



Terms of reference

Project baseline study (Protecting Civic Freedoms in Pakistan)

Background information

Established in 1986 and registered in 1987, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is the country's apex independent human rights body. A nongovernment, not-for-profit organization, HRCP is committed to realizing the entire ambit of human rights—civil, political, economic, social, environmental and cultural—for all citizens and persons present in the country. HRCP uses the framework provided by the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan as well as international human rights instruments, to some of which Pakistan is a state party.

HRCP delivers its programmes through the following interrelated and complementary activity streams: (i) human rights monitoring and fact-finding, (ii) documentation, research and learning, (iii) convening and alliance-building for solidarity, (iv) awareness-raising, (v) advocacy and lobbying, (vi) public interest litigation, (vi) support to survivors of human rights violations, (vii) capacity strengthening, and (viii) human rights education and engagement with youth.

Bolo Bhi is a Pakistan-based policy, research and advocacy organization working to advance digital rights, internet freedom and technology policy. The organization has established itself as a leading voice on freedom of expression, privacy, digital security and online civic space in Pakistan. Bolo Bhi has extensive experience in developing digital security curricula, conducting training for journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers and judicial officers, and producing policy research on cybercrime, data protection, online gender-based violence and digital governance.

Project information

This assignment relates to a 36-month national project funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and is titled 'Protecting Civic Freedoms in Pakistan'. It will be implemented by HRCP (lead partner) with subgrants made to Bolo Bhi and a second sub-implementing partner, both in Y1 (2026/27). The project duration is from 1 October 2026 to 30 September 2029.

The project's proposed log frame is summarized below.

Impact (goal)	To strengthen the protection and exercise of the right to freedom of expression in Pakistan as a right that is indivisible from, and essential to, the enjoyment of all other human rights.
Outcome 1	Journalists and human rights defenders increase their capacity to prevent, navigate and respond to legal, digital and physical threats to freedom of expression through the application of practical safety, digital security and legal protection tools.
Output 1.1	Enhanced technical, professional and digital capacities of journalists and human rights defenders to document, report, advocate for, and safely respond to threats against civic freedoms using rights-based, ethical, and secure approaches.
Output 1.2	Established innovative digital learning and technical support mechanisms enabling journalists and human rights defenders to apply human rights standards, ethical reporting practices, and personal security measures.



Outcome 2	Journalists, human rights defenders and civil society actors demonstrate stronger and more coordinated advocacy for the right to freedom of expression by jointly developing and promoting a national freedom of expression charter, sustaining three cross-provincial communities of practice, and producing collective advocacy outputs that inform engagement with legislators and policymakers.
Output 2.1	Established multistakeholder coordination and engagement processes to promote evidence-based advocacy on civic freedoms.
Outcome 3	Journalists and human rights defenders consistently apply constitutional and international human rights standards, ethical reporting principles and inclusive, conflict-sensitive approaches in their reporting and documentation of civic freedoms and related rights.
Output 3.1	Enhanced capacities of journalists and human rights defenders to produce accurate, inclusive and rights-based content consistent with constitutional and international human rights standards.
Outcome 4	The existing human rights information ecosystem is strengthened through integrated knowledge management, AI-enabled learning and cross-provincial collaboration, enabling journalists and human rights defenders to access verified information, identify trends, document violations and contribute evidence for policy and legislative advocacy.
Output 4.1	A strengthened digital human rights information ecosystem through innovative knowledge management and AI-enabled information tools.
Output 4.2	An expanded evidence base on civic freedoms through research, publications and public dissemination.

The project's primary **target groups** are journalists working across print, broadcast and digital media; human rights defenders, including lawyers, community organizers and activists; and rights-based digital content creators, particularly those documenting civic freedoms and human rights issues. Particular emphasis will be placed on supporting women, religious, ethnic and gender minorities, and actors from high-risk and underrepresented regions, including Balochistan, parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The project will also engage with press clubs, journalists' unions and associations, civil society organizations, and university student societies as well as with the National Commission for Human Rights, the federal human rights ministry, parliamentary committees, and provincial human rights cells and information departments.

The project's **final beneficiaries** are citizens across Pakistan, particularly communities whose voices are least represented in public discourse and whose rights are most vulnerable to restrictions on civic space. These include women and girls, religious, ethnic, and gender minorities, persons with disabilities, workers in the informal economy, and communities in conflict-affected and geographically marginalized regions.

Objectives of the assignment

Broadly, the purpose of this assignment is to establish baseline values against the project's expected outcomes and indicators. Specifically, this includes:

- Outlining the legal, digital, physical and institutional risks affecting freedom of expression and civic space in Pakistan.



- Assessing the capacities, needs and challenges of journalists and human rights defenders in documenting human rights violations, reporting on civic freedoms, conducting rights-based advocacy, and ensuring their digital security and legal preparedness in the context of laws, policies and practices that curb freedom of expression and opinion in Pakistan.
- Assessing the status and operation of existing networks, collaboration and advocacy mechanisms among journalists, human rights defenders, civil society organizations and relevant institutions.
- Identifying one prospective sub-implementing partner that can carry out a series of activities during Q2–Q4 to support the project’s planned outputs and outcomes, based on any thematic, geographic and/or community-level gaps identified during the baseline.
- Refining the framework and benchmarks proposed against which the progress and impact of the project is to be measured, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, while keeping in view the indicators specified in the project’s logical framework.
- Realigning the proposed measurable targets (with disaggregated target values), indicators and means to help refine and adapt the project’s intervention logic and activities as needed.
- Refining the assumptions and values that underlie the project logframe’s indicators and targets.
- Assessing how any crosscutting themes (human rights-based approach, gender equality and women’s empowerment, youth, digitalization) are reflected in the project’s activities.

Timeframe

We expect to engage the consultant’s services for up to six weeks from the date of signing a contract (tentatively, 16 November to 25 December 2026).

Expected deliverables

1. An inception note containing (a) the baseline methodology and proposed sampling strategy, (b) data collection and analysis framework for key performance indicators, and (c) a risk analysis and mitigation plan.
2. A baseline report, including an executive summary and key findings, baseline values for all outcome and output indicators, disaggregated data (gender, age, location, marginalized groups), context analysis (legal, institutional, political), and limitations and assumptions.
3. An indicator matrix with baseline values that revises the original logframe indicators and means where necessary, giving clear baseline measurements for each indicator; data sources, collection methods, and verification means; and targets and benchmarks for midline/endline comparison.
4. A stakeholder mapping that identifies any additional duty bearers, rights holders and allies.
5. A risk and conflict sensitivity assessment, including a do-no-harm analysis; a description of any political, security and backlash risks and corresponding mitigation strategies.