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1. FRONT LINE DEFENDERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROTECTION SUPPORT TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted in 1998, was a remarkable moment for the international human rights movement. The Declaration's full title is Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, often abbreviated to Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. It was adopted by consensus by the General Assembly on 9 December 1998 ([A/RES/53/144](#)). It was the first explicit recognition that people have a right to engage in the human rights discourse and work towards defending their rights, and that these people – human rights defenders (HRDs) – must be protected (Articles 1 and 12).

The Declaration is based on the recognition that HRDs and civil society organizations play an essential role in their societies, by assisting victims of abuse, exposing violations and holding the powerful to account. There was however at the same time the recognition that in many countries, HRDs are subject to threats, fabricated charges, arbitrary detention, physical attacks and killings because of their human rights work. The Declaration was thus based on the realisation that there can be no real progress on human rights if those who struggle for their respect are persecuted.

The definition of HRDs derived by the Declaration is a very broad one. The term refers to anyone working to improve respect for human rights in their own country. It includes individuals working in an NGO; activists who belong to grassroots movements; lawyers taking up human rights cases; journalists reporting on human rights-related issues; or individuals working occasionally on human rights as volunteers. It may be anyone: the essential criteria is that there is an activity related to the promotion of protection of human rights (see OHCHR, Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights ([Fact Sheet No. 29](#))).

In the years following the adoption of the Declaration, a number of initiatives were taken – both within the UN system and regional human rights organisations – to strengthen, complement and encourage respect for the Declaration. A Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (later changed into a Special Rapporteur) was [established](#) in 2000. In 2001, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights created a Human Rights Defenders Unit, and established the mandate of the [Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders](#) in 2011. A [similar](#)

[mandate](#) was established in 2004 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Also in 2004, the European Union adopted [Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#), spelling out the EU policy in support of HRDs in third countries. In 2014, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe adopted its own set of [Guidelines](#) on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.

This flurry of activity at the intergovernmental level was accompanied by significant developments within non-governmental organisations, which started to devote more attention and resources to the protection of HRDs.

This is the background to the creation of Front Line Defenders in 2001. The initiatives taken by international NGOs until then predominantly focussed on alerts and advocacy. There was yet no specialised organisation devoted entirely to the protection of HRDs and implementing an integrated and practical programme of support. This was the gap filled in 2001 by Front Line Defenders. The organisation was founded by Irish woman Mary Lawlor, a former Director of the Irish Section of Amnesty International, who had identified through consultations with HRDs that there was a need for an organization that was exclusively focussed on their security and protection. Mary realised that only a specialised organization could be fast and flexible enough to respond effectively to immediate threats.

The organisation operates an emergency support hotline 24/7 in five languages. The largest programme is the security grants programme: in 2015 the organisation provided nearly €1,2M via over 450 grants to pay for practical security needs of individuals and organizations at risk. This includes temporary relocation when HRDs face an immediate threat to their lives. It provides training in personal and organisational security as well as digital security. Front Line Defenders also publicises the cases of HRDs at risk and campaigns and advocates at the national and international level – including the EU, UN, regional mechanisms and with governments directly – for their protection. It provides rest and respite, and other opportunities for HRDs dealing with extreme stress. In providing its support, the organisation prioritises those HRDs who are most at risk, in particular those working in remote areas or who are less connected, and ensures it reaches out to HRDs working on the entire range of human rights issues – from anti-corruption, LGBTI or women's rights to land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights.

The philosophy behind Front Line Defenders is that the people who are most effective in bringing positive societal change are those struggling to promote and protect human rights at the local and national level. They are the people who have a real impact within their communities, and this is also why they face repression and violence from the entrenched interests of those who abuse power. The most important thing the international community can do to promote the realisation of human rights is to help create space and protection for HRDs to undertake their legitimate activities at the local and national levels. This is why Front Line Defenders aims to respond to the needs identified by HRDs themselves and involves them in the elaboration of its four-year strategic plans.

The organisation has been a pioneer in providing digital security training and support at a time when there was not the level of awareness we see today. Since 2001, in partnership with Tactical Technology Collective, Front Line Defenders has co-created and co-developed [Security in a Box](#), which has become the most widely accessed digital security resource for HRDs, available in 15 languages. Another milestone in the organisation's history is the adoption of the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. Following lobbying from Front Line Defenders, the Irish Government made HRDs a priority of its

EU Presidency in 2004, which led to the adoption of the Guidelines. In recognition of its achievements, in 2007 Front Line Defenders was awarded the [King Baudouin International Development Prize](#), «for the effectiveness of their efforts to combat the isolation faced by human rights defenders around the world, for the support and protection that they offer them, and for their continuing advocacy in favour of an international plan of action for human rights, which is an essential condition for development».

The organisation has grown considerably over time, both in size and activities. From an initial two persons, it currently relies on the work of 30 staff members, including field-based protection coordinators – a strategy that has allowed for closer and more effective contact with HRDs. In response to the growing risks linked to using technology, it has expanded its digital security support and established a network of digital security consultants who can carry out personalised digital security audits and provide one-to-one support. Another area of expansion has been its work on visibility and legitimacy, aimed to counter the increasingly widespread negative public discourse on HRDs. Since 2013, it has explored the use of new means – such as national radio campaigns and graphic novels – to reach new audiences and expand community support for HRDs in their own countries. Today, the organisation supports every year over 1500 HRDs in more than 70 countries.

Several initiatives exist today. In addition to the pioneering Peace Brigade International (PBI), which has been in operation for 35 years and specialises in protective accompaniment in Latin America, other international NGOs offering protection support now include Protection International, which focuses on training and national advocacy; the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, which provides urgent response grants to protect and sustain women's rights and LGBTI rights defenders; the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint advocacy project of the International Federation for Human Rights and the World Organisation Against Torture; Justice and Peace, which provides temporary shelter in The Netherlands; Freedom House, which offers emergency support – among several others too numerous to list.

In countries where HRDs are most at risk, they have come together to set up national protection schemes. This is the case in Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico and Zimbabwe. Protection initiatives have also been set up at the regional level, such as the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Programme (EHAHRDP) or the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA).

A most recent trend in the sector has been the establishment of government-sponsored protection funds managed by consortia of NGOs. In 2011, Lifeline – the [Embattled CSO Assistance Fund](#) was launched with the support of 12 governments, now increased to 18. Its aim is to support human rights organisations in pushing back against a global trend of closing civil society space. It is implemented by a consortium of seven international and regional human rights groups. Similarly, the [EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism](#) was launched in 2015. Funded by the European Union, it is managed by a consortium of 12 NGOs, in which Front Line Defenders is the lead partner. In bringing together some of the leading organisations working on protection or civil society space, these initiatives aim to make available additional resources, create synergies and maximise outreach and access.

While the existence of such a number of organisations offering protection support is positive, one must not forget the reason for that: there is a growing demand because the situation for HRDs has been deteriorating globally. We have seen an increase in the number of countries that pass laws restricting freedom of association, creating hurdles to the

creation and functioning of NGOs and limiting access to funding. Many governments use other pieces of legislation, such as anti-terrorism laws or cyber-crime laws, to silence HRDs. In a growing number of countries, there is also an increasing negative public discourse and smear campaigns against HRDs, who are accused of being foreign agents or acting against the interests of their country. In 2015, we documented 196 killings of HRDs in 25 countries, which was an increase over the previous year; preliminary data for 2016 show a further increase. Against this bleak picture, the hope is that an effective protection support may help HRDs to be more resilient in face of adversity.

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