



Pledge submitted by Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders)
to the Human Rights 75 Secretariat
December 2023

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Pledging entity: Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders)

Location: South Africa

PLEDGE NUMBER 1: 6th Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Summit Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Enhancing the Capacity and Resilience of Human Rights Defenders to Protect Civic Space and Advance Freedom, Equality and Justice in Southern Africa 22-23 November 2023 Windhoek, Namibia

HUMAN RIGHTS 75 STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

Contribution to a vision on the future of human rights

1. On 22 and 23 November 2023, the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network with support from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Regional Office for Southern Africa (OHCHR ROSA) and Freedom House organised the sixth annual Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Summit in Windhoek, Namibia. The summit brought together human rights defenders (HRDs), civil society organisations (CSOs), grassroots movements and representatives of National Human Rights Institutions from Southern Africa to cross pollinate action ideas and co-create possible solutions and pathways to mitigate challenges and risks faced by HRDs in the context of shrinking civic space in the sub-region.
2. The theme for this year's summit was, "Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Enhancing the Capacity and Resilience of Human Rights Defenders to Protect Civic Space and Advance Freedom, Equality, and Justice in Southern Africa."
3. Discussions and deliberations at the Summit focussed on the following issues and broad topics: (i) The 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; (ii) The 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration of Human Rights Defenders); (iii) Enhancing the capacity and resilience of human rights defenders to protect civic space and advance freedom, equality and justice in Southern Africa; (iv) New strategies to confront old problems to ensure that young defenders are safe but not silent; (iv) Integrating gender, equality and inclusion in the human rights ecosystem; (v) What it takes to be a woman human rights leader; (vi) Shrinking civic space in the digital era: Leveraging digital civic space to defendHER; (vii) Mitigating the

effects of anti-NGO laws in Southern Africa; and (viii) The role of human rights defenders in promoting electoral democracy.

4. In line with the theme of the Human Rights 75 Initiative entitled “Freedom, Equality and Justice for All”, during the deliberations participants highlighted several issues important to the work of human rights defenders in the region. The region should consider developing these broad areas into pledges and commitments that would advance the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of human rights in Southern Africa as well as a vision for the future of human rights:

a. Make the UDHR a living document: Through the work done at all levels, from grassroots/frontline we will ensure that the UDHR is not just a document, but rather a lived reality in the lives of our communities, our decision-makers, and ourselves. There should be a strong emphasis on universality and inclusivity to ensure a rebirth of the UDHR. There needs to be an explicit commitment to the inclusion of minority groups in all partnerships and spaces. This is an overarching theme that informs all aspects of the work done by and with human rights defenders in Southern Africa and this important work will revitalise the strength, meaning and normative provisions of the UDHR. It illustrates that the universality of the UDHR transcends all cultures and that it offers solutions to present-day challenges.

b. Support human rights defenders at the frontline: Communities and defenders at grassroots level need to be supported with initiatives tailored to their specific contexts. This includes strengthening the protection of civic space at all levels in order to facilitate full participation in society as well as enjoyment of rights.

c. Build coalitions in promoting and protecting human rights: Individual responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights is vital, however building solidarity is equally important for all human rights defenders, and human rights defenders need to explore strategies to build solidarity across all spheres of society as equal partners and geographically. There should be no ‘us and them’ in pursuit of human rights for all.

d. Women human rights defenders: WHRDs face specific risks as well as specific barriers when seeking to engage in the human rights defender space. It is the responsibility of all HRDs to dismantle patriarchal structures and barriers so that HRD spaces are safe and welcoming to all, and that gendered struggles are acknowledged as aspects of all work that HRDs engage in.

e. Ensure the inclusion of youth at all levels: It is vital that young people are included in all conversations regarding human rights and human rights defenders. This must be an intentional act on the part of all HRDs in the region.

f. Prevention/pre-emptive work: HRDs will take a proactive rather than just reactive approach. This includes advocacy, human rights education, and analysis in the context of events that undermine the human rights situation in a country, local context, or region. This is particularly pertinent prior to, during, and after elections.

g. Accountability: Human rights defenders will be accountable to the human rights standards they defend and will continue to demand accountability for human rights violations where

they occur. Human rights defenders must be accountable to themselves, to one-another, and to the constituencies that they serve. Human rights defenders, will strive to strengthen accountability of those in positions of power - government, business, and other key stakeholders.

h. Advocacy: Human rights advocacy will remain a critical component of the work of human rights defenders. This includes the need to address new emerging issues that respond the changing human rights landscape. Further advocacy is needed on pertinent issues. HRDs commit to reinvigorated advocacy including on NGO legislation, digital literacy and activism, litigation against regulations, and censorship of the online space, which negatively impact human rights. Among the measures included in this are holding businesses to account, such as tech companies to ensure safe online spaces for human rights defenders. In addition, HRDs will work rigorously to hold to account extractive industries contributing to democratic recession and erosion human rights as well as civic space in Southern Africa.

23 November 2023

Expected deadline within which pledge will be realised: Dec 31, 2025