



2017 DUBLIN
PLATFORM

for human rights
defenders at risk

REPORT



Conference rapporteur, Varoslavna Sychenkova, has drawn on the many rich and diverse contributions made at the Platform and has provided in this report an analysis of some of the main issues and propositions that have emerged over the three days.

2017 Dubin Platform

The 2017 Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders brought together more than 110 human rights defenders (HRDs) from 99 countries and numerous international guests to share experiences, learn from each other and develop new and more effective strategies for their security and protection. This unique forum gave participating HRDs an opportunity to speak out about challenges and risks they face in their work, analyse new and well-established patterns of oppression and develop strategies to remain resilient and effective.

To enable this exchange, participants held four plenary panel discussions on some of the biggest challenges facing HRDs today:

- (a) the issue of killings of HRDs and how to effectively campaign against impunity;
- (b) the double-edged nature of social media, which creates opportunities as well as risks;
- (c) strategies to counter gender-specific risks faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs);
- (d) the issue of collective protection and how to build public support for human rights work.

In six working groups on good practices and strategies to ensure effective protection, HRDs addressed several issues, including criminalisation; smear campaigns; community protection; restrictive legislation; strengthening public support; and, non-state actors including businesses and fundamentalist religious groups.

Defenders were also given a stage to share their stories, successes and concerns in the form of personal testimonies, which are key to creating a sense of belonging, togetherness and solidarity that characterises the Platform.

One of the objectives for the Platform is to allow lesser known and connected HRDs to engage and network with key actors in international protection thereby creating new opportunities for collaboration and funding. International guests in attendance included Simon Coveney, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland; Andrew Gilmour, UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights; Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Stavros Lambrinidis, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights; Agnes Callamard, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; and representatives of several governments, inter-governmental organisations, donors and international NGOs.

Throughout the three days, digital security experts provided one-to-one support to the HRDs, helping make their communications more secure. Four 'lightning talks' offered updates on the UN resolution on HRDs; on the Government of Finland's policy in support of HRDs; on a new project documenting HRDs stories of struggle; and on new research by York University on HRD protection and wellbeing.



110 Human Rights Defenders from 99 countries participated in the 2017 Dublin Platform.



The Bigger Picture


HRDs shared their experience of being exposed to risks, threats and violations of their fundamental rights. The range of these violations is very broad, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, arrests and defamation, and occur all over the world. The attacks should not be seen as individual or arbitrary acts. Instead, as numerous speakers highlighted, these attacks form part of an intensified backlash on legitimate and peaceful work for the realisation and protection of human rights.

HRDs have been facing grave risks for decades. In response, local and international organisations, as well as some governments, have developed mechanisms to react to such situations. They have created blueprints for urgent actions, established shelters and focal points for HRDs at risk and undertaken other measures to respond to crackdowns. According to defenders, these measures have been of great importance, helping to expose those responsible for attacks, to relocate defenders at risk, to inform them about tools of protection against physical and digital attacks, and to gain international support when they were exposed to repression. However, considering the reactive nature of these measures, the question is whether they are sustainable and effective over time.

In the panel discussion on stopping the killings of HRDs, Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, pointed out that the current situation of HRDs must be considered in the larger context of recent global developments. The past decade has been marked by rising militarisation and the use of excessive force; entrenchment of neoliberal ideology within political policy on all levels; the rise of populist powers and the use of social and other media to disseminate false news and influence public opinion. These trends have not only contributed to the crisis of human rights and the lack of solidarity in society, but have subsequently led to a shrinking of the space in which HRDs work.



Agnes Callamard (middle), the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, speaking on a panel focused on stopping the killings of HRDs, with Front Line Defenders Board Member, Arnold Tsunga (r) and Nymia Simbulan (HRD, Philippines)



Thus if change is to occur, responding to attacks is insufficient and what is needed is reconsideration of existing structures, changing the current economic and political discourse and raising worldwide solidarity for the work of HRDs. It is essential to see the interrelation between the risks of human rights work, on the one hand, and developments at global and national levels on the other. There cannot be full support for environmental or land rights defenders without taking an allied position on issues of climate change and rising inequality, as noted by Ndranto Razakamanaria from Madagascar.

By the same token, the panel on the gender-specific risks faced by women defenders highlighted that WHRDs will always face some risks as long as there was a failure to tackle patriarchal structures and gender inequality in society and within the human rights movement. Similarly, defenders working on business and human rights will continue to face risks until the negative impacts of existing economic models are more widely understood and reversed, as Lim Kimsor from Cambodia underlined.

These observations all pointed to the same recommendations: there is a need for greater solidarity, for greater understanding of intersectionality and for more coordination of the human rights movement. Not only it is essential to create more solidarity across local, national and international levels, it is also important to strengthen solidarity within the human rights movement at each level. As expressed by Jakeline Romero Epiayu from Colombia HRDs and society should see themselves as part of a worldwide human rights movement: we are all different but we are interlinked in our actions, and if we truly aim for justice, we should face our complexity and unite in it.

Patterns of Attack

Several patterns of attacks that exemplify the global crackdown on civil society emerged from the personal testimonies. The use of extreme violence against human rights lawyers and defenders remains prevalent in certain countries. Frequent news of assassinations, physical attacks, enforced disappearances and imprisonment of colleagues and family members have been persistent risks to HRDs in Mexico, Honduras, Brazil, the Philippines and a number of other countries for many years.

In addition to physical attacks, new methods of repression have been experienced within the last decade. Under the pretext of protecting national security, morals or economic development, states have established a framework of control over HRDs by adopting laws narrowing the space for human rights work or depriving defenders of this space completely. In addition to criminalising the work of HRDs, governments have targeted civil society organisations' ability to remain financially viable by outlawing foreign contributions.

Defenders from Africa reported the repeated abuse of counter-terrorism legislation, national security laws and states of emergency, in particular in the context of elections or constitutional crises. This allows governments to limit freedom of association and assembly and to arrest HRDs without warrant, as a Kenyan human rights defender explained. Defenders from the Americas shared their experiences of being targeted under counter-terrorism laws as a reprisal for financial losses suffered by businesses caused by defenders' opposition to large-scale business projects. 'Foreign agent' laws, as adopted by various countries in the post-Soviet and Asian regions, enable governments to deny human rights organisations access to essential financial sources for their work while stigmatizing them as foreign agents.

HRDs also explained how governments ally with non-state actors when repressing struggles for justice. Such alliances can lead to smear campaigns and harassment through mass media, violence and threats by militias defending business interests, or judicial and other forms of harassment by religious groups.



On the last morning of the Dublin Platform, participants gathered at the Embassy of Turkey to call on the Turkish government to drop charges against ten HRDs, known as the Istanbul10. They had been arrested at a digital security workshop and charged with aiding a terrorist organisation.

Changing the Discourse

An issue that emerged strongly from many personal testimonies is the stigmatisation of HRDs by both state and non-state actors. Such defamation campaigns are aimed at generating the idea that human rights work is 'immoral', 'unpatriotic' and even 'terrorist' in nature. As Stavros Lambrinidis, the European Union Special Representative for Human Rights, pointed out, different narratives are being developed in the context of an ongoing ideological war. These narratives are used by states and their allies against HRDs who disagree with them and present challenges. HRDs explained why these narratives are false and how important it is to change this discourse.

3.1. Why protecting land, environmental and community rights does not mean being 'anti-development'

In the last decade, the world has witnessed an expansion of business projects on an unprecedented scale, involving extractive industries, the building of hydro-electric dams, gas pipelines, and the development of infrastructure projects around the world. At the same time, many communities, and particularly indigenous communities, have been negatively affected by these projects, resulting in forced evictions, deprivation of land and culture, deforestation and further environmental degradation. As pointed out during the panel on killings, HRDs working on these issues face immense risk and account for the highest number of killings. Violence against them is compounded by accusations of being 'anti-development', of preventing their countries from achieving economic growth, and thus of causing financial losses for the entire society.

The danger of these trends lies in the fact that the repressive intent of the state is masked by a façade of protection of national interests. This façade creates a deceptively legitimate reason for repression, undermines societal support for HRDs and leads to their marginalisation. Several HRDs from the post-Soviet region shared their experience of feeling alienated from the general public in their countries due to negative perceptions of them generated by mass media with the support of the various governments.

HRDs agreed on the urgent need to re-establish strong connections with society and to more effectively explain to public audiences the importance of human rights work. This would enable new forms of activism, by encouraging people to join movements, and it is especially important in countries where HRDs are perceived by local publics as part of an 'elite'. HRDs must find creative ways to explain their work, including through visual art, caricatures and humour, online petitions, effective use of social media and collective action by neighbourhoods.





When refuting these allegations, HRDs from Africa, Asia and the Americas drew particular attention to the long term consequences of a blind focus on economic growth. Nonhle Mbuthama from South Africa, who supports her community in opposing mining projects affecting their land, livelihood and environment, refuses to accept the anti-development stigma. Economic development is needed, she stated, but does it have to come with such a high cost for communities who might lose their culture and identity if they are deprived of their land? She believes that development can and should be sustainable, and by avoiding 'economic shortcuts' society will gain more benefits in the long term.

3.2. Why protecting women and LGBTI rights does not mean being 'anti-family'

Defenders of women's and LGBTI rights face defamation because of their work in support of gender equality and freedom to live fully one's identity and sexual orientation. For this, they are frequently presented as 'anti-family' and in violation of moral or traditional norms.

Women and LGBTI defenders targeted by state actors, religious groups and mass media explain that such accusations are not connected to their work or views, but rather originate in patriarchal structures, which remain in place across the world. Women defenders of indigenous rights face discrimination from within their own communities, as Jakeline Romero Epiayu from Colombia shared during the panel on gender-specific risks.

In the view of other members of the community, she said, women are not supposed to take leading roles in community life; if they do so, they are accused of neglecting their 'primary responsibilities' of being mothers and wives. Rachel Boyindjo, who campaigns for women's sexual and reproductive rights in Togo, shared that she was accused of intending to overthrow the traditions established in her country by starting a 'women's revolution'.

Baia Patarai from Georgia added that the origin of 'anti-family'-stigma on LGBTI defenders lies in the belief that LGBTI rights pose a threat to heterosexuality. However, she noted, equal recognition of rights of all members of our society would enable non-discriminatory access to the right to family for everyone. The reverse position - that anti-LGBTI and patriarchal movements are 'pro-family' - is false as it promotes the deprivation of the right to family for certain groups, along with other fundamental rights those groups are fully entitled to.

**"In my country, in small communities, raids from police and hired thugs tend to happen at night. To counter this, when a raid was happening, houses would turn on all their lights in order to alert the rest of the community and to stop abductions or other risks. When the mining company or the government started to cut electricity supply during raids, villagers in the community moved to bashing pots and pans and making a lot of noise to alert their neighbours."
- HRD from Asia**

3.3. Why protecting civil and political rights does not mean being 'against your own country'

Protection of civil and political rights is in some countries associated with being 'against the state', explained defenders from Central Asia, the Americas and Africa. Elena Lorac, who works on equal access to citizenship for Dominicans of Haitian descent, faced accusations of being part of a movement 'to invade the country'. Bright Thamie Phiri, a human rights lawyer from Malawi, was stigmatized as 'being against his country' for representing citizens of Tanzania during a trial in Malawi.

In this context, defenders explain that being 'against the country' in fact means being against the state or influential non-state actors, who intend to prevent critical voices from being heard and considered seriously. When governments' actions fall short in the implementation of human rights, it is essential to protect the affected and remind states of their obligations. As Stavros Lambrinidis stated, the implementation of human rights is the key to countries' stability and development, not an obstacle.

Social media: Tool or Threat?

While the development of social media as a tool for promotion of human rights causes and campaigns has enabled HRDs to reach wider audiences and gain more support, the same platforms also facilitate threats and intimidation against HRDs. In a plenary panel discussion between HRDs and Sinéad McSweeney, Twitter's Vice President for Public Policy and Communications for Europe, Middle East and Africa, speakers discussed this duality that Twitter and other social media platforms present for human rights work.

In certain countries where HRDs cannot access traditional media, social media networks are the only public space for discussions, as Safa Shareef from the Maldives explained. She was echoed by Patson Dzamara from Zimbabwe, who pointed to the opportunity offered by

social media to harness public attention, which is sometimes the only way to guarantee defenders' safety. Ibtissame Betty Lachdar shared in her testimony how she uses social media in innovative and provocative ways to mobilise civil society in Morocco.

On the other hand, defenders shared their experiences of being exposed to harassment and threats online. Although 'only' speech, these attacks create a hostile environment for HRDs, and threats and intimidation online can translate into physical attack or harassment offline. Such attacks have often come from anonymous accounts, which are permitted by the policy of some social media platforms like Twitter. But this anonymity, while enabling perpetrators to effectively hide, also importantly enables HRDs to express opinions in countries where speaking out in public can result in immediate danger.

McSweeney explained that social media companies like Twitter have made efforts to tackle these problems, drawing clear lines between freedom of speech and incitement to hatred or violence. As a response to such situations, she continued, Twitter has created support options whereby online threats and harassment can be reported, allowing the company to take action. Twitter also provides a report of the online complaint, which could be used by HRDs when reporting the threats to police. She added that cooperation between social media companies and HRDs could help strengthen documentation of online threats.

HRDs spoke of their difficulties in engaging with social media companies and of the need for these companies to do more. Other speakers shared ways to create a safer environment on social media, including by being mindful of what information is shared and being familiar with privacy options and issues such as geo-localisation. Loreto Bravo, a Mexican digital security expert, underlined the need to document threats on social media and submit this information to the authorities – although it was acknowledged that states are not always willing to investigate these cases. Bravo also stressed the need to remember that social media companies are moved by commercial interests and encouraged participants to consider alternative social network sites, some of which are non-commercial and give users full ownership and control over their data.

Steps by the international community

All HRDs called for the strengthening and expansion of existing protection support. Many also highlighted the positive impact of international pressure, especially in countries where no domestic remedy is available due to pervasive impunity or the lack of independence of the judiciary. It is important that international pressure is not only aimed at national authorities, but at local ones.

However, international mechanisms for the protection of HRDs may be ineffective. As both Andrew Gilmour, UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, and Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, noted during a Q&A session, the lack of political will of states significantly limits their mandates. Special Rapporteurs can only carry out official visits upon government's invitation, and this requirement means that often, in practice, they are not allowed to visit the very countries where their support is most urgently needed. In a similar manner, Andrew Gilmour admits that the UN mechanisms are constrained by political reality: there is an urgent need to put pressure on states in order to bring about a more tangible commitment to the protection of HRDs.

Several states have taken a stand regarding the protection of HRDs by leading initiatives in multilateral fora, adopting guidelines on the protection of HRDs, supporting HRD protection organisations or intervening in individual cases. Nina Nordström, a representative from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained that Finnish diplomatic missions meet local HRDs at risk and make host governments aware of their concerns. Geir Sjøberg, a policy director of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, added that despite the existing political obstacles, civil society organisations and states should continue to strongly advocate for more effective protection of defenders.

Diplomats can support HRDs by meeting them in person, providing information on available support, coordinating protection strategies with other diplomatic missions or governments as well as raising awareness about the importance of human rights work on international and national levels.

International NGOs were urged by HRDs to intensify their efforts by advocating for more coverage of human rights issues in international mass and social media, educating the public about risks and challenges defenders face, as well as supporting long-term strategies on sustainable and effective protection. In particular, protection strategies should be built on pre-existing community-based measures and take into account the collective nature of the human rights struggle.

Additional steps should be undertaken to push for a change in the existing global structures that pose an obstacle to human rights work. Recent adoption of the UN Paris Climate Agreement, advances towards a binding UN treaty on responsibility of transnational corporations and the global supply chain, a Human Rights Council resolution denouncing capital punishment for consensual same-sex relations all constitute important steps towards stronger recognition of human rights and of HRDs, noted Michel Forst.

The path to global solidarity for human rights, to just economic and social development without discrimination, to full recognition of human rights is an especially rocky road for those who stand in the front line, but it is not a lonely road. As many HRDs stated in their testimonies "I realised I am not alone, we are together in this collective struggle."

"Humanity owes a great debt to that small band of sisters, and brothers, who, often at tremendous personal risk and with no small amount of courage, volunteer to defend the human rights of individuals and communities across the world"
- Simon Coveney, Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs & Trade
at the Dublin Platform 2017



Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade, Simon Coveney addressing the Dublin Platform plenary session (above); HRDs mingling during breaks in the Platform programme.



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As is tradition, the Dublin Platform included a strong cultural component. Moya Brennan and band performed during the opening session and launched *Cosmos*, a piece originally composed by Sara Yang for her father, imprisoned Chinese HRD Guo Feixiong. Irish-American poet Erin Fornoff recited two of her poems, including an original composition for the Dublin Platform; and Dabledoo Music closed the Dublin Platform with a collective performance, with the participation of all attendees.

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SWEDEN



Graciela Pérez Rodríguez (Mexico, back) receives a hug from Loreto Bravo (Chile, facing) after presenting her testimony at the 2017 Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders at Risk