



## Why the International Human Rights Day is important to the work of frontline human rights defenders

Nicholas Opiyo<sup>1</sup>

The International Human Rights Day is observed by the international community every year on December 10 to commemorate the day in 1948 when the United National General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This year will mark 74 years since the UDHR was promulgated. Considered the foundational document for the international human rights system, the declaration is standard setting and has inspired several international and national human rights instruments.

The bill of rights in the Ugandan constitution is, in large part, inspired by the values and aspirations expressed in the UDHR. It is the fourth chapter that is the inspiration for the name of our organization, [Chapter Four Uganda](#), a civil liberties non-profit organization championing the defense of human rights for all, without distinction.

In Uganda, frontline human rights defenders such as Chapter Four Uganda are the bridges between the international normative frameworks and institutions and many people at the grassroots. For this constituency, there is limited interaction and appreciation of international normative frameworks and institutions. To them, human rights have been conspicuous by its abuse and, in many communities, by its total absence. The lived experiences of many Ugandans, history of the country and current trends have been dotted by widespread systemic abuse of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Frontline defenders' unenviable and unending task, among a long list of other tasks, is to raise the level of human rights awareness in these communities as means to empowering those on the margins of the international system to be able to claim and defend their rights and the rights of others.

In the face of the continuing decline in the respect for human rights in Uganda, the duty of empowering citizens in order for them to defend human rights is an urgent imperative.

---

<sup>1</sup> Executive Director, Chapter Four Uganda.

Uganda is rated *not free* in the *Freedom in the World 2022*, Freedom House's annual study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide. Basic freedoms such as the freedom of the press, the right to association and the rights of sexual and other minorities are under assault from state and non-state actors.

The World Justice Rule of Law Index, 2022 ranks Uganda 128 out of 140 countries, coming only before countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, and Myanmar – with the state of the rule of law having steadily declined from 2015 to 2022.

Under these conditions, it is easy to lose faith in the international human rights project. But it is in and because of them that we find inspiration to continue the advocacy for the protection of human rights. Put differently, it is in the potency of the human rights framework to propel development, ensure sustainable peace and security for all that we find the courage to face the dangers associated with the work of defending human rights.

The International Human Rights Day is an important moment of celebration as it is a reminder of the monumental task of pursuing human rights for all. It is, to frontline defenders, a celebration as it is a moment to find inspiration. We look back to take a rearview mirror of where we are coming from in order to see where we are going.

Over the years, Chapter Four and the Ugandan human rights community have marked the International Human Rights Day with a series of events including street processions, townhall debates, radio programs and open ground free legal aid sessions. These events are open to the public and are widely broadcasted in many local dialects. Raising awareness about human rights in general and providing free services to members of the community has been central in these celebrations.

The day also serves as moment to demonstrate the work human rights defenders and the utility of the human rights framework and institutions in ensuring freedom, development, and peace. By creating a space for interaction with the public, we forge relationships between survivors/victims of human rights violations and service providers, including government institutions – to many, it may be the first time to interact with a lawyer, a judge, prosecutor or a magistrate. The interactions with lawyers usually, but not always, are an opportunity for free legal counsel that may lead to securing free legal service in seeking redress.

Lawyers and other human rights defenders are connected with indigent individuals and offer free legal advice that often turn into legal representation at no costs. It is not to suggest that this would not have happened were it not for the International Human Rights

Day. Rather, it is to make the point that the day is another opportunity for this to happen *en masse* with so much good will in one day.

On many occasions, state institutions are part of these celebrations. In Uganda this has been under a donor initiated, funded and government hosted framework known as the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS). The framework is a coordination point for state justice actors in the country. The International Human Rights Day is as much an accountability day as it is a day of free open access to these institutions by the community. These institutions hear from those who benefit from their services. It is common for a court user to face the judge or magistrate in the informal settings and let them know how they felt treated in their courtroom.

Increasingly, human rights defenders involved in defending the freedoms of others are themselves becoming victims of rights abuse. The CIVICUS Civic Monitor, describes the [civic space in Uganda as repressed](#). The report chronicles a litany of violations against human rights defenders such as journalists, LGBTQ activists, peaceful protesters, and civil society. To these human rights defenders, the international Human Rights Day is an opportunity for reflection, (re)education and (re)dedication to the protection and importance of human rights.

The burgeoning lot of young human rights defenders are generations removed from the dark historical moments that internationalized the human rights project – from the World Wars to the commitment of nations to establish systems and institutions ensuring a non-recurrence. The event is a useful reminder of the conditions that precipitated the development of these instruments and institutions. The evil inherent evil that human beings can do to others and the need to protect human rights. It is an education about the fragile nature of rights and a reminder of how quickly they can be imperiled if not protected and guarded by all generations and actors.

I mentor many young human rights defenders who, like myself when I was starting out my human journey, look forward to these commemorations and find in them inspiring speeches, interactions, and mentorship.

To us, the International Human Rights Day is an ever-present signpost – that quietly gives us direction on this well-trodden path, reminding us of the path to take in defending fundamental rights and freedoms.