

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders: Call for Inputs **Raising their voices: HRDs respond to the human rights crisis**

Submission by International Accountability Project

Introduction: motivation and approach

The **International Accountability Project (IAP)** is an international human rights organization working in solidarity with communities, social movements and civil society of the Global Majority to **change how today's development is done**. Our motivation stems from a commitment to protect communities' rights to land, housing, environment and climate justice, and to ensure that their voices shape development decisions that directly affect them.

IAP believes that defending human rights requires a **preventive, community-led model**. While the prevailing global development model prioritizes political and business interests, often excluding communities, IAP advances a vision where affected people lead development decisions. This approach both protects defenders and strengthens environmental, social, and climate justice.

Contribution to equality and justice

Through its flagship initiative, the **Early Warning System (EWS)**, IAP collects, analyzes and distributes information on thousands of proposed investments by major development banks and private financiers. The system provides communities with data before projects are finalized or implemented, creating an opportunity for proactive and preventive action. Each year, EWS analyzes over 2,500 investments worth USD \$260 billion, adding to a database of over 30,000 projects since 2016.

Access to this information **allows communities to mobilize locally, challenge harmful investments, and propose community-led alternatives**. IAP's research and advocacy have also elevated defenders' struggles to global forums. For example, our joint report with partners, *Financing Repression: Why development banks must rethink finance in countries blocking civic freedoms* (2024), documented how banks finance projects in highly repressive contexts, undermining civic space. Similarly, IAP's collaboration with the Coalition for Human Rights in Development (CHRD) and EWS partners has mapped threats against defenders and exposed systemic risks across regions. These efforts contribute to international recognition of defenders' rights and strengthen collective advocacy to protect them.

Achievements

Over the past years, IAP has taken significant steps to **strengthen protection for environmental and climate defenders**. Through the Early Warning System, we have enabled communities to access **timely and actionable information** on thousands of projects and

investments, often before financing is finalized. This has allowed defenders to mobilize early, challenge harmful proposals, and in some cases, prevent or stop damaging projects altogether. Building on this experience, in 2025 we launched the first pilot of **Defender Alerts**, a new initiative designed to **forecast potential risks** and share concise, accessible updates with partners working directly with defenders. The Alerts are intended not only to inform, but also to anticipate threats and spark timely preventative actions in solidarity with at-risk communities.

IAP has also expanded the accessibility of its tools. The launch of the **Energy Finance Tracker** created a unique public database of energy-related investments, providing defenders and their allies with an accessible platform to monitor trends and support advocacy for just climate transitions. Beyond research and data, IAP has convened regional consultations, facilitated exchanges among grassroots movements, and co-authored reports with partner organizations worldwide. These achievements underscore IAP's commitment to not only documenting risks, but actively **redistributing power by equipping defenders with tools, alliances, and platforms for collective action**.

Risks and challenges

Human rights defenders face **criminalization, smear campaigns, restrictive legislation, surveillance, and direct violence** when challenging powerful actors such as governments, companies, and investors. In many contexts, especially those marked by closed civic spaces or active conflict, the mere continuation of their work is itself an extraordinary achievement.

Beyond individual threats, defenders encounter **systemic obstacles** that undermine their protection and effectiveness:

Lack of transparency: Development finance institutions and private investors often conceal critical information, making it difficult for defenders to know who is behind the projects that threaten their rights.

Shrinking civic space: In several countries, defenders are prevented from registering organizations, accessing funding, or speaking out without risk of reprisal.

Limited resources: Many grassroots defenders lack the financial and technical resources needed to sustain campaigns, legal support, or security measures over the long term.

Information gaps: Existing protection efforts often respond only once defenders are under attack. Rarely do they include preventative approaches or data on the broader set of actors involved in harmful projects.

These challenges reinforce patterns of impunity and increase the vulnerability of defenders. Addressing them requires **greater international recognition of preventive tools** like the Early Warning System, coupled with stronger solidarity mechanisms and sustained resources.

Recommendations to the International Community

Protecting human rights defenders requires a decisive shift **from reactive responses to preventive approaches**. IAP encourages the Special Rapporteur to highlight the **urgent need for early access to information** on projects and investments that may generate harm, so that defenders can intervene before risks escalate. Ensuring transparency in development finance is not only a matter of accountability, but also a matter of protection for those at the frontlines.

It is also critical that defenders have the **resources and capacities** to transform this information into collective action. Grassroots organizations and community leaders must be supported to mobilize locally, engage in advocacy at national and international levels, and pursue justice when violations occur. Such support should not be considered optional, but rather an essential component of safeguarding human rights globally.

Finally, the protection of environmental and climate defenders must recognize them not only as individuals under threat, but as **leaders advancing community-driven solutions** for a more just and sustainable future. Preventive action that closes information gaps, strengthens solidarity networks, and amplifies defenders' voices can save lives, safeguard civic space, and contribute directly to global commitments on human rights, climate, and development justice.