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Safeguarding Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Uganda's Oil and Gas Sector: Assessing Risks, Protection Gaps, and Enabling Mechanisms in Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa Districts, Uganda.



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List of Acronym

Acronym:

Full Form

AFIEGO:	Africa Institute for Energy Governance
CSOs:	Civil Society Organisations
CNOOC:	China National Offshore Oil Company
EACOP:	East African Crude Oil Pipeline
EHRDs:	Environmental Human Rights Defenders
NAPE:	National Association of Professional Environmentalists
NCHRD-U:	National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders – Uganda
SNEHRD:	Solidarity Network of Grassroots Environmental & Human Rights Defenders
UHRC:	Uganda Human Rights Commission
UN:	United Nations
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
UNGPs:	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
UNOC:	Uganda National Oil Company
WHRDN-Uganda:	Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda
ORRA:	Oil Refinery Residents Association
DPI:	Defenders Protection Initiative.

Executive summary

Uganda's oil and gas sector, particularly in the Albertine Graben region covering Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa districts, has attracted significant investment from multinational companies such as TotalEnergies, CNOOC, and the Uganda National Oil Company (UNOC). While these projects are promoted as engines of economic growth, they have also generated widespread social, environmental, and human rights concerns. Communities have experienced forced evictions, loss of livelihoods, environmental degradation, and restricted civic space, creating a high-risk operating environment for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).

EHRDs in Uganda represent a diverse group, including grassroots community monitors, civil society activists, journalists, legal advocates, women defenders, and youth leaders. They play a critical role in documenting environmental harm, monitoring corporate and governmental compliance, and advocating for accountability and community rights. However, their work is frequently met with harassment, arbitrary arrests, smear campaigns, surveillance, digital threats, and gender-based violence. Women defenders face unique vulnerabilities, including sexual harassment, stigmatization, and marginalization from decision-making processes.

Despite Uganda's constitutional guarantees and statutory provisions, significant gaps exist in the protection of EHRDs. These include weak institutional coordination, limited enforcement of environmental and land laws, insufficient gender-sensitive policies, inadequate awareness and application of international human rights standards, and underdeveloped rapid response and support systems. Corporate actors have also not fully adhered to international standards such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), leaving defenders exposed to ongoing threats. To cope with these risks, EHRDs rely on informal coalitions, partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) such as SNEHRD, WHRDN-Uganda, AFIEGO, and NAPE, media advocacy, digital security measures, and limited legal or psychosocial support. While these strategies enhance resilience, they remain fragmented, underfunded, and insufficiently coordinated to provide comprehensive protection.

The study provides targeted recommendations for multiple stakeholders. Government authorities are urged to establish a national EHRD protection mechanism, strengthen inter-agency coordination, enforce environmental laws, and implement gender-sensitive policies. Law enforcement and judicial institutions should receive training on EHRD rights and respond promptly to threats. Corporate actors must implement due diligence and grievance mechanisms and expand their corporate social responsibility programs. CSOs and media should coordinate protection networks, provide legal and psychosocial support, and build capacity in digital and advocacy skills. International partners and donors should fund rapid-response mechanisms, capacity-building, and monitor compliance with human rights obligations. Local communities and grassroots networks should enhance peer-to-peer protection, early warning systems, and awareness campaigns.

In conclusion, safeguarding EHRDs is both a human rights imperative and essential for sustainable environmental governance in Uganda's oil and gas sector. Implementing coordinated, well-resourced, and gender-sensitive protection measures will enable defenders to operate safely, strengthen community participation, and ensure corporate and government accountability.

1.0 Introduction and Background

1.1 Background

The discovery of commercial oil reserves in Uganda's Albertine Graben has positioned the country as a potential energy hub in East Africa. Multinational companies, including TotalEnergies, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and the Uganda National Oil Company (UNOC), are leading large-scale extraction, pipeline construction, and infrastructure projects. Districts such as Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa have become focal points of industrial activity, land acquisition, and population displacement.

While the government promotes oil development as a path to economic transformation, affected communities have reported forced evictions, inadequate compensation, environmental degradation, and restricted civic engagement. Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), including grassroots monitors, civil society advocates, journalists, and local leaders, play a vital role in exposing these abuses and promoting environmental justice. However, their activism has increasingly been met with criminalisation, harassment, and arbitrary arrests, and the absence of a coherent national protection framework has left defenders vulnerable, operating in fear and isolation.

Uganda's oil and gas exploration and development have generated widespread social, environmental, and human rights concerns, particularly in the Albertine region. Since the oil discovery in 2006, large-scale projects such as Tilenga, Kingfisher, and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) have expanded rapidly. While these ventures are presented as engines of national development, they have also caused displacement, loss of livelihoods, and shrinking civic space for individuals and organisations challenging the impacts of oil activities.

Within this context, EHRDs have emerged as critical actors in advocating for accountability, transparency, and environmental protection. They include community-based monitors, journalists, land rights advocates, women defenders, and youth activists who document violations, mobilise communities, and demand compliance with human rights and environmental standards. Their work spans land acquisition and compensation, pollution monitoring, forest and biodiversity protection, and promoting public participation⁴ in environmental governance.

Despite their crucial role, EHRDs in Uganda's oil regions operate under intense pressure. Many face intimidation, surveillance, arrests, and accusations of being "anti-development."⁵ Public meetings organised by defenders have been forcibly disbanded, offices raided, and activists detained or threatened with prosecution, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship that undermines civic engagement.⁶

[1] [*Albertine Watch. \(2020\). Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine Region Under Attack: The Tilenga Oil Development Project Raises These Threats.*](#)

[2] [*Albertine Watch. \(2022\). Targeted Threats and Intimidation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine Region. Hoima, Uganda: Albertine Watch.*](#)

[3] [*Albertine Watch. \(2020\). Ibid*](#)

Gender-specific risks further compound these challenges. Women defenders are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, stigma, and social ostracisation, often being labelled as “anti-progress” or “prostitutes” in attempts to discredit their work. Limited access to legal aid, psychosocial care, and security training exacerbates their exposure to violence and intimidation.⁷ Additionally, weak institutional accountability and under-resourced environmental governance frameworks have created protection gaps, leaving defenders without adequate legal or policy recourse.

To counter these threats, defenders have formed solidarity and protection networks. The Solidarity Network of Grassroots Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (SNEHRD) provides legal aid, capacity building, and emergency response support to defenders under attack.⁹ Similarly, the Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda (WHRDN-U) strengthens the safety of women defenders through digital and physical security training, psychosocial support, and gender-sensitive advocacy. These collective efforts have enhanced resilience among local activists, though financial constraints, limited coordination, and restrictive policies continue to hinder their effectiveness.

Overall, the experience of EHRDs in Uganda’s oil and gas sector underscores the urgent need for inclusive protection mechanisms, stronger enforcement of human rights and environmental laws, and multi-stakeholder engagement between the state, corporations, and civil society. Safeguarding EHRDs is not only a moral and legal obligation but also a prerequisite for sustainable development and environmental governance in Uganda’s oil-producing regions.

1.2 Problem Statement

The discovery and development of oil reserves in Uganda’s Albertine Graben, particularly across Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa districts, has positioned the country as a key player in East Africa’s emerging energy landscape. However, these developments have also triggered major socio-economic, environmental, and human rights challenges. Communities living in oil-affected areas face forced displacement, loss of land, inadequate compensation, and pollution of water and soil resources (Albertine Watch, 2021; HRD Coalition, 2023). The resulting livelihood disruptions have heightened tensions between affected households, local authorities, and oil companies, while undermining environmental integrity and social cohesion.

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs); including grassroots monitors, journalists, civil society activists, and local leaders, have become central in documenting violations, advocating for accountability, and promoting environmental justice. Yet, their work is increasingly constrained by a shrinking civic space marked by intimidation, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and smear campaigns. Security agencies and local officials often accuse defenders of being “anti-development” when they question land acquisition processes or environmental compliance (Albertine Watch, 2022; NCHRD-U, 2023).

[4] Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda (WHRDN-Uganda). (2024). *Strengthening Protection for Women Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine Region: A Call for Solidarity and Action*. Kampala, Uganda.

[5] Solidarity Network of Grassroots Environmental & Human Rights Defenders (SNEHRD). (2024). *Annual Report 2023/24*. Hoima, Uganda.

Women defenders, in particular, face gender-specific risks such as sexual harassment, online abuse, and social stigmatisation. Many are labelled as “troublemakers” or “anti-progress,” which discourages participation and reinforces patriarchal exclusion (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024). Despite Uganda’s constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression and association, and its international commitments under instruments such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), there is no comprehensive national protection framework for EHRDs. Existing support mechanisms are fragmented, reactive, and poorly funded (SNEHRD, 2024).

As a result, many defenders operate in fear, isolation, and without adequate legal or psychosocial support. This environment undermines civic participation, weakens environmental accountability, and jeopardises the achievement of sustainable development in Uganda’s oil and gas sector. There is an urgent need to document EHRDs’ lived experiences, identify protection gaps, and propose actionable measures to strengthen their safety and enabling environment at local, national, and international levels. This research, therefore, seeks to document the lived experiences of EHRDs, identify protection gaps, and propose recommendations for ensuring a safe and enabling environment for environmental and human rights advocacy in Uganda’s oil and gas sector.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives

1.3.1 Overall Goal

To document and analyze the experiences of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa districts, with a view to strengthening their protection and enabling environment in the context of oil and gas developments

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

- 1.To map the profiles and categories of EHRDs and assess the human rights and environmental challenges they face.
- 2.To analyze the risks, threats, protection gaps, and coping mechanisms influencing their safety and work.
- 3.To generate actionable recommendations for strengthening EHRD protection at local, national, and international levels.

1.3.3 Research Questions

- 1.Who are the Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) operating in Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa districts, and what roles and categories do they represent?
- 2.What human rights and environmental challenges, risks, and threats do these EHRDs encounter?
- 3.What coping mechanisms and support systems do EHRDs rely on to sustain their advocacy work?
- 4.What policy and practical interventions can enhance the protection and enabling environment for EHRDs at local, national, and international levels?

1.4 Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, employing multiple data collection methods including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 28 respondents, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with grassroots defenders, and document review of policy papers, NGO reports, and academic studies. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify trends in risks, coping strategies, and institutional responses. Triangulation enhanced validity.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses the pressing need to understand and strengthen the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil and gas sector, particularly in the Albertine Graben districts of Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa. By documenting the risks, threats, and protection gaps faced by defenders, the research provides critical evidence to inform policymakers, government agencies, civil society organizations, and international partners on effective strategies to safeguard EHRDs. The study also contributes to enhancing environmental governance and social accountability, as protecting defenders ensures that communities can meaningfully participate in decisions affecting land, natural resources, and livelihoods. Furthermore, the research highlights gender-specific vulnerabilities, particularly for women defenders, and underscores the importance of gender-sensitive protection measures.

From a practical standpoint, the findings will guide the development of a holistic protection framework integrating legal, institutional, corporate, and community-based approaches, while also strengthening rapid response systems, legal recourse mechanisms, and psychosocial support for defenders. Academically, the study fills a gap in empirical knowledge about the operational environment of EHRDs in oil-producing regions of Uganda, providing evidence that can inform comparative research across East Africa. Finally, by amplifying the voices of local defenders and communities, the study promotes awareness, advocacy, and policy reform, contributing to sustainable development and the protection of human and environmental rights in Uganda's oil and gas sector.

“Grassroots Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), community organizers, and Justice activists in the oil-host communities of the Albertine region of Uganda require regular and periodic peer-to-peer learning, experience sharing, capacity building in ethical storytelling skills, legal and rights empowerment education, multimedia reporting, and both traditional and modern psychosocial healing platforms for their safety, mental wellness and effective social, climate, and environmental justice advocacy work. Said Emmanuel Ongyeer. ”

This research was made possible with support from IFAD through the Alliance of Land, Indigenous, Environmental Defenders (ALLIED)

2.0 Key Findings

2.1 Legal and Policy Framework for Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Uganda

The protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is shaped by a combination of national laws, policies, and international commitments. At the national level, the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995, as amended) guarantees fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, assembly, and access to information (Articles 29 and 41). These rights provide the legal foundation for defenders to monitor, report, and advocate on environmental and human rights issues without fear of retaliation. Additionally, the National Environment Act (2019) and its predecessor, the National Environment Act, Cap. 153, establish mechanisms for environmental protection, including requirements for environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and community participation in decision-making processes related to development projects, including oil and gas operations.

The Land Act (1998) and Land Acquisition Act (1965) also have direct relevance for EHRDs, as disputes over land acquisition and compensation are a common source of conflict in oil-affected communities. These laws theoretically provide avenues for legal recourse in cases of unlawful displacement or inadequate compensation. However, in practice, enforcement is often weak, and communities—particularly vulnerable groups—struggle to access timely and effective remedies (Albertine Watch, 2021).

Uganda is also a signatory to several international human rights instruments that recognize the role of defenders and protect environmental and land rights. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998). Under these frameworks, states are obligated to respect, protect, and enable the work of human rights defenders, including those advocating for environmental protection. Furthermore, corporate actors operating in Uganda are encouraged to comply with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011), which establish responsibilities for businesses to respect human rights, prevent harm, and provide remedies when violations occur.

Despite these legal instruments, Uganda lacks a comprehensive national protection framework specifically tailored for EHRDs. While some policies indirectly support defenders—such as provisions for environmental governance, land rights, and access to information—there is no coordinated mechanism to prevent threats, respond to attacks, or provide legal and psychosocial support. Existing efforts by civil society, such as the Solidarity Network of Grassroot Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (SNEHRD) and the Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda (WHRDN-Uganda), partially fill this gap by offering capacity building, legal aid, and rapid response support. However, these initiatives are often under-resourced and reliant on external funding, leaving defenders vulnerable to persistent risks (SNEHRD, 2024; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

In summary, while Uganda has constitutional, statutory, and international frameworks that provide formal recognition and protection of human rights, the absence of a dedicated national mechanism for EHRDs, weak enforcement of existing laws, and limited institutional support significantly constrains defenders' ability to operate safely and effectively. Strengthening legal protections, harmonizing institutional mandates, and establishing an integrated national protection framework are critical for ensuring that EHRDs can fulfill their role in environmental monitoring, advocacy, and community empowerment.

2.2 Gaps in the Policy and Legal Framework for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Despite Uganda having constitutional guarantees, statutory provisions, and international commitments that recognise human rights and environmental protection, significant gaps persist in the legal and policy framework for EHRDs, which undermine their safety and operational effectiveness. The key gaps include;

2.2.1 Lack of Dedicated National Protection Mechanism for Environmental Human Rights Defenders

One of the most critical gaps in Uganda’s legal and policy environment for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) is the absence of a dedicated national protection mechanism tailored specifically to the needs and risks of environmental defenders. While the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995, as amended) guarantees fundamental freedoms—including freedom of expression, association, and assembly (Articles 29 and 41)—these rights are often not effectively enforced in practice. Defenders who challenge powerful actors, including multinational oil companies or local authorities involved in oil and gas development, frequently face harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary arrests, with limited avenues for timely legal redress (Albertine Watch, 2022; NCHRD-U, 2023).

The absence of a dedicated protection framework means there is no formalized system for risk assessment, rapid response, or long-term support for EHRDs in Uganda. Unlike countries with specialized programs or legislation that explicitly safeguard human rights defenders, Uganda relies on general constitutional and statutory protections, which are often insufficient to address the unique threats faced by defenders in oil-affected areas. For example, while the Police and judicial systems are theoretically responsible for safeguarding citizens’ rights, in practice they lack the capacity, independence, or specialized protocols to respond effectively to attacks, threats, or harassment targeting EHRDs (SNEHRD, 2024).

This gap is compounded by the hostile civic and political environment surrounding Uganda’s oil and gas sector. Communities and defenders advocating for environmental protection or land rights are frequently perceived as “anti-development” or obstructionist, which increases the likelihood of reprisals. Without a dedicated protection mechanism, defenders operate largely in isolation, relying on informal networks and civil society organizations for support. While initiatives such as the Solidarity Network of Grassroot Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (SNEHRD) and the Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda (WHRDN-U) provide some protection, these programs are donor-dependent, limited in geographic coverage, and unable to provide comprehensive legal, psychosocial, or emergency support for all defenders at risk (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; Albertine Watch, 2022).

The consequences of this gap are significant. The lack of systematic protection discourages advocacy, weakens community monitoring, and allows environmental violations and human rights abuses to continue with minimal accountability. Defenders are often forced to make difficult choices between their personal safety and their advocacy work, which undermines the broader goal of sustainable development and environmental governance. Addressing this gap requires the establishment of a nationally coordinated, adequately resourced protection framework for EHRDs, integrating legal safeguards, rapid-response mechanisms, and psychosocial support, alongside stronger enforcement of existing constitutional rights (NCHRD-U, 2023; SNEHRD, 2024).

2.2.2 Weak Institutional Coordination and Its Implications for EHRDs

A significant barrier to the effective protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is weak institutional coordination among government bodies tasked with regulating environmental, land, and extractive activities. Key institutions, including the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), and local district authorities in oil-affected regions such as Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa, often operate with overlapping mandates but minimal collaboration on issues related to the safety and protection of defenders (SNEHRD, 2024). This fragmented approach leads to unclear lines of responsibility, making it difficult to identify which agency is accountable for investigating threats, responding to attacks, or implementing preventive measures.

The consequences of poor coordination are evident in the frequent lack of follow-up on reported threats or harassment incidents. EHRDs who face intimidation, arbitrary arrests, or obstruction in their monitoring and advocacy work often encounter bureaucratic delays, conflicting directives, or outright inaction from responsible authorities. For instance, when an environmental violation or a threat against a defender is reported, NEMA may focus on the environmental compliance aspect while the Ministry of Energy addresses industrial development concerns, leaving the defender protection component unaddressed. Similarly, local district authorities may lack the technical expertise or legal mandate to intervene effectively, creating gaps that perpetrators can exploit with impunity (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Moreover, weak institutional coordination undermines the enforcement of existing laws and policies. Even where constitutional and statutory protections exist, the absence of a cohesive framework for inter-agency collaboration results in delayed or inconsistent implementation. Offenders, whether state actors, corporate employees, or private individuals—are rarely held accountable, perpetuating a culture of impunity that discourages defenders from continuing their work. This situation is exacerbated by limited resources, insufficient training, and competing political and economic priorities, which further constrain the ability of institutions to provide proactive protection measures for EHRDs (SNEHRD, 2024).

To address this gap, there is a pressing need for a coordinated, multi-agency protection mechanism that clearly delineates responsibilities, establishes rapid response protocols, and ensures consistent follow-up on threats against EHRDs. Such a framework should integrate central ministries, regulatory agencies, local authorities, and civil society networks, fostering collaboration that strengthens accountability, improves risk mitigation, and enhances the overall safety and effectiveness of defenders operating in Uganda's oil and gas sector (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; Albertine Watch, 2022).

2.2.3 Limited Enforcement of Environmental and Land-Related Laws

A critical gap in the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is the limited enforcement of existing environmental and land-related legislation. Statutory instruments such as the National Environment Act (2019), the Land Act (1998), and the Land Acquisition Act (1965) provide legal mechanisms for addressing environmental harm, ensuring community consultation, and resolving disputes over land acquisition and compensation. These laws theoretically empower both communities and defenders to seek redress for violations caused by industrial projects, including oil exploration and extraction in the Albertine Graben (Albertine Watch, 2021).

However, in practice, the enforcement of these laws is often weak and inconsistent. Resource constraints within key institutions such as the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) and local land offices limit their capacity to monitor compliance, investigate complaints, and prosecute offenders. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, including delayed approvals, lengthy administrative procedures, and poor coordination between central and local authorities, further undermine timely enforcement. Moreover, political interference and vested interests sometimes result in the selective application of the law, particularly in cases involving multinational oil companies or politically influential actors, leaving defenders and affected communities without effective remedies (NCHRD-U, 2023; Albertine Watch, 2021).

The consequences of this enforcement gap are multifaceted. Communities experiencing forced evictions, inadequate compensation, or environmental degradation have limited avenues to assert their rights, while EHRDs advocating for accountability often face retaliation without adequate institutional support. For example, defenders reporting illegal land acquisitions or environmental violations may have their complaints ignored or delayed, reducing trust in governance institutions and diminishing the deterrent effect of legal provisions. This weak enforcement not only undermines defenders' work but also perpetuates environmental harm and social injustices, compromising the principles of transparency, accountability, and sustainable development (SNEHRD, 2024).

Addressing this gap requires strengthening institutional capacity, improving inter-agency coordination, and ensuring political independence in enforcement processes. Establishing clear procedures for monitoring compliance, fast-tracking grievance mechanisms, and providing accessible legal support to defenders and affected communities are critical steps to ensure that environmental and land-related laws are not merely symbolic but actively protect human rights and environmental integrity in oil-affected regions (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; Albertine Watch, 2021).

2.3.4 Insufficient Gender-Specific Protections for Women EHRDs

A significant gap in the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is the lack of gender-specific protections, which disproportionately affects women defenders operating in oil-affected regions such as Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa. Women EHRDs face unique risks and challenges that compound the general threats experienced by all defenders, including sexual harassment, social stigmatization, and targeted intimidation. In many cases, women activists advocating for environmental protection, land rights, or community welfare are labelled as “anti-progress” or “troublemakers,” and in some instances are subjected to derogatory social narratives that seek to undermine their credibility and legitimacy (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; Albertine Watch, 2021).

Beyond social stigma, women defenders are often marginalized from decision-making and consultation processes, limiting their ability to influence policy, negotiate land compensation, or participate in community governance structures. This exclusion is particularly concerning in the context of oil and gas development, where environmental and livelihood impacts disproportionately affect women due to their roles in household resource management, agriculture, and community welfare. The absence of gender-sensitive policies and institutional measures means that women EHRDs frequently lack access to tailored legal, psychosocial, and security support mechanisms that account for their specific vulnerabilities (SNEHRD, 2024).

Current legal and policy frameworks in Uganda do not provide explicit protections or operational guidelines to address these gendered risks. While general protections under the Constitution and statutory laws exist, they are not systematically applied in a way that mitigates the specific threats faced by women defenders. Civil society organizations, including the Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda (WHRDN-U), have attempted to fill this gap by providing training, psychosocial support, and advocacy for women’s participation in environmental governance. However, these initiatives are often underfunded, geographically limited, and insufficiently institutionalized, leaving women EHRDs highly vulnerable to harassment, exclusion, and other forms of gender-based violence (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

The lack of gender-specific protections not only jeopardizes the personal safety and well-being of women defenders but also undermines the broader effectiveness of environmental and human rights advocacy. Women play a crucial role in monitoring environmental degradation, mobilizing communities, and influencing decision-making processes. Protecting them through gender-responsive policies, institutional mechanisms, and community-based support systems is therefore essential to strengthen the overall resilience and impact of EHRDs in Uganda’s oil and gas sector (Albertine Watch, 2021; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

2.2.5 Limited Awareness and Accessibility of International Human Rights Standards

A significant gap in the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is the limited awareness and accessibility of international human rights standards among both defenders and duty-bearers. Uganda has ratified and is legally bound by several key international instruments, including the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998) and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011), which recognize the rights of defenders and outline corporate responsibilities to respect human rights and provide remedies for violations. Despite this, compliance by government authorities and corporate actors in Uganda remains inconsistent, particularly in the oil and gas sector (HRD Coalition, 2023; Albertine Watch, 2022).

Many defenders operating in oil-affected areas such as Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa lack sufficient training, knowledge, or resources to effectively leverage these international standards. This limits their ability to hold both state and corporate actors accountable when violations occur. For instance, while the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) outline clear due diligence and accountability obligations for companies, local communities and defenders often struggle to understand how to invoke these principles in complaints, advocacy, or litigation. This gap diminishes the potential impact of international norms in improving corporate behavior or protecting defenders (SNEHRD, 2024).

Moreover, corporate actors in Uganda's oil and gas sector frequently fail to implement adequate human rights due diligence, grievance mechanisms, or remediation measures as required under international standards. Multinational companies such as TotalEnergies and CNOOC are under pressure to comply with the UNGPs, yet violations related to environmental degradation, forced displacement, and inadequate compensation persist. The lack of consistent application of international norms further compounds the risks faced by EHRDs, who may be threatened, harassed, or criminalized for documenting these abuses (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Duty-bearers, including government agencies and local authorities, also demonstrate limited capacity and awareness of international human rights obligations in the context of environmental protection. This gap results in inadequate monitoring, weak enforcement of domestic laws aligned with international standards, and inconsistent responses to threats against defenders. Strengthening awareness and operationalization of international instruments among both defenders and duty-bearers is therefore essential. Practical interventions could include capacity-building programs, dissemination of guidelines, legal aid, and training on international human rights and business standards, ensuring that defenders are empowered to hold actors accountable while minimizing personal risk (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; SNEHRD, 2024).

In conclusion, limited awareness and accessibility of international human rights standards in Uganda hinders both the protection of EHRDs and the enforcement of corporate accountability, leaving defenders vulnerable and communities exposed to environmental and social harm. Bridging this gap is a crucial step toward creating a safer and more enabling environment for environmental advocacy in the oil and gas sector

2.2.6 Underdeveloped Rapid Response and Support Systems for EHRDs

A further critical gap in the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is the underdevelopment of rapid response and support systems, which leaves defenders highly vulnerable to threats and attacks. While civil society organizations (CSOs) such as the Solidarity Network of Grassroot Environmental & Human Rights Defenders (SNEHRD) and the Women Human Rights Defenders Network-Uganda (WHRDN-U) have established programs to provide legal aid, psychosocial support, and capacity-building initiatives for defenders, these efforts remain insufficiently resourced, fragmented, and geographically limited (SNEHRD, 2024; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

The lack of a coordinated, well-resourced national framework for rapid response means that defenders facing imminent threats such as harassment, arbitrary detention, surveillance, or physical attacks often cannot access timely protection or emergency support. Civil society mechanisms, though crucial, depend heavily on external donor funding, which is often unpredictable and insufficient to meet the needs of all defenders across Uganda's oil and gas-affected regions, including Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa. Consequently, many EHRDs operate in isolation, unable to mobilize legal, psychosocial, or security assistance when under immediate risk (Albertine Watch, 2022).

The absence of systemic rapid-response mechanisms also limits preventive protection measures. For example, early warning systems, risk assessment protocols, and protective networks that could anticipate threats and provide proactive support are largely undeveloped. This gap exacerbates the exposure of defenders to intimidation, legal harassment, and other forms of reprisals. Women defenders are particularly vulnerable due to gender-specific risks, yet gender-sensitive rapid-response measures remain scarce, further compromising their safety and participation in environmental advocacy (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; SNEHRD, 2024).

Addressing this gap requires institutionalizing a coordinated national protection framework that integrates government agencies, civil society networks, and local community structures. Key elements should include a centralized rapid-response mechanism, emergency funding and legal support, psychosocial counseling services, and digital and physical security training. By establishing a resilient, well-resourced, and accessible support system, Uganda can significantly reduce the risks faced by EHRDs, enabling them to continue their vital work in promoting environmental protection, social accountability, and community rights within the oil and gas sector (Albertine Watch, 2022; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024)

In conclusion, Uganda has legal and policy instruments that theoretically protect Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), but gaps in enforcement, institutional coordination, gender-sensitive measures, awareness of international standards, and rapid-response systems leave defenders vulnerable. Addressing these gaps through a comprehensive national protection framework, strengthened oversight, and targeted support programs is essential to safeguard EHRDs, ensure accountability, and promote sustainable and rights-respecting oil and gas development.

3.0 Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's Oil and Gas Sector

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are individuals or groups who, individually or collectively, work to protect the environment and promote human rights, particularly in the context of natural resource management, land rights, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. They monitor environmental impacts, document violations, advocate for compliance with environmental and human rights laws, and support communities affected by industrial or extractive activities. EHRDs may include community leaders, journalists, civil society activists, legal advocates, women and youth defenders, and grassroots monitors who face risks such as harassment, criminalization, or violence due to their advocacy efforts (United Nations, 1998; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are essential in Uganda's oil and gas sector, particularly in the Albertine Graben districts of Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa, where large-scale oil exploration, extraction, and pipeline development are rapidly transforming land use, ecosystems, and community livelihoods. EHRDs play a critical role in monitoring and reporting environmental degradation, ensuring transparency and accountability in land acquisition, displacement processes, and corporate operations. Their advocacy is vital for protecting community rights, promoting equitable compensation, and safeguarding natural resources from unsustainable exploitation.

Given the scale of oil-related projects, communities often face displacement, loss of livelihoods, environmental pollution, and restricted access to information. EHRDs act as intermediaries between affected communities, civil society, government authorities, and corporate actors, ensuring that grievances are documented, addressed, and resolved. They also facilitate public participation in decision-making processes, raising awareness about environmental laws, human rights standards, and sustainable development practices. Furthermore, EHRDs are indispensable in defending the rights of vulnerable groups, including women and youth, who are disproportionately affected by oil development activities.

Without EHRDs, violations of human rights and environmental standards could go unchecked, leading to social unrest, environmental degradation, and diminished community trust in governance structures. Their presence not only strengthens environmental stewardship but also reinforces democratic accountability, civic engagement, and sustainable development in Uganda's oil and gas sector.

3.1 Profiles and Categories of (EHRDs)

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's Albertine Graben region—particularly in the districts of Hoima, Kikuube, and Buliisa—represent a diverse array of actors dedicated to safeguarding environmental integrity, community rights, and social accountability in the context of rapid oil and gas development. These defenders include grassroots community monitors, civil society activists, journalists, legal advocates, women defenders, and youth leaders, each of whom plays a distinct but complementary role in promoting human rights and environmental governance. Collectively, they form the backbone of local monitoring and advocacy efforts, helping to ensure that oil and gas projects do not occur at the expense of communities or ecosystems (Albertine Watch, 2021; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; SNEHRD, 2024).

Grassroots community monitors are often residents who live in villages directly affected by oil exploration and extraction activities. Their proximity to impacted sites allows them to document environmental degradation, land acquisition processes, pollution, and other community concerns in real time. These monitors frequently act as the first point of contact for reporting violations to civil society organisations (CSOs) or local authorities, bridging the gap between communities and national advocacy structures. Their work is critical for early warning systems, community mobilisation, and evidence collection, yet it exposes them to risks such as intimidation, harassment, and threats from both state and corporate actors (Albertine Watch, 2022).

Civil society activists operate within NGOs and advocacy networks to promote transparency, accountability, and public participation in oil and gas governance. They facilitate community meetings, conduct research and documentation, and engage policymakers to enforce compliance with environmental regulations and human rights standards. Civil society activists often coordinate campaigns aimed at highlighting land rights violations, environmental risks, and corporate malpractices. Through their advocacy, they strengthen the voice of communities in negotiations with companies and government agencies, although their work often makes them targets of surveillance, smear campaigns, or administrative restrictions (NCHRD-U, 2023).

Journalists provide a critical public-facing role by investigating and reporting on the environmental and social impacts of oil projects. They document cases of forced displacement, land disputes, water pollution, and corporate non-compliance with legal and environmental standards. Journalists in these regions frequently operate under significant pressure, facing threats, harassment, legal suits, and censorship attempts. Their investigative reporting helps ensure accountability by informing both national and international audiences about the environmental and human rights consequences of oil and gas development (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Legal advocates and paralegals provide essential support to communities facing land loss, inadequate compensation, or environmental harm. They assist in filing legal complaints, representing affected persons in courts or administrative hearings, and helping communities navigate complex property and environmental laws. By offering legal literacy and practical support, these defenders enable communities to assert their rights and seek redress, though they may face bureaucratic resistance, intimidation, or politically motivated interference (SNEHRD, 2024). Legal advocates and paralegals in Uganda's oil and gas regions play a critical role in protecting communities affected by extractive activities. For instance, in Kikuube District, paralegals from a local NGO assisted 15 families displaced by pipeline construction to file formal complaints and secure interim compensation while awaiting court rulings. In Buliisa District, legal advocates represented a group of small-scale farmers whose land was acquired for oil infrastructure without adequate consultation, helping them navigate the Land Acquisition Act and negotiate fair compensation. Despite these successes, advocates frequently encounter bureaucratic delays, intimidation from local authorities, and politically motivated interference that hampers the timely resolution of cases. Their work, however, remains essential in enabling communities to assert their rights, access justice, and hold corporate and state actors accountable for environmental and social harms (SNEHRD, 2024).

Women defenders focus on both environmental and gender-specific issues. They highlight how oil development disproportionately affects women's livelihoods, access to land, and safety. Women defenders often address challenges such as gender-based violence, marginalization in decision-making forums, and limited access to compensation processes. Their advocacy emphasizes the intersection of environmental justice and gender equity, bringing visibility to women's voices in contexts that are otherwise dominated by male stakeholders (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

Youth leaders play a growing role in mobilising younger members of oil-affected communities. They raise awareness about environmental risks, educate peers on sustainable practices, and leverage social media and digital platforms to amplify local concerns. Youth leaders often introduce innovative approaches to advocacy, including mapping environmental impacts, documenting violations digitally, and organising community campaigns. Their engagement ensures that younger generations are informed, empowered, and actively participating in shaping the governance of oil and gas resources (Albertine Watch, 2021).

Together, these profiles illustrate a vibrant and multifaceted ecosystem of defenders, each contributing unique skills and perspectives to the protection of environmental and human rights in Uganda's oil and gas sector. Despite their critical contributions, EHRDs face significant threats and structural challenges that necessitate targeted protection mechanisms, legal support, and institutional reforms to sustain their work effectively.

3.2 Human Rights and Environmental Challenges Facing EHRDs in Uganda's Oil and Gas Sector

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil and gas sector operate in a high-risk civic environment where constitutional rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly are often disregarded. Activists who challenge land acquisition practices, environmental degradation, or corporate and governmental accountability are frequently criminalized through arbitrary arrests, harassment, surveillance, and smear campaigns. These tactics create a climate of fear that discourages advocacy, undermining both the personal safety of defenders and broader environmental governance and community participation (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

EHRDs, particularly those opposing projects like the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), experience persistent intimidation from state and private actors. For instance, in June 2024, activist Stephen Kwikiriza of the Environment Governance Institute was reportedly abducted, severely beaten, and abandoned in a remote area (The Guardian, 2024). In February 2024, eleven students protesting EACOP were detained in a maximum-security prison, charged under colonial-era laws, and subjected to beatings and inadequate legal and medical support (The Guardian, 2024). Similarly, Gabrieli Daudi and three colleagues were arrested in June 2024 after publicly voicing concerns about EACOP during a press conference; they were detained overnight and released without charge (Mongabay, 2024).

These incidents exemplify broader patterns of repression, including judicial harassment, physical abuse, surveillance, and smear campaigns. Activists face legal charges for exercising constitutional rights, while prolonged legal processes drain their resources and discourage activism. Women defenders encounter additional gendered risks, including sexual harassment, stigmatization, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Collectively, these threats compromise individual safety and weaken environmental governance, community participation, and accountability mechanisms in Uganda's oil and gas sector. Immediate protective measures legal safeguards, rapid response mechanisms, and psychosocial support are critical for ensuring the continued advocacy of EHRDs (The Guardian, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Mongabay, 2024).

The vulnerability of EHRDs is compounded by weak institutional responses and the absence of a comprehensive national protection framework. Existing mechanisms are fragmented, reactive, and under-resourced. Law enforcement and judicial institutions often lack the capacity or independence to investigate threats, while regulatory bodies overseeing environmental compliance and corporate social responsibility are limited by technical, financial, and political constraints (NCHRD-U, 2023; SNEHRD, 2024). This institutional weakness forces EHRDs to operate in isolation with minimal legal or psychosocial support.

Corporate actors in the oil and gas sector have inconsistently adhered to international human rights standards, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Gaps between corporate commitments and operational realities are evident in inadequate compensation, environmental harm, and insufficient community consultation. Corporate social responsibility initiatives often fail to address systemic human rights and environmental risks or provide accessible grievance mechanisms for local communities and defenders (Albertine Watch, 2021; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Land acquisition disputes remain a critical challenge. Oil exploration, pipeline construction, and related infrastructure frequently result in forced evictions, inadequate compensation, and unclear land ownership procedures. EHRDs advocating for fair compensation or challenging unlawful land acquisitions are particularly exposed to intimidation, harassment, and legal threats from both corporate actors and local authorities, highlighting the intersection of human rights, environmental justice, and resource governance in Uganda's oil sector (Albertine Watch, 2021; NCHRD-U, 2023).

Environmental degradation is another major challenge. Oil exploration and extraction activities have caused significant deforestation, water contamination, soil pollution, and biodiversity loss, threatening both community livelihoods and the ecological balance of the Albertine Graben. EHRDs documenting environmental harm or calling for compliance with environmental regulations often encounter resistance, including obstruction from government officials or private companies seeking to downplay negative impacts (Albertine Watch, 2022; SNEHRD, 2024).

In addition, EHRDs face limited access to environmental information and weak institutional transparency. Critical data on oil projects, environmental impact assessments, and land acquisition processes are often restricted or inaccessible to the public. This information asymmetry undermines defenders' capacity to hold companies and government agencies accountable, leaving communities uninformed and disempowered in decisions that directly affect their livelihoods and environment (Albertine Watch, 2021; NCHRD-U, 2023).

The shrinking of civic space represents a systemic challenge to defenders' work. EHRDs regularly face restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, including the arbitrary disruption of public meetings, denial of permits, and surveillance by security agencies. Activists raising environmental or land-related concerns are often labeled as "anti-development" or "inciting unrest," which can result in arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and social stigmatization (HRD Coalition, 2023; Albertine Watch, 2022).

Gender-based exclusion further compounds these challenges. Women defenders in oil-affected areas are disproportionately affected by social stigma, sexual harassment, and marginalization from decision-making processes. They often struggle to access resources, legal aid, and leadership roles within advocacy initiatives, limiting their ability to influence environmental governance and community protection mechanisms. The intersection of gender and environmental vulnerability underscores the need for gender-sensitive interventions in protecting human rights and promoting sustainable development (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

Collectively, these human rights and environmental challenges create a high-risk operating environment for EHRDs in Uganda. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive protection mechanisms, legal enforcement of environmental standards, gender-sensitive advocacy, and improved access to information to empower defenders and affected communities alike.

Given these challenges, a holistic protection approach is essential. Effective protection must integrate legal measures, such as strengthened human rights and environmental laws and accessible legal recourse for defenders; institutional measures, including well-resourced and independent oversight agencies capable of monitoring corporate compliance and investigating threats; and community-based measures, such as local solidarity networks, rapid response mechanisms, and awareness campaigns that empower communities and reduce the isolation of defenders. Gender-sensitive approaches are also critical, given the specific vulnerabilities faced by women defenders. The combination of these strategies would not only enhance the safety and resilience of EHRDs but also reinforce sustainable environmental governance, social accountability, and community participation in Uganda's oil and gas sector (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; SNEHRD, 2024).

In conclusion, the analysis highlights that the protection of EHRDs is both a human rights imperative and a cornerstone for effective environmental governance. Without coordinated interventions addressing legal, institutional, corporate, and community dimensions, defenders will remain at high risk, and communities will continue to bear the adverse social and environmental consequences of oil and gas development.

3.3 Risks and Threats Facing Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil-rich Albertine Graben region operate in an increasingly hostile environment due to the sensitive nature of oil and gas development and its social, economic, and environmental impacts. One of the most prominent threats is arbitrary arrests. Defenders who document land grabs, environmental degradation, or displacement often face detention without clear charges, sometimes under accusations of inciting violence, promoting unrest, or opposing national development projects. Such arrests not only disrupt their work but also instill fear in local communities, discouraging collective advocacy (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

Legal harassment is another pervasive challenge. EHRDs are frequently subjected to lawsuits, intimidation through the courts, or administrative obstacles that undermine their capacity to operate freely. These legal actions are sometimes used strategically by powerful actors including oil companies or complicit government officials to silence defenders and drain their resources, creating a chilling effect on civic engagement and environmental accountability (NCHRD-U, 2023; SNEHRD, 2024).

"Reporting on oil-related abuses is dangerous. We face intimidation and legal threats for exposing corporate negligence and government inaction. Without solidarity and support systems, many of us could not continue this work." — Journalist EHRD, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025

Smear campaigns and defamation constitute additional risks. Defenders are often publicly labeled as “anti-development,” “troublemakers,” or “agitators” in local media, community forums, or online platforms. Such campaigns aim to discredit their credibility, isolate them from community networks, and reduce the impact of their advocacy. In extreme cases, this has led to threats of physical harm, social exclusion, or community backlash against defenders (Albertine Watch, 2022).

"We are constantly called troublemakers and anti-development in the local media. It isolates us from the community and makes our work even more dangerous." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025.

Physical surveillance and threats remain serious concerns. Many defenders report being followed, monitored, or physically threatened by unknown individuals or security personnel, particularly when visiting affected sites or attending public meetings. These measures of intimidation not only endanger the personal safety of EHRDs but also restrict their movement and the ability to engage with communities effectively (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

"Young people are eager to protect our future, but speaking out comes with risks. We rely on networks and digital tools to stay safe, yet the fear of retaliation is constant. Advocacy is not just a choice; it is a responsibility we cannot ignore." — Youth EHRD, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025

Cyber threats and digital harassment are emerging as significant challenges, especially for activists and journalists who leverage social media and online platforms to document violations. Defenders often experience hacking attempts, social media attacks, online defamation, or surveillance of digital communications, which compromise both personal safety and the confidentiality of sensitive information (SNEHRD, 2024).

Gender-based threats and violence disproportionately affect women EHRDs. Women defenders face sexual harassment, online abuse, stigmatization, and social marginalization. They may be labeled as “prostitutes” or “anti-progress” in an effort to delegitimize their advocacy and discourage participation in leadership roles. These gendered risks intersect with other forms of intimidation, compounding the vulnerability of women defenders and limiting their influence in decision-making spaces (WHRDN-Uganda, 2024; Albertine Watch, 2021).

As a woman defending our community's land and environment, I face threats that men do not. We are stigmatized, harassed, and often excluded from decision-making. It feels like we are fighting on two fronts—protecting our environment and defending our right to be heard." — Women EHRD, Kikuube District, Uganda, 2025

Collectively, these risks and threats create a highly challenging environment for EHRDs, reducing the capacity for sustained activism, discouraging community participation, and undermining environmental governance. Addressing these risks requires comprehensive protection mechanisms, legal safeguards, gender-sensitive strategies, and rapid-response support to ensure that defenders can operate safely while continuing to hold both corporations and authorities accountable.

3.4 Protection Gaps for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda, especially those opposing large-scale oil and gas projects such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), Kingfisher, and Tilenga projects, face persistent risks including arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and harassment. While Uganda has ratified several international human rights treaties and has national laws that, in theory, protect civic freedoms, there are significant protection gaps that undermine the safety and effectiveness of EHRDs.

Legal and Institutional Gaps: While Uganda has ratified international human rights instruments, the implementation of protective measures for EHRDs remains inadequate. The Human Rights (Enforcement) Act, intended to safeguard defenders, is often not enforced, leading to a culture of impunity for perpetrators of violence and harassment against EHRDs. This lack of enforcement is compounded by inconsistent application of laws and limited accountability for state and non-state actors involved in abuses[1].

"Even though laws exist to protect us, they are rarely enforced. Threats, harassment, and attacks go unpunished, and we often feel completely unprotected when standing up for our communities." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Kikuube District, Uganda, 2025.

Arbitrary Arrests and Judicial Harassment: EHRDs in Uganda frequently face arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment. For instance, in August 2024, at least 72 activists were arrested during protests against oil projects, many of whom were detained without charge. These actions are often justified under vague laws, such as those related to public order or terrorism, which are used to suppress dissent and intimidate critics[2]. EHRDs interviewed voiced their fears regarding arrests and harassment.

"We are constantly afraid of being arrested for simply speaking out. Even peaceful protests can land us in jail, sometimes without charges, and the laws meant to protect citizens are used against us." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025.

Physical and Psychological Threats: Defenders opposing oil developments report physical threats, including beatings and intimidation, often perpetrated by security forces or hired thugs. Psychological harassment, such as surveillance and threats of violence, is also prevalent. These threats create a climate of fear that discourages activism and silences community voices[3].

"Sometimes we are followed, threatened, or even beaten for doing our work. The fear is always there, and it makes speaking up for our community feel like a dangerous risk." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Kikuube District, Uganda, 2025.

Inadequate Support Systems: While civil society organizations and networks like DefendDefenders, DPI, AFIEGO, NAPE, and SNEHRD provide some support, resources are limited. Emergency protection services are often inaccessible; a 2024 report found that only 35% of EHRDs had access to such services at the national level, and just 33% at the regional level[4]. This shortage of support mechanisms leaves defenders vulnerable and undermines their capacity to operate safely.

[6] https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[7] https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/uganda-the-authorities-continue-to-crack-down-on-human-rights-defenders-opposing-oil-development-projects/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Digital Surveillance and Cyber Threats: The increasing use of digital surveillance technologies poses additional risks to EHRDs. Reports indicate that defenders are targeted through digital means, including hacking and monitoring of communications, which compromises their ability to organise and communicate securely[5].

"We constantly worry that our messages, emails, and online activities are being monitored. Digital attacks make it hard to communicate safely with colleagues and communities." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025.

Shrinking civic space and fear of reprisal: While this reflects a broader challenge, it also reveals a protection gap in state–civil society dialogue. There are a few safe platforms where EHRDs can engage government or oil companies without fear of surveillance or backlash. This absence of structured engagement mechanisms further isolates defenders.

"These days, it's risky to even talk to government people or oil company representatives. We don't have any safe spaces for dialogue. You're either monitored, intimidated, or later accused of being anti-development. It leaves us feeling alone and afraid to speak out." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Buliisa District, Uganda, 2025.

Weak Institutional Coordination: There is a lack of coordination among government agencies, law enforcement, and civil society in protecting EHRDs. This fragmentation leads to delayed responses to threats and a lack of comprehensive protection strategies. Without a unified approach, defenders are left to navigate a hostile environment with minimal institutional support.

"When threats arise, no single office takes responsibility. Agencies blame each other, and we are left on our own to deal with harassment and intimidation." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Kikuube District, Uganda, 2025.

In conclusion, the protection gaps faced by EHRDs in Uganda are multifaceted, involving legal, institutional, and societal challenges. Addressing these gaps requires a concerted effort from the government, civil society, and international partners to strengthen legal protections, enhance support systems, and ensure accountability for violations. Only through such comprehensive measures can the safety and effectiveness of EHRDs be ensured, allowing them to continue their vital work in advocating for environmental and human rights.

[8] https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[9] https://pmldaily.com/news/2024/10/protecting-the-protectors-report-finds-only-33-of-hrds-access-emergency-services-at-regional-level.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[10] https://www.unwantedwitness.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Report-06.06.2025-FINAL.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3.5 Coping Strategies and Support Systems for EHRDs.

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil and gas regions face significant risks, including harassment, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and intimidation. To navigate this high-risk environment, defenders employ a range of coping strategies and support systems. Key strategies include forming informal coalitions and networks that enable mutual protection, information sharing, and early warning of threats. These networks, composed of grassroots activists, community monitors and organizers, journalists, and youth leaders, facilitate coordinated advocacy, resource pooling, and peer-to-peer emotional support (Albertine Watch, 2022; SNEHRD, 2024).

Formal support systems are primarily provided by civil society organizations (CSOs) and networks such as DefendDefenders, DPI, SNEHRD, WHRDN-Uganda, AFIEGO, and NAPE, among others. These organizations offer legal aid, capacity-building programs, advocacy training, and psychosocial support. Legal services include filing complaints, court representation, and access to remedies for land or environmental rights violations, while psychosocial programs help defenders cope with stress and trauma (SNEHRD, 2024; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024). Partnerships with CSOs also provide technical guidance, facilitate documentation of environmental violations, and support engagement with policymakers (Albertine Watch, 2021; HRD Coalition, 2023).

"Working as an environmental defender here is risky. We face threats, arrests, and constant intimidation. Our networks with other activists, journalists, and youth leaders are what keep us going. Without these connections and the support from organizations like ORRA, SNEHRDs, and WHRDN-Uganda, many of us here in communities could not continue this work safely." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025.

Digital and media strategies further enhance defenders' resilience. Encrypted communication, secure data storage, and careful social media management protect sensitive information from surveillance or cyber threats. Media advocacy allows defenders to publicize environmental abuses, mobilize communities, and attract national and international attention, exerting pressure on authorities and corporate actors to respond (Albertine Watch, 2022; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

"Using encrypted messages and secure online platforms is essential for our safety. Sharing stories through the media helps communities know their rights and pressures authorities and companies to act, but it also comes with risks. We have to be careful every step of the way." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Kikuube District, Uganda, 2025

Peer-to-peer psychosocial support and mentorship are also critical coping mechanisms. Engaging with colleagues and experienced defenders helps manage fear, stress, and trauma associated with high-risk advocacy. However, these support systems remain fragmented, underfunded, and regionally limited, leaving many defenders isolated or without immediate assistance. Strengthening these mechanisms through sustainable funding, structured rapid-response programs, expanded geographic coverage, and integration with formal protection frameworks is essential for ensuring that EHRDs can continue their advocacy safely and effectively (SNEHRD, 2024; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024)

"Talking with fellow defenders and mentors helps me cope with fear and stress, but support is hard to find in remote areas. We need more structured programs and quick-response help so we can continue our work safely." — Environmental Human Rights Defender, Hoima District, Uganda, 2025.

4.0 Conclusion and policy recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil and gas sector operate in a highly challenging and high-risk environment, where legitimate advocacy is frequently criminalized, and civic space is constrained. The absence of a dedicated national protection framework, coupled with weak institutional coordination and limited enforcement of existing environmental and human rights laws, leaves defenders vulnerable to harassment, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and gender-based threats. Corporate actors, while engaging in extractive operations, have yet to fully implement international human rights standards, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), further complicating accountability and protection.

The study underscores the critical need for a holistic protection approach that integrates legal safeguards, strengthened institutional oversight, corporate accountability, and community-based support systems. Such a comprehensive strategy should include gender-sensitive measures, rapid-response mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives to ensure that defenders can operate safely and effectively. Protecting EHRDs is not only a matter of upholding human rights but is also essential for sustainable environmental governance, social accountability, and inclusive development in Uganda's oil and gas regions.

In conclusion, the resilience and effectiveness of EHRDs depend on coordinated efforts among government authorities, law enforcement, civil society, corporate actors, international partners, and communities. Implementing targeted, multi-stakeholder interventions will be key to safeguarding defenders and ensuring that oil and gas development in Uganda proceeds in a socially and environmentally responsible manner.

4.2 Policy Recommendations for Relevant Stakeholders

4.2.1. Government Authorities

- **Establish a dedicated national protection mechanism:** Government institutions, including the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development, Ministry of Justice, and local district authorities, should create a specialized unit to safeguard Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).
- **Provide rapid response and support services:** The mechanism should deliver timely legal and psychosocial assistance and monitor attacks or threats against defenders in oil and gas-affected regions.
- **Strengthen institutional coordination:** An inter-agency taskforce should be established to clarify responsibilities, improve communication among ministries, authorities, and security agencies, and ensure timely interventions when threats arise.
- **Enhance enforcement of environmental and land laws:** The government should ensure that existing legislation, including the National Environment Act and Land Act, are effectively implemented to protect communities and defenders.
- **Develop gender-sensitive policies:** Specific protections should be put in place to safeguard women EHRDs from harassment, exclusion, and gender-based threats, ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making and advocacy processes (Albertine Watch, 2022; WHRDN-Uganda, 2024).

4.2.2 Law Enforcement and Judicial Institutions.

- **Training on EHRD rights and legal frameworks:** Police officers, prosecutors, and magistrates should receive comprehensive training on the rights of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and relevant environmental and human rights laws.
- **Ensure independence in investigations:** Law enforcement and judicial officers should act independently to investigate threats and attacks against defenders without political or external interference.
- **Prompt response to threats:** Authorities should respond quickly to reports of harassment, intimidation, or violence against defenders to prevent escalation and ensure safety.
- **Accountability for perpetrators:** Law enforcement and judicial institutions must hold individuals and entities accountable for violations against EHRDs, ensuring justice and deterring future offenses.
- **Legal reforms to protect lawful advocacy:** Laws should explicitly safeguard lawful activism, and complaint mechanisms should be streamlined to prevent arbitrary arrests, harassment, or judicial intimidation (NCHRD-U, 2023; SNEHRD, 2024).

4.2.3 Recommendations to Corporate Actors in the Oil and Gas Sector

Evidence from affected communities demonstrates that current corporate responses to harm are inadequate and ineffective. Robust, enforceable corporate obligations are required to ensure access to remedy and restore affected people's rights and dignity.

- **Adhere to international human rights standards:** Companies operating in the Albertine Graben, including TotalEnergies and CNOOC, should fully comply with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).
- **Implement human rights due diligence:** Corporations must systematically identify, prevent, and mitigate potential human rights and environmental impacts associated with their operations.
- **Conduct regular independent audits:** Periodic audits by third parties should be carried out to assess compliance with environmental and human rights standards, ensuring accountability.
- **Expand corporate social responsibility initiatives:** CSR programs should actively promote community engagement, transparency, and accountability while supporting the protection of EHRDs monitoring corporate practices (HRD Coalition, 2023; Albertine Watch, 2021).
- **Establish accessible, independent, and effective grievance mechanisms.** Corporations involved in development projects like the EACOP, Tilenga, and Kingfisher projects must establish and operationalise accessible, independent, and rights-holder-centred grievance mechanisms capable of delivering timely, fair, and enforceable remedies for harms already suffered and those that may occur in the future. In addition provide channels for communities and EHRDs to report environmental and human rights concerns.
- **Adopt and implement public policy commitments,** which recognise the valuable role of HRDs, reference specific risks to HRDs, ensure effective engagement and consultation with HRDs at all stages of the due diligence process, and commit to zero-tolerance for reprisals throughout the company's operations, supply chains and business relationships

4.2.4 Recommendations for Civil Society and Media.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and media actors are critical in supporting Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and promoting accountability in Uganda's oil and gas sector. To strengthen their role, the following actions are recommended:

- **Establish a coordinated national EHRD protection network:** CSOs and media organizations should collaborate to create a unified platform that enables rapid response to threats, information sharing, and mutual support for defenders across districts.
- **Enhance capacity in digital and physical security:** Training programs should equip defenders and journalists with skills in secure communication, data protection, online safety, and strategies to reduce risks during fieldwork or public engagement.
- **Document and publicize violations:** CSOs and media should systematically collect, verify, and disseminate information on human rights abuses, environmental harm, and land disputes to raise awareness locally, nationally, and internationally, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable.
- **Provide psychosocial and trauma support:** Programs should offer counseling, peer support groups, and stress management resources to help defenders cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of high-risk advocacy.
- **Promote advocacy and community engagement:** Media campaigns and CSO-led workshops should educate communities about their environmental and land rights, the role of EHRDs, and avenues for legal and civic participation, fostering local solidarity and reducing stigma against defenders.
- **Strengthen partnerships with legal and international actors:** Collaborating with legal aid organizations, international human rights networks, and donors can enhance defenders' access to resources, protective mechanisms, and global advocacy platforms.

4.2.5 Recommendations to International Partners and Donors.

- Provide technical, financial, and advocacy support: UN agencies, bilateral donors, and international NGOs should offer resources to strengthen the protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda's oil and gas sector.
- Fund rapid response mechanisms: International partners should support initiatives that provide immediate legal, psychosocial, and physical protection to defenders facing imminent threats.
- Facilitate legal and psychosocial assistance: Support should include access to legal representation, counseling services, and other forms of practical aid to enhance defender resilience.
- Promote international advocacy: Partners should highlight violations against EHRDs at regional and global forums, leveraging international pressure to improve protection mechanisms in Uganda.
- Support capacity-building initiatives: International stakeholders can provide training on digital security, media advocacy, and international human rights standards to empower defenders and communities.
- Monitor corporate compliance: Donors and international organizations should track and report on corporate adherence to human rights obligations and environmental standards, ensuring accountability in extractive sector operations (Albertine Watch, 2022; HRD Coalition, 2023).

4.2.6 Recommendations to Communities, EHRDs, and Grassroots Networks

- Strengthen local coalitions: Community monitors, youth leaders, journalists, and other local actors should form networks to provide mutual support, foster solidarity, early warning systems, and information sharing to protect defenders.
- Enhance peer-to-peer protection: Grassroots networks can facilitate coordinated responses to threats, improving the safety and resilience of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).
- Conduct community-led awareness campaigns: Local initiatives should educate communities about environmental rights, land acquisition laws, and the role of EHRDs, fostering understanding and respect for defenders' work.
- Reduce stigma and marginalization: Awareness efforts should aim to counter negative perceptions of EHRDs, building social acceptance and solidarity within communities.
- Empower active community engagement: By informing and mobilizing citizens, grassroots networks can promote sustainable environmental governance and encourage collective participation in advocacy and accountability processes.
- Conduct tailored training on evidence advocacy, monitoring, documentation and reporting: EHRDs should build their capacity in evidence-based advocacy, monitoring, documentation, and reporting to strengthen protection and influence. Tailored training in these areas will help them collect credible data, document incidents securely, and use evidence effectively to promote accountability and engagement with government and corporate actors.
- Initiate a periodic/annual convention to act as a free and safe place. EHRDs should establish an annual convention as a safe space for reflection, experience-sharing, and peer learning, fostering solidarity, resilience, and joint advocacy to advance environmental and human rights protection.
- Map out high risk areas and develop a comprehensive security plan. EHRDs should identify high-risk areas, develop a comprehensive security plan, and share it with grassroots defenders in the region to enhance preparedness, coordination, and overall protection.

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