

Terms of Reference

Research assignment: Forms of digital attacks on Human Rights Defenders in the Majority World

Submission deadline: 9 March 2025

Estimated start date: 1 April 2025

Location: Remote

1. Background

The contextual background for this research assignment is the increasing challenges that restrict the space for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) to operate in the digital age. The emergence of digital technologies has provided many HRDs with a new sphere to organize and conduct their activities. However, these new opportunities also put HRDs under new risks and attacks in the form of e.g. digital surveillance and online harassment, and these digital threats often interlink with physical attacks.

These challenges are the overall focus of the [Digital Democracy Initiative](#) (DDI) which this research assignment is a part of. Global Focus is one of the civil society partners in this initiative funded by Denmark, Norway and the EU. The overall objective of the initiative is to promote and protect local inclusive democratic space in the digital age, running from 2023-2026, with the following two key outcome areas:

1. **Enable and Amplify:** Inclusive democracy and civic space are expanded and protected through the improved use of digital technology for civic engagement by local civil society actors operating in restrictive contexts in the global south.
2. **Defend and protect:** Strengthened digital resilience and security of pro-democracy civil society actors and more rights-respecting policies and standards safeguarding the use of digital technologies and online space.

Global Focus acts as secretariat for the Advisory Board of the initiative, consisting of civil society actors across the Majority World, who provide strategic and operational advice based on their technical and contextual expertise. Furthermore, Global Focus is collaborating with CIVICUS on establishing a Global Digital Knowledge Hub, both curating knowledge materials and providing peer-to-peer learning with civil society actors.

2. Objectives

The research assignment aims to ensure that knowledge gaps related to the overall focus of DDI and identified by the DDI Advisory Board are closed by conducting relevant research. The purpose of the research assignment is to increase the understanding of the issues at stake for HRDs in the digital age, and it will thus provide knowledge that will serve to bridge the gaps and point to needs for potential further actions.

This specific research assignment seeks to expand knowledge on the forms of attacks targeting Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in the Majority World, focusing on digital attacks and their interlinkages with offline attacks. The assignment aims to identify and categorize the various types, mechanisms, and causes of attacks on HRDs in the Majority World. The findings will inform future funding strategies focused on enhancing the security of these defenders and provide nuanced insights into the critical challenges they face.

The research assignment will furthermore investigate existing responses to these attacks by HRDs themselves. The consultant should also include a chapter that links the results of this research assignment with gaps in existing support mechanisms provided by rapid response providers to mitigate digital attacks on HRDs. This mapping will be conducted as a separate consultancy task, conducted by the same or a different consultant (see section 6 on application procedure and evaluation).

Definitions:

- Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) here refers to ‘individuals or groups who act to promote, protect or strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means’ in accordance with the UN declaration on human rights defenders. It can include civil society actors, activists, journalists and other individuals or groups falling under this definition.
- The term “Majority World” was coined by Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam as an alternative to the demeaning term “Third World”. While not a strictly defined technical concept, Majority World here is used interchangeably with “Global South” meaning countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America, home to a majority of the world’s population, and many with a history of colonisation by countries in the Global North.

3. Scope and deliverables

The scope and deliverables of the research assignment include:

1. Conducting research according to a suggested methodology

- Conduct research on the forms of attacks on HRDs in the Majority World. The consultant will propose a qualitative and/or quantitative methodology (see section 6) suitable for



delivering research results within the timeframe of the assignment such as desk research, literature review, surveys, interviews, data analysis, and/or other approaches.

2. Research report

- Write a report of approximately 20 pages (6000 words) on the research findings including recommendations for actions. This is expected to be in a non-academic format, accessible to a broad audience of non-experts. The draft report will receive feedback from the DDI Advisory Board and Global Focus’ secretariat, before being finalized.

4. Outputs and timetable

The consultant is expected to deliver the following outputs:

- **Participate in three closed meetings** with Global Focus’ secretariat and members of the DDI Advisory Board:
 - First meeting: Discuss expectations to the research assignment and proposed methodology
 - Second meeting: Discuss the outline of the report/table of contents
 - Third meeting: Discuss the feedback to the draft research report
- **Review existing outputs** of DDI to identify knowledge gaps.
- **Conduct research**, potentially including interviews with HRDs.
- **Deliver a first draft report** of forms of attacks on HRDs in the Global South.
- **Finalize** research report incorporating feedback from the DDI Advisory Board and Global Focus’ secretariat.
- **Present the research** at relevant open meetings (maximum 3), e.g. a Global Digital Knowledge Hub webinar or relevant spaces or events accessible to civil society.

Timetable for output:

Task	Deadline/date
Initial meeting between consultant, members of the DDI Advisory Board and Global Focus	1 April 2025 depending on schedules
Delivery of first draft for research report	15 June 2025
Delivery of final research report	15 August 2025
Presentation of research at relevant meetings	Maximum 5 hours, including preparation, during Summer/Autumn

5. Expected qualifications and experience of the consultant

The preferred consultant must have:

- Knowledge on civic space issues affecting HRDs in the Majority World, in particular digital attacks.



- Experience with conducting research (for civil society organizations, research or academic institutions, or other). The consultancy does not necessarily require a PhD degree.
- Proficiency in qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies.
- Communication skills and ability to present complex results in an understandable and accessible written format.
- Demonstrated understanding of ethical considerations when conducting interviews with at-risk HRDs, including security related aspects and the burden of labour for HRDs contributing to the research assignment.

6. Application procedure and evaluation

Interested consultants must express their interest by submitting their proposal containing the following:

- A **technical offer** including:
 - Brief description (maximum 1 page) of the consultant's understanding of the topic of the assignment
 - Outline of the proposed methodology for the research assignment
 - Elaboration of ethical considerations related to conducting the research
 - CV
 - Two proposed references and web links to previous work, if available
- A **financial offer** including:
 - The proposed daily rate, including all costs, and an estimate of days used

We currently have two consultancy tasks related to the DDI. The other assignment is *Mapping of support mechanisms to mitigate digital attacks on Human Rights Defenders (ToR)*. In case you are interested in applying for both, you are welcome to send one proposal covering both assignments, including a proposed timeline for conducting the assignments.

You can apply through the Jotform template [here](#).

7. Payment schedule

The payment of the assignment will be paid in two tranches:

1. 75% upon delivery of first draft research report
2. 25% upon delivery of final research report and presentation of the research

If you have any questions about the assignment, don't hesitate to reach out to Julie Arrildt, Policy Advisor and Thematic Coordinator on Human Rights and Civic Space at Global Focus, jua@globaltfokus.dk