

Addressing the documentation needs of human rights defenders

by Kristin Antin, the engine room
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Documenting abuse plays a critical role in securing justice by protecting and defending human rights. Defending human rights is an important and rewarding profession, but those who work to uncover and document the truth face enormous risk. To better understand the community that is documenting and taking this risk, we recently conducted a survey with the goal of better understanding what can be done to better support the brave and inspiring people who do this work. This blog post shares some of the results and outlines possible steps forward.

Background

This effort builds on previous discussions. In March, 2015, a few of us (Nicolas Sera-Leyva of [Internews](#), Kristin Antin of [the engine room](#), Friedhelm Weinberg of [HURIDOCs](#), Rory Byrne of [Security First](#), and others) who were in Manila to attend the [Responsible Data Forum on Human Rights Documentation](#), and [RightsCon](#) discussed the gaps in support that we've noticed, including:

- a place to go to get advice on the practice of human rights documentation (not just a specific tool),
- advice on security practices,
- case studies on what has worked (and hasn't worked),
- discussion of methodologies, tools, and approaches to human rights documentation, and
- how to make informed choices on these.

We believe there are others, too. But in order to begin filling these gaps, we needed to find out more about the needs of the practitioners, the gaps they see, and their ideas for ways to address them. To that end, we put together [this short survey](#), shared it with our networks, and now we are sharing our analysis of the response in this blog post.

From October 5 to November 6, we heard from a total of 11 people. This is less than we had hoped but we believe we still collected some useful information. Thank you to those who contributed to this effort!

This initiative isn't owned by any one organization. Instead, it is an effort being coordinated by a few committed practitioners with the blessing of their employers to better understand how to support human rights documentors.

Notable outcomes from survey results

We weren't necessarily surprised by the survey results, but we're glad to be able to confirm a few of our assumptions. Some of the most notable outcomes from the survey results include:

When it comes to challenges, practitioners are most concerned about putting themselves and others at risk, and knowing which methodology and tool to choose. This tells us that:

1. organizations need more support in secure and responsible practices for data collection, storage, sharing, analysis and archiving, and
2. the options available for documentation methodologies and tools to support the process need to be better defined and compared to help practitioners make the right choice for their situation.

The responses to our question on what kinds of opportunities would increase and improve support to practitioners varied greatly. There wasn't a particularly bad option, nor was there a clear winner. This tells us that we should do further research and surveys to understand what kind of support would be best for types of audiences (i.e. geographic, human rights issue focus, goal of documentation). We should also expect to spend time experimenting with different types of support (i.e. online trainings, in-person workshops, translated material, community of practice, guides) to learn more about what works well with audiences.

When asked about additional support, practitioners are likely to participate in online meetings with peers, and document case studies and advice. From this we gather that practitioners are eager for more opportunities to connect with and learn from their peers.

You can read our full summary of the survey results here. [link to PDF that contains all the content in this google doc]

Moving forward

Based on what we've learned from these surveys and our conversations with practitioners, we want to propose a series of online discussions in early 2016. We're still in the process of identifying topics - please [reach out to Kristin](#) if you have ideas and/or if you want updates on these events!

Survey results: Identifying gaps in human rights documentation capacity building

From October 5 to November 6, we heard from a total of 11 people. This is less than we had hoped but we believe we still collected some useful information. Thank you to those who contributed to this effort! This is what we found:

1. For info and resources on human rights documentation, practitioners turn to their networks of colleagues, peers, funders and documentation centers.

We asked: when you are looking for information how to do human rights documentation, where do you go? Respondents told us that they turn to colleagues, peers and donors for templates, guidelines and brainstorming, as well as their networks of researchers, investigators, lawyers for advice. They told us that they look to other documentation centers for resources. These specific organizations were included as places to go to find resources:

- United Nations
- [Institute for International Criminal Investigations](#) (IICI)
- [HURIDOCs](#)
- [WITNESS](#)
- [Asia Catalyst](#)
- Polish Helsinki Foundation
- [Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law HR electronic library](#)
- [PHAP](#)
- [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC)
- [Doctors Without Borders](#)
- [Insight on Conflict](#)

And a few specific resources were mentioned, including:

- [Manuals for Civil Society Orgs by Asia Catalyst](#), esp the manual titled “Prove it: Documenting Rights Abuses”
- [Verification Handbook](#): a guide to verifying digital content

2. When it comes to challenges, practitioners are most concerned about putting themselves and others at risk, and knowing which methodology and tool to choose.

We asked: what question do you struggle with most? These were the most popular selections:

1. **How do I ensure my project doesn't put people at risk? (3)**
2. **What methodologies exist and how do I choose the right one? (2)**
3. How do I choose the right documentation tool (or collection of tools) based on my situation? (1)
4. How do I make sure my communication with others is secure? (1)
5. What kind of training is available to me/my team on human rights documentation practices? (1)

6. How can I be sure that I'm drawing accurate conclusions from data that has been gathered?
(1)

3. There are many impactful opportunities to increase and improve support to practitioners, from translations to trainings to peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.

We asked: What would be most useful to you, as a human rights documentation practitioner? The options are listed from highest-ranked, to least:

1. Material (resources, guides, etc) in multiple languages (4.11)
2. A community of practice where you could ask questions (listserv, forums, in-person events, etc) (3.70)
3. Training on human rights documentation practice(s) and or physical/digital security tailored to my needs (3.67)
4. Series of guides created by experienced human rights documentation practitioners (3.55)
5. In-person events to network and share experiences/knowledge (3.11)
6. Catalogue/library of existing resources related to human rights documentation (2.89)

4. When asked about additional support, practitioners are likely to participate in online meetings with peers, and document case studies and advice.

We asked respondents to rank how likely they would be to participate in certain kinds of capacity-building activities. The responses varied dramatically. The total score of each activity was very close, but the most popular options included:

- Multiple-day in-person event to document advice, experiences, resources (output: book/guide) (4.09)
- Documenting case studies (4.09)
- Online meetings with peers to discuss human rights documentation (4)
- One-on-one conversations with peers (3.91)
- One-day in-person event to network and sharing experiences (3.91)
- Series of online workshops (3.80)

Participants were most excited about (5 of the 11 respondents responded “yes sign me up!” to) the following activities:

- Multiple-day in-person event to document advice, experiences, resources (output: book/guide)
- Online meetings with peers to discuss human rights documentation
- Series of online workshops