



Summary Report

The Landscape of Public International Funding for Human Rights Defenders

This study has been commissioned by ProtectDefenders.eu (PD.eu), the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism led by a Consortium of 12 international NGOs active in the field of human rights, in an effort to assess and enable an evidence-based discussion on the landscape of institutional funding for human rights defenders. This initiative builds upon a prior internal study conducted in 2016-17, which concluded that the evolution of both public and private funding for human rights defenders did not match their growing needs.

The study aims to **investigate the availability and effectiveness of Official Development Aid (ODA) for human rights work** from 2017 to 2020 by analysing donor policies and financial data and gathering insights from human rights defenders, donors, international NGOs and other stakeholders. The intention is to stimulate debate and discussion that can contribute to more effective and sustainable support to HRDs worldwide to help them carry out and continue their human rights work.

This study included an analysis of financial data related to foreign aid, extensive documentary research, surveys and in-depth interviews with key donor stakeholders. Additionally, a needs analysis of human rights defenders was conducted,

through interviews with human rights defenders from all world regions and with representatives of human rights organisations. It also included an analysis of statistics from the programmes of ProtectDefenders.eu members.

The report provides a **comprehensive analysis of international funding** for human rights defenders (HRDs). Chapter 1 examines in detail the **proportion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to this purpose**, exploring aspects such as geographical distribution, funding channels, and the types of rights supported. Chapter 2 addresses the **needs of human rights defenders and their access to international funds**, identifying key obstacles from the perspectives of NGOs and international donors, and proposing recommendations to ensure more sustainable and diversified funding. Chapter 3 focuses on **localisation as an effective approach to funding for human rights defenders**, assessing perceived and actual limits to this approach from both HRDs' and donors' perspectives. Additionally, two detailed case studies are presented, one highlighting the **specific needs of women's and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders**, and the other analysing donor and HRD perspectives and **concerns on funding levels and priorities in the MENA region**.

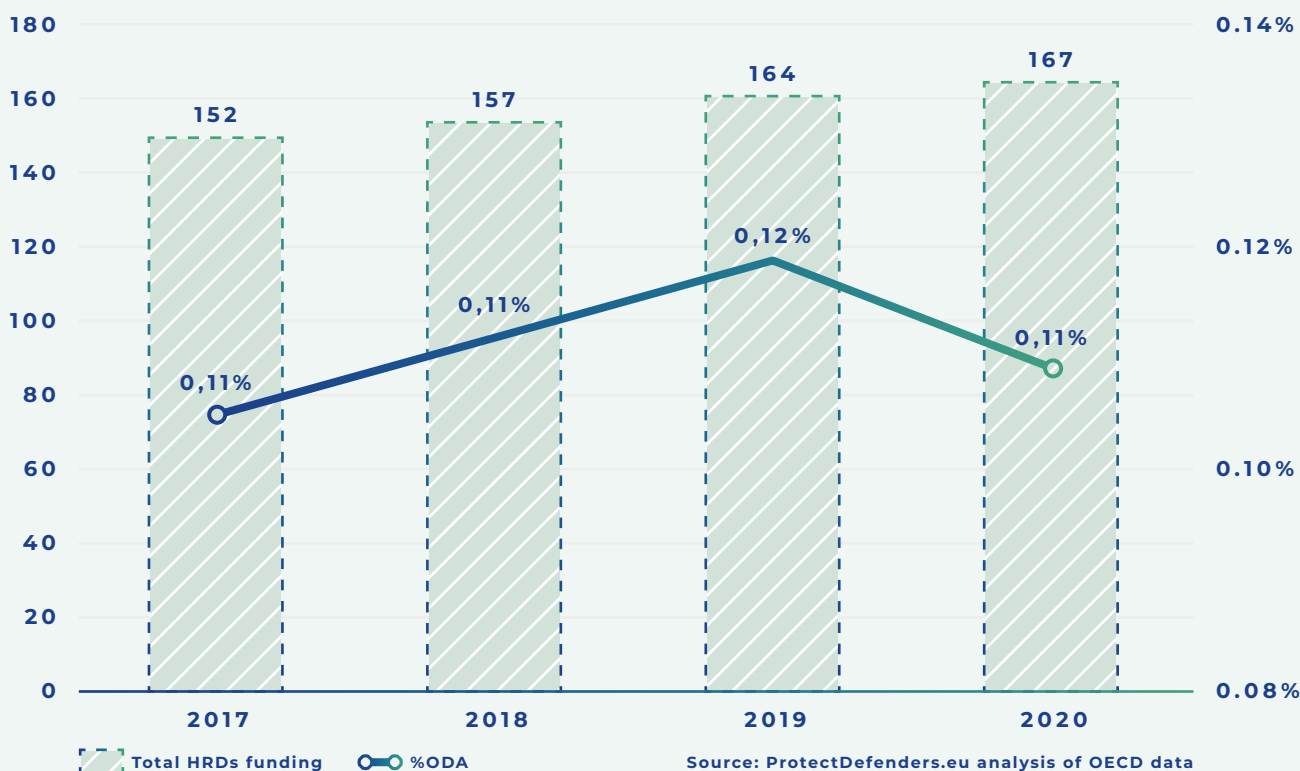
Executive Summary

Data collected in this report shows that funding for the work of human rights defenders has only stagnated, while HRD needs remain far from being met.

The data analysis conducted for this study reveals a disconnect between the rhetoric emphasising greater human rights prioritisation and support for human rights defenders and the actual funding, which has not adequately increased to address the deteriorating global situation. While disbursements dedicated to this group have gradually risen in line with aid levels over the examined period (2017-2020), they represent the same weight in terms of overall Official Development Assistance (ODA): always just hovering around **0.11% of total ODA annually**. According to the data declared by the analysed

donors in relation to ODA **between 2017 and 2020, these contributed 639 million USD to HRDs**; but with a wide divergence between donors, from the top ones spending 1.07% of total development assistance on HRDs, to two not reporting any HRD-focused projects at all. Three donors (**Sweden, the EU institutions and the US**) together represent almost half of total contributions to HRDs during these years, even then representing only approximately 0.2% of their ODA, while some smaller donors in absolute terms (such as **Spain, Denmark and Finland**) spend 0.8-0.9%.

Total HRD funding 2017-2020 (mn USD)



Support still goes mostly to and through “Global North” NGOs, but increasingly reaches local groups.

Despite the Accra Agenda for Action and other commitments to “localisation” or increasing the aid disbursed directly to local actors, international or donor country-based NGOs (**INGOS**) continue to be by far the most common channel of support for delivery to HRDs. They represent **76-81% of donors’** funding towards HRDs, with some donors expressing a clear preference for better-known international partners with perceived significant administrative and managerial capacities – which is also used as a justification for giving them more core funding. Some INGOs are also based in partner countries but registered in donor countries, which may slightly skew the analysis, or are themselves intermediary donors. According to this study’s findings, ultimately **between 47 and 57% of total donor funding for HRDs does reach local NGOs**, human rights groups, and movements, either directly or via international NGOs. This includes sub-granting from international to local NGOs, protection measures and activities to strengthen skills or build the capacity of HRDs. Recipient-country NGOs, or **local NGOs and groups**, **directly received approximately 19-24%** of total funding for HRDs. One upside is that there has been an **increase of 24%** of funds going to these actors compared to the previous period (2013-2016).

Regional and thematic trends reveal growing disparity in funding and disconnect from on-the-ground needs.

Drawing a comparison of regional trends, the Americas received the highest amount of funds between 2017 and 2020, while conversely, **funding decreased in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region**. Donors appear to be concerned and grappling with a severe human rights situation that has not improved since the Arab Spring. There is also a widely shared perception that donors have shifted their focus away from human rights issues to prioritise stability, including counter-terrorism, migration and trade interests. However, even as the trend leans towards a more restricted civic space, many consulted for the study agree that donors must seek to preserve this space and lay the groundwork for the continuation of the work of human rights defenders. It is during worsening situations that such support is needed the most.

Thematically, while more than half (58%) of HRD-related ODA goes to support all HRDs, funding dedicated to **women’s and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders has increased by almost 60%**, while funding for HRDs focused on **freedom of expression and on environmental, land and indigenous rights has decreased by 13%**, despite the increasing profile of both of these issues on the public agenda.

ODA tracking for HRDs shows inaccuracy.

It is **imperative that donors track and record** their spending allocated to human rights defenders **more accurately** to better assess funding support to HRDs. This research has uncovered instances where contributions are not adequately documented. Some donations may go undeclared due to political sensitivities, while others may be categorized outside of Official Development Assistance. It is essential that support for HRDs be clearly designated as contributing to governance, democracy, and SDG spending, aligning with the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, adopting a specific DAC coding for HRD support is highly recommended. This enables donors to better identify and track their spending. Without improved recording practices, evaluating the true impact and trends of donor support over time becomes challenging.

Funding fails to align with HRDs' priorities and growing needs.

Even if reasons vary depending on the geographical location, thematic focus, or size of recipient organisations, the findings of this study all indicate a persistent issue of insufficient and inadequately designed funding for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at local, national and regional levels, and a lack, in particular, of **long-term, flexible and core funding** that would enable human rights organisations and defenders to increase their sustainability and resilience to shocks and crises. This situation sometimes stems from current donor policies and strategies, but also from long-existing practices and positioning linked to historical geo-political legacies and approaches to engaging with former

colonies. Perceptions expressed as a part of this study suggest that donors can seem to lack a principled political positioning favouring human rights over maintaining financial and strategic relations with national governments, even when the latter increasingly limit fundamental freedoms across all world regions. The absence of or limited endogenous funds dedicated to human rights in many countries also increases the dependence of local NGOs on international funding, thus increasing their vulnerability.

A policy of stronger, permanent and comprehensive support to HRDs is required.

Several donors point to having a **wide national political consensus** on the importance of supporting HRDs as the starting point for enabling a more strategic engagement on human rights with partner countries. Such consensus should facilitate the development of tools for enabling sensitive political dialogue that is 'baked into' the fundamental building blocks of donor relations with partner countries when it comes to the protection of HRDs.

According to both the data and needs analysis of this study, support must better reach **grassroots** and 'hard to reach' HRDs such as those working on **feminist and LGBTIQ+** issues, informal movements and those outside capitals, and innovative solutions found for regions where the restrictive environments for civil society make support difficult. Deteriorating human rights situations are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and donors must be ready to plan ahead and face an increasingly unpredictable world where **crises and shifting priorities** must not impact HRD support negatively.

Recommendations

The report presents a compilation of recommendations derived from a diverse array of sources, including stakeholder interviews and relevant literature. Categorized into four overarching themes, these recommendations emphasise the need for i) increased funding and trust in Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), ii) reduced restrictions, iii) enhanced political and diplomatic support, and iv) bolstered core and institutional support, and coalition and capacity-building assistance.

While some recommendations may appear donor-centric, they hold equal significance for International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) supporting third parties and are pivotal for HRDs and local NGOs in their advocacy efforts with both institutional and individual donors.

1. Recommendations on funding for HRDs: increase the volume of funding, support the funding needs articulated by HRDs and build relationships based on trust and respect for HRDs/HROs

The key recommendations from this study emphasise the need for increased funding for human rights defenders from donors. This involves not just a standard gradual increase tied to inflation, but a substantial net increase compared to previous years. The goal is to raise both the total funding for HRDs and the proportion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to them beyond the current 0.11%. Additionally, as a result of feedback and research for this study, there is a call for donors to tailor funding to the needs expressed and articulated by HRDs and communities, as well as to enhance their trust in civil society and HRDs. The diversity of recommendations also shows that there are many ways that donors, INGOs or other stakeholders and advisors can strengthen their support.

2. Recommendations for adjusting the financial, technical and administrative restrictions and requirements on grants to HRDs and their organisations

The second set of recommendations addresses the complex restrictions and compliance requirements imposed on the funding for HRDs. These suggestions were frequently raised as frustrations that HRDs experience when trying to access funding that is appropriate to their needs and the way they operate, and are closely connected to other sets of recommendations.

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3. Recommendations for increasing donors' own capacities and consultation with CSOs to better understand needs and contexts

This study collects various suggestions and recommendations that, either directly or indirectly, urge donors to invest more resources in their own funding mechanisms, capacity and grant-giving infrastructure. These suggestions stem from the challenges raised by local HRDs, indicating ways in which donor institutions can address these issues. This involves dedicating more time, budget, and effort to gain a deeper understanding of the specific country or thematic contexts, the priorities and challenges faced by local HRDs, and the realities, including the precarious situations, of these defenders and their organisations.

4. Recommendations to ensure consistent political and diplomatic support for HRDs and their causes aligns with funding investments

While this study focuses on funding for HRDs, financial investments alone cannot compensate for deficiencies in non-financial support. Strong political backing is crucial for both the protection of human rights defenders and the advancement of their causes. Therefore, stakeholders have proposed various recommendations to augment non-financial support in conjunction with financial assistance.



Explore the full research on the [ProtectDefenders.eu](https://protectdefenders.eu) website



ProtectDefenders.eu is the European Union Human Rights Defenders mechanism, led by a Consortium of 12 NGOs active in the field of Human Rights.



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