

Protecting human rights defenders: ensuring peace and justice

Strategy Peace Brigades International - The Netherlands

2024-2029

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LEGENDA

BMO	Breed Mensenrechten Overleg (the Dutch network of human rights organisations)
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
LGBTQ+	LGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and the "+" signifies inclusion of other gender identities.
PBI	Peace Brigades International
UN	United Nations

FOREWORD

A five-year strategy is a long period in an ever-changing world. In the period before 2019, it was impossible to predict what would come our way. The COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world. The increasingly visible consequences of climate change. The surge in violence, new wars and an increasing demand for more arms. The shrinking civic space for civil society gives human rights defenders less and less space to do their legitimate work and to do it in safety.

Our mission to create space for peace in which conflicts can be dealt with non-violently, remains ever relevant. Human rights defenders are the agents for positive change and development, and the backbone of peaceful societies. They work tirelessly, and non-violently, to build peaceful societies in some of the world's most dangerous countries. We will keep them and their struggles at the centre of our work.

This five-year strategy will help us navigate our complex global society. It will guide our thinking and projects, but it also allows flexibility. The strategy builds on our organisation's 40 year + journey towards a more peaceful world for all.

We would not have been able to achieve our results in the past without our support network. Our volunteers, supporters, partner organisations, financial donors, universities, experts, and many others. I'd like to thank everyone who contributed. Not just for their input on this strategy, but for being part of our community. Together we will continue our work and ensure peace and justice through the protection of human rights defenders. And together we will create space for peace.

Yours sincerely,

Francis Meijners
Chair PBI Netherlands (2024)

Context

Globally, human rights defenders face widespread obstacles, threats and attacks, as civic space continues to shrink. Civic freedoms are under attack in a growing number of countries. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, civil society operates in severely restricted settings in 118 out of 198 countries in the world¹. In this context of crackdown on civil society, threats and killings of human rights defenders have been on the rise. In 2022, 401 human rights defenders were killed and more than 1,500 threats and violations to human rights defenders were registered². Among the most targeted groups are those defending land and environmental rights, freedom of expression, freedom of protest, women's rights and access to justice. Women and LGBTQ+ defenders face particularly frequently death threats and physical violence, alongside gender-based violence and gender-specific risks.

In recent years, the world has faced multiple and intersecting crises further exacerbating the shrinking of civic space and undermining human rights:

- The world is facing several violent conflicts, such as the invasion of Russia into Ukraine, several civil wars being fought in the African region, and the explosion of violence in the Middle East.
- In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc creating a worldwide global health crisis, impacting all areas of life, furthering inequalities and leading to the imposition of measures restricting civic space in several countries worldwide.³
- At the same time the impacts of the climate crisis become more and more visible, with developing countries in the Global South bearing the brunt of the crisis.
- The number of refugees and displaced persons continues to be on the rise as a result of conflict and climate impacts, with an all-time high in 2020 of a total of 89.4 million displaced persons worldwide⁴.
- Finally, in recent years there is a concerning global trend of erosion of democratic institutions and the rule of law

All these developments have directly or indirectly affected the space for human rights defenders to exercise their legitimate role of defending and protecting human rights.

Closer to home, the Netherlands and Europe are witnessing a rise in polarisation, and a shift towards more right-wing conservative governments that prioritise national interests over international solidarity. In the Netherlands, the public discourse is more polarized, with growing presence of racist and anti-Islam rhetoric as well as negative discourses around migrants, LGBTQI+ and sexual and reproductive rights. Additionally, the Netherlands dropped 22 places in the World Press Freedom Index 2022 from place 6 to 28,⁵ after a decline in safety for journalists as a result of polarisation of public opinion and the threat of organised crime. At the same time we see a growing social movement in Dutch society in the fight for climate justice and against racism, however this has also increased pressure on the right to protest.

¹ https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/

² <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-2022>

³ <https://www.undp.org/library/dfs-secondary-impacts-covid-19-closing-civic-space-fragile-contexts>

⁴ <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>

⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation>

About Peace Brigades International

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is an international non-governmental human rights organisation recognised by the United Nations with ECOSOC-status that was founded in 1981. PBI is a horizontal organisation, that operates based on the principles of non-violence, non-interference and non-partisanship. We provide international protective accompaniment with teams of international volunteers through the protection, support and recognition of local human rights defenders who work in areas of repression and conflict and have requested our support. We believe that lasting transformation of conflicts cannot come from outside, but must be based on the capacity and desires of local people. PBI currently has field projects in seven countries around the world: Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, and Nepal as well as 14 country groups.

About PBI Netherlands

PBI Netherlands is a country group part of the global PBI network. PBI Netherlands contributes to the protective accompaniment of human rights defenders worldwide by advocating for the protection of human rights with our international support network, creating visibility on the situation of human rights defenders through communications and the organisation of advocacy tours, recruiting volunteers for the PBI field project, and fundraising activities. PBI Netherlands also hosts Shelter City Utrecht, an initiative for temporary relocation of human rights defenders at risk during which for a period of three months human rights defenders stay in the Netherlands to re-energize, build their network, receive training and get mental health support. With this focus, PBI Netherlands contributes to the protection of human rights defenders both at home and abroad.

Looking back and lessons learned

In the face of these challenges, it's clear that more than ever, there is a need to protect the people at the forefront of these crises. PBI has been providing protection to human rights defenders for over four decades. Looking back on the last five years the organisation has evolved and takes along the following lessons and achievements in the future.

1. Building on collaborative relationships

PBI Netherlands built a strong base of support consisting of citizens, civil society organisations, policy makers and donors. In the last 5 years PBI Netherlands has strengthened existing and built several new partnerships with other civil society organisations and knowledge institutions. We have close relations with the Dutch Gender Platform WO=MEN and Breed Mensenrechten Overleg (BMO, the Dutch network of human rights organisation), as well as started new partnerships to increase the visibility of our work through the Bibliotheek Utrecht and de Kargadoor. At the same time, we strengthened our existing partnerships with Justice and Peace the Municipality of Utrecht through the Shelter City network. PBI Netherlands is approached more and more often for collaborations, to grow this success even further we will continue to invest in these partnerships.

2. Growing focus on advocacy

Recent years have shown the importance of the Shelter City project and advocacy tours of human rights defenders to the Netherlands. Their presence in the Netherlands increases visibility of the situations of human rights defenders globally. Additionally, it allows them to grow their visibility and advocacy support network to ensure rapid response in case of attacks toward human rights defenders.

3. Holistic way of working by including mental health

Worldwide there is an increasing awareness that besides physical and digital safety and security there is a need for support in the mental health of human rights defenders who often operate under enormous pressure. PBI Netherlands, through the Shelter City project, has a strong track record in this field. With the intention to grow the Shelter City project, more space will become available to respond to this important need of human rights defenders.

4. Hybrid ways of working

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to new ways of working and increased possibilities to organise activities online or in a hybrid mode. This provides an opportunity to give more visibility to human rights defenders abroad in the Netherlands and internationally, also when they reside in their own countries. Moreover, it allows several PBI offices from around the world to work together in the organisation of hybrid events, for example around information sessions for the recruitment of field volunteers.

5. Financially stable organisation

After difficult years, PBI Netherlands has stabilised in terms of the availability of funding. The uncertainty in terms of funding has taught us to be efficient, prioritise and use limited funding to continue to do our work for the protection of human rights defenders in creative ways. The newly found stability provides opportunities and energy to focus on the core of PBI's work as well as explore new opportunities for fundraising. Shelter City, funded by the Municipality of Utrecht, is an important funder for PBI Netherlands that provides stability. The next step is to further diversify PBI Netherlands income.

PBI Netherlands Vision, Mission and Strategy

In our new strategic period, we built further upon PBI Netherlands' 40 years of experience and learned lessons in creating space for human rights defenders to defend and protect human rights. Our new strategic priority focus areas are guided by our vision and mission.

Our vision

PBI envisions a world in which people address conflicts non-violently, where human rights are universally upheld and social justice and intercultural respect have become a reality.

Mission 'making space for peace'

Human rights defenders around the world are under great pressure for their work in the field of human rights. They are threatened, criminalised or even murdered. PBI has been successfully providing them with protection for over 40 years by making space for peace. We use a strategy of international presence and concern that supports local initiatives and contributes to developing a culture of peace and justice. We act on request of local non-violent groups working for human rights and social change.

PBI creates political and diplomatic attention in over 20 countries for the human rights defenders at risk accompanied by teams of international volunteers on the ground. We believe that sustainable conflict transformation cannot be imposed from the outside. It must be based on the needs and beliefs of the population. We expand the political space of human rights defenders and provide moral support, so that they can continue to work in their own country for human rights and justice in relative safety.

Priority focus areas

Among the most targeted groups of human rights defenders are those defending land and environmental rights, freedom of expression, freedom of protest, LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights and access to justice. Human rights defenders pertaining to those groups are the ones that frequently request protective accompaniment from PBI's field projects or temporary relocation through the Shelter City programme. As a compact organisation we focus on those groups that face the greatest risks. Therefore, we have identified the following three strategic priority areas for our new strategic period, on which we will focus our awareness raising activities and advocacy efforts:

- 1. Climate justice & the defence of land and environmental rights**
- 2. Gender and sexual diversity**
- 3. Freedom of expression and the rule of law**

Our strategic goals 2024-2028

As a relatively small organisation with limited resources, we will focus on our strengths and those areas of work most urgent to human rights defenders' protection, and build partnerships with organisations where we can mutually add value. Therefore, over the next five years, we will deliver our mission through four prioritised goals.

Goal 1: Strengthen the protection of Human Rights Defenders

For decades, PBI International has been a pioneer in delivering protective accompaniment to human rights defenders in the Global South and in the Netherlands. PBI's constant presence on the ground means that we are one of the only organisations that can advocate at all levels - from the local authorities to the world leaders at the UN. PBI Netherlands builds awareness, advocates and trains volunteers to work in the field, providing protection to human rights defenders. Furthermore, we will focus on providing safe spaces in the Netherlands, for human rights defenders from the Global South.

By 2028, the protection of human rights defenders is strengthened through PBI's protective accompaniment, both in PBI field projects as well as during temporary relocation in the Netherlands.

Goal 2: Strengthen protective networks

An enabling environment is crucial for human rights defenders to be able to carry out their work. In the Netherlands, we build effective partnerships with civil society organisations, and politicians and policy makers that we can mobilise to provide emergency response for threatened defenders. These networks are crucial to amplify the voices of human rights defenders and ensure that their calls for rights and freedoms are heard by those who can make a difference. PBI Netherlands is one of the entities with a strong support network in the Netherlands and can connect human rights defenders from around the world with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, policy makers and politicians that can respond to urgent action requests of threatened human rights defenders.

By 2028, Dutch civil society and human rights networks that PBI Netherlands is engaged with actively advocate for the protection of human rights defenders and the defence of civic space.

Goal 3: Raise awareness in the Netherlands

Citizens can play an important role in creating pressure on governments to take action for the protection of human rights. More than ever, it's crucial to build on our work in informing the Dutch public, and specifically youth, about human rights abuses in the countries that PBI is active in

together with visiting human rights defenders. To raise awareness and engage them to create support for human rights defenders and call for their protection.

By 2028, the Dutch public is aware of the threats faced by human rights defenders and shrinking civic space and speaks up on their behalf.

Goal 4: Deliver impact through an effective organisation

PBI Netherlands is a relatively small organisation. The organisation thrives through our committed and small team of staff and our active volunteers. With limited means we are able to maximise our impact that has grown steadily over time. To deliver on our strategic goals, we will further improve the human and financial resources and organisational (infra)structure, with special care and attention for our teams of staff and volunteers.

By 2028, PBI Netherland is a financially stable organisation that prioritises the well-being and engagement of our employees and volunteers.

Operational plan

The operational plan explains how we intend to achieve our prioritised goals. The operationalisation of our goals will be detailed further in our yearly operational plans during the upcoming five years.

Goal 1: Strengthen the protection of Human Rights Defenders

In the Netherlands, we will strengthen the protection of HRDs through its strategy of protective accompaniment promoting presence of international volunteers in PBI field projects as well as by providing a safe space for human rights defenders in the Netherlands and through PBI International abroad.

1.1 Offer a safe space for human rights defenders

PBI Netherlands is a partner in the Shelter City global movement consisting of municipalities, city governments, civil society organisations and people who stand side by side with human rights defenders at risk. Together, we offer human rights defenders a safe space and inspiring place for three months. This allows them to take a step back from their situation at home, rest, engage with allies, develop skills and attain knowledge depending on their needs. We intend to grow the number of human rights defenders that receive tailor-made support. In addition, we will continue to build human rights defenders' support networks by linking them to other human rights defenders, the Dutch press, policy makers, government, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders.

1.2 Recruiting and training of volunteers

Volunteers play a crucial role in PBI's protective mechanism. PBI Netherlands has over the past decades delivered many volunteers for the project countries. In recent years, it has become more difficult to recruit volunteers due to the changing political and economic situation in the Netherlands. Historically, it has been young people that have volunteered in the project countries. We will therefore focus on raising awareness about human rights abuses, and the work of PBI, amongst students. We will do this by sharing the stories from our volunteers and the impact they have achieved, for example during the events we host. In addition, we will continue to offer informative training and sessions for people interested in volunteering in one of the project countries. In these trainings, volunteers learn the core work and approach of PBI.

Goal 2: Strengthening protective networks

Working in partnership is central to PBI Netherlands approach to deliver on our strategic priorities. Solidarity networks and policy makers are key to protecting human rights. PBI Netherlands actively continues to strengthen and advocate together with these networks.

2.1 PBI is recognised as an expert organisation in the field of human rights by civil society and the Dutch government

PBI Netherlands will be active in policy networks in the Netherlands and provide its advice on human rights defenders, our connection to the global PBI network gives us first-hand information on the human rights situation on the ground. Secondly, we will strengthen our participation in dialogues with civil society organisations, networks and the Dutch government to share our expertise. Third, we connect human rights defenders from around the world with policy makers and civil society organisations in the Netherlands. Lastly, we will continue to raise PBI Netherlands' profile through our own social media outlets.

2.2 Dutch civil society organisations and support networks advocate together with PBI for better protection of human rights defenders.

We will strengthen our strategic partnerships such as WO=MEN, BMO, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Municipality of Utrecht. In addition, we will enter into new strategic partnerships with organisations that bring expertise that is complementary to PBI Netherlands. Together, with our partners and with human rights defenders from around the world we advocate for the better protection of human rights defenders in human rights policy. We will also keep close ties with embassies from the countries PBI is active in. In addition, we will publish thought pieces in renowned media outlets to showcase our expertise and further build upon our existing relations with the Dutch national and regional media to have stories of human rights defenders published.

Goal 3: Raise awareness in the Netherlands

The Dutch public plays an important role in raising awareness about the work of human rights defenders and the challenges they face. By advocating for the protection of human rights defenders and speaking out against the threats they face, citizens can help generate public support in the Netherlands and pressure the government to take actions.

3.1 Citizens in the Netherlands are aware of the situation for HRDs in countries where PBI is active

We will focus on raising awareness among citizens, especially youth, in the Netherlands, by sharing stories of human rights defenders on our online social media channels and by creating mini-documentaries on human rights defenders. The PBI Netherlands film screenings have been a long-term success to raise awareness. We will continue to organise the film screenings and facilitate Q&A with human rights defenders from around the world afterwards.

3.2 Citizens in the Netherlands speak out in favour of the protection of HRDs and civic space in countries where PBI is active

From increased awareness to taking action, we will stimulate and facilitate citizens to take action in support of human rights defenders. We will do so by setting up social media campaigns where we ask citizens to voice their support for human rights defenders. We will focus on increasing our visibility by sharing stories of the people active within PBI Netherlands. These include the many volunteers that work at the office, the staff as well as board members and donors. We will continue to communicate our values and methods of working, which are unique.

Goal 4: Deliver impact through an effective organisation

To deliver on our strategic priorities, PBI Netherlands is aiming to continuously improve its organisational performance. To do so, we will focus on diversifying and growing our funding from donors in the Netherlands, and strengthen our organisational structure.

4.1 Diversification and growth of fundraising from donors in the Netherlands

PBI Netherlands has improved its financial basis in the past year, and will continue to do so in the next strategic period. We will focus on strengthening the relationship with our existing donors for long-term partnerships to implement the projects in the Netherlands. In addition, we will reach out to new institutional donors and foundations in the Netherlands to diversify our funding base. Public donor giving is an important source of income for PBI Netherlands. We will increase the number of fundraising campaigns via social media and during events such as the film screenings, to maximise efficiency in organisation.

4.2 PBI Netherlands is a professional and effective organisation with good governance

PBI Netherlands is a small organisation with limited staff capacity. In our following strategic period, we aim to gradually grow the organisation to reduce the workload on existing staff, and effectively deliver on our existing activities and projects. We will continue to strengthen our existing organisational structure to ensure we deliver to the highest standard and maintain the institutional memory of the organisation. PBI Netherlands is also part of the wider PBI International network. In the coming period, we will continue to participate in the international working groups, and ensure coordination and collaboration with other PBI entities in the field of advocacy and fundraising, among others.

4.3 PBI Netherlands is an inclusive organisation where employees and volunteers are cared for and where capacity and competencies are developed and maintained

Our volunteers are at the heart of the organisation, and are the driving force for much of the implementation of activities we do in the Netherlands. We have around 30 committed and active volunteers, and we will ensure to maintain these numbers. We will revise and implement our policies to ensure that PBI is an inclusive and diverse organisation. In particular we aim to attract more people with different socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. In addition, we will continue to provide workshops for our volunteers to improve their knowledge and skills. We will also focus on ensuring a pleasant, welcoming and safe working space. We will work to ensure all our volunteers including our Advisory Group remain actively involved with PBI Netherlands.