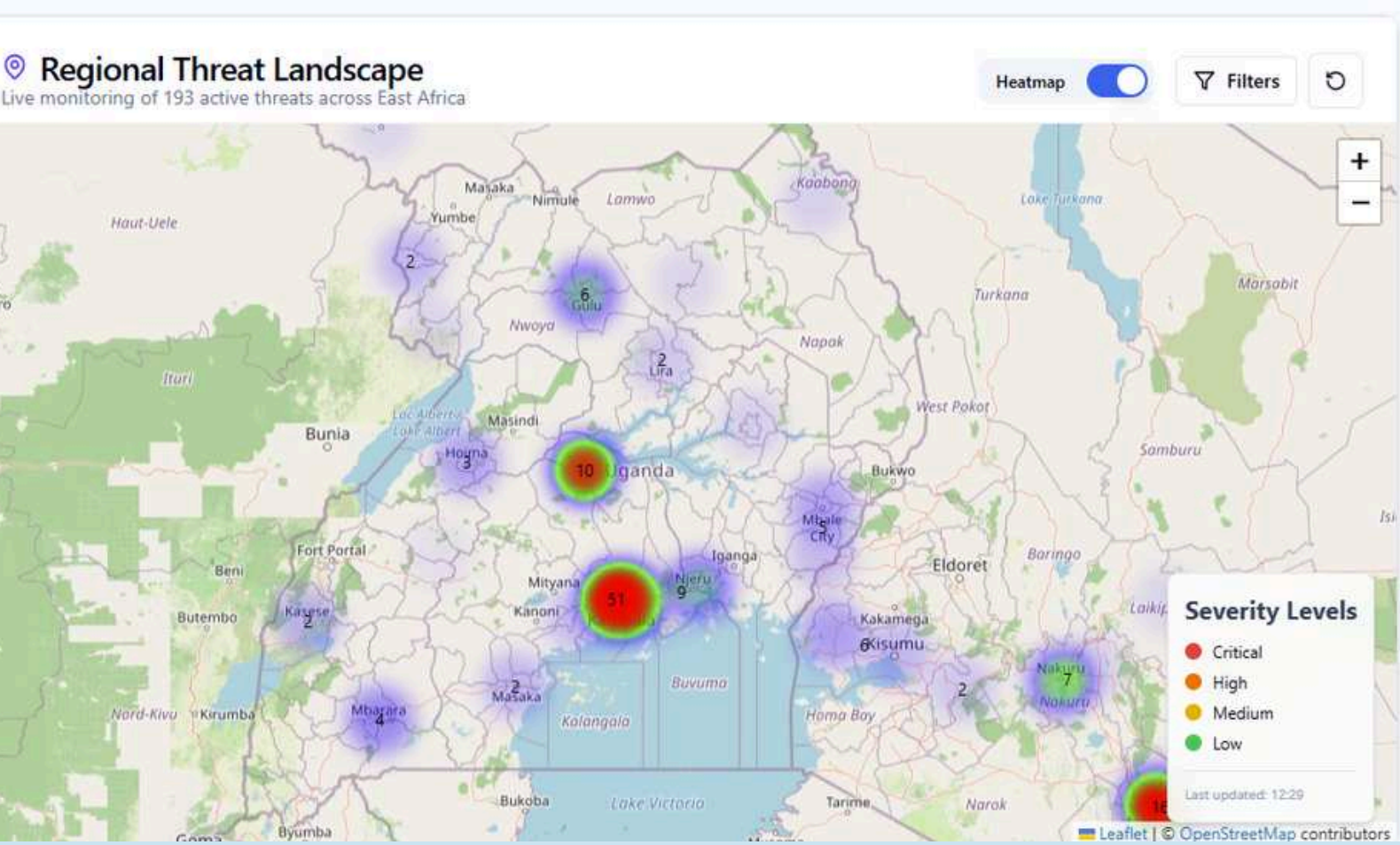
SPACEUG

THREAT MONITORING AND REFERRAL TOOL

IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT REPORT

Results, Insights and Key Learnings



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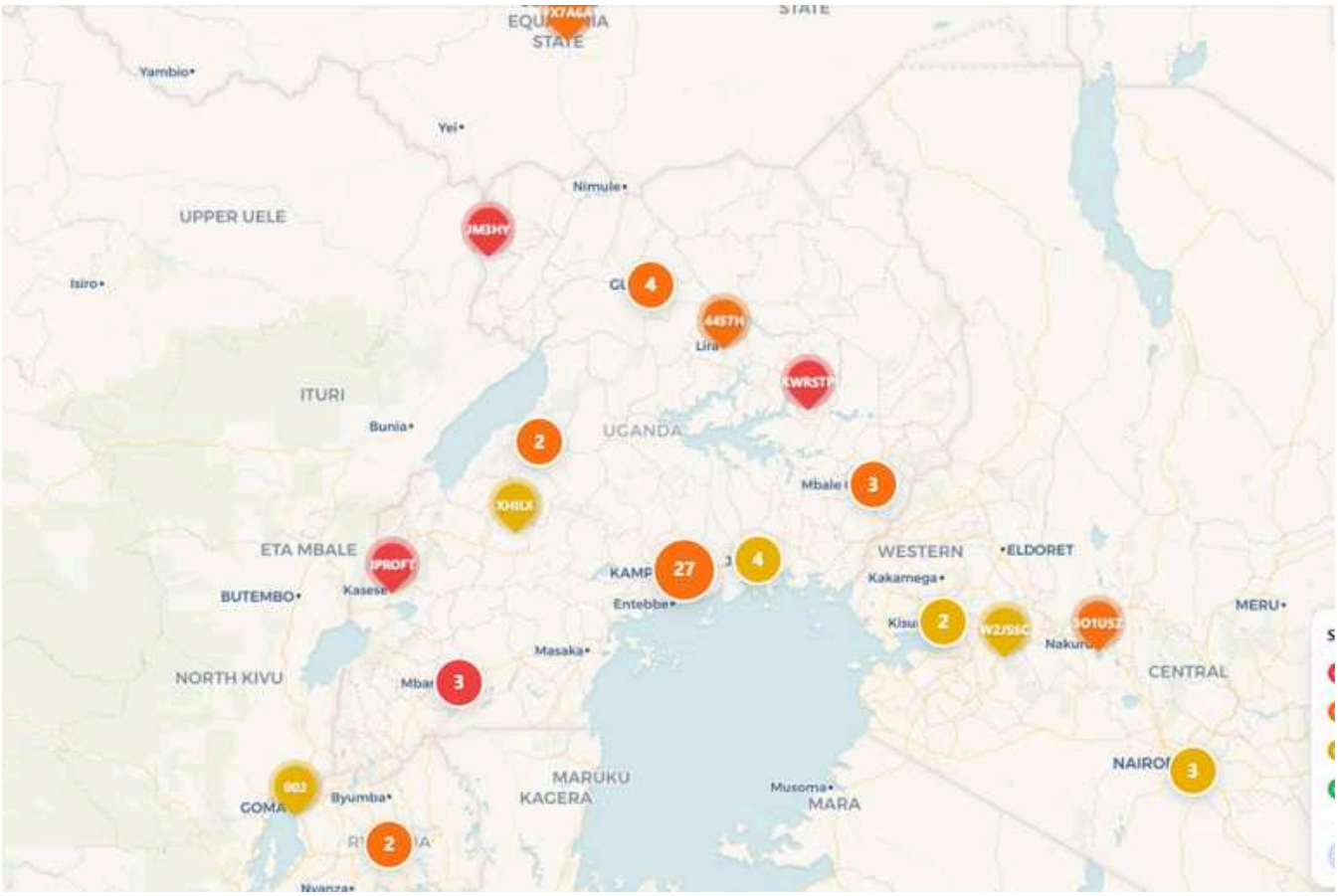


Executive Summary

Rural Smiles Foundation developed the SPACEUG Threat Monitoring and Referral Tool to strengthen the documentation, monitoring and referral of threats affecting human rights defenders, journalists, civil society actors and vulnerable communities.

In 2026, support from the NetHope Connected Artificial Intelligence Grant, made possible by Microsoft Elevate, enabled the integration of four key functionalities: automated regional case routing, multilingual translation, risk scoring, and automated incident-related information retrieval and summarization. The latter searches publicly available online publications for related incident coverage, providing case officers with additional information to support verification and assessment. These capabilities improve incident processing while maintaining human oversight and protecting sensitive information.

SPACEUG recorded 234 incident submissions across six countries, including 193 from Uganda. The project also engaged 15 civil society representatives and onboarded 10 partner organizations, strengthening participation in community-centred digital monitoring.
This report shares SPACEUG's implementation results, incident trends, operational improvements, emerging insights and key lessons learned, demonstrating how responsible artificial intelligence can support civic space protection and informed, human-led responses.

234

Incident submissions recorded

193

Submissions from Uganda

10

Partner organizations onboarded

6

Countries represented in submissions



When Threats Go Unreported, Protection Becomes More Difficult.

Across Uganda, human rights defenders, journalists, civil society organizations and community activists operate in an environment where intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention and restrictions on civic freedoms can undermine their ability to work safely. For individuals in rural and underserved communities, documenting these incidents and accessing appropriate support can be particularly challenging.

Although digital reporting mechanisms offer opportunities to improve documentation, significant gaps remain. Incident information may be scattered across different organizations, geographical locations, languages and public information sources. Some incidents are never formally documented, while others require considerable time to review, assess and refer to the appropriate protection actors.

Rural Smiles Foundation developed the SPACEUG Threat Monitoring and Referral Tool to address these gaps through a privacy-conscious, community-centred reporting mechanism. However, as reporting activity increased, manually reviewing submissions, identifying responsible regional case officers, assessing potential risks and locating related public information presented growing operational challenges.

The need was therefore not simply to collect more reports, but to make incident information more actionable. Integrating responsible artificial intelligence offered an opportunity to streamline regional case allocation, support multilingual reporting, identify potentially urgent cases and retrieve relevant public information, while ensuring that sensitive decisions remain under human oversight.

28/100

Uganda's Civic Space Score Classified as “Repressed,” reflecting severe restrictions on fundamental civic freedoms.

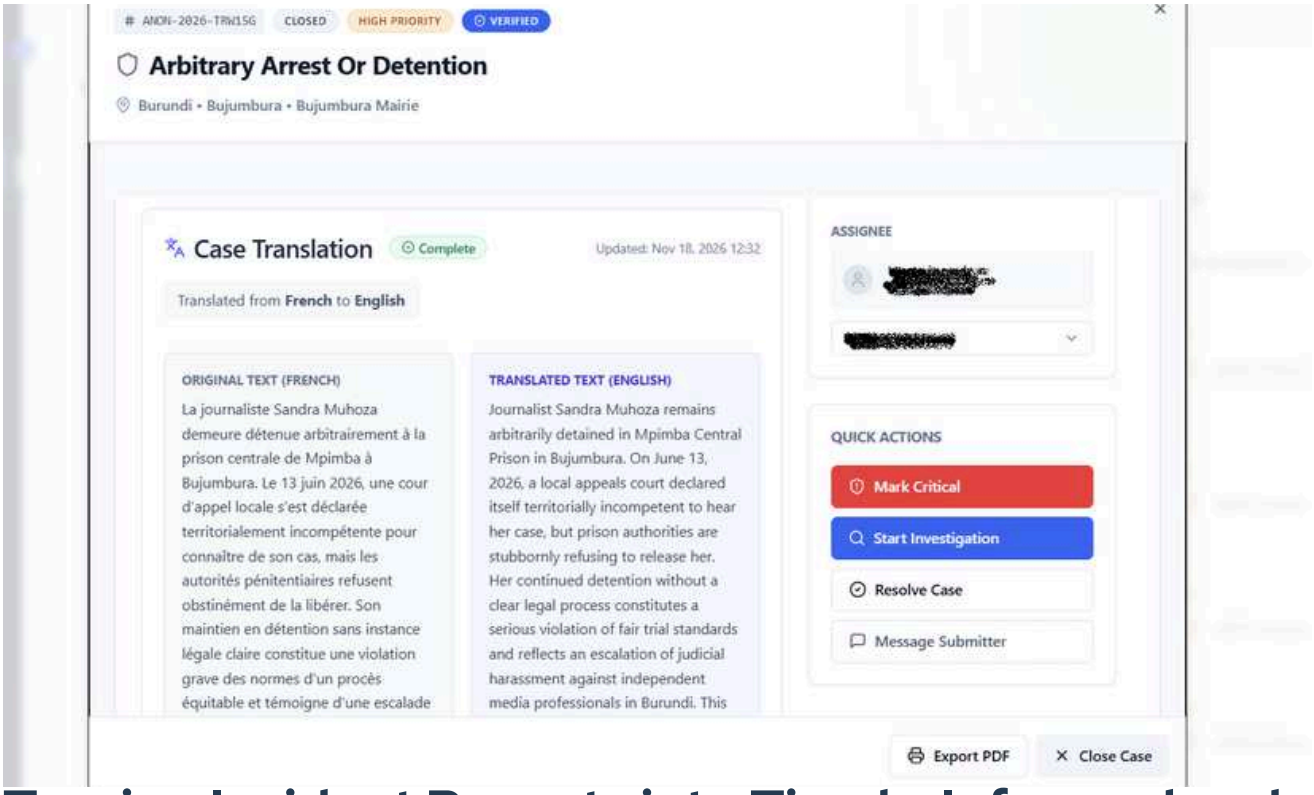
10

Civil Society Organizations Suspended since January 2026, affecting independent civic engagement and organizational operations.

83%

Respondents concerned about the country's direction
On human rights and rule of law

Solution



Turning Incident Reports into Timely, Informed and Human-Led Responses.

SPACEUG is a privacy-conscious digital platform developed by Rural Smiles Foundation to support the reporting, monitoring and referral of civic space threats, intimidation and human rights violations. It provides individuals and civil society organizations with a mechanism to document incidents while supporting structured case management and appropriate follow-up. Through the NetHope Connected Artificial Intelligence Grant, Rural Smiles Foundation completed the integration of four intelligent functionalities designed to improve operational efficiency:

- **Automated Regional Case Routing:** Directs submitted incidents to designated case officers based on the geographical location of the reported incident, reducing manual case allocation.
- **Multilingual Translation:** Supports the processing and interpretation of incident reports submitted in different languages, improving accessibility and reducing language barriers.
- **Risk Scoring:** Assists case officers in identifying potentially urgent or high-risk incidents for prioritized human assessment.
- **Automated Information Retrieval and Summarization:** Searches publicly available online publications for information relating to reported incidents and summarizes relevant findings to support case assessment and verification.

Together, these functionalities strengthen incident processing without replacing human judgment. Case officers remain responsible for reviewing information, assessing credibility and determining appropriate referrals or protective actions.

Automated

Regional Case Routing

Cases directed to designated regional officers

Human-Led

Verification & Referral

Case assessment and decisions remain under human oversight

Multilingual

Incident Processing

Translation supports reports across language barriers

IMPLEMENTATION

From Community Feedback to Responsible Artificial Intelligence Integration

With support from the NetHope Connected Artificial Intelligence Grant, Rural Smiles Foundation followed a practical, community-informed approach to strengthening SPACEUG. The implementation combined technical development, staff capacity building and consultations with civil society actors to ensure the new functionalities addressed real operational challenges. Throughout the process, emphasis was placed on usability, data protection, responsible artificial intelligence and human oversight in sensitive case management.



Step 1

Design & Development

Identified operational gaps and integrated automated regional case routing, multilingual translation, risk scoring and related-publication retrieval and summarization into the existing SPACEUG platform.

Step 2

Testing & Validation

Demonstrated the enhanced platform to 15 civil society representatives through the Kitara Civil Society Organizations Network, gathered feedback on usability and case management, and onboarded 10 partner organizations.

Step 3

Deployment & Learning

Completed deployment of the artificial intelligence enhancements, strengthened staff capacity through training and developed Rural Smiles Foundation's Artificial Intelligence Policy to guide responsible use and continued improvement.

Civic Space Threats and Their Human and Regional Impact

During the reporting period, SPACEUG recorded 234 incident submissions across six African countries, revealing threats to personal security, civic freedoms and democratic participation. Uganda accounted for 193 reports (82.5%), while the remaining 41 reports (17.5%) originated from Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda.

Our analysis examined concerns involving arbitrary detention, intimidation, restrictions on peaceful assembly, judicial harassment, censorship, digital repression and threats to community rights. The findings highlight consequences extending beyond individual incidents, including disrupted livelihoods, family insecurity, restricted access to justice and reduced public participation. Developments across Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania during the same period also illustrate how restrictions on civic freedoms intersect with political accountability, public trust and cross-border protection.

Detention, Judicial Harassment and Restrictions on Civic Freedom

UGANDA

Our monitoring recorded 193 incident submissions from Uganda, representing 82.5% of all reports. During the reporting period, the detention of legal practitioners and civic activists, alongside restrictions on media operations, illustrated the pressures facing independent voices. We observed that these threats have consequences beyond those directly affected, disrupting family livelihoods, limiting access to legal representation and discouraging public scrutiny of government decisions.

Protest Violence, Disappearances and Economic Disruption

KENYA

Our regional assessment highlighted serious restrictions surrounding the 25 June 2026 demonstrations, including arrests, reported disappearances and restrictions on movement. Beyond physical safety, these incidents exposed families to uncertainty, disrupted employment and businesses, and limited access to essential services. We noted that such conditions can discourage peaceful protest and weaken citizens' confidence in their ability to participate safely in public affairs.

Criminalization of Dissent and Restrictions on Expression

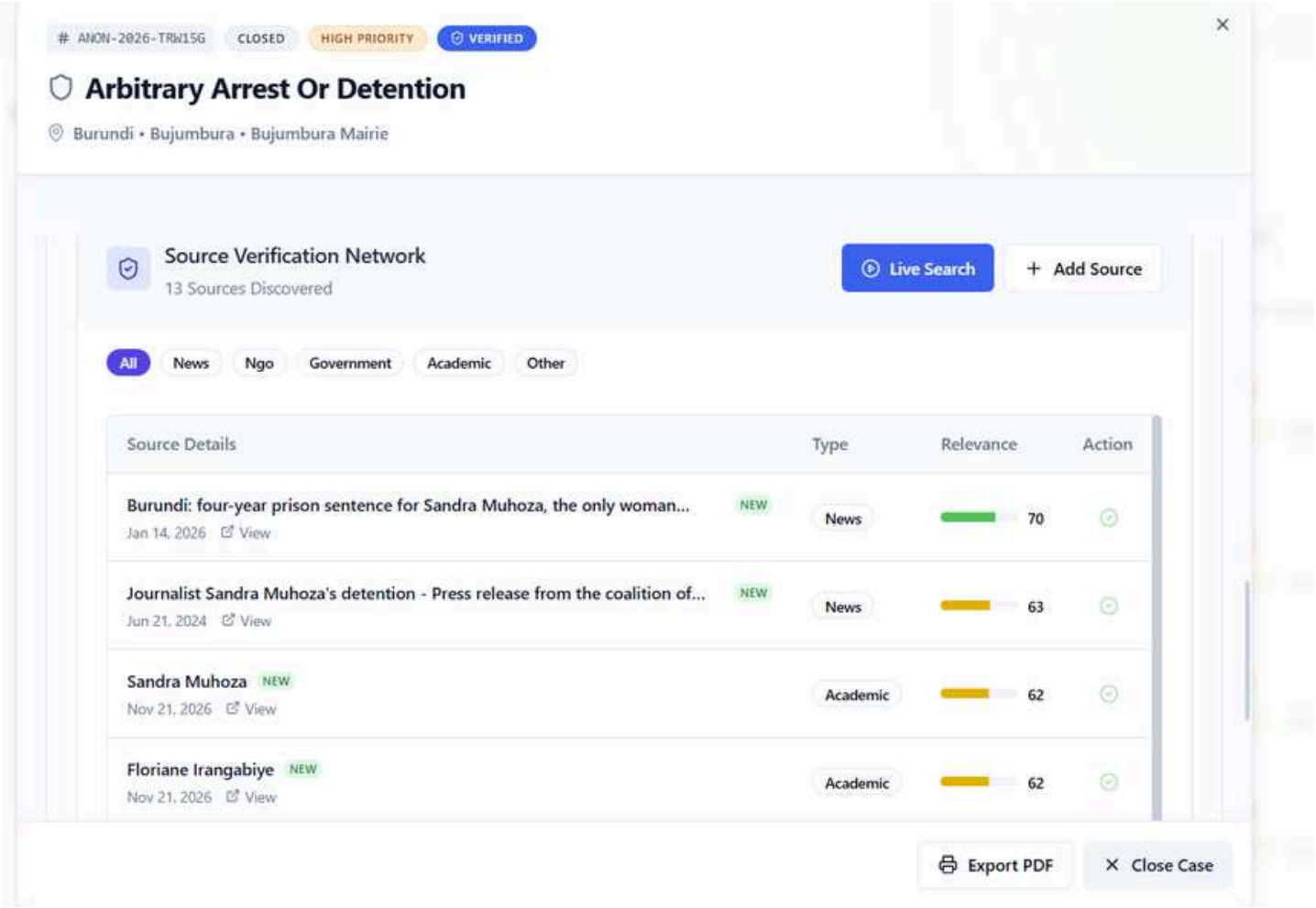
TANZANIA

Our analysis identified significant concerns involving restrictions on political gatherings, arrests and terrorism-related prosecutions during June and July 2026, followed by further limitations on independent media in August. These developments exposed civic actors to prolonged legal uncertainty and financial hardship while reducing access to independent information. We observed that the combined effect of criminal proceedings and censorship can restrict public debate and weaken accountability.

Cross-Border Repression and Regional Stability

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Our assessment highlighted the June 2026 detention and deportation of a Kenyan lawyer from Uganda as an example of how civic restrictions can extend beyond national borders. Such actions raise concerns about freedom of movement, legal representation and the protection of civic actors engaged in regional advocacy. When restrictions cross jurisdictions, they can undermine confidence in regional justice mechanisms, complicate protection arrangements and strain cooperation on fundamental rights.



Challenges and Lessons Learned

Integrating artificial intelligence into SPACEUG presented important technical, operational and ethical considerations. The sensitive nature of civic space incidents required us to balance faster information processing with accuracy, confidentiality and the protection of people reporting threats.

One significant challenge was ensuring that automated outputs remained reliable within different linguistic, geographical and political contexts. Risk scores and publicly available online information could support case assessment, but neither could independently establish the accuracy of a reported incident. Human judgment therefore remained central to reviewing information, determining urgency and making referral decisions.

The implementation also reinforced the importance of safeguarding sensitive incident records, maintaining clear access controls and strengthening staff capacity to use artificial intelligence responsibly. Our experience demonstrated that successful integration depends not only on technological capability but also on institutional accountability, practical workflows and the trust of the communities the platform serves.

Three key lessons

01

Context Matters

Automated analysis must account for local languages, political sensitivities and incomplete information. Human interpretation remains essential for accurate assessment.

02

Protection Comes First

Anonymity, restricted access and responsible data handling are fundamental when documenting threats involving vulnerable individuals and communities.

03

Human Oversight Is Essential

Artificial intelligence can support prioritization and information analysis, but case verification, protection decisions and referrals must remain human-led.

Sustaining Progress, Expanding Regional Protection

The completion of the NetHope Connected-supported artificial intelligence enhancements marks an important milestone in Rural Smiles Foundation's commitment to strengthening civic space protection through responsible technology. We remain committed to sustaining these improvements through continued platform maintenance, data protection, staff capacity development and human-led case management.

Building on this progress, Rural Smiles Foundation is working with CIVICUS through the Digital Democracy Initiative Civic Tech Lab project, “Strengthening Regional Civic Space Monitoring and Protection in East Africa.” This separate initiative is strengthening SPACEUG's security, usability and reporting workflows while supporting its planned expansion into Kenya and Tanzania.
Our next phase will prioritize collaboration with civil society organizations, human rights defenders, journalists, legal protection providers, digital security specialists and regional institutions to strengthen incident documentation, early warning and coordinated referrals.

We welcome partnerships with governments, diplomatic missions, United Nations agencies, civil society networks, research institutions, technology organizations and development partners interested in advancing responsible digital innovation, safeguarding civic freedoms and expanding access to trusted protection mechanisms.

We extend our sincere appreciation to NetHope Connected and Microsoft Elevate for supporting the artificial intelligence enhancements, CIVICUS for supporting SPACEUG's continued development and regional expansion, and the civil society organizations, technical contributors and community stakeholders whose participation made this work possible. Together, we can build safer civic spaces, strengthen regional protection networks and ensure that technology serves the people whose rights and freedoms are most at risk.

RURAL SMILES FOUNDATION

NETHOPE

Email
smiles@ruralsmiles.org

Website
www.ruralsmiles.org