INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

1. Human rights protection in the Philippines

Despite reports of killings, threats and other abuses against human rights defenders in the Philippines, there has long been a gap in the formal acknowledgment of these violations. Various organisations, both locally and internationally, have highlighted this crucial issue, noting that while these violations are occurring, they are not formally documented, largely due to the absence of accepted statistical data on these incidents.

In response, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) of the Philippines has taken a proactive role as a member of the Interagency Committee on Security, Justice, and Peace Statistics (IACSJPS)[1]. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) established the IACSJPS to strengthen its methodologies and address issues related to the generation, processing, analysis, dissemination, and use of security, justice, and peace statistics and indicators, including those related to human rights violations.

The IACSJPS is tasked with tracking the progress of peace, justice, and human rights indicators in the Philippines. Among these indicators are data on human rights violations, which are sourced from the CHR. Recognising the need to formally acknowledge and document violations, particularly those against human rights defenders, the CHR has sought to generate accepted and verified statistical data. This ensures that these critical issues are officially recognised within the national statistical framework.

2. Impact of Inter-agency collaboration

The involvement of the CHR in the IACSJPS has been pivotal for both human rights advocacy and the protection of human rights defenders in the Philippines. Through its collaboration, the CHR ensures that the cases of human rights defenders —who are often at the highest risk of severe rights violations—are accurately documented and verified. This not only strengthens the legal and institutional response to such violations, it also helps hold perpetrators accountable and contributes to the broader goal of reducing impunity.

[1] The IACSJPS Members include the following agencies: Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG); Department of Justice (DOJ); Department of National Defense (DND); National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA); National Security Council (NSC); Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPPRU); Philippine National Police (PNP); Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA); Supreme Court of the Philippines (SCP); and Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

For human rights defenders, the accurate reporting of cases under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.10.1—which tracks verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture—is vital. This indicator provides a clear metric for the international community to monitor and respond to the threats faced by human rights defenders. By working closely with the PSA and other stakeholders, the CHR contributes to a more comprehensive and accurate national human rights database. This, in turn, enhances the capacity of the Philippines to meet its international obligations under the SDGs and strengthens the global fight for the protection of human rights defenders, ensuring that their struggles are recognised and addressed at the national, regional and international levels.

3. Collaborative efforts: Strengthening the response to human rights violations

The presence of the CHR in the IACSJPS, and the collaboration with the PSA, has led to several significant outcomes:

- **Enhanced data collection and validation**: Through technical assistance from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other international partners, the CHR has developed methodologies for collecting and validating data on human rights violations that meet international statistical standards. This has included capacity-building sessions for CHR investigators and regional offices, ensuring that data collected is reliable and can be formally recognised by the PSA. To strengthen its efforts, the CHR entered a Memorandum of Understanding with the PSA. This led to the designation of the CHR as a national data provider and data custodian for SDG 16.10.1. This partnership will improve the collection, validation, and reporting of data on human rights violations, integrating these issues into the national statistical system. This collaboration is further supported by technical assistance from international organisations, including the OHCHR.
- **Strengthened institutional partnerships**: The collaboration has also led to the CHR's participation in the IACSJPS, a body composed of government institutions that include the Department of National Defense, the Supreme Court, the Philippine National Police, and the Department of Justice. The CHR's participation in the committee, which began in 2023, and its election as co-chair, allows it to play a strategic role in shaping the agenda and ensuring that human rights concerns, particularly those related to human rights defenders, are adequately addressed in national policies and data collection efforts.
- **Formal recognition of human rights data**: One of the most notable achievements of this collaboration is the formal inclusion of SDG 16.10.1 in the Philippines' national statistical system. This inclusion, facilitated by the CHR's engagement with the PSA and other government agencies, is a significant step in acknowledging and addressing human rights

violations in the country. This indicator has been officially adopted and is now part of the data reported both nationally and internationally on monitoring compliance with the SDGs.

4. Challenges and mitigation strategies

Despite this progress, the CHR faces ongoing challenges in tracking and reporting on SDG 16.10.1. One significant issue is capacity constraints, as the CHR's limited presence in regional centres around the country has made it difficult to comprehensively monitor and report on human rights violations across the Philippines. To address this, the CHR has focused on capacity-building efforts, including training staff in its regional offices and developing partnerships with civil society organisations to enhance data collection efforts.

Another challenge is the under-reporting of violations. Given the sensitive nature of human rights data, particularly regarding human rights defenders who face threats and harassment, there is a risk of under-reporting. The CHR has responded by exploring the use of citizen-generated data and working with civil society organisations to collect and validate information that might not be captured through official channels.

Ensuring the credibility and acceptance of data is also crucial. To achieve this, the CHR has worked closely with the PSA to align its data collection methodologies with international standards. This alignment has been essential in gaining formal recognition for the data and ensuring its can be used to inform policy and protect human rights defenders.

5. Future plans: Investigating the practice of red-tagging

The CHR will continue its efforts to protect human rights defenders and improve human rights data collection in the Philippines. A key initiative is the ongoing national inquiry into the practice of 'red-tagging', where human rights defenders are labeled as communists or terrorists, making them targets for government action under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The CHR is also advocating for stronger legal protections for human rights defenders, using the data collected to push for policy changes to safeguard their rights.

Further, the CHR aims to institutionalise the collection of citizen-generated data in its reporting processes, leveraging partnerships with civil society to ensure that all human rights violations are accounted for, even in the most challenging environments.

Read *Standing Strong* report at: https://bit.ly/StandingStrongReport

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Co-funded by the European Union

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