intermediary support. Several interviewees attended the Commission for the first time with ISHR support, years into careers as established defenders, and described the experience as transformative. The programme is particularly significant for defenders from Francophone West and Central Africa, who felt that their regions are under-represented at the ACHPR – a regional body that they claimed predominantly operates in English.

ISHR is described by multiple interviewees as providing *“the first ticket – the invitation to know the African Commission.”*

The programme's dual focus on national-level HRD protection legislation and ACHPR engagement is relevant not only separately but in combination: the ACHPR is used to generate political pressure on states to adopt and implement HRD protection laws; those laws then create the legal basis that defenders use in their ACHPR advocacy. ISHR's integration of both levels reflects a coherent and internally consistent theory of change.

One significant relevance gap is geographic. North Africa is largely excluded from the training and accompanied advocacy components as a result of Irish Aid's country list constraints. This is flagged by ISHR staff and by the Frontline Defenders interviewee, who is independently developing a North African training stream.

The successful inclusion of Western Saharan defenders at the 85th session – facilitated by ISHR and generating more advocacy traction than anticipated – demonstrates both the demand and ISHR's capacity to address it, within funding parameters.

4.2 Effectiveness and Impact

Legislative outcomes

The project has contributed to concrete legislative progress across multiple countries. In the DRC, the HRD protection law (Law No. 23/027) was promulgated in June 2023 following sustained ISHR advocacy at both national and Commission levels.

In Nigeria, a bill for the domestication of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders completed its second parliamentary reading by early 2026. In Liberia, a national HRD protection policy was submitted to government in August 2025 and had its first cabinet reading in early 2026. In Tanzania and Zambia, formal government dialogues on HRD policy frameworks were held during the project period.

ISHR also supported Cote d'Ivoire to reform its national HRD protection mechanism to include civil society representatives, a change formally adopted in 2025. In Mali, ISHR supported the protection mechanism in establishing internal processes allowing it to fulfil its mandate towards defenders.

A notable emergent finding: the Central African Republic adopted an HRD protection law in December 2024 drawing directly on ISHR's model law, without direct ISHR involvement in the drafting process. Similarly, Guinea-Bissau has initiated a legislative process using ISHR's resources. This signals that ISHR's normative influence now operates beyond its direct programme relationships.

Capacity change among HRDs

Both immediate post-training evaluations and the retrospective survey confirm strong, sustained capacity change among training participants. All four intended training outcomes – understanding of regional mechanisms, ability to engage strategically with the ACHPR, possession of relevant advocacy tools, and network building – received average ratings above 4.5 out of 5 in the retrospective survey.

Critically, these ratings were sustained over time: the retrospective findings were consistent with the immediate post-training evaluations, indicating that initial positive impressions reflected sustained rather than transient value.

The survey documents post-training behaviour change: participants attended subsequent ACHPR sessions, prepared and submitted communications, trained colleagues using ISHR-developed resources, and built new partnerships. One training participant has integrated ISHR Academy resources into a training programme for over 100 young and women defenders in his country.

Several training participants described using the contacts and networks built through the programme to advance advocacy after the session: connecting organisations across borders, sharing emergency contacts with colleagues facing crises, and using the ACHPR platform to amplify national cases.

The experience and achievements of HRDs at the ACHPR

ISHR's distinctive contribution goes beyond enabling HRDs' physical presence at the Commission to what those HRDs do when they get there. At the 85th session (October 2025), training participants served as NGO Forum panel moderators and speakers, as formal statement-givers on enforced disappearances, and as panellists at Commission session side events on land and environmental rights and on reparations.

Both the retrospective survey and direct observation at the 87th session record alumni returning to the Commission across successive sessions, submitting communications and convening or speaking at side events, and moving over time from first-time attendees to recognised civil-society voices within the NGO Forum and the session itself. The Commission's own Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders confirms the pattern from the institutional side – trained, accompanied HRDs engage more actively, require less orientation from the Commission, and contribute more substantively to its proceedings.

How ISHR's work strengthens the ACHPR and its mechanisms

Beyond what it enables individual defenders to do, ISHR's engagement also has effects on the Commission and its mechanisms themselves. This institutional dimension is less fully captured in the project's output indicators – and, as noted below, was never the object of a dedicated institutional-strengthening workstream – but it emerges from the documentary record and, most directly, from the Special Rapporteur's own account.

The clearest instance is ISHR's support to the mandate of the ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals. The Special Rapporteur describes ISHR as the first organisation he actively engaged with to develop his mandate, and credits it with drafting the first working document for the African Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. He characterises ISHR's technical support as *"something I can count on to make this mechanism grow,"* and its sustained, full-session presence as *"facilitating our job."* Strengthening the effective functioning of this mandate – including its periodic reporting on reprisals – is an explicit commitment in the project design, and ISHR delivers against it session by session through statements on the Special Rapporteur's reports and substantive inputs to the mandate's work.

This institutional contribution takes several further forms. ISHR sustains a presence throughout Commission sessions, not only the NGO Forum where most organisations' participation ends due to cost, giving the Commission and its rapporteurs a reliable civil-society interlocutor across the full arc of each session. It works to defend the Commission's own progressive standards, countering state attempts to weaken landmark instruments such as Resolution 275 and following up on the implementation of rights-oriented outcomes. And it feeds substantive civil-society input into the Commission's normative work – including the draft African Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the study on climate change and human rights, and the alignment of national legislation with the Commission's guidelines on freedom of association and assembly. As the only

international NGO on the NGO Forum Steering Committee since the Forum's founding, ISHR also helps prepare and strengthen the civil-society contributions that feed into each session.

By the project's own design these effects are largely a by-product of strengthening HRDs' engagement with the Commission rather than the aim of a dedicated institutional-strengthening component, and the Special Rapporteur himself identified where ISHR could do more – notably intern secondments to the mandate, stronger bridging of African voices to Geneva processes, and more proactive proposals to the mechanism. Even so, the evidence indicates that ISHR's accompaniment of defenders and its direct support to the Special Rapporteur's mandate have a discernible strengthening effect on the Commission's work on human rights defenders.

The ISHR Academy module

The launch of the free, self-paced online module on engaging with the ACHPR (May 2025, at the 83rd session) is a significant output with multiplier potential not fully captured in the project's quantitative indicators. It is the first comprehensive public resource of its kind for African defenders and training participants are already integrating it into their own training activities.

Unexpected and unintended outcomes

The cancellation of the Western Saharan side event at the 85th session, ordered by Gambian authorities, was converted by ISHR and partners into a highly visible advocacy response: a public statement attracting over 50 co-signatories, press coverage, and heightened attention from commissioners. This unintended development generated more advocacy traction than the original event would have.

At the 85th session, one ISHR-supported HRD delivered an oral statement at the Commission that provoked a public denial from a government minister – which the HRD regarded as a success because it generated official visibility and put the issue on the public record.

ISHR also facilitated the securing of observer status applications for partner organisations and helped identify funding contacts for advocacy beyond what ISHR itself could provide, extending the reach of the programme beyond its direct activities.

4.3 Efficiency

The programme is broadly well-organised. Selection processes for training and accompanied advocacy are described by participants as clear, fair and timely. Logistics – travel, accommodation, security briefings, secure communication platforms – are handled competently.

ISHR's use of secure communications infrastructure (Signal groups, ProtonMail, two-version invitation letters) is specifically valued by defenders working in restrictive contexts, for whom ordinary communication channels carry real risk.

The structural inefficiency is staffing. The Africa programme is carried by effectively two dedicated staff members, responsible for all activities spanning training, accompanied advocacy, legislative technical support, national consultations, shadow reporting, side events, statements, monitoring and reporting, and partnership management – across a continent of 54 countries. When the programme manager went on parental leave in July 2025, the scope of this work only became apparent to the wider organisation through direct experience.

In an assessment made independently by several interviewees: when the wider team had to cover the work temporarily, they finally understood what two people had been carrying for years. A staff member described not having written an additional staff position into the grant as an error that the organisation was working to rectify.

The 2024 training gap, when no training occurred because the ACDHRS was unable to secure co-funding, reflects a structural vulnerability in the previous co-organisation model. ISHR's decision to take sole ownership of the training from 2025 was correct in programme terms. The transition was, however, handled with insufficient communication with the ACDHRS, who learned of ISHR's separate training through social

media or ISHR's website rather than directly. This has required active repair of an important institutional relationship.

Irish Aid's requirement for both an interim and a final report to be submitted within weeks of each other at year-end doubles the reporting workload at the year's operationally most demanding moment without commensurate accountability benefit.

4.4 Sustainability

The strengths are substantial. Long-term institutional relationships – some spanning 10 to 16 years – are among the most durable outcomes of the programme. Partner organisations have internalised ISHR's approach to ACHPR advocacy and now operate with increasing independence.

The ISHR Academy module is a lasting public resource. The model law on HRD protection is now used by governments and civil society actors without ISHR's direct involvement. The alumni Signal network provides an ongoing mechanism for information sharing and peer support.

Post-session follow-up is the most consistently identified gap across all stakeholder categories – mentioned independently by training participants, external stakeholders, and programme staff. What happens to HRDs after they return from the ACHPR? The weeks immediately after a Commission session are a moment of opportunity – commissioner commitments made, advocacy threads opened, networks activated – that too often dissipates because staff capacity does not allow for structured debriefing, strategy sessions, or systematic follow-up.

The retrospective survey specifically identifies *"continued mentoring and accompaniment"* as among the most important unmet programme needs.

An alumni engagement strategy is under development; its implementation is now overdue.

The ability of individual HRDs to maintain in-person Commission engagement after ISHR's support ends is constrained by cost. Most supported defenders cannot fund their own attendance. This is a sector-wide funding reality, not a programme failure, but it reinforces the importance of maximising the value of each supported session.

A succession concern merits attention. Several long-term partner relationships are concentrated in a small number of individuals. The departure of Clement Voule in May 2025 – after years as the programme's institutional anchor at the ACHPR, and as an ISHR staff member who had himself come through the programme as a defender – created a gap in informal authority and access that cannot be quickly replicated.

The appointment of Lidawh-wè Dontema, who brings prior background at the ACHPR Secretariat, is a constructive step toward rebuilding insider knowledge within the team. The new Systems Strengthening Cluster structure, which places ACHPR work alongside Human Rights Council engagement, is intended to distribute institutional knowledge more broadly within ISHR.

4.5 Complementarity and Added Value

The findings on complementarity are unambiguous: ISHR is not duplicating the work of other organisations in the African HRD space.

- **Frontline Defenders** provides physical and digital security support, rapid response, and relocation – not sustained advocacy or ACHPR capacity building. The 2025 co-training arrangement demonstrates effective complementarity in practice.
- **Defend Defenders** operates predominantly in East Africa, with a primary mandate around direct protection. ISHR is deliberately restrained in East Africa to avoid crowding this relationship.
- **FIDH, FIACAT, OMCT** and similar bodies have thematic mandates or constituency structures that differ from ISHR's cross-thematic, capacity-building approach.

- No other organisation provides the specific combination of pre-session training, in-session accompaniment, legislative technical support, and post-session follow-up that ISHR offers. As one of the HRDs who attended ACHPR sessions with support from ISHR said: “When it comes to the African Commission, there is no-one who beats ISHR.”

When the Frontline Defenders interviewee wanted to build her organisation’s ACHPR training capacity, she turned to ISHR as the obvious partner. The Commissioner describes ISHR as the first organisation he actively engaged with in developing his mandate. These are external signals of institutional standing that are not readily replicated.

5. SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS AND CONSULTATIONS

Interviews were conducted with 17 individuals across three stakeholder categories. The following summarises the principal themes emerging from each category.

Accompanied advocacy beneficiaries (ten interviews)

All ten interviewees described the programme as having materially changed their understanding of the ACHPR and their capacity to engage with it. Several described it as the most significant capacity-building intervention in their careers. The quality of accompaniment, the breadth of the networks built, and the rigour of the security protocols were consistently praised.

Concrete post-programme actions were documented in all cases: advocacy at subsequent Commission sessions, training of colleagues, shadow reports and communications submitted, legislative advocacy advanced, and bilateral meetings with commissioners and special rapporteurs sustained.

The most consistent requests for improvement were: longer training periods; the ability to bring a colleague or a younger staff member rather than attending alone; more structured post-session follow-up; and greater balance between English and French in programme delivery.

External stakeholders (two interviews)

The ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders provided the most analytically distinctive external perspective, confirming from the Commission's side that trained, accompanied HRDs engage more substantively and productively. He also offered candid assessments of where ISHR is working within its capacity rather than at it, identifying specific gaps: no intern secondments to the Special Rapporteur mechanism; limited bridging of African voices to Geneva processes; and insufficient proactivity in proposing initiatives to the mechanism. The latter has to be balanced with the difficulty the evaluators observed in gaining direct access to possibly overstretched commissioners, although many HRDs interviewed also credited ISHR with assisting them to build a direct relationship with the Special Rapporteur on HRDs and other commissioners.

The Frontline Defenders interviewee brought a dual perspective as both a former ISHR staff member and current programme coordinator. She provided detailed operational insight on security integration, the value of thematic cohort design, the case for North Africa-specific programming, and the importance of extended duration of Commission exposure during sessions.

ISHR staff (five interviews and inception meeting)

Staff interviews were candid and constructive. The consistent theme was the gap between what the programme aspires to deliver and what staff capacity permits. The workload carried by the Africa programme team is consistently described as unsustainable for the scope of deliverables.

Staff also reflected on the transition away from co-organisation with the ACDHRS (correct in programme design, handled imperfectly in communication), the challenges of engaging the current Special Rapporteur, and the structural importance of the new internal Systems Strengthening Cluster.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The programme is providing critical support to African human rights defenders and to the African human rights system. The evidence of effectiveness – from legislative outcomes, to sustained post-training behaviour change, to the Commission’s own assessment of trained civil society engagement – is substantial and consistent across a wide range of independent sources.

ISHR occupies an institutional space at the ACHPR that it has built over three decades and that no other organisation currently replicates. The programme’s theory of change is sound, its implementation is largely competent, and its long-term partnerships with African HRD coalitions and networks are among the most durable and genuinely valued relationships in this space.

The programme’s most significant constraints are structural rather than programmatic. Chronic understaffing is not a peripheral management concern – it is the central factor limiting what the programme achieves, directly causing insufficient post-session follow-up, concentration of institutional knowledge, geographic limitations, and succession risk.

The broader environment in which the programme operates has become more challenging. The ACHPR is under increasing pressure from state co-optation; civic space is contracting in multiple target countries; the global funding environment for civil society is deteriorating; and anti-rights actors are better organised within Commission processes than they were at the start of the project period. These trends make sustained, well-resourced civil society engagement with the African Commission even more important.

The project’s integration of national-level legislative support with regional advocacy accompaniment is a strength of its design that this evaluation broadly validates. The two strands reinforce each other in ways that neither could achieve alone.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

For ISHR

1. **Staffing.** Commission and fill a third Africa programme staff position as a matter of urgency. Explore internal reallocation – formalising the expectation that staff from other programme areas contribute to ACHPR sessions as they do to Human Rights Council sessions. Ensure any future grant proposal explicitly budgets for three programme staff.
2. **Alumni engagement.** Implement the alumni engagement strategy without further delay. At minimum: a structured post-session debrief for all supported HRDs within two to four weeks; a three-month follow-up to assess post-session advocacy actions and offer technical support; and regular touchpoints through the alumni Signal network.
3. **Security integration.** Formalise the Frontline Defenders partnership as a standard component of all training and accompanied advocacy: security briefings as a fixed element of every training; a security focal point present at every Commission session; and an emergency fund available for crisis situations (medical, security, relocation) during travel and attendance.
4. **Delegation model.** Where resources allow, support small delegations of two to three people from partner organisations – including a younger staff member alongside more experienced advocates – rather than lone individuals. This enables knowledge transfer, reduces succession risk, and allows simultaneous coverage of NGO Forum and Commission session activities.
5. **North Africa.** Develop a strategy for extending training and accompanied advocacy reach to North African defenders, building on the model piloted with Western Saharan defenders at the 85th session. Pursue advocacy with Irish Aid for greater geographic flexibility that this will require.
6. **ACDHRS relationship.** Formalise the relationship with the ACDHRS on clear, mutually agreed terms: ISHR will offer its expertise as a facilitator at ACDHRS-organised events; the ACDHRS will not co-organise ISHR's own training programme. This clarification should be documented in a letter of understanding or equivalent.
7. **Internal restructuring.** Continue and embed the internal restructuring that places ACHPR work within ISHR's Systems Strengthening Cluster, ensuring that staff from other programme areas share ownership of and engagement in Commission sessions.

For Irish Aid

8. **Geographic flexibility.** Allow greater flexibility in the programme's country list to enable responses to unforeseen crisis situations that fall within programme mandate but outside the pre-defined country scope. A defined contingency mechanism – for example, a small proportion of the budget available for unforeseen country responses subject to a brief written justification – would be more workable than amending the country list.
9. **Reporting requirements.** Simplify the reporting cycle by eliminating the requirement for both an interim and a final report to be submitted within weeks of each other at year-end. An interim report at six months and a final report at year-end would provide equivalent accountability at substantially reduced administrative burden.
10. **Staffing in grant negotiations.** In any grant renewal negotiation, ensure that funding for a third Africa programme staff position is explicitly included in the approved budget.

ANNEXES

Annex A: Documents reviewed

- Project Description – Irish Aid Civil Society Fund Application (2023)
- Original Results Framework and Updated Results Framework (2025)
- Annual Narrative Report, Year 1 (July 2023 – June 2024)
- Annual Narrative Report, Year 2 (July 2024 – June 2025)
- Training reports: Arusha (October 2023), days 1–3 summaries
- Post-training evaluation survey data, Banjul 2025 cohort
- Internal lessons note, 2025 training
- Retrospective survey report (comparison of 2023 and 2025 cohorts)
- Kumulika newsletters: Sessions 75 & 77 (2023), 79 & 81 (2024/2025), 83 & 85 (2026)
- NGO Forum 85th Session: concept note, revised agenda, participant statements
- Side event materials: 85th Session (concept notes, flyers, bios and flow of events)
- Inception meeting transcript (21 April 2026)
- External Evaluation Framework, Public Interest Practice (2026)

Annex B: Stakeholders consulted

Accompanied advocacy support		
Lúcia da Silveira	Kutakesa	Angola
Florence Ouattara	CBDDH	Burkina Faso
Neidoteh Boye Torbor	LICHRD	Liberia
Antsa Randrianasolo	ACAT	Madagascar
Anjeelee Kaur Beegun	Égides	Mauritius
Abdulaye Kanni	RNDDH	Niger
Esso-Dong Konga	CDFDH	Togo
Brenda Kugonza	WHRDN-U	Uganda
Fatma Moulay	HRD	Saharawi Republic
Elisha Mutabunga	SOS	Democratic Republic of the Congo
External stakeholders		
Rémy Ngoy Lumbu	ACHPR	Commissioner and Special Rapporteur on HRDs
Stéphanie Wamba	Frontline Defenders	Protection Coordinator
ISHR staff		
Pooja Patel	Deputy Executive Director	
Adélaïde Etong Kame	Senior Programme Manager	
Lidawh-wè Dontema	Africa Legal and Advocacy Officer	
Salma El Hosseiny	Senior Programme Manager	
Salomé Boucif	Training and Advocacy Support Manager	