

Human Rights Defenders in Cabo Verde

By: Natalie Bishop

In February 2021¹⁰, a group of legal researchers from Green Advocates ~~published~~ ~~put together~~ a report, *West Africa Frontline Grassroots Environmental and Human Rights Defender (HRD) Baseline Report*,¹¹ analyzing environmental and human rights issues in the West African region. The report specifically looked at the problems many of these countries have faced in the promotion of human rights and specifically studied the challenges Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) have confronted in their work. The report also gave recommendations and strategies for increasing protection and filling gaps in rights advocacy work. HRDs are an integral part of advocacy in the West African region. They guarantee and fight for the implementation of human rights treaties and work on a local, grassroots level to ensure that communities' issues are being addressed in national policies and legislation. HRDs however, have been under attack in recent years. They have faced discrimination, persecution, threats, attacks, and many have been forced to flee their countries for fear of their lives. In many West African nations, there is little support or protection for HRDs thus, the report outlines recommendations the countries can take to better protect those who are advocating for human rights.

West Africa consists of sixteen countries and is diverse in languages, religions, culture, and approaches to human rights and environmental concerns. The region has a history fraught with violence, colonialism, extremist groups, and conflicts over natural resources, governments, and national policies. But, in recent years the region has also seen immense growth- promoting peaceful transitions of power, empowering grassroots and community-based groups, and advocating for greater environmental, social, and economic protection through HRDs.

Cabo Verde, also called Cape Verde, is a small group of islands off the Western Coast of Africa in the Atlantic Ocean. It was colonized by Portuguese explorers in the 15th century. Its official language is still Portuguese, while virtually all nationals speak Kriolu. The current population is approximately 550,000. Cabo Verde gained independence in the 1970s and has been a democratic republic since the 1990s. It has one of the more stable governments in West Africa with transparent and fair elections. The country also guarantees the right to assemble, which is crucially important for the work of HRDs.

Compared to other countries in the region, Cabo Verde is a relatively amiable towards HRDs. The report found no instances of human rights violation perpetrated against HRDs. Where HRDs working in other countries in the region regularly face unlawful arrests or detentions, forced exiles, and judicial threats, there were no reported instances of such violations in Cabo Verde. The report did find that there was at least one instance of an extra judicial killing of a HRD in the region. But there were no reported instances of criminalization, militarization, stigmatization, or limits freedom of expression and association for HDRs in Cabo Verde. Finally, the report found that the language surrounding HRDs in Cabo Verde is not hostile and HRDs are not considered traitors, unlike the rhetoric in many other West African nations.

Despite relatively progressive practices the report did offer a few recommendations where Cabo Verde specifically can improve their protections of HRDs. One issue Cabo Verde has is with capacity in its legal system. The courts are often overrun and thus the process can be inefficient. Detainees in Cabo Verde can experience delayed hearings which slows down the administration of justice. The Bar Association did provide a legal aid program for Cabo Verde in 2019 which purported to speed up the court process and provide more capacity. More programs like this as well as increased funding may help to make the system more efficient. Finally, Cabo Verde does not have a Paris-Principles-accredited human rights commission, although it has ratified multiple international human rights treaties. Creating a commission would be an even greater step towards promoting human rights in Cabo Verde and would also provide outside accountability and transparency. Additionally, Cabo Verde has yet to create a national human rights institute. Creating these types of organizations, dedicated specifically to the implementation of human rights and protection of HRDs would increase the promotion of human rights in the region.