



EAST AFRICAN  
**CRUDE OIL PIPELINE**  
**HOST COMMUNITIES**



**INSIGHTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (EHRDS)**

**IN THE EXISTING SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE**

## INSIGHTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (EHRDS) IN THE EXISTING SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

In communities along the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) corridor where land, livelihoods, and ecosystems are delicately intertwined, grassroots environmental and human rights defenders (EHRDs) serve as more than advocates; they are the vital link connecting people, environment, and justice. January 2026 marked a critical moment for this relationship. As Uganda accelerates efforts to realize first oil exports to the Indian Ocean for the international market, EACOP host communities have witnessed both the shrinking of civic space and the remarkable resilience of those working to defend and expand it..



This inaugural newsletter captures these experiences not as a catalogue of grievances, but as a testament to the indispensable role of grassroots HRDs in times of heightened civic pressure. It highlights their courage, agency, and continued commitment to safeguarding rights and promoting accountability.

We invite community members, civil society actors, government institutions, international partners, and all engaged citizens to read, reflect, and actively contribute to strengthening the civic spaces where rights are understood, exercised, and protected.

## THE JANUARY CONTEXT: CIVIC SPACE UNDER PRESSURE

January 2026 marked a defining moment for communities and citizens across Uganda. Set against the backdrop of the general elections, the space for rights education, community organizing, and advocacy came under significant strain. Understanding this context is critical, not to assign blame, but to recognize why grassroots environmental and human rights defenders (HRDs) are most essential in periods of heightened pressure.

In the weeks leading up to the elections, several civil society organizations and NGOs many of which worked directly with vulnerable and oil-affected communities had their operational licenses suspended or revoked. These organizations had played a central role in supporting communities to understand land rights, compensation processes, environmental protections, and access to justice. Their sudden absence created immediate and tangible gaps in community support systems.



This situation was further compounded by a fourteen-day disruption of digital communication, which cut off access to information, limited contact with family members, and constrained emergency response channels. In rural areas, where mobile connectivity serves as a critical lifeline, this period of isolation had serious economic, social, and emotional consequences. In the post-election period, tensions in several regions contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty, with grassroots HRDs facing increased scrutiny and operational challenges.

These developments unfolded within communities already grappling with complex and unresolved issues, including contested land acquisition processes, resettlement pressures, delays in fair compensation, and the long-term environmental risks associated with large-scale infrastructure projects. For affected communities, the challenge was immediate and practical: in the absence of trusted support structures, who provides accurate information, guidance, and protection of their rights?

## THE ROLE OF GRASSROOT ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN CIVIC SPACES

Environmental and Human rights defenders are individuals and organizations who, often at personal cost, work to promote and protect the rights enshrined in national and international law. In EACOP host communities, their work takes many practical forms: explaining compensation entitlements to families who have lost farmland, supporting communities in engaging with environmental impact processes, documenting incidents that might otherwise go unrecorded, and creating spaces where people feel safe enough to speak. Thus, the importance EHRDs in oil affected communities can be broken down as follows;

### **Bridging knowledge and community:**

One of the most critical functions EHRDs perform is making rights legible to ordinary people. Legal language, administrative procedures, and international frameworks can be impenetrable without translation into local context and language. When organizations providing this bridge are absent, communities are left to navigate complex development and legal processes alone, a disadvantage that compounds existing inequalities.



In EACOP impacted communities, where land acquisition has been a sensitive and ongoing issue, HRDs have served as essential intermediaries, not adversaries to development, but facilitators of the kind of informed community engagement that makes development genuinely sustainable and accountable.

### **Creating safe spaces for dialogue:**

Perhaps the most under-appreciated contribution of human rights defenders is the creation and maintenance of safe spaces, contexts where community members can discuss concerns, ask questions, and organize responses without fear. These spaces are not natural. They require trust, built over years of consistent presence and principled action.



When civic space contracts, these spaces are among the first casualties. And when they disappear, grievances do not disappear with them, they simply have nowhere to go. Pent-up concerns, unable to find constructive expression, can surface in less productive and more volatile ways. In this sense, the work of HRDs in maintaining dialogue is itself a contribution to stability.

### **Documentation as a form of protection:**

Human rights defenders also play a crucial role in documentation that is to say keeping records of incidents, patterns, and experiences that constitute the evidence base for future accountability and policy improvement. In January 2026, HRDs working in EACOP host communities-maintained records of detentions, disruptions, and compensation concerns even under difficult conditions. This documentation preserves institutional memory and creates the foundation for constructive engagement with authorities, development partners, and the communities themselves.



## MAPPING THE SHRINKING CIVIC LANDSCAPE

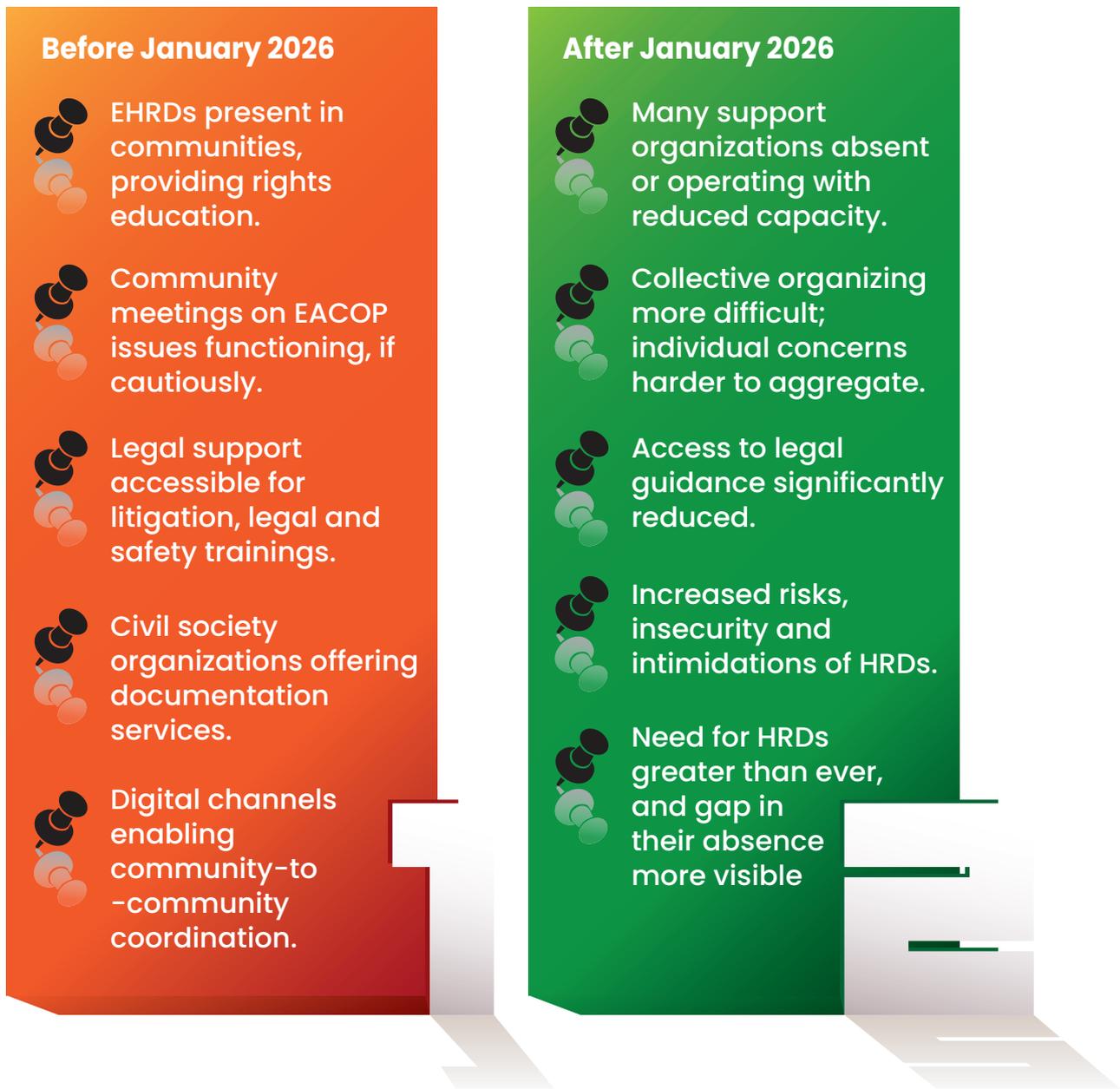
Given the prior events that contributed to the shrinking civic space, it is very crucial to consider the voices from the ground. In gathering reflections from EACOP host communities, several themes emerged consistently. People spoke not only of the difficulties of January but of what had been possible when EHRDs were present and what became harder in their absence.

"They taught us what the law says about our land. They sat with us and explained documents we could not read ourselves. When those organizations closed, it was like someone switched off a light. We just need to know our rights since we are already suffering from " – **Single mother in Hoima district.**

" The human rights people showed us that speaking up is not the same as causing trouble. They helped us understand the difference between a protest and a petition, between anger and advocacy. That knowledge does not leave us, even when they do." – **Youth leader in Rakai District.**

"I wanted to know if my family's compensation was fair. I needed someone who understood the law to help me ask the right questions. Human rights organizations and Community Based organizations gave us that. Without them, how do we know what questions to even ask?" – **Oil affected woman in Hoima District.**

These voices reflect a community that does not merely want HRDs to fight on their behalf but rather they want to be equipped, informed, and empowered to engage constructively in their own futures. That is, precisely, what effective human rights defence looks like. January 2026 accelerated changes in the shrinking civic space that had been developing over a longer period. For EACOP communities, the practical implications of this contraction are concrete and significant.



What this mapping reveals is not simply a story of loss but it is a story of demonstrated value. Each entry in the 'Before' column represents something that HRDs built, often over years of patient, underfunded, community-rooted work. Their contributions only become fully visible when they are no longer there.

### **WHAT ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NEED TO SUCCEED**

Reflecting on the experiences of January, it becomes evident that specific conditions either enable Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) to operate effectively or significantly constrain their work. This reflection is presented in a constructive spirit, aimed at contributing to ongoing dialogue on how all stakeholders can collectively foster a more open, stable, and supportive civic environment.

## Legal and institutional recognition:

EHRDs require clear, consistent, and predictable legal and institutional frameworks that acknowledge and protect their role. This includes transparent procedures for registration, compliance, and operation of civil society organizations, as well as safeguards against arbitrary suspension or revocation of licenses. Where regulatory environments are uncertain or unevenly enforced, defenders are unable to plan long-term initiatives, sustain community relationships, or effectively deliver on their mandates.

## Physical and digital safety:

For EHRDs to carry out their work, both they and the communities they serve must be able to communicate, organize, and document issues without fear of intimidation or reprisal. Reliable digital connectivity has become integral to these processes. Interruptions to communication systems do not merely create inconvenience; they disrupt access to critical information, hinder emergency coordination, and weaken the networks that connect communities to support structures and to one another.

## Community trust and sustained presence:

The effectiveness of EHRDs is closely tied to their embeddedness within the communities they serve. Trust is built over time through consistent engagement, responsiveness, and accountability to local realities. Once disrupted, these relationships cannot be quickly rebuilt. Therefore, creating conditions that allow EHRDs to maintain continuous, long-term presence within communities is essential for effective rights protection and sustained community engagement.



## Access to resources and capacity strengthening:

Defending rights—particularly in rural and underserved areas—requires adequate and sustained resources. Many community-based organizations operating within EACOP-impacted areas function with limited funding, often relying on committed individuals whose contributions exceed the level of available compensation.

Providing EHRDs with reliable financial support, alongside opportunities for training and capacity development, strengthens their ability to respond effectively and operate sustainably. Transparent and accountable funding mechanisms are key to ensuring both effectiveness and credibility.

## **MOVING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The following recommendations are drawn from the reflections of January and are presented as constructive proposals for strengthening collaboration among stakeholders in support of a rights-respecting civic environment.

### **For Environmental and Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society:**

- Strengthen community-based capacity building initiatives that embed rights awareness directly within communities, ensuring continuity of knowledge beyond individual organizations.
- Enhance documentation systems with appropriate safeguards for data security, ensuring records can support accountability and informed advocacy.
- Build and maintain peer-to-peer networks among EHRDs within EACOP host communities to promote solidarity, coordination, and mutual support during periods of constraint.
- Adopt flexible and context-sensitive approaches to rights education, including community-led and informal mechanisms that remain effective even where formal civic structures face limitations.
- Engage constructively and transparently with government institutions and development actors, highlighting the role of EHRDs in advancing inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

### **For Government:**

- Develop and consistently apply clear, transparent regulatory frameworks governing civil society operations to reduce uncertainty and enable effective planning and implementation of EHRD activities.
- Establish accessible and functional grievance and feedback mechanisms through which EACOP-affected communities can raise concerns and receive timely responses.
- Recognize and support the role of EHRDs as constructive actors who facilitate community engagement, accountability, and the long-term sustainability of national development initiatives.

### **For Development and International Partners:**

- Ensure that community engagement processes in projects such as EACOP move beyond formal consultation toward sustained, meaningful, and rights-based participation.
- Invest in strengthening civic infrastructure within project-affected communities, including support for rights education, local leadership, and EHRD capacity building as part of responsible development practice.
- Reinforce and uphold robust accountability mechanisms that provide communities with effective avenues for recourse when commitments are not fulfilled or when impacts arise.

## **CONCLUSION: DEFENDERS AS ARCHITECTS OF DIALOGUE**

January 2026 was a defining period that tested the resilience of civic space in Uganda, particularly within communities along the EACOP corridor. At the same time, it brought into sharp focus the critical importance of Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).



EHRDs do more than respond to crisis. They help build and sustain the foundational elements that enable rights to be realized in practice- community knowledge, trusted relationships, reliable documentation systems, and safe spaces for dialogue and organizing. Within EACOP-affected communities, this foundation has been developed over time through the sustained efforts of committed individuals and organizations operating at the intersection of community development and democratic participation.

This newsletter stands as both a record of that work and an affirmation of its significance. It also serves as an invitation to strengthen and expand it. Sustainable and inclusive development in Uganda is most achievable when affected communities are actively informed, meaningfully engaged, and empowered to participate in shaping the decisions that impact their lives. EHRDs play a central role in enabling this participation. We encourage all readers to engage with the reflections presented here by sharing perspectives, raising questions, and contributing to ongoing dialogue on how civic space within EACOP communities and across Uganda can be strengthened, protected, and sustained



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