



bond



The Law Society
of England and Wales



On the Human Rights Frontline:

Ahead of an upcoming election, we urge all UK political parties to commit to prioritising strategic international action to counter the closure of civil society space and ensure human rights defenders around the world see the UK as a trusted, outspoken partner.

How the UK government can defend the defenders

Introduction

As recognised by [the UK government](#), Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) are agents of change who can ensure the sustainable impact of a range of UK foreign policy priorities. HRDs are experts in their communities whose objectives often mirror those of any progressive foreign policy: combating the climate crisis, upholding free speech and the rule of law, tackling poverty, and empowering women. For example:

- HRDs play an important role in supporting states to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the promise to Leave No One Behind, as has been explicitly recognised at the UN Human Rights Council.
- HRDs are key partners in ensuring sustainable business practices, as they encourage due diligence and labour rights, and identify remedial avenues when harm occurs.
- Support for HRDs constitutes critical support for the rule of law and international rules-based system. If reprisals against HRDs are left unchallenged, respect for the rule of law and the international rules-based system as a whole will be weakened.

However, in recent years, there has been an unprecedented surge in repression faced by HRDs and civil society organisations, against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism and moves by a growing number of states to undermine the international rules-based system; the former facilitates the latter and vice versa. HRDs are both the canaries in the mine – with attacks against them foretelling increasingly repressive and regressive regimes – whilst also being vital partners in exposing and opposing regression and initiating positive political and social change. For example:

- Since 2020, despite facing relentless reprisals from vested interests and fundamentalist groups at both the community and the global level, women human rights defenders have successfully campaigned for new legislation to counter **violence against women and girls** in Kuwait, South Korea and Sudan; improved consent-based rape laws in Croatia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain; and achieved unprecedented judicial developments aimed at ending impunity for sexual violence in several African countries.
- HRDs and journalists have exposed **corruption** globally, including in Morocco, China, Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Russia, Sierra Leone and Honduras.



The Law Society
of England and Wales



- Environmental defenders and Indigenous leaders have consistently been at the forefront of proposals to tackle **the climate crisis**. In Latin America and the Caribbean, civil society organisations played a crucial role in the negotiation, adoption and ratifications of the 2021 Escazú Agreement, the first regional environmental human rights treaty.
- In Zimbabwe, human rights lawyers and HRDs successfully campaigned for constitutional changes to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, **media freedom and access to information**.
- In Ukraine, HRDs, journalists and civil society organisations have played a crucial role in ensuring access to information, documenting developments, providing **humanitarian assistance**, and contributing to the defence of democracy and the rule of law.

It is therefore not only an international obligation, but in the UK's strategic interest to support and partner with HRDs, including Indigenous communities, trade unionists, journalists and civil society groups, contributing to the protection they need to work safely.

UK foreign policy will be more sustainable and impactful if a commitment to engage, support and protect civil society is at its core. **Work to support HRDs should therefore be seen as both a focus in itself, but also a cross-cutting theme to maximise impact across a number of government priorities.** A UK government strategy to counter closing civic space and support HRDs would contribute to the UK's credibility and leadership internationally, while improving the impact and value for money of foreign policy initiatives.

While we recognise and welcome an October 2022 commitment from Minister of State Lord Ahmad that the FCDO will develop a civic space strategy, including work with HRDs, we continue to urge the FCDO to make this a reality and develop a comprehensive strategy. This is the most impactful and cost-effective way for the UK government both to make a difference to the lives of HRDs and achieve change across many of the UK's own foreign policy priorities.

What HRDs and civil society organisations need

In 2021 Amnesty International interviewed 82 HRDs across rural and urban areas of seven countries (Afghanistan, Colombia, Egypt, Libya, Russia, Philippines and Zimbabwe) to understand what engagement they had had with the UK and what engagement would be useful to them. Interviewees included journalists, lawyers, NGO staff and community activists, working across a range of human rights issues.

The majority of the HRDs interviewed were not in contact with representatives of the UK, demonstrating why a more holistic and proactive approach is needed. When asked what the one thing was that the UK should do more, the majority said the UK should **“speak out more”**.

“The statements that had come about, from the UK and others - those statements contributed to me being let out [of prison] alive.” - Jestina, HRD, Zimbabwe



The Law Society
of England and Wales



The second most mentioned recommendation was the provision of **flexible funding sources**, including long-term and core funding for human rights organisations.

“We need some welfare. As HRDs, we don’t have a salary, and the only back up we receive is death. Our only allowance is death.” - Ricardo, HRD, Colombia

The third most popular recommendation was establishing and supporting mechanisms for rapid response and individual and collective **protection for HRDs at risk**.

“A HRD at severe risk can easily lose their life due to a lack of funding for their protection.” - Horia, HRD, Afghanistan

What politicians can do

In 2021, our organisations published [On the Human Rights Frontline – How the UK government can defend the defenders](#). We made the case for – and proposed a draft version of – a UK government strategy to promote civic space and improve support and protection for HRDs.

UK politicians should prioritise gathering inputs from across UK and global civil society to ensure that this strategy is effective, and includes the components we have called for since 2021:

- Implementing effective diplomatic strategies to recognise and protect defenders;
- Transforming the nature and scale of funding for civil society to be sustainable & flexible;
- Developing protection mechanisms, respite schemes and rapid response support.

These interventions do not require large additional funds, but rather a different way of working. They need not be expensive. There are several impactful and cost-effective strategies in other countries which the UK could learn from and collaborate with.

Moreover, a meaningful approach really requires governments to shift their approach from seeing HRDs as sources of information and mere recipients of support, to working with them as equal, legitimate, effective partners for change.

Central to such an approach is meaningful consultation. Consulting with HRDs and civil society in the design, development and implementation of policies, strategies and programmes from inception and throughout implementation is core to their success. This will ensure strategies are informed by those working directly with communities at the local level, and make sure the needs of civil society partners are understood and responded to.

Ahead of the next UK General Election, we urge all political parties to commit to making support, protection and engagement of civil society and human rights defenders a central pillar of their foreign policy. This is good for the UK, good for the world, and good for the UK’s place in the world.



The Law Society
of England and Wales



This briefing is supported by:

1. ABColombia (UK)
2. Agency for Turkana Development Initiatives (ATUDIS) (Kenya)
3. Amnesty International UK (UK)
4. Asia Indigenous Peoples Network on Extractive Industries and Energy (AIPNEE) (Asia)
5. Benet Mosop Indigenous Community Association Uganda (BMCA) (Uganda)
6. BOND (UK)
7. Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) (Global)
8. Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York (UK)
9. Christian Aid (Global)
10. CIVICUS (Global)
11. Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Más (Nicaragua)
12. Community Empowerment and Social Justice Network (CEMSOJ) (Nepal)
13. Corporate Justice Coalition (UK)
14. Departamento Ecuémico de Investigaciones (Costa Rica)
15. Earth Rights International (US)
16. Federación de Comunidades Nativas Fronterizas del Putumayo (Peru)
17. Forest Peoples Programme (UK/Global)
18. Friends of the Earth (England, Wales, NI)
19. Front Line Defenders (Global)
20. Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) (UK)
21. Global Greengrants Fund UK (UK)
22. Indigenous Peoples Partnership (IPP) (Myanmar)
23. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) (Global)
24. Kibera Social Justice Centre (Kenya)
25. King's College Legal Clinic (UK)
26. Labour Behind the Label (UK)
27. Norwegian Human Rights Fund (Global)
28. Peace Brigades International (UK)
29. Peace Direct (UK)
30. Prisoners of Conscience (UK)
31. Project on Organizing, Development, Education, and Research (PODER) (Latin America)
32. Protection International (Global)
33. Sierra Leone Land Alliance (Sierra Leone)
34. Somali Journalists Syndicate (Global)
35. STAR Kampuchea (SK) (Cambodia)
36. The Andrew Lees Trust (UK/Madagascar)
37. The Fund for Global Human Rights (UK/Global)
38. The Law Society of England and Wales (UK)
39. The Marginalised Mirror (Namibia)



The Law Society
of England and Wales



40. The Rights Practice (UK)
41. The Scottish Human Rights Defenders Fellowship (UK)
42. The She Main Table (Kenya)
43. The West African Human Rights Defenders' Network (West Africa)
44. Transform Trade (UK)
45. Unidad de Protección a defensoras y defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (Guatemala)
46. Unión Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas (Guatemala)
47. UNISON (UK)
48. Urgent Action Fund for Feminist Activism (USA)
49. Womankind Worldwide (Global)