

Media Defence

Strategy
2025
2029

Contents

IMPACT AND ACHIEVEMENTS UNDER OUR PREVIOUS STRATEGY	3
INTRODUCING OUR STRATEGY	4
GLOBAL THREATS TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION	5
OUR PRIORITY AREAS FOR 2025-2029	6
OUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	10
DEVELOPING OUR APPROACH TO GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY	15



Impact under our previous strategy



Litigation

2020 – 2024

Approved cases: 400+

Countries: 100+

Grants: £1.5 million

We successfully increased the scale of our work during our last strategy, having approved over 400 cases in 100+ countries, disbursing over £1.5 million in grants since 2020. Going forward, we hope to continue to build on this growth, supporting over 150 emergency defence and strategic litigation cases per year.

We met all our goals set out in our 2020-2024 strategy. In 2023, we supported 84 strategic cases and 92 emergency defence cases. In 2024 we surpassed the aim of 58 new strategic cases and 100 emergency defence ones, reaching over 200 new cases for the first time.

Geographic spread

From 2020-2024, Brazil, Azerbaijan, and Turkey occupied 40% of our active workload. Nigeria, Russia and Colombia and Cameroon represent an additional 10%.

Case outcomes

From 2020 until August 2024, 395 cases were concluded across our strategic litigation (143 cases) and emergency defence programmes (252 cases). In our strategic litigation, we saw a 50% success rate. For cases where Media Defence acted as counsel or submitted a strategic intervention at international mechanisms, the success rate was around 70%.

Capacity and network building

2020-2024

Litigation surgeries: 12

Supported training of 351 lawyers

Partner grants: 78

Increase in cases litigated by our partners: +92.6%

Regional partner convenings: 4

Since 2020, our capacity-building efforts have included a wide range of activities, including partner grants, partner convenings, litigation surgeries, peer-to-peer mentoring, litigators' convenings and regional training modules. Litigation surgeries played an essential role in our capacity-building efforts. From 2020 to 2024, we conducted a total of 12 surgeries, offering guidance and support to legal teams, with 351 lawyers trained by Media Defence directly or in partnership with us. These sessions were delivered in four languages—French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese—to improve accessibility.

Introducing our Strategy

The Strategy for 2025-2029 maintains our focus on attaining excellence in legal services to journalists wherever they are, with the ultimate goal that they continue their crucial public interest reporting.

The Strategy for 2025-2029 maintains our focus on attaining excellence in legal services to journalists wherever they are, with the ultimate goal that they continue reporting and aren't thwarted in their public interest work by either governments or powerful individuals. Our priorities reflect the context we live in. They are similar to what we observed in 2019, but have now become even more urgent given the intensity of threats against journalism, in both repressive countries but also in democracies around the world.

Our aim with this document is to sign post our goals for the next five years, setting ambitious, sustainable objectives as a non-governmental organisation and as a key ally to independent journalists and media outlets facing legal threats.



Global Threats to Freedom of Expression

We are living in a perilous era for freedom of expression around the world. In the context of a broader trend in shrinking civic space, journalists and activists face both new and well-known threats.

Physical Attacks and Imprisonment

More “traditional” tools of repression, such as physical attacks and arrests, persist at high levels when reporting on crime, politics, and corruption. In 2023, 99 journalists were killed, a 44% increase over 2022 and in nine out of 10 cases, the perpetrators were not held to account.

Around the world, journalists are being imprisoned in record numbers, with countries in Asia accounting for the majority of detainees. One example is Vietnam, where authorities have jailed dozens of bloggers and activists (who are among the only sources of independent news) on anti-state charges, in an effort to stifle dissent and suppress their critical reporting.

Abuse of Technology and Laws

Governments and non-state actors are increasingly abusing laws and technology to censor and intimidate critics. In recent years we’ve seen the widespread use of internet shutdowns in response to unrest, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where several governments shut down the internet amidst public protests and elections.

Surveillance, including aggressive spyware, has also been used against journalists. Dozens of journalists around the world were found to have been targeted by Pegasus spyware, a product only available to governments. This and other kinds of surveillance grossly violate the privacy rights of journalists but also jeopardise their ability to keep sources protected, an essential element of journalism.

SLAPPs

Defamation laws, criminal and civil, are commonly wielded to silence journalists along with laws penalising fake news. One disturbing trend is the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which make up a large proportion of Media Defence’s emergency grants. These cases are brought against journalists with the intention of hindering their work, regardless of the merits of the case, by draining their time and resources in legal action.

Judicial Harassment

Another concerning trend affecting journalists is judicial harassment. For example, in Latin America, journalists have been subject to what appears to be coordinated legal attacks by powerful figures. These take the form of multiple lawsuits often accompanied by personal attacks online. We have also seen journalists and others imprisoned or repressed through allegations of financial crimes, including money laundering and tax evasion.

The combined effect of these trends is chilling. Journalists, media houses and activists who expose corruption and human rights abuses, express dissent or report on conflict and politics, risk serious financial and personal damage, their liberty, and even their lives. 2024 has already witnessed serious and ongoing conflicts with global implications as well as an unprecedented number of major elections around the world. The need for information and accountability has never been more urgent. These examples are illustrative of the types of legal threats that Media Defence has, is, and will continue to support in order to protect freedom of expression globally.

Our priority areas for 2025-2029

1 — Violence Against Journalists



Violence continues to be used around the world as a means of silencing and punishing journalists that report on corruption, crime or human rights violations. Violence is used to not only silence individual journalists, but also because of its profound chilling effect on the media in general. In every region we work in, governments use violence in the cloak of legal process (for example, by imprisoning journalists on spurious charges), and illegally (through torture, disappearances, or even extrajudicial killings).

Many governments (both authoritarian and democracies alike) often fail to prevent or properly investigate and punish acts of violence committed against journalists. When a journalist is detained or faces criminal charges, prompt and effective legal assistance is crucial for their safety. At the same time, survivors of violence and the relatives of journalists who have been killed or disappeared require qualified legal assistance in their efforts to establish the truth and hold the perpetrators accountable – a process that is often complex and costly.

We are committed to provide support to journalists who are victims of violence due to their reporting so that they continue their work and to encourage others to do the same.

Our priority areas for 2025-2029

2—

Digital Rights



Access to the internet is vital for the free flow of information, and, consequently, press freedom. Journalism nowadays is overwhelmingly produced and consumed digitally, which has led to a range of targeted interferences to restrict the flow of information, and which often fall outside of accepted international standards.

Restrictions on access to online information, which arise in a range of ways – including internet shutdowns, blocking of social media, content takedown, imposition of liability on intermediaries, gradual expansion of the ‘right to be forgotten’, and gender-specific online threats – continue to threaten the right to freedom of expression online. Although we continue to have success in challenging blanket restrictions on access to the internet, the number of Governments deploying this tactic has multiplied, indicating that the standards need stronger enforcement.

“Fake news” laws, cybercrime and disinformation are now part of the daily threats journalists face when reporting on public interest matters. The use of legislation as a pretence to stifle public debate ramped up in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, we expect this trend to continue.

When dealing with individual cases, where the issue concerns a tension between free expression and privacy we have increasingly seen privacy trump free expression. We are aware that as this situation evolves, governments and courts will develop their approaches in ways that may not always reflect international legal standards, so we must work to support litigation to reinforce these standards.

Globally, journalists and human rights defenders are facing interference with their personal and professional lives through surveillance and spyware technology by their governments, threatening democracy and the rule of law. We have acted quickly in the past when we became aware of such violations and we aim to challenge the use of spyware in court in every region, setting limits and standards that protect privacy, confidentiality and freedom of expression.

Our priority areas for 2025-2029

3— Lawfare



By its very essence, democracy requires dissent, the free flow of ideas, and participation, so governments must protect and enable the conditions for debate on matters of public interest. However, the rollback of freedoms in the last decade has meant that democracy is threatened by the instrumentalisation of legal avenues to stifle criticism of power.

Governments are increasingly relying on administrative measures to suppress criticism – commonly referred to as “lawfare”. Through “lawfare”, governments want to silence the messenger and reduce public spaces for participation. This has generated a chilling effect on civil society and the press, as it has been used and interpreted as a means of controlling public participation and “legally” suffocating critical oversight. In addition, it has been used as a type of censorship that has entrenched itself as a tool of political pressure.

In parallel, there has been an increase in strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), a phenomenon also known as “judicial harassment,” or “judicial censorship”. We have observed a proliferation of criminal, civil, or constitutional lawsuits initiated by powerful actors to pressure public interest journalists. Claims for damages are based on different, often spurious “violations”, primarily referring to damages to honour, good name, reputation, and privacy. These cases are intended to drain journalists of their resources and time as a way to deter and silence them.

The high number of lawsuits against individual journalists constitutes a powerful tool to intimidate public interest reporting and debate in society. Without support from organisations such as Media Defence, too many journalists may succumb to spurious lawsuits and self-censor as a consequence.

Our priority areas for 2025-2029

4—

Promoting Accountability and Fighting Impunity



Impunity for crimes against journalists remains one of the major threats to freedom of expression and critical reporting worldwide. Even in cases where journalists are killed, more than 79% of cases go unprosecuted. In some countries, impunity is close to 100%. These crimes, which include assaults, abductions, enforced disappearances and killings, are often committed by government authorities themselves as direct result of critical reporting. In other instances, such attacks are carried out by private actors, for instance in retaliation for reporting on sensitive subjects such as corruption or ongoing conflicts. Regardless of the perpetrator, those responsible are rarely held to account.

Impunity thrives particularly in conflict environments with a weak or non-existent legal framework, where media coverage is controlled by powerful actors through violent intimidation. As attacks – both online and offline – on journalists go unreported or unsolved, the climate of fear and impunity creates a chilling effect for the media, leading to self-censorship or deterring journalists from reporting altogether. Litigating cases to challenge impunity and demand accountability can oppose this silencing of critical voices, by demanding effective investigations, holding perpetrators accountable and obtaining strong judgments from influential forums. We will use positive precedents to push other jurisdictions to act in accordance with international law, and strengthen state's obligations to protect journalists, especially as new threats are posed to their safety by digital technology.

Our goals and objectives

Our strategy is built upon four mutually reinforcing goals.

- Our front line of defence is our emergency defence support **(goal 1)**. Ensuring journalists have access to high quality legal defence continues to be our core way of helping to protect independent media around the world.
- By focusing on growing a network of legal defence partners and lawyers who can help facilitate this defence **(goal 2)** we will be able to not only reach more journalists in need of our support but also help to establish sustainable and efficient mechanisms of response.
- Our strategic litigation efforts **(goal 3)** act as both a preventive measure, helping us to address laws, policies and practices which underpin and enable freedom of expression violations, and also as remedy for concrete violations.
- By strengthening our organisational infrastructure **(goal 4)** we will be able to provide the most efficient, cost effective and strategic support to journalists that we can.



1



Provide and facilitate adaptive and flexible emergency legal defence to independent media across the globe, increasing our reach to support those most in need

We will continue to support emergency legal defence of independent media across the globe. In addition to continuing to support a high number of cases in Africa, Europe and Latin America, we want to strengthen our networks and collaboration in Asia and the Middle East and North Africa and find ways to reach those most vulnerable to legal attacks. We have undertaken two in-person litigation surgeries in Asia and are building a network of lawyers working on cases involving freedom of expression and digital rights issues. We hope to achieve greater exposure in the region, leading to more journalists being supported.

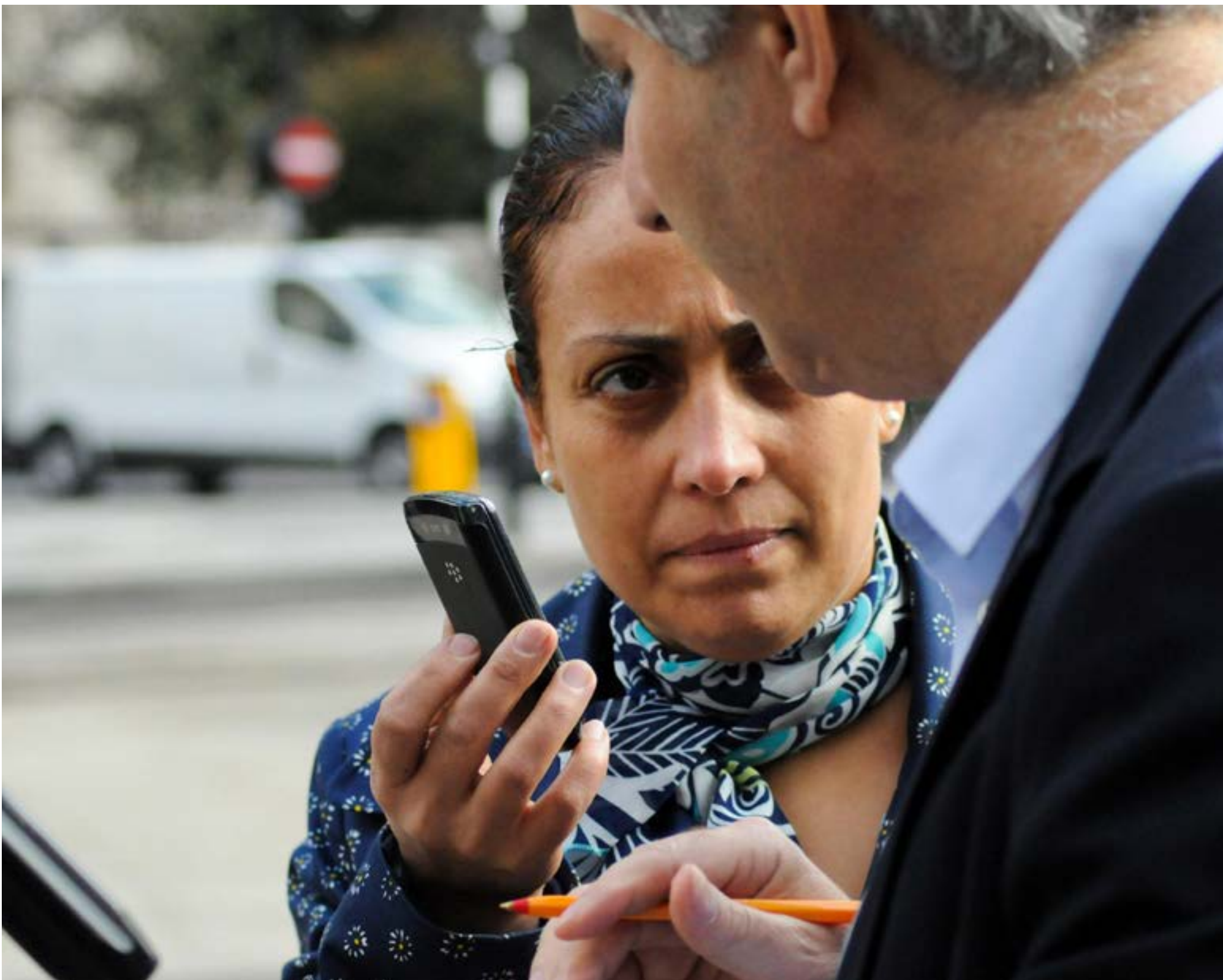
How will we get there?

- Take proactive steps to build trust and increase reach with independent media outside of urban-centres, and in countries and regions where we know there is a need but we do not yet have a strong enough network.
- Continually improve our grant making systems, policies and processes so that we can provide a trauma-informed, needs based and efficient support to journalists in need of legal defence, with particular focus on women journalists.
- Improve accessibility and inclusivity of our website, application forms, resources and events.
- Increase our presence/attendance at national and regional convenings and events to broaden our network and raise awareness of what Media Defence can offer.



2 —

Strengthen Media Defence's legal networks across the world to protect independent journalism from legal threats, prioritising sustainability and elevating those networks to reach international recognition



In pursuit of this goal, we aim to foster vibrant multilingual legal networks globally, serving as a robust foundation for the legal defence of journalists and strategic litigation. By prioritising sustainability, resilience and international recognition, our focus is on creating lasting impact and influence. We envision a dynamic ecosystem where legal professionals and partner organisations collaborate with Media Defence to ensure high-quality legal defence for journalists. We will organise workshops and share knowledge within and across regions with the aim of supporting the capacity of local lawyers and civil society organisations to deliver legal support to journalists efficiently and sustainably.

How will we get there?

Knowledge exchange and network development

Strategically grow our networks through bespoke regional and international convenings for lawyers and partner organisations both in person and online.

- Ensure multiregional and multilingual high quality legal tools and resources are easily available to lawyers and civil society.

Partnerships and grant making

- Increase the number of grants to national media defence centres that provide legal defence in priority and high need countries.
- Ensure we add value to our partners beyond financial grants by offering media and communications collaborations with partners to better showcase their successes and impact, and providing resources alongside grants to institutionally strengthen existing partners to improve resilience and sustainability.

3 —

Engage in strategic litigation to address severe, systemic and strategic legal issues by securing and contributing to landmark judgments; and take steps to maximise their impact

State and non-state actors continue to develop new ways in which to interfere with press freedom. The issues summarised in this strategy (violence, digital rights, lawfare, impunity) remain at the forefront of our legal work because these challenges are increasingly pervasive and represent real and current threats to free speech. We will engage in strategic litigation to help to address both gaps in jurisprudence and laws inconsistent with international standards on freedom of expression which enable these problems to persist. We will do this through a combination of means: (i) supporting lawyers to bring cases domestically and internationally, through funding, advice and assistance; (ii) representing journalists at international courts in order to secure judgments that will have impact beyond their particular case; (iii) intervening, as amici (third party interveners, or as 'Experts'), in domestic and international litigation to advance legal arguments in complex and controversial press freedom cases and; (iv) advocate, to ensure judgments are implemented.

How will we get there?

- Invest more time in strategic planning, regional scoping and legal-socio-political analysis in order to facilitate needs based and creative strategic litigation and implementation projects and partnerships.
- Identify and pursue strategic litigation cases which address our priority thematic issues, and which are regionally specific.
- Explore and seize opportunities (directly or through partnerships) to advance the implementation of landmark judgments to secure and maximise the impact of our network's strategic litigation efforts.
- Advocate for the implementation of judgments won and raise awareness globally of the trend-setting precedents achieved.



4 —

Strengthening our organisational infrastructure to enable efficient, cost effective and strategic support to journalists

In order to meet and sustain this growing demand, we will continue to invest in our fundraising capacity and activities. We will also invest in technology that will enable us to deliver our business strategy and increase our operational efficiency and output. We also seek to improve and grow our communications to be a forward-thinking, innovative, and inclusive hub that enhances the visibility and impact of our mission and work. Our strategic planning, fundraising and communications will be bolstered by our ongoing commitment to monitoring and evaluation which will help us to create an evidence base of our impact and identify lessons for the future.

How will we get there?

- Increase the agility, efficiency, security and accessibility of our (financial, IT, and information management) systems whilst maintaining full legal and ethical compliance.
- Build and solidify our HR foundations to attract, retain and develop a strong, motivated and diverse team and gradually increase our headcount to ensure we have the staff capacity to deliver our strategy.
- Develop and implement a strategic communications plan to streamline day-to-day communications, support us to implement a communications plan that goes beyond social media, and help us to be recognised as a thought leader in the freedom of expression space.
- Strengthen our culture of learning and reflection to better measure and increase the impact and reach of our work, and better communicate our impact through high quality communications.



Developing our Approach to Gender and Intersectionality

As an international human rights organisation, we recognise the importance of non-discrimination, the intersectionality of human rights, and the importance of addressing systemic inequalities at local, regional and global levels.

At Media Defence, we have always taken steps to ensure we do not support or tolerate any form of discrimination, but we are aware there is more we could do to help address deeply rooted inequalities, whether those be due to gender, sexuality, religious belief, ethnicity, disability or any other identity-based characteristic. Over the next five years, we will develop a strategy, and clearer approach towards gender and intersectionality across the organisation and reflect on our role in addressing inequalities. We will be intentional around what this approach will mean for us at a strategic, operational and programmatic level. This analysis will be incorporated into our planning.





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Together, we can defend independent media across the world. If you would like to make a donation to our work, please do so **[here](#)**.