

# WHO WILL DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS IN ORDER TO DELIVER THE SDGS?

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## INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda implicitly and explicitly includes a number of human rights objectives, thereby linking the performance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to national governments' ability to meet certain human rights principals. This connection presupposes the existence of individuals and groups that scrutinize how, where and for whom development is achieved. These human rights defenders (HRDs) function both as watchdogs and advocates for the marginalized and oppressed.

Because their work challenges norms, values, policies and institutions, HRDs are often the targets of violence and intimidation. Among HRDs, women and defenders of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights are particularly at risk. While the protection of HRDs is a challenge in all countries, their insecurity is often exacerbated in fragile contexts where corruption, poor governance and structural violence undermine accountability and reduce access to justice. Increasingly restrictive legislation directed towards civil society organizations (CSOs) and the shrinking space in which they operate further confounds the security situation of HRDs. This brief outlines the most common threats faced by HRDs and recommends means by which some of these threats could be overcome.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary threats to HRDs include restricted movement, assembly and expression; access and service denial; defamation; asset forfeiture; harassment; intimidation; detention; assault; torture; disappearance and death. In addition to endangering personal wellbeing, these threats also reduce the operational effectiveness of organizations that engage in human rights work by eroding public trust, preventing them from communicating with key stakeholders and limiting fundraising capacity. While some HRDs are unable to leave their country (or even their homes), others are forced to flee to protect themselves and their families.

Telecommunications and cyberspace are also rife with insecurity. Government security services often secretly monitor HRDs' online behaviour including public posts (e.g. social media, chat forums) and private exchanges (e.g. email, text, telephone calls). In countries where the accountability of public figures is low and access to justice is restricted, HRDs have very few means at their disposal to counter such abuses. Slander, vilification and smear campaigns are easily reinforced on social media where women HRDs are specifically targeted.

Without the incorporation of human rights provisions, legislation designed to counter violent extremism (CVE) can easily be abused by regimes that aim to silence dissidents and restrict civil society's operations and access to resources. There are numerous examples of how CVE laws have been used to subvert the rule of law, including online surveillance of HRDs and political opponents, and arbitrary detention.

In contexts marked by political volatility, shifting conflict dynamics and tenuous social cohesion, the security of HRDs can vary significantly in a very short period of time. As a result, the promotion of human rights work by international partners can, unintentionally, endanger local HRDs, particularly when they are identified by face or name.



The SDG implementation framework provides significant space to incorporate human rights components as a function of measurement efforts. For example, one of the indicators already proposed to measure SDG Target 16.10 (on public access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms) is the number of journalists and HRDs killed, kidnapped, disappeared, detained or tortured in last 12 months.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. The UN and other international policymaking bodies should play a proactive role in ensuring the protection of HRDs and maintenance of a safe and enabling civil society environment through policy.

- HRDs serve an essential role (watchdogs) in the evaluation of progress towards many of the SDGs.
- The 2030 Agenda provides an opportunity to integrate human rights into global sustainable development efforts. Specifically, the indicators could be used to measure the extent and quality of human rights in a country as a function of its development progress.
- To increase awareness of potential human rights abuses related to gender, principles of disaggregation must be adhered to.

### 2. International policies, treaties and agreements must include explicit rights provisions to ensure that security and economic prosperity do not come at the expense of fundamental human rights.

- CVE and national security policies should directly refer to the freedoms of expression, association, assembly and privacy, and should carefully define violent extremism and violent extremists so that the policy cannot be easily abused.
- The inclusion of binding human rights provisions in trade agreements is one way to ensure that vulnerable populations are not instrumentalized for economic gain. Such provisions might refer to specific national and international policies regarding indigenous rights, land rights, labour rights and the right to political participation.

### 3. The international community should be more conscious of the local security context and its evolution over time.

- Do not invite HRDs or at-risk civil society representatives to speak at events attended by representatives of repressive regimes or government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) without their consent.
- Do not promote human rights work of local HRDs without first consulting them to assess whether it could jeopardize their safety and security.
- Provide flexible, long-term financial support to HRDs and civil society organizations so that they have the capacity to adapt their operations quickly as the situation on the ground evolves.
- Ask HRDs about travel restrictions and associated bureaucratic hurdles to avoid passport confiscation and retaliation for unsanctioned movement.



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