

HUMAN RIGHTS IN SURVIVAL MODE:

REBUILDING TRUST AND SUPPORTING
DIGITAL WORKERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

A Comprehensive Summary of the Study on How Human Rights Workers
Survive under the Duterte Regime in the Philippines

As a contribution to the broader Technology and Social Change Project “True Costs of Disinformation,” a study titled **Human Rights in Survival Mode: Rebuilding Trust and Supporting Digital Workers in the Philippines** deep dives into the plight of the human rights sector in the Philippines, particularly communication and technology workers, and interventions to counter it.

Research Authors: Jonathan Corpus Ong, Jeremy Tintiangko, and Rossine Fallorina
Summarized by DAKILA Philippines

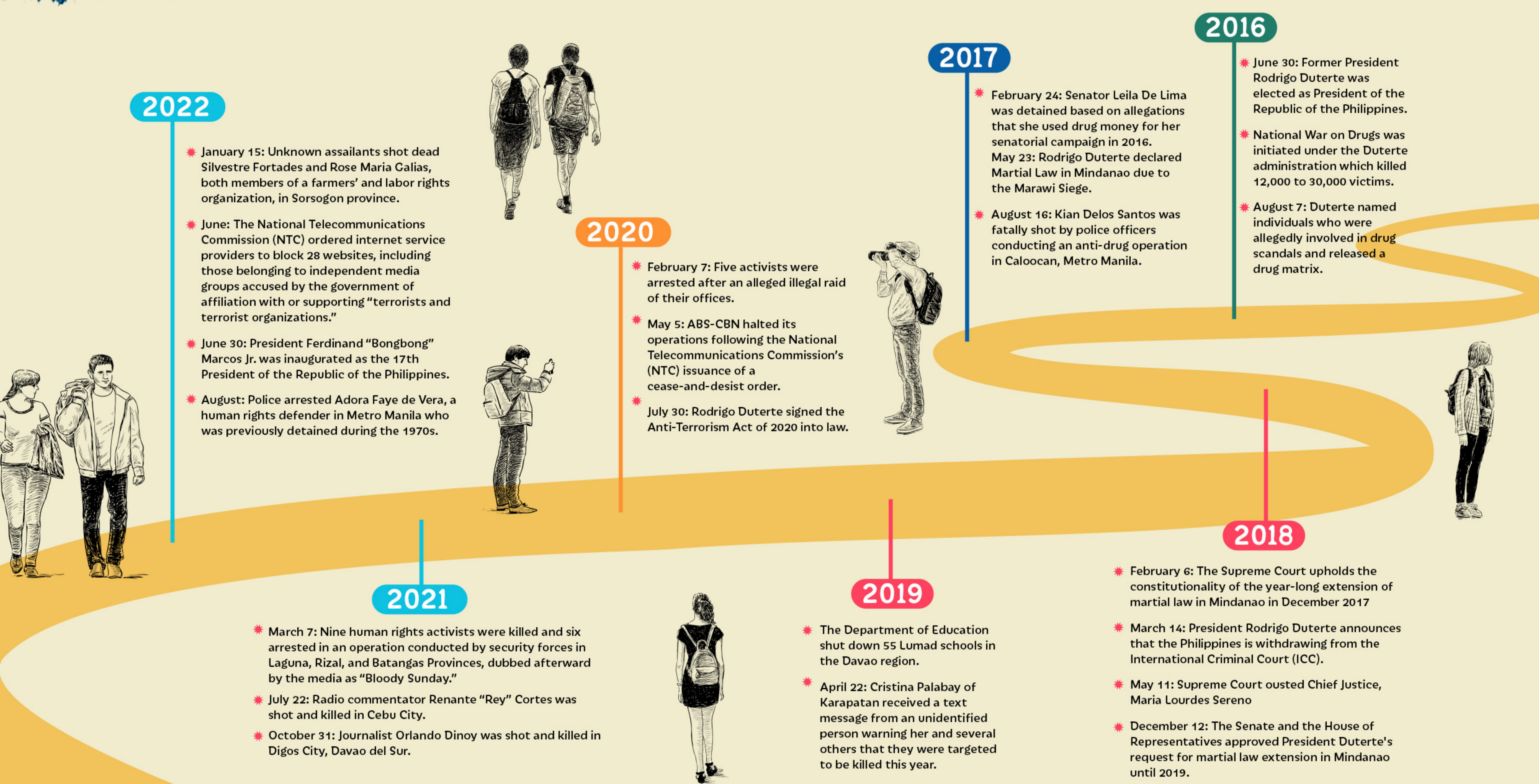
HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE PHILIPPINES IN SURVIVAL MODE



While historically known as the most active civil society in Asia, the Philippines and its state of human rights took a significant blow under the regime of strongman Rodrigo Duterte.

Laws were bent, stretched, and blatantly disregarded during his administration to serve the state's populist agendas. Simultaneously, human rights workers who respond to these are targeted, put in a bad light, and harassed. These attacks against human rights and its defenders put what was once a flourishing civil society in "survival mode."

Human rights advocates in the country are saddled with the double burden of extending help to the diverse victims of human rights abuses while justifying the very nature of their work against smear campaigns and disinformation narratives that paint them as anti-patriotic, partisan, and/or conspiratorially allied with local or foreign bad actors.



References:
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HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

THE STUDY IDENTIFIES STRUGGLES THAT THE HUMAN RIGHTS SECTOR CONFRONTS AT THE NATIONAL, SECTORAL, AND INDIVIDUAL LEVELS.

1. NATIONAL

- * The human rights sector remains vulnerable to conspiratorial accusations of foreign control, local oligarchic elite capture, or alliances with alternative power centers.
- * Digital disinformation, online trolling, conspiracy theories, and other forms of disinformation disorder have been added to state elites' arsenal of "dirty tricks," to further weaken democratic institutions.

2. SECTORAL

- * Seasoned veterans and younger activists have been strategizing differently in their efforts to win back public trust.
- * A lot of organizations still don't have staff dedicated to communication or branding; communication workers continue to play peripheral roles in their organizations.

3. INDIVIDUAL

- * Online disinformation and burnout have taken a toll on human rights workers who carry the brunt of negative public sentiment against the human rights sector.

“

Yung major challenge is si Duterte dahil dinemonize niya ang human rights kaya ang hirap na-i-counter ang narrative. Tuwing nagsasalita si Duterte deliberate yung distortion niya kasi nga gusto niya tumahimik ang mga tao at maperpetuate yung culture of fear and silence.

"Duterte is our major challenge because he demonized "human rights," which is why countering the narrative is difficult. His distortion of human rights is deliberate: he aims to censor and perpetuate a culture of fear and silence among the public."

Research respondent on the role of Rodrigo Duterte in the crisis



While human rights workers diagnose the roots of the sector's crisis quite differently, **they all point to many communication-related problems.**

Respondents of the study referenced social media as rewriting the "rules of the game" of human rights campaigning, but the study found **limited evidence of structural investments to support strategic communication in organizational practice and everyday work routines.**

Figure 1: Communication Staff in Human Rights Organizations

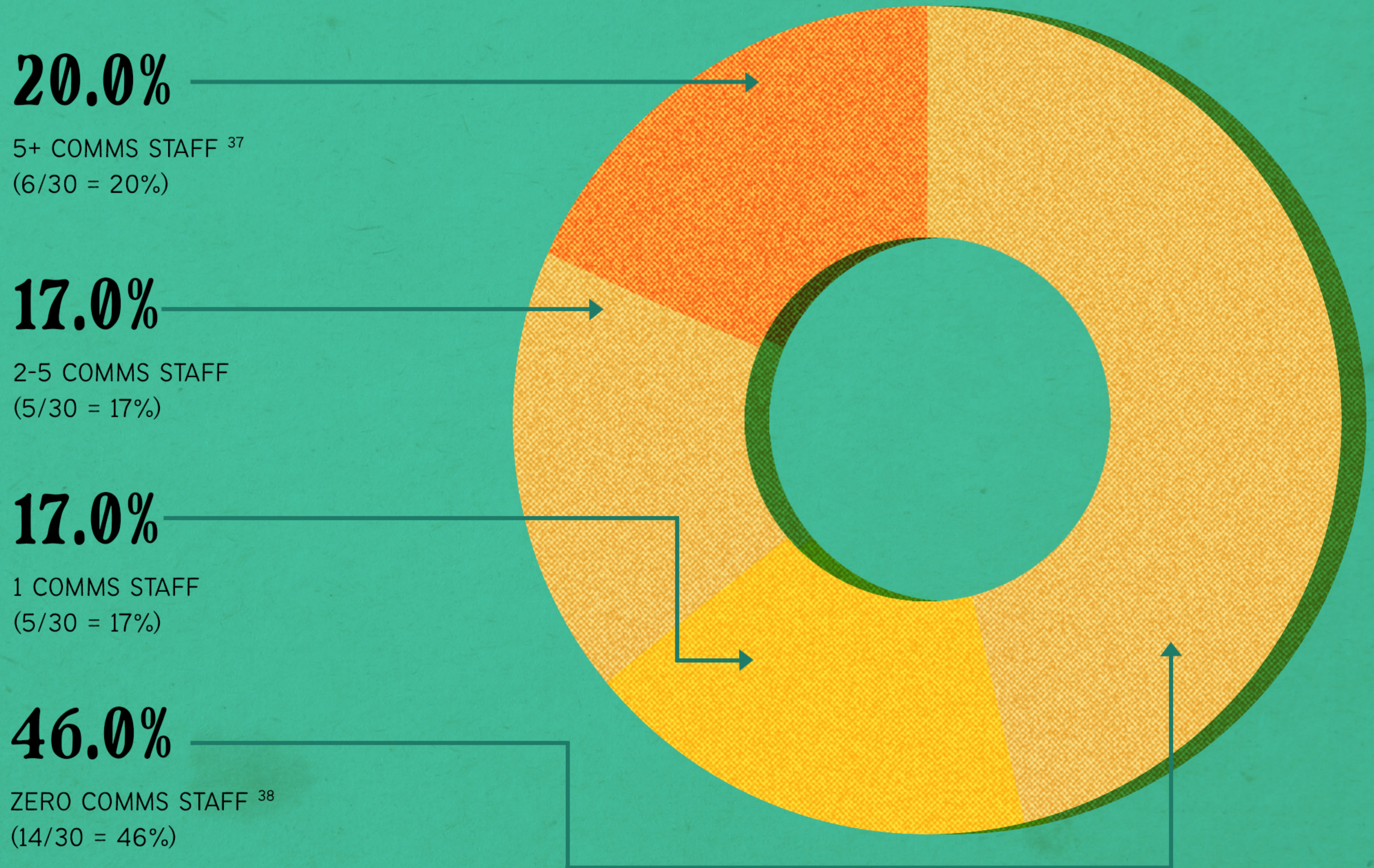


Figure 1: Communication Staff in Human Rights Organizations-Respondents of the study




Human rights organizations adopted different survival strategies to cope with their crisis.

Some became *frontliners* by bravely calling out government abuses.

Others became *backchannelers* who focused on providing essential services and distanced themselves from the 'human rights' label to avoid reputational baggage.

Despite many creative experiments to connect with diverse audiences and beneficiaries, human rights organizations were not able to fully invest in resources in sustainable communication frameworks and empower their communication personnel.



ONLY A COWARD
WOULD SILENCE
THE TRUTH
#JUNKTERROR
BILL

I HATE IT
WHEN YOU
CALL ME
TERRORIST

ONE VOICE
TO UPHOLD
HUMAN RIGHTS!
#JunkTerrorBill
STFU

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?



To rebuild trust and support for digital workers, the study underscores the importance of investing in strategic communications as crisis intervention **BOTH** for human rights workers and victims of human rights abuses.

✓ It allows organizations to cope with the massive disinformation against the sector to rebuild public trust and support.

✓ It adopts strategies more appropriate for its specific campaign objective or the community intervention they are managing to provide better service.



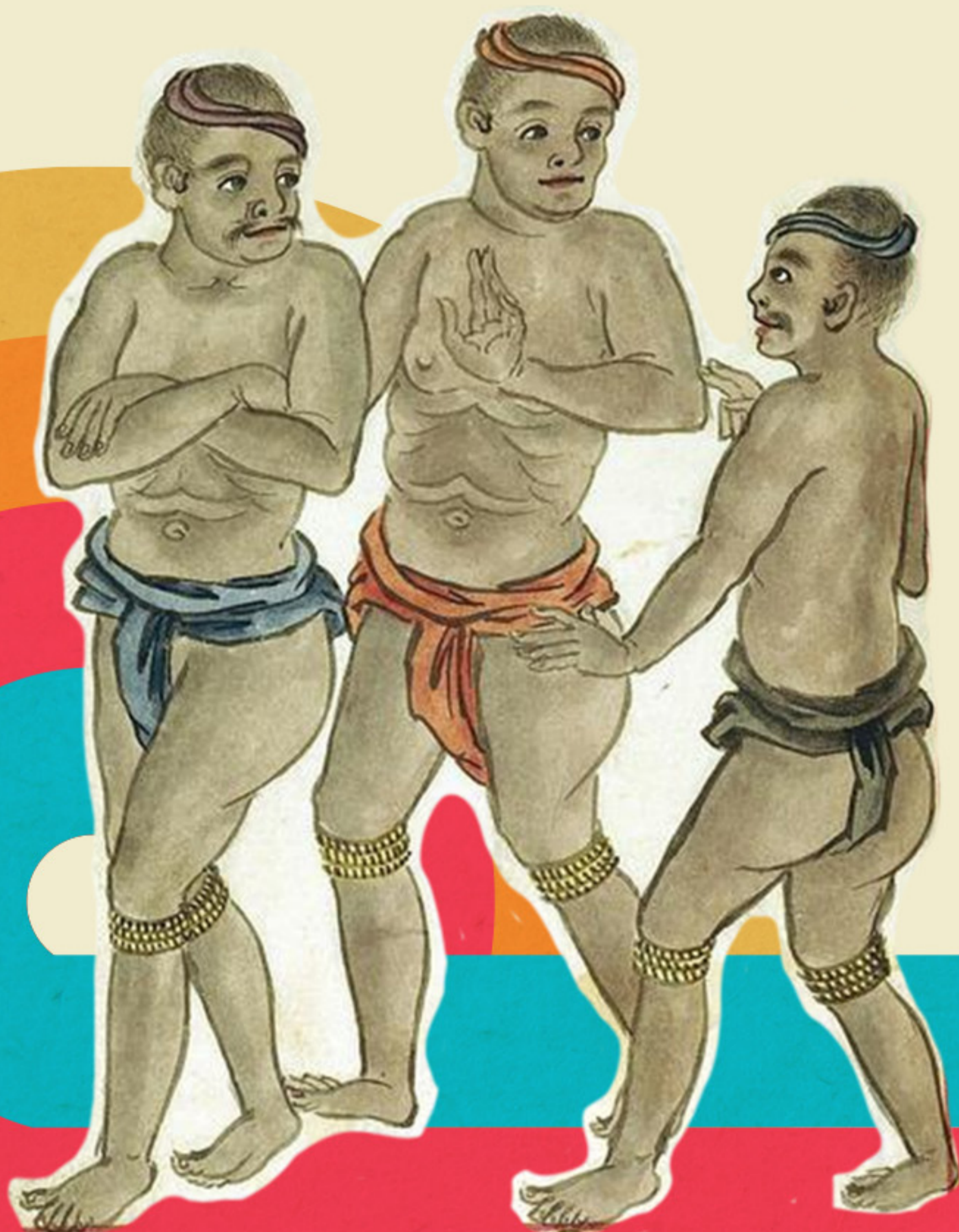
EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS SHOULD:

BE STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL

Treat organizational communications as a strategy rather than a tool. Communications should be utilized to take control of the political narrative, connect with audiences, correct disinformation, and support colleagues and victims in peril.

SPEAK 360

Human rights organizations should BOTH address the attacks and remain committed to serve local communities. These strategies of *frontlining* and *backchanneling* go hand in hand, and should both be maximized by human rights workers.




CALL TO COMMUNE

Build a network of advocates with allies in journalism, advertising, public relations, and the academe both to broaden insights and create innovative interventions.

AMPLIFY VOICES

Empower digital and communication workers, and include their perspectives in organizational decision-making. Provide accessible capacity-building and mental health support to all staff.



DAKILA and its human rights education center Active Vista are part of a multi-organizational project under the Initiative for Advancing Community Transformation (I-ACT) Project, which seeks to increase public support for human rights in the Philippines—promoting rights-claiming, -affirming, and -seeking behaviors— through Social and Behavior Change (SBC). To this end, we’ve worked with diverse partners from various areas of expertise, gathering insights on what works (and what doesn’t) in evolving human rights advocacy practices through SBC.

Visit HumanRights.ph to learn more.



DAKILA - Philippine Collective for Modern Heroism is an organization of artists, cultural and development activists, students, young professionals, and individuals creatively building a movement of heroism towards social transformation.



Active Vista is an institution established by DAKILA. It facilitates the learning process of empowering citizens to become agents of social change.



The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our work across the region addresses five overarching goals—strengthen governance, empower women, expand economic opportunity, increase environmental resilience, and promote regional cooperation.



The Initiatives for Advancing Community Transformation (I-ACT) is a project of The Asia Foundation made possible by the generous support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I-ACT uses a strategy of behavioral science-backed Diagnosing, Prototyping, and Institutionalization to fully understand Filipinos’ appreciation for human rights and meaningfully engage them in efforts to protect civil and political rights.

