



UNIVERSITY
of York

**UNESCO Chair, Protection of
Human Rights Defenders and
Expansion of Political Space**

WORKING PAPER SERIES

**Centre for Applied
Human Rights**

Working Paper No. 3

**HUMAN RIGHTS LEADERSHIP:
AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

Eric Hoddy, John Gray, Nelson José Rivas Araque,
Elena Levina, Bondita Mrina, Johncation Muhindo,
Victoria Nolasco, Christopher Opio, Kudzaiishe Seti,
Azza Soliman, Prosper Tirindindi, Natalia Zviagina



UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space

The UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space (<https://www.yorkunescochairhrds.org/>) is held by Professor Paul Gready at the Centre for Applied Rights (CAHR), University of York. The Chair promotes an integrated system of research, teaching and training, as well as community engagement and communication. As Chair, CAHR facilitates collaboration between high-level, internationally recognised researchers and teaching staff of the University of York and other institutions in the country, as well as elsewhere in the region and in other regions of the world. In support of its activities the Chair publishes policy briefs and working papers.

Previous papers in the series

1. Gready, P. & Jackson, E. (2023) Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection, York: UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, Working Paper No. 1
2. Tsui, F. & Yu, S. (2023) Activism in the face of repression: UK universities as allies for Hong Kong activist students and academics, York: UNESCO Chair in the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, Working Paper No.2

About the authors

The authors of this paper are staff, human rights defenders and former fellows at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, who worked collaboratively to understand, define and develop a research and practice agenda on human rights leadership.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Paul Gready, Pippa Cooper and Patricia Bartley at the Centre for Applied Human Rights. We would also like to thank the human rights defenders who contributed to the project, and Liz Griffin and Mary Jane Real who supported the delivery of the thematic workshops. We also thank the coaches who supported the defenders in the project: Joss Carruthers, Kirstie McLaughlan, Neil Mackinnon, Sue Reynolds, Kay Young, Anne-Marie Rowson, David Alcock, Suzie MacKenzie, 'Ronke Kokoruwe, Rupert Roniger, Joan van den Brink, Jo Cammell, Alex Patient, Shirley Collier.

Suggested Citation:

Hoddy, E. et al. (2024) Human rights leadership: an action research project. York: UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space. Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, Working Paper 3

About the Centre for Applied Human Rights and the UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space

The Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre based at the University of York. CAHR's co-director, Professor Paul Gready, was awarded the UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space in 2023 to promote an integrated system of research, teaching and training, as well as community engagement and communication. As Chair, CAHR facilitates collaboration between high-level, internationally recognised researchers and teaching staff of the University of York and other institutions in the country, as well as elsewhere in the region and in other regions of the world.

For further information about CAHR and the UNESCO Chair, visit www.york.ac.uk/cahr or email cahr-admin@york.ac.uk

Executive summary

This working paper summarises the process and results of a one--year, OSF-funded research project on human rights leadership at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, which was undertaken between January and December 2023.

This action research project worked with 20 human rights defenders to explore questions of leadership in a human rights setting and to apply emerging insights and lessons in their leadership practice. The study group was made up of defenders from different geographic regions, organisational settings, and working on a range of human rights issues, from civil and political rights to land and environmental rights.

The project was driven by initial research questions seeking to understand:

- How is good leadership understood in the context of challenges posed by Covid-19 and attacks on political space?
- How do leadership practices contribute to wellbeing and resilience in these contexts and what positive and innovative responses are emerging?
- To what extent do gender and other hierarchies enable and constrain leadership practices within human rights organisations and movements?

The project's key insights are:

- Leadership is a contested topic among human rights defenders. Some defenders are comfortable to identify themselves as leaders and others less so.
- Leaders are overseeing organisational adaptations in response to changing contexts that are about making individuals and organisations less of a target and mitigating risks. The main challenges to leadership and organisational functioning include weak financial resilience and limited reflective practice in organisational settings.
- Gender and other hierarchies or social signifiers within the human rights movement can undermine human rights work and women's leadership, while efforts to address this can cause backlash and intimidation from colleagues within the movement.
- For most participants, the civic or operating space for defenders' work or activism has 'deteriorated' or 'significantly deteriorated' over the past five years, with implications for their choices as leaders for themselves and for their organisations / networks.
- Arising from the dialogues within the project, this report offers a provisional definition of 'good human rights leadership' as:

multidimensional, characterised by the leading of oneself, the leading of others, leading with others and leading for others on the basis of particular values (especially dignity, fairness and equality) that are also expressed through practice.

Yet in decision making and action, human rights leaders must navigate and negotiate **between different values and priorities**, such as equality in decision making and protection of staff, that can be sources of **tension, disagreement and conflict** in teams. Good human rights leaders are attentive to the ways that **social signifiers**, such as gender and class, as well as organisational culture and local and wider culture may shape their leadership and relationships between people within organisations and movements. Human rights leadership is often **emergent** rather than planned or necessarily desired: activists can find themselves in leadership positions due to **force of circumstance and without training**, often having to navigate complex organisational and political contexts that are

uncertain, repressive and sometimes violent. Qualities that are especially important in challenging times include **resilience and adaptability**. Good human rights leadership is **inherently reflective, honest, and characterised by awareness and learning**.

Dissemination activities and outputs decided on by the study group include:

- A pilot podcast series for sharing learning to defenders outside the project.
- Video interviews with defenders for sharing learning to defenders outside of the project and supporting defender visibility.
- A networking platform for the exchange of knowledge and tools.

Recommendations for future research and practice include:

- Accommodating leadership training and development within a broader programme to develop reflective practice capacities and organisational cultures of reflection and learning. This should include practice supervision for cultivating reflective team members.
- Exploring methodological and training approaches that can address leadership questions and development indirectly by means of alternative vocabularies (e.g. ‘human rights protagonists’) that provide more scope for participants to narrate who they are as human rights actors and how their practice can be supported and strengthened.
- Exploring financial resilience and vulnerability and the implications for human rights leadership practice.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Activities undertaken	7
2. Research approach	9
3. Findings	9
4. Initial participant evaluation and impacts of the project	13
5. A framework for leadership development and research	15
6. Outputs and dissemination	17
Next steps	17
References	18

1. Activities undertaken

The project worked with a group of 20 human rights defenders for the duration of the project, January 2023 – December 2023. At the time, project participants were working on a wide range of rights issues including torture and ill-treatment, health, education, land and environment, and through activities such as legal advocacy, lobbying, community organising, and research. The following core research and engagement activities were undertaken and are summarised in Figure 1.

Interviews

19 interviews were undertaken between January and March 2023 that were organised around the following four themes: conceptions of good leadership, leadership practice, contexts for leadership, overcoming challenges to/for leadership. The purpose of these interviews was to enquire into participants' views on what leadership means in a human rights context and how leadership can be supported. Interview responses were analysed by the research team and used to produce a summary report of the key themes and priorities identified during interviews.

Output: Interviewees Summary Report 1, April 2023.

Workshops 1-4

Workshop 1: An online introductory workshop was held in April 2023 for discussion and feedback on the Interviewees' Summary Report. Participants discussed three sets of questions and themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews with the aim of identifying which thematic areas to focus on during the project.

Output: Summary Report 2: Introductory Workshop on Human Rights Leadership, April 2023.

Workshops 2 and 3: Two thematic workshops with project participants were undertaken and each co-delivered by an expert contributor.

Workshop 2 (June 2023) addressed questions of gender and intersectionality in leadership. The workshop was motivated by a key insight about the influence of privilege on leadership and how it is practised (reflected in social signifiers of gender, caste, ethnicity, age, education, religion and economic resources). The workshop was co-delivered with Mary Jane Real, Co-Director of the Urgent Action Fund – Asia Pacific.

Workshop 3 (August 2023) addressed how leadership can be supported and strengthened through attention to core values, qualities and skills in practice, and the reflective space required to interrogate these. The workshop was co-delivered with Elizabeth Griffin, a leadership coach and honorary professor at the University of Essex. Project participants were required to prepare for the session by completing a reflective workbook.

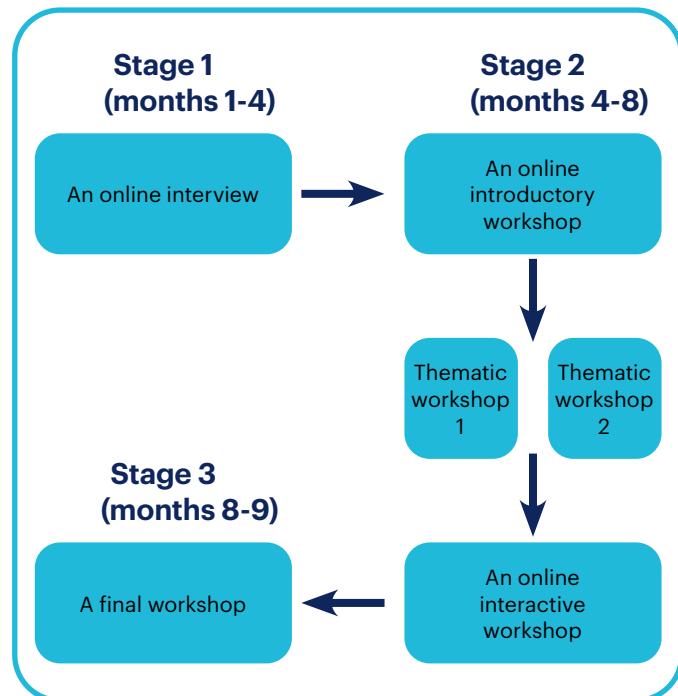


Figure 1. Main activities

Workshop 4: Workshop 4 (September 2023) was led and delivered by the project team for the purposes of synthesising emerging learning from workshops 2 and 3 and to capture the collective learning that was emerging through the project. Participants brainstormed the possible outputs that could be co-produced through the project for disseminating learning (Figure. 2), which led to the formation of three action groups:

1. Networking and visibility, with an emphasis on videos;
2. Feminist leadership, privilege, values, with an emphasis on podcasts;
3. Knowledge exchange and resources, with an emphasis on maintaining a small online network for exchanging information (Facebook).

Participants were introduced to the action planning component of the project (below), and how this could be applied in their work, and to the professional coaching component (below).

Output: Summary Report 3: Human Rights Leadership in Challenging Times (November 2023)

Action planning

Participants produced and implemented action plans that drew on reflections and insights acquired from the thematic workshops and from the project as a whole, as well as from elsewhere. The emphasis was on what participants wanted to do, and do differently, as a leader, on the basis of new learning. Implementation of the action plans was assisted by executive coaching. Action plans were implemented from September 2023 onwards.

Executive coaching

Participants were offered a package of three one-hour coaching sessions with a professionally qualified and accredited leadership coach. In total, 12 coaches worked with 14 participants. Coaching sessions were confidential, and their content did not form part of the research component of the project. Coaching sessions could be used by participants to finalise their action plans, reflect and make decisions as they implemented their plans, and/or help clarify their leadership style and how it could develop further. Participants were encouraged to share their action plans with their coaches prior to coaching sessions beginning – we estimate just under 50% did so, the others choosing to focus their coaching on issues such as wellbeing, leadership development or developing their organisation.

Workshop 5: A final hybrid workshop (December 2023) sought to present emerging project findings back to participants for feedback, discussion and clarification among the group, and to further capture what aspects of collective learning had taken place. The workshop sought to identify contributions of the project to participants' practice and to plan further steps for co-produced outputs.



Figure 2. Jamboard of 'where next?' and outputs

2. Research approach

The research approach consisted of the Delphi method retrofitted with an action research framework and modified to support qualitative research. The Delphi method is typically applied for acquiring informed judgement on 'issues that are unexplored, difficult to define, highly context and expertise specific, or future-oriented' (Fletcher and Marchildon, 2014, p.3). The choice of approach was suited to examining human rights leadership, which is under-investigated in the academic literature, and in particular leadership in a COVID-19 context. The action research framework provided a basis for applying the method in a collaborative, action-oriented research project.

Individual interviews and workshop sessions were recorded and used as data by the project leaders and analysed thematically. The presentation of summary reports in workshops was used to acquire feedback and facilitate further discussion of emerging themes. The project's emphasis was on defenders' own understandings of leadership and leadership practices, their priorities, and appraisals of challenges.

3. Findings

1. How is good leadership understood in the context of challenges posed by Covid-19 and attacks on political space?

I would have wished that someone else who's better or more capable, would take that [leadership] position. But because there's only a few of us left. And I have that responsibility to carry on, although I want that. But I would want other more capable persons to be with me. But I can't have that right now.' Project Participant

Most participants reported that the civic or operating space for their work or activism had 'deteriorated' or 'significantly deteriorated' over the past five years. Two participants indicated no change while one participant indicated there had been an improvement. The main driver of change was identified as government targeting of activists, organisations and groups through a variety of measures that are summarised in Table 1. Some of these measures occurred under the guise of responses to the Covid-19 pandemic – however none of the participants singled out the pandemic as a unique source of challenges worthy of investigation, tending instead to incorporate the pandemic within a much broader set of issues (local, national, global) that present barriers to activism.

Freezing of bank accounts

- Blacklisting leaders
- Threats and intimidation
- Delegitimising human rights work (as a 'threat to national security', etc.)
- Arrests, interrogation, imprisonment
- Violence against activists and colleagues
- Surveillance
- NGO registration and funding laws and restrictions

Table 1

Despite deterioration, interviews revealed significant variation in the extent to which activists and defenders are able to continue their human rights work. On one end, activists and defenders continue, in general, to work as previously. On the other, many activists and defenders are operating in organisations that are in 'survival mode' and have had to significantly adjust and modify their organisational practices in various ways. For these defenders and activists, the most significant aspects of the context are unpredictability and risk – for one participant, human rights work had become like taking 'steps in a dark room.'

A preliminary definition of 'good leadership' was developed through the project which captures a) points of agreement among the research group; and b) points of disagreement that reflect some of the contingencies and context dependent influences on leadership practice. The latter can be seen to capture, at a more abstract level, the requirement of good leaders to recognise difference, make decisions, and negotiate areas of conflict and disagreement. For example, the tension between horizontal and more hierarchical forms of leadership both as practices and as values, and the context and circumstances that might demand particular leadership styles.

In formulating the aforementioned definition, there was some scepticism among some participants about the value of a definition. This scepticism was rooted in at least two concerns. One concern was that if 'leadership' is assumed to equate to 'command and control' this is problematic to reconcile with more horizontal relationships in organisations and movements (NB not all participants made this assumed link between leadership and command and control). While some participants spoke openly about leadership and identified as leaders, others were more openly uncomfortable to do the same. A recurring theme across the project was the tension between horizontal and hierarchical expressions and practices of leadership within organisations and groups. We affirm that there are many expressions of leadership which are not problematically hierarchical.

As a result, this definition is accommodating of different leadership styles, horizontal as well as hierarchical, whose determination may be highly context dependent.

A second concern was that definitions can be oppressive when they are treated as definitive and become imposed.

For these reasons we emphasise our definition as tentative and subject to revision. We suggest the strength of it be tested in terms of its ‘practical adequacy’ i.e. that it is able to ‘generate expectations about the world and about the results of our actions which are actually realized’ (Sayer, 2010, p.47). We view it as a starting point (rather than end point) for investigating human rights leadership in practice and research settings.

A significant finding from work to define ‘good leadership’ is methodologically significant and refers to the manner in which the terms ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ interfere with this aim, as well as how leadership can be supported and strengthened. The term ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ is imbued with meanings that vary socially and culturally and generate particular expectations. According to one participant:

‘Because most of the time we talk about leaders as individuals, and that puts so much pressure on human rights defenders. And that’s one thing I worked on with my coach. Because we have this idea of what ‘good human rights leadership’ is – you have to be good at decision making, problem solving, you have to be a people person. But one thing I learned is maybe we could do away with that traditional notion of leadership which focuses on the individual.’

While the participant quoted above suggests ‘collective leadership’ may be a good alternative, there is value in considering in the design stage and delivery of future research projects and training whether to discard the term ‘leader’ altogether. A question is whether beginning with a less ‘loaded’ term, such as ‘protagonist’ or ‘leaderful behaviour’ could provide more useful alternatives. For instance, ‘leaderful behaviour’ may help to emphasise how leadership is an inherent function within a process of successful social change rather than something which resides in some people or roles and not others, while ‘protagonist’ could dispel particular social and cultural associations and expectations and allow participants to narrate how they see themselves as human rights actors. This may permit future projects to address leadership indirectly but possibly more effectively on the terms set out by the participant.

2. How do leadership practices contribute to wellbeing and resilience in leaders’ contexts; and what positive and innovative responses are emerging?

The relationship between leadership and protecting, maintaining and sustaining activism in challenging times is less clear. Interviews revealed some organisational adaptations in response to changing contexts that were about making individuals and organisations less of a target and mitigating risks (personal, financial etc.). They included:

1. Adjustments of tactics, for example being more muted in public pronouncements and avoiding donors that the government dislikes.
2. Lowering organisational profile, for example by shifting away from human rights language to alternative vocabularies, unbranding, and focusing on certain cases and issues over others.
3. Organisational restructuring and new forms of working, such as by embedding the organisation discretely in large donors.
4. Renewed internal security focus, for example providing staff training on security and training new staff.
5. Mentally preparing oneself for the worst.

A key challenge to individual and organisational resilience and sustainable activism was identified as financial. New restrictions on financial flows are a significant obstacle while the funding and donor system that supports short-term projects is a source of uncertainty for organisations, leaders and team members. Team members face uncertainty with the termination of projects or when

organisations are confronting severe cuts to funding. Some participants suggested that donors do not have a great deal of interest in the idea of ‘financial resilience’ and that there is, therefore, value in future research examining good organisational practice for circumventing national restrictions on funding and alternative funding means (e.g. bitcoin) that can be shared with donors and funders to influence their practices. It was suggested that financial factors and vulnerability are one of the most significant influences on poor leadership and threats to good leadership and organisational resilience.

‘We cannot call it a fight or battle for human rights anymore. We are sitting, not standing anymore since 2022, 2023. Well the strategy is to survive this time. Survive and keep working to a low level.’ Project Participant

‘We have to survive [...] it’s a very practical problem. So, organizations need to learn how to sustain themselves physically.’ Project Participant

A key theme that emerged was the lack of reflective space and the limited capacities in organisations for leaders and team members to engage in reflective practice. In addition to team performance and effectiveness these matter for individual and organisational resilience and wellbeing (Schön, 1983; Askeland and Fook, 2009). Indeed, one of the main contributions of the project identified by participants was the space to reflect and discuss (section 5 below). According to one participant,

‘To me our conversation in the group was like psychotherapy but maybe better [...] I like it better than a conversation with a psychologist [i.e. as delivered through other forms of support for defenders] because we discuss not just how to protect ourselves but how to go forward. At the same time to pause [...] human rights defenders and especially activists prefer to struggle, go and do something. And we don’t have proper time to stop, think and reflection on our own lives and behaviour. This was an opportunity not just to have a rest but also receive new tools, I don’t know, rethink our approaches towards our work with community, colleagues and so on. It was very important to me actually.’

3. To what extent do gender and other hierarchies enable and constrain leadership practices within human rights organisations and movements?

The role of gender and other hierarchies or social signifiers and privilege emerged as an important theme for the duration of the project on account of how they can influence leadership practices in unproductive ways. Hierarchies of significance to leadership practice were identified and discussed through vignettes: caste, education, economic resources, gender, and religion. Participants identified how these signifiers can shape leadership in important ways, such as where a leader’s beliefs about the competencies and capacities of others to make decisions and to engage in more collective and shared forms of leadership may be partly determined by beliefs about the appropriate role of women.

A key constraint was identified as the persistent patriarchy within organisations and groups and the wider human rights sector that undermines women’s leadership. Leadership itself is also culturally informed and stereotyped, although for human rights this varied according to geographic setting.

Obstacles are also encountered in trying to address social signifiers, prejudice and instances of harassment and violence within the movement where these provoke backlash, intimidation and silencing of those trying to speak out. The challenges of addressing issues of prejudice and violence within the human rights movement may be augmented by the added challenge of attacks by the state.

‘We have this whole patriarchal mindset within our own[human rights] sector.’
Project Participant

4. Initial participant evaluation and impacts of the project

Initial evaluation and impacts of the project were investigated by the project group in the final workshop. Participants' main emphasis in their initial evaluation was on the reflective, dialogic spaces provided by the project for reflecting in- and on- action (Schön, 1983) and which consisted of interactions among project participants; between participants and project leaders; and between participants and coaches. Initial evaluation and impacts were identified in terms of:

1. Having a space to reflect individually and as a group on leadership practice, with impact identified in terms of new understandings of the different and contested dimensions of leadership; and adjustments to participants' leadership practices and decision-making.
2. Translating workshop learnings and discussion documents on leadership for local staff in participants' organisations in order to facilitate new conversations about good leadership.
3. In-group solidarity and a renewed sense of self-realisation, where participants from different geographic areas came to identify with one another on the basis of similar vulnerabilities, challenges, and values, and took steps to set up a closed network that would last beyond the duration of the project.

Having space to reflect individually and as a group

Participants' emphasis on the value of reflective space and the lack of it in human rights work may indicate a need for leadership training and development to further cultivate reflective practice in human rights organisations and in leaders, and to develop leader capacities for 'reflective supervision' (i.e. of team members that are accountable to leaders and managers) within organisations. The value of the space was described on many occasions throughout the project. For example, for one participant:

'Sometimes we are in the work too much that we don't reflect on ourselves. So [the project] helped us reflect on our, even that learning and unlearning is important. So learning, unlearning and relearning. So that actually really helped me to look into things in a very different way.'

For another,

'If there is one thing I've learned or benefited from this workshop is the reflection [...] [and] I continue to think deeper and discuss with my coach. We had a lot of discussion [...] [For example] I used to take [networking] for granted but it's from this workshop that I realised even if I have an issue in my community it's not about me and my community. Someone out there can also contribute to that cause. And this is something I got from this workshop, when we're talking about qualities. The ability to network.'

And for another:

'[what was] really good and inspiring for me was the exchange with other women human rights defenders, other human rights defenders. It was really inspiring and being able to think about values in a feminist perspective was really important for me because we are always with lots of things to do and think at the same time, and under the patriarchal situation. So it was really good to stop and think about both ways: of feminism and human rights work. So it was really important to me.'

Some participants reported that the research space allowed them to admit their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, as leaders, to peers in the study group in a way that they are not able to with activists at home or with their families.

Reflective space was also cultivated through the coaching sessions as well as in workshops:

'I found the coaching particularly helpful [...] I intend to retire, being a founder, intending to retire in the next couple of years, [and] hand over to someone else who's already in place. But I suppose the question for me has been the "How to?." [...] We spoke about that a lot. And [coach name] was amazing, really, really was good. So it, it helped me plan, you know, put in a few things in place that I didn't even think about before. For example, what I can do post-2025 and that sort of thing. So yeah, very useful.'

According to another:

'The coach really helped me [...] So I'm in the transition period, like, I want to shift the leadership in the organisation to a second-line leadership. We are in that transition period, and also the sustainability of the organisation is important as well as the sustainability of us, because we know that human rights defenders or activists don't have any resources. Like how we can sustain our work so that we discussed a lot. And, and actually he helped me to find out, like my inner capacity, what I think about myself, and maybe like one thing he was trying to find out from me: what is blocking you to talk about something like this? There's many times that we don't [speak] because something is we've keep inside us. So he try to like, help me to talk about more about my life, my journey [...]'

Relevance of individual and group activities to others

The project will follow up with defenders at a later date about any indirect organisational impact of their participation in the project. However, there were some indications that this was beginning to happen or be considered:

'I opened a discussion about this programme [leadership project] with my colleague in our organisation [...] and we share knowledge and conversations about what happened in our [project] workshop and I want to ask if I can translate our reports into Arabic and share with them. I think it is very useful for them and they asked me to meet with them every month to talk with them about leadership in human rights [...] [the project reports] will be useful for many Arab countries.'

For another:

'I like [the project format] as a good example of how to work with community of HRDs in [country] for example.'

In-group solidarity

Feelings of in-group solidarity and connection were shared by some participants towards the end of the project and featured in conversations about network outputs. For example:

'I'd also like to say we have become a small community across the world nowadays. The human rights community is shrinking. And this actually [project] platform for us, we have all come together from different countries. And we share the same values. But at the same time we can be a solidarity for each other, in our group together. We have created a Whatsapp group together, we are thinking of having a social media group where you can all come and share information. I can see [another project participant] has shared information there on funding opportunity so someone can take this opportunity. I think this is something we have benefited from this workshop.'

5. A framework for leadership development and research

On the basis of these findings, we offer a framework which may be used for informing the design of human rights leadership development material and training (Figure 3). The framework also foregrounds the value of applied, action-oriented research in leadership that involves collaborating with leaders to experiment and reflect on practice.

The framework extends Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 2015) by offering three lenses for human rights leadership that have been distilled out from this research project:

- **Context** – the multiple internal and external systems, sub-systems and their interactions that enable and constrain options and opportunities for action, such as associated with social and organisational culture, and political, legal, economic, ecological environments.
- **The self** – the unique-to-self skills, knowledge, values, personhood and qualities of individual leaders, manifested in how they think, how they learn, and how they act.
- **Agency** – the practice of leadership demonstrated by the defender, in a variety of contexts: leadership of self (or 'being a leader in your own life'); leadership of others; leadership with others; and leadership for others in networks, organisations and movements.

Within the operation of Kolb's learning cycle, the discipline (as well as the skill and capacity) of the practitioner to reflect on action amidst the daily pressure of action and to be self-consciously choiceful (reflecting-in-action) within that daily pressure, distinguishes human rights leaders as more reflexive practitioners: awake to themselves and the expression of themselves through their work (Schön, 1983).

Furthermore, leadership development that attends to the four stages of Kolb's model through the lenses of context, self and agency may assist leaders to bring a deeper and more informed analysis of experience, increasing the chances of more effective learning and more effective leaderful behaviour in the future.

Briefly, these four stages of the cycle unfold as follows:

- **Concrete experience** – This is what we might characterise as the 'daily doing' of advocacy, meetings, decisions, relationship-building, administration, and other tasks which a leader's day contains. How people respond in the moment to the leader's actions and words; what wider factors influence how their actions are interpreted in the short and longer terms, and how the knowledge of the person in front of them influences the words and non-verbal communication of the defender – all these could be examples of the lenses in action.
- **Reflective observation** – Leaders rarely have time or support mechanisms in place to be able to spend time in conscious reflection. Journalling, peer dialogue, coaching, solo thinking-time are ways in which reflection can take place. The discipline in this stage of the model is to bring objectivity: to lead oneself in thinking or talking about an event without always being caught up in the emotions again; to name the separate parts of what happened; to consider how oneself and others were perceived, and the underlying factors or influences which may have been shaping the unfolding events.
- **Abstract conceptualisation** – Also known as 'sense-making'. This stage invites the creation of a narrative or explanation for why things turned out the way they did. The stage can include applying or seeking out theories (such as models of human behaviour, gender theory, ethnographic insights, context analysis etc.) which support an objective interpretation. The active choice of the leader in what they look for can help shape a more holistic interpretation of experience, although biases and assumptions – if not fully surfaced in the Reflective Observation stage – may unknowingly distort the search for explanations and the eventual explanation that the leader reaches. Abstract

conceptualisations can be expected to develop over time as well, and as leaders revise and possibly correct earlier conceptualisations over multiple learning cycles.

- **Active experimentation** – Planning for Concrete Experience. Given how a leader now understands more deeply the What of their doing and how come things happened the way they did, this stage of “Now what?” invites an aware set of decisions – either to ensure that positive outcomes are repeated in the future, or to minimise the risk of unhelpful outcomes occurring again. Interventions may be adapted to be more culturally sensitive or politically responsive. The leader may be carrying an intent to speak differently, or to listen more, or to bring a different ‘presence’ into their work. In essence, their leaderful behaviour is more nuanced, decided-upon (rather than reactive in the moment), and more consciously aligned to an emerging sense of how the defender seeks to be influential and effective in their context.

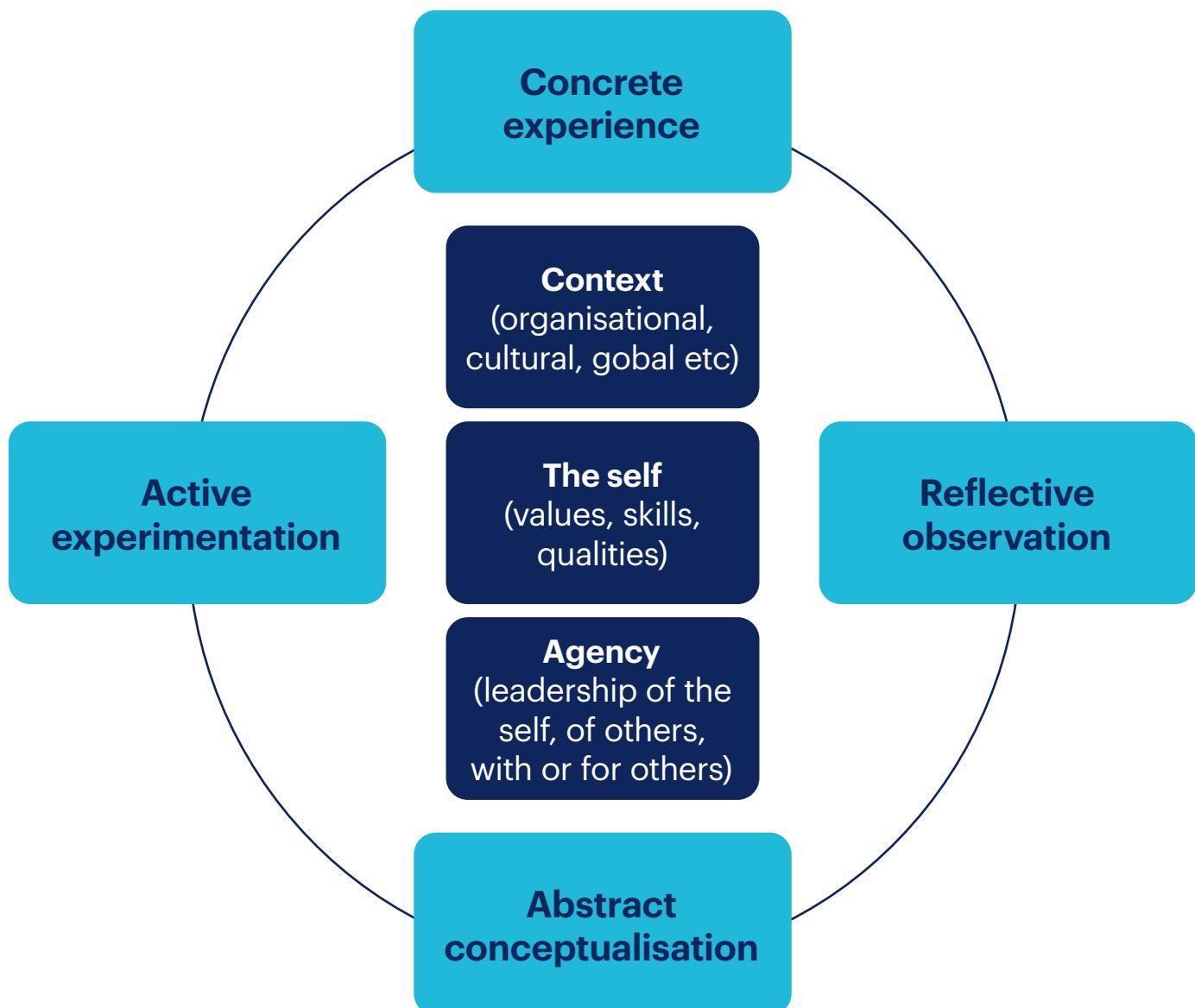


Figure 3. Extension of Kolb's experiential learning cycle

6. Outputs and dissemination

Participants brainstormed the possible outputs that could be co-produced through the project for disseminating learning: 1. Networking and visibility, with an emphasis on videos; 2. Feminist leadership, privilege, values, with an emphasis on podcasts; 3. Knowledge exchange and resources, with an emphasis on maintaining a small online network for exchanging information (Facebook).

Intended outputs:

- **2 pilot podcasts** with human rights leaders focusing on leadership narratives and project reflections. The purpose would be to communicate project findings to a larger audience, and to locate these findings within leaders' own narratives and exchanges with podcast hosts. There is a possibility to extend this into a longer series. Project members felt podcasting to be a more effective means of communicating than by text. Available as part of the *Leadership Podcast Series*
- **5+ short video interviews with defenders** focusing on their views on what leadership is. Available on the *UNESCO Chair website*
- **A network for knowledge exchange and information sharing** to be created and maintained by the project group (on Facebook and WhatsApp).
- **A special issue** in the Journal of Human Rights Practice that will include synthesised findings and co-produced pieces with some project participants.

Next steps

Recommendations for future research and practice include:

- Accommodate leadership training and development within a broader programme to develop organisational capacities for reflective practice. This should include practice supervision for cultivating reflective team members.
- For developing new training material, treat the existing leadership theory and development as sources of insight and exploration rather than as blueprints, and, where possible, undertake needs assessments or co-design strategies with defenders and engage in piloting and testing.
- Explore methodological and training approaches that can address leadership questions and development indirectly by means of alternative vocabularies (e.g. 'human rights protagonists') that provide more scope for participants to narrate who they are as human rights actors and how their practice can be supported and strengthened.
- Consider financial resilience and vulnerability and the implications for human rights leadership practice in light of financial factors and financial vulnerability, as a significant influence on / threat to poor leadership.

References

- Askeland, G.A. and Fook, J., 2009. Critical reflection in social work. *European Journal of Social Work*. 12(3), pp.287-292.
- Fletcher, A.J. and Marchildon, G.P., 2014. Using the Delphi method for qualitative, participatory action research in health leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), pp.1-18.
- Kolb, D.A., 2015. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT press.
- Schön, D.A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Basic Books, New York.

