ANNUAL REPORT
2023
"These issues resonate globally, and you face a backlash simply for doing your job. This reinforces my belief that what I’m doing is right, and it’s why I keep going. The only thing we can do, because it’s hard to be brave when you’re alone, is to work together because it makes things easier."

Awali Shibolo, Lawyer and Executive Director, The Robust Initiative For Promoting Human Rights (TRIUMPH UGANDA)
PILnet Global Forum 2023 (Defending lawyers at risk session)

“Legal professions can actually help contribute to the development of regulations through comparative jurisdictional analysis.”

Laurens Engelen, Partner, Dentons
PILnet Global Forum 2023 (Greenwashing session)
Dear friends, supporters and partners,

As we reflect on the challenges faced and goals achieved in 2023, we are filled with immense gratitude and pride in what we have accomplished together, with your support. Throughout the year, we made great strides in developing our three new focus areas: Civic Space Resilience, Forced Displacement, and Climate Justice, and used the law to address the world’s most complex and urgent problems. Last year we matched 178 matters with pro bono legal assistance through our clearinghouses, held capacity building events for dozens of civil society organizations, and convened hundreds of legal professionals from around the globe to make connections, share experiences, and work towards a better future through pro bono.

We are pleased to share with you our highlights and milestones from 2023.

Civil Society Resilience

One example of our direct, needs-driven support to civil society organizations (CSOs) is our partnership with Minority Rights Group Europe (MRGE) on the MARIO project to assist grassroots groups engaged in minority rights. As part of the project, we held an annual training focused on European institutions and legal mechanisms in Budapest for 30 minority rights organizations, in order to empower participants with a better understanding of the EU institutional and legislative frameworks. Similarly, in Hong Kong, we directly supported CSOs with our legal health assessment service to identify the existing and potential legal issues and operational risks in their organizations, and create a plan to address them.

While we strive to engage directly with civil society partners whenever possible, we want to expand our community and extend the reach of our network’s expertise to every group who needs it. To this end, we have continued to develop our legal resources. These resources include our Employment Compass, created with Eversheds Sutherland and other partners, which are user-friendly guides on employment laws in numerous jurisdictions worldwide. We also worked with JP Morgan Chase’s Force for Good team and our partners at European Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ECNL) and DLA Piper to further develop our Global Nonprofits Guide, which helps CSOs find a suitable location for their nonprofit and navigate the laws of that chosen country.
Forced Displacement

A cornerstone of our forced displacement work last year was our leading role in coordinating the 2023 Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge. As part of this pledge, over 100 refugee-led organizations, NGOs, law firms, academic institutions and others combined forces with PILnet and the Pledge Core Group to volunteer their time and expertise to work with refugees and other displaced people. More than 1 million hours of free legal assistance was pledged to those individuals and to the organizations that are led by refugees or work directly with them. Launched at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in December 2023, this extraordinary commitment was lauded by the UNHCR in both its closing remarks and the forum outcome document.

In our work with displaced populations, we champion a refugee-centered approach that values both legal needs and their existing skills and knowledge. As a crosscutting value in our work with those displaced, we promote a refugee-centered approach that focuses not just on the legal needs of refugees, but also on their skills and knowledge. In 2023, we hosted two Refugee Legal Fellows and hired a new staff member with lived experience of forced displacement to drive our refugee rights pro bono work forward. We have embedded refugee leadership within our own governance framework, and welcomed a new board member, Dr. Awmaima Amrayaf. Dr. Amrayaf brings considerable legal experience as well as her own experience of forced displacement to the decision-making process.

Climate Justice

We are continuing to develop our climate action program and are excited that Adam Weiss of Client Earth joined us as an advisor in 2023 in order to help us further this important work. We are also working alongside our partners at the Australian Pro Bono Centre on our Climate Action Portal, a collection of case studies from around the world exemplifying the ways lawyers are using pro bono to tackle the climate crisis. We are proud to have provided a platform for several important conversations on this topic during sessions at the 2023 Global Forum in Brussels.

Nurturing the next generation of legal professionals

In 2023, we held our third iteration of the public interest lawyering course. This 5-week, online course created a channel for new public interest-minded lawyers to gain experience and an international perspective at the outset of their career. Over 60 students participated in this round of the course. In addition, our Hong Kong office launched the new Public Interest Law Mentorship Program, which gave law students and young professionals the opportunity to learn from seasoned lawyers and build their networks.

Looking ahead

In 2024, we plan to sharpen our focus on the intersection of climate change, displacement, and civic space. We began developing this topic at our Global Forum in Brussels, where we held the session Climate Change, Displacement, and International Governance Frameworks. We will continue to consider how these areas are interconnected and will hold sessions and events around this topic.

We are also looking forward to expanding our work in Latin America. In 2023, we held a webinar for those in this region on working in challenging jurisdictions and have also welcomed an advisor, Jorge Escobedo, Pro Bono Manager of Covington, who will advise us on how to expand in this region.

None of this would be possible without you—our dedicated supporters and partners. Your belief in our mission fuels our drive to make a difference. Together, we are building a better, more equitable world through pro bono. Thank you for your trust and commitment. We look forward to another year of impactful work.
In 2023, PILnet embarked on the MARIO (Minorities, Accountability, Rights, Independence and Organizational Development) program, partnering with Minority Rights Group Europe to bolster the legal resilience of grassroots NGOs defending minority rights in Central and Eastern Europe for three years. Through tailored training, resources, and cross-border connections, 30 organizations received support with the aim of strengthening their legal resilience and building their organizational capacity. Along with training, workshops and bespoke resources provided to the grantees, two legal matters have been matched for pro bono legal aid through the project.

In March 2023, grantees were invited to a training on the EU legislative process and how NGOs can be more engaged in it. Over three days in Budapest, law firm partners Latham & Watkins and White & Case led four interactive workshops on European values and institutions, the EU legislative process, and EU legal mechanisms. The PILnet team delivered a workshop to share the potential of pro bono support for minority rights organizations. A comprehensive legal manual summarizing key insights was also produced. The MARIO program had top billing at PILnet’s 2023 Global Forum in Brussels, with a dedicated MARIO session designed as a live clearinghouse to foster the creation of relationships and collaborations between minority rights NGOs and the legal sector.

In 2024, PILnet remains committed to addressing the legal needs of grassroots organizations, facilitating matches, providing training, and nurturing connections across the region.
EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

PILnet’s Legal Health Check program supports CSOs in Hong Kong by evaluating their legal well-being and identifying potential risks. Following successful trials in 2022, a pilot involving eight CSOs was conducted throughout 2023. There are currently an additional 10 NGOs at various stages of the health check process.

CSOs often lack legal expertise, making them vulnerable to operational risk stemming from complex legal matters. PILnet developed the Legal Health Check service to address this need, providing assessments on organizational structure, financial health, fundraising, and information technology to ensure legal compliance.

“Through the Legal Health Check, we have been able to use this as a guideline of what we need to improve on as well as have a clear vision of how best we could support the communities we work with.”—Jeff Rotmeyer CEO of Impact HK and Love 21 Foundation.

Insights from the program inform future resources and expansion to other CSOs in Hong Kong and potentially globally. PILnet acknowledges Mayer Brown, UBS, and legal partners for their crucial contributions to shaping the program.
RESOURCES

PILnet analyzes the legal needs of CSOs globally and responds to those needs by creating free, multi-jurisdictional resources. One resource that was further developed in 2023 was the Global Nonprofits Guide. This resource, created in collaboration with ECNL and DLA Piper, gives guidance on how to register, operate, or relocate an NGO around the world. Currently, this guide provides guidance on nonprofit regulation for over 50 countries. Throughout 2023, PILnet, ECNL, and DLA Piper, worked with a tech team from the JP Morgan Chase Force for Good program to create a stand-alone website for this resource and to build a guided pathway algorithm that assists CSOs in identifying a suitable country for registration based on their needs and limitations simply by answering a few questions.

Another resource is the Global Employment Compass. PILnet, together with Eversheds Sutherland and other partners, created this resource to strengthen the resilience and autonomy of nonprofit organizations by providing an easily accessible and user-friendly guide on employment laws in numerous jurisdictions worldwide. This resource currently covers over 30 countries.

In addition, PILnet updated the resource Russia Sanctions: Compliance Guidance. This resource provides legal research to help NGOs understand how the sanctions regime might impact them and how some of these risks could be managed. Country information is being updated to provide NGOs with the most accurate information.
PILnet’s matching process ensures that its NGO and law firm partners begin their collaboration journey from a place of shared trust and rapport. PILnet coordinates with pro bono lawyers who are experienced legal professionals based locally in each of their respective jurisdictions, with deep commitment to and knowledge of unlocking the legal system to work with underserved communities. Their legal knowledge is augmented by their understanding of local culture, civil society operational contexts, and fluency in multiple languages.
RAWADARI'S JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Rawadari is an Afghan human rights organization helping to build an Afghan movement monitoring human rights violations, and pursuing justice and accountability for violations. Rawadari was created by a group of Afghan human rights professionals and investigators in exile in 2021. Rawadari is led by Shaharzad Akbar, who served as the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. In December 2022, the fiscal sponsor for Rawadari, an organization based in Belgium, faced some legal difficulties, leading to freezing of their funds and unforeseen financial hardship for Rawadari. Rawadari requested pro bono legal assistance in drafting a memo outlining available legal options to reclaim the much needed funds.

PILnet matched Rawadari with two lawyers from Freshfields. They met and discussed their options, the case, and possible solutions. The lawyers prepared a memo with legal guidance, which was then shared with Rawadar’s board. The legal advice involved furthering the case through legal action in Belgium, and Freshfields facilitated an introduction with a team of lawyers from their Belgium office to assist with the next steps of the case.

SAFEGUARDING GLOBAL IMPACT WITH GAME

GAME is an international non-profit organization that uses street sports to bring positive changes to the lives of children, young people, and communities. Its mission includes training youth leaders as instructors and role models in street sports and civic engagement with at-risk communities across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and Africa. GAME was looking for legal advice on protecting its organizational brand and sports programs across multiple jurisdictions. The organization wanted to explore the legal steps necessary to protect its logos, designs, and program ideas.

PILnet matched GAME with Al Tamimi & Co. in Jordan—the leading corporate and commercial law firm in the MENA region. The Al Tamimi & Co lawyers provided GAME with recommendations on documents to obtain, motions to file, and important internal decisions to make. GAME will begin implementing the recommendations in 2024, and hope to be matched with firms in other jurisdictions in the future. By legally protecting their brand and programs, organizations can ensure their communities receive the highest quality of services from the organization they trust.
FORCED DISPLACEMENT

MOBILIZING THE GLOBAL LEGAL COMMUNITY TO PROTECT REFUGEE RIGHTS

Nearly 120 refugee-led organizations, NGOs, law firms, academic institutions and others from around the world joined PILnet’s Legal Community Pledge presented at the Global Refugee Forum December 14, 2023. Signatories combined forces with PILnet and our Pledge Core Group in a commitment to volunteer their time and expertise in support of refugees and other displaced people.

Collectively, they have pledged over 1 million hours of pro bono legal assistance over three years to refugee-led organizations and groups assisting refugees, with a view to reaching over a quarter of a million refugees per year.
In addition to pro bono legal assistance to refugee led organizations and refugee rights NGOs, pledge members have also affirmed their intent to improve refugee representation in their organizations through hiring practices, to engage in legal and policy advocacy and asylum and legal capacity development, as well as to collaborate on funding and resource mobilization.

With more people displaced from their homes than ever before due to persecution, conflict and climate change, there has never been a more critical moment for the legal community to join forces and work with refugees and other displaced people. The Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge harnesses the expertise, passion, and influence of legal professionals worldwide to drive meaningful change for displaced people globally and to ensure that refugee rights are upheld and strengthened.

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE FACING IMMIGRATION DETENTION

PILnet matched International Detention Coalition with pro bono legal assistance, helping expand their work and protect the rights of refugees facing detention. Every year, millions of refugees and asylum seekers face the threat of detention, often indefinitely, due to unresolved immigration status. The International Detention Coalition (IDC) advocates for ending immigration detention and promoting rights-based alternatives globally.

In 2023, PILnet facilitated five pro bono projects for IDC, covering legal research on EU immigration laws, employment law, and international banking regulations. This assistance not only strengthened IDC’s programs but also supported their organizational legal needs, including setting up European offices.

PILnet's refugee legal assistance matching platform, launched on World Refugee Day in 2021, connects civil society organizations with pro bono legal aid. In 2023, 25 organizations were matched with legal assistance across 21 jurisdictions, including seven refugee-led organizations, with plans to double this support in 2024.

"The impacts for us were quite practical and immediate. We are now better informed and will function more effectively as a global NGO.

Mia-lia Boua Kiernan, IDC Operations and Development Manager."
PILnet connected the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees with pro bono legal assistance to support their launch of an innovative fund for refugee-led organizations in Asia.

PILnet recognizes the vital role of those with lived experience of displacement in responding to the challenges faced by their communities; refugee-led organizations (RLOs) have first-hand knowledge, specialized skills, and singular motivation to find their own solutions. Yet, they often experience legal barriers and are excluded from partnerships and funding opportunities, limiting their impact. PILnet seeks to connect RLOs with free legal assistance to address these challenges.

Among our RLO partners is the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), an Australia-based network of RLOs in the Asia Pacific region working to set a regional agenda for refugee policy that draws on the collective voice of lived experience. Building on their background connecting RLOs helping displaced people access their rights and express their full potential across the region, APNOR recognized a critical gap in funding availability for these groups. In 2023, they created the Refugee Leadership Alliance Empowerment Fund, an opportunity for RLOs from the region to apply for flexible core funding to help fuel their important work.

To improve the legal resilience of this innovative funding mechanism, PILnet connected APNOR with international law firm Hogan Lovells, which engaged several of its offices in the region to review and revise documents needed to establish and manage the fund, including grant guidelines, application forms, reporting templates, assessment criteria, code of conduct, and a grants agreement. The firms worked with APNOR to ensure they were meeting all of the legal requirements and obligations inherent in this type of grant program.

“It made a huge difference in our confidence,” said a representative of APNOR. “The opportunity to work with a pro bono lawyer was fantastic. It helped us achieve what we wanted. Lot’s of other RLOs could benefit from this type of support.”
NEXT GENERATION OF LAWYERS

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS FOR REFUGEES IN HONG KONG

The "Port of Call" student initiative aims to transform Hong Kong into a welcoming harbor for refugees. Winners of the 2022 Law for Change Student Competition, supported by PILnet and the ZeShan Foundation, the group received mentoring, networking opportunities, and grants to implement their project. Through initiatives like educational talks, "human library" sessions, and policy advocacy, Port of Call is working to facilitate access to higher education for refugees and challenge societal biases. Engaging with PILnet programs, they've shared their expertise and recruited new members to sustain their mission.
The Law for Change Student Competition, now in its fifth cycle, continues to inspire law students to use their skills for public interest projects. “After five cycles of the competition, we can see that we are contributing to a culture of change,” said PILnet Senior Program Officer Annie Li. “We see more and more law students wanting to use their skills for the public interest, and many of them have participated in our student competitions.”

Along with other competition winners, Port of Call members have been engaged with PILnet programs more broadly, providing our network with the benefit of their knowledge as well as learning from the expertise of our partners. Members presented their project at PILnet’s Hong Kong networking reception and participated in Asia Pro Bono Conference and PILnet’s Global Forum in Brussels in 2023. They’ve also recruited several new student members who will take the initiative forward after founding members graduate. The Law for Change Student Competition has awarded 14 grants to runners up and winners since 2017.

**NURTURING LEGAL LEADERSHIP IN HONG KONG**

In 2023, our Hong Kong office launched the new Public Interest Law Mentorship Program. Observing growing interest in pro bono and public interest lawyering among law students and young professionals in Hong Kong, PILnet developed this Mentorship program to give law students and young professionals the opportunity to learn from seasoned lawyers and build their networks.

We launched two cohorts in 2023, having in total 32 mentees and 28 mentors. In each cohort there was a learning session for the mentees and mentors to hear from lawyers with alternative career paths and civil society organization representatives respectively. Some mentees also got connected with other mentors through our group networking and learning events.

Feedback from mentees highlighted the program's impact, with participants affirming their increased understanding of public interest issues and the role of law in addressing them. They also reported having a stronger sense of belonging to the public interest law community, and a commitment to continued involvement in public interest law networks and activities. Some of them explained that they had always been interested in public interest lawyering and pro bono, but had been worried about financial stability, and the mentorship has shown them a way to manage both. Many particularly pointed out that they were pleased with the mentor-mentee matches made by PILnet, and connected well with their counterparts. This achievement was made possible largely thanks to PILnet's solid network and extensive working relationship with Hong Kong’s legal community.

PILnet is thankful for all the mentors’ and speakers’ support for the Mentorship Program. The Mentorship Program was made possible by the generous support of WYNG Foundation.
In December 2021, PILnet facilitated a meaningful collaboration between Clean Air Network (CAN), DLA Piper, and Bank of America's in-house counsel to update a multi-jurisdictional comparative study on air pollution control regulations. This partnership stemmed from their joint participation in PILnet’s Regional Roundtable on Environment and Climate Change in August 2021.

CAN is a leading advocate for clean air in Hong Kong. Following the initial match, coordinated by Audrey Lo, an Associate of its Hong Kong office, DLA Piper involved colleagues from different offices to undertake extensive research for CAN, delving into indoor air quality regulations across various jurisdictions, including Hong Kong, France, the Republic of Korea, the UK, and the EU. The comprehensive study was finalized in 2023, marking a significant milestone in their collaboration.

The partnership between CAN and DLA Piper has flourished beyond the completion of the study. In February 2024, CAN organized the "Clean Air for Schools and Beyond" Forum, convening stakeholders to address air quality management solutions in Hong Kong. DLA Piper played a pivotal role as one of the supporting organizations of the forum, with Melanie Yuen, an Associate, presenting the study's findings on indoor air quality regulations.

This ongoing collaboration not only underscores the power of partnership but also highlights the collective effort to tackle air pollution and promote environmental sustainability in Hong Kong.
CONVENINGS

The PILnet Global Forum took place on October 16-18, 2023 in Brussels. The 2023 Forum led to exciting new collaborations. A stateless-led NGO has developed two pro bono projects with Forum participants: one engaging two law firms on access to banking for stateless persons and another partnering with an NGO and law firms to develop a capacity building and clearinghouse project. As a direct result of winning the PILnet Local Impact Award, Sam Cottman from the Domestic Abuse Response Alliance (DARA) was asked to Parliament to talk about the DARA project. He highlighted that the Forum was instrumental in helping raise the profile of their work in advocating for domestic violence survivors.

This year, we sponsored 11 alumni of our student programs in Hong Kong to attend the Forum as a learning event, out of which some of them have revised and improved their project which won our Law for Change Student competition.
EUROPEAN PRO BONO WEEK

In 2023, we celebrated the fifth European Pro Bono Week with events across a dozen jurisdictions in the region which gave a fantastic opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the year’s pro bono success stories as well as to gather with like-minded individuals and learn from each other.

Laura Szűcs, Junior Program Officer

HONG KONG PRO BONO WEEK

Hong Kong’s inaugural Pro Bono Week marked a significant milestone, providing a platform for the entire pro bono community to unite, exchange knowledge, spark innovation, and applaud our collective achievements.

Jonathan Davis, Program Director, Asia - PILnet

BUDAPEST PRO BONO DAY

At the Pro Bono Day in Budapest, we learned about inspiring projects on how pro bono legal support can help Roma youth in their Roma mentorship program when seeking jobs, and we explored from the perspective of a law students' organisation what role the young generation of lawyers can play in pro bono.

Judit Geller, Senior Legal Officer, PILnet
CONTACT US

email info@pilnet.org
web www.pilnet.org
twitter @PILnet
linkedin @PILnet