

Norad Portfolio: Protection and Strengthening of Human Rights Defenders

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Background and Context

Human rights and democracy are under attack from multiple fronts. War and conflict contribute to violations and abuses of human rights and humanitarian law. At the local level and online, many communities are characterised by violent rhetoric, discrimination, and hate speech.¹ For the first time in 20 years, there are now fewer democracies than autocracies.²

In this global context, human rights defenders (HRDs) are particularly at risk. Where they need support and protection, many instead face targeted attacks and a shrinking civic space.³ Each year, thousands of HRDs encounter various forms of resistance from, among others, state actors, armed groups, and private companies.

¹ United Nations (2024): [‘Bedrock of Peace’ Under Attack, Secretary-General Warns Human Rights Council](#). Coverage and Press releases.

² See e.g. V-Dem Institute (2025): [Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?](#) and Freedom House (2024): [“Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict”](#) and Larry Diamond (2024): "Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperilled." *Journal of Democracy*, 2024, 35(1), pp. 5–19.

³ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: [About Human Rights Defenders](#).

This document outlines key challenges faced by human rights defenders and identifies areas of intervention that strengthen their protection and impact. Norad will continue to analyse the existing knowledge base and assess how these efforts relate to other Norad-supported initiatives across various [thematic portfolios](#).

Development of the portfolio

The portfolio for the protection and strengthening of HRDs has been developed based on review of a broad range of literature from international organisations and academic sources. This analysis has highlighted the important role these actors play in monitoring and improving the human rights situation across the world.

Portfolio management⁴ in Norad involves practices and procedures for strategically planning, developing, organising, coordinating, and adjusting a collection of initiatives so that the composition of interventions within the portfolio creates synergies and achieves objectives more effectively. To facilitate sound assessments of causal relationships in the theory of change, significant narrowing has been necessary.

At the same time, there has been a desire to define a human rights portfolio that illustrates the interdependence of human rights and the need for systematic efforts at multiple levels, from international and regional normative work to national and local efforts for the respect, protection, and fulfilment of universal rights.

HRDs constitute an **entry point into the broader human rights landscape**. Focusing on HRDs provides an appropriate methodological focus for human rights efforts, while also allowing flexibility to direct support towards underfunded thematic areas. Efforts to support HRDs, who work across a wide range of human rights issues, reinforce the principle that **all rights are equal and mutually reinforcing**.

Defining human rights defenders

HRDs are individuals or groups who work to strengthen the protection and realisation of human rights, without using violence or force. They advocate for the rights of others and often speak for those who are marginalised or vulnerable. In many cases, they represent local efforts for change within their own communities. HRDs are, or should be, **defined by what they do, not who they are**.

This broad definition, which originates from the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders⁵, is useful when arguing for the protection of individuals and groups

⁴ More information about Norad's portfolios at [Norad.no](https://www.norad.no).

⁵ General Assembly (1998): [Declaration on human rights defenders](#).

engaged in human rights work worldwide, regardless of profession, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or group affiliation. The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights stresses that there are no specific qualification requirements for HRDs, but that every HRD must respect all human rights and their interdependence.⁶

Key challenges

In Latin America⁷ and Asia⁸, physical attacks, enforced disappearances, and murders of various HRDs are more widespread, while in Europe, the legal system is frequently used as a tool against HRDs.⁹ Africa does not tend to feature high on the lists of where HRDs are killed, probably as a result of data gathering gaps.¹⁰

The use of the legal system against HRDs is a global trend, with new legislation targeting HRDs on the rise, and existing laws increasingly being used to prevent them from carrying out their work, for example, through anti-terrorism laws and defamation laws, and repeat sentencing for the same crime when the time is up.

Based on reports and documentation from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and actors such as Amnesty International¹¹, Human Rights Watch¹² and Front Line Defenders¹³, the main challenges faced by HRDs today include:

Attacks, violence, and impunity: HRDs face serious threats including harassment, physical assault, enforced disappearances and killings¹⁴, often with perpetrators rarely brought to justice. This widespread impunity, documented by the UN and

⁶ See also [Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders](#) and the [Norwegian Government](#).

⁷ Mateo Corrales Hoyos (2019): [Addressing the Crimes of Torture and Enforced Disappearances in Latin America: Achievements and Challenges from a Human Rights Perspective](#). *Global Politics Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2, 2019.

⁸ FORUM-ASIA & KontraS: [Joint Analysis on the Situation of Defenders in Asia \(January 2021 – June 2022\)](#).

⁹ See e.g. Aikaterini-Christina Koula (2024): [Human Rights Violations Committed Against Human Rights Defenders Through the Use of Legal System: A Trend in Europe and Beyond](#). *Human Rights Review* (2024) 25:99–122.

¹⁰ See e.g. Front Line Defenders, [HRD Memorial](#) and International Land Coalition et al. (2023): [A Crucial Gap: The Limits to Official Data on Attacks Against Defenders and Why It's Concerning](#). ALLIED.

¹¹ Amnesty International: [The State of the World's Human Rights: April 2024](#).

¹² Human Rights Watch: [World Report 2025](#).

¹³ Front Line Defenders: [Global Analysis 2024/25](#).

¹⁴ Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders (2020): [Final warning: death threats and killings of human rights defenders](#). Thematic report.

leading NGOs, fosters a climate of fear and discourages activism.¹⁵ While all HRDs are at risk, women HRDs may also experience gender-based violence and threats, adding another layer of vulnerability.¹⁶

Criminalisation and lack of legal protection: HRDs are frequently subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention¹⁷, and prosecution under vaguely defined or overly broad laws, particularly those citing security concerns. This criminalisation is a common tactic to suppress dissent and hinder human rights work. Women and LGBT+ defenders may face additional legal risks or discrimination, making their situation especially precarious in many contexts.¹⁸

Stigmatisation and delegitimisation: Authorities and hostile actors often seek to discredit HRDs through smear campaigns, branding them as “foreign agents” or enemies of national values.¹⁹ Such delegitimisation not only undermines public trust but also increases the risk of further violence or legal action, and force HRDs out of public space.²⁰ Women HRDs can be subject to character attacks or sexist rhetoric, compounding the stigmatisation they face.

Restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly: Restrictive laws and practices continue to limit HRDs’ ability to speak out, protest, or organise. Peaceful assemblies are often met with bans, excessive force, or intimidation, contributing to shrinking civic space. These barriers affect all HRDs, with women and minority activists sometimes facing additional obstacles in public participation or risk of targeted harassment.²¹

Digital surveillance and harassment: Many HRDs are targeted by digital surveillance, hacking, and online harassment, threatening their safety and ability to

¹⁵ Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders (2019): [Report on impunity for human rights violations and abuses committed against human rights defenders](#). Concept note.

¹⁶ Human Rights Council (2019): [Situation of women human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#). 40th session 25 February–22 March 2019.

¹⁷ Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders (2021): [Report on the long term detention of human rights defenders](#). Presented to the UN General Assembly at its 76th session.

¹⁸ OHCHR (2022): [Defenders of the Human Rights of LGBT Persons Constantly at Risk, Warn UN Experts](#). UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

¹⁹ Alice M. Nah & Ellen Husseiny (2020): [Fallen heroes, terrorists, spies, or unrealistic dreamers?](#) In Alice M. Nah: *Protecting Human Rights Defenders at Risk*. Routledge.

²⁰ Amnesty International (2017): [Human Rights Defenders Under Threat](#).

²¹ See e.g. Thomas Carothers & Saskia Brechenmacher (2014): [Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

operate.²² These tactics are used to monitor, intimidate, and silence HRDs. Women HRDs in particular may experience gendered online abuse and threats, which can be especially invasive and damaging.²³

Gendered harassment, discrimination and attacks: Women and LGBT+ defenders often encounter specific risks, such as gendered threats, discrimination, and attacks related to their identity.²⁴ These challenges can result in social isolation and limited access to support. Nevertheless, their contributions remain vital to the broader human rights movement.

Roles and responsibilities

Promoting and protecting HRDs requires cooperation between multiple actors at different levels. According to the UN, there is a collective responsibility to ensure that HRDs can carry out their work without fear of harassment or violence.

States are the primary duty-bearers under international human rights law, responsible for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) and other human rights instruments. States are obliged to ensure an enabling environment for HRDs, including enacting laws and policies that safeguard their work²⁵, investigating and remedying violations against them, and refraining from actions that undermine their safety or freedom.²⁶ States also have a duty to facilitate access to justice and effective remedies for HRDs whose rights are violated.²⁷

²² Jonathon W. Penney (2017): ["Internet surveillance, regulation, and chilling effects online: a comparative case study."](#) *Internet Policy Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2.

²³ Human Rights Council (2025): [Human rights defenders and new and emerging technologies: protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age.](#) Resolution adopted by the HRC on 4 April 2025, 58th Session.

²⁴ See e.g. Mistri Shrinwanti (2024): ["Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse Against Women Human Rights Defenders: An \(in\)visible Threat to Women's Human Rights and Human Security."](#) In *Home (In)Security: Identifying the Invisible Disruptors of Security*, Springer, pp. 15–52.

²⁵ See e.g. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR): [Legislation on the protection of human rights defenders](#), and Center for Justice and International Law (2021): [The Esperanza Protocol: An effective response to threats against human rights defenders](#). Washington, D.C.

²⁶ UN General Assembly (1998): [Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), Article 2.

²⁷ Furthermore, States can provide protection through the development of guidelines on HRDs for their foreign missions. See e.g. [Norwegian guidelines for support to human rights defenders](#).

The multilateral system, represented by organisations such as the UN and regional bodies²⁸, plays a crucial oversight and support role in human rights implementation. These institutions provide frameworks and mechanisms for protection, such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders²⁹ and they monitor compliance, provide technical assistance, and offer platforms for dialogue and cooperation. UN mechanisms — including Special Rapporteurs, treaty bodies, and the Human Rights Council — are tasked with promoting standards, documenting abuses, and urging states to protect HRDs. The multilateral system also facilitates international accountability and mobilises global action when HRDs are at risk.

Civil society can be defined as “an arena where people come together to promote interests and needs on behalf of themselves and others, challenge power-holders, and influence political debates”.³⁰ Civil society actors encompass non-governmental organisations, grassroots groups, and activists, and are essential for the realisation and advancement of human rights.³¹ Civil society actors advocate for policy reforms, raise awareness, monitor violations³², and provide direct support to HRDs at risk. Their role is acknowledged in international instruments as both watchdogs and partners in implementation.³³ Civil society also serves as a conduit between individuals and institutions, enabling marginalised voices to be heard and helping to hold duty-bearers accountable.

The private sector, including businesses and corporations, has a growing responsibility to respect human rights in accordance with frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.³⁴ Companies are expected to implement due diligence to identify, prevent, and address adverse human rights

²⁸ E.g. the Council of Europe, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights.

²⁹ European Union (2008): [Ensuring Protection – European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#).

³⁰ Norad (2018): [Norad's Support to Civil Society: Guiding principles](#).

³¹ See e.g. Amanda Murdie (2014): [“The Ties That Bind: A Network Analysis of Human Rights International Nongovernmental Organizations.”](#) *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2014.

³² ALLIED Data Working Group (2023): [A Crucial Gap: The Limits to Official Data on Attacks Against Defenders and Why It's Concerning](#), Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, highlights that civil society organisations, not governments, are the primary sources of data on HRD killings.

³³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/declaration-human-rights-defenders> UN General Assembly (1998): [Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), Articles 1, 13, 18.

³⁴ Special Representative of the Secretary-General on human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises (2012): [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework](#).

impacts linked to their operations, including risks faced by HRDs. The private sector should establish policies that support HRDs, avoid complicity in abuses, and collaborate with other stakeholders to promote safe working environments. Michel Forst, former UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs, states that “the responsibility of businesses to respect human rights not only entails a negative duty to refrain from violating the rights of others, but also a positive obligation to support a safe and enabling environment for HRDs in the countries in which they are operating”.³⁵

Academia and research institutions contribute to human rights implementation by producing reliable data, analysing trends, and informing policy. They support and protect HRDs through education, training, and critical research, often serving as platforms for open debate and advocacy. Their work helps shape effective laws and practices and strengthens accountability.³⁶

Possible interventions

Efforts that yield positive results for HRDs include those that strengthen the rule of law, ensure independent institutions, and protect freedom of expression and freedom of association, according to key actors.³⁷ Structural measures, in particular, have lasting impact: legislation that recognises and protects HRDs, support for independent courts, and mechanisms that ensure legal follow-up of threats and attacks. Furthermore, initiatives should address underlying causes such as corruption³⁸, inequality, concentration of power, and lack of democratic accountability.³⁹

³⁵ UN General Assembly (2018): “[Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on business and human rights defenders](#).” Seventy-third session Item 74 (b).

³⁶ See e.g. UNESCO (2024): [Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development](#) and Alice M. Nah, Karen Bennett, Danna Ingleton and James Savage (2013): [A Research Agenda for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders](#). *Journal of Human Rights Practice*.

³⁷ Based on documentation from, inter alia, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Front Line Defenders, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, such as Human Rights Council (2023): [Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#). 52nd session 27 February–31 March 2023, Agenda item 3.

³⁸ See e.g. OHCHR: [Corruption and human rights](#); Human Rights Council (2021): [At the heart of the struggle: human rights defenders working against corruption. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor](#). Forty-ninth session 28 February–1 April 2022; and Anne Peters (2024): [Human rights and corruption](#). *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 22(2).

³⁹ See e.g. Matthew C. Stephenson (2015). [Corruption and democratic institutions: A review and synthesis](#). In S. Rose-Ackerman & P. Lagunes (eds), *Greed, corruption, and the modern state: Essays in political economy*, pp. 92–133). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Norad is not aware of broad and systematic academic studies on prevalence, causal relationships, and outcomes — including, for example, the effectiveness of various protection mechanisms — but research appears to rely on statistics and data produced by reputable NGOs and multilateral actors in the field.

More limited studies, however, point to the need for protection designed to address the specific risks faced by HRDs,⁴⁰ the need for a holistic and gender-sensitive approach to protection⁴¹, and the fact that certain groups and/or geographic regions are wholly or partially excluded from various support mechanisms.⁴²

When authorities are held accountable and civil society is given genuine influence, both the safety and the operating space for HRDs increase.⁴³ Flexible, long-term support, particularly through local organisations, has also proven to be more effective than short-term, project-based interventions.⁴⁴ Work at the international and national levels is interconnected and necessary to protect HRDs. Protection of HRDs at the individual level helps to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of normative processes by integrating experiences and perspectives from the field into the development of international standards.⁴⁵

Ensured Protection and Emergency Support

This area of intervention focuses on ensuring immediate and practical protection for HRDs at risk, as well as their families and communities. It includes emergency response measures such as access to contingency visas, temporary relocation, medical assistance, digital security, and access to safe physical environments. In addition, it encompasses initiatives that strengthen individual resilience, such as

⁴⁰ Alice M. Nah (ed.) (2020): [Protecting Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#). Routledge.

⁴¹ See e.g. A. Nissen (2023). [Gender-Transformative Remedies for Women Human Rights Defenders](#). *Business and Human Rights Journal*, 8(3), 369–402.

⁴² K. Bennett, D. Ingleton, A.M. Nah & J. Savage (2015). [Critical perspectives on the security and protection of human rights defenders](#). *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 19.

⁴³ UN General Assembly (2019): [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#). 74th session Item 72 (b).

⁴⁴ OECD, Norad and others highlight that long-term support for democracy and civil society yields the best results, especially when it is flexible and not heavily earmarked. See e.g. ProtectDefenders.eu. (2024): [Report 2023–2024: Supporting and Strengthening Human Rights Defenders Globally](#).

⁴⁵ See e.g. Andrew Chubb & Kirsten Roberts Lyer (2024): [Transnational Human Rights Violations: Addressing the Evolution of Globalized Repression through National Human Rights Institutions](#). *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 16, Issue 3, November 2024.

psychosocial support,⁴⁶ training in exposing disinformation⁴⁷ and understanding digital threats, as well as access to legal assistance. The aim is to reduce the risk of harm and reprisals, and to provide HRDs with tools and support to enable them to continue their work under safer conditions.

Strengthening Systems and Institutions

This area focuses on building and improving the structural and institutional frameworks that provide long-term protection for HRDs. It involves supporting the development and implementation of laws and regulations that offer genuine protection, as well as efforts to ensure independent judicial systems and accountable governance. This also includes work to secure participation in legislative processes, the development of digital guidelines,⁴⁸ and the establishment of sustainable financial models that enable HRDs to operate independently. By strengthening institutions and legal safeguards, the foundation is laid for lasting protection and justice.

Increased Mobilisation, Visibility and Advocacy

This area of intervention focuses on building communities, creating alliances, and raising awareness of the situation of HRDs both nationally and internationally. It includes initiatives such as monitoring and documenting human rights violations and abuses, conducting targeted awareness-raising activities and public outreach,⁴⁹ and strengthening networks and coalitions that can provide support and increase influence.⁵⁰ Emphasis is also placed on connecting actors, promoting dialogue, including with reluctant parties, and ensuring that HRDs have a voice in normative processes. By highlighting their work and challenges, pressure for change and increased protection is generated through public attention and international solidarity, which also enhances the recognition and credibility of HRDs.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Alice M. Nah (2020): "[Navigating mental and emotional wellbeing in risky forms of human rights activism](#)". *Social Movement Studies*.

⁴⁷ B. Rød, C. Pursiainen & N. Eklund (2025): "[Combatting disinformation – How do we create resilient societies? Literature review and analytical framework](#)". *European Journal for Security Research*.

⁴⁸ S. Gregory (2023): "[Fortify the Truth: How to Defend Human Rights in an Age of Deepfakes and Generative AI](#)". *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 15, Issue 3, November 2023, Pages 702–714.

⁴⁹ See e.g. J. Hitchen og J. Kasoma (2013): "[Making the Transition: Engaging Communities in Uganda with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#)". *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 5, Issue 3, November 2013, Pages 512–521.

⁵⁰ East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (2013): "[Networks for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders: Notes from the Field](#)". *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 5, Issue 3, November 2013, Pages 522–534.

More on the role of civil society

The current [call for proposals](#) focuses on civil society actors and their role in protecting and strengthening HRDs. Norad's knowledge base highlights a strong need for support to regional and local civil society actors in ODA countries.⁵¹

Considering limited budget resources and the vital role of these actors, Norad will prioritise increased support to relevant civil society actors in ODA countries. Diverse civil society partnerships will be considered, involving international, regional or Norwegian organisations. The call will support organisations that protect and strengthen HRDs, as they relate to the portfolio's three main outcome areas:

Ensured protection and emergency support: This area focuses on civil society actions ensuring immediate safety and resilience for HRDs and their families, enabling them to continue their work in the face of threats and risks.⁵² Relevant activities may include:

- **Emergency response and safety measures:** Providing urgent assistance, such as (but not limited to) temporary relocation, financial support, medical care and access to safe accommodation for HRDs and their families. Measures to increase safety and security, such as security equipment, including digital security, as well as other equipment and measures that contribute to increase the security and safety of HRDs.
- **Psychosocial and legal support:** Offering psychological support to address stress, trauma and burnout, as well as legal aid to navigate threats, harassment or persecution.
- **Capacity development:** Training in physical and digital security, risk assessment and countering mis/disinformation to strengthen HRDs' ability to protect themselves and sustain their work under challenging conditions.

⁵¹ See e.g. Ali Alrahamneh (2024): [The Capacity of Civil Society Organizations to Protect Human Rights](#). In *Frontiers of Human Centricity in the Artificial Intelligence-Driven Society 5.0*, Springer, and Feras Hamdouni (2023): [How Civil Society Organizations Can Promote and Protect Human Rights in Challenging Contexts](#). DT Institute.

⁵² See e.g. Alice M. Nah, Karen Bennett, Danna Ingleton and James Savage (2013): [A Research Agenda for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders](#), *Journal of Human Rights Practice (Special Issue)*; Civil Rights Defenders: [Emergency Fund Support for Human Rights Defenders in 2023](#); and OSCE (2024): [Final Report: The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law](#). *Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, Vienna, April 2024*.

Strengthened systems and institutions: This area focuses on civil society initiatives that seek to achieve long-term structural and institutional changes, relevant for HRDs, to strengthen compliance with international human rights obligations at country level.⁵³ Relevant activities may include:

- **Legal and policy frameworks:** Promoting institutional, legislative and regulatory measures to strengthen human rights; providing meaningful opportunities for engagement and dialogue for HRDs, in legislative and other relevant processes; and mobilising stakeholder support for rights-based policies.
- **Monitoring and accountability:** Researching, monitoring and documenting human rights violations and abuses and reporting these to national and international bodies to hold duty-bearers accountable and reinforce principles of the rule of law.
- **Outreach and cooperation:** Engaging and working systematically with relevant stakeholders to enhance the understanding and implementation of human rights at various levels of society, i.e. relevant institutions, professional groups, local communities, etc.

Increased mobilisation, visibility and advocacy: This area focuses on civil society efforts to enhance the visibility and influence of HRDs and their work, ensuring they can mobilise support and drive change. Relevant activities may include:

- **Documentation and raising awareness:** Increasing knowledge and raising awareness about human rights violations and abuses, providing visibility to the work of HRDs and amplify their stories.
- **Alliances and solidarity:** Supporting networks and coalitions that provide HRDs with information, knowledge, support, protection, and increased impact through collective action.
- **Dialogue and advocacy in normative processes at national, regional and international levels:** Facilitating dialogue between stakeholders, including authorities and other key actors, while ensuring HRDs have a voice in processes that shape norms and policies, thereby influencing attitudes and practices over time.

⁵³ See e.g. Ali Alrahamneh (2024): [The Capacity of Civil Society Organizations to Protect Human Rights](#). In: A. Hannon (eds): *Frontiers of Human Centricity in the Artificial Intelligence-Driven Society 5.0. Studies in Systems, Decision and Control*, vol 226. Springer.

Relevance of human rights defenders to other Norad portfolios

HRDs are essential agents for progress across many of Norad's thematic portfolios. By advocating for fundamental rights, exposing injustices, and empowering marginalised groups, their work directly advances the goals of civic space, environmental protection, education, governance and public finance, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Civic space: HRDs play a central role in safeguarding and expanding civic space by advocating for freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Their work ensures that citizens can participate in public life without fear, challenges unjust restrictions, and holds authorities accountable, directly supporting the aims of Norad's Civic Space portfolio.

Forests: Defenders, especially Indigenous Peoples, local environmental defenders and investigative journalists, are critical in protecting forests by exposing illegal logging, land grabbing, and environmental abuses. Their disclosures help uphold environmental rights and sustainable management, aligning closely with Norad's Forests portfolio which emphasises Indigenous Peoples' rights and forest protection.

Education: HRDs advance the right to education by campaigning against discrimination, promoting access for marginalised groups, and monitoring state compliance. Their efforts contribute to inclusive, quality education for all, echoing the objectives of Norad's Education portfolio.

Higher education and research: HRDs contribute to academic freedom, critical inquiry, and research integrity. By advocating for open, independent institutions and protecting scholars at risk, their work strengthens the higher education and research systems Norad supports, ensuring these are spaces for free thought and innovation.

Governance and public finance: HRDs foster transparency and accountability in governance and public finance by exposing corruption, advocating for equitable resource allocation, and demanding public participation in decision-making. This directly reinforces Norad's goals of improved revenue and governance of public finance in developing countries.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR): HRDs are vital in advancing SRHR by fighting for access to services, challenging stigma, and defending the rights of women, girls, and LGBT+ communities. Their activism supports the realisation of SRHR for all, a key focus of Norad's portfolio.