



# Front Line Defenders: External Evaluation

Fostering a stronger international response to key  
threats faced by Human Rights Defenders

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# Evaluation: Key Messages

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*“Human Rights Defenders take care of others, but who takes cares for Human Rights Defenders? That is where Front Line Defenders come in.” - Ukrainian Human Rights Defender*

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1. Front Line Defenders implemented a comprehensive package of support through the programme “Fostering a Stronger International Response to Key Threats faced by Human Rights Defenders” – leveraging their close relationships and HRD-centred approach, detailed research and monitoring, and international credibility and reputation, to effectively respond to security and wellbeing needs of defenders, and facilitate a broad range of international actors to act on individual cases to enhance the protection of HRDs around the world.
2. Despite some limited operational and resourcing challenges, the evaluation identified a range of examples to indicate that the programme has contributed to its intended objectives of increasing understanding and awareness of key threats, facilitating stronger international protections of HRDs at risk, and ensuring HRDs have access to enhanced practical support.
3. The programme helped to expand the work and reach of the regional protection coordinators – roles which were regarded as pivotal and valuable by HRDs at risk due to their dedication and holistic support facilitation, and who provide a sense of credibility and knowledge in the eyes of advocacy targets.
4. The programmatic themes of Killings, Digital Rights, Business and Human Rights, and Women HRDs were regarded as relevant and compatible with the areas where HRDs are experiencing heightened threats and risks. Front Line Defenders’ reports and information on killings appeared to be particularly effective resource for governments and advocacy targets, and for securing media coverage. Advocacy targets felt Front Line Defenders could do more to help equip them with the knowledge and solutions to respond to digital and business-related threats.
5. Many evaluation informants described significant changes in the political and human rights environment over the past few years, growing conflict and inter-state tensions, and a growing perception of the ineffectiveness or unwillingness of key advocacy levers to engage on some issues. It will be important to consider this evolving context when developing future programmes and advocacy strategies. Front Line Defenders will need to secure and dedicate more resources to strategic and tailored advocacy planning to ensure they engage actors who are able to yield the most positive outcomes for HRDs.
6. The programme contributed to a range of outcomes which are in line with the programmatic objectives, such as: Enhanced documentation, archives and increasing pressure on governments to remedy threats and violations; Increased recognition of HRDs and their work; Improved sense of solidarity and resilience of HRD and HRD movements; Restoring the status or capacity of HRDs to freely do their work and improving standards and laws to help prevent attacks and threats on HRDs or strengthen protection.
7. Monitoring and evaluation can be improved by ensuring adequate systems are in place to capture data more systematically in a way that is accessible for the wider team, and by making indicators and outcome monitoring processes context specific to respond to the different opportunities and needs of different HRDs in different circumstances.
8. Relationships and partnerships are key to the success and sustainability of Front Line Defenders’ reach and effectiveness, and continuing to foster, expand and connect these partnerships will be important to ensure they can provide support to more (and more diverse) defenders at risk.

# External Evaluation: Fostering a stronger international response to key threats faced by Human Rights Defenders

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# Project Background

Front Line Defenders is an international organisation that works for the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk around the world through rapid response, including protection grants, capacity building (in physical and digital security and wellbeing) and advocacy. Front Line Defenders implemented the programme “Fostering a stronger international response to key threats faced by Human Rights Defenders” between January 2022 and March 2025, which was predominantly funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland.

The overall objective of the programme was that HRDs at the local and national level are recognised and supported as essential actors in defending and advancing human rights and bringing about positive change in society. The specific and more short-term objective is that HRDs’ resilience and protection globally is strengthened through increased understanding of, and responses to, key threats. The programme prioritised four key themes: killings, gender-related threats, digital threats, and threats linked to businesses.

The programme worked towards three specific outcomes:

- Outcome 1: Better understanding and awareness of key threats facing Human Rights Defenders globally.
- Outcome 2: Stronger national, regional, and international protection of HRDs at risk.
- Outcome 3: Enhanced practical support available to HRDs at Risk.

The programme worked towards these outcomes using the following tactics:

- Development and dissemination of global and thematic analysis and datasets/databases
- Inputting into and advocating for policy changes and frameworks that could help to enhance protection
- Leading or facilitating strategic meetings, advocacy rounds, and events focused on national, regional, and international protection
- Leading urgent appeals for individual HRDs at risk
- Developing and disseminating protection tools for HRDs
- Facilitating international meetings of HRDs on thematic areas
- Delivering trainings, consultations, and workshops to HRDs.

## Evaluation Aims and Methodology

### Evaluation objective

This evaluation was conducted as an end of programme assessment for the entire programme, but with a particular emphasis on Front Line Defenders’ advocacy activities and impact (Objective 2). The purpose of the evaluation was to support accountability to key programme donors and for organisational learning purposes.

### Approach and Methodology

A set of evaluation questions structured around the OECD evaluation criteria were established in consultation with Front Line Defenders to guide the evaluation process, as outlined in the table below.

Evaluation and Learning Criteria	Specific Learning Questions
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How relevant was the programme design and logic in effectively contributing to HRD protection at an international level?</li><li>• How well has Front Line Defenders’ work been adapted to be relevant and effective for the four key programmatic areas?</li><li>• To what extent has Front Line Defenders’ advocacy work remained relevant to achieving the overall and specific objectives of the programme?</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent are Front Line Defenders' activities and priority areas responding to the most pressing needs and issues facing HRDs, and the specific needs of WHRDs and other HRDs that experience different forms of identity-based discrimination?</li> </ul>
<b>Efficiency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Were there any notable operational or programme management issues which impacted the delivery of the programme? If so, how efficiently did Front Line Defenders respond to these and what can be learned to aid future programming?</li> </ul>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How effective has the use of research, and in particular Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis, been in shaping key actors' understanding of threats to HRDs?</li> <li>How have the advocacy strategies and tools used contributed to the programme objectives? What are recommended adaptations or future strategies to make these more effective?</li> <li>To what extent has Front Line Defenders' advocacy work been effectively targeted at relevant actors? How have these actors responded to these interventions or used the information and materials provided by Front Line Defenders?</li> <li>What added value are Front Line Defenders' practical tools and support providing to HRDs in the medium/longer term? How can Front Line Defenders better measure the impact of the practical tools it develops?</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent has Front Line Defenders' research and policy input contributed to concrete action around HRD protection by targeted actors? What examples of this can be identified?</li> <li>To what extent has Front Line Defenders' advocacy and practical support generated meaningful outcomes for the most vulnerable/marginalised/targeted HRDs (Indigenous defenders, LGBTIQ+ defenders, WHRDs)? How could Front Line Defenders adapt/strengthen its support to these groups?</li> <li>Has there been any unexpected or unintended outcomes or results that the programme has contributed to?</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent has the programme contributed to the development and strengthening of partnerships and relationships with key groups and actors?</li> <li>To what extent has the programme contributed to results and outcomes which can be meaningfully sustained and or replicated beyond the programme delivery period?</li> <li>What are the main risks or concerns regarding sustainability of outcomes which Front Line Defenders should consider in future programme design?</li> </ul>

The evaluation used a light touch outcomes harvesting approach to the evaluation process, which can be defined as facilitating open spaces to allow for participants to describe and explore outcomes that the project has contributed to. The evaluation relied on two key data collection strategies:

- A detailed document review: reviewing evaluations, reports, and associated documentation to map outcomes and learnings relevant to the evaluation questions. See annex one for the list of documents reviewed.
- Key informant interview programme: semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff, HRDs, partner CSOs, and policy/advocacy targets (those receiving briefings, information or advocacy materials from FLD). See annex 2 for a summary of the stakeholders interviewed).

## Evaluation and Data Limitations

As with all research and evaluations, there are limitations to the data which readers should be cognisant of before engaging with, and using the evaluation. The evaluator would like to highlight the following notable limitations:

- Small interview sample: Whilst a larger sample of interviews (15-16) was planned for the evaluation, introductions were made to 14 stakeholders, of which 12 were successfully engaged in the evaluation. This is likely to have limited the breadth of outcomes, impacts and learnings that could be explored (for example the two CSO partners interviewed were both primarily connected to the Memorial Programme).
- Limited access to data: Year 3 programme data and detailed reporting was not yet final at the time of the evaluation. The evaluator was able to speak to three HRDs that had been supported by FLD, and had access to survey data from HRDs attending the Dublin Platform event. Whilst this provided a useful way to ensure HRD perspectives were part of the evaluation, it only represents a small sample of the broader work FLD does.
- Indivisibility of the Programme and Front Line Defenders' wider work: many of the stakeholders involved in the evaluation are not familiar with the specific programmatic divisions or the boundaries of specific funded projects, often having engaged with Front Line Defenders on multiple occasions or engaged with Front Line Defenders' resources, reports or activities funded by other programmes – this makes the evaluation challenging to distinguish specific outcomes and feedback relating to this project, versus Front Line Defenders wider organisational work.

As the evaluation is limited by a lack of data quantity and data breadth/diversity (of stakeholder engagement), the extent to which we can draw robust conclusions is limited. Instead, the evaluator has sought to identify themes from the data collected and added some additional reflections based on the data gathered. The report should therefore be used to help guide further reflection, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement processes, but Front Line Defenders should seek to further validate and explore these topics with a wider group of stakeholders before acting directly on the findings.

## Project Performance

Whilst project documentation and reporting were still being finalised at the time of the evaluation, the evaluator has summarised the project's performance in relation to the qualitative outcome indicators in their results framework, based on the data reviewed and collected for the evaluation<sup>1</sup>.

Outcome Area	Indicator	Evaluator's assessment	Summary Commentary (see full report for details)
<b><i>Better understanding and awareness of key threats facing Human Rights Defenders globally</i></b>	Evidence of increased awareness of trends and threats among key policy makers and institutions	Achieved	Advocacy targets, CSO partners, and HRDs reported feeling more informed about threats and challenges facing HRDs in different countries and regions, as a result of engaging with Front Line Defenders' materials, events, and reports. Not only did interviews indicate greater awareness of key issues, but advocacy targets also reported greater knowledge and understanding of what to do about challenges and specific HRD cases.
	Examples of FLD's Global Analysis and other FLD research being quoted/referred to in high level documents/meetings.	Achieved	As outlined in the Effectiveness section, FLD reports, particularly the report on killings, has been used and referenced to by EU and UN stakeholders, as well as a broad range of media.

<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in a detailed summary of performance indicators at the activity and output level should refer to Front Line Defenders result framework reporting once finalised, alongside quantitative programme indicator targets for outcomes.

<b>Stronger national, regional and international protection of HRDs at risk</b>	Examples of new policies adopted or adapted or implemented more effectively – which address HRD issues and reflect increased commitment to HRDs protection	Progress made/partially unable to determine	Front Line Defenders used their advocacy resources to enhance protection for HRDs in relation to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, the EU Visa Policy for HRDs, and EU and US <a href="#">joint guidance</a> for online platforms on protecting HRDs. It was beyond the scope of this evaluation to determine the effectiveness of these adopted policies.
	Positive outcome (examples) for HRDs	Achieved	Example of positive outcomes for HRDs (such as dropping of SLAPP suits, securing higher quality legal defence, improvement wellbeing etc.) have been identified by the evaluator through interviews with HRDs. Whilst only a small sample, Front Line Defenders programme documentation and reporting cite many more illustrative examples of such outcomes.
<b>Enhanced practical support available to HRDs at Risk</b>	Evidence of practical tools being used by HRDs to address threats and access international support.	Limited data- unable to fully determine	Whilst one key stakeholder referred to Front Line Defenders’ manual being a key resource they share with networks of HRDs, there was no direct data available to review the extent of the reach and use of guides and tools disseminated (see effectiveness section).
	HRDs being supported through practical support and tools reporting increased capacity and/or security.	Achieved	HRDs interviewed for the evaluation, and those who fed back via the Dublin Platform consistently reported greater advocacy, security and wellbeing outcomes (whilst there was appetite for more security support, it is clear that HRDs are using, applying and benefiting from the different support offerings provided by Front Line Defenders to strengthen their capacity to more safely engage in rights defence (see outcomes section).

# Findings

## Relevance

This section explores evaluation data relating to the coherence of the programme design, Front Line Defenders' approach, and their positioning.

A previous Front Line Defenders review which helped inform the design of this programme “reaffirmed the need for Front Line Defenders to strengthen promotion of regional mechanisms for the protection of HRDs, strengthen the focus of UN mechanisms on HRD protection and engage with International Financial Institutions to strengthen their policy and practices on HRD protection”.<sup>2</sup> The programme, was therefore designed with this objective in mind, whilst continuing to lever, sustain, and inform this work through ongoing monitoring and research, targeted advocacy and the provision of security, wellbeing and other forms of support directly to HRDs in need. Therefore, whilst the programme had three distinct objectives and intended outcomes, these were largely interdependent on one another. For example, multiple HRDs, staff, and advocacy target informants emphasised it was the detailed insight and relationships that Front Line Defenders have with HRDs, and in-depth knowledge of the common issues they face, which gives them credibility to advocate at the international level for their protection. Advocacy targets interviewed also highlighted, one of FLDs strengths were their ability to offer practical and operational solutions to HRD cases and issues. In the opinion of the evaluator, there is a strong sense of coherence in the programme design that combined advocacy with direct support to HRDs, and thematic/regional monitoring.

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*“Front Line Defenders have a deep knowledge of HRD issues, including psychosocial support needs, and they are constantly highlighting their needs. In addition, their protection coordinators in the regions gives them an in depth, regional perspective. This is their added value – having nuanced, focused, and detailed knowledge which means they find operational and practical solutions to things”. – EU representative.*

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All stakeholder groups interviewed emphasised the importance of having regional protection coordinators for enhancing HRD reach across the regions and deepening the quality of knowledge of the different issues and contexts affecting them. This regional presence enabled Front Line Defenders and the HRDs they worked with to serve as credible and authoritative sources of information for different advocacy targets. Helping them to formulate well-informed recommendations. The regional presence, combined with Front Line Defenders' specific and focused mandate on protection, were seen as key to making them an effective advocacy partner.

<sup>2</sup> Annex 1 of Front Line Defenders' application to the Finish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Project Description)

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*“Front Line Defenders are global, and therefore are well positioned for facilitating global level support”. - CSO partner.*

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All of the HRDs interviewed also emphasised the important role that regional protection coordinators played in offering support, facilitating advocacy opportunities, and providing context-appropriate solutions to the challenges they were facing- as well as helping HRDs to be heard and listened to before international mechanisms and fora.

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*“In our experience, Front Line Defenders were the only organisation that reached to us with proactive support. They somehow knew exactly what we needed. We didn’t have other interactions like this from other organisations...and when we do advocacy together, it paves an easier path for us, their reputation helps give us credibility as they are so well respected by these institutions.” – Ukrainian Human Rights Defender.*

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Based on interviews with all of the different stakeholder groups, inbuilt into Front Line Defenders’ ways of working appears to be a relationship-oriented approach, which has been important to ensure Front Line Defenders are HRD-led, and that they are well-connected to international bodies and mechanisms (such as the EU, UN etc.) to effectively advocate for HRD protection. Importantly, Front Line Defenders’ HRD-led approach and global reach meant they were able to pursue a wide range of cases on the different thematic issues covered by the project, often covering jurisdictions and incidents not covered by other international human rights organisations. “They really work on a wide range of cases, not just the big well-known ones like the other international organisations cover.” commented one advocacy target interviewee. Front Line Defenders’ approach to maintaining relationships with HRDs, their families and/or legal representatives in a long term and systemic way also meant they were trusted to have more up-to-date information about their protection needs, cases and needs in real-time. This case/individual case approach was also emphasised by multiple stakeholders interviewed as being an effective way to have impact for HRDs in the current climate.

In terms of the programme themes (killings, digital rights, business and human rights, and women HRDs) – staff and CSO partners indicated that the themes remained coherent and relevant, and in-line with the main issues affecting HRDs globally during the programme period<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, stakeholders highlighted that engaging in advocacy at various levels and with different bodies and systems was deemed as essential to ensure an HRD specific and HRD-led approach. Whilst more reflection and discussion may be needed to further refine advocacy tactics and targets (discussed further in the effectiveness section), the programme design to work across these themes through tailored advocacy efforts informed by HRDs’ specific cases was relevant and coherent to the context and needs of HRDs. Looking forward, multiple interviewees commented on the likelihood of an increase in needs from

<sup>3</sup> One advocacy stakeholder mentioned that FLD could do more to help them understand issues surrounding business and digital rights-related threats, and in particular, practical ways for them to act on these issues.

HRDs in, or affected by, conflict, which may be an important theme to include in future programmes.

Unprompted by the evaluator, many external interviewees brought up the question of the definition of an HRD. Some partners expressed appreciation for the broad and flexible definition of HRDs, as it made collaboration easier. However, others felt that the definition might limit the scope of individuals they can support, or be inconsistent with definitions used by other international bodies, for example, one advocacy target interviewed noted the subjective nature of assessing someone's political motivations. At the same time, some stakeholders viewed Front Line Defenders as a reliable authority on defining who qualifies as an HRD, often deferring to Front Line Defenders' judgment on this matter. Given Front Line Defenders' strong reputation and authority on matters of HRD protection in the eyes of some international institutions, it may be important for Front Line Defenders to ensure their definition, and its application is nuanced, and coherent with the wider field of actors working to advance the protection of HRDs.

The evaluation also sought to explore the extent to which gender, marginalised groups and intersectionality were incorporated into the programme. Following a gender audit conducted in 2018, Front Line Defenders have been working to embed gender and intersectionality across their work (one such recommendation from the audit was to seek specific funding for WHRDs and integrate WHRDs' concerns into wider work, which has been achieved through this programme). Within this programme, Front Line Defenders have sought to monitor the gender of the HRDs they support, conducted improvements to its internal database to better monitor support to HRDs living with disabilities, HRDs outside their home country, different age ranges, and intersectional issues. Front Line Defenders have also conducted trainings with EU stakeholders on threats and responses for WHRDs to enhance their understanding of gender related dimensions of HRD attacks. According to partners and advocacy target interviewees, Front Line Defenders were perceived as supporting a wide range of women HRDs, HRDs from different minority or marginalised communities, and those facing multiple forms of discrimination. Front Line Defenders have also collaborated with specialist women's rights organisations or those addressing gender related issues and found effective ways to collaborate (for example Front Line Defenders' collaboration with women rights groups on sex worker rights defenders), learn from one another and share expertise (an effective model for enabling more HRDs from a broader range of communities to benefit from Front Line Defenders' protection support and expertise). HRDs interviewed (all three of which were women) emphasised that the support provided to them felt tailored, and specific to their unique needs and situations.

It is clear from this limited evaluation that Front Line Defenders routinely considers how gender and identity might impact the cases they support, and the specific protection needs of HRDs, enabled by their HRD-led approach to their work, and their ability to work flexibly across different topics and themes. Similarly, interviewees reported multiple examples of when Front Line Defenders have found ways to address gender related barriers to participation, for example enabling childcare support for advocacy or peer-learning events, and funding partners to attend alongside WHRDs (despite the additional budgetary challenges this might incur). Whilst Front Line Defenders have therefore taken some solid steps to integrating an intersectional gender lens into their work, there is of course more that can be done to further embed this lens. Front Line Defenders noted in one of their reports that partnerships with disability rights organisations and networks had not advanced as

much as had hoped, and the planned gender and intersectionality analysis do not appear to have been as in-depth or documented to the extent that might ensure a more specific and proactive approach to reducing gender and identity related barriers to protection. The evaluator considers (based on this evaluation) that this is not due to a lack of will or expertise, but rather due to the lack of time or capacity to embed this into both the strategic planning and implementation of programming efforts, in order to ensure these efforts are more meaningfully integrated into their work.

### Evaluator Reflection

HRDs and CSOs partners also raised the challenge of accessing resources to be able to continue to plan and execute their work as HRDs. One factor which Front Line Defenders may need to consider in the design of future programmes, or for further reflection of its organisational theory of change, is how to address the significant need for HRDs to access resources and opportunities to collaborate and connect, and to sustain themselves and their work. Whilst these may fall outside of the scope of protection, if Front Line Defenders' longer-term goal is to ensure HRDs continue to defend their and their communities' rights, this barrier also needs to be addressed. It may therefore be important to explore how Front Line Defenders might be able to support such work within its mandate, what partnerships it could rely on to ensure this happens, or how it might use its position and access to funders and funding networks to make the case for such work. Through this programme, Front Line Defenders has been able to engage the donor community through organizing two donor days, one in 2023 and another in 2025, as well as conducting research on funding available for human rights defenders including environmental defenders.

## Efficiency

The main operational/programmatic challenge identified in the evaluation concerns the monitoring and evaluation of the work. At the monitoring level, Front Line Defenders experienced some challenges in achieving some of the activity-based targets due to the indivisibility of some of the issues and topics covered and the holistic approach taken by the organisation. For example, support for an HRD might have gender related aspects as well as digital threats which arose from a business and human rights issue. Recognising the holistic nature of their work, and the indivisibility of some of the topics addressed is important to recognise and incorporate into goal and target setting.

Some of the key outcome indicators also present challenges for example, the percentage of individuals released from detention. Given Front Line Defenders works on a breadth of countries, some with more challenging and difficult prospects of a timely or positive outcome means this percentage could be low – yet these defenders still deserve access to support even if the environment is more challenging. Whilst the release of a defender in detention may be key to ensuring they can continue their work, the HRD might also have other objectives and goals that Front Line Defenders' protection advocacy could support, such as ensuring their experience is heard, amplified and documented, increasing the HRD's profile, or ensuring they are recognised as HRDs and not "enemies of the state" within their countries. These outcomes also contribute to the resilience and protection of a defender in different ways. In addition to monitoring key statistics relating to release, similar future projects might also consider creating more case based indicators (e.g. working

collaboratively with the HRD or their representatives to define the objective within their given context, and monitoring progress towards this). An aggregate indicator could also be achieved by monitoring the percentage of cases in which the HRD's primary objective was successfully achieved.

Also relating to monitoring and evaluation, Front Line Defenders struggled to develop and implement a process to adequately monitor the use and application of the tools and resources it created for supporting HRDs. Front Line Defenders indicated to the evaluator that they collect data following trainings and support provision to enable them to understand HRDs' perceived changes in knowledge or capacity on topics such as security.

### Evaluator Reflection

It is recommended that Front Line Defenders embeds evaluation and feedback processes more rigorously into their security and support processes (embedding a few key questions into the end of trainings, or a quick follow up survey following individual support), and also explore follow up evaluation and learning opportunities e.g. a tracer survey, or periodic focus group with HRDs to explore what has been implemented, what tools have been used, what barriers are in place which have prevented them from using or applying the new knowledge or tools etc. This could be done routinely, e.g. an annual survey to all supported HRDs, or annual focus group/interview programme with a sample of HRDs supported. Front Line Defenders could also connect with key partners who may have knowledge of how tools and resources are being used and shared within other networks of HRDs. These sessions could also be facilitated at events or opportunities where HRDs and partners are already gathered, converting them to broader co-learning events about what is working and what more is needed.

Many of the CSO partners and HRDs interviewed raised concerns about the resourcing and sustainability of the work of the regional protection coordinators, given how tailored, flexible and dedicated the partners and HRDs felt their support to be to their specific cases. Whilst this is a strength that speaks to the quality of support provided via the protection coordinators, given how valuable this relationship was for HRDs, HRDs were concerned about burn-out and sustainability for the Protection Coordinators.

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*"The Protection Coordinator is an angel for us. It is such a strong partnership with the Protection Coordinator, I do not know how she covers so many countries, she feels so present and active in our cases.... I don't know how she has the bandwidth to do this for so many different HRDs in different countries. I think Front Line Defenders probably need more coordinators like this as this can't be sustainable for one person. They have so much knowledge and experience which is such a valuable resource for us, a resource that we need to be sustained." – HRD, Ecuador*

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There were no other notable operational or programme management issues which impacted the delivery of the programme that were consistently raised by interviewees, or identified

through the documentation review. However, the following challenges were identified or mentioned at least once:

- Despite Front Line Defenders' intention to be long-term and systematic in their approach to pursuing protection for different HRDs, a lack of resources to enable strategic planning and rigorous/organised follow-up was cited by some Front Line Defenders staff. Staff interviewees indicated more time and budget are required for strategic planning, and identifying opportunities for reviewing and following up on cases previously advocated for. This is partly compounded that many cases may take some time to resolve, meaning the list of ongoing cases increases over time. More time was desired by some staff to be able to strategise more comprehensively on each case, looking at longer term advocacy strategies beyond specific activities and interventions.
- One external stakeholder commented that they often hear from HRDs that Front Line Defenders' support can be difficult to access with difficult forms to complete, lack of hotlines via signal or WhatsApp (for example if an HRD is having to flee, they may not have resources for international calls, or access to devices that are suitable for completing long forms). This stakeholder also shared anecdotes of HRDs saying they never received a response from Front Line Defenders – particularly HRDs who are new or where it may be their first time approaching Front Line Defenders.

One challenge consistently mentioned, outside of Front Line Defenders' control, was the significant changes in the political and human rights environment over the past few years, growing conflict and inter-state tensions, and a growing perception of the ineffectiveness or unwillingness of key advocacy levers to engage on some issues, and a growing sense of mistrust by HRDs and communities in some international systems. This appears to be a very legitimate concern shared by those interviewed, and will be important to consider when developing future programmes and advocacy strategies.

## Effectiveness

### ***Research and Global Analysis: Better understanding and awareness of key threats facing Human Rights Defenders globally (Outcome Objective 1)***

According to interviewees engaged in the evaluation, Front Line Defenders' research benefited from their brand and reputation, giving their reports a lot of weight and credibility. Stakeholders appreciated the global nature of the analysis, and the focused and digestible presentation of information. One advocacy target commented that they particularly appreciated the inclusion of examples of laws and policies which help to protect HRDs, supporting them to map good practices which exist that they might draw inspiration from.

Not only did the interviewees find the research to be of high quality, but they also actively shared and used the research in their own work – indicating that Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis is having a degree of influence on their work. One advocacy target mentioned they sent the Global Analysis to all of their different teams, shared it with working groups on HRDs, incorporated information into high-level speeches, and referred to statistics relating to killings of HRDs; a CSO partner described how Front Line Defenders' analysis compliments their own research, adding weight, perspective, and credibility to submissions they make at the national level. Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis has also had significant media reach, for example the 2022 report (published in 2023) was covered by seventy-eight different media outlets from over twenty countries.

Notably, the information relating to the number of killings seemed to be particularly effective in contributing to the media reach, and being used and referenced by different stakeholders. However Front Line Defenders and partners indicated some challenges in the collection and analysis of this data, principally the fact that it has the risk to be misleading in countries where it is too challenging to collect this type of data, where Front Line Defenders do not have partners or ground sources of information, and where governments are more successful in the erasure of HRDs and their work. Partners also emphasised the challenges in being able to verify data and incidences of killings due to a lack of resources, and the security risks associated with this type of work. One external interviewee felt that more coordination across different organisations collecting this type of data was needed, with some common frameworks, definitions and approaches that could make the data more accurate, consistent and robust, noting that Front Line Defenders might be in a strong position to take the lead on such coordination.

Interviewed partners also indicated that whilst the reports are useful, more could be done to contextualise the data relating to killings and threats, to give the reader a more nuanced understanding of the factors enabling killings and lack of accountability.

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*“The stories need to be contextualised, explaining the systems, context and environment which enable killings to happen” – CSO partner.*

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Both internal and external interviewees also reported that more time and resources should be prioritised into the dissemination planning of the Global Analysis and any other reports prepared to ensure they have maximum impact and reach, and using the trends and patterns identified to help inform advocacy planning.

***Advocacy: Stronger national, regional, and international protection of HRDs at risk (Outcome Objective 2)***

When discussing the strengths and added value of Front Line Defenders’ advocacy work, interviewees cited a range of different qualities and factors. Advocacy targets interviewed emphasised the importance of Front Line Defenders’ work to bring HRDs into direct contact with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), giving MEPs something more tangible to engage with and making it easier for them to raise issues as a result of these encounters; and emphasised the high quality, short and to the point briefings which succinctly outlined the key information, making it easy to act on. Front Line Defenders’ clear mandate focused on protection, their vetting procedures, the legal authority, and the presence of regional coordinators were all cited as key factors which underpinned the utility and engagement with their advocacy. One stakeholder felt that Front Line Defenders should do more to emphasise the work done by regional coordinators to strengthen the credibility and authority of their submissions and briefings, and provide more direct contact between coordinators and advocacy targets.

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*The Dublin Platform was greatly impactful to me as HRD, being a part of this year was a milestone. High level connections, strengthening*

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*partnerships as HRDs from different regions – Human Rights Defender,  
Sub-Saharan Africa*

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Based on interviews with advocacy targets, it appears to the evaluator that Front Line Defenders' case specific advocacy provide more added value compared to more general advocacy (given similar topics are covered by organisations like Amnesty or Human Rights Watch). Advocacy targets interviewed emphasised the value of Front Line Defenders' work on specific and actionable cases, which were often not covered by mainstream media or other organisations. One advocacy target commented:

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*“In one instance, Front Line Defenders conducted significant advocacy on a case that was not covered by the media and it successfully pushed for it to be included in the parliamentary agenda, ultimately leading to a resolution. It's rare for an individual case to make it onto the agenda, but this case was strategically timed to coincide with an official country visit, which played a key role in its success”.*

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The same stakeholder shared that Front Line Defenders were very effective in raising awareness at the EU of situations concerning HRDs at risk in the Gulf which were “flying under the radar.” Another advocacy target emphasised the close and practical relationship they had with Front Line Defenders, indicating Front Line Defenders were effective in providing specific details on what to raise e.g. which cases, what aspects of their case to emphasise, the risks to consider etc. It is clear therefore that Front Line Defenders' case specific and targeted advocacy is indeed adding value, helping HRD voices and experiences to be heard and documented, and at times resulting in practical/tangible changes for the situation of HRDs.

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*“Front Line Defenders' advocacy has certainly informed others working in foreign policy. We act on cases based on their research, and delegations have a better understanding of the issues and the needs of HRDs, and the different needs of women HRDs and what we can do”. – International Institution*

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In terms of improving Front Line Defenders advocacy work, multiple stakeholders suggested that Front Line Defenders could work more closely in collaboration with other international NGOs to make submissions where possible, and work more in and through coalitions and partnerships to support more UN advocacy, helping to strengthen the capacity of its partners to engage with these mechanisms. This may need to be done with care due to different mandates, definitions used and focus areas. The other area for improvement, particularly concerning EU level advocacy, was a need to target the wider European Parliament (EP), as opposed to what some interviewees described as the “usual suspects” (referring to those parts of the parliament and members that are already warm and receptive to HRD related

concerns and issues), and timing their engagements strategically (for example the EP will soon be setting the agenda for the proceeding period – an opportunity for Front Line Defenders to help ensure HRD protection is on this agenda).

At the EU level, interviewees also indicated that more could be done on the theme of digital threats faced by HRDs to help the delegation understand these issues more, and make more practical recommendations as to what the EU can do relating to big tech and associated threats to HRDs.

As mentioned previously, the context for HRDs and advocating for their protection is becoming increasingly challenging. Multiple interviewees suggested that with an increase in far-right representation in the EU, new trade agreements with countries which might be perpetrators of attacks on HRDs, and other global challenges, Front Line Defenders will need to take a more nuanced and strategic approach, thinking carefully which governments, institutions, and allies could be effective for each specific case or advocacy goal they are pursuing, noting they might be an effective allies on one case, but ineffective in another due to geopolitics, trade agreements etc.

### ***Enhanced Practical Support Available to HRDs at Risk (Outcome Objective 3)***

Front Line Defenders received high praise from interviewees for their rapid response work and holistic approach to protection of HRDs. One advocacy target emphasised that Front Line Defenders’ protection manuals were particularly valuable and comprehensive, and regularly distributed these to HRDs they met or networks that worked with HRDs. Based on data available from HRD interviews, and survey data following the Front Line Defenders’ Dublin Platform, it is clear that HRDs highly valued the practical support offered by Front Line Defenders. As mentioned previously, HRDs interviews described the support received as tailored, specific and added value to their cases and objectives as HRDs. Whilst only three HRDs were interviewed, all three described how they valued the holistic and multi-pronged approach taken by Front Line Defenders to support them, often exceeding their expectations.

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*“To be honest, at first, I didn’t expect much, I thought it would be another organisation taking my time – but I was actually really impressed. The campaign they started really raised the profile of my case; it showed my community that there is someone that will help you if you want to speak out. You can feel very alone when you face the kinds of threats I was up against, but every single day I had a voice supporting me thanks to Front Line Defenders”. – HRD, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

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HRDs interviewed also praised training they received on advocacy and security, as well as the wellbeing support provided.

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*“The Advocacy training was awesome...I learned how to act with less effort, how to not waste energy whilst still being active. I learned to focus*

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*on solutions and find the right partner to help me achieve these goals”. - HRD, Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

*“Front Line Defenders training opened up a new direction to us – we learned how international EU organisations could be useful, the different guidelines and organisations we can reach out to. That training changed significantly how we approach advocacy. We research more the mandate of who we are speaking with, what their stance is, we prepare more, and we do more after we meet them. This has given us more of a voice and more opportunity”. – HRD, Ukraine*

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Similar feedback was given via the Dublin Platform’s feedback survey, with defenders indicating wellbeing sessions helped them to feel safe and supported, security sessions enabled defenders to make practical changes to laptops and other devices for better protection, and that sessions were useful to meet others and become more aware of other human rights struggles across the world.

HRDs described having access to many different kinds of practical support and felt this was highly effective. In terms of enhancing the effectiveness, the defenders mainly emphasised wanting to duplicate and replicate Front Line Defenders’ offering so that more defenders like them could benefit. They also described wanting more time specifically dedicated to training and capacity building relating to physical and digital security. The defenders interviewed (and feedback from defenders after the platform) detailed a range of suggestions relating to wanting more time or resources for security support, including:

- wanting more time dedicated at training sessions or events to security (noting that these sessions felt rushed or limited as part of wider training and event programmes)
- having follow up sessions with defenders to check on progress in implementing digital security suggestions
- conducting risk and security assessments for both defenders and organisations facilitating support to defenders in partnership with Front Line Defenders.

One HRD also suggested providing more support to HRDs in documentation and physical and digital archive management, to ensure materials they may need for their work are protected whilst also mitigating personal risks of storing this information on their devices.

## Outcomes

Given the scale of the evaluation, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of the outcomes that Front Line Defenders work has contributed to, however, based on the feedback from interviewees, and documentation available for review, there is clearly a range of outcome themes that can be identified that Front Line Defenders different programme areas have (collectively) contributed to. This section outlines each theme with a brief description with an illustrative example of each, as summarised below with reference to the Programme results framework area.

Outcome theme identified	Relevance to specific objective: HRDs' resilience and protection globally is strengthened through increased understanding of and responses to key threats	Relevance to Outcome 1: Better understanding and awareness of key threats facing Human Rights Defenders globally	Relevance to Outcome 2: Stronger national, regional and international protection of HRDs at risk	Relevance to Outcome 3: Enhanced practical support available to HRDs at Risk
Enhanced documentation, archives and increasing pressure on governments to remedy threats and violations	X	X	X	
Increased recognition of HRDs and their work	X	X	X	
Improved sense of solidarity and resilience of HRDs and HRD movements	X			X
Restoring the status or capacity of HRDs to freely do their work	X	X	X	X
Improving standards and laws to help prevent attacks and threats on HRDs or strengthen protection	X		X	

***Enhanced documentation, archives and increasing pressure on governments to remedy threats and violations***

Documentation and archives play an important role in ensuring there is an accurate record of events and facts, contributing to a detailed account of the situation of individual defenders, community of targeted defenders, or the practices employed by states or other actors to silence HRDs. This is important in countries where there may be limited political will to ensure fair treatment or release of HRDs from detention. Through Front Line Defenders' monitoring, research and advocacy work, there is not only verified reports produced by Front Line Defenders, but also documented formally through EU, Council of Europe (CoE), and UN resolutions, increasing pressure on authorities to address the situation. One HRD interviewed as part of the evaluation emphasised the importance of the support received under this programme of having trial observers facilitated by Front Line Defenders, to

increase pressure and compliance with due process, and support accurate record keeping of legal processes and treatment of targeted HRDs.

### Example

On 28 November 2024, the European Parliament adopted the resolution "The shrinking space for civil society in Cambodia, in particular the case of the labour rights organisation CENTRAL", which includes information and insights from Front Line Defenders. The resolution states<sup>4</sup>:

1. Condemns the shrinking of the civic space in Cambodia; calls for the immediate release of all political prisoners, activists, journalists – including award-winning journalist Mech Dara –, human rights defenders and other civil society actors held on politically motivated charges; calls for the immediate cessation of all repression and harassment targeting civil society actors.
2. Calls on the Cambodian authorities to dismiss all politically motivated charges against CENTRAL and its members, to halt politically motivated audits and smear campaigns, and to respect the role of civil society organisations, including Equitable Cambodia and Mother Nature Cambodia, in promoting labour and human rights and defending the environment.

According to Front Line Defenders, Catarina Vieira, one of the key MEPs who spoke in the plenary debate to support the resolution, was one of the advocacy targets that Front Line Defenders engaged by arranging a meeting with HRDs. Besides the advocacy round that took place in September, Front Line Defenders also worked with other NGOs in Brussels to push the EU to act on the issue of reprisals against HRDs and the shrinking civic space in Cambodia.

In addition to increasing pressure, securing this formal documentation and recognition that the individuals affected are indeed HRDs, and not enemies of the state, or terrorists, as might be described by media or governments is extremely important for HRDs and their families, one Front Line Defenders partner described:

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*“Part of the impact is making sure killed HRDs are recognised as HRDs, and that this is documented, this is important for their communities and their families, and can play an important role in helping to secure longer term policy changes to support bills which protect HRDs”.*

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### **Increased recognition and profile of HRDs and their work**

Front Line Defenders' approach to amplify the voices of HRDs has also resulted in elevated profiles of HRDs, helping both them and their cause to receive more political and media attention. By leveraging Front Line Defenders' relationships with different advocacy stakeholders, reporting on HRD cases, and granting awards to HRDs at risk, the issues they address gain greater visibility, and HRDs themselves gain better access to protection and advocacy levers.

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*“Without Front Line, we wouldn't have as much of a robust network – they really increased the visibility of our cases at domestic and international*

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0053\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0053_EN.html)

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*levels...We are showing the world what the criminalisation of environmental defenders looks like. And it helps protect defenders, if anything was to happen to them, the mining company knows it will become international news". – HRD, Ecuador*

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### **Example**

In 2023, Segundo Ordóñez was awarded the Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk for the Americas. Segundo, part of a farming community in Ecuador who became the legal representative in a case challenging exploitation and poor working conditions, and as a result has faced various threats and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) against him.<sup>5</sup> As well as the award, Front Line Defenders supported Segundo to take part in advocacy rounds. According to Front Line Defenders his case was featured in a European Parliamentary Debate. This eventually resulted in letters from MEPs to the ambassador of Ecuador and the Chief of the Constitutional Court, and interventions from the UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights Defenders and on Modern Slavery. The legal case in question eventually resulted in the Constitutional Court of Ecuador ruling that Japanese-owned Furukawa Plantaciones del Ecuador CA implemented slavery-like labour practices on its plantations.

### ***Improved sense of solidarity and resilience of HRD and HRD movements***

Partner CSOs emphasised the importance of events like the Dublin platform, and other convenings facilitated by Front Line Defenders to allow HRDs to connect and share experiences across different countries and regions.

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*"There is a lot of impact gained from identifying shared experiences between HRDs around the world, we realise we are not alone in the challenges we face, and helps to give us perspective" described one partner.*

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Another partner stressed how valuable (and rare) these opportunities are "We really need more spaces like the Dublin platform where we can meet, discuss how we are facing challenges, find ways to coordinate the defence of HRDs together". Front Line Defenders staff coordinating the Memorial project also described the healing nature for HRDs and their families/communities through events like Dublin Platform, and cited multiple examples and exchanges they have had with HRDs that demonstrate the value of the Dublin platform and memorial events to help HRD communities process trauma.

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*"At the Dublin Platform, they created a safe and respectful space where difficult and often traumatic topics could be addressed openly. I greatly valued the access to a wide network — from other human rights defenders to representatives of international organizations. This support was not only*

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<sup>5</sup> See more about the facts of this case here <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/segundo-ordonez>

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*practical but also emotional — the sense of solidarity was empowering and deeply appreciated” – HRD, Ukraine*

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HRDs interviewed also emphasised the importance of Front Line Defender’s support in increasing their resilience through the programme’s wellbeing retreats, advice, and guidance.

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*“They (Front Line Defenders) were good at helping us set boundaries with communities of defenders we were working with, they gave us a lot of guidance on the most appropriate ways to support other defenders”. – HRD, Ecuador*

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### **Restoring the status or capacity of HRDs to freely do their work**

Front Line Defenders’ longer-term goal is to ensure that HRDs can continue to do their peaceful and legitimate human rights defence work. Whether through advocacy to strengthen engagement for protection, security support/practical tools or resources, urgent appeals, or other types of interventions. Front Line Defenders have contributed to countless examples of enabling HRDs to continue to do their work, whether that be removing travel restrictions on HRDs seeking to engage in advocacy work abroad, facilitating support and connections to restore the licenses of lawyer HRDs, or working with embassies to release detained HRDs due to be returned to their country of origin. Front Line Defenders have taken targeted and tailored measures to support individual HRDs to ensure their protection and freedom to engage in their work.

#### **Case Study: Fighting Defamation Charges and Strengthening the Voice of Anti-pollution Campaigners**

Hajrija Čobo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), is an environmental rights defender representing a group of activists who campaign to protect their forests and rivers. Hajrija was accused of defamation by the British mining company Adriatic Metals who sought financial compensation from Hajrija. Following extensive advocacy from Front Line Defenders on the case of WHRD Hajrija Čobo which included writing to the authorities and to diplomats, facilitating a meeting between her and the EU Delegation and other advocacy actors, and a social media campaign. In April 2024, Adriatic Metals attempted to withdraw their lawsuit and settle. However Hajrija rejected the withdrawal, stating “Withdrawal means they can reactivate it anytime, aim to silence me forever... I am doing this to ensure freedom of speech for everyone, not just myself.” The Court ruled on the case and dismissed Hajrija of the defamation charges. Hajrija also received advocacy training, security advice and wellbeing support from Front Line Defenders.

**The WHRD and her legal counsel directly credited Front Line Defenders, and the international pressure created as a result of its advocacy. “This support and the campaign were the best thing that ever happened to me in my activism” described Hajrija.**

Since the case, and because of Front Line Defenders’ support, Hajrija described feeling more confident and embolden to continue her advocacy:

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*“Now I speak even louder, after they sued me and failed, who will dare sue me again? They know I am serious, and they know I have support from around the world”.*

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Not only has the support helped Hajrija to continue her advocacy, but she also believes it has helped others in her town feel safe enough to speak out:

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*“It has created a voice against pollution in our town – more people are raising their voice and speaking freely after my case. They have seen that we can win, people see you can win even without having a lot of money, they have seen that money doesn’t matter if truth is in your hands”.*

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### ***Improving standards and laws to help prevent attacks and threats on HRDs or strengthen protection.***

Addressing specific and individual risks to HRDs is a significant part of Front Line Defenders’ work, but they have also contributed to improving policies and guidelines to help prevent violations and protect defenders more systemically. Whilst it is not possible to attribute policy/legal changes solely to Front Line Defenders’ advocacy on such issues, they have made consistent and targeted interventions and advocacy, leveraging their relationships with different institutions and governments to support stronger inclusion and wording on the protection of HRDs. Throughout the programme, Front Line Defenders used their advocacy resources to enhance protection for HRDs in relation to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, the EU Visa Policy for HRDs, and EU and US [joint guidance](#) for online platforms on protecting HRDs<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Example**

Following intensive advocacy around an EU Visa policy for HRDs, the European Commission adopted a revised [Visa Code Handbook](#) which is the authoritative source for guidance on implementing the Visa Code and issuing Schengen visas. For the first time it has specific references to HRDs as a special category throughout the document. If implemented correctly, this should allow more flexibility around the issuing of visas for HRDs and hopefully address some of the main blocks that HRDs face. In the run up to the revision of this policy, Front Line Defenders was heavily involved in putting together an EU member state seminar organised by the Spanish EU presidency “A Safe Haven for Human Rights Defenders – Visas as an EU Tool for Protection.”

### ***Internal outcomes***

In addition to these outward looking outcomes, Front Line Defenders staff also reported important internal outcomes concerning their own advocacy capacity such as gaining

<sup>6</sup> Further details of these are available in Front Line Defenders’ donor reports for the programme.

internal clarity that international and regional advocacy are tactics that Front Line Defenders can and will support; as well as increasing their own reputation as a credible advocate for HRD protection, illustrated by the increasing number of relationships and requests from different advocacy targets for Front Line Defenders' input. With many high-level institutions (governments, EU, UN etc.) using and referring to Front Line Defenders materials, there is a high level of regard for their focused and targeted perspectives on HRD protection that adds value to their work.

## Sustainability

Whilst Front Line Defenders have contributed to some important outcomes and results; interviewees were keen to emphasise the threats to the sustainability of these outcomes due to an increasingly challenging operating context. As conflict increases globally, protection will remain important, but HRDs needs are likely to become broader than only protection, with a wider range of essential and pressing needs; similarly with the US recent cuts to foreign aid, planned reductions in UK aid, and governments increasingly allocating more budget to military and defence, there are likely to be fewer resources at a time where the threats to human rights defenders could increase in scale and severity. There continues to be an important need for both the emergency response support that Front Line Defenders can offer HRDs, as well as multi-pronged advocacy to highlight the cases of HRDs in need, and the types of threats they are experiencing.

Front Line Defenders is likely to be facing a more complex advocacy environment and increase in demand for their support, and thus it will be critical to secure sustained funding and support for its work. Based on data collected during this evaluation, it is the evaluators opinion that Front Line Defenders should also look holistically at the sector and use their positioning to help advocate for funding to support not only their work, but the work of HRDs and other networks that respond to the needs which fall outside of their mandate. It will be important for Front Line Defenders to have more resources and prioritise more time to plan their advocacy work strategically to make sure it is as cohesive and impactful as possible, creatively working with and through partnerships where possible.

Throughout this programme Front Line Defenders has been an effective partner for many organisations and advocacy targets, establishing trust, credibility and authority on HRD protection – these relationships are an important factor for the sustainability of their work and need to continue to be nourished and expanded.<sup>7</sup> Multiple partners emphasised that Front Line Defenders is in a strong position to work as effective facilitators and collaborators to help HRDs and HRD networks to share lessons and amplify their work. There are pockets of networks like the Memorial programme where there may be good practices to learn in terms of convening HRDs from different areas to support mutual learning, strategizing and support.

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*“Front Line Defenders is one of the partners we rely on and talk about most when we need help, but they need to regionalise their support more,*

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<sup>7</sup> Whilst most external stakeholders commented on the reliability of Front Line Defenders as a partner, one partner commented that there is some inconsistency on if/when Front Line Defenders will respond, and could do more to be an effective collaborator across the sector. The evaluator suggests exploring this further when possible and when a larger sample of partners could be engaged.

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*with more communication and joint planning together” – CSO Partner Organisation*

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### **Evaluator Reflection**

Both internally and externally there appears to be appetite to continue to de-centralise the work, expanding the regional coordination in both scale and autonomy to increase reach and improve efficiency and coherence in decision-making. This thinking, which the evaluator understands is already in progress at Front Line Defenders, could help to ensure the challenges raised in relation to access, contextualising research, responses and advocacy efforts, and improved efficiency are addressed. As the sector continues to face increasing challenges, Front Line Defenders should continue to be part of, and be an active participant in its coalitions and partnerships to help strengthen both the support and advocacy aimed at HRD protection, and the sustainability and resilience of the sector's work.

## **Conclusions**

Whilst a more robust study may need to be conducted to be more authoritative on the impact of this programme, based on the data collected and reviewed in this evaluation, the evaluator is of the opinion that Front Line Defenders is a well-positioned, well-regarded organisation that effectively built relationships with a range of advocacy targets to advance the protection of HRDs and work effectively towards the programme objectives. Their HRD-led approach ensured that not only were they working on the most relevant themes and topics affecting HRDs globally, but they also tailored their support and advocacy to the specific needs and aims of the HRDs they sought to protect. The support received by HRDs was consistently praised for its comprehensiveness and quality – adding value to their own advocacy work and enhancing their protection and safety. Whilst HRDs valued the practical security support on offer, they indicated that more time and resources need to be dedicated to preventative security planning, more, and longer, dedicated spaces to build knowledge of good Cyber security practices, and support and follow up on the implementation of security practices.

The four programme themes remained relevant throughout the programme, and through ongoing research and analysis, Front Line Defenders are already identifying emerging issues (e.g. HRDs in conflict) which may become more dominant, and they will likely need to continue to adapt and respond to as they emerge. Protection work concerning killings and threats, and issues facing women and minority HRDs appear to be well incorporated into their advocacy strategies and planning, however there may be more work to do to advance Front Line Defenders advocacy work on digital and business related threats, factoring in how advocacy tactics might need to be adapted, and ensuring their targets have a clear understanding of both the issues and the actions they can take to protect HRDs.

With ongoing shifts and challenges in the geo-political situation, and outstanding questions regarding the effectiveness of some governments and institutions to hold states and businesses accountable for violations of the rights of HRDs, Front Line Defenders is likely to face significant challenges which should be addressed: 1) the need for both resources and

time to enable more strategic thinking, planning and adapting to allow effective and efficient responses to changes and opportunities, and to find new ways or broader range of actors to advocate for the protection of HRDs and 2) addressing the issue of scale, with potential for more and more HRDs to become at risk, and a growing case list to monitor and maintain action on, Front Line Defenders will need to think creatively about securing resources, finding ways to regionalise and localise its efforts to enable more nimble and context specific responses to threats and opportunities, and enhance its partnership working to help scale their offering to a wider and more diverse audience so they can reach more networks and communities of HRDs who could benefit from their support (for example networks of disability rights defenders).

Front Line Defenders frequent invitations to engage with the UN, EU, governments, and the sheer number of HRDs that seek their support is an indicator of the high-quality service they provide, their authority on matters of protection, as well as their ability to develop and maintain important relationships and networks. This has enabled them to contribute to range of important outcomes for HRDs which align with the objectives sought within this programme.

Strengthening future programmes with simple but more consistent approaches to monitoring and evaluation will also enable more learning to help improve their work, and facilitate the documentation and assessment of outcomes and impact more effectively.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations below should be treated as strategic reflections and areas for Front Line Defenders to consider exploring further.

### **Strategy**

- Front Line Defenders should review its Theory of Change with a specific view to ensure a power and influence analysis is explored to help map and identify the possible outcomes that could be achieved through engagement with different stakeholders. Considering carefully how recent geo-political changes might mean former assumptions and programme logic may be less valid, and identifying and solidifying impact-oriented logic into the theory of change that is coherent with the current context. This can then be used to help inform resourcing and programmatic strategies.
- Continue to explore devolving Front Line Defenders work to be more regionally focused, allocating resources to ensure the focus remains on better, more context specific, and adaptive protection support and advocacy.
- In strategic planning (and within the Theory of Change), ensure broader recognition that Front Line Defenders is playing an important piece of a much wider eco-system which enables HRDs to be able to continue to do their work. Ensuring all HRD needs are met (even if outside of Front Line Defenders mandate and is delivered by partners or other organisations).
- Create a more formalised gender/international mainstreaming policy or guidelines to solidify the good practices already in place at Front Line Defenders, whilst also ensuring that this thinking is part of budget planning, financial and operational processes. These guidelines should ensure there is a clear and documented process for gender and intersectionality analysis for programme themes, projects etc. to

ensure common alignment and in-depth understanding of the needs of WHRDs and minority groups.

## Advocacy

- Budget for, and allocate more time for planning and strategy (both within Front Line Defenders and in partnership with others) – ensuring there is a clear plan of action for each case taken on that fits within broader advocacy goals and priorities, and that each action for an individual case is part of a thought-out long-term engagement/advocacy plan. Ensuring there is a clear rationale and potential for impact for each stakeholder targeted. Front Line Defenders might invest in additional research to map out a wider range of regional advocacy targets to diversify its approach, assessing the viability of different bodies to engage with. For example, engaging with the CoE Committee of Ministers, The Interamerican Commission on Human Rights, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) etc..
- Prioritise case specific/individual HRD related advocacy where Front Line Defenders can add specific value and where other organisations may not be addressing.
- Continue to invest in regional and thematic analysis and database systems and build in time to enable advocacy strategies and priorities to be built around data trends. This will help enable real-time learning from available data. Issues and themes can be identified for broader advocacy goals, working with HRDs affected by these issues to co-develop tangible solutions and responses. This could help to ensure HRDs remain at the centre of broader advocacy objectives and that solutions are meaningfully nuanced.
- Ensure there is sufficient time and resources to enable Front Line Defenders to react and adapt to changes and opportunities which might affect the advocacy planning.

## Research

- Consider if Front Line Defenders would be willing to take the lead in creating/facilitating the co-creation of a common framework and methodology for monitoring and collating data on killings that could be used and developed by a range of partners, to help improve the consistency of data, and remove the research planning burden for CSOs.
- Find more ways to communicate the context behind key threats and issues in different countries and regions, so readers have a strong understanding of the systems, laws and other factors which enable killings, threats or other HRD issues.

## Partnerships

- Continue to build on and develop more coalitions and partnerships with different communities of HRDs/CSOs led by and with experience of those directly affected by different forms of discrimination (e.g. LGBTIQ+, disability rights, etc.). This will allow for expertise exchange, as well as deepening Front Line Defenders knowledge of specific issues Front Line Defenders and its ability to offer tailored protection resources, advice and advocacy support.
- When working on broader advocacy goals (e.g. visa policies, national or regional laws etc.), it is recommended to ensure this work is done in partnership with other organisations and that it is visible to others where safe to do so. Given Front Line

Defenders limited resources, it may be that Front Line Defenders could offer more of a facilitation role for such initiatives, convening others to align on specific goals and facilitating access or support for the wider coalition of partners to address these goals.

## Support to HRDs

- Ensure sufficient time and resources are given to HRDs to support physical and cyber security capacity building, knowledge sharing, and implementation of good practices.
- Continue to build on Dublin Platform, ensuring there are follow up actions and plans following the event to sustain the energy, momentum and connections established at these events. Where possible, facilitate more networking and collaboration opportunities at different levels (local, regional, global etc.) to allow HRDs to connect and learn from common challenges and issues and/or to coordinate protection.
- Consider offering Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) research capacity development (either directly or via partners) for organisations involved in collating data on killings of HRDs, especially in contexts where there are high risks for the collection of data and/or limited access to regions or information sources. This could also include digital archive management training and support.
- Conduct a risk assessment and mitigation strategy for partners involved in researching killings and collecting data on this, and those brokering support to networks of HRDs – ensuring Front Line Defenders are doing all they can to mitigate physical digital and psychosocial risks faced by doing this work.
- Review processes and protocols for responding to requests for support from HRDs to ensure processes are in place so that all HRDs obtain a response to their request. Consider the possibility of making a hotline available via digital platforms like WhatsApp or signal.
- Sense-check or review HRD reporting processes for situations where third party contacts or organisations may be involved in facilitating communication between defenders and Front Line Defenders – ensure fair reporting and accountability processes are in place which do not put additional risk or burden on HRDs or third party partners.
- Reflect on the definition of an HRD to make sure it is fit for purpose, sense checking to see if there are any significant limitations that might impact the achievement of advocacy and support goals, or if it might be leaving out any groups of HRDs who are vulnerable to risk. Make sure there is sufficient coherence in this definition with the wider field of actors working to advance the protection of HRDs.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

- When developing key success indicators, consider making them context and HRD specific. For example, instead of “% of urgent appeals that resulted in positive outcome for the HRD” recognise that these are part of wider advocacy strategy by HRD, and happening within different contexts of what is or possible. Consider defining with the HRD what the desired outcome is in their particular case and context, and evaluate each case against this. The indicator could therefore be “% of cases in which the HRD’s primary objective has been achieved.”

- Use MEL to continue to support the regionalisation of the work, avoiding blanket target for indicators and thinking what a realistic target for each indicator is in each region or sub-region.
- Build in flexibility into the logic-models and indicators used for projects and programmes. For example, if the same activities are being conducted across different themes, overall targets can be defined with percentage indicators for each theme. E.g. Target = 30 Urgent Appeals, 20% address digital topics, 50% address killings or physical threats etc.". This could help with monitoring the scope and breadth of issues without having too many separate outputs.
- Consider developing a broader/thematic outcomes framework which identifies and maps the broad range of outcomes that Front Line Defenders' work contributes too, using this as a blueprint to aid the collection and identification of outcome examples and evidence i.e. developing a suite of outcomes areas that Front Line Defenders' and HRDs expect or hope to see if the interventions are being successful, which once defined, can be used to help design Front Line Defenders' monitoring and evaluation strategies to ensure collecting relevant data to demonstrate these outcomes – see [this framework for Digital Rights](#) as an example/ for example.
- Consider doing an annual HRDs survey or interview programme to explore the longer-term impacts and outcomes of Front Line Defenders support, whether through advocacy, practical support, or the use of tools – to allow a longer-term measure of impact and the exploration of the use and implementation of tools, trainings etc.

## Recommendations for Funders

- Provide funding to organisations (like Front Line Defenders) who take a holistic and tailored approach to protection, combining different tactics such as advocacy, training, and rapid response. This allows flexible and human-centred responses to be deployed and helps to ensure multiple levers or tactics can be used to increase the likelihood of success for HRDs.
- Ensure funding portfolios which seek to support HRDs addresses the wide range of HRD needs to facilitate their work. This ranges from protection, advocacy to improve the operating environment, resources for planning and strategizing, to wellbeing initiatives etc. It is important to make sure all pieces of the puzzle are funded.
- Where meaningful consider allocating resources to fund more joint initiatives to foster more cross sector collaboration and relationship development, or funding projects which allow for different sectors to connect, align, and collaborate in meaningful ways.

# Annexes

## 1. Documents reviewed

### Programme Documentation

- Application for Finnish Government support for INGOs' (including annexes)
- Y1 Report and Results Framework
- Y2 report and Results Framework
- Y3 Interim Report Notes
- Front Line Defenders submission on WHRDs in Conflict
- Beirut Advocacy Workshop Report
- Quarterly Analyses 2022-23
- List of Global Analysis 2022 mentions and references
- Dublin Platform Survey Data

### Additional Organisational Documentation

- Front Line Defenders Gender Audit (2018)
- Front Line Defenders Irish Aid Evaluation (2021)
- Indigenous Peoples Project Evaluation (2023)
- Impact and Lessons Learned Review in Supporting Ukrainian HRDs (2023)
- Front Line Defenders Strategic Plan Interim Review (2021)

## 2. Key Informant Interview Respondent Breakdown

The table below outlines the planned respondent group, and the number of interviews conducted for each stakeholder group. See data limitations sections for further information.

<b>Stakeholder Group</b>	<b>Interviews Planned</b>	<b>Interviews Conducted</b>
<b>Front Line Defenders Staff</b>	3	4
<b>HRDs</b>	6	3
<b>Governments and intergovernmental bodies (UN, EU etc.)</b>	4	3
<b>NGO and advocacy partners</b>	2	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15-16</b>	<b>12</b>