

## **The changing global human rights landscape: A challenge to the African Union (AU) - European Union (EU) partnership**

### **A briefing by European and African civil society**

**17 November 2025**

In September-October 2025, ahead of the AU-EU human rights dialogue on 7 October, twenty civil society experts convened to discuss the current far-reaching and unprecedented changes taking place in the global human rights landscape and what meaningful actions the two institutions, their member states and their partnership can take to effectively promote and protect human rights in this context.

In Europe and Africa, civil society is witnessing significant global changes on human rights with:

- Cuts in funding support to civil society organizations and international and regional human rights institutions, which work to safeguard against increasing human rights violations and shrinking civic space
- Misinformation and disinformation about civil society and its work
- The active undermining of norms and institutions including international human rights law commitments; and
- Authoritarian practices on both continents.

As a group drawing on civil society work and experience on both continents, we asked ourselves the following questions:

- What are we seeing/documenting?
- What is the impact of these developments on civil society, human rights defenders (HRDs) and human rights bodies?
- What is the impact of these changes on victims/survivors/activists?
- What can the institutions do to address this at the level of the AU and the EU, in their member states and in their partnership, to maintain the protection and promotion of human rights in this context?

Following the most recent human rights dialogue on 7 October 2025, the institutions issued a [joint statement](#) that: *“welcomed the constructive recommendations submitted at the outset of the Dialogue by a substantial joint African European consortium of civil-society organizations (CSOs). They stressed the key role of civil-society actors in contributing to good governance, accountability and defense of human rights, as well as sustainable development more broadly. Recalling the Right to Defend Human Rights, more can be done to protect citizens acting as human rights defenders, including CSOs and journalists, from threats and attacks. They expressed concern about the shrinking of civic space globally, stressing the critical importance of preserving an enabling environment for CSOs both to resource themselves and to conduct their programmes and activities.”*

Our organizations acknowledge the importance of the EU-AU human rights dialogue as an essential space for civil society working on democracy and human rights on both continents as well as the potential of the AU-EU partnership to positively shape national human rights agendas, policies and practices in Europe and in Africa. One testimony to the potential impact that can be realized through the EU-AU partnership is the [European Support for Transitional Justice/Initiative for Transitional Justice in Africa project](#), jointly launched by the AU and EU in April 2023.

## **Background: the changing global human rights landscape**

Civil society space is shrinking and under attack by states on both continents, even as related challenges proliferate, from rising authoritarian practices to conflict and insecurity to new digital opportunities and risks.

Civil society notices worrying trends in both regions in terms of the policing of protests and criminalization of activism and status, showing a disjunction between law and practice. Governments increasingly treat assemblies as security problems rather than civic expression, deploying heavy-handed tactics and modernized less-lethal technologies that inflict severe harm. Despite regional courts finding such practices unconstitutional or amounting to torture, domestic investigations are rarely initiated and where initiated, there is outright contempt of court decisions. The effect is twofold: victims go without remedies, and a chilling effect deters future civic participation. The conflation of contemporary human rights violations with past abuses that remain unaddressed underscores the need for accountability and credible transitional justice processes to combat impunity, provide reparations to victims and guarantee the non-recurrence of violations.

Transnational repression of civil society and rights defenders is also on the rise and documented in both [Europe](#) and Africa.

Funding cuts have amplified the impact of authoritarian practices and the shutdown of civic space, including protests, elections and other political processes, especially during conflict situations, where the delivery of humanitarian aid is profoundly impacted.

In many areas, the very definition of human rights action is being questioned, and human rights itself risks being redefined altogether. [Recent changes](#) to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Guidelines are just one example of these fundamental shifts.

## **Funding cuts**

Today's spiraling funding cuts to foreign assistance across the globe will significantly impact civil society, rights defenders and victims of human rights abuses – and the work of the EU, AU, their member states and their collaboration will not remain unscathed.

With a [worldwide reduction of 9-17% in overseas development assistance](#) (ODA) in 2024 and cuts to development funding in the [Netherlands](#), France, Germany, the [UK](#), US, and the EU in 2025, many NGOs on both continents are currently reducing or stopping their activities.

Specific at-risk groups as well as organizations working for and with them, have been disproportionately impacted by funding cuts, in particular around [HIV/AIDS](#), health-based responses to drugs, the [education sector](#), women, gender, minorities and anti-discrimination and refugees and migrants.

Civil society witnesses the profound impact of funding cuts on monitoring and documenting human rights violations in conflict settings such as Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as well as in providing critical support through human rights programmes. Liquidity crises and challenges at the United Nations (UN) and regional levels have an impact on justice and accountability mechanisms, affecting several key initiatives including the African Commission and UN fact-finding missions on Sudan, as well as the UN Fact-Finding Mission on DRC and the UN Commission of Inquiry on DRC. These cuts also affect UN Peacekeeping

Missions, many of which are mandated to document and investigate human rights abuses and provide capacity building for local institutions, often together with civil society, e.g., on the prison system with MINUSCA (the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic).

The current funding cuts from the [United States](#) and European donors only amplify long-standing donor trends to privilege other objectives like security, over human rights – or to fund UN bodies “instead of” civil society, as for example with EU and its member states funding the UNODC (the UN Office on Drugs and Crime) and UNDP (the UN Development Programme) in Africa with grants that would have previously gone to civil society. This will result to a dilemma of “how civil society can deliver more in terms of objectives and results with less means”?

Funding cuts have had particularly sharp impact in countries where civil society relies heavily on funding from international donors, for example South Sudan, Central African Republic and other African contexts where there is no other way civil society can generate funding other than through international donors.

In this context, victims and survivors of gross human rights violations bear the brunt of funding cuts. Rehabilitation for torture survivors remains dramatically underfunded, while victims of other gross human rights violations remain without reparation and redress. Perhaps due to wider funding issues, states frequently rely on civil society organizations to provide medical, psychosocial and legal services to survivors but fail to institutionalize sustainable support. Past civil society work has repeatedly called for earmarked, predictable funding to fight torture and ill treatment, as well as integration of rehabilitation into health and social protection systems; these include reports from the [2016–2017 EU-NGO Forum](#) and the [2017 civil society seminar](#) ahead of the EU-AU human rights dialogue. Yet, to date, state obligations under Article 14 of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) remain largely unmet in both regions in practice.

On the positive side, recent jurisprudence has expanded the interpretive contours of torture beyond physical violence in custodial contexts to include violent repression of assemblies, the deliberate infliction of psychological harm, and state complicity in abusive practices abroad. Key decisions include the ECOWAS Court (Lekki Toll Gate, 2024) decision in [Mohamed Morlu v. Sierra Leone](#) and at the EU level, where the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) established in [El-Masri](#) (2012) and [Bouyid](#) (2015) that complicity or even a single episode of degrading treatment can violate prohibition norms.

In a time of liquidity crises and funding cuts, collaboration between the EU and AU is more crucial than ever – both to explore possibilities for greater cost effectiveness and to seek more ambitious impact on human rights through regional cooperation, beyond the domestic.

### **Misinformation/disinformation about civil society**

A global trend of increasing mis- and disinformation about civil society organizations is unfolding in similar ways across various countries and regions: foreign agent laws, smear campaigns, allegations of fraud, efforts toward “transparency” that undermine civil society space, including in the European Union and the European Parliament (EP). MEPs of the European People’s Party (EPP) [led](#) a sustained wave of [attacks](#) at the European Parliament in 2024-25, focusing in particular on EU funding for [environmental NGOs](#) who do advocacy work at the EU level, and also shedding doubt on the integrity and independence of civil society at large. [Guidelines](#) were issued

for the EU LIFE program to cease funding EU-facing advocacy activities by civil society; and media reports indicated there was discussion within the European Commission about applying [similar guidelines](#) to all civil society funding. Finally, a six-month EP investigation was [launched](#) by right-wing groups in June 2025 into “whether EU funds were misused for lobbying by environmental NGOs”.

In response to the mounting impact of mis- and disinformation on civil society and human rights defenders in Africa and the EU, there is a need for legal frameworks that govern information sharing without infringing on rights, as well as measures to counter the misuse of laws such as Kenya’s Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act<sup>1</sup>, and the deliberate spread of false information to discredit HRDs by alleging fraud or [anti-government activity](#), and/or to malign and stigmatize them.

Given the adverse impact of mis- and disinformation on civil society, these concerning developments can be countered by robust and proportionate legislation in line with international law standards, effective monitoring and early-warning systems and stronger international cooperation. There is a key role for the African Union to engage its member states, including by urging ratification and implementation of the Malabo Convention on data protection in Africa. The EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has significant potential but faces challenges with consistent implementation and enforcement.

### **Active undermining of norms and institutions including international human rights law commitments**

Today, various UN and regional bodies and mechanisms – crucially including the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the HRC, and the African Commission - all face funding cuts as well as political and operational challenges. Lack of funding is often invoked to explain these challenges, but where does the legitimate limit lie to excusing operational difficulties by pointing to liquidity crises? When do ongoing, recurring funding shortfalls represent a *de facto* undermining of crucial human rights institutions?

Similar trends can be seen within the EU, with a growing failure to implement decisions from human rights bodies, restrictive immigration and asylum policies, and direct attacks on human rights norms.

Both EU and AU member states have recently announced their withdrawal from the Rome Statute, including Burkina Faso, Hungary, Mali and Niger, presenting a significant challenge for efforts toward justice and accountability for the most serious international crimes.

On both continents, civil society organizations face shrinking access to resources and financing, directly impacting their ability to operate, and this decline in funding appears linked to a decline in states’ political will to deliver on human rights commitments in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Together with civil society, the AU and EU should continue monitoring and documenting how this law is being applied in Kenya and report violations to relevant international human rights mechanisms, including UN Special Rapporteurs, to raise awareness and prompt action. There is a need to also review the Budapest Convention to not only focus on how to facilitate international collaboration between law enforcement agencies but to seek accountability on law enforcement agencies who go against the letter and spirit of this convention.

Indigenous people, minorities and other marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by this shrinking civic space, while the persistent lack of implementation of human rights decisions at AU, UN, and EU levels undermines trust in these systems and deepens the vulnerability of affected communities. Women, children, people in criminal justice systems, deprived of liberty, LGBTIQ+ persons, minorities, racialized groups, people who use drugs, people with disabilities, and many other marginalised groups, are impacted disproportionately by the closing space for civil society on both continents. In several cases, such as the [case concerning the rights of the indigenous Ogiek in Kenya](#), despite landmark rulings from regional human rights bodies recognizing their collective rights, impacted communities continue to face evictions and heightened persecution. The failure to implement decisions not only denies justice, but also reinforces structural discrimination and exclusion, and puts already marginalized communities at greater risk of being targeted. In this breach, election periods often showcase “worst practices” rather than strengthening democratic norms.

There are many parallels between developments on both continents, in terms of diminishing access to political and human rights institutions, as well as diminishing adherence of states to key human rights commitments. Access to the ACHPR remains a long-standing issue in Africa, while [restrictive visa policies](#) restrict access to the international institutions, for HRDs from across the globe to be able to come and advocate toward counterparts in the UN and the EU.

While human rights bodies find themselves under attack, civil society on both continents is also witnessing a concerning pattern of lack of implementation of decisions issued by human rights bodies, both by the African Commission and Court on Peoples and Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. Crucially, national non-implementation of international and regional decisions makes it impossible for civil society to have a fallback mechanism beyond the national level.

In Africa, there are ongoing attacks on human rights institutions, especially the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR). The ACHPR is a space where civil society can raise their voices if they cannot do so in the national context, so the consequences of these attacks are significant. There are also state attacks on UN processes and mechanisms in Africa. In Uganda, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) was [closed](#) in 2023, while in Burundi, almost all human rights defenders have left the country while even the UN Special Rapporteur [struggles to get access](#) to information and even physical access to the country. This is echoed at the national level, where underfunding and under-resourcing of national human rights institutions - like in the case of the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) - undermines these institutions’ crucial ability to function independently and effectively and hinders their mandated roles of monitoring rights, advising governments, and promoting human rights.

EU member states’ own restrictions of human rights domestically blunts the foreign policy impact of the EU and member states who some perceive as having abandoned their role as human rights champions, key advocacy actors and allies to raise concerns about human rights in Africa.

All these attacks on human rights bodies and norms have far-reaching consequences, alongside the **weaponization of laws** as criminal, cybercrime, and public order laws are increasingly used to criminalize activism, dissent, and poverty itself, and a widespread fear of reprisals - with little real or perceived protection from institutions, fewer victims and defenders are willing to come forward.

Still civil society can see several potential ways forward through youth mobilization, strategic litigation and positive jurisprudence.

Youth mobilization is a key area for the AU and EU to support and facilitate. Young people continue to stand up against abuses of power and human rights violations. Such people-centered advocacy remains a powerful driver for human rights progress.

Strategic litigation is resource-intensive, slow, and often leads to judgments that remain unimplemented, discouraging victims and weakening faith in international and regional justice. When the resulting judgments and decisions are not implemented, the EU, AU and their member states must remain mindful how this compound human rights struggles for affected communities: delaying relief, failing to halt rights violations and deepening mistrust in legal systems. Yet strategic litigation remains a vital tool for advancing justice and holding states accountable.

Both EU and AU should build on positive jurisprudence. African regional courts have advanced recognition of indigenous peoples' rights in climate and [biodiversity contexts](#). Such progressive jurisprudence is lacking in Europe, where recognition of collective rights for minorities and indigenous peoples would be welcome.

### **Authoritarian practices**

Recent years have seen a regression of democratic principles on both continents. Individual EU member states demonstrate increasing authoritarian practices and authoritarian rhetoric, in particular around migration, while individual AU member states are passing ever more restrictive laws and engaging in authoritarian rhetoric.

Both the EU and AU are challenged to respond to member states' authoritarian practices that attack the important work of human rights defenders, including repressive laws and targeted attacks on protest and dissent, and restrict the right to protest, in particular around climate change, the situation in Palestine, the rights of refugees and migrants, and other areas of real or perceived dissent. Hard-won gains on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association are being reversed in law, policy and practice. Internet shutdowns come together with state repression and [violence](#) by police and security forces in response to protests and during times of conflict, and result in adverse social and economic impact on civil society and activists.

In the face of rising authoritarianism, local civil society organizations find themselves in danger, and human rights defenders—acting in the name of the universality of human rights—are increasingly threatened by local authorities but unprotected by states and international donors. This leads to a sense of abandonment in their struggle, sometimes resulting in forced exile. In this context, the proliferation of self-censorship by civil society risks rolling back gains for vulnerable groups and their rights.

On both continents, the EU and AU are ever more challenged to meaningfully protect and support HRDs and civil society, and also to counter authoritarian trends, acting decisively to respect, protect and fulfill all human rights. Civil society in Africa and Europe affirm these efforts by their regional institutions and commit to support them as critical partners.



## **Recommendations to the EU, AU, their member states and for the AU-EU partnership:**

### **General**

- In line with the [Joint Communiqué](#) following the recent Human Rights Dialogue in October 2025, redouble AU and EU support to civil society and rights defenders on both continents both in the joint positioning as well as in concrete follow-up actions.
- Prioritize delivery on existing human rights policies and commitments and invest substantively in the monitoring of actions by the institutions and their member states, as well as the genuine consultation of civil society, rights defenders and activists in decision-making that affects them.
- Foster deeper information exchanges and work on good practices on human rights between EU and AU based civil society.
- Provide sustained support for accountability and transitional justice mechanisms aimed at combating impunity for gross human rights violations and ensuring adequate and effective reparations for victims and affected communities.

### **Funding cuts**

- Effectively and strategically respond to proliferating funding cuts worldwide:
  - Conduct a study on the human rights and development impact on funding cuts in AU and EU states
  - Put in place a special funding instrument to support CSOs working on democracy and human rights in the EU and AU
- Boost cooperation between the EU and AU to counter global funding shortfalls and undermining of human rights bodies
- Reinforce funding and technical support for HRDs in Africa and the EU, matching this with full diplomatic backing by the institutions and their member states. An investment in a strong and independent civil society is an investment in both regions' peace and security.

### **Misinformation/disinformation on civil society**

- Take an unequivocal, joint and public stance for the respect of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association and the right to protest.
- AU states should ratify and implement existing conventions, in particular the Malabo Convention, the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, adopted in 2014 to combat cybercrime and protect personal data.
- The EU should be more attentive to the [business model of online platforms](#) and their advertising to counter risks of the proliferation of misinformation in Europe.
- Redouble collaboration between the EU and AU on digital policies, prioritizing human rights safeguards together.
- Reinforce legal frameworks on the definition and protection of HRDs, aiming for the most ambitious approach possible.
- Act to ensure more structural support to independent media in Europe and Africa.

### **Active undermining of norms and institutions including international human rights law commitments**

- Take action to end all attacks on UN human rights bodies, as well as regional and national human rights institutions; and to pro-actively improve access to both institutions and

their genuine consultation of rights defenders and civil society on decisions that affect them.

- Act to effectively implement the decisions of the African Court on Human Rights, the Council of Europe, along with recommendations of UN human rights bodies and take concerted, targeted action to hold member states accountable where they fail to implement decisions in practice.
- Ensure transparent, structured, and consistent engagement of the EU and AU institutions with civil society organizations, strengthening mechanisms to facilitate this.
- Ensure that the regional human rights systems engage in mutual exchange of good practices to strengthen monitoring and implementation of decisions, drawing on the experience of the Committee of Ministers within the Council of Europe. Meaningful consultation with applicants and impacted communities should be an integral part of the process.
- Demonstrate the mutual benefits for member states in engaging with AU institutions, reversing the “lack of interest” narrative.
- Support smaller coalitions of AU/EU member states working towards concrete human rights objectives.

### **Authoritarian practices**

- Jointly and publicly affirm the universality and indivisibility of rights, the EU and AU commitment to justice and accountability for violations, and their rejection of all authoritarian practices and hate speech, in line with their stated human rights commitments
- In parallel, both institutions and their member states should remain vocal about the undermining of human rights institutions and norms within and across the two regions
- Share and align regional human rights guidelines with a view to furthering more ambitious human rights policy and practice on both continents, and explore ways to improve implementation of existing policies, e.g., the AU Human Rights Guidelines on freedom of association and assembly.
- De-criminalise archaic offences used to [criminalise](#) activism, poverty and people for who they are, not what they do.
- Work to strengthen safeguards and accountability for the use of surveillance technology against civil society.
- Expand early warning tools that can warn about potential conflicts and crises for timely intervention. The EU and AU should speak out when seeing early warning signs – and implement early warning partnerships when there are signs of conflict, an undemocratic change of power and/or a human rights crisis.
- Both sides should reinforce the training of police officers and security forces with a human rights-based approach, while acting to ensure accountability for abuses.
- Ensure the EU and the AU have a common approach in controlling the trade in equipment used for human rights violations as a vital part of stopping the harms they are used to commit. Trade in law enforcement equipment that can be used for torture should be compliant with human rights and, given the high stakes for the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the EU and AU should act to ensure that the trade in



inherently abusive equipment is prohibited, and place trade controls on standard law enforcement equipment used for torture<sup>2</sup>.

- In this spirit, both AU and EU should commit to a joint roadmap toward a legally binding UN treaty on torture-free trade. Practical measures should include harmonised export controls, joint training for customs and law enforcement, supporting the international process towards a Treaty (including, where not already done, joining the [Alliance for Torture-Free Trade](#)) and public reporting on trade in banned items.

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<sup>2</sup> Recent jurisprudence—across regional courts and international tribunals—has progressively expanded the interpretive contours of torture: beyond physical violence in custodial contexts to include violent repression of assemblies, the deliberate infliction of psychological harm, and state complicity in abusive practices abroad. The ECOWAS Court (Lekki Toll Gate, 2024) and cases such as *Mohamed Morlu v. Sierra Leone* highlight that live ammunition targeting peaceful demonstrators, indiscriminate use of less-lethal weapons, or orchestrated intimidation campaigns can constitute torture when they produce severe suffering and are used to dominate, punish or deter civic participation. Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights in *El-Masri* (2012) and *Bouyid* (2015) establishes that complicity or even a single episode of degrading treatment can violate prohibition norms. At the UN level, CAT Committee jurisprudence—e.g. in *Agiza v. Sweden* (2005)—reaffirms the absolute prohibition and the risks attendant to refolement.

These judicial developments matter for the EU-AU partnership which should make it clear that 'torture' in law encompasses a broad array of state conduct: excessive force in protest policing, abuse in custodial settings, gendered violence, and policies that expose people to foreseeable risks of ill-treatment (including in migration management).