

Raising the visibility of human rights defenders on the occasion of the anniversary of the Declaration on human rights defenders

Concept note

Introduction

The Declaration on Human rights defenders

In 1998 and after more than a decade of a long and collective process, the human rights community celebrated the adoption of the Declaration on human rights defenders (HRDs). This Declaration is a powerful text. It enshrines the importance and the legitimacy of human rights work. It celebrates the diversity of profiles, trajectories and issues ordinary women and men around the globe can embrace to defend their rights. It reaffirms that one is a human rights defender by what one does, regardless of sex, age, ethnicity and social class.

However, the Declaration has been increasingly under attack. Attacked by governments and other actors who have tried to erode its foundation, to reduce its scope and to question its relevance. And it is no coincidence that those who attack the Declaration at the United Nations are the same who attack human rights defenders on the ground and who try to restrict their work more and more.

The vulnerability of the Declaration is also due to the lack of familiarity of many actors with it. Since he was appointed in 2014, the Special Rapporteur has met with many actors, human rights defenders, institutional representatives and grassroots movements who do not know the Declaration or who do not see or understand it as the powerful advocacy tool it should be. It also appears that the Declaration has not yet reached many activists outside of traditional human rights organisations, especially those coming from social, environmental or development movements.

Beyond the Declaration, broader and systemic attacks against human rights defenders and civil society

Human rights defenders are increasingly under attack around the world. According to Front Line Defenders 2017 report, more than 300 human rights defenders were murdered in 2017.

As presented in his report¹ to the United Nations General Assembly in October 2015, attacks against human rights defenders can take many forms (physical, psychological, economic, and social) and are perpetrated by State as well as non-State actors (companies, armed entities, fundamentalist groups, etc.).

Although it is possible to identify regional and national particularities, common patterns can be found in many regions and are usually both the cause and consequence of cultures of impunity and corruption in many countries. Too little has been done to develop systemic preventive solutions that could directly mitigate the risks facing human rights defenders.

The 20th anniversary of the Declaration: An opportunity for advocacy, campaigning and communication

The Special Rapporteur firmly believes that the 20th anniversary of the Declaration on human rights defenders should serve as an opportunity to make the Declaration more visible and more accessible to everyone. It should also be the occasion to remember and celebrate those who dedicate their lives to the defence of human rights.

In the resolution 7/8, the Human rights Council requests the Special Rapporteur, *inter alia*:

- (a) To promote the effective and comprehensive implementation of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms through cooperation and constructive dialogue and engagement with Governments, relevant stakeholders and other interested actors;

In line with this long-term endeavor, the Special Rapporteur would like to make the most of his role as universal mechanism to build on the momentum generated by the anniversary of the Declaration. In this context, the Special Rapporteur and his team have been launching a series of discussions to share ideas on this anniversary.

Building on these discussions, the Special Rapporteur wishes to launch a series of initiatives and activities led by different actors actively engaged in the protection of human rights defenders and the recognition of their right to defend rights. In order to ensure ownership by human rights defenders and local communities, it will be critical to engage with the defenders and with grassroots movements at each stage of the anniversary. Human rights defenders and communities will be encouraged to actively participate in this anniversary, organising events and developing communication tools according to their own local/national contexts.

I. Objectives

- To raise the profile of human rights defenders around the globe and to counter the narrative they face in many contexts;
- To show the positive contribution of human rights defenders to democracy, rule of law and peace;
- To build bridges between traditional human rights sectors and other actors (social movements, development agencies, companies, etc.);
- To convey messages that all actors could be using during the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Declaration and beyond;
- To link different activities and events on human rights defenders, in order to contribute to delivering a unified and strong message on the important role of human rights defenders

II. Expected outcomes

- The Declaration on human rights defenders is more accessible to the human rights community and more broadly to public opinions. This anniversary is a great opportunity to raise awareness of who defenders are, what the risks they face are, and what rights they have, within the general public, in a simple, understandable way.
- The positive role of human rights defenders is more understood and accepted in public opinion and for other actors (e.g. companies);
- New coalitions and partnerships are built across the world to strengthen the work of human rights defenders.

III. Non-exhaustive list of activities that could be carried out during 2018

- **Global Coalition for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders**

Such a coalition would gather civil society organisations, international and regional mechanisms, national actors and other interested stakeholders and it would seek to raise the profile of human rights defenders worldwide and generate commitments – from a range of actors - to implement and respect the Declaration.

- **World summit on the situation of human rights defenders**

In December 1998, a coalition of international non-governmental organisations conducted the first world summit on human rights defenders. It took place in Paris and gathered more than 350 human rights defenders from 110 countries. A similarly ambitious event, twenty years after this summit led by a new coalition of NGOs would offer the possibility to reflect on the main achievements since the adoption of the Declaration and on the obstacles HRDs are still facing on the ground. It would also facilitate engagement with HRDs who do not have the opportunity to regularly engage with international mechanisms and with actors such as social movements, national human rights institutions and companies. The active support of regional networks will be key to ensuring the visibility and accessibility of such an event. Human rights defenders will discuss and adopt a series of pledges that could be presented during the High level panel discussion.

- **Nobel Peace Prize Initiative**

In an effort to publicly recognize the positive impact of human rights defenders, the three mandate holders on the situation of human rights defenders (Hina Jilani, Margaret Sekaggya and Michel Forst) have led an initiative to propose the community of human rights defenders for the Nobel Peace Prize. As a result, in January 2018, the French government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted the nomination to the Nobel Committee. It has been since backed by other States and actors and the Nobel Committee is currently reviewing the application.

- **High level panel discussion on the situation of human rights defenders**

Following the 2018 Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, a high-level panel discussion will be organised in December 2018 during the United Nations General Assembly. It will focus on good practices and challenges in regard to the implementation of the Declaration on human rights defenders.

- **Communication tools provided by the mandate**

The Special Rapporteur has recently engaged discussions with a communication agency to work on communication tools for the 20th anniversary: for example, leaflets, posters, a dedicated website. The communication should work on different key messages tailored to specific audiences (States, the general public, business actors, etc.). It will be critical to ensure these tools are made available and can be easily adapted in a variety of languages and dialects.

IV. Roles and expectations

The Special Rapporteur does not wish to become himself the coordinator of celebrations but he offers to identify spaces to build a momentum around the anniversary (either already organised by other actors or to be organised) where global common messages could be shared and disseminated.

In order to show to broad support among the world, the Special Rapporteur would like to engage the following actors to join the Global Coalition:

- Civil society organisations
- States actively engaged in the support and recognition of the role of human rights defenders
- Regional protection mechanisms
- Regional, thematic or local networks

- National Human Rights Institutions
- Donors
- Social movements
- Relevant UN agencies
- Companies and development agencies

Civil society organisations, States and other actors would be encouraged to:

- Join the global coalition for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders;
- Provide ideas on potential activities and contribute to the identification of common messages;
- Help disseminate the key messages during their own activities or through their communication channels;
- Develop activities such as public events to celebrate the anniversary of the Declaration.

V. Calendar (can be extended)

- December 2017- March 2018: Feedback from the different stakeholders sent to the mandate. A meeting with Permanent missions of States and a meeting with Geneva- based non-governmental organisations were organised in Geneva: two discussions with English speaking and Spanish-speaking participants were organised on line.
- February- March 2018: Discussions between the team of the mandate and the communication agency on communication tools
- March 2018: Series of advocacy activities led during the 37th session of the Human Rights Council session
- October 2018: Events around the presentation at the UNGA by the Special Rapporteur of a world report on the situation of human rights defenders
- November : World summit of human rights defenders
- December 2018: High Panel discussion on the situation of human right defenders
- December 2018: Events around the 9th and 10th of December to celebrate the work of human rights defenders and to link this anniversary to the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on human rights. Launch of the global coalition for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.

Throughout the year, online discussions and webinars will be organised to ensure human rights defenders can directly engage with the Special Rapporteur and his team.