Wellness Under Pressure:

Psychosocial Well-being and Resilience of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Uganda.

RESEARCH REPORT

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List of Acronyms

APA – American Psychological Association

CSOs – Civil Society Organizations

EACOP – East African Crude Oil Pipeline

EHRDs – Environmental Human Rights Defenders

FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights

FGDs – Focus Group Discussions

HRDs – Human Rights Defenders

IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature

KIIs – Key Informant Interviews

MHPSS – Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

NaTA – Nature Talk Africa

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

PAPs – Project Affected Persons

UN – United Nations

UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme

WHO – World Health Organization

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Executive Summary

This report **presents the findings** of a wellness baseline study on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda, conducted by Nature Talk Africa (NaTA) in April 2026. The study examines the emotional well-being, psychosocial challenges, coping mechanisms, solidarity systems, and resilience practices of EHRDs and climate justice actors, particularly in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected regions such as the Albertine Graben and parts of Central Uganda.

EHRDs **play a critical role** in promoting environmental justice, protecting ecosystems, and safeguarding the rights and livelihoods of communities affected by environmental degradation and extractive industries. However, their work is carried out in increasingly high-risk environments characterized by land conflicts, displacement pressures, weak governance systems, and shrinking civic space. These conditions expose defenders to persistent threats, intimidation, surveillance, and legal harassment, while also placing them under sustained psychological and emotional strain.

The study finds that EHRDs in Uganda experience **high levels of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout.** These challenges are driven by prolonged exposure to environmental conflicts, community grievances, and advocacy pressures, often without adequate psychosocial support. In oil-affected regions such as Buliisa, Hoima, Kikuube, and Kiryandongo, stress is intensified by direct engagement with land acquisition, displacement, and livelihood disruptions. In urban contexts such as Kampala and Wakiso, emotional strain is more closely linked to heavy workloads, institutional pressure, and advocacy fatigue.

A key insight from the study is the interconnected nature of psychosocial and socioeconomic impacts. EHRDs not only face emotional distress but also experience livelihood insecurity, financial instability, and social fragmentation within communities affected by extractive development. Processes such as land acquisition, compensation disputes, and displacement contribute to weakened community cohesion, increased mistrust, and heightened emotional burden for defenders who often belong to the same affected communities they serve.

Despite these **challenges, EHRDs demonstrate strong resilience**, sustained by informal coping mechanisms and solidarity systems. Peer support networks, community-based organizations, spirituality, and collective action play a central role in helping defenders manage stress and continue their work. These systems provide emotional validation, shared learning, and a sense of purpose. However, they remain largely informal, under-resourced, and insufficient to address long-term or cumulative psychosocial stress.

The study identifies significant gaps in existing wellness and protection frameworks. Current approaches to EHRD protection are heavily skewed toward physical security and legal support, with limited integration of mental health and psychosocial care. Access to professional mental health services is constrained, particularly for grassroots defenders in rural areas. Support systems are fragmented, underfunded, and often reactive rather than preventive. Additionally, stigma around mental health and shrinking civic space further limit access to care and open discussion of emotional well-being.

A central finding of the report is the "resilience paradox": while EHRDs continue to demonstrate commitment and effectiveness in high-risk environments, their resilience is largely individually sustained rather than institutionally supported. This masks underlying emotional exhaustion and increases the risk of burnout, withdrawal, and reduced long-term effectiveness.

The report highlights **several opportunities for strengthening** EHRD wellness and protection systems. These include integrating mental health and psychosocial support into existing protection frameworks, expanding peer support and solidarity networks, developing organizational wellness policies, and leveraging digital platforms for remote support. There is also a need for increased research, data collection, and evidence-based programming to inform context-specific interventions.

Overall, the study underscores that the well-being of EHRDs is not only a welfare concern but a strategic priority for sustaining environmental and climate justice advocacy. Strengthening psychosocial support, institutional protection, and resilience systems is essential to ensuring that defenders can continue their work effectively and sustainably. The report calls for a shift toward holistic, integrated protection frameworks that recognize emotional well-being as a core component of environmental governance and human rights practice.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Climate change, environmental degradation, and large-scale extractive development are reshaping livelihoods, governance systems, and community relations across many parts of the Global South. In Uganda, these dynamics are particularly evident in climate-vulnerable regions and oil-affected areas within the Albertine Graben, where rapid resource extraction and infrastructure expansion intersect with fragile ecosystems and high levels of dependence on natural resources. While these developments are often framed as pathways to national economic transformation, they have also generated significant environmental justice concerns, including land dispossession, biodiversity loss, pollution risks, and livelihood insecurity (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018).

Within this context, Climate Justice and Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and community organizers play a critical role in advocating for equitable resource governance, environmental protection, and the rights of affected populations. These actors include grassroots leaders, civil society advocates, and community mobilizers who engage in monitoring environmental impacts, documenting violations, supporting affected communities, and challenging harmful practices by state and private sector actors. Their work is central to advancing accountability and ensuring that marginalized voices are included in environmental and climate decision-making processes (UNEP, 2018).

However, EHRDs operate in increasingly complex and high-risk environments. Evidence from global monitoring organizations shows that environmental defenders face escalating levels of intimidation, surveillance, legal harassment, forced displacement, and physical violence in many countries (Global Witness, 2023). In Uganda's extractive and climate-sensitive regions, these risks are often intensified by power asymmetries between communities, government institutions, and corporate actors, limiting meaningful participation in environmental governance. Such conditions create sustained exposure to insecurity and psychosocial strain, which can undermine both individual well-being and collective advocacy efforts.

Beyond physical threats, growing attention has been drawn to the psychological and emotional toll of environmental and human rights activism. Continuous exposure to community suffering, land conflicts, environmental degradation, and unresolved grievances contributes to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout among EHRDs. Occupational stress research suggests that prolonged exposure to high-demand and high-risk environments without adequate psychosocial support significantly reduces resilience and increases vulnerability to mental health challenges (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Similarly, research in environmental and occupational psychology highlights that burnout, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion are common among individuals engaged in sustained advocacy and care-related work (Clayton et al., 2017).

In response to these challenges, many EHRDs and community organizers rely on informal coping mechanisms and solidarity systems to sustain their work. These include peer support networks, collective action, community solidarity groups, spiritual and faith-based coping strategies, and mutual aid practices. Such mechanisms play an important role in providing emotional relief, fostering

shared resilience, and strengthening social cohesion in contexts of adversity. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by limited resources, insecurity, and the absence of structured psychosocial support systems, leaving many defenders vulnerable to chronic stress.

Globally, there is increasing recognition of the need to protect environmental defenders not only from physical harm but also from psychological and emotional distress. International frameworks emphasize the importance of safeguarding human rights defenders as essential actors in achieving sustainable development and climate justice (UNEP, 2018). Despite this recognition, most protection mechanisms continue to prioritize legal aid, physical security, and advocacy support, with limited integration of mental health and psychosocial well-being interventions.

In Uganda, empirical evidence on the lived experiences of EHRDs—particularly regarding emotional well-being, coping strategies, solidarity systems, and resilience-building practices—remains limited. This evidence gap constrains the development of holistic and context-specific interventions, resulting in fragmented and largely reactive responses from government, civil society, and development partners. Without a deeper understanding of psychosocial realities, protection efforts risk overlooking the emotional dimensions of risk faced by defenders.

Uganda's Albertine Graben region is widely recognized as one of the most ecologically diverse and resource-rich areas in East Africa, characterized by high biodiversity, including endemic species and critical ecosystems such as national parks, wetlands, and wildlife corridors. At the same time, it hosts significant petroleum reserves that were commercially confirmed in the mid-2000s, positioning the region as a strategic site for large-scale oil and gas development (International Crisis Group, 2017; Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020).

Over the past two decades, the Albertine Graben has experienced rapid transformation driven by petroleum exploration activities, infrastructure expansion, and associated investment projects. These include seismic surveys, exploratory drilling, road construction, oil wells, pipelines, and refinery-related infrastructure. While the Government of Uganda frames oil development as a catalyst for national economic transformation and poverty reduction, evidence suggests that the scale and speed of these projects have significantly altered local socio-ecological systems (International Crisis Group, 2017).

One of the most significant impacts has been intensified pressure on land and natural resources. Large-scale land acquisition for oil infrastructure has led to displacement risks, land fragmentation, and changing land tenure dynamics, particularly in communities reliant on customary land systems (Ayebare et al., 2021). In many cases, communities report limited consultation and inadequate compensation, contributing to tensions between residents, government agencies, and private sector actors.

Oil and gas development has also placed significant stress on fragile ecosystems within and around protected areas such as Murchison Falls National Park and other conservation landscapes in the Albertine Rift. Infrastructure development, including roads, seismic lines, and pipeline corridors, has contributed to habitat fragmentation, increased human–wildlife conflict, and disruption of migration routes (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], 2019).

Furthermore, the intersection of extractive development and conservation has generated complex governance challenges. Environmental governance in the Albertine Graben involves multiple actors with divergent interests and unequal power relations. Weak enforcement of environmental regulations, limited participation in decision-making processes, and inadequate transparency have contributed to mistrust and conflict over resource management (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The cumulative effect of these changes is heightened social and environmental tension around land

use, conservation, and livelihood security. Communities in oil-affected districts frequently report loss of agricultural land, restricted access to natural resources, and disruption of traditional livelihood systems such as farming, fishing, and forestry (Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020).

In addition, Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in the region operate in an increasingly sensitive and high-risk environment. Reports indicate that environmental defenders in Uganda have experienced intimidation, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, and legal harassment, particularly when raising concerns about oil development projects (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These risks are compounded by limited civic space and uneven enforcement of environmental regulations.

Beyond political and legal pressures, EHRDs also navigate communities experiencing socio-economic disruption linked to oil development. According to UNEP (2019), large-scale extractive projects in environmentally sensitive areas can exacerbate inequality and weaken traditional governance systems, further complicating the work of local defenders.

1.2 Problem Statement

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) play a vital role in protecting ecosystems, promoting environmental justice, and safeguarding the rights and livelihoods of communities dependent on natural resources. Their contribution is widely recognized in global governance frameworks, including the United Nations, as essential for sustainable development and human rights protection (UNEP, 2018).

However, EHRDs operate in increasingly high-risk environments marked by intimidation, threats, displacement pressures, and socio-political conflict. Global evidence shows that environmental defenders frequently face harassment, legal persecution, and violence, particularly in contexts shaped by extractive industries and weak environmental governance (Global Witness, 2023). These conditions expose them to sustained psychosocial stress, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and trauma-related impacts, which affect both individual well-being and collective advocacy effectiveness.

Research further indicates that prolonged exposure to high-risk advocacy work without adequate psychosocial support reduces resilience and increases vulnerability to mental health challenges (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Clayton et al., 2017). In the case of EHRDs, these risks are intensified by weak institutional support systems, limited access to mental health services, and over-reliance on informal coping mechanisms such as peer support and spirituality, which are insufficient for addressing chronic stress in conflict-prone environmental contexts.

Despite growing awareness of the dangers faced by environmental defenders, existing protection frameworks largely prioritize physical security, legal aid, and advocacy support, with limited integration of mental health and psychosocial care. In addition, there is limited empirical evidence in Uganda on the emotional well-being, coping strategies, solidarity systems, and resilience practices of EHRDs, resulting in fragmented and reactive interventions.

Therefore, there is a critical need to systematically assess the emotional well-being and support systems of EHRDs in Uganda. This study addresses this gap by examining emotional well-being, solidarity structures, and resilience-building practices among Climate Justice and Environmental Human Rights Defenders and community organizers in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected regions. The findings are intended to inform more holistic, context-specific protection frameworks and programming that strengthen psychosocial well-being, resilience, and the sustainability of environmental and climate justice advocacy.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 Overall Objective

To assess and document the current state of emotional well-being, solidarity systems, and resilience-building practices among Climate Justice and Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and community organizers in Uganda, particularly in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected communities.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

i. To assess the current mental and emotional well-being status of Climate Justice actors and Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Uganda.

ii. To examine the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies used by EHRDs in managing psychosocial stress and occupational risks.

iii. To analyze existing community solidarity structures and peer support networks that contribute to emotional and collective resilience among EHRDs.

iv. To identify key gaps, challenges, and opportunities in current wellness, protection, and psychosocial support systems for EHRDs.

v. To generate evidence-based and actionable recommendations for strengthening wellness programming, advocacy strategies, and policy interventions for EHRD protection and support.

1.3.3 Geographical Scope of the Study

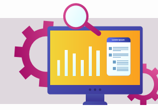
This study was conducted in selected regions of Uganda with significant environmental, socio-economic, and governance dynamics influencing the work of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs). The geographical scope covered the Albertine Region—specifically Buliisa District, Hoima District, Kiryandongo District, and Kikuube District—as well as the Central Region, focusing on Kampala and Wakiso District.

The Albertine Region was selected due to its exposure to large-scale oil and gas development, land acquisition processes, and environmental change, which present heightened risks and pressures for EHRDs. In contrast, the Central Region provided an urban and peri-urban context where defenders engage in policy advocacy, land governance issues, and environmental protection within more institutionalized but equally demanding environments.

The study focused on Climate Justice actors, Environmental Human Rights Defenders, and community organizers actively engaged in environmental governance, land rights, and advocacy processes within these areas. It examined their emotional and psychological well-being, coping mechanisms, solidarity structures, and resilience practices within the context of their work.

While the selected regions provide important insights into both extractive and urban advocacy contexts, the findings may not fully represent all EHRDs across Uganda. However, they offer a strong contextual understanding of the key challenges, experiences, and support systems shaping EHRD wellness in high-risk and climate-sensitive environments.

2.0 METHODOLOGY



This study used a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach to examine the emotional well-being, coping mechanisms, solidarity systems, and resilience practices of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and Climate Justice actors in Uganda. It focused on participants working in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected areas, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse experiences of environmental advocacy under risk.

Primary data were collected through key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, complemented by a review of relevant literature and policy documents. This enabled a deeper understanding of both individual experiences and broader contextual factors influencing psychosocial well-being.

Data were analyzed thematically, focusing on patterns related to emotional well-being, stress, coping strategies, and collective resilience. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of participant well-being, were strictly observed throughout the study.

3.0 UNDERSTANDING WELLNESS OF EHRDs

Wellness among Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) refers to a holistic state of physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being that enables individuals to effectively carry out their advocacy work while maintaining personal resilience and stability. It goes beyond the absence of illness to include the capacity to manage stress, sustain meaningful relationships, and remain emotionally grounded in the face of persistent risk and uncertainty. For EHRDs, wellness is shaped by the demanding nature of their work, which often involves confronting powerful actors, addressing environmental injustice, and operating within contexts marked by land conflicts, extractive industries, and weak governance systems (UNEP, 2018).

In such environments, wellness is continuously influenced by exposure to psychosocial stressors including intimidation, threats, community tensions, and the emotional burden of witnessing environmental degradation and social harm. These pressures can lead to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and trauma-related symptoms, particularly when sustained over long periods without adequate institutional or psychosocial support (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As a result, wellness for EHRDs is not only an individual experience but also a structural issue shaped by the availability of protection systems, supportive networks, and access to mental health and psychosocial services (Clayton et al., 2017).

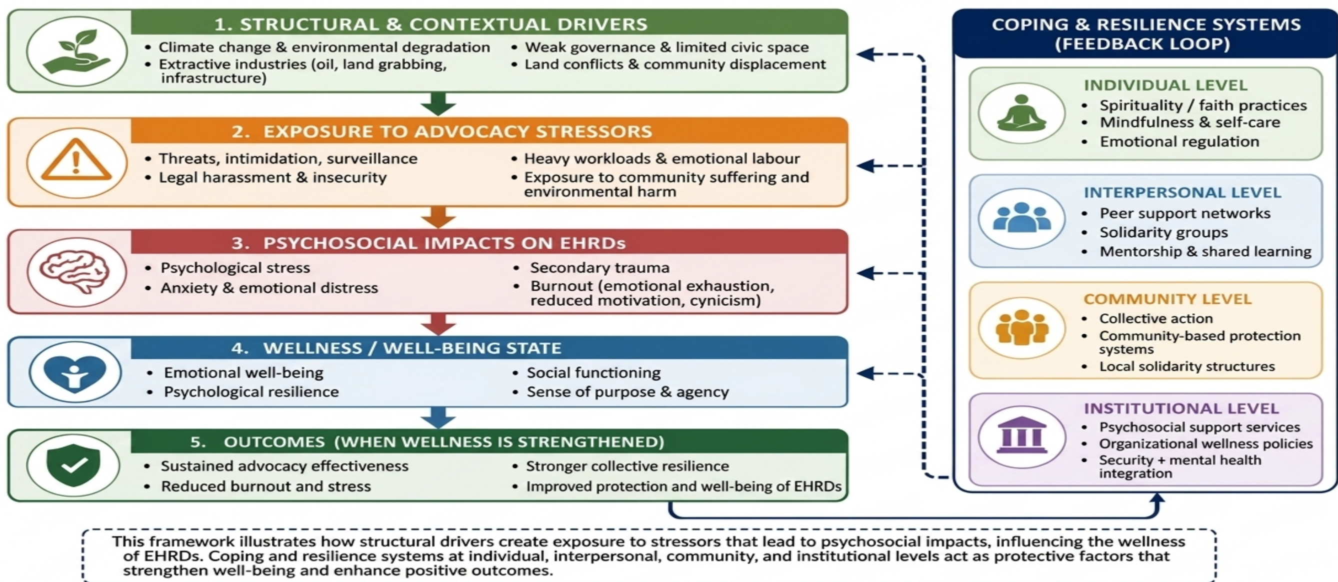
Importantly, wellness among EHRDs is also deeply relational and collective. It is often maintained through solidarity networks, peer support, community engagement, and shared coping strategies such as dialogue, spirituality, and collective action. These informal systems play a critical role in buffering stress and reinforcing resilience, especially in contexts where formal psychosocial services are limited (Global Witness, 2023). However, reliance on informal mechanisms alone is often insufficient to address the cumulative psychological impacts of sustained advocacy in high-risk settings.

Understanding wellness in this context therefore requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the interplay between individual coping capacities, community-based support structures, and broader institutional protections. It also requires acknowledging that emotional well-being is central to the sustainability of environmental and climate justice work. Strengthening wellness among EHRDs ultimately depends on integrating psychosocial care into existing protection frameworks, building resilient support systems, and creating enabling environments where defenders can carry out their work without compromising their mental and emotional health (Clayton et al., 2017; UNEP, 2018).

The diagram presents a conceptual framework explaining the wellness of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) as a dynamic and interconnected process shaped by structural conditions, stress exposure, psychosocial impacts, coping systems, and outcomes. At the foundation, structural and contextual drivers such as climate change, environmental degradation, extractive industries, weak governance, and land conflicts create the broader environment in which EHRDs operate. These structural pressures expose defenders to a range of advocacy stressors, including threats, intimidation, surveillance, legal harassment, heavy workloads, emotional labour, and continuous exposure to community suffering and environmental harm.

These stressors accumulate over time and contribute to psychosocial impacts on EHRDs, including psychological stress, anxiety, emotional distress, secondary trauma, and burnout characterized by

emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation. In response, the framework highlights a central wellness or well-being state that reflects the overall emotional health, psychological resilience, social functioning, and sense of purpose and agency among defenders. This state is not static but



On the right side of the diagram, coping and resilience systems are presented as key protective layers operating at multiple levels. At the individual level, practices such as spirituality, mindfulness, self-care, and emotional regulation support personal coping. At the interpersonal level, peer support networks, solidarity groups, and mentorship provide emotional and social reinforcement. At the community level, collective action, local protection systems, and cultural solidarity structures strengthen shared resilience. At the institutional level, psychosocial support services, organizational wellness policies, and integration of security with mental health interventions provide structural support.

These coping systems feed back into the overall wellness state, influencing outcomes at the final stage of the framework. When effectively supported, EHRDs experience sustained advocacy effectiveness, reduced burnout and stress, stronger collective resilience, and improved protection and well-being. Overall, the diagram illustrates that EHRD wellness is shaped by the interaction between structural risks and multi-level support systems, emphasizing that resilience is not only an individual attribute but also a collective and institutional process.

3.1 The mental and emotional well-being status of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda

The mental and emotional well-being of Climate Justice actors and Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda is significantly shaped by the different environmental, political, and socio-economic contexts in which they operate. Across both the Albertine and Central regions, EHRDs experience high levels of psychological stress, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. These conditions are largely driven by sustained exposure to environmental conflicts, land disputes, advocacy pressure, and limited access to structured psychosocial support systems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). However, the nature and intensity of these stressors vary between regions, reflecting differing operational realities.

In the Albertine Region—particularly in districts such as Buliisa, Hoima, Kiryandongo, and Kikuube—EHRDs face some of the most intense environmental justice challenges in Uganda due

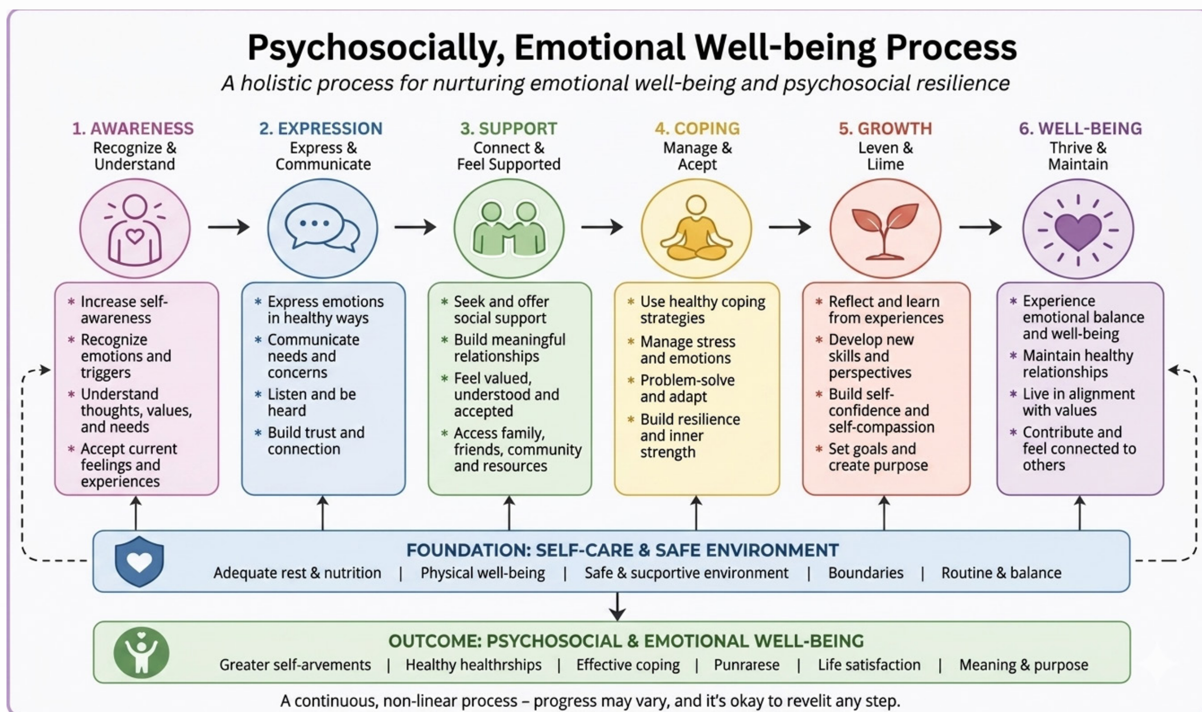
to ongoing oil and gas development and large-scale land acquisitions. In Buliisa, for example, defenders working with fishing and farming communities report chronic anxiety linked to uncertainty over land ownership and livelihood security as oil exploration expands. In Hoima, the development of major oil infrastructure such as the refinery and pipelines places continuous pressure on EHRDs who are involved in community mobilization and documentation of grievances, often resulting in emotional fatigue and burnout. Similarly, in Kiryandongo, large-scale land acquisitions for agribusiness and settlement projects have led to psychological distress among defenders who witness forced evictions and community fragmentation. In Kikuube, EHRDs engaged in land rights advocacy report fear and stress due to intimidation and the risks associated with challenging powerful economic interests. Across the Albertine region, emotional well-being is therefore heavily undermined by direct exposure to displacement risks, environmental degradation, and weak protection-mechanisms.

In contrast, EHRDs in the Central Region, particularly in Kampala and Wakiso, operate in a more urbanized but administratively and politically sensitive environment. In Kampala, Climate Justice actors working within civil society organizations and advocacy networks often experience emotional exhaustion due to heavy workloads, donor reporting demands, and continuous engagement in policy advocacy processes. The pressure to deliver results within strict timelines, combined with the sensitivity of environmental governance issues, contributes to anxiety and long-term burnout. In Wakiso, EHRDs involved in land eviction cases, wetland conservation, and urban development conflicts report stress arising from frequent community disputes and interactions with local authorities. These defenders often face emotional fatigue due to repeated cycles of advocacy with limited resolution of underlying structural issues. Unlike the Albertine region, stress in the Central region is less about physical displacement and more associated with organizational pressure, advocacy fatigue, and institutional demands.

Despite these regional differences, a common pattern emerges across both contexts: EHRDs rely heavily on informal coping mechanisms such as peer support and spirituality, with limited access to formal psychosocial services. While these coping strategies provide emotional relief and strengthen resilience in the short term, they are insufficient to address chronic stress and prevent long-term psychological impacts. Consequently, many EHRDs remain vulnerable to burnout and emotional withdrawal, highlighting the urgent need for structured mental health support and institutionalized wellness systems to sustain their work and well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2016)

3.2 Psychosocial and Socioeconomic Impacts on Environmental Human Rights Defenders

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) operate at the intersection of environmental protection, community advocacy, and human rights defense, often in contexts marked by uncertainty, risk, and resource constraints. As a result, their work exposes them to a wide range of psychosocial and socioeconomic impacts that significantly shape both their personal wellbeing and professional effectiveness. Psychosocially, many EHRDs experience high levels of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout due to sustained exposure to threats, intimidation, and the pressures of advocacy work. Socioeconomically, these challenges are often compounded by livelihood disruptions, limited financial security, and unstable working conditions, which further intensify vulnerability. Together, these interconnected impacts highlight the complex realities faced by EHRDs and underscore the need for integrated responses that address both mental health and socioeconomic resilience.



3.2.1 Psychological Stress and Burnout

Psychological stress is a pervasive reality for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), particularly those working in high-risk and complex environments such as Uganda's oil and land governance contexts. Stress arises when individuals perceive that the demands placed upon them exceed their coping capacity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For EHRDs, these demands are rarely isolated; they are layered, continuous, and multidimensional, often involving community expectations, environmental degradation, legal uncertainty, and personal safety risks. Over time, this sustained pressure can erode emotional stability, impair concentration, and weaken decision-making capacity, ultimately affecting both personal wellbeing and advocacy effectiveness (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023).

In practical terms, EHRDs working around major extractive projects such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, Tilenga Project, and Kingfisher Project often operate under persistent stress. They engage with communities experiencing displacement, mediate land and compensation disputes, and navigate interactions with powerful state and corporate actors. At the same time, many defenders are directly affected by the same livelihood disruptions and social tensions facing their communities. This dual exposure—simultaneously personal and professional—intensifies psychological strain and reduces opportunities for emotional recovery.

Burnout represents a more severe and chronic outcome of prolonged stress. It is commonly characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism or emotional detachment), and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Among EHRDs, burnout may manifest as reduced motivation for advocacy, withdrawal from community engagement, or feelings of helplessness when efforts do not yield immediate results. In contexts of prolonged land disputes, delayed compensation, and recurring community grievances, defenders may perceive their work as ineffective despite long-term impact.

The progression from stress to burnout is gradual but cumulative. Repeated exposure to emotionally demanding situations—such as witnessing community hardship, managing conflict, or facing intimidation—contributes to chronic fatigue and emotional depletion. In areas undergoing rapid

land-use change, such as Wakiso District and oil-affected regions of the Albertine Graben, many EHRDs operate without adequate institutional support, structured rest periods, or access to mental health services. This increases vulnerability to burnout, particularly where workloads are high and support systems are weak (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

The consequences of burnout extend beyond the individual. At a personal level, it may result in anxiety, irritability, sleep disturbances, and reduced overall wellbeing. Professionally, it undermines advocacy effectiveness, weakens community engagement, and limits responsiveness to emerging challenges. At an organizational level, persistent burnout can lead to staff turnover, loss of institutional memory, and reduced program sustainability.

Importantly, stress among EHRDs is not only operational but also moral and emotional. Many defenders are deeply committed to environmental justice and community wellbeing. When progress is slow or harm persists despite their efforts, they may experience moral distress, which further intensifies psychological strain. The expectation to remain constantly resilient can also discourage acknowledgment of mental health needs, reinforcing silence around emotional exhaustion.

3.2.2. Causes of Burnout, Trauma, and Stress among EHRDs

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) experience stress, trauma, and burnout due to a combination of structural, occupational, and psychosocial pressures that are closely tied to the contexts in which they operate. These stressors are typically chronic, cumulative, and interconnected, building up over time rather than occurring as isolated incidents. In climate-vulnerable and extractive settings such as Uganda's Albertine Graben, these pressures are intensified by land conflicts, environmental degradation, and power imbalances between communities, the state, and private sector actors.

One of the primary sources of stress is exposure to intimidation, threats, and insecurity linked to advocacy work. EHRDs frequently experience surveillance, harassment, and threats of violence when challenging land acquisition processes, environmental destruction, or extractive industry activities. In some cases, they also face legal intimidation, including arbitrary arrests or court proceedings used to discourage activism. These experiences generate constant fear and uncertainty, contributing to chronic psychological stress (Global Witness, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Land-related conflict and displacement pressures affecting communities also constitute a major source of emotional strain. Many EHRDs work directly with populations experiencing land grabbing, forced displacement, or restricted access to natural resources due to oil development, conservation expansion, or commercial agriculture. Witnessing community suffering and unresolved land disputes contributes to emotional distress, moral burden, and secondary trauma, particular-

ly when defenders feel unable to prevent harm or secure justice outcomes (Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020).

High workloads and emotional labour further contribute significantly to burnout. Many EHRDs operate in under-resourced organizations or volunteer settings, often performing multiple roles such as advocacy, documentation, community engagement, and legal support. This workload, combined with limited financial and institutional support, leads to physical exhaustion and emotional fatigue. Continuous engagement with affected communities experiencing poverty, loss, or trauma increases the risk of compassion fatigue (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Clayton et al., 2017).

Civic space restrictions and institutional pressures also contribute to stress. In some contexts, shrinking civic space limits freedom of expression, association, and access to information. EHRDs may also face mistrust or hostility from authorities and private actors, which undermines legitimacy and increases social isolation. These conditions reduce psychological safety and intensify feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness.

Trauma exposure is another key factor, especially for defenders working in highly affected communities. EHRDs frequently witness environmental destruction, displacement, land conflict, and socioeconomic hardship. Repeated exposure to such conditions can lead to secondary traumatic stress, characterized by anxiety, emotional numbness, intrusive thoughts, and sleep disturbances (Clayton et al., 2017).

Burnout is further exacerbated by limited recovery time and weak support systems. Many defenders lack access to structured psychosocial services, adequate rest periods, and organizational wellness policies. As a result, stress accumulates without recovery, leading to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and diminished effectiveness. Financial insecurity often compounds this burden, as many defenders must balance activism with livelihood responsibilities. Social and community pressures contribute to stress. EHRDs may face misunderstanding, stigma, or conflict within their own communities, particularly when advocacy is perceived as opposing development projects or local interests. This can result in social isolation, reduced trust, and emotional strain, especially for grassroots defenders in sensitive contexts.

Addressing psychological stress and burnout requires a deliberate and systemic response. Strengthening psychosocial support systems is essential, including access to counseling, structured debriefing, and safe spaces for reflection. Peer support networks can help normalize shared experiences and reduce isolation, while organizational policies that promote manageable workloads, rest periods, and staff wellbeing are critical. Integrating stress management and trauma-informed approaches—such as mindfulness practices and structured reflection sessions—can further enhance resilience and reduce burnout risk (APA, 2023; Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Ultimately, safeguarding the mental health of EHRDs is not secondary but central to sustaining environmental and human rights advocacy. Without adequate support, the cumulative effects of stress and burnout can significantly weaken defenders' capacity to continue their work, with broader implications for environmental governance and justice outcomes.

3.2.3 Surveillance, Intimidation, and Threats

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in Uganda frequently operate in high-pressure environments where surveillance, intimidation, and threats are embedded risks—particularly in contexts involving land acquisition, extractive industries, and rapid urban development. These practices are not always overtly violent but create a sustained climate of fear that undermines both individual wellbeing and collective advocacy efforts.

Surveillance—whether physical, digital, or community-based—is commonly reported by EHRDs working around large-scale oil developments such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, Tilenga Project, and Kingfisher Project. Defenders engaged in documenting land acquisition processes or mobilizing affected communities have reported being followed during field visits, monitored during community meetings, or questioned about their activities by local authorities and security personnel. In some instances, digital surveillance has been alleged, including suspicious phone activity or monitoring of social media engagement. This persistent sense of being watched often leads to self-censorship, reduced community outreach, and heightened anxiety (Front Line Defenders, 2023).

For example, within the EACOP project corridor, civil society actors working with Project Affected Persons (PAPs) have reported increased scrutiny during community sensitization activities. Meetings are sometimes attended by local officials or security personnel, which can discourage open discussion among community members. Similarly, in areas affected by the Tilenga Project in the Albertine region, EHRDs documenting environmental and social impacts have described being informally monitored, with community informants occasionally reporting their movements to authorities or company-linked actors. Around the Kingfisher Project, defenders engaging with fishing communities have faced similar patterns, particularly when raising concerns about restricted access to natural resources.

Intimidation often accompanies surveillance and serves as a more direct tactic to deter activism. In Uganda's oil regions, EHRDs have reported receiving warning messages—both verbal and via phone—discouraging them from engaging in advocacy or public criticism of project activities. Others have experienced coercive questioning by security actors or local leaders, sometimes framed as "routine inquiries" but perceived as attempts to instill fear. Public labeling of defenders as "anti-development" or "saboteurs" has also been noted, which can damage reputations and isolate them within their own communities. Over time, such intimidation erodes psychological safety, fosters mistrust, and contributes to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion (OHCHR, 2022).

These dynamics are not limited to oil project areas. In Wakiso District, where rapid urban expansion and land speculation are widespread, EHRDs working on land rights and evictions have similarly reported intimidation. This may include threats from private developers, pressure from local authorities, or harassment linked to documenting forced evictions. Given Wakiso's proximity to Kampala and high land value, disputes are often highly contested, increasing risks for those advocating for affected communities. Surveillance in such contexts may take the form of monitoring meetings, tracking movements, or infiltration of community networks.

Threats represent a more explicit and severe form of coercion. In both oil project regions and districts like Wakiso, EHRDs have reported threats of arrest, legal action, or physical harm linked to their work. In some cases, threats extend to family members, amplifying fear and psychological distress. The risk of arbitrary arrest or legal harassment—such as accusations related to unlawful assembly or incitement—further constrains civic space. These threats, even when not acted upon, create a chilling effect that discourages sustained engagement in advocacy and weakens collective organizing (Global Witness, 2024).

The cumulative effect of surveillance, intimidation, and threats is profound. EHRDs often experience heightened anxiety, hypervigilance, and burnout, alongside reduced trust in institutions meant to protect them. Socially, these pressures can fragment community cohesion, as fear discourages participation in collective action. For defenders who are themselves members of affected communities, the risks are compounded by personal stakes in land and livelihood issues.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-layered approach. Beyond physical protection, there

is a need for strengthened legal safeguards for defenders, accessible reporting and accountability mechanisms, and targeted psychosocial support. Digital security training is also critical, given the increasing role of communication technologies in advocacy work. Ensuring that EHRDs can operate safely and effectively is essential not only for their wellbeing but also for the protection of environmental and human rights more broadly (Front Line Defenders, 2023; OHCHR, 2022; Global Witness, 2024).

intercepted, or being monitored on social media and mobile platforms. Such surveillance creates a persistent sense of being watched, which can lead to heightened anxiety, self-censorship, and reduced willingness to engage in advocacy activities (Front Line Defenders, 2023).

Intimidation often accompanies surveillance and is used as a tactic to discourage activism without necessarily resorting to physical violence. This may include threatening phone calls, hostile messages, public defamation, or coercive interactions with authorities or powerful actors. For EHRDs working in resource extraction or land governance contexts, intimidation is sometimes used to deter them from documenting environmental harm or mobilizing community resistance. Over time, repeated exposure to intimidation can erode psychological safety, weaken trust in institutions, and contribute to chronic stress responses such as hypervigilance and emotional exhaustion (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner [OHCHR], 2022).

Threats represent a more explicit form of coercion and may include threats of arrest, physical harm, loss of livelihood, or harm to family members. In some high-risk contexts, threats escalate into targeted violence, reinforcing a climate of fear that affects not only individuals but entire communities of defenders. The psychological impact of such threats is profound, often resulting in trauma symptoms, withdrawal from public life, and long-term distress. Importantly, the cumulative effect of surveillance, intimidation, and threats creates an environment of sustained pressure that significantly undermines the wellbeing, resilience, and operational effectiveness of EHRDs (Global Witness, 2024).

Addressing these risks requires not only physical protection measures but also psychosocial support systems, digital security training, and stronger legal protections for defenders. Creating safe reporting mechanisms and strengthening accountability for perpetrators are also essential to reducing the prevalence and impact of these violations.

3.2.4 Livelihood Disruptions Due to Displacement and Land Acquisition

Livelihood disruption is a significant consequence of large-scale infrastructure and extractive industry projects that require extensive land acquisition. In Uganda's emerging oil and gas sector, developments such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), Tilenga, and Kingfisher projects provide concrete illustrations of how land-based livelihoods are affected. For Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) and the communities they work with, land is not merely an economic resource but a foundation of identity, cultural heritage, and social stability. When land is acquired without adequate consultation, timely compensation, or effective livelihood restoration, affected households often experience both immediate and long-term economic dislocation (Cernea, 2000; World Bank, 2018).

In the case of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, which spans multiple districts across Uganda, land acquisition has primarily affected smallholder farmers. Reports indicate that many Project Affected Persons (PAPs) experienced delays between valuation and compensation, during which restrictions were placed on land use. As a result, farmers were unable to plant perennial crops such as coffee and bananas, leading to reduced agricultural productivity and food insecurity. Although some households were not physically displaced, they experienced "economic displacement," as

their ability to derive income from land was significantly curtailed (International Federation for Human Rights [FIDH], 2020; World Bank, 2018).

Similarly, the Tilenga Project in the Albertine Graben has resulted in both physical and economic displacement. Large tracts of land have been acquired for oil wells, roads, and processing infrastructure, affecting farming communities in districts such as Buliisa and Nwoya. In addition, restrictions on access to fishing areas near Lake Albert have undermined an important supplementary livelihood. Some resettled households have reported challenges with the adequacy and productivity of replacement land, further complicating livelihood recovery. These dynamics reflect broader patterns identified in displacement literature, where resettlement often fails to fully restore pre-displacement living standards (Cernea, 2000).

The Kingfisher Project in Kikuube District presents comparable challenges. Partial land acquisition has left some households with fragmented or insufficient land for viable agriculture, while safety restrictions around oil infrastructure have affected access to fishing zones. Although compensation has been provided in some cases, concerns persist regarding valuation, delays, and the lack of structured livelihood restoration support. Consequently, some households have resorted to short-term coping strategies, such as casual labor or consumption of compensation funds, without sustainable income replacement (Oxfam, 2021).

For EHRDs, these livelihood disruptions are both an advocacy concern and a personal reality. Many defenders originate from the same communities affected by land acquisition, meaning that they directly experience the economic and social impacts they seek to address. This dual role intensifies emotional and psychological strain, as they must navigate personal livelihood losses while advocating for fair compensation, transparency, and accountability. In contexts where compensation processes are contested, EHRDs may also face intra-community tensions, further complicating their work and well-being (Bennett et al., 2015).

Beyond economic impacts, livelihood disruption has profound social and psychological consequences. Displacement weakens community cohesion, disrupts social networks, and erodes traditional systems of mutual support. In the Ugandan oil context, these effects are evident in increased uncertainty, anxiety about the future, and reduced capacity for collective action among affected populations. Over time, such conditions can exacerbate vulnerability, particularly among women, elderly persons, and other marginalized groups (World Bank, 2018).

Addressing livelihood disruptions in projects such as EACOP, Tilenga, and Kingfisher requires more than financial compensation. It necessitates comprehensive livelihood restoration programs, timely and transparent compensation processes, and inclusive, participatory land governance mechanisms. Ensuring that affected communities—and the EHRDs who represent them—are meaningfully involved in decision-making is critical to mitigating long-term socio-economic and psychological harm (Cernea, 2000; World Bank, 2018).

3.2.5 Social Fragmentation and Weakened Community Solidarity

Social fragmentation refers to the breakdown of relationships, trust, and shared identity within a community, while weakened community solidarity describes the erosion of collective action and mutual support systems that people rely on in times of need. These dynamics are particularly evident in contexts of rapid socio-economic and environmental change, including large-scale infrastructure development, extractive industries, and urban expansion. In such settings, disruptions to established social systems can fundamentally alter how communities relate, cooperate, and respond to shared challenges (Putnam, 2000; World Bank, 2018).

In Uganda, processes linked to projects such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, Tilenga Project, and Kingfisher Project have contributed to emerging patterns of social fragmentation. One of the key drivers is uneven compensation and benefit distribution. Differences in land valuation, timing of payments, and negotiation outcomes can create visible inequalities within communities. Such disparities often generate mistrust, jealousy, and suspicion, undermining previously cohesive social relationships. Research on displacement and development-induced change shows that perceived injustice in compensation processes is a major source of intra-community conflict (Cernea, 2000).

Displacement and resettlement further exacerbate fragmentation by physically separating individuals from their established social networks. In areas affected by the Tilenga and Kingfisher projects, some households have been relocated to new settlements where traditional systems of mutual support—such as extended family networks, communal labor arrangements, and shared cultural practices—are weakened or lost. Even in cases of economic (rather than physical) displacement, restrictions on land use and changing livelihood patterns can disrupt daily interactions that sustain social cohesion. These shifts often reduce opportunities for collective engagement and reinforce social isolation (World Bank, 2018).

Divergent perspectives on development projects also contribute to weakened solidarity. Within communities along the East African Crude Oil Pipeline corridor, differences in attitudes—ranging from support to resistance—can divide households and social groups. Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), who advocate for accountability and community rights, may be perceived differently depending on these positions, sometimes leading to mistrust or social exclusion. Such divisions can weaken collective voice and reduce the effectiveness of community-led advocacy efforts (Bennett et al., 2015).

In rapidly urbanizing areas such as Wakiso District, social fragmentation is also driven by land pressure, evictions, and speculative land markets. Increasing land values often intensify disputes over ownership and boundaries, sometimes creating conflict within families and among neighbors. The shift from communal or customary land relations to more individualized, market-driven systems can erode traditional norms of cooperation and reciprocity. As a result, communities may transition from collective to competitive social dynamics, weakening solidarity and shared responsibility.

The consequences of social fragmentation are both social and psychological. Strong community networks have long served as informal safety nets, providing support during periods of hardship. When these networks weaken, individuals become more vulnerable to economic shocks, stress, and marginalization. Fragmentation also reduces the capacity for collective action, limiting communities' ability to advocate for their rights, engage with external actors, or respond to environmental and social challenges. For EHRDs, operating in fragmented communities adds complexity to their work, as low levels of trust and cohesion can hinder mobilization efforts and increase interpersonal tensions.

Addressing social fragmentation requires deliberate and inclusive approaches. Transparent and equitable compensation processes, participatory decision-making, and accessible grievance mechanisms are essential to building trust. Community dialogue platforms can help bridge differences and rebuild relationships, while targeted interventions—such as social cohesion programs and conflict resolution initiatives—can strengthen solidarity. Ensuring that development processes actively consider and mitigate social impacts is critical to preserving the social fabric that underpins community resilience (Putnam, 2000; World Bank, 2018).

3.3 Emotional Well-being

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) operate at the intersection of environmental

protection, human rights advocacy, and community justice, often within high-risk and resource-constrained environments. As a result, their work exposes them to significant psychosocial and socio-economic impacts that affect both their wellbeing and sustainability in activism. Psychosocially, emotional well-being—defined as the ability to manage emotions, cope with stress, and maintain psychological balance—is a critical dimension of mental health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). However, for many EHRDs, this balance is frequently disrupted due to persistent exposure to stressors such as intimidation, uncertainty, and advocacy-related pressure.These conditions often result in elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, which undermine emotional stability and long-term functioning. Emotional well-being is closely linked to resilience and psychological adjustment, enabling individuals to recover from adversity and maintain effective engagement in demanding roles (Ryff, 1989; Diener, 2000). In the case of EHRDs, however, continuous exposure to environmental conflict and insecurity weakens this resilience over time.

The diagram presents psychosocial and emotional well-being as a continuous, step-by-step process supported by a strong foundation of self-care and a safe environment.

The process begins with Awareness, where an individual recognizes and understands their emotions, triggers, thoughts, and needs. This stage is foundational, as emotional well-being starts with the ability to notice, interpret, and name internal experiences.The next stage is Expression, which involves communicating emotions in healthy and constructive ways. It includes talking about feelings, sharing concerns, active listening, and building trust through open communication. This stage helps prevent emotional suppression and fosters meaningful interpersonal connection.

This is followed by Support, where individuals actively seek and provide social support. It involves building and maintaining meaningful relationships, feeling accepted and valued, and accessing assistance from family, friends, community networks, or institutional resources. Support enhances emotional stability and reduces feelings of isolation.The fourth stage is Coping, which focuses on managing stress and emotional pressure. Individuals employ healthy coping strategies such as problem-solving, adaptation, and resilience-building. This stage is critical in enabling individuals to navigate difficult personal, social, or work-related challenges.

Next is Growth, where individuals reflect on experiences, learn from challenges, and develop new skills and perspectives. This stage emphasizes self-development, confidence-building, self-compassion, and the discovery of meaning and purpose through reflection and lived experience.The final stage is Well-being, which represents a state of emotional balance, stability, and fulfillment. At this point, individuals are better able to maintain healthy relationships, live in alignment with their values, and contribute positively to others while experiencing overall life satisfaction.

All stages are grounded in a foundation of self-care and a safe environment, which includes adequate rest, proper nutrition, physical health, personal boundaries, structured routines, and emotional safety. This foundation is essential for sustaining the entire process and ensuring long-term resilience.The diagram ultimately illustrates psychosocial and emotional well-being as the overall outcome, characterized by increased self-awareness, healthier relationships, effective coping, resilience, and a strengthened sense of meaning and purpose.

Socioeconomically, Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) also face challenges such as disrupted livelihoods, unstable income, and limited access to financial protection systems. These conditions intensify psychosocial stress, creating a dual burden that affects both personal well-be-

ing and professional effectiveness. Together, these interconnected challenges highlight the need for integrated interventions that address both mental health and socioeconomic resilience.Over time, persistent exposure to unmanaged stress may lead to withdrawal from activism or early exit from human rights work, thereby weakening environmental and community protection efforts. In the long term, the absence of psychosocial interventions increases the risk of severe mental health consequences, including chronic anxiety, depression, and burnout, further deepening the vulnerabilities of already high-risk defenders.

Overall, the emotional well-being of EHRDs is significantly undermined, with stress, anxiety, and burnout emerging as the most prevalent and interlinked psychological burdens affecting both their work and daily lives. These conditions reflect sustained exposure to high-pressure environments, insecurity, and demanding advocacy roles. At the same time, limited access to psychosocial support reveals a critical systemic gap in providing adequate protective and restorative mechanisms for individuals on the frontlines of environmental and human rights work. Collectively, these findings depict a workforce operating under intense emotional strain with minimal formal support systems, underscoring the urgent need to integrate structured well-being programs, mental health services, and comprehensive protection frameworks into environmental and human rights advocacy systems.

3.3.2 Unmet needs in wellness and protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs

For Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), the key unmet needs in wellness and protection tend to cluster around five interconnected areas: psychosocial support, physical safety, institutional protection, socioeconomic security, and enabling work environments. These gaps reinforce each other, meaning that weakness in one area often worsens stress and vulnerability in another.

A major unmet need is accessible and consistent psychosocial support. Many EHRDs operate in high-stress and often threatening environments but have limited access to professional mental health services, trauma-informed care, or structured peer-support systems. Where support exists, it is often informal, fragmented, or reactive rather than preventive.Closely related is the need for safe spaces for emotional expression and debriefing. Defenders frequently suppress distress due to fear of stigma, organizational expectations, or lack of trusted channels. Without structured opportunities to process experiences, stress accumulates and contributes to burnout.

On the protection side, a critical gap is effective physical and digital security systems. This includes protection from intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and threats linked to environmental and land-related advocacy. Many EHRDs lack access to rapid response mechanisms, legal protection pathways, or secure communication tools. Another key unmet need is institutional and legal protection. Weak enforcement of laws protecting human rights defenders, slow response to reported threats, and limited accountability for perpetrators create a sense of impunity. This undermines trust in formal protection systems and leaves individuals largely self-reliant.

There is also a significant gap in socioeconomic security, including stable income, livelihood continuity, and financial protection. Disruptions caused by displacement, project-related land conflicts, or retaliation often leave defenders economically vulnerable, which in turn increases psychological stress and reduces their ability to sustain advocacy work.

Thus, EHRDs face unmet needs in supportive organizational and policy environments. Many operate within institutions that lack structured wellness policies, workload management systems, or

staff care frameworks. This results in chronic overwork, limited recovery time, and weak integration of well-being into program design.Taken together, these unmet needs show that the challenge is not only individual stress but a broader systems gap: wellness and protection are still treated as secondary rather than integral to environmental and human rights work.

3.4 Community Solidarity Structures and Peer Support Networks among Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Community solidarity structures and peer support networks are central to the survival, effectiveness, and emotional resilience of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), particularly in high-risk and resource-extractive contexts such as Uganda's Albertine Graben. These systems function as informal and formal mechanisms through which defenders share information, provide emotional support, coordinate collective action, and strengthen protection against threats. In contexts where formal psychosocial and institutional support is limited, solidarity becomes both a coping strategy and a form of resistance (UNEP, 2018; Global Witness, 2023).

3.4.1 Nature and Forms of Solidarity Structures

Solidarity among EHRDs typically operates through multi-layered arrangements, including grassroots community networks, civil society coalitions, and thematic advocacy groups. In Uganda and similar contexts, organizations such as grassroots EHRD networks have emerged specifically to strengthen collective protection, capacity building, and emergency response for defenders facing risks linked to environmental and land governance conflicts (Solidarity Network of Grassroots Environmental and Human Rights Defenders [SNEHRD], 2024).

These networks provide structured support such as security training, legal empowerment, documentation of violations, and emergency assistance. They also facilitate monitoring and reporting of threats while creating shared databases of defenders at risk, which enhances collective situational awareness and response coordination (SNEHRD, 2024). At a broader level, umbrella organizations and coalitions of human rights groups contribute to solidarity by linking grassroots actors with national and international advocacy platforms, thereby amplifying their voices and increasing protection visibility (Human Rights Network Uganda [HURINET], 2023).

3.4.2. Peer Support and Emotional Resilience Mechanisms

Beyond institutional structures, peer support networks play a critical psychosocial role. EHRDs frequently rely on fellow activists, community leaders, and trusted peers for emotional support, validation, and shared problem-solving. These peer interactions create spaces where defenders can express distress, share experiences of intimidation, and collectively process trauma arising from activism-related stressors (Clayton et al., 2017).

Research on human rights work shows that peer-to-peer solidarity contributes to emotional resilience by reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of shared purpose (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the context of environmental advocacy, where defenders often face stigmatization and being labeled as "anti-development," peer networks provide affirmation and psychological protection against marginalization (Global Witness, 2023). Such networks also support informal mentoring, where experienced defenders guide newer activists in navigating risks, advocacy strategies, and coping mechanisms.

3.4.3. Collective Action as a Form of Psychological Protection

Collective action is another key dimension of solidarity that strengthens both external advocacy and internal resilience. When EHRDs engage in joint mobilization—such as community meetings, protests, advocacy campaigns, or legal petitions—they not only amplify their political influence but also share the emotional burden of resistance. Studies on environmental and social movements show that collective engagement reduces individual stress by distributing responsibility and reinforcing group identity (UNEP, 2018).

In Uganda's extractive regions, collective action is often embedded in community-based organizations that link environmental protection with livelihood concerns. These structures enable communities and defenders to jointly respond to land disputes, environmental degradation, and displacement pressures, thereby reinforcing both social cohesion and psychological endurance (Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020).

3.4.4 Regional and Transnational Solidarity Networks

In addition to local systems, EHRDs benefit from regional and transnational solidarity networks that provide advocacy support, capacity building, and protection mechanisms. These include alliances between civil society organizations, regional human rights networks, and international advocacy groups that monitor violations and provide emergency responses for at-risk defenders (UNEP, 2018). Such networks enhance resilience by connecting local struggles to global human rights and climate justice movements, thereby increasing visibility and reducing vulnerability to repression.

These broader networks also facilitate access to training, psychosocial support initiatives, and knowledge-sharing platforms focused on well-being and resilience-building within activist communities (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Importantly, they contribute to what has been described as "collective protection," where responsibility for defender safety is shared across multiple actors rather than resting solely on individuals or local communities (Global Witness, 2023).

3.4.5. Limitations and Gaps in Existing Solidarity Systems

Despite their importance, solidarity structures and peer support networks face several limitations. Many are under-resourced, informally organized, and heavily dependent on voluntary participation, which limits their sustainability and reach. In addition, the emotional burden carried within peer networks is often unstructured, with limited access to professional psychosocial support or trauma-informed care (Clayton et al., 2017).

Furthermore, insecurity, surveillance, and shrinking civic space in some contexts can weaken trust within networks and restrict open communication among defenders. This can lead to partial isolation of EHRDs, particularly those working in highly sensitive or conflict-prone areas, reducing the effectiveness of solidarity mechanisms (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Overall, community solidarity structures and peer support networks are essential to the emotional well-being and collective resilience of EHRDs. They function as both protective and empowering systems that sustain activism in high-risk environments. However, while these structures provide critical informal support, they are not a substitute for formal psychosocial services and institutional protection frameworks. Strengthening and integrating these solidarity systems into broader protection and well-being strategies is therefore essential for enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of environmental and climate justice advocacy.

4.0 GAPS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WELLNESS, PROTECTION, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR EHRDS

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) operate in increasingly complex socio-political and ecological contexts, yet the systems intended to support their safety and well-being remain fragmented and uneven. A critical analysis of existing wellness, protection, and psychosocial support structures reveals significant gaps in design, implementation, and accessibility, alongside emerging opportunities for strengthening holistic defender protection.

4.1. Key Gaps in Current Systems

a) Limited integration of psychosocial support in protection frameworks

Most protection mechanisms for EHRDs focus heavily on physical safety, legal aid, and emergency relocation, while psychosocial and mental health support remains marginal or entirely absent. International protection frameworks acknowledge the importance of holistic defender safety, but implementation tends to prioritize security risk management over emotional well-being (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018). This creates a structural gap where psychological distress is addressed only indirectly, if at all.

b) Weak mental health infrastructure tailored to defenders

In many Global South contexts, including Uganda, mental health services are already under-resourced and urban-centered, making them inaccessible to rural EHRDs working in remote or high-risk areas. Furthermore, available mental health systems are rarely adapted to the specific realities of activism-related trauma, such as intimidation, land conflict exposure, surveillance stress, and community backlash (Clayton et al., 2017). This mismatch reduces the relevance and uptake of formal psychosocial services.

c) Fragmentation of support actors and interventions

Support for EHRDs is often delivered through disconnected actors—local NGOs, international organizations, legal aid groups, and informal community networks—without coordinated systems for referral, continuity of care, or shared protection protocols. This fragmentation leads to duplication in some areas and complete absence of services in others, especially at grassroots levels (Global Witness, 2023).

d) Under-documentation of psychosocial harm

There is limited systematic documentation of emotional distress, burnout, and trauma among EHRDs, particularly in Uganda and similar contexts. Without robust data, psychosocial risks remain invisible in policy planning, resulting in weak prioritization of mental health interventions in environmental governance and human rights programming (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

4.2 Key Challenges Facing Existing Support Systems

a) Shrinking civic space and insecurity

EHRDs often operate in environments characterized by surveillance, intimidation, and legal harassment, which not only increases psychological stress but also limits access to support services. Fear of retaliation discourages many defenders from seeking formal mental health care or openly participating in support programs (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This creates a cycle of silence and unaddressed distress.

b) Stigma surrounding mental health and emotional vulnerability

In many communities, mental health challenges are still heavily stigmatized. EHRDs may be expected to demonstrate resilience and strength at all times, which discourages disclosure of emotional distress. This "activist resilience expectation" often leads to normalization of burnout and emotional exhaustion as part of the job rather than treatable conditions (Clayton et al., 2017).

c) Resource constraints and sustainability issues

Many support initiatives for EHRDs rely on short-term donor funding, which limits continuity and long-term psychosocial programming. As a result, interventions such as counseling, peer support training, and wellness programs are often project-based rather than institutionalized within national systems or organizations (UNEP, 2018).

d) Unequal access to support services

Urban-based organizations and well-connected defenders are more likely to access psychosocial and legal support, while rural and grassroots defenders—especially those in oil-affected and climate-vulnerable areas—remain underserved. Geographic, financial, and informational barriers further deepen this inequality.

e) Lack of trauma-informed approaches

Many existing interventions are not grounded in trauma-informed care principles. This limits their effectiveness in addressing cumulative stress, vicarious trauma, and chronic exposure to environmental and social injustice experienced by EHRDs over time.

4.3. Emerging Opportunities for Strengthening Systems

a) Growing recognition of holistic defender protection

There is increasing global recognition that protection of human rights defenders must go beyond physical security to include psychosocial well-being. International frameworks and advocacy organizations are gradually integrating mental health considerations into defender protection agendas (UNEP, 2018; Global Witness, 2023). This creates policy space for reform.

b) Expansion of peer support and solidarity networks

Peer-led and community-based support systems are emerging as effective low-cost mechanisms for emotional resilience. These include defender collectives, mutual aid groups, and community solidarity networks that provide emotional validation, shared coping strategies, and informal counseling. Strengthening these networks offers a scalable entry point for psychosocial support.

c) Integration of mental health into human rights programming

There is growing potential to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into human rights and environmental governance programs. This includes embedding counseling services, stress management training, and resilience-building modules within existing EHRD protection initiatives (Clayton et al., 2017).

d) Use of digital platforms for support and connection

Digital tools and secure communication platforms are increasingly being used to provide remote psychosocial support, emergency alerts, and peer networking among defenders. While access remains uneven, these tools offer opportunities for expanding reach, especially in geographically isolated areas.

e) Strengthening research and evidence-based programming

The growing recognition of data gaps presents an opportunity to invest in research on EHRD well-being, resilience, and coping strategies. Context-specific evidence—such as that from Uganda's Albertine Graben—can inform more targeted, culturally appropriate, and sustainable interventions.

Overall, existing wellness, protection, and psychosocial support systems for EHRDs are characterized by significant structural and operational gaps, particularly in the integration of mental health care, coordination of services, and accessibility for grassroots defenders. These challenges are compounded by insecurity, stigma, and resource limitations. However, emerging opportunities—including increased global recognition of psychosocial risks, expansion of peer support networks, and integration of mental health into human rights programming—provide a foundation for developing more holistic and resilient protection systems for environmental defenders.

4.4 Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies to Manage Psychosocial Stress and Occupational Risks

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) employ a range of coping mechanisms and resilience strategies to manage the psychosocial stress and occupational risks associated with their work. These strategies are shaped by high-risk environments characterized by intimidation, land conflicts, environmental degradation, and limited institutional protection. Coping mechanisms refer to the immediate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses used to manage stress, while resilience strategies describe longer-term adaptive processes that enable individuals and communities to sustain their work despite adversity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

One of the most common coping mechanisms among EHRDs is peer support, where individuals rely on colleagues, fellow activists, and community members to share experiences, express emotions, and seek reassurance. This collective form of coping helps reduce isolation, validates experiences of stress and burnout, and strengthens emotional resilience within activist networks. For example, in districts such as Hoima and Buliisa, EHRDs often use informal debriefing sessions after field activities to process emotionally difficult experiences linked to oil development and land disputes. Similarly, in Kampala-based civil society networks, peer exchanges during coalition meetings serve as important spaces for managing advocacy-related stress and organizational pressure.

Another key coping mechanism is spirituality and faith-based coping, which provides emotional grounding, hope, and meaning in the face of uncertainty and risk. Many EHRDs draw strength from prayer, religious practices, and spiritual reflection to manage fear, injustice, and emotional exhaustion. In regions such as Kiryandongo and Kikuube, where land evictions and livelihood disruptions are common, spirituality often serves as a critical source of comfort and psychological endurance during prolonged advocacy struggles (Pargament, 1997).

In addition to coping mechanisms, EHRDs develop resilience strategies that support long-term adaptation to challenging environments. These include building strong community solidarity networks, engaging in collective action, and forming alliances with civil society organizations and legal support systems. In the Albertine region, community-based defenders often strengthen resilience

through collective resistance against land grabs, reinforcing solidarity and shared responsibility. In the Central region, particularly Kampala, resilience is further strengthened through institutional partnerships and advocacy coalitions that provide technical, legal, and emotional support.

Another important resilience strategy is adaptive learning and capacity building, where EHRDs continuously develop skills in documentation, advocacy, legal literacy, and negotiation. These skills enhance their ability to navigate complex governance systems, reduce vulnerability to intimidation, and build confidence in advocacy processes over time.

Despite their importance, these coping and resilience strategies remain largely informal and unevenly supported. The absence of structured psychosocial services, organizational wellness systems, and institutional mental health support limits their long-term effectiveness. Prolonged reliance on informal coping mechanisms without formal support increases the risk of cumulative stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This highlights the urgent need for integrated psychosocial interventions that complement existing community-based resilience practices.

Overall, while peer support and spirituality remain central coping mechanisms, their effectiveness is constrained by limited access to professional mental health services. Emotional well-being requires sustained and structured support systems that go beyond individual or informal strategies (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Without such systems, many EHRDs remain vulnerable to long-term psychological consequences, including withdrawal from activism and reduced effectiveness in their work. Therefore, strengthening institutionalized mental health services and organizational wellness programs is essential for sustaining resilience among EHRDs.

4.5 Resilience-building practices of EHRDs in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected communities.

Resilience-building practices among Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected communities are the strategies, behaviors, and collective systems through which defenders sustain their well-being, adapt to ongoing stressors, and continue their advocacy work under conditions of risk and uncertainty. In Uganda's contexts such as the Albertine Graben and other climate-stressed regions, resilience is shaped by intersecting pressures including land conflicts, environmental degradation, extractive industry expansion, and climate-related livelihood disruptions. These conditions require EHRDs to develop both individual and collective mechanisms for coping and sustained engagement (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018; Global Witness, 2023).

At the individual level, resilience-building practices often include emotional regulation strategies, adaptive coping mechanisms, and personal meaning-making processes. Many EHRDs rely on strong personal conviction, commitment to justice, and a sense of responsibility toward affected communities to sustain motivation despite adversity. Practices such as reflection, spirituality, prayer, journaling, and mindfulness are commonly used to manage stress and restore emotional balance. Research on occupational stress indicates that such internal coping mechanisms are important for maintaining psychological stability in high-pressure environments, although they are most effective when complemented by external support systems (Clayton et al., 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

At the interpersonal level, resilience is reinforced through peer relationships and social support systems. EHRDs often depend on trusted colleagues, community members, and fellow activists for

emotional support, advice, and shared problem-solving. These relationships help reduce isolation and provide spaces for processing traumatic experiences related to intimidation, land conflicts, or environmental harm. Peer mentorship is also an important practice, where experienced defenders guide newer activists on how to navigate risks, manage stress, and engage safely in advocacy work. Such relational support strengthens both emotional resilience and practical coping capacity.

Collective resilience-building is particularly significant in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected communities, where EHRDs operate within broader community struggles over land, livelihoods, and environmental protection. Community-based organizations, solidarity groups, and local advocacy networks enable shared decision-making, collective action, and mutual protection. Through joint advocacy, public meetings, community mobilization, and participatory monitoring of environmental impacts, EHRDs build a sense of shared purpose and collective agency. This collective engagement helps distribute emotional burdens and reinforces social cohesion, which is critical in high-risk advocacy contexts (Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020).

Cultural and spiritual practices also play an important role in resilience-building. In many Ugandan communities, faith-based practices such as prayer, worship, and spiritual counseling provide emotional grounding and hope in the face of uncertainty. Traditional practices, storytelling, and communal gatherings allow defenders and communities to process experiences of loss, displacement, or injustice in culturally meaningful ways. These practices contribute to emotional healing and reinforce identity and belonging, which are essential components of resilience in contexts of prolonged stress.

Organizational practices further support resilience when EHRDs operate within structured civil society groups or networks. These include workload management, role rotation, peer debriefing after high-risk events, safety planning, and limited rest or recovery periods. Some organizations are increasingly integrating psychosocial awareness into their internal systems, although such practices remain inconsistent and often dependent on external funding. Where present, these organizational measures help reduce burnout and promote sustainable engagement in advocacy work.

Despite these practices, resilience-building among EHRDs remains largely adaptive rather than systematically supported. Many defenders rely on informal coping strategies due to limited access to formal mental health services, weak institutional support, and insufficient integration of psychosocial care into environmental governance frameworks. This creates a situation where resilience is maintained under continuous strain, increasing the risk of cumulative stress and burnout over time (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Nevertheless, there are emerging opportunities to strengthen resilience-building systems. These include integrating mental health and psychosocial support into EHRD programming, strengthening peer support networks, institutionalizing well-being policies within organizations, and expanding community-based psychosocial interventions. Digital tools and regional solidarity networks also offer new pathways for enhancing communication, emotional support, and rapid response to crises affecting defenders (Global Witness, 2023).

In conclusion, resilience-building practices among EHRDs in climate-vulnerable and oil-affected communities are multifaceted, combining individual coping strategies, peer support, collective action, cultural practices, and organizational measures. While these systems enable continued engagement under challenging conditions, they remain insufficiently supported by formal structures. Strengthening integrated and sustainable resilience frameworks is therefore essential for protect-

ing the well-being of EHRDs and ensuring the long-term effectiveness of environmental and climate justice advocacy.

4.6 Support Systems for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Support systems for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are predominantly informal, relying on personal networks such as colleagues, friends, family members, and community-based relationships rather than structured institutional mechanisms. While these informal systems can provide immediate emotional comfort, shared understanding, and solidarity during moments of crisis, they tend to be inconsistent in availability, quality, and reliability. As a result, their effectiveness in addressing sustained or cumulative stress is limited, especially in contexts where EHRDs are exposed to continuous threats, uncertainty, and workload pressure.

The lack of formalized support structures—such as organizational psychosocial programs, regular counseling services, peer supervision systems, or mental health referrals—means that many defenders navigate emotional distress on an ad hoc basis. This creates significant variability in how individuals cope, with some receiving adequate informal support while others remain largely isolated. Over time, this inconsistency weakens the overall resilience of EHRD networks, as there is no standardized mechanism to identify, monitor, or respond to chronic stress and burnout.

Furthermore, informal systems are often reactive rather than preventive, addressing emotional strain only after it has escalated rather than mitigating it early. This limits their capacity to support long-term well-being or recovery. In high-risk environments such as land governance and environmental advocacy contexts, where stressors are persistent and multi-layered, the absence of structured, reliable support systems increases vulnerability to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal from activism. Consequently, there is a clear need to institutionalize consistent and accessible support frameworks that can complement existing informal networks and ensure sustained psychosocial care for EHRDs.

4.7 Wellness programming for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)

Wellness programming for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) refers to structured interventions designed to support their psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being while they engage in high-risk environmental and human rights advocacy. Given the increasing exposure of EHRDs to intimidation, violence, land conflicts, and sustained psychosocial stress, wellness programming has become an essential component of holistic protection frameworks rather than a peripheral support activity (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018; Global Witness, 2023).

A key component of wellness programming is psychosocial support services, which include counseling, trauma-informed care, and mental health interventions. These services are intended to address anxiety, stress, burnout, and trauma resulting from prolonged exposure to environmental conflict and advocacy-related risks. Interventions may include individual counseling, group therapy sessions, debriefing after critical incidents, and referral pathways to specialized mental health services. However, in many contexts where EHRDs operate, such services are often limited or inac-

cessible, particularly in rural and resource-constrained areas, requiring adaptation into community-based and culturally sensitive models (Clayton et al., 2017).

Peer support systems also form a critical part of wellness programming. These include peer listening groups, well-being circles, and informal support networks where defenders share experiences, process emotional stress, and exchange coping strategies. Such spaces reduce isolation, strengthen collective resilience, and provide emotional validation in environments where defenders may feel marginalized or threatened. Research shows that peer-based support enhances psychological recovery and helps sustain long-term engagement in high-stress advocacy work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

In addition, stress management and resilience-building training are commonly integrated into wellness programming. These interventions focus on helping EHRDs recognize early signs of burnout, manage emotional stress, and develop coping strategies such as mindfulness, grounding techniques, and workload management. They also emphasize boundary setting between activism and personal life, which is critical for preventing emotional exhaustion and sustaining long-term engagement in advocacy work (Clayton et al., 2017).

Increasingly, wellness programming is being integrated with security systems to create a more holistic approach to protection. This includes combining physical safety measures with psychosocial support, such as providing psychological debriefing after threats or violent incidents, incorporating stress assessments into risk management processes, and ensuring that emergency relocation includes emotional and mental health support. This integrated approach recognizes that insecurity and psychological well-being are closely linked and must be addressed together (Global Witness, 2023).

Community-based and culturally grounded healing practices are also an important dimension of wellness programming for EHRDs, particularly in contexts like Uganda. These include spiritual support systems, collective prayer, storytelling, traditional healing practices, and community solidarity gatherings. Such approaches provide emotional relief, reinforce social cohesion, and offer culturally relevant ways of coping with stress and trauma in the absence of formal mental health services.

At the organizational level, wellness programming is strengthened through policies that promote sustainable activism. These include workload management strategies, mandatory rest periods, role rotation, burnout prevention policies, and internal staff support systems. Such measures help shift the responsibility for resilience from individuals to institutions, ensuring that defenders are not solely reliant on personal coping strategies to sustain their work.

Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain in wellness programming for EHRDs. Many interventions are short-term, project-based, and donor-dependent, limiting their sustainability. Services are often concentrated in urban areas, leaving grassroots defenders underserved. In addition, mental health and psychosocial support remain underfunded and insufficiently integrated into broader human rights and environmental protection frameworks. Stigma surrounding mental health further limits access and uptake of available services, while the lack of trauma-informed approaches reduces their effectiveness in addressing the specific realities of environmental advocacy.

Nevertheless, there are growing opportunities to strengthen wellness programming for EHRDs. These include the integration of mental health and psychosocial support into human rights programming, expansion of peer-led support models, use of digital platforms for remote counseling and networking, and development of long-term organizational well-being policies. Increasing recognition of environmental advocacy as high-risk psychosocial work also provides an important policy entry point for improving support systems.

Therefore, wellness programming for EHRDs remains a critical but underdeveloped area within environmental governance and human rights protection. Strengthening these systems is essential for safeguarding the emotional well-being of defenders and ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of environmental and climate justice advocacy (UNEP, 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

4.8 Solidarity-building initiatives for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), and community organizers in Uganda

Solidarity-building initiatives for Climate Justice advocates, Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), and community organizers in Uganda are increasingly recognized as essential mechanisms for sustaining collective action, emotional resilience, and protection in high-risk environmental governance contexts. These initiatives emerge in response to the complex pressures faced by defenders, including land conflicts, extractive industry expansion, climate vulnerability, and shrinking civic space. In such environments, solidarity is not only a social value but also a practical strategy for survival, advocacy effectiveness, and psychological support (Global Witness, 2023; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018).

One of the most common forms of solidarity-building is the formation of grassroots networks and community-based organizations that bring together EHRDs, affected communities, and local activists. These networks facilitate information sharing, collective advocacy, and coordinated responses to environmental threats such as land grabbing, pollution, and forced displacement. In Uganda's climate-sensitive and oil-affected regions, such as the Albertine Graben, these structures enable communities to collectively monitor environmental impacts and engage authorities more effectively than individuals acting alone (Tumusiime & Slepian, 2020). They also strengthen collective voice, ensuring that marginalized communities can participate more meaningfully in environmental governance processes.

Peer-to-peer solidarity networks are also central to sustaining emotional resilience among EHRDs. These networks provide safe spaces where defenders can share experiences of intimidation, stress, and burnout, and collectively process the emotional burdens associated with activism. Through informal gatherings, peer mentoring, and support circles, EHRDs are able to reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce shared purpose. Research in occupational stress and activism indicates that such peer-based systems play a critical role in buffering against burnout and emotional exhaustion by fostering belonging and mutual validation (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Clayton et al., 2017).

At a broader level, coalition-building among civil society organizations strengthens solidarity by linking local struggles to national and international advocacy platforms. These coalitions enable EHRDs to amplify their voices, access legal and technical support, and benefit from rapid response mechanisms in cases of threats or violations. In Uganda, networks of human rights organizations and environmental justice groups contribute to coordinated advocacy efforts, documentation of abuses, and engagement with policy processes. Such collective action increases visibility and protection for defenders while also reinforcing solidarity across different regions and thematic areas (Human Rights Network Uganda [HURINET], 2023).

Regional and transnational solidarity initiatives further expand protection and support systems for EHRDs. These include collaborations between Ugandan defenders and international environmental justice movements, donor-supported protection networks, and global human rights platforms. Such linkages provide access to emergency support, capacity building, advocacy amplification, and visibility in cases of risk or persecution. International solidarity also plays a deterrent role by increasing scrutiny of violations against defenders and strengthening accountability mechanisms (Global Witness, 2023).

In addition to organizational and advocacy-based solidarity, community-driven cultural and social support systems remain important in Uganda. These include faith-based support groups, collective prayer sessions, storytelling practices, and communal gatherings that provide emotional comfort and reinforce shared identity. Such culturally grounded forms of solidarity are particularly significant in rural and resource-constrained settings where formal psychosocial services are limited. They help sustain emotional resilience by fostering meaning, hope, and collective strength in the face of adversity.

Despite their importance, solidarity-building initiatives face several challenges. These include limited funding, fragmented coordination among actors, insecurity and surveillance that restrict open collaboration, and unequal participation where more resourced organizations dominate networks. In some cases, fear of retaliation also limits open engagement in solidarity activities, particularly among grassroots defenders working in high-risk extractive zones. These constraints reduce the overall effectiveness and inclusiveness of solidarity systems.

Nevertheless, there are growing opportunities to strengthen solidarity-building for EHRDs and climate justice advocates in Uganda. These include strengthening formalized networks of defenders, integrating psychosocial support into solidarity structures, leveraging digital platforms for secure communication and coordination, and enhancing collaboration between grassroots actors and international allies. Expanding these initiatives can help transform solidarity from an informal coping mechanism into a structured system of collective protection, emotional support, and sustained advocacy.

Thus, solidarity-building initiatives are a foundational pillar of resilience for EHRDs and climate justice actors in Uganda. They not only enhance collective advocacy and protection but also provide essential emotional and psychosocial support in high-risk environments. Strengthening and institutionalizing these initiatives is therefore critical for ensuring the sustainability, safety, and effectiveness of environmental and climate justice movements

5.0 Conclusion

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are essential actors in advancing environmental justice, protecting communities, and safeguarding natural resources. However, the sustainability of their work is closely linked to their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Although EHRDs demonstrate strong commitment and resilience despite high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, this resilience is increasingly strained by limited psychosocial support and weak institutional protection systems.

A key finding is the "resilience paradox," where defenders continue to operate effectively in high-risk environments driven by personal conviction, justice-oriented values, and community solidarity. However, this resilience is largely informal and individually sustained rather than structurally supported. As a result, it masks growing emotional exhaustion and long-term vulnerability to burnout. Evidence from occupational stress research shows that prolonged exposure to high-pressure environments without adequate psychosocial care undermines well-being and may eventually reduce effectiveness and lead to withdrawal from activism (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This highlights a critical imbalance between sustained engagement and insufficient institutional support.

Therefore, EHRD resilience cannot rely solely on individual endurance. It requires stronger systemic investment in psychosocial support services, integration of mental health into protection frameworks, and organizational wellbeing policies. Without these measures, the emotional burden of environmental advocacy remains unfairly individualized. Therefore, protecting the mental and emotional well-being of EHRDs is not only a welfare concern but a strategic requirement for sustaining effective environmental and human rights advocacy.

5.1 Recommendations

5.1.1 Recommendations to government:

Government and policy makers play a central role in addressing the wellbeing challenges faced by Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), and the recommendation can be unpacked into several key components.

•Mainstreaming psychosocial wellbeing into human rights and environmental governance frameworks means that mental health and emotional wellbeing should not be treated as separate or secondary issues, but integrated into national policies that govern environmental protection, land use, and human rights. This ensures that wellbeing considerations become part of planning, implementation, and monitoring processes rather than being addressed only in crisis situations.

•Developing national guidelines that recognize EHRDs as a high-risk occupational group is important because it formally acknowledges the unique risks they face, such as intimidation, displacement, and prolonged stress exposure. By classifying EHRDs in this way, governments can establish clear standards for duty of care, including access to psychosocial support, protection mechanisms, and emergency response systems similar to those provided in other high-risk professions.

•Inter-ministerial collaboration between health, environment, and justice sectors is essential for a coordinated response. The Ministry of Health can provide mental health services and clinical support, the Ministry of Environment can integrate wellbeing into environmental governance and community engagement processes, and the Ministry of Justice can address legal protection and accountability issues. This cross-sectoral approach ensures that support is not fragmented but in-

stead delivered through a unified system.

•Strengthening legal and policy protection against harassment and intimidation addresses one of the root causes of psychological stress among EHRDs. Many defenders experience anxiety and burnout due to threats, surveillance, or legal intimidation linked to their advocacy work. Stronger enforcement of protective laws, faster response mechanisms, and clear reporting channels can reduce exposure to these stressors and improve overall wellbeing.

•Allocating funding for community-based mental health programs in high-risk environmental regions ensures that support services are accessible at the local level. Many EHRDs operate in rural or remote areas where formal mental health services are limited. Investing in community-based programs, mobile clinics, and trained local counselors helps bridge this gap and ensures timely, culturally appropriate psychosocial support.

5.1.2 Recommendations for CSOs

•Institutionalizing internal wellness policies: This means formally embedding wellbeing into organizational rules, procedures, and workplans rather than relying on informal or ad hoc support. CSOs should develop written policies that clearly outline how staff and defenders will access psychosocial care, how often wellbeing checks will occur, and what support mechanisms are available. This ensures consistency, accountability, and long-term commitment to mental health care within the organization.

•Establishing mandatory psychosocial support systems: Organizations should move beyond optional support and make psychosocial services a standard part of operations. This includes providing regular counseling sessions with trained professionals, conducting burnout screening to detect early signs of stress, organizing debriefing sessions after high-risk field activities, and carrying out routine wellbeing audits to assess staff mental health status. These systems help identify problems early and prevent escalation into severe burnout or psychological distress.

•Training focal persons in psychological first aid (PFA): CSOs should designate and train specific staff members as wellbeing or psychosocial focal persons. These individuals should be equipped with skills in psychological first aid, which focuses on providing immediate emotional support during moments of stress or crisis, and trauma-informed care, which ensures that responses to distress are sensitive to past trauma and avoid re-triggering harm. This creates an internal layer of first-response support within organizations.

•Early identification of stress symptoms: Through trained focal persons and structured systems, organizations can detect early warning signs of stress, anxiety, and burnout among staff and defenders. Early identification allows timely intervention, reducing the risk of deterioration into chronic mental health conditions. This also helps organizations adjust workloads or provide targeted support where needed.

•Embedding wellness into organizational culture: Wellbeing should not be treated as a side activity or optional benefit but should become part of how the organization operates on a daily basis. This includes leadership promoting open conversations about mental health, encouraging rest and recovery, normalizing help-seeking behavior, and ensuring that work expectations do not undermine psychological safety. A strong wellness culture reduces stigma and encourages collective responsibility for mental health.

5.1.3 Recommendations to Donors and Development partners

•Prioritizing funding for mental health and wellbeing components:Donors should intentionally allocate resources specifically for mental health within environmental and human rights programs. This means treating wellbeing as a core programmatic priority rather than an optional or supplementary activity. Funding should directly support psychosocial services such as counseling, stress management, trauma recovery, and staff wellbeing initiatives, recognizing that effective advocacy depends on the mental resilience of defenders.

•Requiring psychosocial support strategies in funding frameworks: Funding guidelines should obligate implementing partners to clearly demonstrate how they will address mental health and wellbeing. This includes presenting structured plans for psychosocial support, allocating dedicated budgets for counseling services, and outlining staff wellbeing and resilience-building activities. By making these requirements part of proposal evaluation and approval processes, donors ensure that wellbeing is systematically integrated into project design and implementation.

•Supporting long-term funding cycles: Mental health and resilience building are not short-term outcomes; they require continuous support over time. Donors should therefore move away from short project cycles and instead provide multi-year or flexible funding arrangements. Long-term funding allows organizations to build stable psychosocial systems, maintain consistent counseling services, and develop sustained resilience programs for EHRDs. It also reduces the pressure of constant funding insecurity, which itself can contribute to stress.

•Including wellbeing indicators in reporting frameworks:Traditional donor reporting often focuses on outputs such as number of trainings conducted or policies developed. However, for EHRDs, it is equally important to measure outcomes related to wellbeing, such as reduced burnout levels, improved coping capacity, or increased access to psychosocial services. Incorporating wellbeing indicators into monitoring and evaluation frameworks ensures that mental health is tracked, valued, and improved over time, rather than being overlooked.

5.1.4 Recommendations to Community Structures, Peer Networks & Individual Level EHRDs

•Strengthening structured peer support systems in communities: Community-based EHRD groups should move beyond informal interaction by establishing organized support mechanisms such as peer mentorship groups, safe spaces for sharing experiences, and regular wellbeing check-ins. These structures help create consistency in emotional support and reduce isolation among defenders.

•Building capacity of peer leaders: Selected members within EHRD networks should be trained in basic psychosocial support skills, including active listening and emotional first aid. This enables them to provide early support, recognize distress signals, and bridge gaps where professional mental health services are not available.

•Promoting personal wellbeing and early self-care among EHRDs: At the individual level, EHRDs should be encouraged to recognize early signs of burnout, manage workloads, take rest periods, and adopt reflective practices. This helps reduce accumulated stress and supports long-term emotional resilience.

•Encouraging help-seeking and collective care without stigma: EHRDs should be supported to seek help from peers or professionals without fear of stigma, while also engaging in collective care systems. However, this must be understood as complementary to—not a substitute for—formal psychosocial and institutional support systems.

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