

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS **STRATEGIC PLAN** 2023 - 2027

JANUARY 2023





THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS  
WE WORK WITH EVERY DAY ARE  
AN INSPIRATION TO ALL OF US IN  
FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It is a measure of the continued effectiveness of human rights defenders (HRDs) around the world that autocrats and bigots continue to invest significant resources to try and silence them or disrupt their work. Sophisticated surveillance, brutal violence, expensive smear campaigns, significant security service and police time and energy, endless judicial proceedings, new restrictive laws; the efforts of the oppressors pay a kind of tribute to the courage, tenacity and creativity of human rights defenders. Whilst human rights academics debate the relevance of a weakened UN system, the reality on the ground in countless countries across all regions is that communities continue to mobilise around a struggle framed in rights, as with the “freedom, peace and justice” slogan of the revolution in Sudan and the «women, life, freedom» slogan of the protests in Iran. As Sonia Guajajara, head of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (ABIP), said at the UN Climate Conference, “if there is no protection of indigenous territories and rights, there will also be no solution to the climate crisis, because we are part of that solution”.

The human rights defenders we work with every day are an inspiration to all of us in Front Line Defenders. Liah Ghazanfar Jawad continues to work to support women and women’s rights in Afghanistan under the brutal Taliban rule even though she has the option to be with her family outside the country. Despite brutal war ravaging Ukraine and producing millions of refugees, the Ukraine 5am Coalition and indeed the majority of Ukrainian HRDs have decided to work from inside the country, where they believe they are most needed, despite risks to their lives. Obert Masaraure and Robson Chere of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe choose to continue their struggle even as they are detained, ill-treated and released. As Berta Cáceres said before she was murdered in Honduras, “They are afraid of us because we are not afraid of them”.

This new strategy builds on 21 years of experience of working with and learning from human rights defenders. It draws on the input of human rights defenders, our dedicated staff, partners and key stakeholders. It builds on the achievements of the last four years during which we have sustained and expanded our support to the protection of human rights defenders in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic and a variety of human rights crises.

Through this strategic plan we have set out our vision to strengthen our ability to meet the needs and demands of human rights defenders. We are committed to the struggle. We stand with human rights defenders and will provide support in every way that we can. We will challenge ourselves to be more effective and innovative to strengthen the protection of human rights defenders.

**JANUARY 2023**



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ATTEND A CANDLELIGHT VIGIL AT THE HRD MEMORIAL IN DUBLIN TO COMMEMORATE COMRADES KILLED FOR THEIR PEACEFUL WORK, OCTOBER 2022

## 2. SUMMARY OF KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Given the increasing needs of HRDs we will continue to expand our support and aim to reach more defenders during the course of this Strategic Plan. This will include strengthening and expanding our core programmes, delivering grants, training, visibility, and advocacy. It will also involve adapting our support and innovating to meet the needs of defenders facing ongoing and new threats in the unprecedented context of conflict, economic and climate crises, the expansion of digital surveillance, the burgeoning far right and anti-rights movements, and the continued impact of corporate extractivism.

Many developments in this Strategic Plan are focused more on strengthening what we do and how we do it rather than introducing new areas of work. We are aiming to deepen our approach and provide more effective support. In particular, we will strengthen our intersectional approach, with a focus on gender, race and disability to ensure we reach and are accessible to those most at risk. We will adapt our programmes and support to further strengthen our focus on collective protection as well as individual protection. We will continue to find ways to provide fast and effective protection support in the most challenging contexts, and we will advance our planning for and learning from various crisis contexts.

We will continue to focus on supporting HRDs most at risk across all regions and building strong relationships of trust. We will also build and strengthen our support to groups of HRDs who we know face specific risks. This includes support to women human rights defenders, LGBTQI+ defenders, and land/ indigenous/ environmental defenders. We will also strengthen and adapt our support and understanding of risks to HRDs with disability, social movements, and HRDs on the move. We also recognise that providing protection support and legitimacy to new and emerging groups of HRDs, who don't necessarily identify as such, is an important added value of our work. We will deliver the plan in close coordination with key partners and continue to develop strong partnerships where needed.

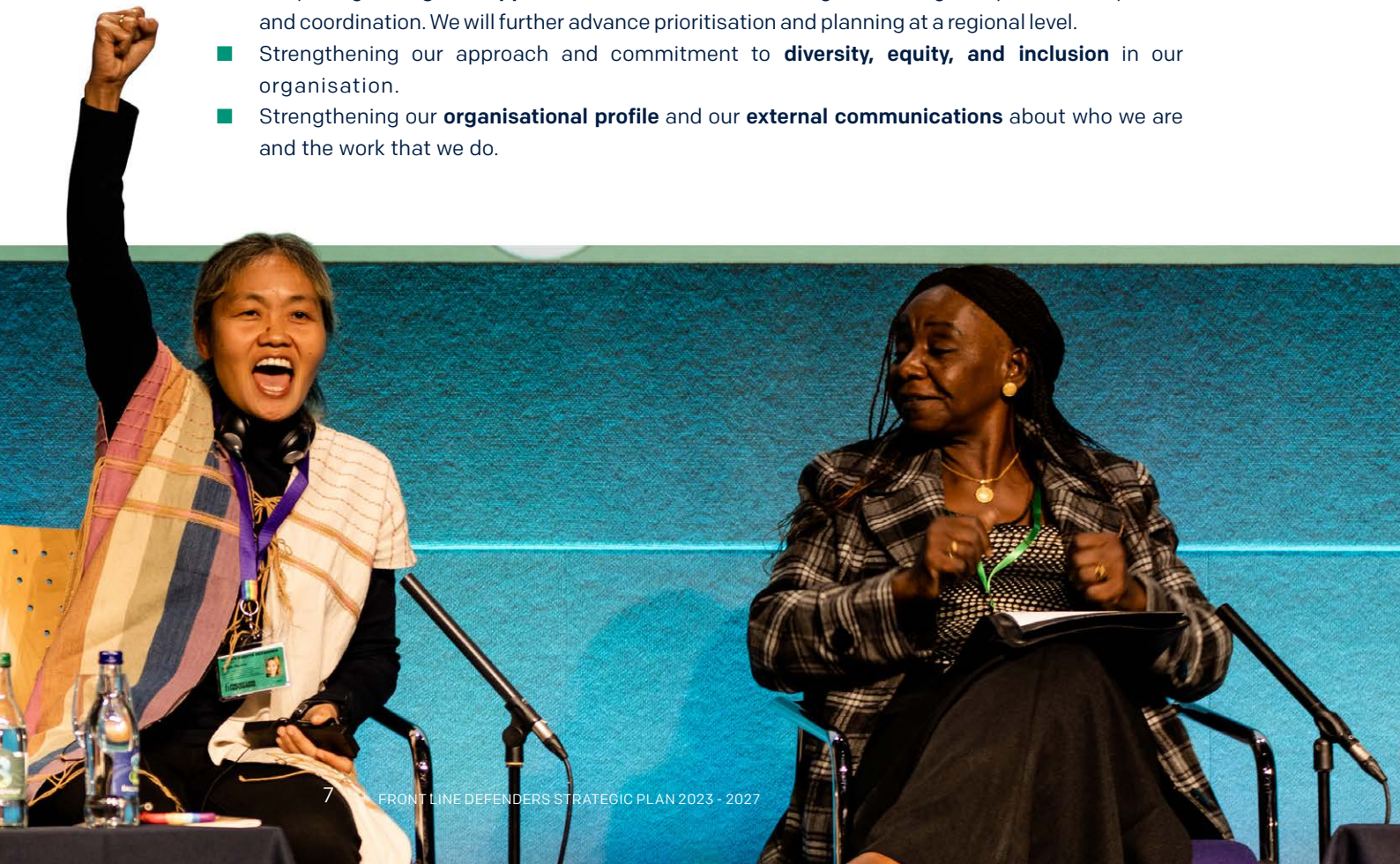


## SOME OF THE **KEY AREAS** WE WILL AIM TO DEVELOP OR STRENGTHEN INCLUDE:

- **Increasing our focus on supporting HRDs to strengthen resilience and diversifying and expanding ways to deal with stress and trauma.** This will include developing a well-being strategy to demonstrate our commitment to well-being and to develop a common understanding of the support we can provide. We will increase our resources and capacity to enable us to strengthen our response to the well-being needs of HRDs.
- Increasing our focus on **strengthening local protection capacity.** This will include building on the support we provide through training of trainers, support to local Digital Protection Champions, and support to local civil society protection mechanisms, initiatives and organisations. We will provide strategic funding to strengthen local protection eco-systems.
- Initiating more **cross-regional learning opportunities for HRDs.** This will include co-creating and convening more spaces at regional level for HRDs to exchange ideas and facilitate cross-regional learning opportunities for HRDs focused on specific threats, contexts and protection issues.
- Developing further our **advocacy and policy work** –at EU/UN/US, at regional levels, and on specific thematic areas - gender, business and human rights, killings of HRDs, digital protection and securitisation/counter-terrorism.
- **Developing further visibility and communications strategies** that contribute towards countering negative narratives of HRDs. We will also focus more on research as a strategy **for protection of HRDs**, including a focus on investigations into attacks on specific groups, using research to visibilise the protection needs of marginalised groups and evidence-based advocacy.

At an organisational level we will continue to invest in developing Front Line Defenders as an effective, sustainable, people-focused, and accountable organisation. **Some key developments to strengthen the organisation include:**

- Deepening our **regional approach.** We will continue to strengthen our regional presence, expertise and coordination. We will further advance prioritisation and planning at a regional level.
- Strengthening our approach and commitment to **diversity, equity, and inclusion** in our organisation.
- Strengthening our **organisational profile** and our **external communications** about who we are and the work that we do.



# 3. SUMMARY OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN .....

## VISION

Human rights defenders are recognised and supported as essential actors in defending and advancing human rights, and bringing about positive change in society.



## MISSION

To support and enable the protection of human rights defenders who are at risk as a result of their human rights work.



## VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

- We are focused
- We demonstrate respect
- We demonstrate perseverance

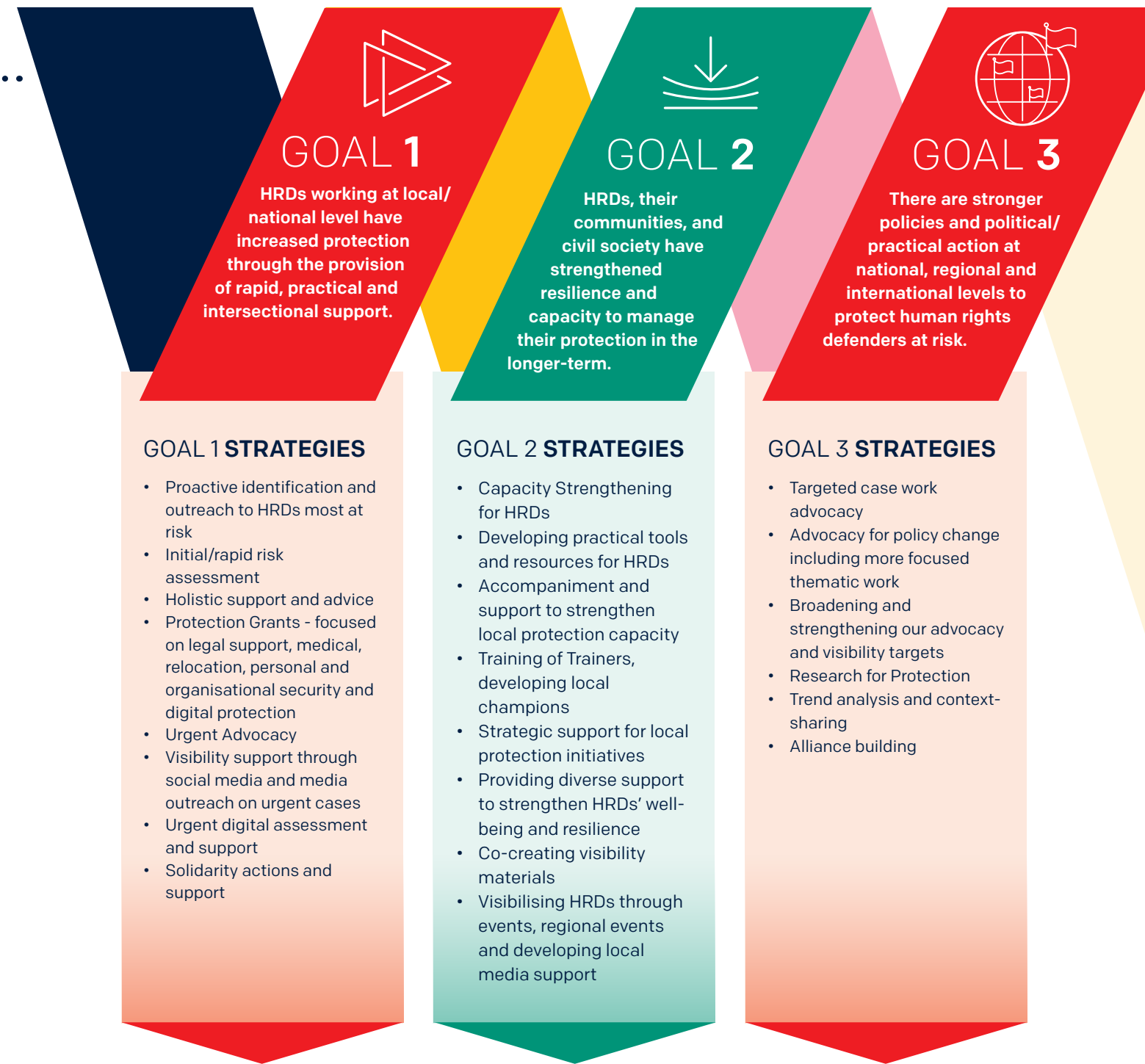


## APPROACH

- HRD-driven
- Holistic Protection
- Intersectional Approach
- Individual and Collective Protection
- Eco-system Approach







## FRONT LINE DEFENDERS AS AN ORGANISATION





## 4. EXTERNAL CONTEXT

HRDs continue to lead creative and successful movements. As a result, they face an increasing backlash for their peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

A complex and unprecedented landscape for human rights defence lies ahead with many challenges, including a sustained, well-resourced and concerted repressive strategy by authoritarian governments to target HRDs, a weak defence of human rights from some democratic governments, and the further erosion of human rights protections in some of those countries. Civic space restrictions, conflict and crises, climate change, technological threats, rising authoritarianism and anti-gender policies will all significantly affect the work, safety and well-being of human rights defenders. Covid-19 has had and will continue to have economic, social, organisational, psychosocial and physical impacts on defenders.

Opportunities also present themselves with growing mobilisation and increased solidarity in opposition to issues such as kleptocracy, inequality, anti-gender policies, and climate change. New networks and initiatives are being formed across sectors and across issues e.g. antiwar feminist movements. There is a growing number of local and regional initiatives focused on protection. There are new opportunities to engage with and influence new and emerging actors and protection mechanisms/policies through advocacy, policy and operational work. There is also increased acknowledgement and growing understanding of digital protection risks and an acceptance of well-being as a critical part of holistic security.

This Strategic Plan will be delivered in the next five years in a way that can be adapted to an ever-evolving and changing external context. **Key trends** identified that will shape our work and support to HRDs during the course of this Strategic Plan include the following:

## CONTINUED RISE OF **CORRUPT, POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM** WHICH SPECIFICALLY TARGETS THE RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The concerning trend towards authoritarianism and nationalism has grown in certain democracies, while well-established authoritarian regimes have been emboldened to clamp down further on their societies. Corruption and impunity continue to be factors that contribute to enabling attacks and threats against HRDs, and those HRDs that work on these issues face significant risks as a result.

Deliberate and well-resourced strategies to develop a negative narrative on human rights, and to smear, restrict and repress human rights defenders and independent media are an important part of the autocrat's playbook and are used as measures to secure and hold on to power.

International human rights institutions are facing unprecedented challenges, with states withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from international fora, and increasing instances of reprisals against HRDs for testifying in front of regional or international institutions.

Emerging powers are changing the global balance of power, altering the character of international institutions and world order.

## CONFLICT, ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL **CRISES**

HRDs will be negatively impacted by further economic crises. Cost of living, food, fuel and housing crises will all impact the livelihoods and economic security of HRDs, and likely lead to a diversion of attention and resources away from an already underfunded human rights ecosystem. Economic crises will also continue to increase social mobilisations and bring along associated risks for defenders.

Large-scale and ongoing conflicts and crises will continue to have an impact on communities and civil society across all regions. For many HRDs, their work and risks often change with an increased focus on humanitarian activities and needs. HRDs in occupied territories or active conflict areas face an additional set of risks and challenges. Large numbers of communities and HRDs are also often forced to relocate, leading to upsurges in the number of HRDs on the move. HRDs are often left in limbo with limited options to continue their work, and for temporary third country relocation, and longer term solutions for themselves and their families.

The climate crisis will be a defining issue for civic space during the course of this Strategic Plan and will have a seismic impact on security across all regions and across a range of HRDs. The climate crisis will continue to increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing social, economic and environmental factors, especially in vulnerable communities and regions, leading to increased displacement and political crises, all of which will have a profound impact on HRDs.

HRDs challenging states and other actors to respond adequately and transparently to the impact of climate change, the climate justice movement, and social mobilisation will continue to increase, with youth defenders and indigenous communities likely to be at the forefront of the struggle. Land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights will likely remain the most dangerous sector of human rights defence due to the profit-driven exploitation of natural resources, combined with rampant corruption, weak . . . governments and systemic poverty.



**PROTEST IN PARIS TO CALL FOR THE RELEASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN LONG-TERM IMPRISONMENT, OCTOBER 2018**

## **INCREASED RESTRICTIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS WORK**

Over the course of the past four years, dozens of pieces of legislation further narrowing civil society space were passed by governments around the world. Covid-19 allowed for the introduction of rafts of legislation which further curbed freedom of assembly and association. The use of restrictive legislation, counter-terrorism and national security policies and powers are some of the most politically expedient tools available to governments that want to demonise and criminalise HRD activities. Authorities shift and transform what constitutes terrorist activity to suit a wide array of political purposes, and to criminalise HRDs working on a range of rights areas including land, environment, self-determination, women's rights, anti-torture, refugee and migrants' rights and indigenous peoples' rights.

Policies of delegitimising and isolating HRDs are also being implemented across all regions. Defamation, smear campaigns, hate speech, online violence, stigmatisation and other attacks on the identity, public image, credibility and reputation of HRDs are increasingly used. HRDs are isolated through restrictions on movement and travel, along with other insidious ways of dividing civil society and communities. Internet shutdowns, cyber attacks and limiting access to information are tactics increasingly used to isolate HRDs and threaten their work. Restricting access to funding and barriers to transferring funds have also become a key threat to HRD livelihoods, their ability to continue their work and their protection.

## ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

Non-state actors including businesses (domestic and transnational), tech companies and financial institutions continue to play an important role in the nexus of threats and violence against HRDs. There have been increasing reports of threats towards defenders working on business-related human rights abuses in recent years, particularly in the context of extractive, agribusiness, energy and development projects, with land, environmental and indigenous defenders at particular risk. Company complicity in these attacks, and the complacency of businesses and financial institutions in tackling abuses linked to their investments and value chains make them an important advocacy target. The vast majority of online threats to defenders and smear campaigns which can result in physical harm are carried out on a handful of well-known social media platforms, yet the corporations which operate the platforms have failed to adequately tackle this phenomenon. HRDs in many regions continue to experience threats and attacks from paramilitaries and criminal organisations, including cartels whose vested interests are threatened by the work of HRDs.

## GROWING THREAT OF SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance technology is increasingly used to target HRDs, to infiltrate their networks, get access to their information and contacts, and dissuade them from continuing their human rights work. Targeted surveillance has particular negative effects on the well-being of women human rights defenders, as authorities exploit gendered, political and social power structures to dox, defame and blackmail them, by publishing private conversations and intimate photos taken from women human rights defenders' (WHRDs) devices.

### WOMEN IN MEXICO CITY MARCH TO DEMAND JUSTICE ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, 8 MARCH 2022



## **THE PROFILE OF HRDS IS EXPANDING AND EVOLVING**

Over the last four years the understanding of who is a HRD further evolved as the illiberal pushback on certain rights continued. New groups of defenders are emerging, who may not automatically self-identify as such or be recognised as such, including climate activists, humanitarian workers, refugee and migrants' rights defenders, anti-corruption activists, sex worker rights defenders and communities engaged in collective struggles to defend land, environmental and social and cultural rights. Other groups who may not have been traditionally considered HRDs are de facto becoming defenders partially as a result of the deteriorating space in which they work, e.g. health rights defenders.

HRDs are increasingly playing important roles in protest movements worldwide ranging from organising and mobilising to monitoring and documenting human rights violations arising from the repression of protests and to assisting those who were injured or arrested. The role of women in organising, strategising and leading many of these protests has been especially apparent and they have been at the forefront of significant victories.

In some contexts and in some social movements there has been a strategic shift to leaderless movements. Young protesters have also played a pivotal role in organising and calling for change. In many contexts, finding effective models of funding and support for informal groups of HRDs remains a challenge.

## **INCREASED THREAT FROM FAR RIGHT AND ANTI-RIGHTS MOVEMENTS**

This threat has been particularly exacerbated for traditionally discriminated groups. Pushback against women's rights and the LGBTQI+ movement, whose risks and challenges involve many layers of intersectionality, is occurring in every region of the world. Despite significant gains and the growth of WHRD movements, women's rights are still heavily contested and the far right will continue to challenge these rights in the coming years. LGBTQI+ movements continue to grow stronger but face increasingly sophisticated backlash from existing and new anti-rights and conservative actors.

Racist policing, race-based nationalism, xenophobia, anti-refugee and anti-migrant rhetoric and other intersecting themes are critically linked to HRD security, and underpin a wide range of violent attacks on both individual HRDs and the political activism of racialised groups, especially Black and Afro-descendent communities.

## **EXPANDED ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT FOR PROTECTION WORK**

The ecosystem of support for protection work has evolved in the last four years, with many positive trends including some progress on HRD protection laws in a number of countries, regional civil society protection mechanisms and hubs, increased coordination among organisations working at international and regional levels, and the emergence of more (W)HRD networks. More guidelines and initiatives for the protection of HRDs are being developed. However, in parallel a number of National Protection Mechanisms have also seen reduced funding and/or diminished effectiveness.



# 5. WHO WE ARE

## ABOUT FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

Front Line Defenders was founded in 2001 with the aim of protecting human rights defenders at risk, people who work, non-violently, for any or all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and subsequent covenants and treaties addressing and specifying rights.

Front Line Defenders is an international organisation with a global reach. We have a regional presence to support HRDs at risk across all regions. We recognise and value the importance of contextualising our support.

Front Line Defenders was founded and has its head office based in Ireland. We also have an office focused on advocacy in Brussels.



**OUR VISION:** Human rights defenders are recognised and supported as essential actors in defending and advancing human rights, and bringing about positive change in society.



**OUR MISSION:** To support and enable the protection of human rights defenders who are at risk as a result of their human rights work.



**OUR VALUES AND PRINCIPLES:** Front Line Defenders was founded with a clear and ambitious mandate to provide practical support to HRDs who are most at risk. Our values and principles are the fundamental beliefs and principles that underpin the strategic direction of the organisation, the work we do, and how we do it.

- **We are focused:** In a complex global context, remaining focused as an organisation on our core mandate - protection of HRDs at risk - is our strength. The organisation is built on a foundation of the primacy and centrality of defenders and being fast, flexible and agile in its support. We will remain focused on responding to the needs expressed by HRDs.
- **We demonstrate respect:** Our work is built on profound respect for HRDs, for the work that they do, their courage and their knowledge. We respect the leading role of local civil society in their own contexts. We recognise that listening with empathy to HRDs and understanding the situations they are in is key to providing effective protection support. We demonstrate humility in the role that we have in supporting them.
- **We demonstrate perseverance:** We will continue to find ways to provide meaningful support and be present to HRDs facing the most difficult circumstances and at most risk. In many cases this means finding creative solutions, innovating and being brave in our decision making. We also appreciate the importance of continued solidarity as a key element of protection support. We will continue to show determination to hold those in power to account.

To achieve this Strategic Plan we need to build, strengthen and invest in our **organisational culture** rooted in these values. We will respect each other as colleagues and value the expertise, experience and background that all colleagues bring to the organisation as well as the specific responsibilities that they undertake. We recognise the importance of diversity in the organisation and commit to addressing barriers to inclusion and participation. We know that to achieve impact we need to strengthen our collaboration, be accountable to each other, and communicate effectively. We will build a culture of reflection and encourage creativity. We will celebrate our achievements, and learn and adapt when things don't go well. We acknowledge that doing this work is challenging and to pursue our vision we need to strengthen our support and empathy for each other.







## OUR APPROACH

In this strategic plan we are putting more emphasis on our approach to protection support.

**HRD-driven:** Key to our approach to protection is putting HRDs' experiences of risk at the centre of our support; supporting HRDs to assess the risks that they face and allowing HRDs to define their own needs; providing support that is flexible and having the organisational ability to adapt and customise our support to individual and collective needs. Building trusted relationships is central to our approach to support. Many HRDs and communities have their own strategies for protection, which we learn from and build on. We recognise that protection is not linear – needs and risks of HRDs evolve in different ways and at different times. While we aim to maintain consistency, we also aim to be flexible to the particular needs of the defender, the risks they face and their context.

Being HRD-driven also means that we ensure that we **do no harm**. We strive to ensure that the support that we provide does not add to or increase risks for the HRDs, their families and communities we support. We aim to be continuously mindful of the potential risks of harm we may bring, and exercise caution, sensitivity and good judgement at all times. We also respect the importance of informed consent and confidentiality. The security of data, visibility strategies, transfer of funds, ensuring our support does not divide communities, and ensuring inclusivity and consideration of groups that have been historically discriminated such as women, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQI+ are particularly important areas that we consider carefully.

A key element of our approach is also to **support HRDs globally**. We recognise the importance of being accessible and we are well positioned to support HRDs working across all regions. We have a strong and diverse network of over 15,000 HRDs upon which to build our support and we have worked to support HRDs in over 150 countries in the previous Strategic Plan.

**Holistic protection:** Since the organisation's inception, we have always recognised that risks and threats are multifaceted, and that often multiple interventions/ areas of support/ ways of assessing risks are needed to strengthen security, bring about change, and have a long-term impact on HRD protection. Elements of personal security, physical security, legal security, digital security, well-being and stress management, visibility, solidarity, advocacy and organisational security are core elements of the support that we provide. We recognise there are many other elements of risk that fall outside our capacity and mandate and that linking and referring HRDs with others is also often crucial for their needs. We provide support that is reactive to immediate threats and also support that is preventative, or focused on resilience and capacity strengthening. Over the course of this Strategic Plan we will strengthen our approach to holistic protection, learning and documenting good practise, and we will create more opportunities for cross-team training and shared learning within the organisation.

**Individual and collective protection:** While individual protection will continue to be a key focus for us, we know that effective protection comes firstly from families, communities, collectives, movements and local networks of support. We know that it takes groups of HRDs, social movements, and communities to make change happen, and that the rights HRDs are fighting for are often collective rights or require collective strategies. The risks associated with taking action are often shared risks.

During the course of this Strategic Plan we will continue to support the protection needs of individual human rights defenders, based on the level of risk and the needs expressed by HRDs, whilst further strengthening our approach to collective protection, and we will ensure that our protection work can be adapted to supporting collective strategies. This includes finding ways to strengthen collective protection capacity and mechanisms; supporting communities, networks, social movements and groups of HRDs to strengthen their connectivity; and increasing visibility for communities of HRDs. We recognise that collective protection is particularly important for HRDs working within social movements as well as for indigenous peoples' rights defenders, LGBTQI+ HRDs, WHRDs and HRDs working on labour rights. We also recognise that we need to better adapt our support to HRDs working in the context of collective protest movements.

**Intersectional approach:** To provide effective support and protection we need to analyse the intersection of risk with the various and multiple identities of HRDs including gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, class, economic status, immigration status and age. Risk and the capacity to access protection support relate to both their work and identity/ies. Ensuring our support is aligned to HRD needs is a process that requires an intersectional approach. Building trust, listening, asking the right questions and flexibility to provide a variety of protection measures are key to our support.

During the course of this Strategic Plan we will sharpen our 'lens' and provide tailored protection support. Priorities will include: increasing our outreach to particular groups of defenders (in particular HRDs with disability, transgender HRDs, and land/environmental/indigenous rights HRDs), increasing our understanding of the nuanced risks for particular groups of HRDs and continually developing our thinking on what constitutes a risk; strengthening the accessibility of our support; strengthening how we communicate our work from an intersectional perspective; strengthening learning and analysis of the support we provide; building knowledge and capacity internally.

We also acknowledge and are conscious of the power dynamics and privilege that comes with being an international organisation based in Europe and the Global North. We recognise the importance of addressing and overcoming barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion in the support that we provide and to ensure the organisation is truly representative of our global mandate and values.

**Ecosystem approach:** Our work fits within an ecosystem of protection support at a local, national, regional and international level. We will remain thoughtful about how we can learn from, strengthen and add value to this ecosystem. We are also conscious that there are limits to our mandate and where it has added value we need to build bigger alliances of support for HRDs. We also know that we need to continue to build our network and diversify our contacts in order for verification processes to be effective.

At an international level we will continue to be the lead organisation of ProtectDefenders.eu and an active member of other consortia such as Lifeline Embattled CSO fund, Digital Defenders Partnership, Defenders in Development, and HRD Memorial Project. As part of this Strategic Plan some key priorities will include strengthening our support to locally-led protection mechanisms, sharing our data and analysis more effectively, and strengthening strategic partnerships for referrals including specialist support (e.g. organisations focused on legal support, psychosocial support, resettlement) and strengthening our outreach (disability, transrights, environmental rights organisations). FLD also collaborates closely with governments and foundations as donors and as key allies in supporting the protection of HRDs. We will aim to be a reliable partner, sharing information and knowledge with others.



## WHO WE SUPPORT

We will continue to focus on supporting HRDs who are most at risk and we will remain responsive to HRDs facing risks globally. HRDs work in diverse contexts and on diverse issues – we intentionally take a broad and context-sensitive perspective of who is a human rights defender. Proving protection support and legitimacy to new and emerging groups of HRDs is an important added value of our work.

We know that the risks HRDs face are impacted by many factors including: governance; elections; conflict; corruption; geography; issues they are working on; gender; race; class; disability; religion etc. Identifying the groups of HRDs for whom we need to strengthen our outreach and support will be determined by our regional context analysis. However at an organisational level we will aim to strengthen our support to a number of groups of HRDs that we are conscious face specific risks. These include:

- **WHRDs:** We will continue to put the gendered dimensions of risk and gender based violence at the forefront of our work and develop gender-responsive protection measures for women human rights defenders. This will include strengthening the legitimacy and recognition of groups of women HRDs, e.g. mothers of the disappeared, Sex Worker Rights Defenders, women refugee and migrant rights defenders and the role of WHRDs within broader movements. We will facilitate more WHRD-specific spaces and we will embed the recognition of care labour in our activities. We will develop a more strategic approach to supporting HRDs working on issues related to health, sexual and reproductive rights, and we will build our knowledge through partnerships with feminist organisations.
- **LGBTQI+:** We will be better at unpacking the different needs of lesbian, gay, trans, queer and intersex defenders and develop a more nuanced understanding of the risks that they face. In particular we will strengthen our outreach to trans defenders. We will build on the learning

from our research focused on LGBTQI+ and Sex Workers Rights Defenders (2020 and 2021). We will ensure our internal processes/procedures and how we communicate our work is gender-affirming. We will facilitate more gender-specific spaces and build our knowledge through partnerships with LGBTQI+ focused organisations.

- **Land/Environmental/Indigenous rights defenders:** We will focus on the risks faced by land, environmental and indigenous rights defenders and develop further our collective protection approach to prevent and respond to the threats that they face. We will build on local knowledge of traditional protection practises. We will continue to adapt our support for HRDs that are rurally based, have limited access to electricity and internet, and have diverse language needs. We will focus more on the intersection of land, environment, indigenous rights defenders and their important role in mitigating the threats of climate change. We will strengthen our outreach and increase our protection support to climate and environmental HRDs. We will also build on current work focused on businesses, development-financing institutions, and private sector actors as perpetrators or enablers of attacks against these defenders.
- **HRDs with disability:** We will build our knowledge of the risks faced by HRDs with disability and those working on disability rights, acknowledging their specific needs and the barriers to accessing support. We will track and grow the support that we provide. We will ensure HRDs with disabilities have access to all of our programmes. We will develop our knowledge of assistive technologies, ensuring information about our programmes is in accessible formats and ensure that HRDs with disability can meaningfully participate in all of our programmes. We will build our knowledge through partnerships with disability-focused organisations.
- **Social movements:** Social movements in urban settings, rural and indigenous communities, anti-racism, women's, LGBTQI+ and youth movements have been key to promoting transformative social change and to responding to the needs of communities. During this Strategic Plan we will more proactively work with, support and collaborate with social movements and grass roots organisations and networks. We will adapt our support, seek to innovate as needed and think more strategically about how and where these group of HRDs claim their rights, their resistance strategies and the risks they face e.g. protests, online actions, community organizing. We will continue to learn from these groups and develop further collective protection responses.
- **HRDs on the move:** We recognise that HRDs are forced to leave their home countries for multiple and varied reasons, including the extremity of the risks and persecution they face, armed conflict, and economic insecurity. While we will continue to focus most of our resources and attention on HRDs who are working to promote human rights in their own country, we recognise that HRDs on the move often continue to be at high risk and have complex and particular needs, including long-term solutions. We appreciate and recognise that in some cases HRDs also continue to do important human rights work after leaving their home country. During this Strategic Plan we will learn from our current work focused on support to HRDs on the move including resettlement and other visa programmes for refugee HRDs, and build on our knowledge and experience of humanitarian visas and relocation hubs. We will further unpack and make distinctions between different groups of HRDs on the move in order to help us better understand the risks particular to them, identify our added-value, and prioritise support to those HRDs at risk in ways that align with our mandate, strategy, and resource/capacity limits. We will also continue to build relationships and partnerships with those actors in the protection eco-system that can provide both emergency and long-term support to HRDs on the move who continue to be at risk.

# 6. WHAT WE AIM TO ACHIEVE



**IMPACT:** HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARE RECOGNISED AND SUPPORTED AS ESSENTIAL ACTORS IN DEFENDING AND ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS, AND BRINGING ABOUT POSITIVE CHANGE IN SOCIETY

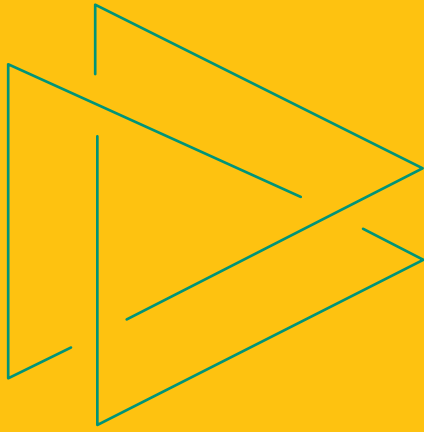
We believe that HRDs working at the local and national level play the most important role in protecting human rights and bringing about positive change for their societies and communities. HRDs in many contexts face significant risks as a result of their work.

We believe international support can add value through providing fast, flexible and needs-based support to strengthen the capacity of HRDs and their communities to manage the risks they face as a result of their work and enable them to continue their work.

We believe that achieving impact requires strategies that respond to immediate risks in an urgent way, strategies that build longer-term capacities for HRDs, organisations, communities/networks and civil society, and strategies that change policy and practice to strengthen the protection of HRDs.

We will remain focused on supporting HRDs that face immediate risk. However we know that in many cases eliminating risk is not possible and in this strategic plan we will put greater emphasis on strengthening resilience and capacity to manage risks.





# GOAL 1

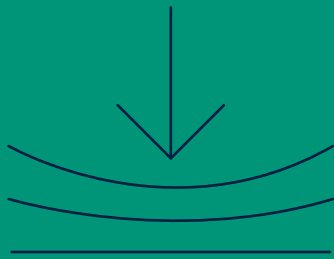
**HRDS WORKING AT LOCAL/NATIONAL LEVEL HAVE INCREASED PROTECTION THROUGH THE PROVISION OF RAPID, PRACTICAL AND INTERSECTIONAL SUPPORT**

**We will contribute to this goal using the following strategies:**

- Initial/rapid risk assessment
- Holistic support and advice
- Protection Grants - focused on legal support, medical, relocation, personal and organisational security and digital protection
- Urgent Advocacy
- Visibility support through social media and media outreach on urgent cases
- Urgent digital assessment and support
- Solidarity actions and support

We will also aim to strengthen our support to HRDs through the following **Strategic Priorities:**

- **Strengthening accessibility and outreach:** Continue to develop ways that HRDs can reach us, strengthen our accessibility from language, race, and disability perspectives. Refocus our efforts on face-to-face support to strengthen our outreach and network. Utilise more structured research for mapping and analysing gaps in our support to HRDs.
- **Developing our approach to emergency 'triage':** Further develop our intersectional approach to risk assessment. Develop a shared methodology for emergency risk assessment and explore new ways to provide 24-hour support in a sustainable way. Continue to develop our holistic response to the urgent needs of HRDs, including strengthening our regionally-based digital protection support, developing capacity and partnerships to respond to well-being/psychosocial support in urgent cases for HRDs, and visibility support through social media and media outreach on urgent cases.
- **Continuing to develop and grow our Protection Grants Programme as a key flagship programme for the organisation.** Continue to develop and explore more options for safe and effective ways of transferring funds in increasingly restrictive environments. Continue to learn, develop and share best practise on emergency grant support.
- **Strengthening further our case work:** Highlighting more flexibility in our Urgent Advocacy responses (urgent appeals, statements, private letters, visibility and social media strategies). Developing more strategies tailored at national and local levels, including continuing to explore advocacy targetting non-state actors. Where feasible, provide more follow-up on ongoing cases.
- **Developing/strengthening strategies to respond to specific trends and threats highlighted through our data and analysis:** Mapping effective strategies to respond to criminalisation, death threats/killings, business-related retaliation, and defamation as increasing threats for HRDs.
- **Strengthening our planning for and learning from crisis contexts:** Strengthen our approach to scenario planning and foresight thinking together with others (e.g. prepositioning visas, preparing for internet shutdowns, building key relationships with embassies, exploring options for transferring funding, raising alert of signs of crisis, strengthening capacity of HRDs). Develop flexible capacity, funding and internal guidance for responding in crises. Continue to learn from experience of finding flexible ways, rooted in HRD contexts, to support HRDs most at risk during crises.



# GOAL 2

HRDs, THEIR COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY HAVE STRENGTHENED RESILIENCE AND CAPACITY TO MANAGE THEIR PROTECTION IN THE LONGER-TERM

We will contribute to this goal using the following strategies:

Capacity Strengthening for HRDs focused on Risk Assessment and Protection Planning, Digital Protection, Physical Security, Visibility for Protection, Advocacy	Developing practical tools and resources for HRDs	Accompaniment and support to strengthen local protection capacity - Training of Trainers, developing local champions, strategic support for local protection initiatives	Providing diverse support to strengthen HRDs' well-being and resilience - Grants, Rest and Respite, Consultations, Referrals, strengthening capacity and networks for psychosocial/professional support for HRDs	Co-creating visibility materials to counter negative narratives and promote positive narratives of HRDs	Visibilising HRDs through FLD events, regional events and developing local media support e.g. the FLD Award, Dublin Arts and Human Rights Festival
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We will also aim to strengthen our support to HRDs through the following **Strategic Priorities**:

- **Develop more tailored capacity strengthening support:** Develop trainings/consultations in some new or more specific areas tailored to the needs and risks faced by HRDs – e.g. advocacy, focused on a specific threat or protection strategies (protests, defamation and online). Continue to deliver our capacity support in diverse ways that best meets the needs of HRDs - one-to-one consultations, group consultations, workshops, online/offline – (applying learning from the Covid-19 pandemic). Develop context/issue-focused resources/guidelines for HRDs highlighting best-practice e.g. Digital Protection Resources and Guides (eg. Security-in-a-box). Develop a cohesive approach across our capacity strengthening support. Facilitate more gender-specific spaces for HRDs and develop more gender-specific tools and guides. Ensure that HRDs with disability can meaningfully participate in physical and virtual workshops and consultations.
- **Increasing our focus on supporting HRDs to strengthen resilience and diversifying and expanding ways to deal with stress and trauma:** Develop a well-being strategy to demonstrate our commitment to well-being and to develop a common understanding of the support we can provide. Increase our resources and capacity to enable us to strengthen our response to the well-being needs of HRDs. Ensure a diversification of the well-being support we provide rooted in what well-being means to HRDs and in their local context, and when relevant adapt our support to a collective approach to well-being.
- **Expand and strengthen our support to local ecosystems for protection:** Provide increased follow-up and more strategic and sustained support and mentoring to local protection champions/ToT participants. Utilise protection grants to strategically support capacity strengthening and resilience building strategies at a local level. e.g. for visibility, supporting network building, and local training. Strengthen our support and coordination with local, national and regional civil society protection mechanisms/organisations/networks. Establish funding for strategic support to HRDs/organisations leading local protection initiatives e.g. safe houses, organisations or networks providing protection support, local spaces for reflection and knowledge-building.
- **Initiate more cross-regional learning opportunities for HRDs:** Continue to deliver the Dublin Platform as a key opportunity for HRDs to come together and to share experiences. Convene and co-create more spaces at a regional level for HRDs to exchange ideas and facilitate cross-regional learning opportunities for HRDs focused on specific threats, contexts, protection issues.
- **Develop further visibility for protection strategies for HRDs:** Explore more opportunities for the strategic use of visibility and communications for HRD protection. Deploy storytelling strategies to change and reconstruct narratives of human rights and HRDs. Focus on visibilising marginalised groups of HRDs and building positive narratives on the work and impact of HRDs. Co-develop strategic communications materials with HRDs such as comics, calendars, podcasts, videos, etc. on key cases where solidarity, memory, recognition and visibility can play a crucial protection role (cases of criminalisation, smearing, division in the movement, contested false narratives, etc). Strengthen our capacities and resources to confront visibility-related threats to HRDs. Developing and nurturing relationships with key media outlets or journalists so as to contribute towards building positive narratives of HRDs.



# GOAL 3

THERE IS STRONGER POLITICAL ACTION AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK

We will contribute to this goal using the following strategies:

Targeted case work advocacy

Advocacy for policy change including more focused thematic work

Broadening and strengthening our advocacy and visibility targets

Research for Protection

Trend analysis and context-sharing

Alliance building

We will also aim to strengthen our support to HRDs through the following **Strategic Priorities:**

- **Maintain our focus on HRDs at risk in our advocacy work:** Continue to put HRDs at risk at the core of all of our advocacy work and ensure regular follow up at both the national and international levels. Create more space for HRDs to advocate directly for their issues by connecting them with relevant advocacy targets both in country and abroad. Create opportunities for their participation in international meetings enabling them to engage a diverse range of advocacy targets. Continue to strengthen our support to emblematic long-term HRD cases through our advocacy and campaigning work on long-term imprisonment and business and human rights.
- **Broaden and strengthen our advocacy targets and outreach at the national, regional and international levels with governments, inter-governmental organisations and other relevant stakeholders:** While building upon established bilateral engagement with the EU and its member states, Norway, Switzerland and more recent outreach in the US and Canada, develop focused advocacy strategies at national, regional and international levels to influence key actors and explore engagement with non-western countries as allies and influencers. Continue to support and engage the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs and increase outreach to other relevant UN mandates and mechanisms. Identify strategic opportunities to engage the UN's Human Rights Council, UN Third Committee and the Security Council around HRD protection. Develop and test strategies to effectively engage strengthened regional mechanisms for the protection of HRDs.
- **Continue to build corporate accountability work:** Continue to conduct focused advocacy on binding business and human rights legislation including on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence. Maintain and develop our advocacy towards International Finance Institutions including through close collaboration with the Defenders in Development campaign. Build on the work of our digital protection team to develop focused advocacy targeting the technology sector including social media platforms and surveillance technology companies. Explore new tactics to target and hold accountable corporate actors including for example in relation to the green energy transition.
- **Maintain focus on pressing for effective implementation of policies in support of HRDs at risk, including stronger policy, protection and funding mechanisms:** Continue to advocate for stronger implementation of the EU Guidelines on the Protection of HRDs and other similar guidelines and initiatives, including in the private sector. Utilise casework to build strong evidence to change policy by producing regular analyses to be shared with relevant advocacy targets.
- **Build longer-term, more focused thematic advocacy work:** Focus on gender, business and human rights, killings, digital protection, and securitisation/counter-terrorism. Pursue targeted advocacy strategies for each theme identifying key targets and opportunities including policy initiatives. Engage where relevant with local and international coalitions and networks to support this work.
- **Develop more focused advocacy strategies for specific country contexts:** Determined through regional context analysis, create strategies for sustained national, regional and international advocacy on certain country contexts. Where relevant and it adds value, work more on the development and/or implementation of protection laws and national protection mechanisms in a specific and targeted way.
- **Communicate the needs of HRDs and influence donors:** Focus specifically on the needs of HRDs in specific crisis contexts, forgotten crises, marginalised HRDs and conduct advocacy for effective funding models and enabling protection support for HRDs.
- **Develop a more focused communications strategy on the role of HRDs:** Focus on strengthening our messaging and communications on the role of HRDs in bringing about positive change in their societies and the key role that HRDs play in addressing e.g. injustice, inequality, corruption, climate change, and promoting a broader understanding of who HRDs are and why their protection is important.
- **Utilise further research as a strategy for protection of HRDs.** Including focusing on: investigations into attacks on specific groups; using research to visibilise the protection needs of marginalised groups and to provide evidence to support advocacy; thought-leadership on new conceptualisations of risk and protection of HRDs; mapping and trends analysis. Develop a consistent research methodology, which is HRD-led and protection-centred across all our research work.





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## 7. DEVELOPING FRONT LINE DEFENDERS AS AN ORGANISATION

**We will continue to develop Front Line Defenders as an organisation** to strengthen our impact and ensure we can meet the needs of HRDs in the challenging global context. To achieve this we will focus on organisational effectiveness, sustainability, and ensuring that we are a diverse, inclusive and people-centred organisation. We also recognise and appreciate the huge trust that is placed in us by human rights defenders, donors, supporters and the wider human rights sector, and we will demonstrate the highest standards of governance and accountability. We will be honest, open and transparent in the decisions we make and use our resources responsibly.



### TO STRENGTHEN OUR **EFFECTIVENESS** WE WILL:

- **Further develop our regional approach:** Continue to strengthen our regional presence, expertise and coordination. Further advance prioritisation and planning at a regional level focused on the implementation of the global Strategic Plan. Build on experience from Protection Partnerships and country-focused projects to strengthen strategic, coordinated and sustainable responses in specific contexts. Cultivate the leadership role of the Protection Team.

- **Strengthen internal communications:** Develop and invest in effective internal communications and collaboration tools and processes to enable us to work securely, effectively and efficiently. Develop proactive and creative ways to foster better connections and relationships within our matrix structure (programmes and regions), across the organisation, and across time zones. Build and re-affirm our culture, ethos and values through internal communications. Review our spaces for planning and learning, both in person and on-line to maximise the use of our resources.
- **Enhance organisational leadership:** Continue to develop the role of the Management Team with a focus on resource allocation, prioritisation and problem solving. More broadly build leadership capacity within the organisation and cultivate a leadership culture focused on accountability and collaboration. Ensure there is diversity and inclusion in our management and leadership structures.
- **Invest in effective data management:** Further develop the database as a key tool to support organisational decision making, coordination and analysis of our work. Utilise our data better, in conjunction with others, to highlight trends impacting HRDs.
- **Develop a more comprehensive and systematic approach to monitoring and learning:** Further develop the monitoring and evaluation of our programmes to better inform our strategies and understand our impact. Create more space for sharing and reflection internally, particularly focused on specific contexts, complex cases, learnings on specific protection strategies. Contribute more analysis from our learning and best practise to the broader ecosystem of protection of HRDs.



## TO BE MORE **SUSTAINABLE** WE WILL:

- **Invest in systems, processes and relationships:** Following a period of organisational growth in the last Strategic Plan and acknowledging the challenges experienced as a result of Covid-19, use the initial phase of this Strategic Plan to consolidate our work and focus on organisational

# WELL-BEING

Katsia Zhyhnyarouskaya  
well-being resilience collective



strengthening. Ensure we have the organisational systems, agility, processes, and relationships that make us an effective and coherent whole before we expand our programmes further. Invest time and capacity in strengthening systems that lay the foundation for our work, in particular human resources, IT, administration and finance. Ensure that the capacity of support roles matches the growth we have experienced within our programmes.

- **Continue to resource and support staff to strengthen resilience and well-being:** Prioritise proactive approaches to stress management and build a culture of resilience which recognises and appreciates the emotional impact of the work that we do. Through ongoing dialogue with staff, both individually and collectively, continue to develop organisational policies and supports that include facilitating work-life balance, developing a more formal system of back-up for staff leave, and facilitate staff to access professional support if needed.
- **Deepen and expand our relationship and engagement with donors and partners:** Continue to work in partnership with governments, foundations, civil society organisations and private donors who support our work. Strengthen our outreach and profile in North America and continue to play an active role in key consortia and networks. Continue to seek core and flexible funding to enable us to respond to the needs of HRDs in the most effective way. Manage financial/budget growth in a phased and strategic manner. Continue to build key relationships with governments for support on visas and relocation processes for HRDs.
- **Assess the environmental impact of the organisation:** Examine our own environmental impact more closely and conscientiously and better assess and track the impact of our work on the environment. Explore ways to reduce and mitigate our environmental impact and develop environmental standards/ guidelines and targets for our operations.
- **Continue to review, update and develop our internal security capacity:** Ensure that we lead and demonstrate best practice with regards to staff, organisational and digital security. This will be done through regular security reviews, training, creation of best practice policies and procedures, contingency planning, incident management and liaison with partners.





## TO BE A MORE **DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE AND PEOPLE-FOCUSED ORGANISATION** WE WILL:

- **Nurture our organisational culture:** Ensure the organisational culture reflects and expounds our values and supports our mission. Make our values and culture more visible and lived through ongoing discussions in the organisation. Commit to ensuring that Front Line Defenders is a supportive workplace in which people feel valued and included. Foster the Staff and Fellows Association as an important forum for voice and representation within the organisation.
- **Strengthen our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion:** Develop a shared understanding of what diversity, equity and inclusion means for Front Line Defenders and strengthen internal capacity to lead and challenge ourselves to do better. Assess the barriers and proactively address them, including by developing and implementing an action plan and a policy which outlines our ambition and commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in the organisation.
- **Invest in our staff:** Continue to ensure we are attracting and retaining our highly qualified staff. Develop a comprehensive and robust recruitment and induction programme. Ensure all staff are given opportunities for growth and development.



## TO STRENGTHEN OUR **ACCOUNTABILITY** WE WILL:

- **Strengthen how we communicate externally:** Aim to be more effective and targeted in our organisational communications and development of our organisational profile. Through communications rooted in our values, ensure that we are more accessible to HRDs, that we can better explain the work that we do, and ensure that clear messaging builds trust and strengthens accountability.
- **Strengthen our approach to accountability to HRDs:** Build on our current accountability mechanisms, including implementing a complaints mechanism, surveys, feedback forms, evaluations and consultations with HRDs. Continue to ensure we have staff who understand the local context and have diverse language skills. Ensure HRDs have the opportunity to inform and influence our priorities and strategies, question decisions and raise concerns. Ensure that HRDs better understand all of the different types of support that we provide, that they have clarity on the processes that inform decisions and, where feasible, increase our focus on follow-up with HRDs.
- **Continue to implement safeguarding policies and procedures:** Continue to build awareness internally and externally on safeguarding. Invest in robust processes to ensure we do not engage or support any behaviours, inadvertently or otherwise, which cause harm or exploit. Ensure our approach to safeguarding continues to be survivor-centred and based on international best practice.
- **Commit to highest standards of governance:** Continue to review and strengthen our governance and management systems. Invest in financial and human resource systems. Adhere to the highest standards of transparency, financial and legal compliance. Regularly review and monitor progress on the Strategic Plan with oversight from our committed Board.



# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS **STRATEGIC PLAN** **2023 - 2027**

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