

2024

Pro Bono Report

In 2024, the Vance Center provided 174 clients with pro bono representation in 235 matters, collaborating as co-counsel with 844 lawyers from 164 law firms across 69 countries.

This report includes summaries of selected matters involving some of the 28 law firms represented on the Vance Center Committee, covering our four thematic program areas.



Environment

Contributing to UN Special Rapporteur Report on Ocean Governance and Human Rights Law

With a co-counsel law firm, we prepared a legal memorandum analyzing ocean governance and the relevant application of human rights law to inform an upcoming report to the Human Rights Council by **Astrid Puentes Riaño**, the [United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#). The research examined human rights-based elements in existing regional ocean governance agreements and surveyed international human rights law as it pertains to ocean governance. The UNSR intends to use this research for her forthcoming report to the UN Human Rights Council and to guide her engagement at the Third United Nations Oceans Conference in 2025. Our research directly supports the UNSR in fulfilling her mandate to promote and report on states' human rights obligations related to the enjoyment of a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

We worked with several law firms with expertise in selected jurisdictions to produce a series of [environmental advocacy toolkits](#) designed for women land defenders and frontline communities in five countries in Latin America and the Caribbean for our client [Women's Earth & Climate Action Network \(WECAN\), International](#). Over the last three years, the Vance Center has worked with international and local law firms on three projects for WECAN related to the Escazú Agreement, the first regional treaty on environmental rights of the Americas. Through this partnership, we have produced important legal resources for communities and human rights defenders to understand and advocate for their rights under this new framework. WECAN plans to use these user-friendly toolkits, which cover both general and specific rights, to help women land defenders navigate domestic laws in their countries to achieve the protections of the Escazú Agreement.

Legal Toolkits for Environmental and Land Defenders in LAC Region

**Carbon
Compensation
Agreement to
Guide
Community
Negotiations**

With a co-counsel law firm, we prepared a Draft Carbon Compensation Agreement for client [Namati](#), a nonprofit environmental justice organization focused on grassroots legal empowerment. The agreement will help inform and support communities, local paralegals, and other stakeholders engaged in negotiations on carbon projects. The firm is providing additional support to Namati to develop a toolkit that communities will use to negotiate, implement, and manage compensation agreements for carbon projects in their communities.

With a co-counsel law firm, we researched U.S. federal laws, regulations, and jurisprudence and prepared a memorandum analyzing existing federal authority over processes affected by the Global Plastics Treaty for client the [Environmental Investigation Agency](#) (EIA). This research will help inform EIA's advocacy with U.S. policymakers, agencies and other entities involved in the treaty negotiations, including other civil society organizations, with the goal of ensuring the U.S. ratifies the treaty.

**Global Plastics
Treaty and
Climate
Change
Mitigation
Research**

**Government
Corporate
Climate
Reporting and
Disclosure
Requirements in
MENA and SE
Asia**

Together with several law firms, we researched laws regulating the climate impacts of companies' activities in 17 countries in the MENA region and Southeast Asia for client the [Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment](#). The research, which aims to address significant gaps in international knowledge about these laws, is available in the [Climate Change Laws of the World database](#), a publicly available resource that contains the world's most comprehensive repository of laws and regulations related to climate change.

Human Rights and Access to Justice

**UPR
Submission
on Women in
Prison in El
Salvador**

We worked with a co-counsel law firm to assist **Mujeres Libres El Salvador**, a member of our Women in Prison Network, with preparing a submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council in connection with the 4th Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle. The co-counsel law firm team joined us in preparing a submission focusing on women in prison, including causes of criminalization, the conditions of imprisonment, and the specific impact of the ongoing state of emergency in El Salvador. As a result, Mujeres Libres El Salvador was able to make their first ever contribution to the UPR process. Their submission was included in El Salvador's UPR review in January 2025.

The **UN Independent Expert (IE)** on sexual orientation and gender identity asked the Vance Center for help analyzing the Anti-Prostitution and Homosexuality Law passed by Iraq's parliament in April, to inform future communication with the Iraqi government about the law. With a co-counsel law firm's support, we prepared a comprehensive memo for the IE analyzing the law and identifying how its provisions violate international human rights law instruments, addressing Iraq's obligations under UN human rights treaties and decisions of relevant treaty monitoring bodies. This analysis will guide the IE's engagement with the Iraqi government regarding the law and will inform the Expert's work in other jurisdictions that are considering or have adopted similar legislation.

**Informing the
UN Independent
Expert's
Communication
with the Iraqi
Government**

**Mapping Legal
Protections
Against
Workplace
Sexual
Harassment in
Africa**

In partnership with the Africa End Sexual Harassment Initiative (AESHI) and the [Pan African Lawyers Union](#) (PALU), and with support from an international co-counsel law firm and multiple national law firms in the relevant countries, we analyzed existing legislative protections addressing sexual harassment in 22 selected jurisdictions across Africa and produced a report summarizing the findings and offering recommendations. The report will help inform and guide efforts toward creating a regional model law to address workplace sexual harassment on the continent.

We engaged pro bono counsel from seven African countries as well as international coordinating counsel to research data protection laws and policies and their enforcement for the [Africa Freedom of Information Centre](#) (AFIC). With co-counsel firms, we prepared memoranda analyzing and comparing the legal frameworks regulating digital technology systems, such as biometric artificial intelligence and facial recognition technologies. This research will help AFIC and its local member organizations track and request information, identify opportunities for legal challenges to the collection and use of DTS data, and inform efforts to file public interest litigation to challenge laws that violate human rights, and push for better data protection and privacy policies.

**Analyzing
Digital
Technology
Systems and
Data Protection
in Sub-Saharan
Africa**

**Representing
Imprisoned
Journalist José
Rubén Zamora
Before
International
Human Rights
Bodies**

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [responded](#) to a complaint we filed with help from co-counsel in August 2023, arguing that the ongoing imprisonment of Guatemalan journalist **José Rubén Zamora** violates international law. The Vance Center, assisted by pro bono lawyers from an international firm and Chilean firm, is also representing Mr. Zamora in his case before the Inter-American human rights system.

Institutional Integrity

**Amicus on
Inter-American
Court
Jurisdiction in
Venezuela**

With a co-counsel law firm, we submitted an amicus curiae brief to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of Chirinos et al. v. Venezuela. The brief argues that the Court has jurisdiction over Venezuela and may exercise retrospective jurisdiction on alleged human rights violations in the country that have occurred since Venezuela withdrew from the American Convention on Human Rights in September 2013. During a hearing on February 4, 2025, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights referenced our brief's arguments and urged the Court to take these arguments into consideration as it decides the case later this year. If the Court agrees with our argument, its decision will set precedent for confirming the Court's jurisdiction for all cases related to human rights violations in Venezuela after 2013. This would create a legal framework for safeguarding the rights of individuals subjected to human rights abuses in Venezuela and contribute to setting an important standard for all member States of the Inter-American System.

As part of the Vance Center’s ongoing work to strengthen judicial independence, we analyzed existing standards and precedents for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granting precautionary measures to judges facing threats to their human rights. A memorandum produced with the co-counsel firm outlines the Commission’s current standards for precautionary measures, focusing on criteria related to judicial independence, and presents arguments for the IACHR to expand these criteria to more effectively address threats to judicial independence. The Vance Center’s judicial association partners in Latin America submitted this report to the Commission in September 2024 and have used it to advocate for the Commission to adjust its standards to recognize and respond to threats to judges at risk.

**Enhancing IACHR
Standards for
Granting
Precautionary
Measures to
Judges at Risk**

**Comparative
Analysis of Easy-
to-Read
Judgments**

With co-counsel, we prepared and published legal research comparing the implementation and regulation of “easy-to-read” judgments across different jurisdictions. The analysis has been published as a [guide](#) that emphasizes the critical role of easy-to-read judgments in enhancing accessibility to the justice system for non-legal professionals and building trust in legal systems. The report provides examples and guidelines for judges and other legal practitioners across the globe who are interested in incorporating easy-to-read practices into their opinions and procedures and will help inform ongoing activities with judges’ associations to enhance best practices in Latin America and beyond.

Working with 18 law firms in Latin America, we produced and published the third edition of the [Latin America Anti-Corruption Assessment](#). This biennial analysis, available in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, analyzes the mechanisms to combat corruption in 18 countries in the region and calculates a rating for each country on a scale of zero to ten. The Anti-Corruption Assessment is a flagship project of the Vance Center’s **Lawyers Council for Civil and Economic Rights**. The assessment provides recommendations and best practices for actors engaged in anti-corruption work across the region to implement new ideas and adapt their strategies to meet evolving challenges and offers a route for legal practitioners to take a more active role in combating corruption.

**Latin America
Anti-Corruption
Assessment
2023-2024**

Public Interest Reporting

**Assisting Exiled
Media Outlets to
Establish
Nonprofit
Organizations**

Collaborating in each case with an international law firm, we advised and assisted **nonprofit publishers** from Russia, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Jordan, and Central America to establish nonprofit organizations in the United States and obtain 501(c)(3) tax exemption, as well as transfer intellectual property to the new organizations. This restructuring helps the journalists working with these organizations to continue reporting on events in their home countries with the protection of the First Amendment.

The London office of an international law firm provided pro bono defense to an **international nonprofit investigative publisher** against a defamation claim at the High Court of Justice in London. The same firm had successfully defended a previous claim against the client, working in both cases with a barrister providing low bono service.

**Defamation
Defense for
International
Investigative
Publisher**

Lawyers for Reporters

Defending an Independent Nonprofit News Organization Targeted by a Non-Party Subpoena

Together with litigation co-counsel, we prepared and transmitted responses and objections to a non-party subpoena served on our client, a **nonprofit publisher** that reports on inequity and innovation in education across the United States. On behalf of one of the litigants in a class action lawsuit, the subpoena demanded the client's reportorial materials related to a story covering a party to the suit, including its internal editorial communications and journalists' interview notes. The responses we prepared with co-counsel forcefully made the case that such materials are protected from disclosure under New York's reporter's privilege and the First Amendment. The party issuing the subpoena did not pursue these privileged materials after receipt of our responses and objections.

We worked with co-counsel to help [The Urbanist](#), an advocacy organization covering transportation and housing policy in and around Seattle, Washington, to expand its base of support and reach by establishing a nonprofit charitable corporation affiliate. We counseled the client on the proposed affiliate's legal obligations, prepared the required governance materials for the new entity, and then helped it apply for and secure tax-exempt charitable status.

Corporate Restructuring Assistance for Seattle-based Outlet

Advising on Nonprofit Media Merger

In collaboration with a co-counsel law firm, we assisted a **local nonprofit news outlet** covering New York State's Hudson Valley to merge with another local outlet to create a unified newsroom. This representation required advising on the legal, strategic, financial, and operational aspects of the merger. Working alongside co-counsel, we facilitated a smooth transition of assets, ensured regulatory compliance, and guided the organizational integration of both outlets. The matter was resolved amicably, saving the jobs of journalists, strengthening an independent press in the region, and allowing for greater access to local news for the affected communities.
