FIELD GUIDE TO MONITORING AND DOCUMENTING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

Are you organizing in your community, checking on a neighbor after an encounter with authorities, or helping run a student council alert desk? Maybe you are a paralegal heading out to an eviction site, a youth volunteer holding a phone camera at a mobilization, or someone simply refusing to look away when a rights violation happens in your neighborhood.

Human rights defenders are often the first people communities turn to when a violation occurs. Whether responding to an unlawful arrest, documenting a demolition, assisting a survivor of violence, or recording threats against environmental defenders, the actions taken in the first few hours can make a significant difference.

This field guide gives frontline defenders practical, battle-tested tools to safely, ethically, and effectively document human rights violations. It is intended for community organizers, volunteers, paralegals, youth leaders, environmental defenders, labor organizers, indigenous peoples' advocates, faith-based workers, journalists, and anyone committed to protecting human dignity.

Every interview conducted with care, every photograph properly documented, and every incident accurately recorded contributes to building a stronger human rights protection ecosystem. Documentation preserves evidence that supports legal action, strengthens advocacy campaigns, and holds perpetrators accountable. Yet the work carries serious responsibilities: poorly documented information can expose survivors to greater risks, compromise legal cases, or unintentionally spread misinformation.

KALASAG recognizes that every community has unique experiences and capacities. We encourage you to adapt the tools in this manual to your local context while remaining guided by the core principles of human rights documentation. Every documented story represents a person's lived experience. Behind every report is a family seeking justice, a community demanding accountability, and a defender choosing courage over silence.

May this manual strengthen your work and remind you that every act of careful documentation helps protect not only individual rights but also the collective struggle for democracy, justice, and human dignity.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by
the European Union

PART 1:

HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION IN SIMPLE TERMS

What is Human Rights Documentation?

Human rights documentation is the process of collecting, recording, verifying, organizing, and safely storing information about human rights violations.

Simply put, documentation answers six important questions:

Who was affected?

Where did it happen?

What happened?

How did it happen?

When did it happen?

Who may be responsible?

Good documentation does more than describe what happened. It preserves evidence that may later be used to:

- Assist survivors;
- Support legal action;
- Strengthen advocacy campaigns;
- Identify patterns of abuse;
- Monitor trends over time;
- Inform local, national, and international human rights mechanisms.

The point of documentation is not proving someone guilty but to accurately record facts so that appropriate institutions can investigate, determine responsibility, and provide remedies.

Monitoring and Documentation

Although often used together, monitoring and documentation are different but complementary activities.

- **Monitoring** means observing and tracking human rights situations over time. It helps identify patterns, emerging risks, and recurring violations. It asks: "What is happening in our community?"
- **Documentation** means systematically recording specific incidents and collecting evidence about what happened. It asks: "What exactly happened in this incident?"

Both are essential for strengthening community protection.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

Principles of Human Rights Documentation

ACCURACY: Document only what you know to be true. Separate facts from assumptions, opinions, and rumors. If you are uncertain about information, clearly indicate that it has not yet been verified.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Protect the identity and personal information of survivors, witnesses, and other individuals who may face risks if information becomes public. Only share information with authorized persons and only when necessary.

INFORMED CONSENT: Before collecting information, explain who you are, why you are documenting, how the information may be used, and potential risks. It is the survivor's right to refuse or stop the interview at any time. Consent should be voluntary.

SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH: Respect the dignity, choices, safety, and well-being of survivors. Allow them to decide what they wish to share and what they do not. Never pressure anyone to relive traumatic experiences for the sake of documentation.

INDEPENDENCE: Documentation should not be influenced by political pressure, personal interests, or outside interference. Credibility depends on maintaining independence and professional integrity.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Human rights defenders must also be accountable for the information they collect. Document carefully and store information securely. Do not forget to correct mistakes when discovered. Maintain transparency in documentation methods whenever appropriate.

DO NO HARM: One of the most important principles of human rights work is simple: No piece of information is more important than a person's safety. Documentation should not increase the risks faced by survivors, witnesses, communities, or human rights defenders.

Before beginning documentation, ask yourself:

- Could this interview expose the survivor to retaliation?
- Could taking photographs identify someone who wishes to remain anonymous?
- Is this location safe enough for documentation?
- Could my presence attract unwanted attention?
- Are there safer ways to collect this information?

Sometimes the safest decision is to postpone documentation until the situation becomes more secure. Good documentation protects people while bad documentation can unintentionally place people in danger. When in doubt, prioritize protection over documentation.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

⚠ Safety First!

Community-based human rights defenders often work in difficult and unpredictable environments. Incidents may occur in areas affected by armed conflict, political tensions, disasters, demolitions, strikes, or ongoing police or military operations.

Before responding to any incident, conduct a quick safety assessment. Ask yourself:

- **Is this area currently safe?** If violence is ongoing, do not enter until the immediate danger has passed.
- **Is anyone monitoring the area?** Be aware of possible surveillance by state agents, private security personnel, or hostile groups.
- **Am I working alone?** Whenever possible, conduct documentation in pairs or teams. Always inform someone of your location and expected return time.
- **Do I have an exit plan?** Know the safest routes before entering an area. Prepare emergency contacts and alternative transportation if necessary.
- **Is my information secure?** Protect notes, photographs, and contact information using appropriate digital and physical security measures. Avoid discussing sensitive information in public places or through unsecured channels.

REMEMBER: Your role as a human rights defender is important—but safety is equally important. Communities rely on HRDs who can continue their work over the long term. Protecting yourself and your fellow HRDs is not a sign of fear; it is an essential part of sustaining the movement for human rights.

PART 2:
BEFORE GOING TO THE FIELD

"The first step in good documentation is making sure you can safely return home."

Human rights defenders are often among the first to respond when violations occur. Whether the report involves an arbitrary arrest, forced eviction, red-tagging, labor rights violations, attacks against environmental defenders, or gender-based violence, our instinct is often to respond immediately.

However, being responsive should never mean being reckless.

Before going to the field, take time to understand the situation, assess the risks, and prepare yourself and your team. A few minutes of preparation can protect lives, improve the quality of your documentation, and prevent additional harm to survivors and communities.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by
the European Union

Incident Response Checklist

Not every report requires an immediate visit to the site. Before leaving, gather as much initial information as possible. A quick assessment will help determine the appropriate response while minimizing risks to everyone involved.

Initial Information Checklist:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Who reported the incident?
- Who are the affected individuals or communities?
- Is the situation still ongoing?
- Are the alleged perpetrators still in the area?
- Is anyone in immediate danger?
- Has emergency medical assistance been provided?
- Are other organizations or responders already on-site?
- Is it safe to enter the area?

Clarify Your Purpose

Before going to the field, clearly identify your objective. Your mission may be to:

- Conduct an initial fact-finding mission;
- Interview survivors or witnesses;
- Document physical evidence;
- Monitor an ongoing situation;
- Provide referrals or immediate support;
- Follow up on previously documented cases;
- Verify information received from other sources.

Having a clear objective helps your team prepare appropriately and avoid unnecessary risks.

Risk Assessment: Stop. Think. Assess.

Every field mission carries some level of risk. Before deployment, take a few moments to evaluate whether the mission can be conducted safely.

Ask yourself: Could this documentation activity place me, my team, the survivor, or the community at greater risk? If the answer is yes, reassess your approach before proceeding.

Environmental Risks

Consider the situation on the ground. Is violence still ongoing? Is there an active police/military operation? Are armed groups present? Is there tension within the community? Are there checkpoints restrictions? Are there environmental hazards such as flooding, landslides, or damaged infrastructure?

Risks to Survivors and Witnesses

Documentation should never increase the danger faced by those affected. Could interviewing the survivor expose them to retaliation? Is the survivor currently being monitored or threatened? Will your visit draw unwanted attention? Is there a safer place or time to conduct the interview?

Risks to Human Rights Defenders

As human rights defenders, we must also protect ourselves. Is your organization known in the area? Have you or your colleagues experienced harassment or surveillance? Is there a possibility of intimidation, arrest, or violence? Are you emotionally and physically prepared for the mission?

Risks to Information

Information can also be at risk. What happens if your phone is confiscated? Are your notes protected? Are your files encrypted? Do you have secure backups? Could sensitive information expose survivors or witnesses? Always assume that information may eventually be accessed by unauthorized individuals.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

KALASAG Risk Assessment Matrix

RISK LEVEL	SITUATION	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Low Risk	No immediate threats. The situation is stable.	Proceed with documentation while following standard safety measures.
Moderate Risk	Some security concerns are present. The situation may change.	Proceed with additional precautions. Work in teams, limit time on-site, and maintain regular communication.
High Risk	Active violence, military or police operations, or serious threats are ongoing.	Do not proceed. Prioritize safety and postpone documentation until conditions improve.

When Not to Conduct Documentation

One of the most difficult decisions a human rights defender may face is deciding not to proceed with documentation. Choosing to postpone documentation is not a sign of weakness; it is often the safest and most responsible decision.

DO NOT CONDUCT DOCUMENTATION WHEN:

- Violence is still ongoing.
- Security forces or armed groups are actively operating in the area.
- Your presence could place survivors or witnesses at greater risk.
- You do not have a safe entry and exit plan.
- You are working completely alone in a high-risk situation.
- You are physically exhausted or emotionally overwhelmed.
- You lack sufficient information about the incident.
- You cannot safely protect the information you collect.
- Your presence may escalate tension within the community.

REMEMBER: Not every incident needs to be documented immediately. Sometimes waiting until the situation is safe results in better documentation and better protection for everyone involved. Documentation should never come at the expense of human life or safety. As human rights defenders, our responsibility is not only to document violations but also to protect ourselves, our colleagues, survivors, witnesses, and the communities we serve. Good documentation is measured not by how quickly it is completed, but by how safely and responsibly it is conducted.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

What to Bring

Good documentation does not always require heavy equipment but it always requires preparation.

Essential Field Kit:



Additional Equipment (bring if available):

- Camera
- Audio Recorder
- GPS Device
- Tablet or Laptop
- Portable Internet Device

Personal Essentials:



TIP: *Bring only what you need. The lighter your equipment, the easier it will be to move quickly and safely during emergencies*

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

How to Prepare

Proper preparation improves coordination, reduces confusion, and increases safety. Before leaving:

- Inform your organization where you are going.
- Share your itinerary with someone you trust.
- Agree on a communication schedule.
- Review available information about the incident.
- Print or prepare all necessary documentation forms.
- Charge all electronic devices.
- Save emergency contact numbers.
- Discuss roles and responsibilities within the team.

Identify Team Roles:

Team Leader:
Manages logistics, tracks field conditions, and makes safety decisions.

Interviewer:
Facilitates the conversation and builds rapport with the survivor or witness.

Note-Taker:
Methodically captures statements, direct quotes, and chronological details.

Photographer or Videographer:
Documents physical evidence, scenes, and context with strict consent.

Safety Focal Person:
Monitors the perimeter and maintains regular communication check-ins with base.

Driver *(if applicable)*:
Ensures vehicle readiness and keeps exit routes accessible.

Clear roles help teams work more efficiently and safely.

PART 3:
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Understanding Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations occur when the State, its agents, or other actors fail to respect, protect, or fulfill the rights guaranteed under the Philippine Constitution, national laws, and international human rights standards. Violations may result from direct actions—such as unlawful arrests or torture—or from failures to act, such as failing to protect communities from environmental harm or ensure access to basic services.

As community-based human rights defenders, our role is not to determine legal liability, but to accurately document what happened, preserve evidence, identify protection needs, and ensure that the voices of affected individuals and communities are heard.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

Civil and Political Rights

Civil and political rights protect people's freedom, dignity, and participation in public life. They ensure that everyone can live free from violence, arbitrary government action, discrimination, and intimidation. They also protect the rights to express opinions, organize peacefully, seek justice, and participate in democratic processes.

Violations of these rights often involve abuses committed by public authorities or individuals acting with their support or acquiescence. They may also be committed by non-state actors when the State fails to prevent, investigate, or respond to such abuses.

HRDs frequently document violations of civil and political rights because these are often the most visible and immediate forms of abuse affecting communities.

Common Civil and Political Rights Violations:

Right to Life
Extrajudicial killings; attempted killings; death in police/military custody; excessive use of force; targeted killing of activists, journalists, labor leaders, indigenous peoples, environmental defenders, and community leaders.

Right to Liberty and Security of Person
Arbitrary arrest; illegal detention; enforced disappearance; illegal searches and seizures.

Freedom from Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment
Physical torture; psychological torture; sexual violence during detention; threats against family members; mock executions; sleep, food and water deprivation; solitary confinement under abusive conditions.

Freedom of Expression
Harassment of journalists; censorship; confiscation of media equipment; closing of media organizations; online censorship; filing of criminal charges intended to silence critics (e.g., libel/cyberlibel).

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association
Violent dispersal of peaceful protests; denial of rally permits based on content; harassment of community organizations; interference with union organizing; surveillance of civil society organizations.

Political Participation
Voter intimidation; election-related violence; harassment of election observers; restrictions on political participation; abuse of state resources to suppress political opponents.

Human Rights Defenders and Civic Space
Red-tagging; surveillance; harassment; intimidation; Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP); online attacks and disinformation; death threats; judicial harassment; criminalization of activism.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights Violations

Human rights are not limited to protection from violence or arbitrary arrest. Every person also has the right to live with dignity, including access to adequate housing, food, health care, education, decent work, social security, cultural identity, and a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Violations of these rights often occur gradually and may affect entire communities rather than a single individual. They are frequently linked to poverty, discrimination, development projects, environmental degradation, or failures of government policy and services. HRDs play an important role in documenting these violations because they often witness their long-term impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

Common Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights Violations:

Housing Rights
Forced eviction; demolition without due process; relocation without adequate housing; destruction of homes; evictions without consultation.

Labor Rights
Wage theft; non-payment of wages; illegal dismissal; unsafe working conditions; union busting; child labor; forced labor; contractualization that violates labor standards.

Right to Health
Denial of emergency medical care; lack of access to health services; unsafe detention conditions; environmental pollution affecting public health; failure to provide essential medicine.

Right to Education
Denial of school access; attacks on schools; harassment of students and teachers; discrimination in education; military occupation of schools.

Cultural Rights
Destruction of cultural heritage; restrictions on indigenous cultural practices; denial of access to sacred sites; failure to recognize indigenous identity.

Environmental Rights
Water and air pollution; illegal mining; deforestation; quarrying affecting communities; destruction of agricultural land; projects affecting ancestral domain without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Right to Livelihood
Destruction of fishing grounds; loss of farmland; confiscation of farming equipment; restrictions preventing communities from earning a living; closure of community markets without alternatives.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by
the European Union

PART 4:
CONDUCTING TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWS

An interview is one of the most valuable sources of information in documenting human rights violations. Through interviews, survivors, witnesses, and other individuals share firsthand accounts of what they experienced or observed.

However, interviews often involve people who have experienced violence, loss, displacement, intimidation, torture, or other traumatic events. These experiences can affect memory, emotions, and the ability to recall events in a clear chronological order.

As an HRD documenter, our responsibility is to listen carefully, ask respectful questions, document accurately, and ensure that the interview itself does not cause additional harm.

Before the Interview:

Before beginning any interview, ensure that:

- The location is safe and private;
- The interviewee understands who you are;
- You explain why the interview is being conducted;
- You explain how the information may be used;
- You discuss possible risks;
- You obtain informed consent;
- The interviewee understands that participation is voluntary;

Create a Safe Environment

People who have experienced trauma often feel powerless because decisions were taken away from them during the violation. Reduce this feeling by giving them control over the interview whenever possible:

- Allow them to choose where to sit;
- Allow them to decide whether someone they trust should be present;
- Allow them to choose whether they prefer to speak in their own language;
- Ask whether the interview may be recorded;
- Confirm whether they would like to take breaks.

Building Trust

Trust is earned. Take time to introduce yourself, your organization, and your role. Avoid making promises that you cannot keep.

- Do not say: “We will make sure you get justice.”
- Say instead: “We will carefully document what happened and help connect you with the appropriate support and referral services.”

Being honest builds credibility.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by
the European Union

Starting and Conducting the Interview

- **Starting the interview:** Begin with simple questions. Starting with easy background details helps reduce anxiety before discussing difficult experiences.
- **Asking questions:** Use open-ended questions (not answerable with a simple yes or no) whenever possible. Neutral questions help preserve the accuracy and credibility of the testimony.
- **Listening matters more than speaking:** A good interviewer spends more time listening than asking questions. Allow the survivor to tell their story in their own words. Avoid interrupting unless clarification is necessary.
- **Respect silence:** Silence is part of the conversation; do not rush to fill every pause. People who have experienced trauma often need time to remember, process emotions, or decide whether they feel safe enough to continue.
- **Trauma-informed interviewing:** Trauma can affect how people remember and tell their stories. Survivors may recall events out of order, forget specific details, become emotional, or repeat parts of their experience. These are common responses to traumatic events and should not automatically be interpreted as signs of dishonesty.

TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING

DOS	DONT'S
Allow silence.	Do not rush the interview.
Listen actively.	Do not blame the survivor.
Offer breaks.	Do not pressure anyone.
Respect emotions.	Do not interrupt.
Respect interviewee's pace.	Do not make empty promises.
Focus on person's well-being.	Do not guarantee outcomes.

Closing the Interview

Before ending the conversation:

- Ask if the interviewee would like to add anything else.
- Summarize the key points to ensure accuracy.
- Explain the next steps in the documentation process.
- Ask whether they have any questions.
- Provide information about available referral or support services, if appropriate.
- Thank them for their trust and for sharing their experience.

Never leave an interview abruptly after discussing traumatic events. Take a few moments to ensure that the interviewee feels emotionally settled before ending the conversation.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

PART 5:
INCIDENT DOCUMENTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

[Download File Here]

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

PART 6:

WRITING HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION

Good documentation tells the story of what happened clearly, accurately, and objectively. It gives voice to survivors while preserving facts that can support protection, accountability, and justice.

Why Writing Matters

Information gathered from notes, interviews, and photographs becomes useful when organized into a clear, accurate, and objective account of the incident. Well-written documentation can be used to:

- Support legal proceedings;
- Request urgent protection or assistance;
- Monitor patterns of human rights violations;
- Prepare advocacy reports;
- Inform the media;
- Submit complaints to government agencies or international human rights mechanisms;
- Preserve historical records of violations.

Poorly written documentation, on the other hand, may confuse readers, weaken a case, or compromise the credibility of the information collected.

Characteristics of Good Documentation



Distinguishing Facts from Statements and Observations

Presenting witness accounts as established facts weakens credibility. Use clear attribution whenever necessary:

- **FACT:** The incident occurred on April 10, 2026.
- **WITNESS STATEMENT:** According to the survivor, two unidentified men entered the house at approximately 11 PM.
- **OBSERVATION:** The documenter observed broken windows and damaged furniture inside the residence.

Always distinguish between what was observed, reported, documented, and verified.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

Avoid Common Mistakes

- Do not guess missing information.
- Do not add personal opinions.
- Do not exaggerate details.
- Do not use inflammatory language.
- Do not omit important facts.
- Do not change a survivor's words to make them "sound better".
- Do not mix observation with assumptions.

Before Submitting Your Documentation

Review your report carefully before finalizing. Ask yourself:

- Is every statement supported by evidence or testimony?
- Are dates and times consistent?
- Have names been spelled correctly?
- Have I distinguished facts from opinions?
- Are quotations accurate?
- Is confidential information protected?
- Have I documented immediate protection needs?
- Have I included all supporting evidence?
- Have I saved the report securely?

The F-A-C-T Rule

F FACT FIRST	A ATTRIBUTE INFORMATION	C CHRONOLOGICAL	T THINK PROTECTION
Write only what you know, what was observed, or what was reported.	Clearly identify who provided the information.	Present events in the order they happened whenever possible.	Before finalizing your report, ask yourself whether sharing any information could place survivors, witnesses, or communities at greater risk.

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by the European Union

MOVING FORWARD

Your responsibility as a documenter does not end when an interview concludes or when the intake form is filled out.

The true measure of frontline documentation lies in how securely the information is handled, how quickly urgent medical, legal, and psychosocial support reaches the survivor, and how your team decompresses after bearing witness to traumatic events. Take time to debrief with your fellow advocates, prioritize your collective well-being, and ensure that every recorded note is safely encrypted and stored. Sustaining the movement requires advocates who are healthy, grounded, and protected over the long haul.

You are not doing this work in isolation. Every verified fact, every carefully documented testimony, and every preserved photograph contributes to a nationwide shield of accountability and solidarity.

In a context where truth is contested and civic spaces are threatened, your commitment to ethical and courageous documentation defends not only individual survivors, but our shared future of human rights, justice, and collective dignity.

ABOUT KALASAG

KALASAG: The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection is a protection and empowerment initiative designed to strengthen the sustainability, security, and advocacy capabilities of Filipino human rights defenders, youth leaders, and survivors of human rights violations. By connecting frontline advocates to accessible legal aid, digital and physical safety tools, psychosocial support networks, and community spaces, Kalasag ensures that defenders are supported and equipped as they pursue justice and accountability.

Kalasag is established under Project SHIELD HR (Securing Human rights Initiatives for Empowerment, Leadership, and Defense in the Philippines), implemented by a consortium composed of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), DAKILA — Philippine Collective for Modern Heroism, Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM), Medical Action Group (MAG), and Sectoral Transparency Alliance on Natural Resource Governance Cebu (STANCe), with the financial support of the European Union.

Ingat at padayon sa laban!

KALASAG
The Advocates' Hub for Human Rights, Safety, and Protection

Funded by
the European Union