



huridocs 2020 Annual Report

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Introduction

Human rights advocacy can be a difficult task in normal circumstances. The stakes are high, resources are tight, and powerful forces go to great lengths to disrupt the work and discredit the idea that the dignity and freedom of all people should be protected.

The circumstances of the year gone by were anything but normal. With the arrival of the COVID-19 health emergency in 2020, human rights defenders were confronted by unprecedented challenges—as well as old challenges compounded by the new reality.

Yet even against this more complicated landscape, we saw how information remained powerful when made accessible to those who can use it for good: evidence that convinces a court to deliver justice; research that uncovers a need and paints a case for reform; testimonies that move the public to clamour for change.

Throughout 2020, we remained steadfast in supporting the human rights movement to document and manage such information. Ours has long been a digital and distributed organisation, which helped in adapting to travel bans and stay-at-home orders.

However, we also embraced the opportunity to explore new approaches to our work. Three main principles guided our way:

- *Well-preserved and well-organised information is fundamental for human rights work.*
- *Technology must be rooted in the real-world needs and ever-evolving circumstances of human rights defenders.*
- *Reflection is key to achieving sustainable human rights impact.*

These weren't new or sudden revelations for our organisation, but crises have a way of casting a light on what truly matters.

Time and again in 2020, we also saw how human rights defenders rose to the occasion with courage and creativity. We stand in awe of the activists, advocates, researchers and policy makers who, in spite of trying conditions, gave their all to build a fairer world.

From the bottom of our hearts, we at HURIDOCS say thank you. It truly is an honour to support you whenever and however we can—in 2020, in 2021 and long into the future.

In solidarity,
The HURIDOCS team

2020 by the numbers

49

Organisations that HURIDOCS supported with systems to manage information, training and advice

60

Human rights projects that HURIDOCS collaborated on to monitor violations, improve access to public information, manage complaints and preserve historical memory

36

Countries in which partners of HURIDOCS worked

150+

Active databases of human rights information hosted by HURIDOCS

1,900+

Commits, or times that changes were saved to the core code of Uwazi, our flagship database application for human rights information

24

People on HURIDOCS staff

350,000+

Estimated unique visitors received by all collections of human rights information that HURIDOCS hosts

38

Years since HURIDOCS was founded

1.5 million

Overall budget in US dollars



Well-preserved and well-organised information is fundamental for human rights work.

Whether in the halls of government or in the grassroots of society, one of the essential ingredients of promoting human rights is credible information. Activists, advocates, researchers and policy makers need to have the documented details of human rights violations, as well as know what avenues for justice (or lack thereof) exist. Only then can advocacy, litigation and other interventions be as impactful as possible.

Since our founding nearly four decades ago, our raison d'être has been to help human rights defenders adopt tools and strategies for managing large bodies of evidence, law and research. True to our mission, in 2020 we supported dozens of organisations around the world to gather, organise and act upon human rights information in safe and efficient ways.

For example, HURIDOCS and Korea Future Initiative collaborated to compile cases of religious freedom violations targeting North Korean citizens over the last 30 years. The [database](#) contains files on 273 victims, 54 individual perpetrators and 85 locations.

Working with The Engine Room, we also helped the Argentinian Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) to rebuild their Police Violence Database on Uwazi, our flagship open-source database application. Reflecting on the experience, Santiago Borrajo of CELS and Lesedi Bewlay of The Engine Room [said](#)

they were reminded just how important it is to choose your partners well: "HURIDOCS has a great team we relied on, alongside consultants within the civic tech space who have experience working with Uwazi."

"It's taught us how we can create platforms with accessible and educational information."

Adriana Ramírez Vanegas, head of CIMAC's Freedom of Expression and Gender program

Migrant Forum in Asia were quick to initiate the [Justice for Wage Theft](#) global campaign, calling for urgent measures to protect workers who have been denied wages and repatriated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The NGO Impact Iran created an [online library](#) that indexes and assesses Iran's compliance with over 400 recommendations made by United Nations human rights mechanisms to the Iranian government. And FORUM-ASIA [re-launched](#) the Asian HRDs Portal, which documents the diverse threats that human rights defenders working in Asia face. We were honoured to offer guidance to all three of these Uwazi-based projects.

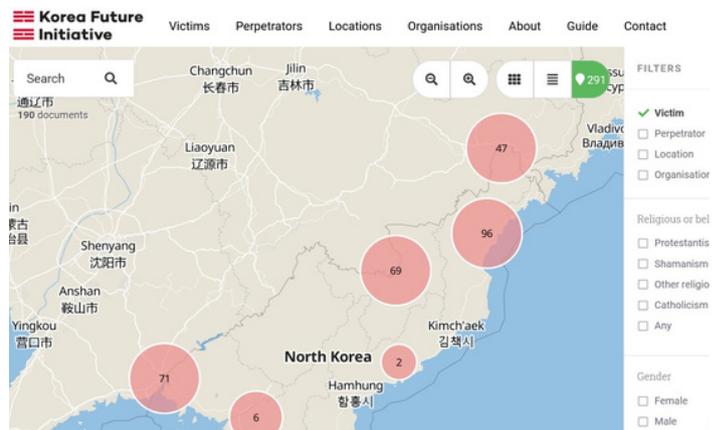
We helped [Press in Arrest](#) configure Uwazi to organise case documents relating to arrested journalists in Turkey.

And we lent a hand to the University of Sheffield to create the foundation of a methodology for monitoring attacks against journalists, in line with Sustainable Development Goals indicator 16.10.1; to do so, we relied on established documentation approaches as well as our own micro-thesauri.

Also with our support, Comunicación e Información de la Mujer A.C. (CIMAC) officially launched their cartography project, a searchable and shareable database that sheds light on the double-barrelled violence that women journalists in Mexico face. "It's taught us how we can create platforms with accessible and educational information," said Adriana Ramírez Vanegas of CIMAC about our partnership.

During the year, we extensively collaborated with several national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to better manage information. NHRIs can play a significant role not only in making sure victims of violations receive recourse, but also in championing the value of human rights in the public arena. To that end, we helped a dozen NHRIs throughout Francophone Africa and the South Pacific to set up complaint management systems—and in one case a detention centre monitoring system—in Uwazi.

Additionally, we advised the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI) to put together an online library of resources and best practices for NHRIs. And with our support, the Commission on Human Rights in the Philippines launched their Human Rights Observatory for monitoring the state's implementation of



Korea Future Initiative's FORB database, which documents cases of religious freedom violations against North Koreans. It was built in Uwazi.

its human rights obligations along four tracks: indigenous communities, gender-based violence, climate change and migrants' rights.

In 2020, we were able to spend some time on our own homegrown projects too: We began the process of making improvements to RightDocs, an online library that aims to strengthen the visibility of United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions, amendments and votes. The database is being rebuilt in Uwazi, and our hope is to relaunch in the first half of 2021.

Human rights work can be sensitive, and as such we can't mention every group that we supported here. Nonetheless, each and every one of our partnerships in 2020 surfaced valuable insights into what human rights defenders need and expect in different contexts. These bits of wisdom travelled far beyond the confines of each collaboration: they enriched our own understanding of documentation and information management as well as informed our development of Uwazi. All of this in turn will help us to better serve human rights defenders as we move through 2021.

Technology must be rooted in the real-world needs and ever-evolving circumstances of human rights defenders.

For a tool to truly serve human rights defenders, its development must be continually shaped by their obligations, challenges and contexts. This truth runs through the heart of HURIDOCS, and in 2020, we furthered our commitment to it.

Throughout the year, we teamed up with the Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG) and The Engine Room to examine how civil society actors use technology to document human rights violations and how their efforts could be made most useful for transitional justice processes. As part of the process, HURIDOCS conducted 14 one-on-one interviews, organised two roundtable discussions, and shared surveys with 36 established organisations from around the world that undertake or support human rights documentation.

Our research found that the main hurdles that human rights defenders must overcome are analysing information to best support transitional justice, preserving and verifying the accuracy of evidence, and protecting information and sources from potential threats. We're pleased that in 2021 we'll be able to concretely address some of these identified challenges, since PILPG has selected HURIDOCS as its tool developer for the next phase of the project. This means that we'll be expanding the development of our flagship database application Uwazi to further support the needs of human rights documenters.

In 2020, we also deepened our efforts to apply machine learning to human rights information. Access to legislation, case law and resolutions is vital for human rights defenders who pursue justice and accountability wherever they may be: a lawyer arguing in court, a diplomat lobbying states within a regional or international body, or a local activist mobilising their community.

"It was really a learning experience to run through an innovation project where the solution could change along the way."

Anne-Sophie Lois, the UN Representative and Head of Office for Plan International's United Nations Office in Geneva

However, curating and categorising the many documents where such information lives is time-consuming and resource-intensive. With machine learning—computer algorithms that improve over time through experience—we can lessen the burden that this task represents, as well as open the door to richer analysis of the information.

We made significant progress on developing machine learning features in Uwazi that allow for smarter search, automatic extraction of a document's title, and suggested categories for a

document based on its substance. We were able to do so thanks to support from the Google.org Fellowship, which allows Google employees to do pro bono work full-time with a Google AI Impact Challenge grantee like HURIDOCS. Six fellows lent us their skills in software engineering, product management and user experience design and research, and our collaboration bore fruit for several of our partners.

In 2020, we helped the Geneva-based NGO UPR Info launch a more robust and multilingual version of their database of human rights recommendations made by United Nations member states as part of the Universal Periodic Review mechanism. The process of adding new information to the database once took the UPR Info staff a couple of months, but with the new machine learning features integrated into Uwazi, they were able to work through a backlog of two years' worth of updates.

We similarly supported Plan International to rebuild a database of international law on their Girls' Rights Platform with smart features. What was once manual work is now more efficient: any new documents published by relevant institutions are automatically imported, and database administrators receive highly accurate suggestions of how to classify documents by country, topic and persons affected. "It was really a learning experience to run through an innovation project where the solution could change along the way," said Anne-Sophie of Plan International about the project. "We were forced to confront our assumptions and open ourselves to users and to listen to them: what do the users want and need?"

Reflections on using machine learning to improve access to human rights information



During the final stretch of 2019 and the first several months of 2020, we worked with a group of Google.org Fellows to lessen the burden on human rights defenders by automating certain things within Uwazi.

"Machine learning...opens up new possibilities for human rights work and collaboration between groups. This empowerment of human rights defenders is inspiring."

Natalie Widmann, HURIDOCS machine learning specialist

"Machine learning gets a lot of hype these days, but for many people it's still a mysterious and daunting subject that's either going to magically solve all their problems or lead to some inexplicable bad outcomes. We spent a lot of time explaining the basics of machine learning to our users in an accessible way."

Grace Danciu, Google product manager

"This technology has the potential to offer a better user experience and more comprehensive information, and free up scarce resources for human rights advocates who stand at the forefront of advocacy and defense."

Mila Guilhem, HURIDOCS programme manager

"It was refreshing to see my work have such a direct and 'obviously good' impact."

Benjamin Dittes, Google software engineer

And we worked with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to incorporate machine learning into the backend of the Universal Human Rights Index, which compiles information coming from international human rights mechanisms. The database will be more consistent, up-to-date and easier to manage, by virtue of the specially trained algorithms that look over the information and suggest relevant themes, concerned persons and Sustainable Development Goals.



*A pre-session platform organized by UPR Info in Geneva.
Photo courtesy of UPR Info.*

The potential of machine learning goes well beyond these specific features and use cases. As a result, during the year we organised workshops with our partners to explore how we might apply machine learning to further strengthen access to public human rights information, as well as to think through what role machine learning could play in the documentation of human rights violations.

Also with an eye on the future, we made the difficult decision to officially sunset our applications Casebox for case management and OpenEvsys for recording human rights violations in

favour of expanding Uwazi to fully enable these use cases. Given that the needs of human rights defenders have evolved and the possibilities afforded by technology have changed, Uwazi provides a more solid codebase upon which to build solutions that will endure. In 2021, we will be working closely with our partners who use Casebox and OpenEvsys to migrate to Uwazi or an actively developed third-party solution.

And regarding Uwazi, we released several new features and improvements throughout 2020. Among other developments:

- Human rights defenders can now move their information in and out of the platform in bulk with CSV import and export.
- Entries can now be viewed in a table format, in addition to the preexisting card and map views.
- Different databases now have the improved ability to sync to another, if so desired.
- And administrators now have greater power to customise their Uwazi collection, from selecting their preferred default location on the map to choosing how data in a bar or pie graph is displayed.

We also made significant and comprehensive changes to our underlying technical infrastructure, shifting to a multi-tenant system. Moving forward, this will allow us to scale the number of human rights projects that we can serve through Uwazi.

Reflection is key to achieving sustainable human rights impact.

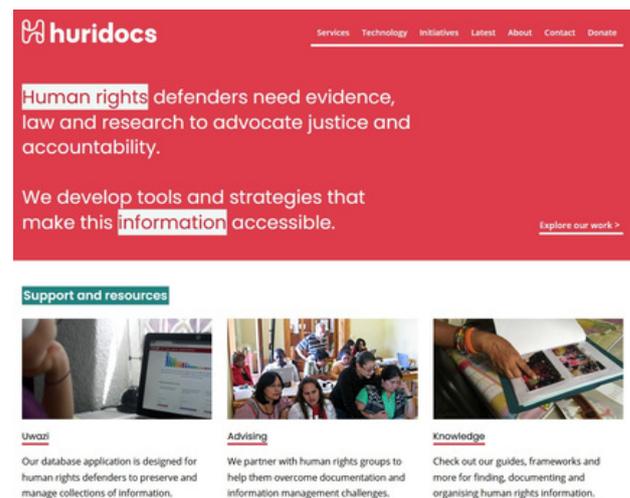
Long-term success in any field requires introspection. But when the dignity and freedom of people are on the line, it's even more crucial that we critically assess how our interventions contribute to the progress of human rights—and if not, what we can do differently.

In 2020, we leaned into this principle of self-reflection in order to ensure that we are indeed serving our human rights partners well, in addition to positioning our own organisation to be healthy and sustainable long into the future.

As part of the process of elaborating our next organisational strategy, we brought on two external consultants to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our current activities and identify untapped opportunities. They conducted interviews with 20 HURIDOCs partners, peers and funders as well as with seven staff and board members. Consequently, we came away with rich insights, such as the idea that HURIDOCs could effectively share learnings and advance thinking, born both in our own practice and in partnership with human rights defenders. The evaluation also highlighted that our sector could benefit from prioritising movement building and adopting a more forward-looking approach.

We are committed as an organisation to letting go of what no longer serves, and as such we debuted a new visual identity

for HURIDOCs that better communicates our values of openness and humanity. In tandem, we overhauled our website HURIDOCs.org to be easier for human rights defenders, allies in the human rights technology space, and funders to find what they're looking for. The new website design was based on interviews and usability tests conducted with members of our target audiences who graciously volunteered their time.



The newly redesigned HURIDOCs home page.

In 2020, HURIDOCs had a budget of 1.5 million USD, representing consistent growth compared to 2019, when it was at 1.35 million USD.

Notably, we were able to continue to add to our organisational reserves, setting aside an additional 100,000 USD for an overall cushion of 305,000 USD. Given the turbulent times we anticipate to come and our past experience of funding volatility, we are very happy about this

How does HURIDOCS's 2020 budget compare to other years?

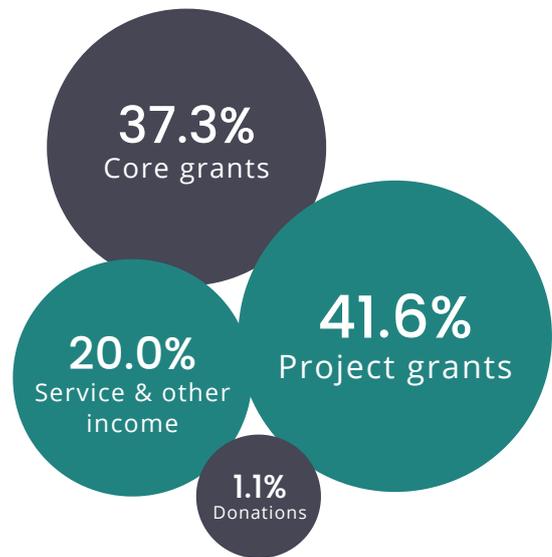
1,573,642 2020 budget in USD

1,346,744 2019 budget in USD

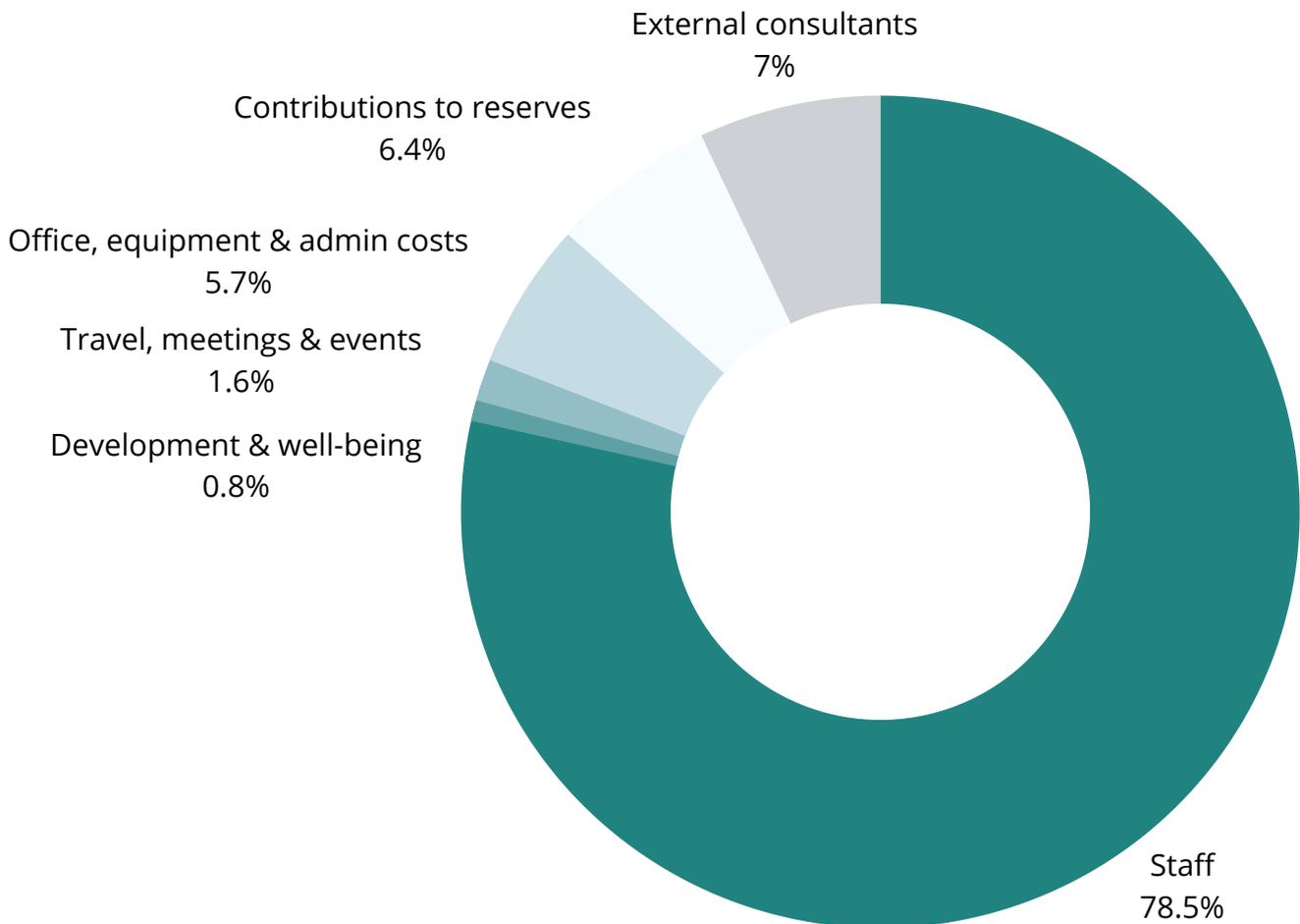
939,920 2018 budget in USD

1,327,434 2017 budget in USD

What were HURIDOCS's sources of income in 2020?



What did HURIDOCS spend the budget on in 2020?



significant step. Dozens and dozens of groups have come to rely on HURIDOCS, so we have a duty to assure against any disruption in what we provide.

This budget was made possible due to our funders in 2020:

- Open Society Foundations
- Oak Foundation
- Google.org
- the Permanent Mission of Denmark to the United Nations in Geneva
- the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) through a subgrant from Meedan
- the United States Department of State through a subgrant from PILPG; Capital Group
- the Principality of Liechtenstein's Office for Foreign Affairs
- HIVOS through its Digital Defenders Partnership
- and the City of Geneva.

A quarter of our income also came through fee-for-service contracts—we are grateful for all of our partners who contracted us.

In line with this budget increase, we expanded our team with four added roles to provide more and better assistance to human rights defenders. Although the majority of our staff worked remotely before the emergence of COVID-19, our team also had to adjust to the additional demands and constraints that the pandemic brought about. As a result, we gave a strong priority to taking care of ourselves and each other, including through a well-being support budget that all staff could draw from.

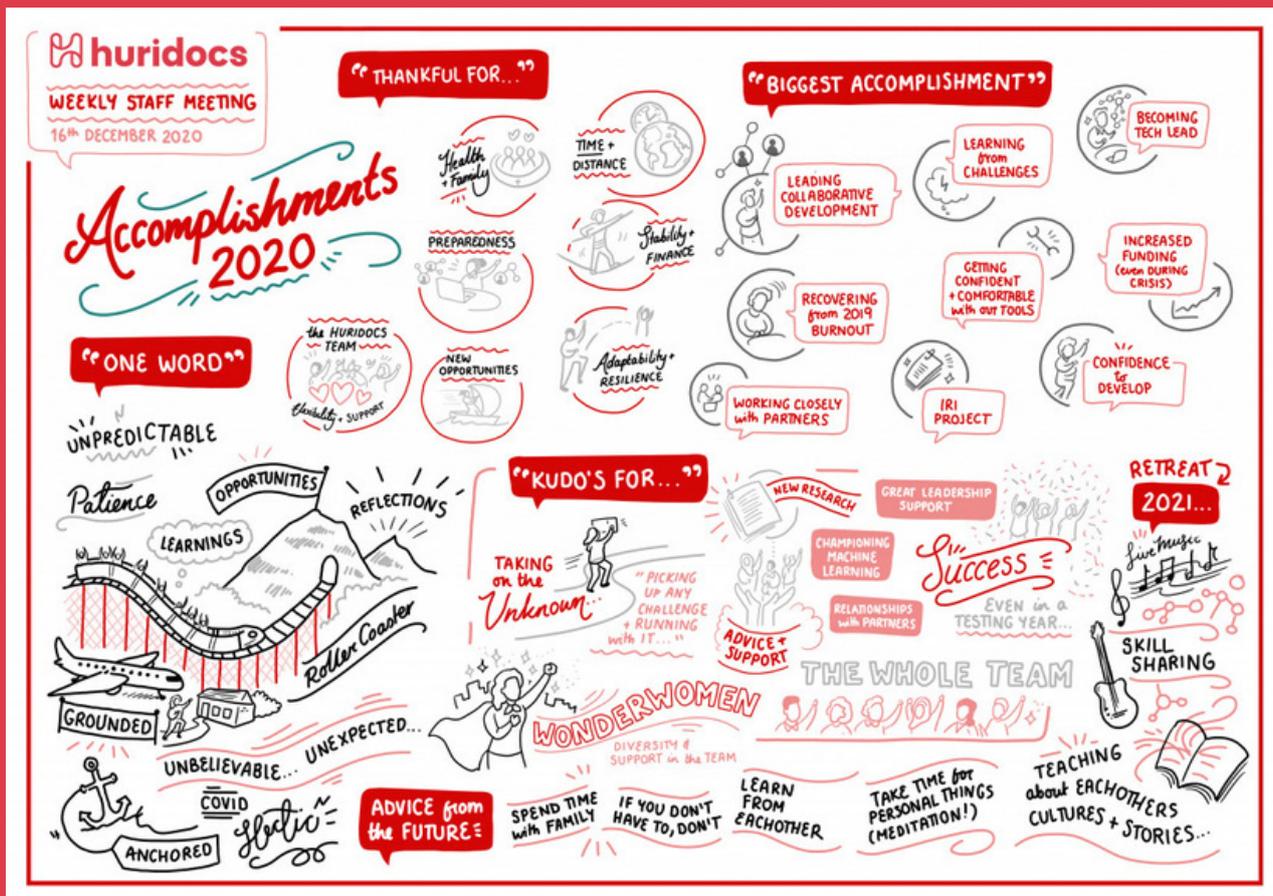


A screenshot from the [Martin Ennals Award Foundation's film](#) dedicated to finalist Sizani Ngubane.

Looking inward is valuable, but so is maintaining perspective. To that end, in 2020 we had the privilege to once again [sit on the jury](#) of the Martin Ennals Award, a prize that celebrates individuals who promote and protect human rights at great risk to themselves. The 2020 laureate, Huda Al-Sarari, is a lawyer who has collected evidence of widespread torture and arbitrary detention taking place in Yemen. Finalist Norma Ledezma has moved mountains in her work on femicide, enforced disappearance and human trafficking in Mexico.

And we were saddened to learn that finalist Sizani Ngubane [passed away](#) at the end of 2020. She leaves behind an inspiring legacy of extraordinary advocacy to defend the rights of rural women and girls in South Africa.

As the world continues to be affected by the pandemic, we know we have to find ways to adjust in order to persevere in the pursuit of justice and accountability. In 2021, we at HURIDOCS will focus on doing so, finalising a new organisational strategy that will allow us to strengthen our partnerships with human rights defenders across the globe.



A graphic recording of discussion at the final HURIDOCS staff meeting of 2020, illustrated by [artist Amber Anderson](#).

Liked what you read?

Check out our website for more stories about what human rights groups are able to achieve with our guidance and tools. Sign up for our newsletter and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Want to see more of this work in 2021 and beyond?

Consider making a donation to HURIDOCS. A contribution will help us continue to support human rights defenders.

Have a project in mind that you'd like to discuss?

We'd love to see how we can help! Get in touch.