

Annual Report

Advancing digital rights through legal action

2025



Digital
Freedom Fund

Our vision

We envision a society in which technology is created to prioritise wellbeing and used fairly so that everyone can fully enjoy their human rights.

Our mission

To advance and protect human rights in digital spaces through legal action.

Up to this point

In 2025, we permanently adopted a distributed leadership model, re-granted more than EUR 800,000 to fund 24 projects across over 10 countries, hosted three Community events and launched our first Community Hub.

What's next

In 2026, we will launch our second Community Hub, host three events, and open at least one grantmaking round.



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Message from the Co-Directors



2025 was a challenging year for human rights defenders. Armed conflicts, climate crises, and the rapid mainstreaming of generative AI reshaped our work. This was all compounded by severe funding cuts from governments including the USA, Netherlands, France, and Germany. Through it all, what keeps us going at DFF is our belief in people power.

We remain committed to a future where people come before profit. A future where technology is designed to reduce rather than deepens inequality. A future where online spaces are safe, participatory, and democratic. What has been emerging more and more is the realisation that most of us share this vision of digital justice. This makes us hopeful for a better future.

As important as this vision is, what has been equally important for us to grapple with: how will we get there? For us, the answer is clear. The guiding principle that must underpin meaningful and lasting change is **shifting power to the people**.

There is considerable discussion and optimism across the sector about the importance of shifting power. Many organisations have committed to more equitable approaches. Yet too often these conversations remain aspirational. Clear frameworks, practical methods, and evidence of tangible outcomes are missing. This makes it difficult to understand how power is actually being redistributed and why that redistribution matters.

Over the past two years, we devoted ourselves to acknowledging power and moving beyond rhetoric to embed this principle throughout our work. We expanded participation in our programmes so that many of our participants come from marginalised communities, including racialised groups, migrants and LGBTI people. We transitioned to participatory grantmaking, with funding decisions made by our [Community Peer Group](#). Internally, we intentionally [distributed leadership](#) through a [self-designed organisational model](#) that reflects [our values](#) and challenges traditional hierarchies.

Our most important learning was simple: when power is placed in the hands of the community, change happens faster. By shifting decision-making and ownership to those closest to the issues, we accelerated progress towards our collective vision for the future.

We have seen clear evidence of this in our work. What began as a network largely made up of Central European digital rights organisations has grown into a vibrant and diverse community of **more than 400 groups across the globe**. Today, it includes organisations working across racial and social justice, gender justice, children's rights, migrant rights, and LGBTI rights. This expansion has not only broadened our reach but has also strengthened our understanding of how digital harms intersect with other forms of inequality. It has brought new voices, perspectives, and solutions into the movement.

Over the years, DFF has built a critical mass of impact, both inside and outside the courtroom, by widening the community of digital rights defenders. Our **150+ regranting projects** strive for a future where the rights and dignity of those most affected by online harms are centred. For instance, protecting the right of privacy of [trans people](#) through a project by our grantee partner, [TGEU – Trans Europe and Central Asia](#), or breaking the [barriers for Rom-](#)

[ani](#) communities in accessing essential services due to digitalisation in a case by [European Roma Rights Centre](#).

In many ways, 2025 was a pivotal year for DFF. It was the year in which years of reflection, experimentation, and hard work converged. As we centred our work around these commitments, several strands emerged and reinforced one another. These are reflected in our [2026-2030 Strategic Framework](#).

Looking ahead, there is reason for hope. Around the world, people are organising and taking back power over our digital futures. Progress will not come easily – it will be hard won. Yet it is possible, and meaningful change is already underway. Our focus remains clear: to support people power and help turn the hope for more just, equitable, and democratic digital futures into reality.

With gratitude,

Nikita Kekana & Darrah Hassell

Co-Directors at Digital Freedom Fund

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Nikita Kekana' and the signature on the right is 'Darrah Hassell'.

The team

We are a dynamic group with diverse expertise and passions, all united by a shared vision to ensure that everyone has access to justice and can exercise their digital rights in the online and offline world.



Alexandra Giannopoulou
Partnership Lead & Legal Officer



Darrah Hassell
Co-Director & Finance Manager



Splash Dance
Well-Being and Care Lead &
Community Programme Support



Jihane Jadrane
Events and Operations Lead &
Well-Being and Care Officer



Nikita Kekana
Co-Director & Community
Programme Lead



César Manso-Sayao
Legal Officer



Thomas Vink
Grantmaking Lead



Ekaterina Balueva
Communications Officer



Ewa Pieszczyk
Finance Officer

Our key milestones and activities in 2025



February

2025 First Grant Application Round concluded: 11 projects funded

Workshop at RightsCon on funding strategic litigation in collaboration with Access Now and the Center for Intimacy Justice

May

Hosted Movement Lawyering Strategic Litigation Retreat in Cascais, Portugal



June

Published [Legal Pathways for Platform Accountability in Europe Practical Guide](#)

Published our [Highlighting Litigation Success in the Digital Rights Community Outcomes Report](#)

Digital Environmental Justice Workshop in Marseille, France

July

Participated in workshops on automated decision-making in welfare at the Fourth European Workshop on Algorithmic Fairness

2025 Second Grant Application Round concluded: 13 projects funded, surpassed EUR 5 million in total grants

Launched [AI Hub](#)

September

Co-organised a session on using strategic litigation against tech harms with AWO and Data Rights at PrivacyCamp

Co-facilitated Digital Environmental Justice Circle at Global Gathering

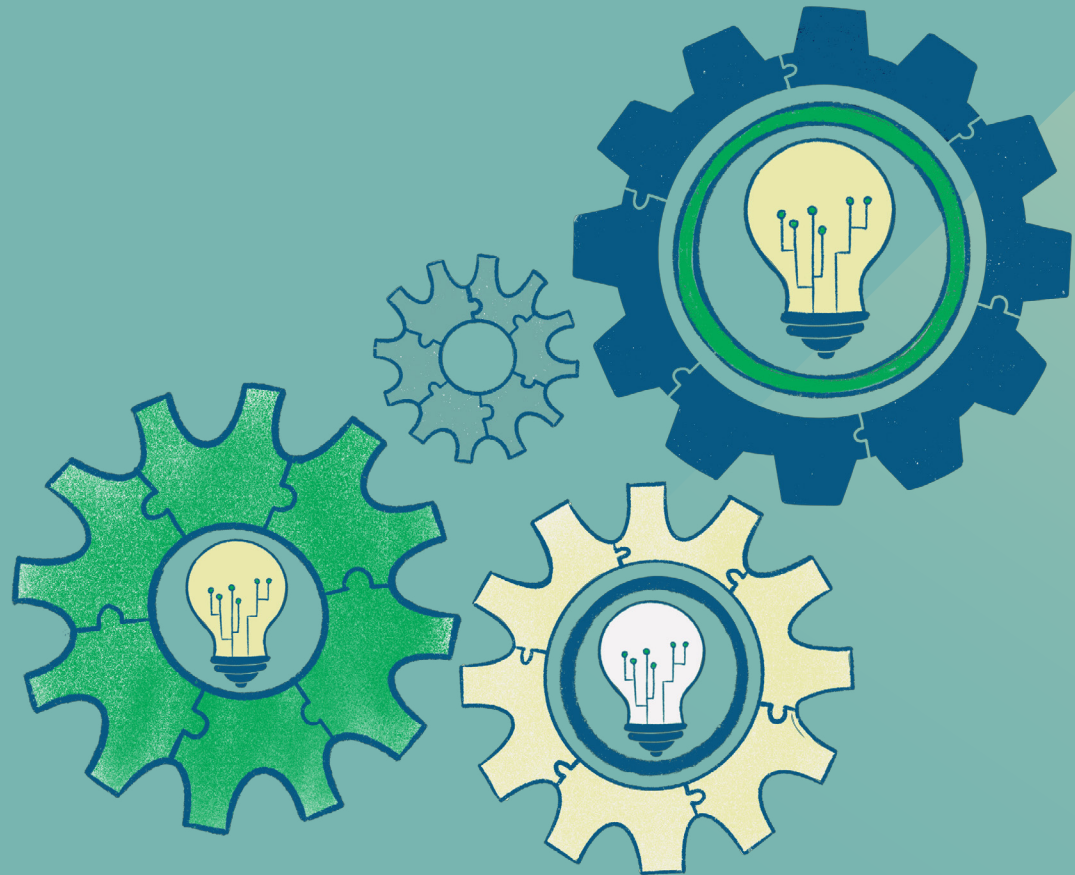
October

Hosted AI Strategic Litigation Retreat in Munich, Germany



Our work in 2025

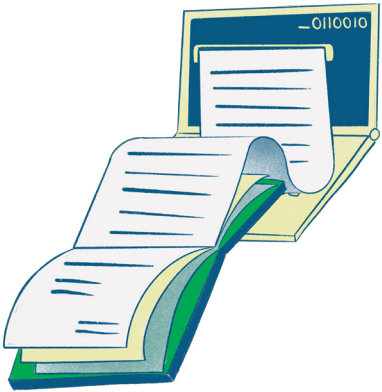
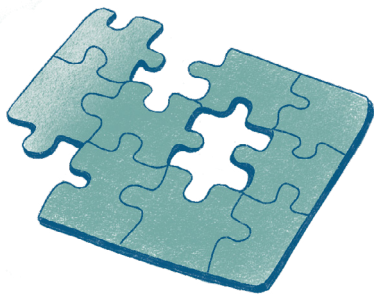
We carry out our mission through two complementary programmes, our **Community Programme** and **Regranting Programme**, guided by our 2026-2030 strategic framework. Our priorities under this strategy are shifting power to those most affected by digital harms and advancing strategic legal action as a tool for change.



Regranting Programme

Since 2017 we have built and perfected a funding model and process to support research and legal action to advance the digital rights of communities most affected by digital harms. Utilising our expertise and this proven model, we regrant towards projects that have the greatest chance of achieving impact for the digital rights community.

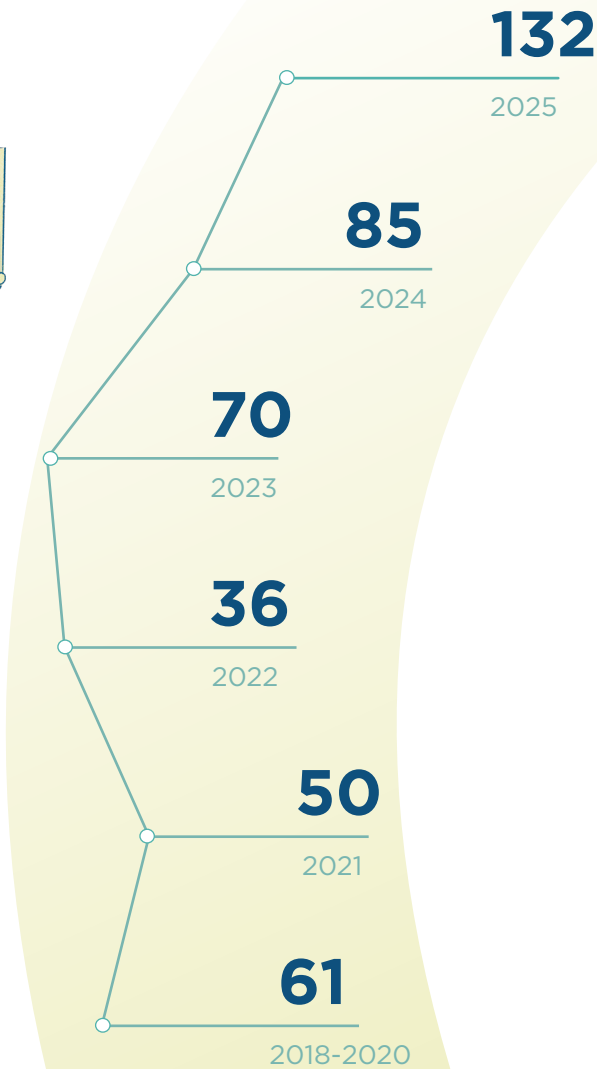
We received **132 grant applications in 2025**, making this the most grant applications we have ever received. This was a **60% increase over 2024** and nearly double what we received in 2023. Legal action remains key to defending human rights and resisting authoritarianism, and the demand for funding from civil society grows every year.



Full applications received

434

Total



New grants in 2025

In 2025, we ran two open calls for applications, awarding funding of EUR 830,000 towards 26 projects across 13 countries, including Albania, France, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK, alongside one multi-country project and another involving the European Commission. We received 132 applications, and 85 were rated positively, so quality remains high, but we could support only 18% of applications. Please [get in touch](#) if you're interested in supporting this programme.

This year's new grants targeted a wide range of digital rights issues: from state surveillance of journalists to AI labour exploitation to platform complicity in human rights abuses. Notably, 2025 was also our biggest year yet for funding LGBTI-related projects, ensuring that those most affected by discrimination were directly represented in the legal fight for their rights.

The new projects relate to research or legal action on the following topics:

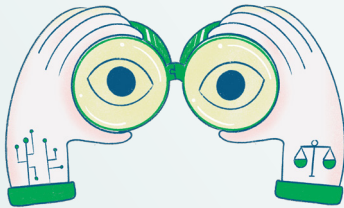
Association Accept	two grants related to LGBTI rights in Romania, one on digital identity systems another for tackling online hate speech.	Coalition MARGINS	use of anonymous Facebook pages to orchestrate gender-based violence.
Association Mousse	required use of gender binary options in online forms in France.	Civil Rights Defenders	a new law in Sweden that forces government bodies to “snitch” on people they think may be in the country without valid documentation.
Black Sex Worker Collective – Berlin	discrimination and systemic deplatforming of Sex Workers by digital platforms.	European Roma Rights Centre	lack of access to essential public services by Roma due to digitalisation in Albania and Bulgaria.
Center for Intimacy Justice	using the DSA to tackle gender-based censorship of sexual and reproductive health content on TikTok and Meta.	Elite Taxi Association	confidential project.



Foxglove	Google using AI tools to scrape the work of independent news reporters.
5Rights Foundation	safety concerns around a popular app used by children.
Hungarian Helsinki Committee	the unlawful use of facial recognition by law enforcement.
Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia	litigation challenging the use of spyware.
Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety	government surveillance of journalists.
Interet a Agir	companies exploiting AI data workers by extracting their personal data without proper consent.
Iridia - Centre for the Defence of Human Rights	confidential project.
La Quadrature du Net	confidential project.
NOVACT & SUDS	Spanish corporations that enable surveillance, digital warfare, and oppression against the Palestinian community.
Partners Serbia	abuse of user data for AI training by a Big Tech company.



Reversing.works	unlawful data practices of a food delivery platform.
SLAPP Watch Coalition	the blocking of a Kurdish-language news outlet in Turkey.
TGEU - Trans Europe and Central Asia	using data protection law to advance gender identity recognition.
Urgence Homophobie	systematic violations of trans refugees' digital identity rights in France.
Confidential grantee	litigation against the government's blocking of a major LGBTI website.



Not all organisations can be publicised at this stage. As more of the projects are made public and progress we will share more information about the groups involved and outcomes of the litigation through our [case study](#) page.

Community Peer Group

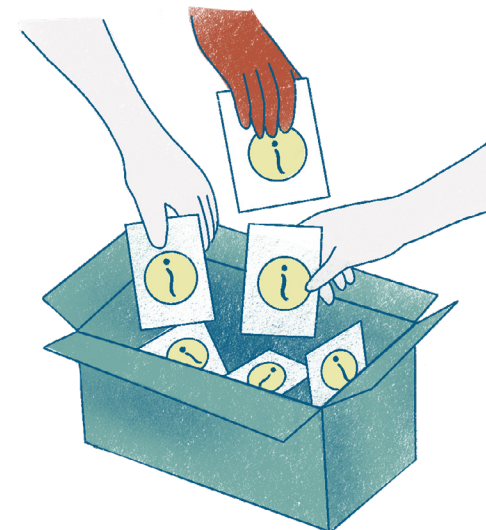
A deeply meaningful shift in our work in 2025 was in how grant decisions are made. As part of our commitment to transforming our grantmaking to shift power to those most affected by digital harms, we [launched](#) a pilot of participatory grantmaking.

Rather than DFF deciding which applications to support, a Community Peer Group made up of activists, litigators and other members of the wider community came together and collectively decided which projects should be funded. We first piloted Community Peer Group decision making for research project applications. After receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback from the Community Peer Group and other stakeholders, we expanded the pilot to cover all applications, including litigation track support.

We ran evaluations of the pilot in both [June](#) and [November](#). The feedback was clear: [Community Peer Group members overwhelmingly felt it was working, wanted participatory grantmaking to continue](#), and wanted to remain part of the work.

“I was encouraged to see the consensus between peer group participants. Despite coming from the broad digital rights field, the group included people with varying perspectives and from different regions, so it was great that we were aligned on our vision for the programme and for participatory grantmaking at DFF in particular”

Paige Collings, a member of the first Community Peer Group.



Community Programme

In 2025, we restructured our Community Programme and launched the first phase of our [Community Hubs](#) initiative. In the past, we primarily held standalone events based on the immediate needs of the Digital Rights Community. Responding to the Digital Rights Community's wish to have places where meaningful collaboration and lasting partners can be developed, we decided to organise our work around thematic Hubs.

The Hubs create dedicated spaces for participants to come together over two years to collaborate around the most pressing digital thematic issues.

At the heart of the Hubs is a simple idea: meaningful change happens when people work together over time. These spaces spark lasting relationships between participants, while also creating room to collectively imagine and shape accountability for digital rights harms. The Hubs are community-inspired, meaning participants co-design all Hub activities based on their priorities and needs.

3 Community events

60 Attending participants

45 Attending organisations

30 First-time attending organisations



AI Hub

The AI Hub focuses on legal strategies to ensure that the development and deployment of AI and related infrastructure centres human rights and environmental justice. We aim to build a larger, more resilient, and more connected community working on AI accountability; ensure technology increases the well-being and safety of people and the planet; and achieve justice for those harmed by AI and related infrastructure through better laws and stronger enforcement.



This hub fosters collaboration, research and coordinated legal actions that address:

- The spread of climate misinformation and greenwashing online
- Harmful and discriminatory AI, platform and app design.
- Labour rights across the AI and digital infrastructure supply chain.
- Human rights and environmental destruction in the tech mining and manufacturing sector.
- Legal and environmental concerns associated with the current data centre boom.
- Use of surveillance technologies against activists, people on the move and journalists.

Community events

AI & Digital Environmental Justice Workshop

This workshop was co-hosted with [La Quadrature du Net](#) in France, and launched the AI Hub. Topics included mapping the environmental and human costs of data centres, developing legal cases challenging AI infrastructures towards climate justice, climate misinformation in platforms, and countering online and digital threats targeting environmental activists.



AI Hub Retreat

In October, we organised a strategic litigation retreat for the AI Hub participants. The projects developed by the Hub participants covered a wide range of topics, including online child safety, human rights violations relating to the construction of data centres, and combating AI applications used for surveillance of activists and protesters.



Movement Lawyering Strategic Litigation Retreat

In May, with [Weaving Liberation](#), we co-hosted the Movement Lawyering Strategic Litigation Retreat. The retreat focused on platform accountability using lawyer and legal strategies that centre movement building. Session topics included trauma-informed legal practice and advocacy, organising strategies based on survivors of online harms.



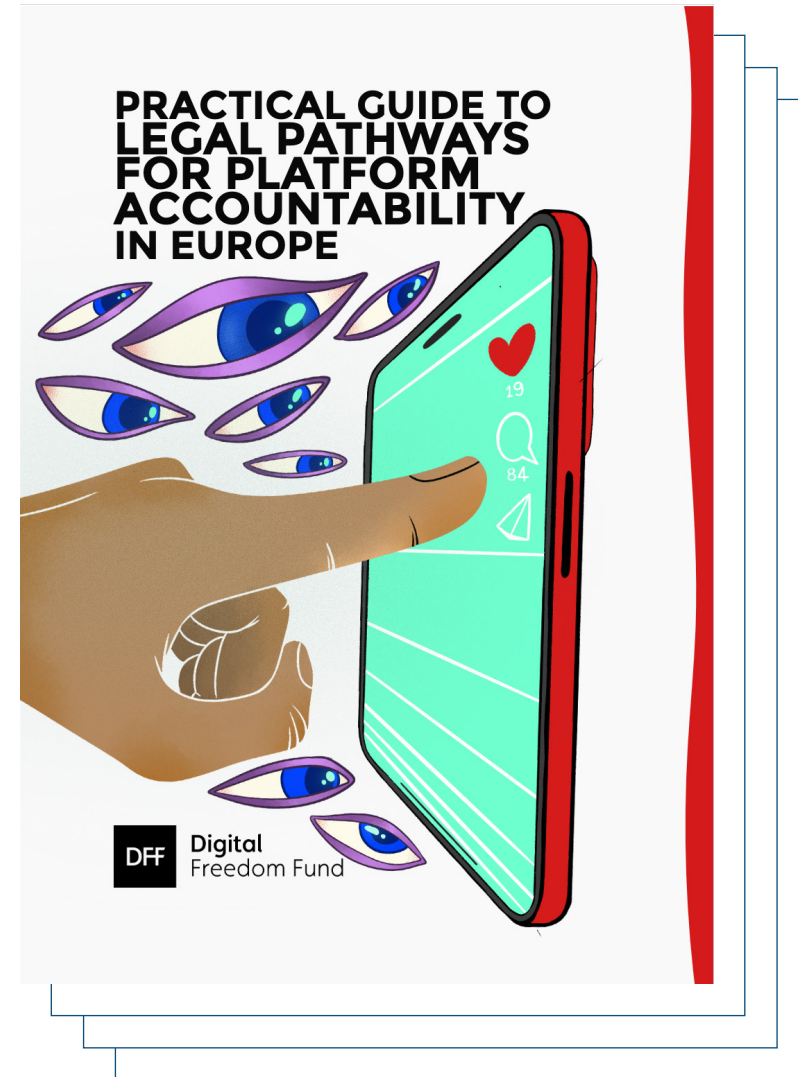
Community resources

Legal Pathways for Platform Accountability

→ [Learn more](#)

In May, we published our latest practical guide titled Legal Pathways for Platform Accountability in Europe. This collaborative work aims to guide and support litigators, civil society organisations, and communities in resisting platform power by using five different EU legal frameworks:

- Digital Services Act
- AI Act
- Platform Work Directive
- General Data Protection Regulation
- Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.



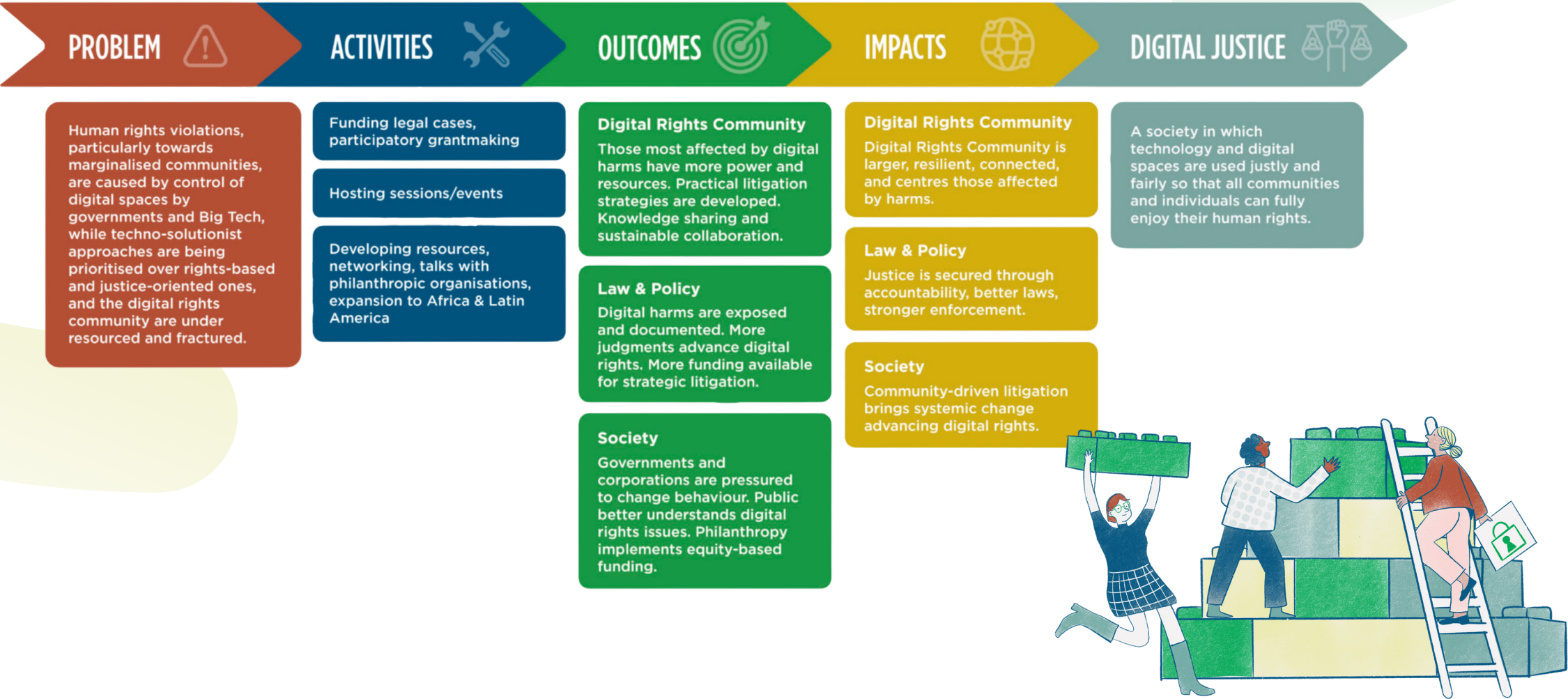
Our impact

For many of our grantees, a positive impact is not always measured by a court decision. Just as often, impact shows up differently through more favourable media portrayals of the topic, increased representation of affected communities, or other groups being inspired to take action of their own.

We are proud to see our grantees fighting for digital justice and to share their wins along the way.



In 2025, we continued to strive for a society where technology is used justly and fairly. Following our Theory of Change, we are highlighting our victories based on three impact areas: (i) strengthening the digital rights community, (ii) fairer laws and policies and (iii) a society which prioritises justice and human rights in online spaces.



In 2025, we helped build a larger, more resilient, better-connected Digital Rights Community.

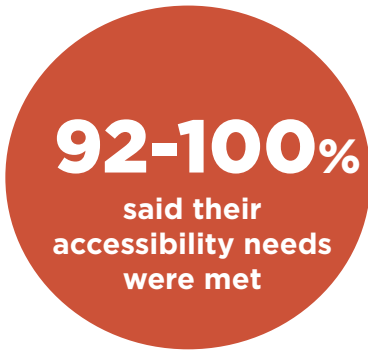
In 2018, our first strategic meeting brought together fewer than 20 people. Today, we're part of a digital rights community of over 400 organisations working to defend human rights in online spaces around the world. Last year, that community grew more connected and more resilient, with those most affected by digital harms centred in litigation and other efforts. Through our events, we fostered safe spaces for lasting collaborations, new cases and coalitions. The AI Hub takes this further and breaks down long-standing silos between movements by bringing over 30 climate activists, human rights defenders, and digital rights experts into the same room, often for the first time.



First AI Hub grant awarded

This year the first project fostered by the AI Hub received a grant. The Hub participant Interet A Agir (IAA) is taking action to protect workers recruited to train AI against exploitation of their personal data by AI companies.

We ran three community events in 2025, and every one left participants feeling more equipped and more connected.



- 67%** of participants at the AI & Digital Infrastructure Retreat said they planned to start a litigation project next.
- 56%** of participants at the AI retreat said they would apply for DFF funding.
- 9** different projects which had positive outcomes from 2025 are linked to DFF events.

“The retreat absolutely accomplished a strong sense of community, and I appreciate the relationships we’ve been able to develop.”

2025 Movement Lawyering Litigation Retreat participant

“You are a unicorn in the strategic litigation ecosystem, super necessary, relevant, and more important than ever!”

2025 Movement Lawyering Litigation Retreat participant



The growth of the digital rights community that we helped create is also reflected in our grantmaking: **68 of 132 applications in 2025 were from first-time applicants**, 15 of 24 grants went to first-time grantees, and **over 300 organisations have now applied since 2018**, with the number of groups funded expected to surpass 100 in 2026. This growth really stands out, given that our first strategic meeting in 2018 was attended by fewer than 20 people.

“We think that DFF is doing a great job – from our experience, DFF is by far one of the best foundations to work with; processes are well adapted to the realities we face as a small NGO with few resources in a rapidly changing toxic environment, operating under significant pressure. DFF’s processes are straightforward, extremely respectful of grantees and require an investment of human resources that is proportionate and fair. DFF is also flexible and clearly self-aware of the power imbalance between grant applicants and a foundation. We also feel supported and an openness to discussion, which is rare and reassuring.”

Grantee partner

“It was incredibly valuable to spend so much time – both structured and unstructured – with a diverse group of like-minded, committed and knowledgeable practitioners.”

2025 AI & Digital Infrastructure Retreat participant



Success Stories that made an impact



Targeted Population: human rights activists

Irídia vs. Pegasus [→ Learn more](#)

Spyware

Phone invasion

Targeted surveillance

Our grantee partner, [Irídia](#), has been fighting the use of Pegasus spyware against civil society.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

Court orders indictment of three NSO Group executives

In February 2025, a court ruled in Irídia’s favour and ordered the indictment of three NSO Group executives, who held positions of responsibility at NSO-related companies when a lawyer was allegedly targeted with Pegasus spyware. This is the first time NSO Group executives have been formally notified they are under criminal investigation. This case became a landmark moment for accountability across the spyware industry.

Stronger Digital Rights Community

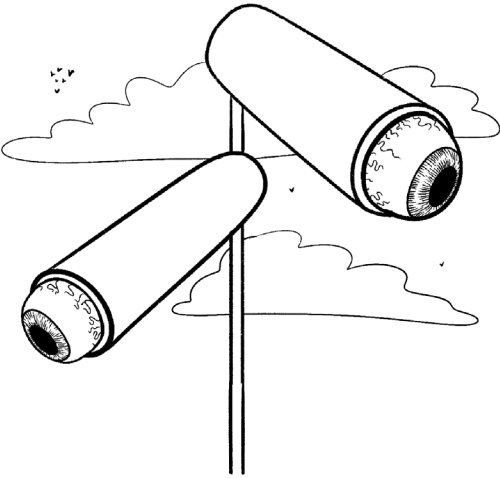
Formed the Pega-Coalition with fellow DFF grantees

In June 2025, the [Pega-Coalition](#) was launched, made up of seven European human rights organisations involved in spyware litigation. These groups are all in DFF’s network, and six have received DFF grants. DFF’s support and introductions had a major contribution in the coalition being able to form.

A More Just Society

Put spyware abuse on the global public record

Irídia’s case has raised public awareness of spyware abuse worldwide. Outlets including [TechCrunch](#), [EL PAÍS](#), [Follow the Money](#), and [The Intercept](#) are following the case, and global movements such as [BDS](#) are amplifying it further.



Targeted population: journalists

Foxglove vs. Google’s AI news scraping tool

→ [Learn more](#)

Automated decision-making

Platform accountability

Competition law

Foxglove is pushing competition regulators to stop Google from using AI tools to scrape the work of independent news reporters and displaying inaccurate information in AI summaries.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

Triggered a formal EU antitrust investigation into Google

Following a complaint from Foxglove, the European Commission opened a formal investigation into whether Google is violating EU competition rules with its AI Overviews feature. Foxglove is pushing to force Google to give newsrooms a permanent, genuine opt-out from having their content used in AI Overviews.

Targeted Population: Those with sensitive health concerns

Stronger Together — Medical Data Privacy for People Living with HIV

→ [Learn more](#)

Data protection

Discrimination

Health data rights

Our grantee partner, Stronger Together, has been fighting to protect the medical privacy of people living with HIV in North Macedonia, and spurred the government action before the case ever reached court.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

Triggered government action that mitigates digital harm

As part of their project on privacy violations in the processing of medical data in North Macedonia, Stronger Together published two reports on medical data protection and presented their findings at a workshop with health authorities in February 2025. The workshop led to a concrete acknowledgement by health authorities of the gaps in regulation and a commitment by health officials to amend legislation to protect people such as those living with HIV. This demonstrates how legal advocacy and the prospect of legal action can drive reform without formal legal proceedings.

Targeted Population: workers

Xnet — Misuse of freelance workers’ data in Spain —> [Learn more](#)

Data protection

Gig economy

GDPR

In Spain, millions of freelance workers’ personal data was being shared and sold without their knowledge. [Xnet’s](#) research exposed the illegal practices behind it, mapping a path to hold the system accountable.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

Won a court order to stop the sale of freelancers’ personal data

Following Xnet’s 2022 complaint against illegal data processing, a court ordered the Chamber of Commerce to delete freelancers’ data and prohibited the sale of their data to private firms without consent. Further illegal sale of data will carry a EUR 500,000 fine. The decision rested on Xnet’s report, “[La venta de los datos de las personas en régimen de autónomos](#),” research produced with the support of DFF.

Targeted Population: workers

Worker Info Exchange vs. Uber & Ola —> [Learn more](#)

Data protection

Gig economy

GDPR

[Worker Info Exchange](#) has been challenging how gig platforms like Uber and Ola use algorithms to manage their workers refusing to provide workers with information on how algorithmic management works.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

The case is mentioned by the European Commission

The European Commission published a [study](#) on algorithmic management in the EU, highlighting Worker Info Exchange’s cases against Uber and Ola as examples of successful strategic legal action against digital labour platforms. According to the report, such cases prove that gig workers can challenge unfair algorithmic management through collective organising and worker empowerment.



Targeted Population: children

5Rights Foundation & Good Law Project vs. Apple & Google app stores —→ [Learn more](#)

Data protection

Digital Service Act

Platform accountability

[5Rights Foundation](#) and [Good Law Project](#), took on Apple and Google over their failure to protect children from surveillance advertising.

Key victories:

Better Law & Policies

Big Tech held accountable and is forced to expand age-rating protections

Surveillance advertising is the practice of building profiles using individual’s personal information to target them with ads. 5Rights Foundation and the Good Law Project have filed a complaint asserting that children are falling victim to surveillance advertising through app stores. Following the complaint, Apple has expanded its app store age-rating categories. The UK Competition and Markets Authority is also launching consultations into the conduct of app stores related to processing of children’s data for surveillance advertising purposes.



Organisational Growth

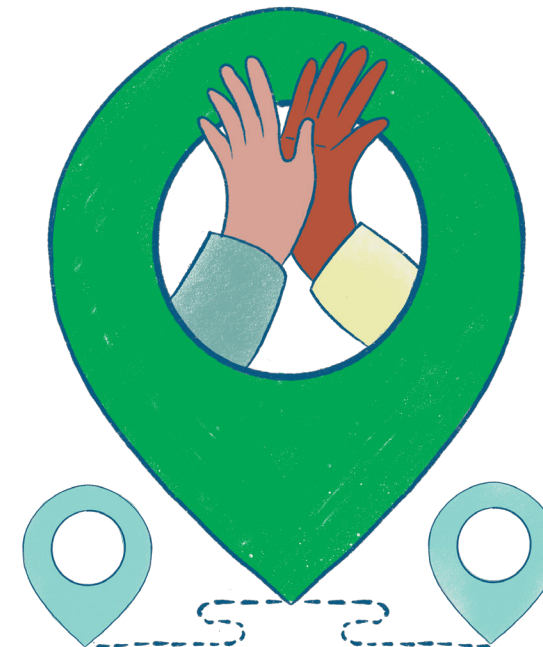
We operate DFF on a distributed leadership model. Distributed leadership is based on principles of constant re-iteration and adapting to the developing reality of the organisation. In 2025, we worked particularly hard on better developing our feedback structures

- When asked, **staff have a very positive view** and associate the new way of working with “progress”, “getting empowered”, “being inspired”, and “doing better”.
- Compared to June 2024, **we have further developed a much stronger collective vision of our distributed leadership** approach and how it works for everyone.
- Some critical parts of our structure **still need to be worked** on to ensure the long-term sustainability of the approach, such as more clarity on decision-making and embedding more opportunities for feedback.

In the first half of 2025, we introduced an additional line of support and care through a **“buddy” system**, in which each member of staff has a buddy with whom they meet about once a month. The goal is for buddies to be some-

one who does not work on a frequent basis with the staff so the conversations can be better focused on well-being rather than operational work topics.

The buddy system increases the number of feedback channels, especially for informal feedback. Through this and other channels, such as our monthly team feedback and model evaluation meetings and surveys, we have been better able to identify challenges and gaps in our processes. These spaces also serve as spaces to come to quick collective solutions.



Our finances and spending

For 2025, we adopted a conservative approach to ensure long-term sustainability of the organisation through 2026. This resulted in reduced operational spending and the grantmaking budget remaining stable compared to 2024.

Combined spending by DFF and hosted entity Weaving Liberation decreased from 2.16 million to 1.87 million, largely due to the completion of the DigiRISE project. DFF committed its full grantmaking budget of 725,000 to 24 projects. This is on par with grantmaking in 2024 when we approved the highest volume of grantmaking in a single year.

Operational spending at DFF decreased significantly due to parental and other long-term staff leave and cost-saving measures such as cutting unnecessary services and switching service providers for key cost drivers. The funding base remained relatively stable with new and renewed multi-year funding. We are pursuing new funding for expansion of the Community Hubs and to increase regranting.

—→ See our 2025 audited accounts [here](#).

Our Governance

DFF's Board is formally charged with oversight of all activities and vested with all decision-making power of the organisation. DFF recruited three new Board members in 2025 to replace two outgoing Board members. The Board also elected Audrey Gaughran and Monique Steijns as Co-Chairs. As of December 2025, the DFF board consisted of eight members.

—→ A list of our Board members and their expertise and experience can be found [here](#).



Annual Report
2025

Credits

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