

HURICAP

HIGHLIGHTS AND INSIGHTS

Overview of the programme, its achievements and lessons learnt, from 1994 through 2025



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All pics by Wim de Regt, unless otherwise indicated

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Introduction

HURICAP was Amnesty International Netherlands' Human Rights Capacity-Building Programme, a programme that built the capacities of a large number of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Africa and the Middle East, to do effective human rights work, sharing the experience of Amnesty International. It aimed to spread Amnesty's skills across a wide range of organizations based in areas affected by many human rights violations and abuses, such as conflict areas and post-conflict areas. The programme started in 1994 as the Special Programme on Africa, based on an agreement between Amnesty Netherlands and the International Secretariat (IS) of Amnesty International. The programme aimed to complement the work of the IS by working bottom-up from the needs of homegrown human rights groups in Africa, working in partnerships with local organizations. Over the years it focused increasingly on capacity-building, especially in monitoring, documenting and reporting human rights violations (MDR), on different topics, including Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, but it also ventured into adjacent fields, like advocacy.

This “newsletter” marks the end of the HURICAP programme, at the end of 2025. As of 2026, Amnesty International Netherlands (AINL) entered a new strategic planning period and decided to stop accepting government funding. This means the programme had to end as it was funded with substantial Dutch government funds since 2011. The newsletter aims to commemorate and recall what the HURICAP team and programme achieved over more than 30 years of existence, to capture the programme's main achievements and share some lessons learned.

The history of the programme

The Special Programme on Africa (SPA) started in 1994 to support the human rights movement in Africa. After a series of explorations and conferences, SPA started its first country programme in 1999 in Liberia. Based on the advice of a prominent human rights activist, the programme built a network of **human rights volunteers in rural areas**, who organized dialogues with the rural population about relevant human rights issues. After a positive evaluation of the pilot programme that ended in 2004, SPA facilitated the development and implementation of similar programmes in Sierra Leone (2007-2015), Uganda (2007-2020) and Burundi (2010-2015). This was done in collaboration with **coalitions of local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)**, who worked with rural communities mostly living in extreme poverty and under a very weak rule of law resulting from armed conflict.¹



Human rights volunteers taking notes at a community meeting in Northern Uganda



Meeting with a Batwa community in Karusi, Burundi (photographer unknown)

SPA founder Peter van der Horst:

“

Among other things, the country programmes included activities to seek social justice in situations where access to the formal justice system is problematic, through dialogues with local and traditional leaders about issues such as gender equality, traditional justice, or harmful traditional practices. The programmes also included training in monitoring and reporting human rights violations.”

The explorations in the early years of SPA also led to the development of a **handbook series on monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Africa**, called *Ukweli* (a Swahili word that can refer to both truth and fact). While largely written by Amnesty experts (including current Amnesty International Secretary General Agnès Callamard), the editorial committee included experts from different CSOs in Africa. The Ukweli main book and a number

¹ Peter van der Horst, “Sharing the SPA experience”, internal AINL paper, March 2011; this paper also states that a deliberate choice was made by the SPA Oversight Committee to strengthen the wider human rights movement in Africa and not Amnesty International units in Africa, to avoid confusion with the IS responsibilities.

of companion handbooks on different kinds of human rights violations, like political killings, torture and sexual violence, were published in 2000. In 2003-2004, a basic version of the handbook, specifically for community activists, was published in English, French and different African languages. The publication of these handbooks was accompanied by a series of **training programmes** in monitoring, documenting and reporting violations (MDR) across different countries in Africa, conducted by experts from Europe and Africa, but later purely by trainers from different African countries. This led to the publication of a Facilitators' Guide (2004), which was later rewritten as the HURICAP Trainers' Manual on MDR (2019). From 2019 through 2025, the Ukweli series was renewed, with a completely rewritten *Main Book*, an *Abridged version* (to replace the "community handbook"), a companion handbook on *torture* and one on *enforced disappearances*.²

SPA/HURICAP trainer and field officer Koffi Aglébé:



The first thing to mention about the programme was its very original, revolutionary and well-appreciated idea of sharing Amnesty International's "business secret" (conducting MDR) with smaller organizations in Africa and making it a reality."

SPA/HURICAP officer Wim de Regt:



Throughout the years working on and in Africa, we heard many human rights defenders and civil society activists refer to the Ukweli handbooks and MDR trainings, as offering their first introduction to human rights research, giving them the foundation for a lot of the work they did ever since."



A training in MDR skills for volunteers in Maroua, Northern Cameroon, around 2017

² For all the new and old Ukweli handbooks, see <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/ukweli-monitoring-and-documenting-human-rights-violations-in-africa>; the new handbooks are available in English, French and Arabic.

In 2003, the first Training of Trainers (ToT) in MDR was held in South Africa, for trainers from different parts of anglophone Africa. A second francophone ToT was held in Senegal in the same year. This was the start of the development of a **trainers' network**, a group of active human rights trainers from different parts of Africa, who could train in basic human rights and MDR, one group in English, another one in French, and as of 2022 also one in Arabic. The trainers were offered advanced and specific ToTs in various years. Many of these trainers were recruited by the programme itself for specific training assignments, but also by other organizations, and in this way their skills served the broader African civil society. The HURICAP trainers' network became a close-knit community of practice, which after the Covid pandemic was supported by webinars and a digital trainers' platform, to provide access to all training sessions that the programme developed.



The experiential learning cycle illustrated in a ToT, Kenya



Naomi Barasa, Samuel Thuku, Koffi Aglébé and Andrew Karim during a ToT in Kenya, 2014

Koffi Aglébé:

“ SPA/HURICAP’s setting up of an African trainers network ensured that trainings were adjusted to African realities, and also provided flexibility, quick reactivity, and cost-effectiveness.”

Hamane Touré, HURICAP trainer from Mali:

“ For me, HURICAP is a school of transformation... and a professional family. As a trainer, the programme has offered me a rare space where you grow as much as you teach. I found a sincere, demanding, committed community there – a circle where everyone is recognised for what they bring to the table. HURICAP has enabled me to become a more human, more grounded, more attentive trainer.”

Peter van der Horst:

“ Just a one off training is not a guarantee that participants are going to practice the new skills and knowledge. [What is required is...] a longer-term trajectory with a selected number of NGOs, which also includes coaching, giving feedback, developing strategies and positioning the work in their organization (including fundraising).”

The programme also developed other handbooks and training materials. In 2005 *Ben ni walen* (Bambara for “Let’s agree and take action”), with the subtitle *Mobilizing for human rights using **participatory theatre***, was published, together with and after years of working with human rights educators in communities in several countries in Africa. In 2010 the first series on **Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR)** by the name of *Haki Zetu*

("Our rights" in Swahili) was published. This series contained a Main Book and companion handbooks on the right to housing, water and sanitation, food, health, education, work and livelihoods, and land rights. After the publication of Haki Zetu, the trainers' network was also trained to deliver training workshops in analysing and taking action on ESC rights.



Participants in a training using the Haki Zetu publication, Kenya, 2014

As with the other handbooks, they were meant for human rights and civil society activists planning to document (ESCR) violations and to advocate for improvements. The handbooks were distributed across different organizations in Africa. Between 2019 and 2025, the *Haki Zetu* main book was also completely rewritten under the general name of *ESC Rights in Practice*, to account for new developments and to make it relevant to other parts of the world, including examples from the Middle East and North Africa.³ Finally, the HURICAP programme published a handbook in two volumes on **business and human rights**, *Biashara Na Haki* (Swahili for "Business and rights"), to provide activists with knowledge and tools to defend human rights in their dealings with companies operating in or around their communities.⁴

From 2011 onwards the programme received substantial funding from the civil society support programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in **5-year funding cycles**, in different consortia under the coordination of *PAX for Peace*. The last Alliance also included *DefendDefenders*, working from Kampala throughout Africa, and *ABAAD*, a Lebanese gender-focused organization which also worked in some other Middle Eastern and African countries. The government funding allowed the small SPA/HURICAP team to grow into a team of 8 staff members in the last cycle (2021-2025).

³ The new ESCR handbooks (Part 1, Understanding ESC Rights, and Part 2, Taking Action, both available in English and Arabic) as well as the Africa-focused *Haki Zetu* series (available in English, French and Portuguese) can be downloaded from <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/haki-zetu-esc-rights-in-practice>

⁴ The *Biashara Na Haki* handbooks are available in English and French and can be downloaded from the [Amnesty Netherlands website](https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/biashara-na-haki).

Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders, Alliance partner during 2020-2025:



We would like to thank Amnesty International Netherlands and specifically Wim as a person because of his recommendation through which we became part of the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) consortium led by PAX. We benefited in terms of programming, technical know-how transfer, in opening programmes in different areas of the continent, and in getting to know and collaborate with organizations with different kinds of expertise.”

In 2014 the programme’s name changed to **HURICAP** (Human Rights Capacity-Building Programme), to respond to interest beyond Africa (notably the Middle East) and to focus more on capacity-building, which had become the specific expertise of the programme and which was more aligned with the work of the rest of Amnesty International. HURICAP reached out to Amnesty’s Regional Offices, which were newly established by the International Secretariat, to work “closer to the ground”, offering help in building MDR/ESCR capacities of civil society partners of the Regional Office teams.



A training of trainers from the Middle East, Amman, Jordan, 2022

Former SPA/HURICAP officer Ellen Vermeulen:



The evolution of the unit’s name from SPA to HURICAP was almost an organic process. While there was a demand from other parts of the world, we also felt it was time to focus our branding more on what we did best, which is developing and implementing capacity strengthening strategies.”

Former SPA/HURICAP officer Jolanda Groen:



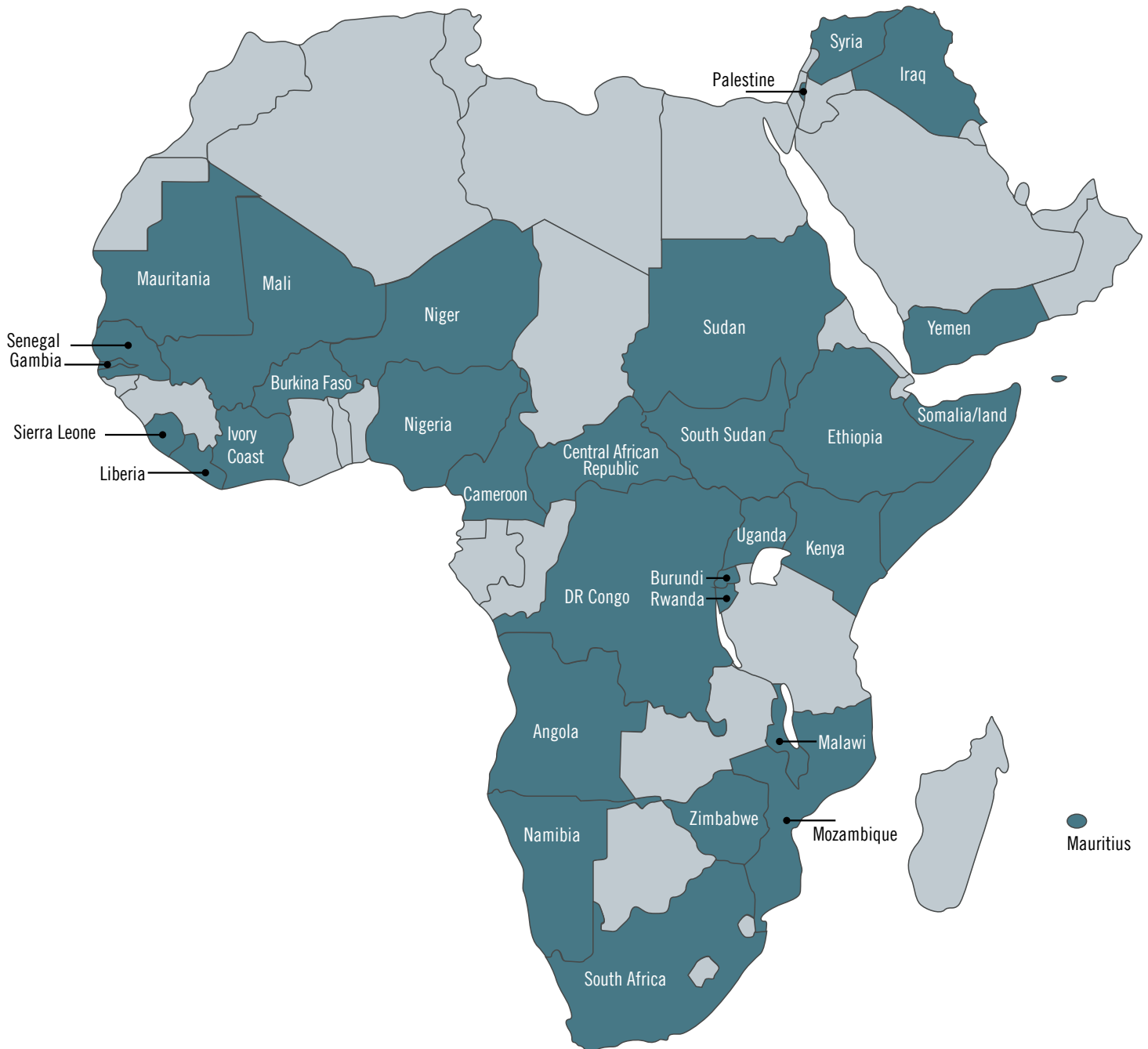
Yes, we as HURICAP developed the training materials, we identified and skilled dedicated trainers from our regional networks, we provided the resources and means for civil society organizations to explore and build their capacity in human rights work, to build a vision and to professionalise as organizations... But all of this is meaningless without the dedication, motivation, commitment and courage of our HURICAP trainers, and even more so, of our partners and their human rights monitors on the ground. They were the ones who did the actual work and ensured that gross human rights violations were addressed and victims and their families were supported.”

Timeline of milestones in the history of SPA-HURICAP

1994	Establishment of the Special Programme on Africa (SPA)
1997-1998	Organization of lobbying trainings in Malawi, Burkina Faso, Mauritius
1999-2004	First country programme in Liberia, working with human rights volunteers attached to networks of local NGOs/CBOs
2000-2004	Publication of the Ukweli MDR main book and companion handbooks, including a community handbook and a Facilitators' Guide for MDR trainers
2001	Organization of MDR trainings in Kenya, Uganda, Namibia
2003	Regional MDR Training of Trainers (ToT) workshops in South Africa and Senegal, followed by advanced ToTs and ToTs for new groups of trainers, and numerous training workshops in several African countries
2005	Publication of Ben Ni Walen, on participatory theatre for human rights education
2007-2015	Second long-term country programme in Uganda
2007-2020	Third long-term country programme in Burundi
2010-2015	Publication of Haki Zetu, ESC rights in practice main book and companion handbooks on different rights
2011-2025	Participation in several Dutch government-funded Alliances
2014	SPA changes to HURICAP (Human Rights Capacity-building Programme), followed by new country programmes with individual CSOs in Africa and the Middle East
2018-2019	Publication of Biashara Na Haki, Impacts of businesses on human rights, in two volumes (Knowing your rights and Taking action)
2019	Production of MDR trainers' manual (replacing the Facilitators' Guide)
2022	Training of Trainers (ToT) on MDR for Middle Eastern organizations
2025	Publication of new Ukweli MDR handbooks on investigating human rights violations (Main Book and Abridged version), torture, enforced disappearances
2025	Publication of new ESC rights in practice handbook, in two volumes (Understanding ESC rights and Taking action)

Did you know that...

- We worked in/on 30 countries (in Africa and the Middle East), ranging from Mozambique to Mauritania, from Iraq to Zimbabwe.



- We built human rights work capacities of 72 civil society organizations in these countries.
- We organized 10 regional Trainings of Trainers (ToTs) for existing and new HURICAP trainers. In some other cases, ToTs were held in specific countries, where national or local people were trained to train or coach field monitors.

- We facilitated approximately 140 trainings with more than 2000 participants. Many of these trainings and ToTs sparked other trainings and activities by the trained participants, reaching a multitude of other people.
- We serviced a stable network of about 30 trainers from Eastern, Southern and Western Africa and the Middle East, who ensured the trainings were adapted to regional and local contexts.
- Some of our trainers are based at Amnesty International sections in Africa, others are based in other NGOs, again others are independent consultants.
- Our handbooks have been distributed across Africa and the Middle East.
- Our training manuals (on MDR and ESCR) contain standardized session plans with guidance for trainers to adjust them to their own contexts and needs. The separate session plans can be accessed online by the trainers we trained.
- The acronym MDR and the *Ukweli* series became well-known among CSOs in Africa.
- We developed a self-paced online training in MDR, consisting of 5 modules.

Jeremie Nkuzimana, Great Lakes programme coordinator at DefendDefenders:



We requested HURICAP's support to build capacities of human rights monitors remotely. HURICAP developed online MDR modules covering basic human rights knowledge, MDR steps, principles, collecting physical, material and documentary evidence, interviewing, and writing interview/case reports. The modules were followed by one-to-one online coaching calls, which according to the monitors and supervisors contributed immensely to their learning."



Group work during a training in Burundi



Certificates for the trained trainers in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 2016

- Through the years, we focused increasingly on coaching and mentoring of the people we initially trained on MDR and other topics. This was done in offline get-togethers as well as in online meetings or written reviews and exchanges.
- We supported numerous CSOs with resources to allow them to undertake field missions, to practice MDR work, such as transport and communication costs, to organize exchanges, to publish and launch their own research outputs and to undertake advocacy activities.
- In some projects, we facilitated our partners in using digital data collection tools.
- In some projects, we facilitated the development of organizational and specific advocacy strategies.
- In the last Alliance programme, we took a lead in starting a local ownership pilot (a governance structure composed of in-country partners from three countries in the Sahel) and in developing safeguarding guidelines (to guard against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment).
- In a final HURICAP trainers' webinar, participants mentioned that they especially liked meeting other trainers and new people, the programme's grassroots focus (promoting "victims as policy makers") as well as the creativity employed by the programme.

Some stories of change brought about by HURICAP⁵

DRC – Closure of illegal detention sites in North Kivu

In rural North Kivu, arbitrary detention and torture were widespread, particularly in underground cells known as Kiboro. These sites were used by Wazalendo fighters (auxiliaries of government forces) to punish individuals suspected of opposing political or military groups, settle personal disputes, and extort money. A HURICAP partner organization in North Kivu documented the inhumane conditions in these illegal prisons, as well as torture and degrading treatment. Since December 2023, the partner consistently denounced this situation in several meetings with DRC government including military officials. Subsequently, the provincial Governor responded with an official order instructing local administrators to take urgent measures. Through sustained advocacy by our partner, supported by provincial authorities, the practice was progressively dismantled. By January 2025, field verification by Local Human Rights Monitoring Committees (CLMDH) confirmed the complete closure of these sites.

Saidi Kubuya, Director of ASSODIP, Democratic Republic of Congo:

“

For 10 years we benefited from the support of HURICAP. Because of that our organization has truly transitioned from amateurism to professionalism. We used to collect information about prison conditions only, without analysing the information, therefore our reports were not as credible as they are now. These days we set clear objectives when we start collecting information, and we report on various human rights violations now, while maintaining the MDR principles (such as “do no harm”). We now know how to set up investigations (identifying evidence and analysing it), how to do interviews, how to do document research.”



Plenary session during a training in Faradje, Haut Uele, DR Congo, around 2022

⁵ These stories were gathered through Outcome Harvesting, a methodology employed by HURICAP and the SCC (Strengthening Civil Courage) Alliance, in participatory sessions with in-country partners.

Burundi – A victims’ association speaks out about enforced disappearances

After many years of suffering in silence, and seeking refuge abroad, the family members of victims of enforced disappearances in Burundi (usually opposition members rounded up by intelligence services) came together in October 2024. They established an association, to support each other and obtain external psycho-social and legal support, as well as to raise awareness and advocate for investigations and justice. The establishment of this association had a major impact on the well-being and outlook of the families of the victims.

The association was created with the help of a HURICAP partner organization (based outside Burundi, as almost all human rights organizations have had to flee the country), who meticulously documented over 300 cases of enforced disappearance since the 2015 mass protests against the unconstitutional third term of late President Nkurunziza. Based on the documentation, HURICAP helped them develop an advocacy strategy, where the idea came up as it was felt that a victims’ association could raise the attention of currently uninterested or hostile advocacy targets.



Press conference during the launch of the Burundian victims association

“Since we are together, we are feeling more relaxed, and we hope the association will help to access justice”, said Alaine Kaneza, the widow of late Aimé Aloys Musaga, who disappeared in 2017, through an online testimony (in Kirundi) viewed by more than 47,000 people.

2025 also saw a number of opportunities for the association to present itself in international circles, such as at a side event at the UN Human Rights Council sessions, where the vice-chair of the association spoke about the enforcibly disappeared and their grieving family members, who have mostly fled the country for fear of further persecution. Similarly, the association presented itself at international meetings in Europe, organized by the HURICAP partner.

Kenya – NGOs from disadvantaged regions spearhead inputs for national and international mechanisms

In 2024, HURICAP partners from the Coastal and North Eastern regions of Kenya have for the first time engaged in the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, contributing substantially to the presentation of an NGO “shadow report”. Previously, this process was driven by NGOs from Nairobi and central regions of Kenya, but this was the first time partners from the Coast and North Eastern regions participated and played a key role in the security and human rights section of the report, due to their ability to provide accurate and credible data and findings derived from more than five years of investigation efforts (supported by HURICAP) on cases of enforced disappearances, torture/ill-treatment and extrajudicial killings perpetrated against Muslim communities in three counties. Such communities continue to suffer from police operations targeting terror suspects, in which many Muslim activists are targeted indiscriminately. The documentation of such cases enabled the partner

organizations to get a strong profile on these matters and they therefore also spearheaded the drafting of a bill to criminalize enforced disappearances in Kenya, in collaboration with key national NGOs.

One of the outcomes of the thoroughly substantiated shadow report and advocacy efforts, was that the Kenyan government adopted many key recommendations on security and human rights that came out of the UPR.



Women mapping their community, Kenya.
(photo by Liana Rodrigues)

South Sudan – The first-ever locally launched report by a national CSO on human rights violations by the National Security Service (NSS)

On 25 September 2025, for the first time in the history of South Sudan, a national CSO published and launched an evidence-based report on civic space-related violations by notably the feared National Security Service (NSS). The launch and publication received quite some media attention in South Sudan, and the NSS felt immediately obliged to put the findings into question, while they were based on verified information delivered by monitors trained and coached by HURICAP and its alliance partner DefendDefenders, over about four years.

This shows that national CSOs in South Sudan can still keep pressure on a seemingly uncontrolled repressive State agency, amidst a further constraining operational space for CSOs and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs). HURICAP helped the organization set up a secure documentation system, improve the quality of the documentation and design and produce the report about the violations over a three-year period (2022-2025).

Niki Frederiek, Amnesty International researcher for South Sudan:

“The main strength of the HURICAP programme is the mentoring support. One-off workshops or week-long training can help increase knowledge but rarely builds skills effectively. There is so much to MDR that the HURICAP model of trainings plus active and sustained mentorship is the only model that truly builds capacity for accurate and safe human rights documentation. HURICAP’s work on South Sudan resulted in the first-ever locally launched report on human rights violations by the National Security Service (NSS) in Juba, South Sudan’s capital. To the best of my knowledge, never before has a national actor launched a report that is critical of the NSS in South Sudan. The report was published by the national network of human rights defenders in South Sudan, and is the direct result of a multiple-year capacity-building project informed by a campaign co-created by the network, HURICAP and our regional office. Earlier on, HURICAP also trained a group of trial monitors, who are going to monitor Conflict-Related Sexual Violence cases in South Sudanese courts, and contributed to our research on that issue.”

Sudan – Sudanese HRDs in exile engaging with the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan

After the conflict broke out in Sudan in April 2023, HURICAP had to change its programme plans substantially and as most human rights defenders left the country, it engaged with defenders who fled to Nairobi and Kampala. Several groups were trained in monitoring and documenting conflict-related human rights violations, and this enabled them to investigate cases through their contacts in Sudan or victims based in Uganda, Kenya, Egypt and even based in Middle Eastern countries, who managed to flee Sudan.

After a series of workshops and individual coaching sessions, a core group of documenters managed to collect such compelling evidence of violations and abuses, that it was fit to submit these to the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan that was created to monitor violations during the current conflict in Sudan. The FFM Sudan received the submissions with appreciation and used the information to write their own reports to the UN Security Council. The submissions were hailed as an important addition and an example of the fact that grassroots defenders are able to come up with sufficiently detailed information from hard-to-reach areas to prove that violations and abuses have taken place. Furthermore, having trained defenders to monitor the situation on the long-term will certainly have a key added value for future accountability processes, directly benefiting Sudanese victims of the current conflict.

Sahel – Elevating conflict-related education rights violations to the international stage

The HURICAP Sahel programme envisioned documentation of human rights abuses in the framework of the conflict between the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and several jihadist groups which are terrorizing large parts of these countries, and thereby causing havoc, death and destruction among the population. The documentation was carried out by partner CSOs in all three countries, who came together and would do common advocacy towards their governments and international actors. Though the partners created a motivated cross-border network of monitors, it became increasingly difficult to collect data and advocate on civil and political rights violations, due to the increasing repression of civic space in all three countries, as military governments took over between 2020 and 2023.

In response to this changing situation, the partners decided to refocus their documentation work on the effects of the conflicts on education rights, which was less sensitive than looking for State involvement in for example direct killings of civilians suspected of supporting the jihadists (a common suspicion). The research on the right to education aimed to understand the impact of disrupted education



*Interview with a displaced woman in Mali
(photographer unknown)*

on children to inform adequate responses for displaced families and host communities. After systematic data collection throughout 2024, the results were presented in a webinar on the eve of the international day to protect education from attack on 8 September 2025, and in in-person meetings with embassies, research institutions and International NGOs (INGOs) in Dakar, Abidjan and Bamako, where partners presented evidence and explored collaborative responses. This has provided the partners with access to new networks and, for example, a concept note for follow-up activities was elaborated and amongst others presented by partners in Mali to the British Embassy in Bamako.

Iraq – Victims from Ninewa convince national policy makers to investigate ISIS killings

In 2025, a delegation of representatives of survivor-led organizations from Ninewa traveled with Iraqi partner organizations to Baghdad to meet with the Parliamentary Committee of Martyrs, Victims and Political Prisoners, and the Education Committee in the Iraqi parliamentary human rights office. Among them were families of the missing from Mosul, Yazidi survivors from Sinjar, and community advocates who, for the first time, presented their own policy recommendations to national decision-makers. This led to parliamentary discussions, a subsequent order to open up the Sinjar mass graves and actions to speed up compensation to victims.

These breakthroughs came after years of documentation of testimonies and listening to victims' and survivors' struggles and challenges, by HURICAP and PAX partners in Northern Iraq. HURICAP trained the organizations to document the abuses and PAX helped partners to draw up advocacy strategies. Both partners prioritized the establishment of victim-led groups (the network of advocates) who led all advocacy and lobbying activities, ensuring the process remained inclusive and survivor-driven.

Abdulrahman, PFO, Iraq:



Our partnership with HURICAP has significantly strengthened PFO's human rights programming and institutional capacities. Through the two projects we implemented together in 2024 and 2025, we were able to expand our human-rights-based interventions, improve the technical quality of our monitoring and documentation work, and engage more effectively with communities, youth groups, and decision-makers. The trainings on MDR greatly elevated the skills of our team, enabling us to adopt more structured and evidence-based approaches. We integrated new tools for analysis, case documentation, data protection, and project planning that improved the credibility of our work and deepened our impact. The collaboration helped PFO align our programmes more closely with international human rights standards and strengthen our engagement with partners at national, regional, and international levels."

What other partner organizations say about HURICAP

Ayesha Harun Jammeh, Program Director of the Gambia Center for Victims of Human Rights Violations and commissioner of the Gambia Reparations Commission:



When we started at the Victims Center, none of us founding members had any capacity in documenting human rights violations. I used to be in finance, banking and social work. Before HURICAP came to us, we only used to have a form in which we registered basic details of victims. Since 2018, and the 2-3 years that we were supported by HURICAP, everything changed. The three trainings and all the coaching sessions with HURICAP shaped the organization to where we are today. We have been able to develop expertise in documenting human rights violations, to the extent that we are always called upon when this skill is needed in the Gambia. We also managed to set up a database of violations, with the help of others, but based on the knowledge and skills acquired from HURICAP. And then it further extended to the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Committee (TRRC), established to account for what happened during the brutal Jammeh regime (1994-2017). The TRRC, which has an investigative mandate, requests us for information we collected and then would further look into the cases, collecting more evidence. And basically all organizations in the Gambia, civil society, victim groups, the UN, all reach out to the Victims Center for information. The edge we have over most people trained as lawyers is that most of the lawyers cannot really document cases of human rights violations, as the curriculum they had in school doesn't teach them such skills. Therefore, many people resort to me, being in civil society. For example, I recently trained three batches of police officers on how to document sexual violence, at the request of the UN, and again, I used the tools given to us by Amnesty International. I also won a few prizes, featured in a few documentaries and became an advisor to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances. I have my own podcast now, called The Victims Podcast."



Ayesha from Gambia presenting
(photo by Samba Jawo, ICTJ Legal Officer)



Discussing a case during a coaching visit,
Gambia (photo by Liana Rodrigues)

Mounir Marjeieh, Community Action Centre, East Jerusalem:

“

HURICAP's support opened doors that we simply could not have accessed on our own, and in doing so, ensured that Palestinian voices were heard. The partnership with HURICAP created a real shift in how we approach international advocacy. It pushed us to look beyond our usual pathways and explore new avenues for action. The research we produced was not only impactful, but it also helped us refine our methods and deepen our analysis. With HURICAP's support, we were also able to bring rights holders and victims of serious human rights violations directly into international forums, allowing them to claim agency and assert their rights.”

Memory Bandera, Programmes Director of DefendDefenders, Alliance partner during 2020-2025:

“

With HURICAP, even before the last Alliance programme, we did some joint trainings. We had some that stood out, especially the trainings we did with Burundians on monitoring, documenting and reporting human rights violations, I think that was one of the most successful countries that we worked on collaboratively. We also developed our internal capacity to do MDR much better. One of our colleagues, for example, after working closely with your team over the years, is specializing in documentation and databases. Having him collaborate with your team has helped us to also come up with open source tools to support human rights defenders in their work. These tools have been tested with the South Sudanese HRDs and we've seen how well they worked. So I think that already shows the achievements that we have had with the HURICAP team in terms of how we document human rights violations, how human rights defenders do this safely and correctly and how is that information then translated into reports and into useful information that is then used at different levels. That information has come in handy for DefendDefenders specifically in our protection program. We're able to reference that information when we make decisions on protection or when we want to know the trends that are happening in the region and in the countries that we work in. We've also been able to use the information with our research team. So when we're doing our own research internally, we've been able use some of your modules. We've also been able to use that information for our advocacy work.”



The population of Blue Nile demanding an end to aerial bombardments, border areas of Sudan, 2014 (photo by Chris Kelly)

Rosabella Ntanzu, programme coordinator of DefendDefenders:



For Burundi, we've seen trained partners use collected data for advocacy, such as in UPR shadow reports, in HRC (UN Human Rights Council) and ACHPR (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights) side events and in-person meetings. This has helped to renew mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi. In Kenya, HURICAP has built the infrastructure of partner organizations in isolated areas and enabled them to work more with women human rights defenders. Over the years these organizations managed to participate in the development of shadow reports for the UN HRC Universal Periodic Reviews. In Sudan, HURICAP has shown that their program has been adaptable. After the war started, the trainings have been delivered both in Kampala and in Nairobi, after which the monitors have collected useful data that has helped with advocating for the fact-finding mission in Sudan. And even when the project closes, those skills will still remain with the local partners and be used to further the human rights agenda as far as advocacy is concerned.

I also want to speak about the complementarity between DefendDefenders (DD) and HURICAP because our mandates sort of sync. Because we have had calls from the HURICAP team telling us of monitors that are at risk, we were able to provide emergency protection support. And then when HURICAP trains the monitors and human rights defenders and they're able to collect data, then that data is used for the advocacy bit at the African Commission and at the Human Rights Council. We have also been in spaces where you were able to articulate the work that DD does, and we are also able to articulate the work of HURICAP."

What our trainers say about HURICAP

Hamane Touré, HURICAP trainer from Mali:



HURICAP's main strength is its ability to transform people who in turn transform their communities. What makes HURICAP unique is its patient investment in individuals and local organizations. For thirty years, the programme has trained thousands of actors – activists, teachers, journalists, community leaders – using a methodology deeply rooted in African realities.

In 2014, we brought together the Africa Human Rights Education programme and HURICAP (then SPA) to strengthen human rights learning and capacity-building in Africa. On that occasion, HURICAP's openness marked the beginning of our collaboration in Mali, from which many initiatives have emerged and hundreds of human rights defenders and journalists have learned about MDR.

Just a few days ago, I was conducting a training session with a coalition working on the nexus between gender, peace, security and climate change. At the end of the session, several participants told me how much they appreciated my expertise and my way of facilitating discussions, which they found made it very easy to understand. As I listened to them, I found myself thinking, 'All of this is a bit like HURICAP speaking through me.'



Hamane Touré in a training session in Burkina Faso

Moussa Ouédraogo, HURICAP trainer in Burkina Faso:



HURICAP has contributed significantly to strengthening the human rights capacities of CSOs in Africa. Through participatory and innovative approaches, HURICAP has enabled the transfer of skills in MDR, which is at the heart of its mission.

My first training with HURICAP was in the Central African Republic. All in all, together with other colleagues from the HURICAP trainers network, I contributed to strengthening the MDR capacities of some fifteen human rights



Moussa Ouédraogo
(photo by Sophie Garcia/Hans Lucas)

organizations in West and Central Africa. One of HURICAP's strengths is its ability to adapt to changing contexts. Wherever it has intervened, HURICAP has constantly adapted its working methods, diversified its offerings, innovated and anticipated the challenges faced by its partners. This is particularly true of the online courses that HURICAP designed for human rights defenders in Burundi when the crisis arose."



Group work during a training in Bangui, Central African Republic, 2017

Samuel Thuku, HURICAP trainer in Kenya:

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HURICAP's strength is training on practical monitoring, documentation and report writing skills to community-based organizations and thereby enabling organizations to produce reports that represent the voice of victims and affected communities. Key examples are Amnesty's report on sexual violence in the South Sudan armed conflict, Do Not Remain Silent, which was the first Amnesty International report written together with local organizations, and the Gambian Center for Victims of Human Rights Violations' report No Longer Silenced by Fear, to which I contributed my training and coaching expertise developed through HURICAP."



Samuel Thuku

The voice of human rights monitors

Fatima⁶, a trained monitor from Kenya:



In our area, many people are arrested and disappear. [...] We do sensitizations, community forums, school visits... where we talk to people on their rights, for example that when they are arrested they have to be brought to court within 24 hours, that they are entitled to get documents about their case, what to do when you encounter a person who has been raped, what kind of help you can get. [...] In addition to that we received training on MDR, how to document cases. Initially our writing was so bad, we would miss out on important information. Now I know how to better write and how to conduct my interviews. [...] These days, there are a lot of protests. Because of the strength that the community now has. Before then, people were even afraid to come out, there was so much stigma. Whenever people heard that one of your relatives has been taken, they shied away from your home, abandoned you, but now we see protests, people coming out, supporting one another and becoming vocal, because of the sensitizations and documentation work we've been doing."

Mr. C.D.⁷, a trained monitor from Burundi:



Because of the situation in Burundi, I had to secretly complete the five online training modules offered by Amnesty Netherlands. The exercises and coaching took place at home, via telephone and email. Only my wife, who is herself active in civil society, knows that I followed a training course, but not what it is for. My voluntary work for a Burundian civil society organization in exile consists of gathering information through cautious and strategic conversations with prisoners when I visit prisons for social purposes, and via social media and other contacts within the country. I can never tell anyone that I am a human rights activist. Every step requires strategy, caution and courage. If you get caught, you end up in prison yourself."

⁶ Pseudonym for safety reasons

⁷ Id.

Some lessons learnt

- We have not come across other long-term programmes (let alone organizations) like HURICAP, specializing in training and building capacities of groups of people living in areas affected by continuous human rights abuses to document these abuses themselves.
- Capacity-building requires a sustained engagement between Amnesty and in-country CSOs⁸. This usually means a collaboration of at least one year, but often a period of at least 3-5 years is needed to ensure a lasting improvement of the CSO's capacity to undertake human rights work (such as providing human rights education, MDR/research, advocacy, etc.). This time frame does not match Amnesty International's usually shorter-term focus on specific countries and current developments in terms of situations and topics.



Celebration after a women's group meeting, Northern Uganda

- Capacity-building is more than training! The most effective capacity-building combines training with coaching/mentoring (through frequent offline/online meetings and workshops, working together on a product, as well as commentary and exchange of documents via e-mails or text messaging), co-creation of strategies, phased application of learnings, and organizational development support.
- Training, even when it includes numerous practical exercises, is only useful if participants apply the learnings in live settings within at least a few weeks after the training.
- Training only has a lasting effect if you train and/or coach the same group of participants several times or during a period of at least one year.
- Ideally, the trainees work together in an existing organization or network, to ensure that the application is embedded in an institutional structure, through which sustainable impacts can be created.

⁸ "In-country" means CSOs working in/on their own countries. Often, the term "local" or "national" CSOs is used, but both these terms may give a different connotation. This could include Amnesty sections or offices working in/on the country they are based in.

- An external programme cannot build capacities from scratch. Therefore, it needs to build on (or “strengthen”, if you like) existing nascent or emergent capacities the partner CSO already has. In order for capacity-building to have an impact, CSOs therefore need to demonstrate that they already carry out human rights work (or more narrowly, MDR) and have (sustainable) financial and human resource capacity to maintain that work.
- Effective capacity-building is contextualized, adjusted to the situation of the NGO(s), participants, and to the issue and situation on the ground. Therefore, HURICAP invested time and effort in scoping missions, through which partners were selected, and in training needs assessments, to learn about the background and needs of participants. And it supported the creation of tailor-made manuals or handbooks with partners.
- As the HURICAP programme has operated since 2011 largely on government funding, the programme could hardly connect to other departments or units within Amnesty, as Amnesty rules only allow government funding to be used for human rights education (incl. capacity-building). Therefore, Amnesty itself could not ensure that the capacities built would lead to structural policy and practice changes brought about by advocacy. For that, we mostly worked through Alliance partners (advocacy done by PAX or DefendDefenders, notably) or by in-country CSOs themselves.
- With conflict spreading and civic spaces closing in many countries, the HURICAP programme developed remote ways of working, through online training and coaching of defenders on the ground, or through training people in exile who in turn gather information from their contacts on the ground. It is key to invest in relationships of trust, before defenders in difficult situations are ready to collaborate and learn, which can be achieved through working with CSOs/contacts in exile and frequent exchanges on safe platforms (notably Signal), demonstrating that we listen to their concerns.



A youth group in Northern Uganda showing documentary evidence

- Grassroots human rights defenders and CSO staff have different potentials, based on aptitude, educational background and experience. Some will be able to develop into human rights researchers, whereas others will continue to struggle with probing for crucial details to prove violations, and with writing analytical reports or interview transcripts, particularly if their first language is different from the language in which the report is written. Therefore, it is important to adjust and offer diversified training/coaching for different levels of either monitors (sending alerts on alleged abuses), documenters (collecting and recording basic information/evidence) or researchers (analysing the information and writing reports). Secondly, it is important to continuously develop tools (such as checklists for specific types of violations in specific circumstances) and search for user-friendly and safe technology (notably for smartphones, which are more widely used by HRDs than laptops) that may offer assistance in sending safe alerts, in recording, transcribing and translating interview texts and verification through open source investigation. As everywhere, artificial intelligence may provide some solutions but also poses risks (of revealing highly sensitive information to big tech companies, of creating unchecked/improper information/texts).
- Working in partnership with international and especially with expert organizations from the Global South is of added value if these organizations offer complementary expertise and services (such as DefendDefenders on protection and regional advocacy, PAX on peacebuilding, which is often a major topic for in-country CSOs). However, it works best if the collaboration concerns the same in-country partners or networks of partners. In the NGO community, effective collaboration always depends on the interests and connections of the persons having to work together; this also counts for partnerships between different Amnesty International units. It is therefore key to invest time and effort in exploring these interests and connections, before embarking on joint projects.
- Working in partnership with in-country, local or grassroots NGOs and CBOs not only ensures that skills are shared, but also enables Amnesty International and these CSOs to agree on specific roles and responsibilities for each party, which may keep the in-country CSOs safe and Amnesty free from being portrayed as a 'foreign agent'.
- In financial and security management, working together with partners and consultant trainers requires clear agreements on roles and responsibilities. HURICAP gained extensive experience in financial risk management (safeguarding against corruption, terrorism, and money laundering practices) and practical security risk management (for field missions, working with security training providers, etc.)



Training participant reporting on group work

Concluding remarks

HURICAP and its predecessor SPA have disseminated Amnesty's thorough human rights documentation methods to numerous homegrown civil society organizations and human rights defenders in Africa and the Middle East. Throughout the programme's 30+ years of existence, it gained experience in impactful capacity-strengthening approaches, ranging from training and coaching sessions to training of trainers/coaches, development of handbooks and trainers' manuals, online modules, co-creation workshops, development of context-specific tools and more. The programme team had grown until 2025 but remained a small set-up that could achieve impact through the trainers' networks it set up in Africa and the Middle East, and its connections with international Alliance partners and dozens of civil society organizations.

Several HURICAP programmes have been evaluated. The external evaluation of the Alliance programme on which the HURICAP team worked for the last five years concluded amongst others that "MDR support has been highly effective as a system-building and accountability-enabling intervention."⁹

While the programme ended in 2025, Amnesty Netherlands decided to continue to provide capacity-building at the request of entities of the Amnesty International movement worldwide. Given more limited resources, this will initially be at a smaller scale.

Amsterdam, May 2026

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⁹ INTRAC (2026) – Thematic Deep Dive for End-Term Evaluation of SCC Programme, 2021-25: SCC's support for Monitoring, Documentation and Reporting (MDR) of human rights violations in highly restricted contexts

