



REVIVED GRASSROOTS JUSTICE

Working with District Human Rights Committees to Enhance Access to Justice

In the fight against HIV, TB, malaria, gender-based violence, and other rights violations that keep communities trapped in cycles of vulnerability, formal systems alone are not enough. Police stations, courts, and health facilities exist, yet for many survivors—especially those living with HIV, key populations, adolescent girls, persons with disabilities, and survivors of economic or sexual violence—justice remains fragmented, distant, and often inaccessible.

This is the gap that District Human Rights Committees (DHRCs) were designed to fill. Originally envisioned as a decentralised arm of the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), the DHRC is a multi-sectoral community structure mandated to receive, document, manage, and refer human rights violations. It brings together duty bearers and rights holders in one coordinated table: District Community Development Officers, Probation and Social Welfare Officers, police Child and Family Protection Units, health and HIV focal persons, paralegals, cultural leaders, civil society representatives, and community voices including people living with HIV and survivors of violence.

For years, this structure existed largely on paper. Independent human rights reporting as far back as 2009 noted that completing the establishment of district human rights committees remained an unfulfilled UHRC recommendation. In most districts the committees quietly faded and only a few, such as Wakiso, retained activity.

Under the Global Fund's NFM2 and NFM3 grant cycles, and with the critical support of TASO Uganda, UGANET recognised this dormant but legitimate structure as a powerful vehicle for rights-based programming. UGANET revitalised what already carried constitutional and institutional legitimacy. What began as training and the rollout of a National Human Rights Violation reporting tool across 56 districts has matured into sustained, hands-on support to 31 districts across Eastern, Central and Western Uganda. Today these committees are no longer dormant structures. They are functioning mechanisms that identify cases early, coordinate responses across sectors, and link communities directly to legal aid, health services, and justice.

This article tells that story—the approach, the results, the unique value of UGANET's engagement, and why continued investment in these committees is both necessary and high-impact.

The UGANET Approach

UGANET's engagement with DHRCs is deliberately rooted in the existing UHRC framework. The committees remain district-level structures chaired by government officers and composed of mandated duty bearers. What UGANET has done—supported by TASO under the Global Fund programme—is to re-establish, standardise, resource, and accompany them so they can actually function.

District selection followed the geography of grant implementation. The 31 districts currently supported are those where UGANET's HIV, TB and malaria programming is active, ensuring human rights response is embedded in the same communities where health interventions already operate. Within each district the process of building (or rebuilding) the committee was deliberate and adaptive. Under NFM3, UGANET worked with civil society and district partners to design and validate a standardised Human Rights Violation reporting tool, then rolled it out nationwide. Committees began with five members drawn from rights holders, civil society, law enforcement, district government, and community structures. As caseloads grew, the model expanded to nine members to ensure the full chain of expertise—from community voice to legal action—was present at the table.

Selection is accountable and self-renewing. Members are nominated against clear criteria and confirmed by the existing committee. When members leave or are transferred, the committee itself nominates replacements. Membership is voluntary; no one is paid to serve. This design keeps the structure grounded in genuine commitment rather than external appointment.

Once constituted, every committee receives the same structured onboarding, harmonised terms of reference, and training in case management and documentation. The result is one coherent model operating across 31 districts, regardless of each district's starting point. Between quarterly formal meetings, the real work continues daily at community level: cases are documented with unique codes, tracked through mediation, police referral, court action or legal representation, and followed until resolution.

Critically, DHRCs are not a parallel system to UGANET's paralegals and lawyers. They are the community front door. Cases requiring professional legal intervention are identified early and referred without delay. In turn, UGANET provides ongoing capacity support through monitoring and evaluation visits, legal backstopping, and two-way referral pathways. The relationship is reciprocal: DHRCs feed cases upward; UGANET feeds support and learning downward.



Facilitating Access to the Formal Justice System — M&E support visits to the DHRC in Bundibugyo (left) and Masindi (right)

Why This Model Works—and Why It Is Unique

Four features make the revitalised DHRC model particularly powerful:

1. Closing the Coordination Gap

Police can investigate, courts can adjudicate, probation officers can counsel, and health workers can treat—but none of them, working in isolation, can hold a survivor through the entire journey. The DHRC is the only district-level structure that brings all of these actors to one table around a single case.

2. Constitutional and Institutional Grounding

Because it sits inside existing local government structures and is chaired by a district official, it carries legitimacy and a pathway to sustainability. When a funding cycle ends, the roles, relationships and institutional memory remain.

3. Complementary Partnership with Legal Aid

The function of the DHRC is bolstered by UGANET's Legal Aid programme. Cases requiring legal action are channelled to UGANET who follow through to ensure that communities get justice. The DHRCs and UGANET as a Legal Aid service provider complement each other.

4. Real-Time Community-Level Intelligence

Because DHRCs document cases systematically and sit inside the communities they serve, they detect emerging patterns—rising defilement, denial of education, economic violence, harmful cultural practices—and can trigger rapid, targeted responses. Examples already include boy-child engagement sessions in Bundibugyo, radio programmes in Hoima, and community outreaches in Kalangala.

Documented Impact

Across the 31 districts, DHRCs have moved from dormant structures to active mechanisms of accountability, documentation, resolution and prevention.

Cases that previously disappeared into informal community handling are now formally registered, tracked and resolved. In Nakasongola a sexual violence case referred by the DHRC resulted in the perpetrator's arrest and formal prosecution. In Kyankwanzi an aggravated defilement case led to the perpetrator being remanded, with court proceedings continuing via virtual means to overcome distance barriers. In Kabarole a woman denied inheritance rights because of her gender and marital status—after being blocked by bribes and threats in multiple offices—finally received justice through a community meeting convened with the Resident District Commissioner, resulting in property sharing and reconciliation. In Luwero survivors of sexual violence received integrated support: testing, counselling and police referral through a single coordinated pathway. Land eviction cases have been referred to area land committees and settled; child neglect cases have ended in formal agreements with ongoing follow-up.



With support from the RDC, the DHRC successfully held a community meeting to distribute and share properties between the survivor and perpetrator; the two were also reconciled.

Beyond individual cases, outreach is reaching significant numbers. Succession Act sensitisation in Nakasongola drew 50 community members; family safeguarding meetings in Kyankwanzi reached 600; radio programmes and community dialogues consistently engage people across age groups. Attendance is routinely disaggregated by age and sex, showing broad community penetration rather than narrow targeting.

The documentation itself is transformative. Each case carries a unique code, category, actions taken, status and recommendations—creating an auditable record that was previously absent. DCDOs, probation officers, police, health focal persons, cultural leaders, paralegals and civil society representatives share responsibility for the same caseload and produce collective action plans.

Perhaps most importantly, the committees are beginning to identify and respond to patterns. High teenage pregnancy, rising defilement, and cultural barriers to reporting are being flagged and met with targeted prevention work rather than only reactive case management.

Continued Investment

The results to date demonstrate that structured, community-based human rights response works. Cases are being documented that would otherwise have gone unrecorded. Perpetrators are being held to account. Families are being reconciled. Survivors are receiving integrated health, psychosocial and legal support. Communities are being reached in the hundreds. All of this is happening through a structure that already belongs to the district system and costs relatively little to sustain.

Yet the model is still maturing. Most members last received formal training in 2022. Caseloads have grown. Leadership has changed in several districts. Transport and basic facilitation remain consistent bottlenecks that leave cases open longer than necessary. Real-time digital reporting would allow earlier detection of patterns. Cross-district learning would accelerate weaker committees by drawing on the experience of stronger ones. Sustained rather than one-off sensitisation is required to overcome community attitudes that still prevent reporting.

Continued investment will deepen capacity, close remaining operational gaps, expand geographic reach where needed, and ensure that the coordination, documentation and survivor-centred pathways already established become permanent features of district-level response.

UGANET’s engagement with DHRCs is distinctive precisely because it did not create a parallel system. It revived a UHRC structure, standardised it across 31 districts with TASO’s support under the Global Fund.

With the right continued support, District Human Rights Committees can reach further, respond faster, and serve every supported district at full potential—turning the promise of decentralised human rights protection into daily reality for the people who need it most.

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