



# Strategic Vision for Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders (CHRDs)

**This strategic vision aims to mobilize and inspire civil society, governments and donor communities to advance, promote and protect the rights of Child Human Rights Defenders (CHRDs).**

It is a shared vision codesigned by children and adult representatives of human rights-focused civil society organizations and UN agencies in a series of workshops between January and May 2024. We are coming together as children, UN bodies, and international and local civil society organizations because we want to see commitments, support and actions made by wider civil society, governments and donor communities to protect and uphold the rights of child human rights defenders.

## Definition of a Child Human Rights Defender (CHRD)

We will follow the definition used in *The Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders: Implementation Guide*,<sup>1</sup> which builds on the 2018 Day of General Discussion as:

*“Children who take actions to promote, protect and fulfill human rights, including children’s rights, are human rights defenders, even if they do not see themselves as such, or are not considered and called as such by others.”*

Child Rights Connect, [The Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders: Implementation Guide \(2020\)](#)



## BACKGROUND

In 2023, [30 percent](#) of the world's population was under the age of 18, making it the largest generation of young people in history. Among them, CHRDs are increasingly at the forefront of activism and mobilizing worldwide to demand change on a broad spectrum of societal, economic, environmental and political issues concerning humanity today. United in organized groups or acting individually, they mobilize to

ensure their voices are heard and strive to create a healthier planet and a world where the human rights of all individuals are upheld.

Children have the inherent right and desire to be involved in decision-making, yet their potential and ability to contribute to society are obstructed in

many countries. The challenges faced by civil society at large are amplified for child defenders; and, for children affected by inequality and discrimination—such as girls, children with disabilities, Indigenous children, children in street situations and others—the risks and challenges are compounded. Despite the growing power and influence of these child defenders, many states respond with measures to frustrate and undermine their crucial work. Around the world, CHRDs face a multitude of challenges and barriers, including: existing and new repressive laws; lawsuits; educational sanctions; denial of public services; disinformation campaigns; and various types of reprisals, such as threats, intimidation, bullying, violence, detention and killing, all aimed at stifling their calls for a more equitable world. Tragically, in 2022 alone, scores of child human rights defenders were [killed](#) or [exposed to violence](#) by authorities, simply for striving to improve the world they will inherit. These risks were confirmed by children and adults during the collaborative strategic vision design of this document.

In response to this escalating global assault on the rights of CHRDs, the international community—building on years of advocacy by international and national civil society organizations—has taken concerted measures to further articulate the strategic vision to promote and protect the rights of CHRDs.

All societies need people to defend, promote and protect human rights, raise their voices to call for positive change, and hold governments, businesses and other duty-bearers to account in making it happen.

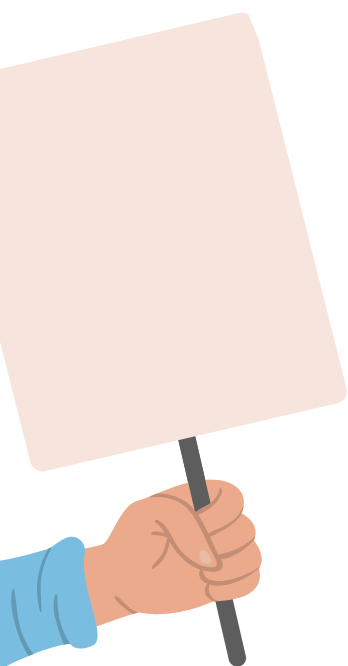
# OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

## VISION

Child Human Rights Defenders—regardless of their gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, socio economic status, disability, race, political opinion, caste, geographical region, ethnicity, religion or beliefs, migration status and any other characteristics—are free, safe, supported and empowered to participate in decisions affecting them, to fully exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and to seek accountability. States and other duty-bearers fulfill their obligations and develop mechanisms to support CHRDs and protect them and their rights.

## MISSION

To build a diverse and intergenerational global community of advocates across civil society, CHRDs, governments, UN bodies and donors, who will stand up, defend and promote the rights of CHRDs and provide protection and support, as defined by children. Efforts will ensure gender-equality and an intersectional approach that takes into account the needs of diverse CHRDs, including those who face the greatest barriers.



## THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

- 1.** CHRDs in all their diversity are safe and supported to exercise their rights and meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, increasing their voices and impact.
- 2.** The rights of CHRDs are recognized, actively promoted and protected by the UN and its Member States.
- 3.** Intergenerational and cross-movement solidarity is strengthened between activists, coalitions, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and civil society actors to overcome the risks and challenges facing CHRDs, and to protect and promote their rights; including, but not limited to groups and communities focused on child rights, human rights, youth, climate, racial justice and social, faith, feminist and gender movements.
- 4.** Sector-wide awareness of CHRDs' rights and the important role they play in society is promoted, translating into better support for CHRDs by adult-led organizations, donor communities, UN bodies, youth-led movements and other relevant stakeholders.
- 5.** CHRDs in all their diversity can access protection, learning resources, capacity building, statistics/data, information and funding when they need them most, in ways that follow best practices around child safeguarding, ethics and age-appropriateness.
- 6.** Efforts to support CHRDs and protect their rights are sustainable. Actions that benefit children today but also generations to follow. Policy and advocacy efforts nationally and globally that secure and advance the rights of CHRDs in laws/policies/funding; organizational commitments/policies that secure needed shifts in the sector at large; and, changes in the funding landscape that secure access to resources for children and stakeholders now and in the future.

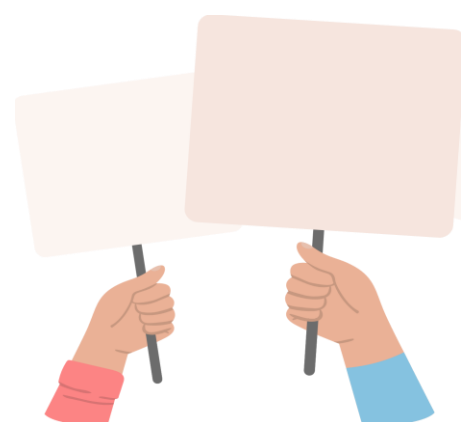
## WORKING TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY

Adults and children have identified a coordination and capacity gap in the human rights ecosystem, where specific needs of CHRDs, adult HRDs and CSOs could be met. To fully realize our vision, we will need: Intergenerational and inclusive communities, co-owned by CHRDs and adult stakeholders, to promote solidarity and participation and to provide resources and assistance to CHRDs. Communities that can bring together CHRDs, CSOs and other stakeholders—including the UN and donor communities—from across sectors, countries and regions, to scale up capacities, share resources, support shared learning, develop standards, and pursue collaborative opportunities to advance and protect the rights of CHRDs.

### Collaborations that can:

- build movements of advocates and programmatic experts to support CHRDs in all their diversity, internally within their organizations and externally;
- ensure CHRDs have access to protection mechanisms, learning spaces and resources to enable them to lead change nationally and globally;
- advocate to hold state and non-state actors to account, via human rights mechanisms and by advocating for laws, policies and regulations that support and protect the rights of CHRDs, and spaces for CHRDs to participate in decisions that affect children; and
- support joint campaigning and raising awareness of CHRDs' impact, ensuring we have the data and evidence to power this work.

Building intergenerational communities is a response to a need and is to be guided by respecting and linking with national, regional and global efforts, organizations and networks who are already leading impactful work. These spaces must elevate the innovative work happening, build on the resources already available, and demonstrate how existing work/structures could better align, thereby avoiding duplication of effort and increasing positive impact.



# PILLARS OF WORK

The following section describes the four different pillars of work needed to promote and protect the rights of CHRDs.

## **Pillar 1 Learning, sharing, and capacity building**

Work together to provide CHRDs with the skills they are requesting.

Create spaces for CHRDs and adult human rights defenders to learn from each other.

## **Pillar 2 Protection**

Work in collaboration and build the capacity of civil society organisations to offer increased support and protection to CHRDs.

## **Pillar 3 Research, policy, and advocacy**

Develop research-informed child rights governance, policy, and advocacy strategies that will encourage the adoption of CHRDs' rights and child participation best practices within the UN and Member States.

## **Pillar 4 Public awareness**

Support the development of national public awareness campaigns to tell the stories of CHRDs, and show their contributions to positive change in the world.

### LEARNING, SHARING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Many CHRDs consider community-building and networking essential to their human rights work. Such networks and connections not only provide an additional layer of protection but are also powerful opportunities for peer learning and skill-sharing.<sup>2</sup>

Our vision is to equip CHRDs with the skills they are requesting, provide joint spaces for learning and mentorship with adult HRDs, and provide spaces for adult HRDs and CSOs to access, collaborate and consult CHRDs. Examples might include: developing, reviewing and testing standards, practices and tools together with children.

Our intent is to work together to collect and create demand-driven learning spaces and resources that connect child, youth and adult human rights defenders at all levels, across borders, and build intergenerational solidarity.

#### Examples of collaboration and work could include:

**CHRDs Learning Resources** - create, maintain and distribute an easily searchable, language-inclusive archive of existing child-friendly, gender-responsive and disability-inclusive trainings and resources, such as:

- Human/child rights and governance
- Coalition building - working with adults for a joint cause
- Advocacy
- Campaigning
- Digital and personal security
- Harnessing new technology
- Access to justice
- Documentation, monitoring and evidence gathering
- Data protection
- Safety and well-being

---

<sup>2</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders: *"We are not just the future": challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders* (2024).

**Seed Funding for CHRDs** – Support CHRd advocacy and movement-building, including in the start-up and delivery of child-led campaigns and coalitions.

**Adult HRDs Mentorship** – Aligned with each learning area, partner adult and child HRDs from diverse movements and communities, including human/child rights, environment, gender equality and feminism, disability and others.

**Community Gathering(s)** – Create eco-friendly, hybrid (online and in person) spaces to bring together CHRDs and adult HRDs to inform, learn, network and build solidarity.

**Adult-led organizations' standards and tools** – For adult HRDs and CSOs, develop and test tools—for example 'sector standards'—that clearly define what and how CSOs need to support CHRDs.

**Innovation with Technology** – Create opportunities to understand new technologies and the potential benefits/threats to CHRDs. Explore how technology experts and companies can advance the objectives and protect the rights of CHRDs.

**Community building** – Take an inclusive, intergenerational, cross-sectoral and intersectional approach, in the following ways:

- Link to existing work in organizations and networks, nationally, regionally and globally;
- Work with donor communities, the UN and its agencies, and with governments through our child rights and governance and policy and advocacy work;
- Act in solidarity with movements that are child-led (e.g. climate, economic, feminist, inequality, social justice, etc.) and more formal groups (such as child parliaments, children's networks etc.); and unite with equity-seeking groups that include children who are impacted by intersectional inequalities and discrimination, including gender-based and sexual violence, children with disabilities, children in street situations and LGBTQI+.



## PILLAR 2



### PROTECTION

CHRDs facing emergencies and conflicts require rapid response protection mechanisms operated by specialist teams with local knowledge and local networks. By working in collaboration, we can bring together expertise to adapt these mechanisms, secure the resources needed to offer these services to children, and raise awareness of these services.

Our vision is to increase civil society's ability to offer CHRDs protection by building the capacity of CSOs across the human/child rights sector to adapt existing human rights defender protection mechanisms and develop meaningful and ethical child participation strategies.

#### Examples:

##### **Adapt protection mechanisms and ongoing technical support**

- Review existing, tried-and-tested human rights defender protection mechanisms, and adapt them for CHRDs.
- Map where needs are greatest, what protections exist and who is providing them.
- Ensure accountability mechanisms and safeguarding policies are in place and implemented regarding adult HRDs working with CHRDs.
- Develop early warning and rapid response support systems (including peer-led systems) that can alert, mobilize and help respond to threats affecting CHRDs.

##### **Develop and/or share child participation and safeguarding trainings**

- From rapid response to fundraising, ensure ways of working and approaches are holistic and rights-based.
- Develop and implement relevant child-engagement and safeguarding strategies for the safe and meaningful participation of children, including:
  - safeguarding tools to prepare adults working in the protection world; and,
  - new policies and amendments to existing policies.
- Trainings on how to support CHRDs, using artistic, playful and other approaches, and accessible and quality child-friendly materials.

**Increase access to support services**, including access to justice (i.e. quality legal services such as pro bono representation, reparations, and psycho-social support for CHRDs affected by legal, cultural, political, social and other challenges.

**Institutionalize sustainable support for CHRDs** (internally, within CSOs and other stakeholders) by updating internal policies and procedures. Integrate CHRDs into existing programs and develop joint programmatic proposals that systematically integrate/mainstream child rights and the agency of CHRDs.

## PILLAR 3

### RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Advocacy strategies, informed by research and data, are needed to encourage the UN and individual countries to advance the rights of CHRDs and to adopt child participation in laws, policies and practices.

Our vision includes a rights-based approach that recognizes children as equal citizens and changemakers with civil and political rights, whose rights are protected within and beyond the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Approaches to advocacy must include law reform, equal access to justice and implementation of laws. Efforts will champion child participation from various entry points; for example, by ensuring children can influence law-making processes; shape the content of the laws themselves; monitor the implementation of laws; and, access strategic litigation processes. We will collectively seek to promote and secure safe, meaningful and ethical participation of CHRDs in UN and other global and national influencing-spaces related to human and child rights implementation.

**Research, evidence and data collection** – Tailor and develop narratives and materials for influencing work within our community, with donors, governments and development institutions, and for public awareness-raising. With the ambition to:

- Better understand in which countries and regions CHRDs face the greatest risks and reprisals—including based on compounding experiences of discrimination—and collect and share data on this through global data repositories.

- Demonstrate the positive contributions to civil, political, social and environmental change made by CHRDs.
- Track and monitor current and emerging threats, including current and planned laws affecting CHRDs (e.g. national and/or regional monitoring mechanisms).
- Collaborate with HRDs, children and civic space researchers to track CHRDs needs, trends and gather evidence; map and share what is happening at national and regional levels; and identify emerging challenges that could be the subject of codesigned solutions.

**Global Advocacy** – advance global advocacy to build support with UN member states and ensure the domesticating of international conventions and agreements. Promote the development and use of international standards to advance national programming and advocacy work, and provide inputs to national laws, policies and overall governance systems that are fit for children. For example:

- Track UN-level human rights mechanisms and increase focus on CRC and UPR reporting work, as they are already institutionalized processes from global to local.
- Focus on opportunities including Child Rights Mainstreaming, and the recommendations from the [guidance note by the SG](#).
- Connect with the equal access to justice and governance arenas within Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.
- Secure a more robust and systematic framework to facilitate the engagement of children within the UN architecture.

**National Advocacy** – Drive national child rights governance and advocacy work, which challenge national laws and regulations that are threatening the civil and political rights of children; and, support calls for child participation frameworks and guidelines, child parliaments, and other types of institutional processes for children to participate in decision-making and seek accountability. Examples could include:

- Advocate for financing/funds for child participation and CHRDs, to increase direct support for participation and child-led initiatives.
- Create and share guidelines for developing and strengthening national rights frameworks and advocacy strategies, led by CHRDs or including their participation.

## PUBLIC AWARENESS

CHRDs are too often misunderstood, ostracized and punished for their actions. The challenges they face are often exacerbated by compounding experiences of discrimination. There is a lack of public support and awareness for the critical role CHRDs play in society, their fundamental civic rights and freedoms and the positive change they manifest.

Our intent is to support the development of national public awareness campaigns that tell the stories of CHRDs in all their diversity and demonstrate their contributions to positive civic, social and environmental change.

### Examples could include:

#### Develop and run a global/local communication strategy

- Tailor messaging and narratives to engage key publics.
- Maintain a calendar of relevant child rights governance, policy, advocacy and news events.
- Generate a global/local news feed of digital-ready content for community members to amplify via their social media platforms and press offices, by collating stories, sharing graphics and more.
- Issue regular news updates to the community about learning resources, funding opportunities and policy and legal trends.

#### Public awareness raising campaign workshops

- Provide support with running campaign codesign workshops, with children and adults. Campaign/learning ideas may include reclaiming and creating a positive narrative around child human rights defenders and telling the diverse stories of CHRDs.



## ACRONYMS

Acronym	Term
CHRDs	Child Human Rights Defenders
CSOs	Civil society organizations
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
SG	Secretary General of the United Nations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

## GLOSSARY

Term	What does it mean?
<b>Accountability</b>	Showing up for and setting out to accomplish the things one said they would do. It means taking responsibility to make sure the ideas and plans created turn into reality. It also includes a willingness to be transparent, allowing others to observe and evaluate one's performance.
<b>Advocacy</b>	Telling others about something that is important to you and persuading them to take action to make a positive change. For example, asking lawmakers to make a law ending child marriage.
<b>Capacity building</b>	Training people and creating tools to help them learn new skills, for example: learning to better advocate for their rights (e.g. with local lawmakers, or within the United Nations system).
<b>Coalition building</b>	Organizing a group effort to bring about change relating to a joint interest.
<b>Child Human Rights Defenders</b>	Children standing up for their own human rights and the human rights of other children (examples: teaching others about children's rights, running a campaign or speaking out about a human rights issue).
<b>Child-friendly</b>	Ensuring children can understand and access resources and spaces, which tend to be overcomplicated and difficult to navigate.
<b>Child participation</b>	When children speak up/contribute to conversations about their rights, when their opinions are heard, and their ideas are included in decisions. This is a Right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
<b>Child rights-based approach</b>	Making sure children are consulted and that their rights are considered when adopting laws and making programs and policies happen. This means putting children's rights-as explained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child-at the center of documents, projects or research.

Term	What does it mean?
<b>Child rights mainstreaming</b>	Making sure that an action or idea relating to children’s rights is well-known and acted on by everyone and considered in every decision.
<b>Civil and political rights</b>	<p>Rights that include your right to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seek, get and share information about your rights and about various human rights issues;</li> <li>• have your ideas and opinions heard;</li> <li>• have information about yourself kept private; and,</li> <li>• be able to take part in peaceful protest.</li> </ul> <p>You have these rights when you are online, too!</p>
<b>Civil society organizations / non-governmental organizations</b>	Charities or groups of people that work together to help others and work on good causes like fighting poverty or climate change. These groups are <i>not</i> a part of the government.
<b>Days of General Discussion</b>	Discussions held in Geneva by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every two years in September. These discussions give stakeholders the opportunity to comment on themes, which are chosen in advance.
<b>Disinformation</b>	Spreading false information about a cause that can stifle the voices of activists. Commonly occurs in the form of political messaging distorting the goals of activists.
<b>Educational sanctions</b>	Schools penalizing students for participating in activism (e.g., suspension for missing class to participate in a protest).
<b>Funding</b>	Money provided by an organization or government for a particular purpose. For example, money (funds) provided by a government to an NGO for engaging children on a report about children’s rights.
<b>Fundraising</b>	Raising money to support an organization or a cause. Fundraising can include asking companies to donate money, holding an event where ticket costs are donated, and many other actions that raise funds.

Term	What does it mean?
<b>Governments</b>	The people who make and administer the rules for a given area (like a city or a country). At a country level, a government can be a big system that encompasses a lot of institutions and leaders such as legislatures (the group of people that make laws), administration (those that help society run and provide services) and judiciaries (courts where judges help settle conflicts between people or organizations, solve problems and find the right justice for a crime).
<b>Human Rights Defenders</b>	People standing up for their own human rights and the human rights of others. They can advance child rights through their own advocacy or by supporting CHRDs.
<b>Implementation</b>	Taking an idea and putting it into practice in the real world.
<b>Institutionalize</b>	Thoroughly integrating something into organizational structures. In the case of CHRDs, this would mean having organizations adapt to include CHRDs in their advocacy work.
<b>Intergenerational approach</b>	Connecting advocates of all age groups to work together. In the case of CHRDs, encouraging adults, youth, and children to work together for child rights. Also, creating an inclusive environment for children in the larger HRD community.
<b>Intersectional approach</b>	Examining the obstacles faced by CHRDs with the recognition that intersecting forms of discrimination can compound and increase barriers to participation in advocacy work.
<b>Justice</b>	Providing support for people who have been harmed and correcting the harms that people face. For CHRD work, this includes allowing children to complain if their rights are denied, listening to children and taking their complaints seriously, finding ways to restore their rights or punishing the person who violated their rights.
<b>Monitoring</b>	Watching the progress of implementation to see how successful it is or to make sure that it is being done right.



Term	What does it mean?
<b>Network</b>	A group of organizations working together for a common goal. The Child Rights Connect Network for example, has 100 national, regional and international organizations that are working together to ensure that all children can fully enjoy their rights, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
<b>Obligations</b>	Something, like a promise or a law, that requires someone to do something.
<b>Policy</b>	A plan or set of values, rules or intentions that help guide people as they make decisions.
<b>Pro bono legal services</b>	Legal services provided to those who cannot afford representation (often at no financial cost to that individual).
<b>Protection mechanism (for HRDs)</b>	A way that a government makes sure that those who defend their human rights, or the rights of others, are safe. Some protection mechanisms can also be put in place by NGOs or by the UN.
<b>Public services</b>	Services funded by governments or human rights organizations to provide for the general needs of a community (e.g., food stamps, public education, street cleaning, etc.).
<b>Report</b>	A document that shares the results of research, investigations or analysis about a particular topic.
<b>Safeguarding CHRDs</b>	Protecting child human rights defenders from being exploited or abused. Prioritizing the needs of CHRDs and ensuring adults working with children have the proper tools to appropriately communicate with them.
<b>Secretary General of the United Nations</b>	The person in the highest position of the UN, who promotes the work of the UN and speaks out for peace around the world. This person works closely with all member states (countries) to make sure they are fulfilling the mission of the UN.

Term	What does it mean?
<b>Socioeconomic status</b>	Considering both the social and economic factors that impact a person's opportunities in society and overall quality-of-life.
<b>Special Rapporteur</b>	Human rights experts who monitor specific human rights topics and advise others.
<b>Stakeholder</b>	An individual or group who is affected by, invested in or closely connected to an issue.
<b>Strategy</b>	A plan with a goal and real steps and actions that people need to take to achieve the goal.
<b>Sustainable Development Goals</b>	A list of goals adopted by UN member states in 2015 which outlines how we can achieve peace and prosperity at a global level.
<b>United Nations</b>	An international organization that was created in 1945 and is made up of over 190 countries that are known as Member States. These countries work together to improve the world for everyone and protect human rights.
<b>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</b>	An international treaty that describes human rights for all children (any person under 18 years old), including economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights.
<b>Universal Periodic Review</b>	A process that the Human Rights Council uses to monitor and improve the human rights situation in every country around the world. They are universal because all states are reviewed, and all human rights are addressed.

**Strategic Vision for Promoting  
and Protecting the Rights of  
Child Human Rights Defenders  
(CHRDs)**

