



Strategy for the Norwegian Human Rights Fund 2026-2030

Protecting human rights globally through supporting human rights organisations locally

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1 About the NHRF

The Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF) was founded almost 40 years ago, in 1988, with the explicit goal of mobilising and providing funding to local human rights organisations on the frontlines of the struggle for human rights globally. Since then, we have supported thousands of local human rights organisations around the world, without intermediary links or time-consuming procedures. We are a member-based organisation, and our current member organisations are Amnesty International Norway, the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), the Atlas Alliance, the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights at the University of Oslo, and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations.

Our vision is:

A world of democratic and human rights-respecting societies that are free of discrimination, marginalisation and inequality, where perpetrators of human rights violations are held accountable, human rights defenders are protected and people can claim their rights without fear.

Our mission is:

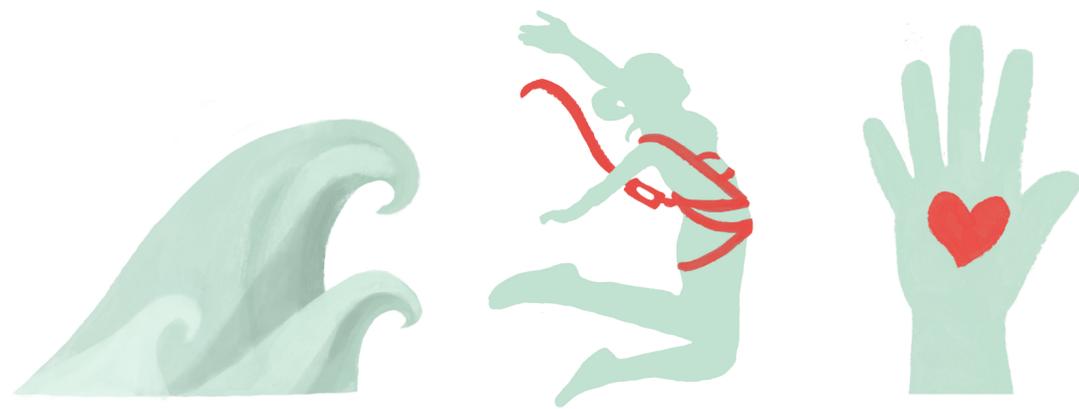
To ensure that funding is made available to support *local* human rights organisations in conducting human rights work where *they* set the agenda. To provide funding in a way that is flexible, courageous and done in solidarity with local human rights organisations. Through this, we contribute to human rights defenders and their organisations having the resources, skills and connections they need to be able to successfully conduct their human rights work.

② The foundation for our work

We aim to be a flexible and courageous donor and partner acting in solidarity with local human rights organisations and human rights defenders around the world.

We believe in the importance of human rights initiatives being led by those experiencing human rights injustices themselves. Local communities, organisations and networks that are empowered with the funds, knowledge and agency to demand that their rights are fulfilled are essential for the fulfilment of human rights globally. We consider funding and supporting such actors to be our most important contribution to defending human rights.

The international normative framework for human rights, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations resolution on human rights defenders, forms an important foundation of our work. The work of the organisations we support furthermore builds on the wider frameworks on human rights, development, and peace and security. This includes the Women, Peace and Security agenda, based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.¹



¹ The work of the organisations we support most closely aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

③ The global challenges we are aiming to respond to

Two intersecting and mutually reinforcing trends are currently characterising the global landscape of human rights work: **A decline in democracy and respect for human rights**, underpinned by such developments as growing inequality, an escalating climate crisis and threats to a rules-based international order, combined with **dramatic cuts in aid budgets** of the United States of America and European countries, including cuts to human rights funding.

The last decades have seen a rise in autocratic regimes and civic space shrinking across the globe.² The fundamental freedoms that are preconditions for being able to carry out any kind of human rights work are under major threat. Governments are putting in place legislation to limit or criminalise human rights

work, including introducing restrictions on foreign funding, as well as other legislative and administrative changes to stifle human rights work. Human rights defenders are often under surveillance and on the receiving end of threats and attacks. We are furthermore seeing growing inequalities in the world,³ with a clear negative impact on the global human rights situation.

At the same time as needs grow, we are seeing projections of global aid declining.⁴ In many countries, particularly middle-income countries, there has long been a “donor exodus” and a clear lack of funds despite a worsening human rights situation and reduced room for action to conduct human rights work. Moreover, while there is much talk of “localisation” of humanitarian, development and

human rights work, only a small fraction of global funding for human rights goes to local human rights organisations in the Global South and East.⁵

In addition to these two major trends, there are other intersecting developments that impact both the challenges that human rights defenders are working to address and the environment for human rights work. This includes the escalating climate crisis, the continued exploitation of natural resources globally, gender-based discrimination against women and LGBTIQ+ persons, and further threats to an already crumbling rules-based international order.

Considering our mandate and our comparative advantages in the ecosystem of human rights actors globally, these are the main challenges we aim to respond to through our work.

² CIVICUS Monitor. 2024. *People Power Under Attack 2024*.

³ Kamande, A. et al. 2024. Oxfam. *The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2024*.

⁴ OECD. 2025. *Cuts in Official Development Assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term*.

In addition, a study conducted by Frontline Defenders in the first half of 2025, carried out across 58 regional and international civil society groups working in whole or part on HRD protection and support, found that 75% of the organisations reported funding cuts over the past year (April 2024-April 2025), while 83% of respondents reported an increase in protection requests from HRDs only since January 2025. 20 May 2025. *Civil Society Call to Action for Funders Global Funding Cuts and the Impact on the Human Rights Defender Protection Ecosystem* (Not for Publication).

⁵ As an example, the Human Rights Funders Network did a study in 2020, based on an analysis of over 28,000 grants from 761 funders in 51 countries, which showed that only 17% of funding supported human rights in the Global South and East, with only 58% of these funds granted to organisations in these parts of the world. Human Rights Funders Network. 2024. *Advancing Human Rights: 2020 Key Findings*.

4 How we will respond to these challenges

The challenges mentioned above have enhanced the relevance of the NHRF mandate and model. **It has become even more important to strengthen and expand funds like the NHRF who can provide direct support, financial and otherwise, to local human rights organisations and movements so that they can conduct their human rights work.**

We work with a model of prioritised countries that are selected based on mapping and analyses of where NHRF support is most needed and where it has most potential for positive impact. In these countries we support work that falls under all our thematic areas. Outside of the priority countries, we only support local actors who work within the thematic area of “protection of human rights defenders and the right to defend rights”.

We will prioritise support to the following kinds of organisations and networks:

- * Those that are small to medium-sized. Some initiatives will be nascent, and others can be more experienced.
- * Those that are community-based/grassroots-based and have representation of target group members/community members in the organisation, including in decision-making positions.
- * Those based in our priority countries and working within our interlinked, prioritised thematic areas.
- * Those that have few or no other external donors, and no other Norwegian funding.
- * Those that are women led and/or foster women and gender-diversity in leadership.
- * Those aiming to ensure intergenerational approaches in leadership and foster the sustainability of the human rights movements through a focus on succession planning in the organisation.



We generally enter into initial agreements with grantee partners after open calls, while sometimes inviting a select number of organisations to submit concept notes and/or proposals. Our donors and member organisations can also propose projects or grantee partners for us to support, with or without earmarked financial support. We generally do not provide funding to organisations that are international NGOs or networks.

5 Thematic focus areas

The issues that organisations and movements address are deeply interconnected and rarely fit neatly into one thematic category. Work on furthering human rights often cuts across multiple thematic areas, reflecting the complexity of human rights abuses and the efforts to counter them. Recognising this overlap, we direct our support to organisations and movements working on one or more of the following interlinked thematic areas:



Access to justice and promotion of accountability

Access to justice and work against impunity for human rights violations is essential both for ensuring justice to those affected and to act as a deterrent for future crimes. Perpetrators of past violations need to be held accountable and potential perpetrators should know that they are likely to be held accountable if they commit human rights violations in the future.

The work on access to justice and promotion of accountability is often linked to transitional justice work in conflict or post-conflict environments and often involves seeking accountability for human rights abuses taking place during conflict. Work for access to justice and promotion of accountability can also be linked to human rights abuses committed by businesses and corporations, as well as violations of human rights committed by state and non-state actors in general.

Inclusive societies free of discrimination and inequality

Work against discrimination and inequality and for more inclusive societies is fundamental to human rights work. The kinds of discrimination and effects of inequality faced by communities and persons varies depending on the context and may change over time, necessitating a flexible approach to the work that is supported under this thematic area. Examples of what is eligible for support is work to ensure the rights of ethnic or other minorities, indigenous peoples, women, members of the LGBTIQ+ community, persons with disabilities, marginalised workers, migrants, as well as Dalits and others experiencing caste-based discrimination.

Environmental human rights

Protection of our common environment such as land, forest, and other strategic ecosystems, is in humanity's common interest. Indigenous peoples and other local communities depend on and co-live with the forests and ecosystems, their well-being is typically bound to nature and territories, and their knowledge and presence is key in their protection. Indigenous and community environmental defenders suffer constant threats, persecutions and murders for defending their territories, land and forests against extractive companies, armed groups and environmental degradation.

Through promoting and acknowledging the complex connection between indigenous and local communities' livelihoods, tenure rights, ways of living, knowledge systems and biodiversity, we will contribute to strengthening both the conservation of nature and strategic ecosystems and the protection and promotion of human rights.

Protection of human rights defenders and the right to defend human rights

The protection of human rights defenders and the right to defend human rights is a fundament for all other human rights work. Protection must be tailored to the specific social and cultural context that human rights defenders and communities live and operate in, and on both an individual and collective level. We take a holistic approach to protection, understanding that it entails physical, digital, psychosocial and communal elements, and that it can be both proactive by focusing on prevention and self-protection strategies, as well as reactive by responding when attacks happen. Local human rights organisations and local, national and regional networks play an important role in protecting human rights defenders and defending the right to defend human rights.

In addition to providing grants focusing on the protection of human rights defenders and the right to defend human rights, the NHRF will continue to manage the temporary relocation programme *Oslo as a Breathing Space City for human rights defenders*.⁶

Other than managing the temporary relocation programme, the NHRF does not provide support to individual human rights defenders.

⁶ The NHRF is the secretariat for this programme, which we manage in collaboration with four other Norwegian human rights NGOs. The human rights defenders who are selected for the programme come to Oslo for a stay of up to three months, allowing them to take a break from their everyday life in stressful and hostile environments. The aim is that they can return to their home countries with a larger and stronger network, having rested and recovered, and carrying feelings of solidarity and support with them.



6 Our methods of working with grantee partners

We support local human rights organisations in three interconnected ways: **funding, organisational development, and building connections and opening doors.**

Funding

We are primarily a human rights fund. Our main method of working is to provide direct financial support to local human rights organisations, with the main goal of supporting the local agendas and priorities of our grantee partners.

In line with our core mandate of providing funding to local human rights organisations and reaching those who often have few or no other donors, we generally provide funding for up to six years. Our role in the ecosystem of donors is focused on reaching those that are small or medium-sized. Through limiting the number of years we fund one organisation, it is our goal to be able to constantly fund new, smaller, organisations, while the organisations we have supported over some years are able to reach out to other donors that they were previously either not aware of and/or not able to fundraise from. It will also be our aim to foster synergies across the ecosystem of human rights funding, by connecting grantee partners to relevant opportunities for them and their work. A responsible exit from the funding relationship is as such a priority for us.

As per our values, we aim to be a flexible donor that provides funding adapted to the diverse needs of the local organisations we support. Our perspective is that **the organisations themselves are best positioned to determine their own priorities and approaches given their context.** In our grant making, we therefore focus on finding flexible and responsive solutions to locally anchored initiatives. This means that in addition to project funding, we encourage supported organisations to include capacity building of staff, psycho-social support and wellbeing, organisational development, measures to enhance their security, or other necessary administrative costs in their budgets.

In certain circumstances we are also able to provide grants to specialised organisations that can be strategic partners of the NHRF and provide support to our other grantee partners in a country or region.

Organisational development

We will work on organisational development in two ways, both with the aim of strengthening the organisations' ability to succeed in their human rights work:

- 1) Providing our own support.** This will particularly be in the areas of financial management, policies and procedures on administration and human resources, organisational development, anti-corruption work, safeguarding work, and monitoring, evaluation, learning and development (MELD) work.
- 2) Connecting the grantee partners to organisations that can provide specialised training or accompaniment or support peer to peer learning.** This can be in several areas where the grantee partners assess that they need support, e.g. communications and advocacy, fundraising, or protection and security, including digital security and psycho-social support. It can also relate to continued strengthening and learning in specific thematic areas.

Within our available resources, the NHRF will seek to organise digital and physical meeting spaces between local organisations in-country and across countries, so that co-sharing and co-learning can take place between the organisations.

We consciously consider ways of working where we can support organisations that are more nascent or less experienced, without them being overburdened with administrative requirements. During the first years of our funding relationship, we aim to support and assist our grantee partners so they can develop their organisational structures to be able to handle more complex grants and more complex donor requirements, without compromising their organisational identity. We will consciously work to ensure that we do not support unnecessary and unwanted bureaucratic development, so called "NGO'isation". There are certain requirements, particularly in the areas of financial management and administrative procedures, that need to be in place to be able to receive funds from the NHRF and other donors. However, for all other organisational development initiatives, it will be the local organisations deciding what their priorities are. Overall, our aim is to contribute to the development of sustainable organisations and networks that can operate independently and in line with their own priorities.





Building connections and opening doors

To support the grantee partners' ability to do advocacy and campaigning, as well as supporting them in how they can raise funds for their work, we aim to be a door-opener and connector for them. Through this function we also aim to introduce them to actors that can support them in their organisational development.

We aim to connect our grantee partners, as per their own needs and wishes, to other human rights actors and to decision makers. These can be other local organisations, national or regional networks, specialist organisations, including the NHRF member organisations, diplomatic missions, donor organisations, the UN and other institutions and individuals. **In this way, we strive to function as more than a donor and be an ally that supports collaboration and helps build meaningful alliances across regions, levels and thematic areas.**

For the NHRF it is important to contribute to building links between the local and the global. Consequently, we will aim to function as a connector and a door-opener between local organisations and decision makers on the international level, such as multilateral institutions, governments and donors. We believe that decision makers on a global level need to listen more to local human rights organisations and human rights defenders,

while local organisations and defenders should have knowledge about and access to decision makers on an international level. We will therefore work to ensure that the organisations have access to and are able to build connections to decision makers on a global level that can address local issues in relevant global fora.

We believe that using our role to make connections and open doors without stepping beyond that into a role as accompanier, will foster independently driven co-creation, co-learning and strengthening of the local organisations in their missions. Rather than focusing on doing advocacy and fundraising on behalf of our grantee partners, we aim to open doors for them and support them to be able to do their own work in these areas.

To play the role of a connector and door-opener, the NHRF will ensure that we ourselves build and maintain connections to a wide range of human rights actors and decision makers, including donors, on a national, regional and global level. This allows us to make relevant connections and open relevant doors for the organisations we support. With this, we aim to increase the possibility for our grantee partners to strengthen their organisations, do their advocacy, campaigning and communications work, and fundraise for their work beyond the grants from the NHRF.

Knowledge management and monitoring, evaluation, learning and development (MELD)

Our focus on learning and managing knowledge has two main goals. Firstly, to continue to improve our strategies, methods and practices, and secondly to better understand the impact of the work that we and our grantee partners are doing. We aim to create and use different learning-based tools to help us achieve these goals.

We aim for our knowledge work to foster shared growth and learning so that we can continue to improve how we and our grantee partners work to protect and promote human rights. We ground our knowledge-work primarily in the experiences of local grantee partners, but also in conscious learnings drawn from other sources such as regional and global networks, peer-organisations and -funders, internal expertise, research, and regular external evaluations of our work. In line with our methods for support to grantee partners, we see ourselves as facilitators, not drivers, of local knowledge production.



7 NHRF's own communications work and advocacy work



In our own advocacy and communications work, we aim to use our experience from nearly 40 years of supporting local human rights organisations to advocate for more donors to fund human rights work in ways that are flexible, courageous and done in solidarity with local organisations and local agendas. We will also use our advocacy and communications work to raise awareness about the crucial need for safe and open civic space for human rights organisations to carry out their work. In our communications work we will present the struggles and success stories of the organisations we support with the objective of advocating to our audiences the need for supporting local human rights work and the positive impact that can be achieved through such support.

We will communicate and advocate in a tone that is hope-based and imaginative. Through contributing to making the voices and stories of human rights defenders visible, we seek to develop empathy for and solidarity with human rights defenders, among audiences with the ability to influence the situation for human rights defenders globally and locally in a positive way. This includes both national and international decision makers and donors.

We particularly recognise the added value and responsibility that we have in influencing Norwegian decision makers and donors to sustain and increase their support to human rights defenders and human rights organisations. We see this as an important objective of our advocacy and communications work. We also aim to influence other Nordic donors and donors on an international level to increase their support.

8 Growing the fund and ensuring a sustainable organisation at the NHRF

We aim to ensure that more funds are mobilised from donors and provided to local human rights organisations in the Global South, both overall and through the NHRF. We will seek to continuously increase our total turnover year by year, while ensuring that we grow in a responsible way that allows us to continue to be a courageous and flexible donor acting in solidarity with local human rights organisations. We will consciously seek funding from back donors that enables us to work in line with these values.

A focus will be on ensuring that we are an organisation with the necessary programmatic and administrative resources to conduct our work to a high standard. To have a sustained and growing impact, we also aim to maintain a secretariat with the resources to ensure a sustainable organisation. We will maintain a presence of national staff or consultants in our prioritised countries.

We will continue to operate in a way that ensures that a large proportion of our total turnover goes directly to local organisations, meaning that we will sustain a culture of modesty in our spending on administrative costs.

Our team is crucial for achieving our goals. We will focus on being cost-efficient while still offering a good, healthy work environment for our staff and high-quality support to the local human rights organisations we support. We strive to create an organisational culture where employees will both thrive and feel safe. We aim to have highly competent employees who are equipped to take care of current and future work tasks and to contribute to the continuous improvement and growth of the NHRF. We will prioritise the care and well-being of our employees and within the limit of our resources support them in developing the necessary skills and competencies that the organisation needs to maintain its high standards of work. We will continue to strive for an inclusive organisational culture that values and respects all humans. The NHRF does not tolerate any kind of harassment or discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, life status, disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, family situation or any combination of these.

Finally, we are committed to being an organisation that focuses on learning. Through learning from our own work and that of others, we aim to continue to improve our strategies, methods and practices to provide the best possible support to local human rights organisations around the world.



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to everyone who has contributed to the process of developing this strategy for the NHRF. This strategy stands on the shoulders of human rights defenders, staff, board members, advisers and friends of the NHRF who have shaped the work of the organisation through nearly four decades. We are grateful to everyone who has contributed through the history of the NHRF as well as to all our grantee partners, friends and allies who shared their analyses and their advice in input meetings and workshops in the process of developing this strategy.



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