



**AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES HUB
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**



SUSTAINABILITY, INNOVATION AND THE FUTURE OF DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA

2025 HRD SUMMER SCHOOL REPORT



UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE
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PUG

Politics & Urban Governance

Research



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Our Summer School, though, if we were naming it strictly by season, it should probably be called a different name, has been a platform for both experienced and emerging activists from across the African continent. The first and second editions brought together participants from 15 countries. Across the two second Schools, three kinds of feedback have stayed with me, because they captured some of the key considerations we navigate when running the programme.

One participant told me, “This programme wasn’t boring, I always thought university things were boring.” When I probed, I realised they were not criticising universities as such but referring to approaches that feel formulaic, overly formal, and pitched in ways that fail to meet people where they are. Another participant offered the opposite reflection: that because the School takes place at a university, they expected more theory and felt parts of the programme resembled a workshop rather than an academic offering. A third participant expressed appreciation specifically for the programme’s participatory, grounded approach, arguing that it was the first time they felt a university space “saw” them.

That range of feedback captures our ongoing dilemma. Because the Summer School is hosted by a university, we constantly seek to balance sharing power with participants, creating a Freirean, co-created learning environment, without suppressing the intellectual resources and expertise that the institution contributes. Paulo Freire reminds us that education is most powerful when learners and educators co-construct knowledge rather than reproduce hierarchies. Yet translating this principle into a short, intensive programme for human rights defenders is a continuous work in progress.

Another challenge we wrestle with is balancing theory and practice. Our tendency, especially in the first School, was to be more participant-centred, sometimes at the expense of engaging deeply with theoretical frameworks. Participants appreciated the participatory approach, but several also expressed a desire for stronger conceptual grounding. We have taken this seriously. Designing a programme where theory and practice reinforce each other requires careful sequencing: anchoring sessions in key concepts; offering examples from real contexts; ensuring practice exercises do not drift into generic “workshopping”; and curating faculty who can bridge academic insight with lived experience. This balance is evolving as we learn from each cohort.

Recruitment is another area of ongoing refinement. Through both open calls and targeted sharing with our networks in universities and civil society, we aim to reach HRDs who have had the least access to training of this kind. Our success has been mixed, and we continue to learn how to reach those working in more marginalised contexts, including those whose work does not fit neatly into established categories of activism.

The 2025 Summer School, which ran for five full days compared to three and a half days in 2024, allowed us to make meaningful improvements. The faculty for 2025 reflected the interdisciplinary nature of the work. We had contributions from leaders such as Deprose Muchena, Director for Resource Futures Africa at the Open Society Foundations, who gave an overview of the current global crisis of democracy; Tawanda Mugari, the Geek in Chief and Co-founder of Digital Society, who examined digital rights and activism; Khanyo Farise, Deputy Regional Director (Research) for East and Southern Africa for Amnesty International, ; Fidelis Mudimu from Front Line Defenders; Professor Fiona Anciano, a political scientist and expert in storytelling, and Professor Bekinkosi Moyo, a leading scholar on African philanthropy and Director of CAPSI at Wits; and the Arise Family team, who facilitated the well-being component. This diversity ensured that participants engaged with a wide spectrum of expertise, from strategic leadership to research, digital security, philanthropy, and trauma-informed approaches.

Institutional support was a significant strength this year. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Robert Balfour, shared a keynote (presented by Professor Yu, Deputy Dean of EMS), emphasising the central role African universities must play in advancing human rights. Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Matete Madiba closed the programme and issued certificates, underscoring the need for theory and practice to complement one another in building resilience in human rights struggles.

Across the two years, the Summer School has become an evolving experiment, where we are rethinking our role as a university in supporting HRDs and protecting democracy. The process is constantly being reshaped by feedback, strengthened by institutional support, and held together by the shared commitment to protect and resource human rights defenders across the African continent.



Dr Mmeli Dube, Africa Hub Programme Lead and PUG Researcher

Acknowledgements:

The Africa Hub and PUG would like to extend sincere gratitude to all 2025 Summer School participants and facilitators for their engagement and commitment to shared learning throughout the programme. We also gratefully acknowledge the Student and Academic International Relief Fund (SAIH), Front Line Defenders, and Amnesty International who sponsored HRD activists to be part of the 2025 Summer School. The Africa Hub further thanks leadership and staff of UWC for their continued support and commitment to its growth. This support reflects UWC’s enduring legacy as an institution grounded in social justice and ongoing openness to activists, scholars and movements. Together, these contributions sustain the vision of the Africa Hub and reinforce the values of human rights, democracy, freedom and equality, that underpin its work.

Background

The 2025 Summer School took place against the backdrop of continued threats to HRDs in Africa. Defenders including journalists, activists, scholar-activists, and students continue to face arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment, and other forms of persecution. In countries such as Zimbabwe, journalists have been detained for their work; in Tanzania and Uganda, political activists face repression; and in places like Mozambique, post-election violence has led to killings, arrests, and displacement (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Kapit, 2024; Scholars at Risk, 2023). Within universities, scholar-activists and student leaders are particularly vulnerable as authoritarian regimes seek to curtail academic freedom and silence critical voices (Gready & Jackson, 2023).

Broader issues such as armed conflict and climate change also continue to undermine human rights across the continent (Amnesty International, 2024; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2024). Women's rights remain constrained in many contexts, where discriminatory policies such as male guardianship still limit mobility and autonomy (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These challenges are compounded by shifts in global politics that have reduced international support for human rights initiatives, threatening the sustainability of HRD protection mechanisms and emboldening authoritarian regimes.

Yet, amidst these challenges, HRDs have continued to demonstrate resilience and impact achieving progress in areas such as ending the death penalty in some countries and promoting greater transparency in natural resource governance. The Summer School worked to further equip HRDs with leadership skills, networks of solidarity, and innovative strategies necessary to sustain and amplify their work.

The aims of the 2025 Summer School were threefold:

- To create a space for defenders of human rights and democracy to reflect, learn, share knowledge, and strengthen the protection ecosystem.
- To enhance participants' human rights knowledge and skills to increase their effectiveness in advancing justice and accountability.
- To foster collaboration and cooperation between civil society and universities in advancing human rights and democracy across Africa.

Hosting its second annual Summer School, the Africa Hub brought together a diverse group of participants representing the broad and dynamic crop of human rights activists, academics who work across Africa. A total of **24 participants** comprising human rights defenders, academics, activists, and practitioners from **15 African countries**, including South Africa, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Kenya, Benin, Malawi, Cameroon, Libya, Angola, Zambia, and South Sudan were selected. This interdisciplinary group representation underscored the Summer School's success in creating a space where scholarly and practitioner perspectives intersect. The Summer School provided a collaborative platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and critical reflection on human rights issues in Africa. By fostering learning among diverse HRDs, this year's Summer School continued to strengthen regional solidarity, deepening understanding of ongoing human rights challenges, and strengthening participants' skills and networks to effectively advance social justice across the continent.





Theme One: Understanding the Context of Defending Rights and Implications of Global Shifts in Africa



Breaking the ice with purpose: Participants shared their work and experiences through the Lifeboats game, creating space for meaningful networking from the start.

Participants at the Africa Hub Summer School

Photograph: The Dollie House

Keynote Lecture: Understanding the contexts of Defending Rights and implications of global shifts in Africa - by Deprose Muchena

Highlights from Keynote lecture

The keynote speaker, Deprose Muchena opened with an analysis of the rapidly shifting global order and its implications for democracy, human rights, and the work of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Africa. Situating the discussion within the Summer School's theme "Sustainability, Innovation and the Future of Defending Human Rights in Africa" emphasises was placed on the need for both vigilance and creativity in an increasingly hostile global environment. Deprose described the world that HRDs seek to influence as one marked by rising authoritarianism, pandemics, the age of Artificial Intelligence, resource-driven conflicts, and climate change. These dynamics, he argued, are collectively reshaping the terrain of human rights and democratic practice across the world, and Africa in particular.

Tracing the resurgence of authoritarian regimes and the erosion of democratic freedoms citing various reports, he highlighted that over 72% of the world's population now lives under autocratic regimes and that there have been 16 consecutive years of global democratic decline. Authoritarian leaders increasingly use the "authoritarian playbook" of repression, which includes weaponizing fear, undermining institutions, blaming minorities, exploiting religion, revising history, and spreading misinformation.

He cautioned that types of legislation restricting speech and civic space often under the guise of "combating disinformation" have become a global phenomenon, spreading from 14 to 91 countries in less than a decade. This has dire implications for HRDs, civil society, and freedom of expression. His striking insight was that citizens appear to be accepting of authoritarian models, with over a third of youth globally expressing support for strong, unelected leaders, a worrying generational shift for democracy's future.

Deprose turned to the political economy of critical minerals, framing it as both a threat and opportunity for Africa. He reminded the participants that as the world races toward a decarbonized economy, Africa's vast reserves of lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements have drawn new geopolitical interest leading to a "second or third scramble for Africa. Because the extraction of those resources often leads to environmental and human rights attacks". He underscored that how Africa manages its mineral wealth, governance systems, and social contracts will determine whether this moment fuels equitable development or entrenches extractive dependency.

Using Mozambique's Cabo Delgado as a case study, he illustrated how resource extraction, inequality, and exclusion can combine to produce enduring conflict. In such contexts, resources can either fund peace or grievances, depending on the choices by governments. Commenting on the role of universities, Deprose emphasised the continuing role of universities as vital spaces for human rights protection, critical thought, and HRD support. He described the university as "a microcosm of society, tasked with teaching and cultivating ethical leadership, advancing research to challenge injustice, and offering safe spaces for HRDs and scholars at risk". This resonated strongly with the core mission of the Africa Hub, which works to position universities as sites of protection for democratic values and human rights defenders. He challenged academic institutions to formalise partnerships that provide protection, recovery, and intellectual grounding for HRDs facing persecution. He concluded his keynote with a call for innovation in human rights defense that looks at integrating technological literacy, climate consciousness, and cross-sector collaboration to safeguard democratic values and human dignity. During the interactive discussion, participants raised questions about working in shrinking civic spaces, state co-option, and autocratic regimes such as those in Ghana, Kenya, and Eswatini.

"Surveillance capitalism enables actors to profit from monitoring us and contracting with governments to use tools of fear and control that restrict our movements and paralyze our work. As HRDs, we must understand and adapt to this reality of surveillance capitalism."

In closing, Deprose emphasised the importance of collective resilience, strategic solidarity, and the creation of rapid-response networks capable of exposing abuses in real time. He encouraged HRDs to draw lessons from movements like Kenya's Gen Z protests, and to embrace their realities with unwavering faith in eventual victory. "The bigger the crisis, the bigger the opportunity," he concluded, urging defenders to transform adversity into innovation and build a sustainable HRD ecosystem capable of withstanding the current challenges. The lecture established a sound foundation for the Summer School through connecting global patterns of power, conflict, and technology with the urgent task of reimagining human rights and democracy struggles in Africa. It challenged participants to see themselves not just as defenders reacting to crises, but as architects of a more just and democratic future.



Deprose Muchena - Director of the Resources Futures in Africa initiative at the Open Society Foundations. Photography by The Dollie House

"As HRDs, we are in the phase where courage is necessary but not sufficient to confront the system that we are operating under; we also must read to understand the world we live in."

Panel Discussion: Human Rights Movements – Sustainability and Innovation Amidst Shrinking Civic Space

This panel consisted of Khanyo Farise, Senior Researcher at Amnesty International and Fidelis Mudimu, Protection Coordinator at Front Line Defenders, tasked to reflect on the sustainability, adaptability, and future direction of human rights movements operating within an increasingly restrictive civic space. Drawing from the keynote, the session examined how movements can remain resilient and innovative amid challenges such as authoritarian resurgence, resource scarcity, and internal structural limitations.

Key discussion points:

What is (not) working within movements?

Both panellists noted that global solidarity, digital activism, and youth engagement had strengthened visibility, collaboration and international solidarity among human rights actors. Fidelis gave the example of the Gaza flotilla, a group of civilian boats that sought to deliver aid to Gaza, as an example of “HRDs putting their lives on the line to show up for a just cause”. For him this pointed to an enduring sense of solidarity. Khanyo noted what she described positive changes in the recognition of intersectionality of human rights, reflected in growing attention to issues such as sexual rights, environmental and climate justice, and related struggles. However, the threat of shrinking civic space remained a cause for concern. At the same time movements were still characterised by fragmentation, limited coordination and short-term project cycles. While there had been progress in building regional and cross-sectoral alliances, the lack of sustained funding and institutional support often undermined continuity and collective impact.

External pressures faced by organisations and networks

Both panellists highlighted the increasing criminalisation of dissent, restrictions on funding, and digital surveillance as major external challenges. Authoritarian governments were continuing to manipulate legal and regulatory frameworks to silence civil society voices, while misinformation campaigns were eroding public trust in human rights work. This echoed the analysis of the global context provided in the Keynote Lecture. Additionally, economic instability and donor fatigue had compounded financial insecurity across the sector.

Internal weaknesses within movements

When asked to reflect on some internal challenges that movements face, the panellists acknowledged issues such as burnout among activists, weak succession planning, and limited attention to well-being and security among activists. Dependence on external donors had also led to negative competition for resources resulting in agenda fragmentation, and reactive programming; rather than proactive and locally grounded strategies. In proposing some strategies to strengthen movements, the panelists agreed on the need to cultivate inter-generational leadership, enhance gender equity within organisations, and embed psychosocial support structures for defenders.

Building sustainable movements under pressure

As highlighted by the keynote speaker, the current crises called for changes in terms of resource mobilisation strategies, deeper investment in understanding of the context, renewed attention to organisational structures and operational approaches, and a rethinking of leadership within human rights and democracy movements. Against this backdrop, the discussion turned to what was needed to achieve such and other changes.

Khanyo and Fidelis emphasised the importance of innovation, collective care, and local ownership. Sustainable movements required investment in community-based leadership, flexible funding models, and stronger protection networks for defenders at risk. Both panellists advocated for building alliances that transcended traditional NGO frameworks connecting social movements, academia, and grassroots networks. They also highlighted the strategic importance of technology and storytelling as tools for both mobilisation and resilience, particularly in repressive contexts.



Khanyo Farise, Senior Researcher at Amnesty International and Fidelis Mudimu, Protection Coordinator - East and Southern Africa at Front Line Defenders sharing their thoughts during the Summer School.

Activism in Difficult Contexts: Cross-Regional Lessons from Africa and Asia

This session, led by two Amnesty International Fellows and one Africa Hub Fellow, aimed to expose participants to comparative cross-regional experiences of activism under authoritarian and repressive regimes, fostering cross-contextual learning and solidarity. Drawing on case studies from Sri Lanka and Myanmar, participants explored strategies of mobilisation, creative resistance, and international support that can inform human rights defense work across Africa. A reflection on the Libyan context also provided a case study on indigenous struggles for recognition, cultural survival, and political participation under conditions of prolonged political instability and marginalisation.

Activism and Sri Lanka's political shift – Lessons from the Aragalaya movement



Presenter: Amra Ismail – Journalist, Human Rights Lawyer, and Civic Space Fellow, Amnesty International

"The Aragala Movement in its true essence showed that authoritarian rulers can be toppled through franchise. Through its collective solidarity, people from different backgrounds this goal was achieved."

Amra shared that the Aragalaya ([the struggle of the people](#)) movement (2022–2024) in Sri Lanka was a citizen-led, leaderless uprising demanding systemic political change amid economic collapse and corruption. Mobilising over 600 decentralised protests nationwide, it demonstrated the potential of people-powered activism to challenge entrenched political elites.

Key insights from the presentation:

The presentation illustrated the diverse and spontaneous ways in which mobilisation, under the Aragalaya banner, emerged and was sustained in Sri Lanka. The youth-driven effort evolved into a decentralised movement led by diverse and informal networks. This enabled sustained activism without reliance on formal leadership structures. Amra shared how digital platforms strengthened the resistance. Strategic use of hashtags such as #GoHomeGota, #NoDealGama, widespread use of VPNs allowed activists to bypass censorship and mobilise online. This in turn prompted reflections on comparable youth-led movements, including the GenZ driven protests in Kenya, Arab Spring in North Africa and beyond.

Cultural expression emerged as one of the strategic tools of mobilisation. For Amra, public art, theatre, and traditional music fostered inclusive dialogue and became tools of healing and political expression. Alongside these creative strategies, legal teams stepped in to safeguard the civic space through the provision of pro bono legal defence for protesters. They also pursued justice through fundamental rights litigation. For Amra, "the Aragala Movement in its true essence showed that authoritarian rulers can be toppled through franchise. Through its collective solidarity, people from different backgrounds this goal was achieved."

The broader political repercussions shifted the political environment, opening space for new actors and alternatives. The electoral breakthrough of the National people's Power (NPP) in 2024 marked a significant shift in Sri Lanka's political landscape and signalling the capacity of democratic mobilisation to challenge entrenched authoritarianism. For human rights defenders, the exploits of the Sri Lankan Aragalaya movement underscored the transformative potential of creative, inclusive, and sustained grassroots and digital activism in challenging authoritarian structures.

Transnational activism and human rights activism in Myanmar



Presenter: Yucca – Program Director, Exile Hub, and Civic Space Fellow, Amnesty International

"Internet connection is important for resistance. If people are not connected, they do not know what they are resisting. People have to know what is happening to understand how to move."

Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, civil society faced violent repression, driving many activists into exile. Despite military control and internet shutdowns, transnational activism thrived through global solidarity and digital innovation.

Key insights from the presentation:

Yucca underscored how activists in Myanmar had relied on a combination of inside–outside Solidarity. Exiled activists had maintained communication with in-country networks through encrypted tools and cross-border journalism, ensuring that information continued to circulate despite the risks. Digital Innovation became essential, particularly the use of VPNs, satellite internet providers, and radio, which ensured continued information flow during internet blackouts.

The presenter shared that their experiences, clearly showed that, "internet connection is important for resistance. If people are not connected, they do not know what they are resisting. People have to know what is happening to understand how to move."

Regional Alliances had also strengthened the activism. One such case was the [Milk Tea Alliance](#) united digital activists across Asia, which amplified Myanmar's struggle globally. Activists also turned to alternative financing mechanisms such as Cryptocurrencies and crowdfunding which enabled them to bypass state-controlled financial systems and fund resistance safely. Women and youth leadership proved strategic. Grassroots women's groups and underground education initiatives kept the movement alive and resilient. Taken together, these experiences highlight important lessons for HRDs. Cross-border collaboration and technological adaptation can sustain activism under extreme repression, demonstrating the power of solidarity and networked resistance.

Activism in Difficult Contexts: Lessons from Global Movements

Indigenous struggles and activism in Libya



Presenter: Mousa Kouri - Monitoring and Documentation Programme Officer at Aman Against Discrimination (AAD)

“Laws prohibiting human rights activities and organisations were suspended after the 2011 Libyan revolution, ushering in a “honeymoon” period for civil society that allowed for the establishment of organisations focused on discrimination, hate speech, and racism”.

Mousa began by giving some context on how, in Libya, indigenous Amazigh, Tebu, and Tuareg communities have long fought for cultural recognition, linguistic rights, and political inclusion. These groups continue to face cultural, linguistic, and political marginalisation under successive regimes. Their activism, though often overshadowed by ongoing conflict and state fragility, arguably reflects broader African struggles for equality and representation. Challenges for NGOs in Libya faced significant hurdles, especially since 2016. From restrictions imposed by the Central Bank of Libya with regulations requiring NGOs to obtain approval for opening accounts and receiving funds. In 2019, parliament granted the Civil Society Commission broad powers to suspend or cancel NGO registrations without judicial process. Mousa also mentioned a 2023 the Supreme Court legal opinion stating that NGOs created after 2011 are not legal due to the absence of a regulatory law.

Despite these challenges NGOs have used various techniques to continue their work. For example, leveraging connections with individuals working within the government, collaborating with international organisations operating in Libya to address sensitive topics, and engaging Western embassies to exert pressure on Libyan authorities. Mousa also highlighted working in rural areas to avoid central government scrutiny and registering organisations outside of Libya, like in the UK, to facilitate easier access to funding. In closing on the progress of NGO laws currently in Libiya, while there is currently no law regulating civil society organisations, two proposals for such a law have been developed by local organisations and a platform of human rights organisations, with plans to resubmit them to parliament.

Despite repression and limited civic space, indigenous movements such as Tebu have turned to cultural revival through language education, media, and community-led governance as a form of resistance. He explained the use of storytelling to garner local community support, especially for complex issues like immigration, by reframing the problem away from migrants and towards government policies. For Mousa, these efforts reflect similar initiatives around the world, of creative activism organised through distributed, grassroots networks rather than centralised leadership, showing HRDs that identity-based mobilisation remains both a political and human rights struggle.



Moderator: Sinidisa Monakali - PUG researcher

Facilitated by Sindisa Monakali, Researcher at PUG, the session concluded with a comparative discussion linking Asian and African experiences of activism. Participants reflected on the relevance of decentralised, citizen-driven movements in African civic spaces, highlighting examples such as the Gen Z protests in Kenya which they characterised as largely leaderless and digitally coordinated.

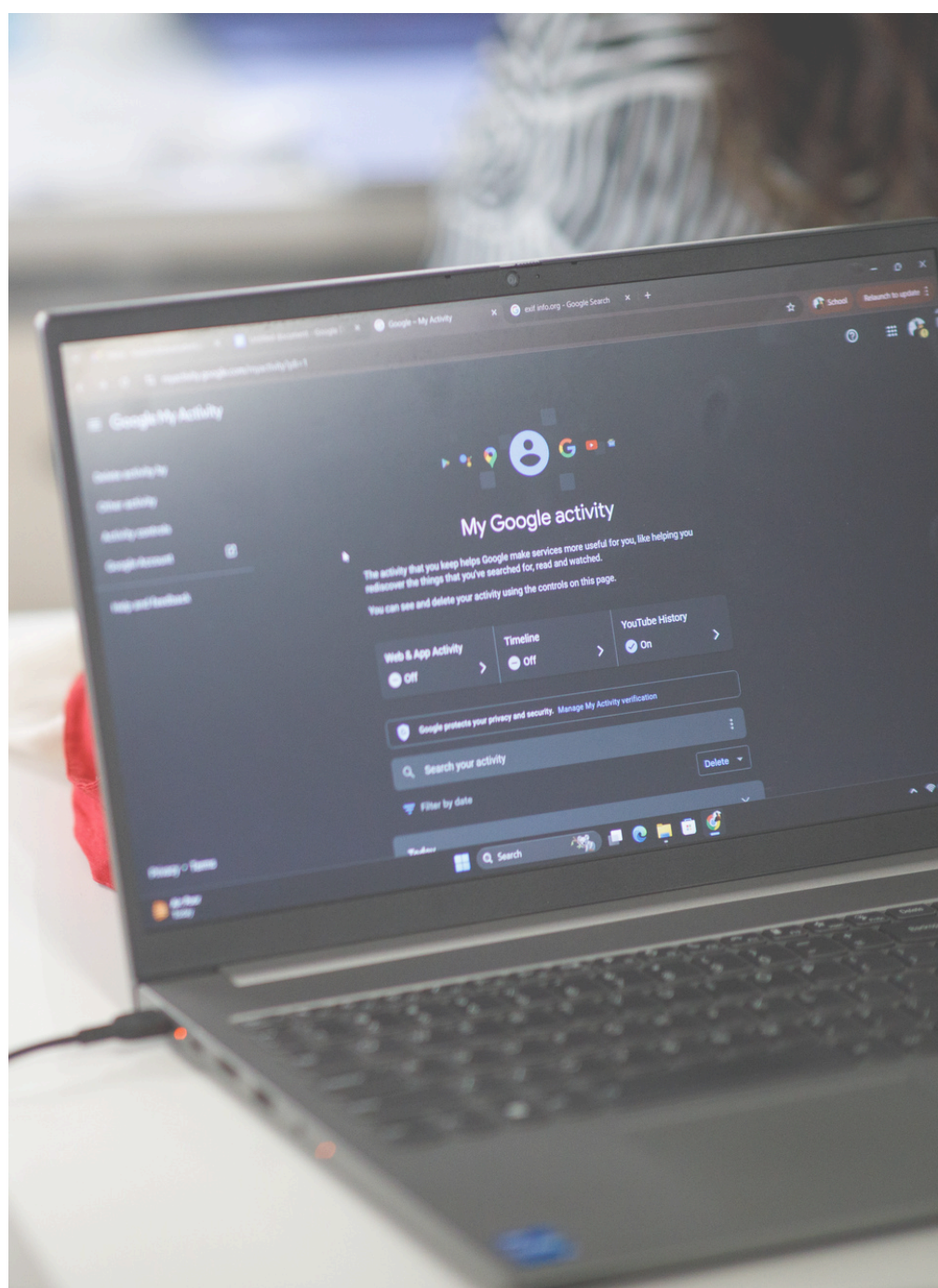
They also discussed the shared patterns of repression across physical and digital civic spaces in Asia and Africa. Drawing on examples from Zimbabwe, they reflected on how the right to protest is restricted, resulting in limited physical space for mobilisation and leading to HRDs to rely on digital platforms to gather without needing permission from the state. Another example was Nigeria enacting the Companies and Allied Matters Act 2020 (CAMA 2020) which limits the operations of many NGOs and CSOs, similar to restrictions observed in Libya.

Participants acknowledged the common struggles faced by NGOs globally, such as repressive laws and restrictions on civic space, and emphasised the importance of solidarity and learning from each other's resistance tactics, particularly through the use of digital platforms for advocacy and awareness as a way of gaining global solidarity online.

From the discussion, participants gained a deeper appreciation of how creativity, digital literacy, and solidarity can sustain activism under repression. The session reinforced that learning from cross-regional, movements while grounding approaches in local and indigenous contexts, can expand the possibilities for human rights defense and democratic renewal across Africa.



Theme Two: Innovation, Sustainability and Digital Safety



Lecture: Building sustainable African human rights and democracy movements - lessons from research and emerging practice by Professor Bhekinkosi Moyo

Lecture overview

Prof Moyo's lecture focused on the critical theme of how activist movements in the human rights, governance, and democracy sectors can achieve financial sustainability, mobilise resources, and strategically adapt to evolving challenges. His reflections emphasised that human rights organisations must shift their focus towards sustainability by rethinking their approaches to resource acquisition, governance, empowerment, and social change. He urged Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) to develop strategies that ensure long-term impact and resilience amidst global financial and political shifts.

Resource Mobilisation: Strategy vs Fundraising

Prof. Moyo began by drawing a distinction between strategic resource mobilisation and short-term fundraising. He premised this view on the observation that the global shifts in politics and economics, that have affected the philanthropies who traditionally fund human rights and democracy, call for major changes in HRDs' approaches to questions of sustainability.



Prof. Bhekinkosi Moyo, Director of Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI)

“We are in a situation where we have to think beyond fundraising and think about resource mobilisation. By doing so it shows that you are being strategic and thinking long-term leading to sustainability.”

He emphasised that sustainability required a strategic mobilisation approach grounded in “long-term thinking, intentionality, preparedness, creativity, and control”. This approach, he noted, should be built on relationships of trust cultivated over time rather than on opportunistic engagements. This for him, should be different from approaching fundraising as a short-term, transactional process often driven by temporary opportunities and external pressures. Such approaches, he cautioned, could lead to dependency and weaken the autonomy of human rights organisations. He encouraged HRDs to prioritise sustainable partnerships and long-term trust-based strategies to ensure institutional stability.

Global Shifts in Financial Architecture

A key focus was on the evolving global financial landscape and its implications for civil society.

Prof Moyo highlighted several global trends reshaping funding dynamics:

- **Withdrawal of Western powers:** He observed that Western nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom had increasingly withdrawn from multilateral aid frameworks such as the USAID, redirecting funds towards domestic priorities, privatisation, and internal social programs.
- **Rise of new global players:** This withdrawal created a vacuum now being filled by emerging powers and regional actors such as China, Brazil and India.
- **China's expanding influence:** China's growing investment in infrastructure and policy engagement across Africa was discussed as both an opportunity and a concern. While China had shown interest in development, its limited commitment to human rights principles raises alarm among HRDs.
- **Geopolitical Investments:** Prof Moyo referred to the growing involvement of countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose multi-billion-dollar investments in Africa often linked to long geopolitical motives and channelled through governments rather than civil society.

He warned that these funding trends could weaken accountability and transparency, forcing HRDs and civil society organizations (CSOs) to find innovative ways to secure resources without compromising their watchdog roles.

“These new global players are not handing out blank checks like former players. They are conscious and commercial in their approach. They are focused on issues such as blended finance mechanisms. Which leads to the question of how do you as HRDs and civil society organisation apply and get into the utilisation of instruments such as this”.

Innovative Strategies for Financial Sustainability

Prof. Moyo challenged civil society to move beyond traditional donor-dependency models and adopt innovative, locally grounded strategies. He proposed several pathways to achieve this. First he suggested that **human rights movements should consider engaging with the state to access public funds**. While many movements had historically rejected government funding, it might be time to reconsider selective engagement, provided such relationships did not compromise independence or accountability.

He also highlighted the potential of **leveraging local African wealth, by tapping into its billionaires, millionaires, and emerging entrepreneurial class**. He reminded the participants that Africa is home to 25 billionaires and over 120,000 millionaires, presenting untapped potential for philanthropy. Engaging this emerging class, he argued, could significantly strengthen the human rights and governance sectors. Additionally, he encouraged organisations to engage younger, tech-oriented donors active in fields such as digital finance and artificial intelligence, adapting to their preference for virtual and online engagement rather than traditional approaches.

Lecture: Building sustainable African human rights and democracy movements - lessons from research and emerging practice by Professor Bhekinkosi Moyo

Furthermore, Prof. Moyo emphasised the value of social entrepreneurship. He urged organisations to **explore social enterprise models to generate internal revenue**, strengthen stewardship of existing donors, and build long-term financial resilience. Overall, he argued that sustaining the human rights agenda required cultivating enduring relationships rather than relying on short-term, transactional fundraising.

The discussion following Prof Moyo's keynote centered on ethical dilemmas, strategic innovation, and systemic challenges faced by HRDs and CSOs in mobilising resources. Participants raised moral questions about accepting funds from controversial sources. Concerns were voiced about the complicity of wealthy individuals for instance, elites in Swaziland and South Africa associated with political or corporate abuses and the ethical implications of partnering with them. Questions were also raised about the feasibility of accessing state funds in repressive contexts such as Zimbabwe, where organisations risked being co-opted or labelled unpatriotic whenever they challenge government policies. The other concern was around the political risks faced by private philanthropists supporting HRDs, especially where political and economic power are intricately intertwined under authoritarian regimes.

Prof. Moyo acknowledged the dilemmas and then made an observation that “there is no money that is entirely safe. HRDs’ must constantly weigh the legal aspects against ethical risk.” He emphasised the need for organisations to **adopt clear fundraising and gift acceptance policies defining the ethical boundaries of funding sources**. He further advised balancing legal compliance with ethical integrity and establishing internal independence policies to manage conflicts of interest.

Operational, legal, and capacity hurdles

Participants highlighted legal and structural barriers limiting organisational sustainability. In Nigeria, for example, laws prohibiting non-profits from generating income could constrain their possibilities. Prof. Moyo suggested exploring dual registration models or incorporation in flexible jurisdictions such as Mauritius. In countries like Angola, restrictive bureaucracy prevented CSOs from formal registration, while in Zimbabwe, capacity gaps at the grassroots hindered financial accountability and reporting. He stressed the need for comprehensive capacity building across the fundraising cycle, encompassing financial management, legal understanding, and effective stewardship of donor relationships.

The session concluded with critical reflections on the inequities within international donor frameworks. Participants also reflected on donors’ inability to provide adequate core support. The lecture further highlighted that the heavy administrative and reporting requirements imposed by donors can undermine sustainability, encouraging greater reflection on reforms that centre equity, trust, and partnership. Prof Moyo's lecture challenged participants to reflect on how sustainability could be understood within shifting global realities. His message highlighted that the future of activism and democracy building in Africa is closely linked to rethinking resource mobilisation anchored in ethics, innovation, and collaboration, while maintaining the integrity and independence that must define the human rights movement.

“There's no money that is actually safe. HRDs’ must constantly weigh the legal aspects against ethical risk”.



Photo: Summer School Participants interacting in the digital security session

Training: Digital Tools and Human Rights Activism by Tawanda Mugari

Session Overview

The training session led by Tawanda Mugari combined interactive learning and practical reflection to explore the intersection between technology, digital activism, and human rights work in Africa. An expert in digital advocacy and cyber-security, Tawanda facilitated a series of participatory group work aimed at strengthening HRDs' skills and confidence in using digital tools, strategies, and ethical frameworks to navigate an increasingly digitalised and surveilled civic space. The session highlighted how technology can both enable and constrain human rights work, encouraging participants to critically engaged with digital opportunities while reflecting on associated risks. The session unpacked that security should be approached in a holistic manner which looks at the physical, psycho-social and digital. As HRDs it is important to understand ones level of risk and how that can be transferable especially with the nature of each HRD. Using the definition in the image below, Tawanda explained that every participants risk profile varies depending on the setting they in. As a result, one has to constantly be aware of their surroundings and digital settings.



Tawanda Mugari - Co-Founder & Geek in Chief at Digital Society of Africa, Civic Space Fellow: Amnesty International & Alumni Ford Foundation Global Fellow

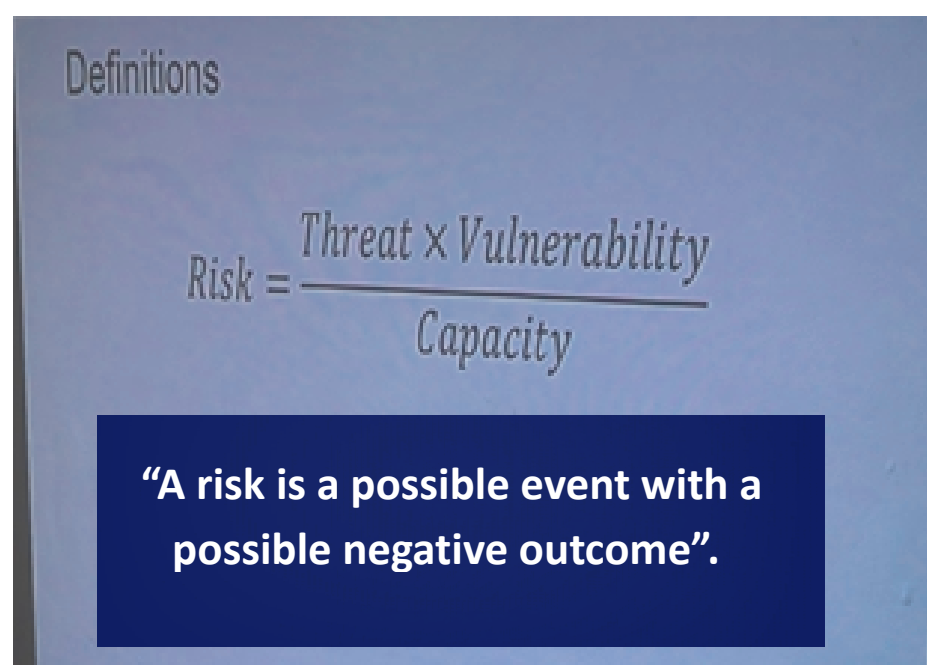


Image: Training overview definition of risk. Credit: Tawanda Mugari presentation

The training was divided into four interconnected sessions, each combining conceptual inputs and practical exercises. It focused on leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) for advocacy, using digital tools for resource mobilisation, strengthening cyber-security practices, and documenting digital rights violations including internet shutdowns. Participants engaged with real-world examples and shared experiences, allowing learning to be based in their activism and diverse contexts.

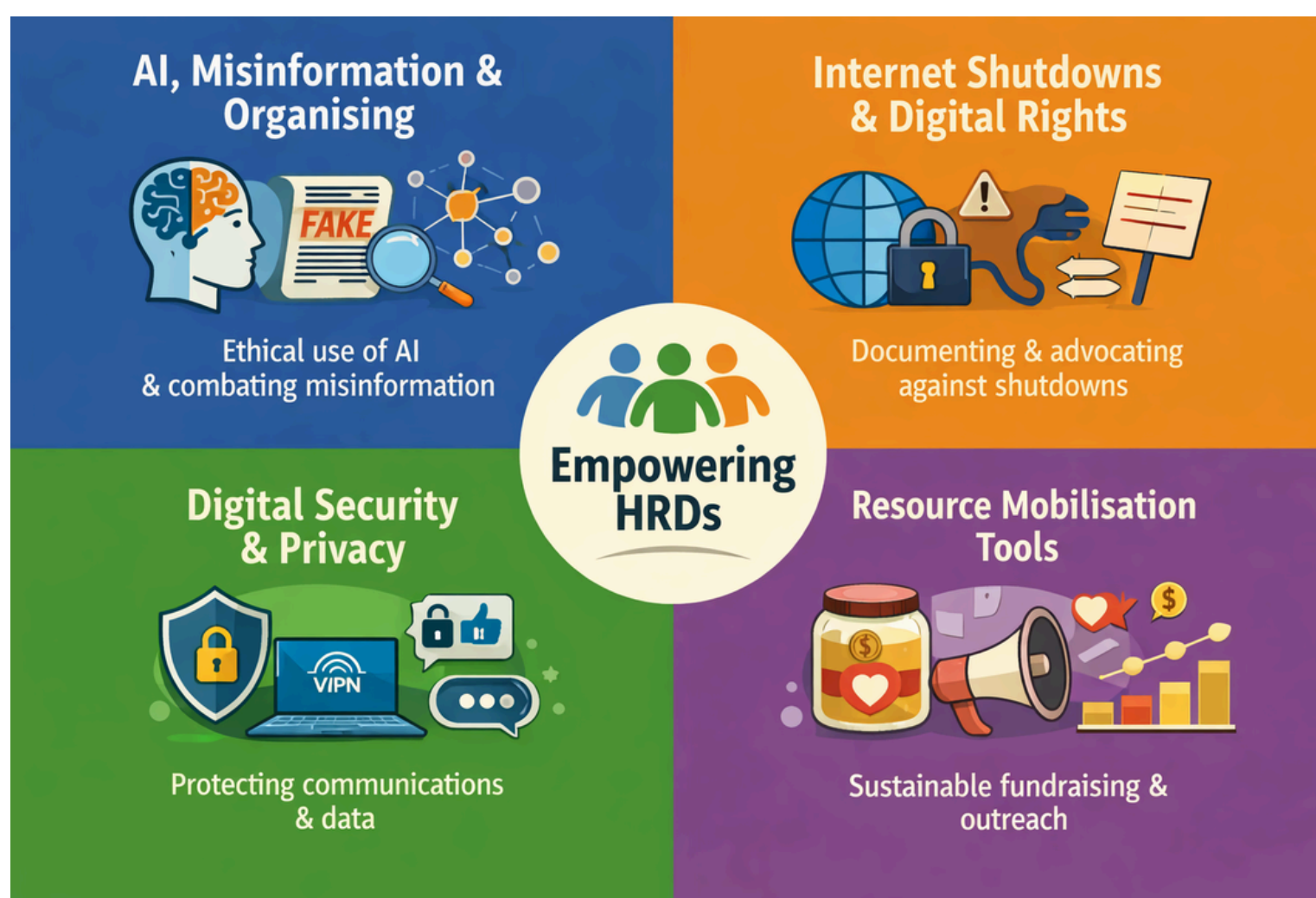


Figure 1: Training overview of key digital themes explored during the programme (Africa Hub)

Cyber-security

This workshop provided a practical guide to protecting digital assets, communication, and personal data. He underscored that HRDs are often targeted through phishing, surveillance, and online intimidation; therefore, cyber-security is a matter of personal and organisational safety. The practical components of the training looking at digital hygiene, risk assessment methods, password management, and device protection. Participants were trained on digital hygiene practices, including the use of **Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)**, **two-factor authentication**, and **encrypted messaging platforms**. Using practical tools such as [history.google.com](https://www.history.google.com) to monitor data trails, leveraging [web.archive.org](https://www.web.archive.org) to assess and clean digital footprints, and enrolling in [Google's Advanced Protection Program](https://www.google.com/advancedprotection). Participants were also encouraged to check the security of their email accounts using [have I been pwned](https://haveibeenpwned.com). The session looked at the importance of secure storage and partial disk encryption. The training demonstrated how encryption reduces the risk of data exposure in cases of device seizure, loss, or intrusion which are threats frequently encountered by human rights defenders. Participants reflected on how digital security practices are shaped by both individual choices and shared norms and collective habits within movements.

Internet Shutdowns and Digital Rights – Documentation and Advocacy Strategies

The fourth workshop explored the increasing use of internet shutdowns by governments to silence dissent and restrict civic engagement. Participants examined approaches to documentation and evidence-gathering techniques, including data logging and geo-location tracking, to support advocacy and accountability efforts, with attention to credible, ethical, and rights-based practices appropriate to restrictive contexts. The discussion highlighted that access to the internet is a fundamental enabler of freedom of expression and assembly. Participants reflected on the importance of regional and global collaboration in challenging censorship, promoting open internet policies, and advancing digital rights as part of the broader human rights framework.

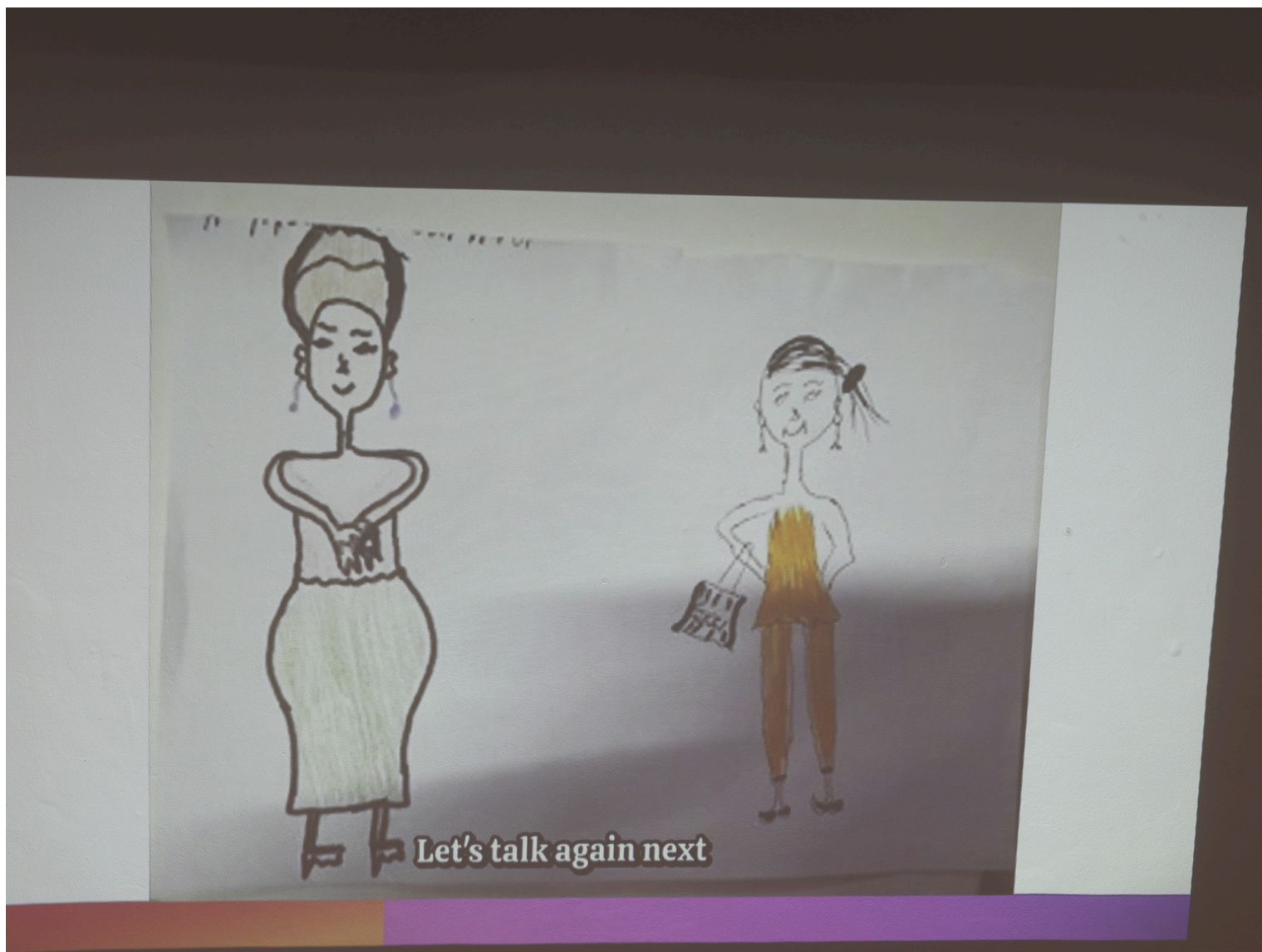
The importance of digital security for Human Rights Defenders

A key learning throughout the session was the central role of digital security to the protection of HRDs. Through discussion and shared reflection, digital safety was understood as increasingly inseparable from physical safety in the contemporary context of activism. As defenders rely more heavily on digital communication and data sharing, participants recognised the corresponding rise in exposure to surveillance, hacking, and data theft. The session emphasised the importance of developing a strong digital security culture, including secure communication habits, encrypted storage, VPN usage, and ongoing risk awareness. Participants reflected on how prioritising digital security strengthens individual safety while also reducing risks to wider networks, partners, and communities.

Key lessons

- AI presents both opportunities and risks, requiring HRDs to adopt ethical, transparent and context-sensitive approaches in their work.
- Digital tools can strengthen the sustainability and visibility of human rights movements through innovative fundraising and online mobilisation.
- Core digital security practices, including VPNs, and encrypted messaging are essential for online safety.
- Documenting and reporting internet shutdowns are crucial for accountability and international advocacy.
- Building a culture of digital security within organisations is as vital as traditional physical protection mechanisms.

The sessions created a shared learning space for developing a practical and reflective understanding of how technology intersects with human rights activism. By engaging with digital tools responsibly and strengthening digital security practices, human rights defenders can enhance their effectiveness while reducing vulnerability. Collectively, participants came to better understand that protection strategies are most effective when treated as collective and layered processes, particularly in contexts where legal, digital, and psychosocial risks intersect. The discussion challenged the assumption that stronger tools or frameworks automatically lead to better outcomes, highlighting instead the central role of ethical judgement and political will.



Theme Three: Storytelling for Advocacy and Protection



What Happened to Shantal:

A Journey of Pain and
Resilience

INDEFATIGABLE
FELLOWS



Introduction to Storytelling for Advocacy and Protection by Prof. Fiona Anciano and Babongile Bidla

Session Overview

The introductory storytelling session formed an important part of the Summer School. The aim was to strengthen activists' capacities to use narration as a strategic tool for healing, solidarity, and advocacy. The workshop, designed as practice-based and participatory learning space, drew on the insights of Prof Fiona Anciano, Babongile Bidla, and academic work by Wheeler (2018) and Jackson (2013). Storytelling was not merely positioned as an artistic exercise, but as a deeply political and relational process capable of shaping collective identities and influencing social change.

“Storytelling helps us see the human being behind the title, the institution, or the organisation. Story telling helps us understand and connect with someone as a person—not as an abstract official—we speak to communities differently”.

Participants were guided to understand storytelling as an inter-subjective activity, connecting personal experience with broader social and political realities. This framing emphasised that storytelling is central to human rights work because narratives help communities make sense of injustice, assert agency, disrupt unequal power relations, and mobilise action. The session emphasised that stories, when responsibly and ethically crafted, can humanise struggles, expose structural violence, and inspire public empathy and policy attention.

Storytelling as a methodology in human rights work

Storytelling in this session was introduced as a methodology that is both reflective and collective, allowing HRDs to organise experiences into coherent narratives that strengthen political consciousness. Across the sessions, storytelling was explored as:

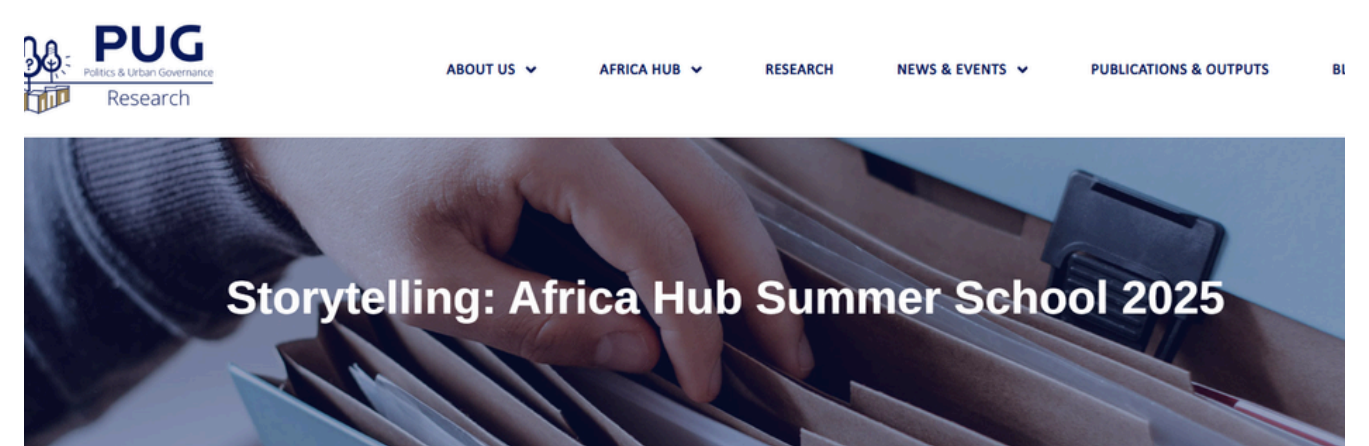
- A means of shaping one's own subjectivity while simultaneously contributing to the shaping of collective political subjectivities.
- A form of meaning-making those foregrounds emotions, lived experience, and context to build a compelling account of events.
- A method that supports social justice by troubling dominant narratives and foregrounding marginalised voices.
- A flexible, creative process that empowers participants to retain control over what they choose to share.

The introduction covered the key elements of a strong narrative characters, context, emotion, and a clear story arc and highlighted the potential of storytelling to influence decision-makers, enrich advocacy strategies, and mobilise communities. The space provided support to the HRDs in developing a shared understanding of narrative as a transformative tool that advances healing, solidarity, and social justice advocacy. Through hands-on exercises and collective learning, participants developed the skills to craft meaningful personal and collective stories that can influence policy, mobilise communities, and protect the rights of vulnerable groups. The workshop reinforced storytelling as an essential methodology for human rights defenders working within increasingly constrained civic spaces.

“When drafting your story, think about how you engage and speak to your audience. I always try to remember that, that it's not about an abstract entity I'm trying to engage with. It's about people I'm trying to talk to”.



Prof Fiona Anciano - Professor in the Department of Political Studies, holds a UWC Chair in Citizenship and Democracy and leads the Politics and Urban Governance Research Group (PUG) at UWC



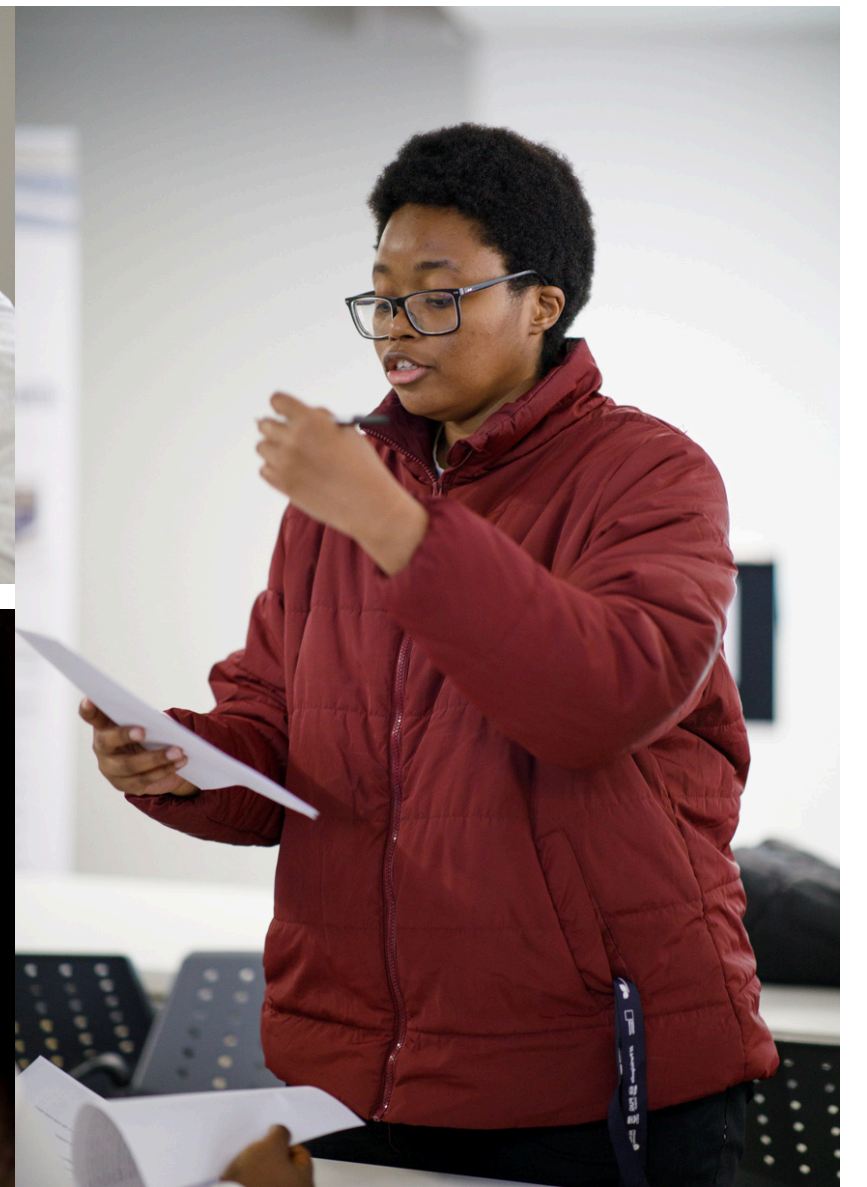
Published: 2025-12-08

The Annual Human Rights Defenders Summer School, hosted by the African Universities Hub for Human Rights (Africa Hub), equips HRDs from across Africa with crucial skills and knowledge. A key element of the capacity-building program utilized an innovative pedagogical approach: **storytelling**.

Participants engaged in dedicated workshops focusing on storytelling for human rights advocacy and protection. This process provided a critical space for reflection and was intended to foster resilience, well-being, and safety. HRDs practiced developing both personal and collective narratives, which draw directly from their own experiences within the human rights space. The workshops helped participants develop stories but prompted them to think about how they can use the same tools for advocacy.

[Click picture to see Summer School storytelling outputs](#)

Storytelling hands-on exercise



Worthy Sacrifices
A 15-year-old's impossible choice: school or survival



Photo: Interactive session group work - participants producing stories. [Click link](#) see outputs on PUG website



**Keynote speech by the UWC
Vice- Chancellor: The Role of
Universities in Supporting
HRDs**



Reflecting on the role of Universities in Supporting HRDs by Prof. Robert Balfour - UWC Vice-Chancellor

The address was delivered on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor by Professor Derek Yu, Deputy Dean of the EMS Faculty.

The address set the broader context for the Summer School, inviting participants to reflect on the role of universities amid shifting democratic and socioeconomic realities in Africa.

“This is the second edition of the Human Rights Defenders Summer School, and it continues to provide an important platform for reflection and solidarity. Our focus today is on sustainability and innovation. It is also about the future of human rights in Africa, so I will outline various trends and evidence before we consider the role of universities, and particularly what it means for us at UWC.

Two reports I would like to highlight:

The [Freedom in the World 2024 Report](#) shows that political rights and civil liberties declined in 21 out of 54 countries, while only 8 countries saw some improvement. In Africa, freedom has fallen for 10 consecutive years, driven by electoral irregularities and ongoing conflicts. Another important source, the [Afrobarometer Survey](#) conducted in 39 African countries between 2021 and 2023, shows weakening trust in key government institutions. Religious leaders, the military, and traditional leaders still enjoy comparatively high trust, but political institutions rank the lowest overall.

Looking at South Africa, the picture is also concerning. About 70% of respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working. When we move on to socioeconomic pressures, we know the three major challenges: poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Due to limited time, I will focus on unemployment. In South Africa, the unemployment rate increased to 33% in the second quarter of 2025. If we use the broader definition, including discouraged work seekers, the rate is even higher at 43%. Among young people aged 15 to 34, almost half are unemployed, and among those aged 15 to 24, the unemployment rate reaches 62%. There is also a clear gender gap: graduate unemployment stood at 15% for women, compared to under 9% for men.

These labour statistics point to a difficult environment, particularly for youth job-seekers, women, and people living in rural areas of certain provinces. It is also challenging for those who cannot find work in the formal sector and attempt to launch their own businesses. Many small businesses struggle to survive or grow due to various factors such as financial exclusion, poor infrastructure, and other barriers. Combined with declining trust in institutions and shrinking civic space, the risks faced by human rights defenders become even greater. While systematic data on burnout or trauma among activists is limited across the continent, civil society reports tell a consistent story: defenders often face high stress, harassment, and very little support. These risks are not evenly distributed. Women, young activists, and defenders in rural areas are often the most exposed.



UWC Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Robert Balfour

Now I want to speak about the role of universities before concluding.

Given these conditions, universities become even more important. A key responsibility is to defend academic freedom. Without it, we lose a crucial space for critical inquiry and accountability. Universities can also act as relatively safe spaces. The African Universities Hub for Human Rights is one example; it demonstrates how institutions can host defenders, build networks, and incorporate lived experiences into scholarship.

In societies where youth unemployment is high and trust in institutions is weak, universities play a significant role. They can produce independent evidence, create spaces for debate, and support civic innovation. Innovation is urgently needed because repression is not static — it evolves through digital surveillance, restrictive laws, and disinformation. Universities are well placed to study these threats and equip defenders with strategies to respond. Before concluding, I want to emphasize that sustainability depends on **support** — reliable funding, networks of solidarity, and attention to well-being and resilience. Many defenders face burnout, isolation, and trauma. Providing psychosocial support is essential to sustaining their work.

Some concluding reflections:

Evidence shows serious risks: high unemployment (especially among youth), a persistent gender gap, declining trust in institutions, and weakening democratic norms across many African countries. But it also shows where change is possible — through strong academic institutions, cross-sector partnerships, and innovation focused on defending rights in difficult contexts. At UWC, our own history reminds us what it means to stand for justice. Born in the struggle against apartheid, UWC has always been a place where the fight for human dignity and democracy is lived out. Today, that legacy guides our continued commitment to supporting human rights defenders — not just symbolically, but through sustained research, training, and partnership. We are grateful to the donors and partners whose support makes this Summer School possible. We also want to recognise the 2025 fellows who have joined us as part of this important programme. Your presence speaks to the courage and resilience of the next generation of human rights defenders.

Finally, defending human rights and dignity cannot be the responsibility of a few institutions alone. It must be at the heart of the academic mission across Africa. We encourage more universities to open their doors, provide spaces of refuge, advance research, and stand in solidarity with defenders. This is not an extracurricular commitment — it is central to what it means to be a university in our time. Thank you.”

Reflections on the Vice Chancellor's Keynote

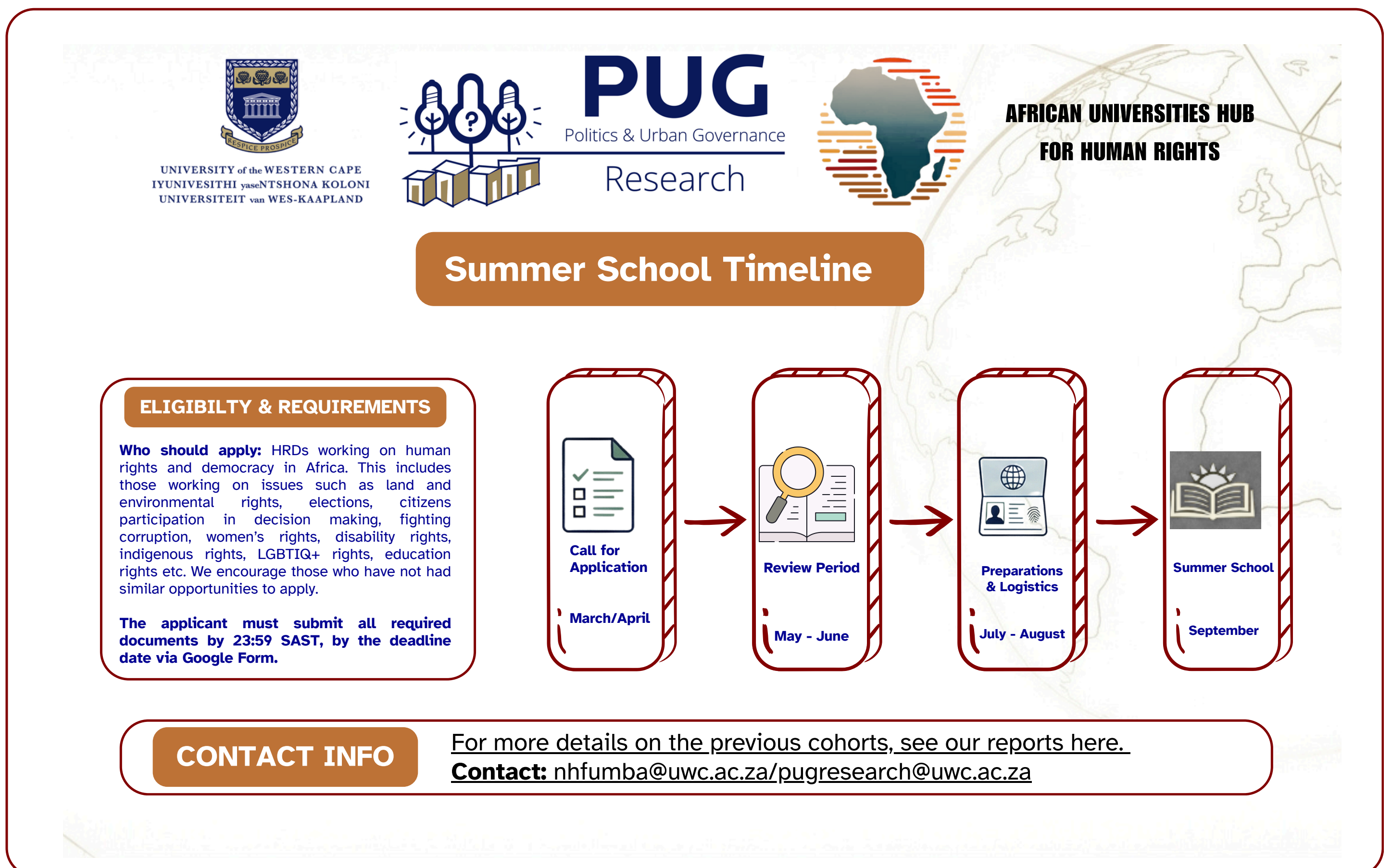
The Vice-Chancellor's address echoed themes introduced at the outset of the Summer School by Dr Mmeli Dube, who outlined the historical and shifting role of universities in relation to democracy and social justice. Drawing on the history of the University of the Western Cape, these reflections invited consideration of how universities shaped by struggle might reimagine their responsibilities in the present. This question partially informed the framing of the Summer School convened by the Africa Hub. The VC's address later returned to these questions from an institutional perspective, grounding them in current democratic and socioeconomic pressures. Participant reflections then highlighted how such institutional visions encounter diverse national and institutional realities in practice.

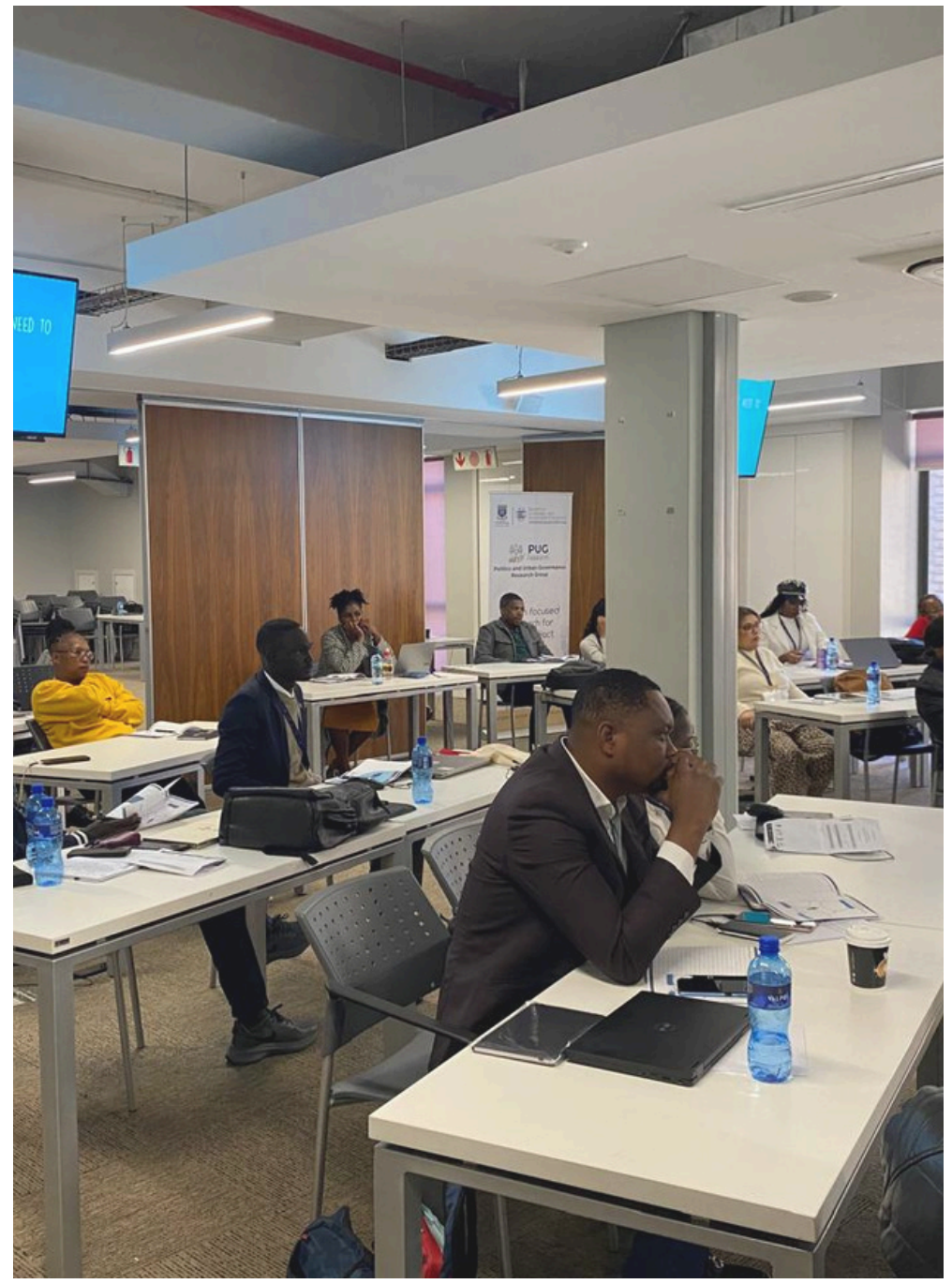
Participant Reflections on the Vice-Chancellor's Address

Participants reflected on how national and institutional contexts shape universities' capacity to support human rights defenders:

- **Uganda and Nigeria:** Public universities are often surveilled or politically controlled, making activism risky.
- **Eswatini:** The criminalisation of human rights language severely limits university autonomy.
- **Kenya and Ghana:** Participants noted growing interest and potential, though political interference persists; private universities may offer more viable entry points.
- **Cameroon:** Faith-based universities were seen as more autonomous and engaged on human rights than public institutions.
- **South Africa:** Universities were encouraged to deepen community partnerships and avoid extractive research practices.

Overall, participants emphasised that while universities can play transformative roles, their engagement depends on national politics, institutional autonomy, and leadership commitment.





Theme Four: Wellbeing, Resilience and Effectiveness



Workshop on Stress, Trauma and Wellbeing by Arise Team

Facilitators: Arise Team – Danielle Moosajie, Alexa Russell Matthews & Interns

Session Focus: Stress, Trauma & Wellness for HRDs; Tools for Self-Care; Building Long-Term Resilience

The session was structured as two interconnected mini-workshops, focusing on wellbeing, resilience, and effectiveness, and the other on stress and trauma in human rights work.

The workshop on Wellness, Resilience and Effectiveness created space for reflective exploration of the psychological, emotional, and physical challenges experienced by HRDs. Delivered by the Arise Team, Danielle Moosajie and Alexa Russell Matthews, the workshop invited participants to examine how chronic exposure to stress, trauma, and high-pressure environments impacts the wellbeing and effectiveness of activists, advocates, and frontline defenders across the continent. The facilitators grounded the discussion in the lived experiences of HRDs, illustrating how prolonged strain can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, reduced decision-making capacity, and diminished organisational performance.

The one on stress, trauma and wellbeing introduced participants to practical frameworks for understanding trauma responses, such as hypervigilance, anxiety, emotional numbing, and exhaustion, and how these responses accumulate over time in human rights work. The facilitators emphasised that wellness is not a luxury but a critical condition for sustainable activism. Participants were encouraged to identify their own stress triggers and early warning signs, and to reflect on how these manifest in work environments, relationships, and community engagements.

A core dimension of the session was the introduction of tools for self-care, with the Arise Team stressing the importance of intentional, routine, and personalised wellness practices. These included grounding techniques, breathing exercises, boundary-setting skills, reflective journaling, peer-support mechanisms, and integrating restorative activities into daily routines. The discussion highlighted the need for organisational cultures that normalise self-care, provide psychosocial support, and avoid glorifying overwork. The facilitators encouraged HRDs to shift from reactive coping toward proactive wellbeing planning.

The session closed with a focus on building long-term resilience for HRDs working in volatile civic environments. The Arise Team presented resilience as a collective and systemic process, rather than solely an individual task. Strategies discussed included cultivating strong support networks, maintaining purpose-driven work, establishing healthy work-life rhythms, engaging in continuous learning, and adopting safe digital and physical security practices. Participants were reminded that resilience is strengthened through consistency, community, and an ongoing commitment to self-preservation in the face of adversity.

Overall, the session reinforced that sustainable human rights work requires an integrated approach to wellbeing, where HRDs protect not only communities but also themselves. The workshop provided both reflective space and practical tools, enabling participants to reflecting on ways to strengthen their resilience and effectiveness in their long-term advocacy journeys.



Photo: Summer School participants engaging with Arise team | Photograph: The Dollie House



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Theme Five: Collaboration, Networking and Future Direction



Theme Five: Activists Exchange

Participating Organisations: [Equal Education](#), [Unite Behind](#), [Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education](#), [Ndifuna Ukwazi](#), and [Centre for Strategic Litigation](#).

The Activists Exchange session brought together a range of movement actors to reflect on the current landscape of activism in Africa. With organisations rooted in community organising, public accountability, political education, and spatial justice, the session created space for shared reflection and practical exchange. The inclusion of perspectives from activists operating under conditions of repression and in exile grounded the conversation in the lived experiences, underscoring the urgency of cross-border solidarity.

Following the exchange in a facilitated roundtable format, participants also discussed the gaps between research and frontline activism and identified opportunities for strengthening collaborative, evidence-informed practice. The session aimed not only to reflect but also to surface possibilities for future collaboration and mutual support.

Building alliances across movements and borders

Panelists emphasised that meaningful alliances are neither spontaneous nor purely symbolic. Rather, they are built through intentional, values-based collaboration. Reflection on past coalition efforts highlighted that alliances succeed when there is political clarity, transparent communication, and shared responsibilities. The discussion also underscored the role of political education in bridging ideological differences, ensuring that partner organisations understand each other's histories, strategies, and organisational cultures. A cross-border perspective cautioned against transposing activist models across contexts, without sensitivity to differing levels of political risk. Participants reflected that all alliances must be attentive to local realities and avoid placing disproportionate public-facing responsibilities on smaller or more vulnerable groups. In this regard, collaboration was understood to be most sustainable when grounded in trust, mutual respect, and alignment around achievable, context-sensitive and issue-based goals.

Protection strategies: collective safety and preparedness

Protection emerged as a core theme, reflecting the growing risks faced by activists across the region. Through shared discussion, participants explored a range of strategies:

- **Collective protection systems:** These included shared emergency funds, joint legal support, and coordinated rapid-response mechanisms developed in response to high-risk campaigns.
- **Digital and information security:** Organisations reaffirmed the importance of secure communication platforms, encryption, and proper data management to reduce exposure to surveillance and retaliation.
- **Psychosocial resilience:** The discussion highlighted that safety extends beyond physical risk to include burnout prevention, debriefing spaces, and cultivating organisational cultures that support sustainable activism.
- **Cross-border safety:** Experiences of surveillance, displacement, and exile illustrated the importance of regional networks capable of supporting activists facing repression through relocation, legal assistance, or referrals.

These reflections reinforced the understanding that protection must be proactive and collective, and must integrate physical, digital, legal, and emotional dimensions.



Photo: Left to right- Zukie Vuka, UnitedBehind; Equal Education and Lorenzo Johnson, Ndifuna Ukwazi

Opportunities for collaborative research

Participants reflected on several ways in which closer collaboration between research and activism could be strengthened. These included co-designing research agendas around movement-identified questions, developing action-oriented partnerships that generate practical outputs for advocacy and protection, and creating regional spaces for documenting and sharing cross-border activist experiences. Participants also noted the value of open-access resources that translate academic work into accessible tools, as well as fellowship and residency models that embed activists in universities and researchers in organisations to deepen mutual understanding of movement dynamics.

Solidarity and new connections

Solidarity was framed as a practice rather than a symbolic gesture. Participants described solidarity as material, political, and reciprocal, expressed through resource-sharing between organisations, joint advocacy, co-hosted political education initiatives, and shared campaign infrastructure. The discussion also highlighted that long-term relationships develop when organisations invest in one another's leadership development, not only in specific campaigns. Possibilities for peer-to-peer engagements were noted during the session, with participants recognising areas of overlap and mutual interest across housing justice, public education advocacy, municipal accountability, and regional protection for at-risk activists.

Key takeaways

- Cross-movement and cross-border collaboration is a deliberate political practice, requiring sustained trust-building rather than ad hoc coordination.
- Effective protection depends on collective and integrated approaches that address digital, legal, physical, and psychosocial risks simultaneously.
- Solidarity gains depth and durability when grounded in shared practice and long-term relationships, rather than symbolic alignment.
- Closing the gap between research and activism requires co-creation of knowledge, institutional openness, and accessible forms of evidence.

Taken together, the session supported critical reflection on the conditions necessary for collaboration, protection, and solidarity to be meaningfully sustained across diverse contexts.

Closing remarks by Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) for Student Development and Support– Prof. Madiba Matete

The UWC Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) for Student Development and Support, Professor Madiba Matete delivered the closing remarks of the Summer School with a reflective yet urgent message, drawing together the broader themes that had shaped the programme.

“I believe that, with the support of the summer school, HRDs will be able to draw on intellectual resources to help place Africa on a more hopeful and empowered path. A path where we think critically, understand what it means to be human, and learn how to coexist. We need to deepen our understanding of what it means to respect, nurture, and uphold one another’s rights as we grow together”.

The downward trajectory of human rights and the paradox of intelligence

Highlighting the global deterioration of human rights, Prof. Matete stressed that Africa’s challenges are part of a wider decline in ethical governance, accountability, and social cohesion. This observation framed what she termed “the paradox of intelligence, conflict, and violence”. Although humanity has reached unprecedented levels of technological advancement, she argued that this “double intelligence”, shaped by the interaction between human intelligence and the growing capabilities of Artificial Intelligence, has not translated into improved human relations or strengthened human rights systems. She cautioned that despite access to powerful tools, modern communication systems, data-driven methodologies, and AI-assisted decision-making, societies continue to struggle with intolerance, inequality, and abuses of power. In her view, the intellectual progress that should elevate humanity is, paradoxically, unfolding alongside a weakening of ethical consciousness, diminished moral leadership, and an erosion of social trust and cohesion.

Conflict, violence, and the limits of historical lessons

Building on this theme, Prof. Matete reflected on the persistence of conflict and violence across the world. Despite the wealth of historical lessons, advanced conflict-resolution practices, and international frameworks designed to prevent mass atrocities, the world continues to witness large-scale destruction, including the bombing of cities and recurring genocides. Her reflections aligned to the insights raised earlier in the Summer School, particularly the recognition that the number of active state-based conflicts globally remains unacceptably high. Prof Matete emphasised that the endurance of violence in such a technologically advanced era exposes a deeper moral and structural deficit. For her, the central question is no longer whether humanity can mitigate conflict, but why societies continue to fail to act on the knowledge and tools available.

Re-anchoring human rights in ethical foundations

A significant portion of her remarks focused on internal threats to human rights, those rooted in societal values, institutional behaviour, and moral drift. Prof Matete highlighted two core principles that she believes must guide the revival of human rights culture.

1) The meaning of humanity

She reiterated that sustainable progress in human rights begins with re-examining what it means to be human. Drawing on the philosophy of Ubuntu, she emphasised mutual respect, relational accountability, and ethical coexistence. She cited the widely known Ubuntu expression: “If I do good to you, I’m doing good to myself. And when I don’t do good to you, I am not doing good to myself.” In her view, the erosion of this ethos, rather than a lack of resources or technology, lies at the heart of the human rights crisis.



Photo: Prof Matete Madiba, DVC for Student Development and Support

2) The problem of greed

Prof Matete identified greed as a destructive force that “eats away human rights,” arguing that inequity is not driven by scarcity but by failures in ethical leadership and fair resource distribution. To illustrate this, she referenced [the murder of a South African whistle-blower Babita Deokaran](#) who exposed the looting of funds at Tembisa Hospital. “The exposé revealed how public health resources were siphoned off through fraudulent tenders, severely compromising healthcare access for marginalised communities”, said Prof. Matete. Matete stressed that the long-term consequences of corruption including loss of life, the collapse of essential services, and protracted efforts to rebuild public institutions demonstrate why the work of HRDs remains indispensable.

Call to action for HRDs

Concluding her remarks, Prof. Matete acknowledged the commitment demonstrated by participants who dedicated their time and energy to the Summer School, emphasising that their intellectual and practical contributions are critically needed in the current moment. She urged HRDs to “leverage their intellectual tools and intellectual resources to challenge the downward trajectory of human rights on the continent and to create spaces for renewed hope”.

She offered three strategic recommendations:

- HRDs, she argued, should play a critical role in reshaping public consciousness about humanity, dignity, and coexistence. By expanding their engagement in communities, institutions, and public discourse, they can help shift mindsets and reinforce ethical foundations across society.
- Prof. Matete expressed a strong desire for future Summer Schools to intentionally engage student leadership structures, such as SRCs. She suggested dedicated time for dialogue between HRDs and student leaders. Such engagement, she noted, could reframe student activism. This resonated with earlier discussions on integrating education, practice, and academia to strengthen resistance to oppression.
- Finally, the DVC emphasised the importance of building collective responsibility across sectors and generations. She encouraged participants to think beyond individual activism and toward long-term, value-driven movements capable of safeguarding future societies.

Prof Matete’s closing address served as both a reflective synthesis and a forward-looking view. By highlighting the contradictions of modern intelligence, the persistence of conflict, and the threats posed by greed and weakened ethical values, she reinforced the urgency of strengthening human rights systems in Africa. Her emphasis on re-centring humanity, promoting coexistence, and investing in future leadership underscored the learning objectives of the Summer School and affirmed the vital role HRDs play in shaping a more just, ethical, and hopeful continent.



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