



# Collective Protection of Human Rights Defenders

A collective approach  
to the right to defend  
human rights



# INTRODUCTION

Given that human rights defenders (HRDs) act most of the time in groups, with their communities and through networks, their protection should not be limited to individual protection measures.

We must go beyond the individual dimension and propose policies and measures aimed at protecting communities or groups that face threats due to their human rights defence activities. The ultimate goal must be to create an enabling environment for the right to defend human rights.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) do not usually work alone, but in groups, in association with others, in social movements, building collective networks and supporting each other. Focusing protection mechanisms on individual protection limits the impact of measures to a very narrow number of defenders, while ignoring the collective dimension of human rights defence work, which may even undermine the collective processes and dynamics of groups and communities that work together for human rights causes.

As highlighted in [Protection International's report Rethinking the protection of Human Rights Defenders \(2018\)](#), the collective protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) goes hand in hand with the strengthening of social movements and social fabric.

The purpose of this publication is to contribute to a shift in current prevailing narratives on the protection of human rights defenders. For protection to be effective, sustainable and reach a greater number of human rights defenders, we shift towards a more collective mindset.

*Protection approaches should not just aim to provide security for individual defenders. We must further pursue structural changes leading to policies that guarantee a safe and conducive environment for all those who, individually or collectively, defend human rights.*

*To achieve this, we need to rethink and expand current HRDs protection mechanisms so that the protection of HRDs is provided both individually and collectively.*



# 01

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COLLECTIVE PROTECTION?



We understand collective protection as a set of strategies, measures and actions that aim at protecting both a collective actor (an organisation, a community, a group) and the individuals who are part of it, and that are or may be at risk due to their human rights defence activities. Thus, collective protection goes beyond the protection of community or group leaders who may be, in principle, the main target of attacks. It also goes beyond granting individual security measures to each member of a group or community.

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*Collective protection implies a shift in mindset where the objective is to provide a more comprehensive and sustainable protection response with an impact on all HRDs, by favouring an enabling environment for the right to defend human rights.*

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We should not forget that protection, be it individual or collective, is always relational, as the protection of one defender will depend on the actions of other people. Therefore, individual protection measures also need to consider, among other things, the environment in which defenders work, their relatives and their colleagues, since in most cases protection has an impact beyond the individual.

# 02

## CAN GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES BE IDENTIFIED AS HRDS?



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”](#) (often abbreviated as the UN Declaration on HRDs) did not establish a specific definition of who is or can be a human rights defender (HRD). However both in its title and preamble, which refers to “individuals, groups and associations ... contributing to ... the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals”; the Declaration explicitly recognised the collective dimension of human rights defence.

This broad definition sets the international standard by which HRDs can be individuals but also groups or associations, which also encompasses communities and networks.

However, in practice, the dominant paradigm in HRD protection has clearly focused on the protection of individuals. Most protection programmes, both at international and national level, are based on sets of measures intended to provide security to a given individual who may be at risk due to her/his work in the defence of human rights.

The lack of emphasis on groups, communities or networks leads to protection narratives that downplay, or even neglect, the collective dimension of human rights work, thus ignoring the existence of risks of a collective nature that cannot be addressed with individual measures.

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*In order to ensure that the specific protection needs of groups and communities are also taken into account, protection programmes need to include a collective approach, where the goal of protection is not to provide security to defenders at risk (individual approach), but to achieve sustainable and structural changes that guarantee the right of everyone to defend human rights (a collective approach).*

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# 03

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOSTER A COLLECTIVE APPROACH IN THE PROTECTION OF HRDS?



### TOWARDS A "NETWORKED APPROACH"

The defence of human rights is a lively process, linked to our human nature as social and relational beings. A more relational approach that includes networks and interactions between defenders, groups and communities will help us re-think protection from a collective angle that can help overcome the shortcomings of current protection narratives of individual HRDs at risk.

# 04



## PROBLEMS DERIVED FROM THE PREVAILING INDIVIDUALISATION OF HRDS IN CURRENT NARRATIVE

Individual protection of HRDs focuses on providing measures to individual persons who are at risk due to their human rights work. Measures such as emergency grants, relocation programmes, urgent alerts and awards, are based on individual risk assessments and have as main objective to provide security (and visibility in the case of awards) to individual defenders.

Very often, defenders who are granted these individual protection measures are the leaders of movements, communities or groups that are targeted by State or non-state actors with the aim to stop or hinder their human rights defence work. However, the actions that these defenders take are often shared with other members of their community, with family relatives, with colleagues, or other network allies.

## CHALLENGES DERIVED FROM THE DOMINANT INDIVIDUALISTIC APPROACH TO PROTECTION OF HRDS

### The distortion of the human rights causes

When putting the emphasis only on individual HRDs, human rights defence is diluted as the focus is on the person, and not that much on the cause they defend. It seems that we are recognising the courage of outstanding brave individuals, and not the actions or the rights they defend along with other people.

### Unawareness and omission of collective efforts

By focusing on certain individuals we are ignoring that human rights defence is frequently undertaken by coordinating efforts within civil society or within those communities affected by human rights violations. There is a lack of recognition of collective efforts of groups and communities which face threats aimed at hindering precisely that collective effort.

### An individual-based security model

Individual security measures do not address root causes of threats to HRDs, which are in most cases a reaction against the cause the latter defend. Also, individual security measures overlook the fact that threats can also affect family members, the HRD organisation and/or community.

### Counterproductive impact for groups and communities

If giving a human face to a cause can be seen as having a bigger impact onto the general public, it can also have counterproductive implications: it risks focusing on the individual's personal story instead of giving visibility to the root causes of these struggles. It also risks disrupting the community itself, by *de facto* distancing the individual from the community.

### Counterproductive impact for the individual HRD

Putting the emphasis on individuals and their positions of leadership within groups may also contribute to increasing risks for the individual themselves, as raising their profile can make them become a more valuable target to eliminate. Besides, security measures such as provision of bodyguards or armoured vehicles may also interfere with the work of the beneficiary HRD.

### INDIVIDUAL & COLLECTIVE PROTECTION MUST BE TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Including a collective approach to protection does not imply that individual cases must be ignored and individual safety measures not be provided. Collective protection cannot entirely replace the protection of individuals who are part of the collective, as there is an individual dimension of risk (i.e. some of the community members will be more exposed to a particular or imminent risk than others).

However, if we want protection to reach out to all those involved in human rights defence, and not only to a limited number of defenders, a shift towards a more collective approach is indispensable.

# 05



## WHY IS THERE A TENDENCY TO INDIVIDUALISE HRDS?

It is hard to encourage states and international bodies with a stake on protection to acknowledge the collective dimension of human rights defenders and to implement policies that incorporate a collective approach.

We identify a number of inter-related (not exhaustive) challenges that can explain why collective protection tends to be neglected in protection policies, as reflected in the report of the international roundtable on "*Rethinking the protection of Human Rights Defenders*"; organised by Protection International and Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) in December 2017.

### WHY COLLECTIVE PROTECTION TENDS TO BE NEGLECTED IN PROTECTION POLICIES:

Complex definition of what a collective or community is or represents

The social dimension of collective protection implies long-term protection measures and sustainable resources and interventions

Recognising groups or communities that organise themselves around human rights causes may clash with the interests of political and socioeconomic powerholders that oppose such collective struggles

It seems easier to advocate for individual cases that have a visible face and a personal testimony to tell

Individual protection is easier to define and to communicate, as it is mostly based on specific security measures

Giving visibility to individuals is easier and shows that efforts have been made, while attention is diverted from root-causes of aggressions



# 06

## KEY ELEMENTS OF COLLECTIVE PROTECTION STRATEGIES



Collective protection requires working on protection strategies whose ultimate goal is to ensure an enabling environment for a community or group of defenders to be able to defend rights safely. A collective protection strategy should aim at:

- A. Improving the capacity of the group or community to respond to risk and address threats — **increasing their resilience as a group.**
- B. Ensuring the group or community is able to defend rights without fear of threats or attacks — **increasing their collective workspace.**

### A COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO PROTECTION STRATEGIES IMPLIES:

Recognising that individuals are frequently linked to communities or groups. If a community or group leader is affected, this also affects the rest (community members, relatives, colleagues), and vice-versa.

Understanding that putting the emphasis on individual and vertical leadership may contribute to increasing risks for individuals and communities.

Strengthening the capacity of communities and groups, their social fabric and their organizational capacities. With a strong social fabric, the risk usually decreases.

Taking into account the contextual factors and the environment of the defenders.

Increasing the agency of groups and communities to defend human rights and understanding that they are not only individual subjects of protection but also agents of their protection.



## A. INCREASING RESILIENCE AS A GROUP

Measures to strengthen the group or community

Collective protection is deeply linked to the strengthening of the social fabric of the group or community, the increase of their visibility and workspace, and the development of their capacities to defend their rights as a group. Some examples of collective protection elements to be considered when designing collective protection strategies (not an exhaustive list):

Recognition and reinforcement of existing practices of the community or group and transform them into protection community practices;

Strengthening of the ability of the community to reach out to local, national and international networks as a protection tool;

Strengthening of the organisational and institutional presence of the community or group.

Development of channels of communication and dialogue between the community or group and local and national state authorities with a duty to protect;

Provision of safe spaces and infrastructure that ensures that the group or community can meet and organise themselves safely;

Specific measures that guarantee the permanence of the group or community in the territory they defend;

Measures that protect the community assets such as crops, schools, community buildings;

Measures to strengthen self-protection and counter stigmatization of the group;

Ensuring resources for psychosocial care and training on well-being and mutual care in the group, including a gender perspective;

Training of communities and groups in reporting threats and attacks without running additional risks.

## B. INCREASING THE WORKSPACE TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS

Political actions and measures that help legitimising HRDs collectively and deter attacks

Protection of HRDs cannot only consist in building their capacities or strengthening the social fabric of a group. Political actions that help legitimise HRDs collectively are indispensable to deter attacks. Collective protection requires decisive political action aimed at achieving public recognition of HRDs groups and communities, legitimising their work and raising the costs of attacks to the group. To achieve this, State authorities should undertake actions that include:

Engagement of political actors at local, national and international level in creating narratives that legitimise the work of defence groups or communities and send zero-tolerance messages against attacks;

Recognition and emphasis on the right of groups and communities to freedom of expression, association and assembly;

Identification and public visibility of emblematic cases of groups and communities who organise themselves to defend their rights;

Commitment to end impunity as a key element to deter perpetrators from committing violations;

Periodic follow-up on the situation of communities and groups at risk;

Periodic contact and visits by national and local authorities to groups and communities and risk.

The above sets of measures and actions should be designed and decided together with the members of the community or group at stake based on a proper assessment of collective protection needs.

# THIS PUBLICATION IS PART OF PROTECTION INTERNATIONAL'S GLOBAL CAMPAIGN:

## OUR CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

### COMMUNITIES ARE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In the year that marks the **20th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on HRDs**, we are experiencing an unprecedented backlash against human rights, which makes the environment surrounding defenders increasingly hostile.

In a context of smear campaigns against HRDs that legitimise attacks against them and foster impunity, Protection International wishes to **contribute to a changed narrative on human rights defenders, towards a greater recognition of the collective aspect of their work and achievements.**

Under the slogan **#CommunitiesareHRDs**, we can build together a new narrative on HRDs. Human rights work is not done by "heroes" but by ordinary people gathering together around a human rights cause.



**COMMUNITIES**  
ARE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

*Our campaign's slogan "Communities are HRDs!" refers to communities as collective groups in a broad sense, i.e. groups fighting together for and defending the respect of human rights.*

- *grupos sociales que viven juntos;*
- *las coaliciones espontáneas y estructuradas;*
- *grupos de personas que comparten identidades, como las comunidades LGBTI;*
- *categorías profesionales (como abogados o periodistas);*
- *organizaciones y movimientos de la sociedad civil.*

Mobilise all actors and notably decision makers to understand better and support a **collective approach to human rights work**

Advocate for **collective protection in public policies**

Highlight the importance of **women HRDs** and their key role in communities

Strengthen the human rights movement as a whole and **empower collective groups** to change the narrative on HRDs

**Promote an understanding on the UN Declaration on HRDs** and its link with other international human rights instruments



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PROTECTION INTERNATIONAL is an international non-profit organisation that supports human rights defenders worldwide in developing their security and protection management strategies.