

Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in Africa: **Eastern Africa Convening**



Securing Gains. Centering Dignity. Shaping Futures.

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia | 26 - 30 October 2026

Concept Note



1. Purpose

The Eastern Africa Regional Convening forms part of the broader Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in Africa initiative led by the Open Society Foundations. It will provide a strategic platform for stakeholders from Eastern Africa to reflect on the changing human rights landscape, identify emerging risks and opportunities, and develop practical priorities for strengthening human rights governance, protection, prevention and accountability.

Co-convened with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI), the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Feminists in Kenya, the convening will ensure that Eastern African perspectives, experiences and priorities contribute meaningfully to the wider continental dialogue on the future of human rights in Africa. It will connect regional realities with African Union priorities, particularly the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Agenda 2063, and the broader commitment to a peaceful, democratic, inclusive and people-driven Africa.

For the purposes of this convening, Eastern Africa will include the East African Community countries and the Horn of Africa.

2. Background and Rationale

Africa has developed a substantial regional human rights architecture anchored in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and reinforced by the work of the ACHPR, African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, African Union institutions, Regional Economic Communities, National Human Rights Institutions, civil society and communities. Agenda 2063 further places good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, rule of law, peace, security, gender equality and people-centred development at the centre of Africa's long-term transformation.

Eastern Africa reflects both the achievements and continuing challenges of this evolving architecture. The region has contributed to constitutionalism, regional integration, judicial innovation, gender equality, refugee protection, disability inclusion, business and human rights, civic participation and access to justice. Eastern Africa's experience in refugee protection, community-led peacebuilding, and regional responses to displacement offers important lessons for strengthening human rights protection and solidarity across the continent.

At the same time, the region faces persistent and emerging challenges. These include conflict and displacement, pressures on civic and democratic space, socioeconomic inequality, climate change, technological transformation, misinformation and disinformation, gender-based violence, challenges facing human rights defenders, and debates around culture, sovereignty, identity and established human rights standards. Across the region, growing citizen mobilisation, particularly among young people, reflects increasing public demands for accountable governance, transparency, economic justice and meaningful participation in public affairs. In parallel, concerns relating to restrictions on civic space, shrinking independent media space, digital surveillance, arbitrary detention, and limitations on freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly continue to feature prominently in regional human rights discourse. These dynamics are reshaping the environment in which human rights are realized. Rapid urbanization makes cities and local governments increasingly important for the practical realization of human rights. A human rights cities approach can help translate human rights standards into local governance, planning and service delivery by promoting participation, inclusion, accountability and non-discrimination. Local authorities can therefore play a key role in ensuring that human rights are reflected in people's everyday lives. The convening therefore provides a timely opportunity to move beyond diagnosis towards identifying African-led, regionally grounded and future-oriented responses capable of safeguarding human rights gains while responding to emerging realities.

3. Regional Context: Risks and Opportunities

Eastern Africa sits at the intersection of several transformations affecting the wider continent. Conflict and humanitarian crises have intensified displacement and placed pressure on communities and institutions. These dynamics illustrate the increasingly interconnected nature of peace, security, displacement and human rights across borders. Climate-related droughts, flooding, resource competition and rapid urbanisation are increasing vulnerabilities and inequalities. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence are creating new opportunities for participation, service delivery and cross-border mobilisation, while also generating concerns relating to surveillance, online violence, disinformation, data protection and digital exclusion.

Large-scale infrastructure, extractive industries, energy transition and development investments also raise important questions concerning land, labour, indigenous and community rights, environmental protection, benefit-sharing and access to remedy. At the same time, organised resistance and backlash against established human rights norms and protection frameworks increasingly intersect with debates around sovereignty, culture, family, religion, and identity, raising important questions about how existing human rights gains can be safeguarded while sustaining constructive dialogue within changing social and political contexts.

These challenges coexist with significant opportunities. Eastern Africa has vibrant youth, feminist and social justice movements, community peacebuilding initiatives, public-interest litigation exercises, digital rights advocacy, climate justice movements, humanitarian networks and strong traditions of cross-border solidarity. Together with the region's experience in refugee protection and community resilience, these assets provide important foundations for strengthening prevention, resilience, accountability, and people-centred human rights governance and offer valuable lessons for the future of human rights in Africa.

4. Thematic Focus Areas for the Convening

The convening will be organised around interconnected themes reflecting Eastern African realities while complementing the other sub-regional processes:

Theme 1: Democratic Governance, Security, Civic Space and Human Rights Institutions: Strengthening constitutional governance, democratic participation, accountability, oversight and public trust; protecting human rights defenders, freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly; and strengthening the effectiveness, independence and resilience of human rights institutions and civil society.

Theme 2: Human Rights, Conflict, Peacebuilding and Displacement: Exploring rights-based approaches to conflict prevention and early warning, peacebuilding, humanitarian crises, displacement, transitional justice and community-based reconciliation, including the protection of affected populations.

Theme 3: Economic, Social, Climate and Environmental Justice: Promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights; addressing inequality, climate change, climate-induced displacement, drought, flooding, land and natural resources governance, pastoralist livelihoods, business and human rights, energy transition, rapid urbanisation and development models that place communities and human dignity at their centre.

Theme 4: Human Rights in the Digital Age: Exploring the potential and pitfalls of artificial intelligence, digital governance, data protection, surveillance, internet governance, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, misinformation and disinformation, while exploring opportunities for technology to strengthen participation and rights protection. Discussions will also consider the implications of internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, online harassment and technology-enabled restrictions on civic participation, particularly during periods of political contestation and public mobilisation.

Theme 5: Inclusion, African Narratives and Safeguarding Human Rights Gains: Examining gender equality, women's rights, youth, indigenous and pastoralist communities, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups; examining the drivers and impact of organised anti-rights mobilisation and other efforts that seek to curtail or reverse established human rights norms and standards, while identifying effective strategies for strengthening social cohesion, inclusion, dialogue, and the protection of existing human rights gains, including on equality and non-discrimination; and elevating African voices, values, knowledge systems and experiences that demonstrate Africa's ownership and contribution to regional and international human rights norms.

Cross-cutting lenses: Gender equality, youth participation, inclusion, prevention, intersectionality, accountability and resilience, African knowledge systems, community voices and intergenerational perspectives will inform all thematic discussions.

5. Overall Goal and Objectives

Overall Goal

To foster a regionally grounded and forward-looking dialogue that strengthens collaboration and generates practical priorities for a resilient, inclusive, accountable and people-centred human rights system in Eastern Africa, while contributing Eastern African perspectives to the continental process on the future of human rights in Africa.

Specific Objectives

The convening will:

Generate a shared analysis of emerging human rights risks, opportunities and trends affecting Eastern Africa.

Examine interconnected drivers reshaping human rights, including democratic governance challenges, accountability and oversight, shrinking civic space, conflict and displacement, climate change, socioeconomic inequality, technological transformation, misinformation and disinformation, and organised anti-rights pushback.

Identify approaches for safeguarding and advancing existing African and international human rights commitments and strengthening relevant institutions.

Elevate Eastern African experiences, indigenous and local knowledge systems, community practices, lived experiences and African contributions to human rights norms and institutions.

Explore the role of cities and local governments as important actors in the implementation of human rights, including through human rights cities approaches that translate human rights standards into participatory local governance, inclusive public services, urban planning and accountability mechanisms.

Strengthen collaboration among AU institutions, governments, RECs, NHRIs, civil society, communities, academia, private-sector actors and development partners.

Identify practical policy, institutional, advocacy and movement-building priorities for the region.

Generate recommendations, key messages and regional perspectives to inform the Continental Convening.

Establish practical follow-up actions with clear institutional ownership.

6. Convening Design and Approach

The convening will adopt a participatory, solutions-oriented and forward-looking approach, combining strategic dialogue with lived experiences and practical problem-solving.

The three substantive days will use moderated plenaries, thematic panels, interactive discussions, small-group sessions, Think labs and facilitated synthesis. Speakers and participants will be selected according to the thematic priorities and their capacity to contribute substantively to the dialogue.

Alongside the convening, a narrative and communications strand will bring the conversation on the future of human rights into closer dialogue with everyday life. Before and during the convening, voices from across Eastern Africa will explore what freedom, dignity, safety, justice and living a good life mean, surfacing the region's diverse histories, knowledge, lived realities and visions for the future.

The campaign will connect the work of human rights institutions and movements with the lived experiences, values and aspirations that give rights meaning in practice. It will explore how people understand and experience dignity, freedom and justice within their relationships, communities and everyday realities, while creating space for Eastern African perspectives, knowledge systems and intergenerational experiences that have shaped understandings of rights across the region. Through short videos, interviews, visual storytelling and a print or digital zine, these voices will form a people-centred body of work that informs the convening, extends the conversation beyond it, and strengthens the connection between regional human rights institutions and the people and communities they exist to serve.

The design will promote meaningful participation rather than predominantly presentation-based sessions, including dedicated space for testimony and perspectives from affected communities and frontline human rights actors. It will also provide sufficient space for facilitated drafting and plenary validation of recommendations, key messages and follow-up priorities, complemented where appropriate by cultural and artistic contributions reflecting the region's creative and intellectual life.

7. Venue and Date

The Eastern Africa Regional Convening will take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 26 to 30 October 2026.

26 October: Arrival

27-29 October: Substantive convening

30 October: Departure

Addis Ababa provides strategic proximity to the African Union and relevant regional and international institutions. The specific meeting venue will be confirmed by the co-conveners and partners.

8. Target Participants

The convening will bring together a strategically selected and diverse group of stakeholders, including:

African Union institutions and human rights organs, including the ACHPR, African Court and ACERWC; relevant municipal authorities, and urban governance networks

East African Community, IGAD and other relevant regional institutions;

National Human Rights Institutions and NANHRI;

civil society organisations and human rights defenders;

women's rights and feminist movements;

youth and social justice movements;

organisations representing indigenous and pastoralist communities, and other communities disproportionately affected by climate change, displacement and natural resource pressures; persons with disabilities, and other marginalised communities;

community peacebuilding practitioners and humanitarian actors;

climate, environmental, digital rights, technology governance and artificial intelligence actors and practitioners;

academia, research institutions and African intellectuals;

journalists, artists, cultural practitioners, storytellers, historians and oral tradition experts;

faith-based actors and relevant private-sector actors; and

UN entities and other institutions supporting human rights in Africa.

Selection will prioritise expertise, regional and gender balance, diversity, lived experience and the ability to contribute to implementation and follow-up.

9. Expected Outputs

The convening is expected to produce:

A concise Eastern Africa human rights priorities and recommendations document.

Agreed key messages for contribution to the Continental Convening.

A practical regional follow-up action matrix/roadmap, identifying responsibilities and indicative timelines.

A concise convening report documenting key discussions, recommendations and commitments.

A "Voices of Eastern Africa" narrative series, bringing together community and stakeholder perspectives through short videos, interviews, visual stories, and a print or digital zine exploring lived experiences and visions for the future of human rights in the region.

A consolidated network of participating institutions and actors for continued engagement.

10. Expected Outcomes

The convening is expected to contribute to:

stronger shared understanding of emerging human rights risks, opportunities and priorities in Eastern Africa;

enhanced regional collaboration among human rights institutions, governments, civil society and other stakeholders;

stronger recognition and safeguarding of Africa's existing human rights norms, institutions and achievements;

increased visibility of Eastern African and community perspectives in continental human rights discussions;

greater recognition of African knowledge, experience and leadership in shaping the future of human rights;

clearer policy, institutional and advocacy priorities for responding to emerging challenges; and

stronger integration of Eastern African priorities into the broader continental process.

11. Implementation and Follow-up

The convening will be implemented through three interconnected phases: pre-convening preparation, the three-day regional dialogue, and post-convening follow-up.

Before the convening, the co-conveners and partners will finalise the concept note and agenda, undertake regional scoping and stakeholder mapping, confirm participants and speakers, establish communications and narrative activities, clarify institutional responsibilities and prepare the necessary logistical arrangements.

During the convening, rapporteurs and facilitators will capture recommendations, commitments and proposed actions across the thematic discussions. The final sessions will consolidate priority recommendations, key messages, and follow-up actions.

Following the convening, the co-conveners will consolidate and disseminate the outcomes, integrate Eastern African recommendations into the Continental Convening, and maintain an action matrix for agreed regional follow-up. Over the following six to twelve months, relevant institutions and partners will be encouraged to incorporate agreed priorities into their programmes, advocacy and institutional processes, while communications products continue to extend the reach of the convening's findings.

Progress should be periodically reviewed against the agreed action matrix, providing a simple mechanism for monitoring implementation, institutional accountability, and learning. Communications and narrative products will continue to amplify Eastern African perspectives beyond the convening and support sustained engagement on the future of human rights in Africa.