

The Shelter Cities Program (Netherlands)

Good practice: Protecting Human Rights Defenders through multistakeholder cooperation

Relevant DFI commitment: Protect and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms across the digital ecosystem while providing access to meaningful remedies for human rights violations and abuses, consistent with international human rights law.

Type of the initiative: Program

Stakeholder Group: Civil Society and Government

Launch/adoption: 2012 - Now

Goals

The Shelter Cities program aims to support and protect human rights defenders at risk by providing them with temporary safe spaces in cities worldwide. Its primary goals are to offer human rights defenders a chance to rest and recuperate, enhance their skills and knowledge, expand their networks, and raise awareness about human rights issues in host communities.

Description

The Shelter Cities initiative, launched in 2012 by the Dutch NGO Justice & Peace, is a global network of cities that temporarily relocate human rights defenders facing threats or persecution in their home countries. The program offers a three-month stay in a safe environment, during which participants can access various forms of support, including physical and mental health care, security training, and capacity-building opportunities. Participants also have the chance to engage with local organisations, universities, and government officials to build international support networks. The initiative has grown to include 22 Shelter Cities across Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, with each city comprising a network of local organisations and citizens committed to supporting human rights defenders.

The concept of a shelter city emerged in the Netherlands as a concrete and accessible way to support at-risk human rights defenders and has grown into a global network of cities, organisations and human rights institutions worldwide. Shelter Cities offer a safe space for Human Rights Defenders to continue their work, offering resources and tailored support, from psychological or medical care to security training and skills development. Shelter cities also provide an opportunity to connect with a broad network of human rights allies, which can contribute to mobilisation efforts at all levels. The shelter city movement is an example of international cooperation in implementing the first DFI principle. By contributing or participating in a shelter city network or establishing a shelter city within their borders, countries can help protect the work of human rights defenders while facilitating international multistakeholder collaboration on the issue.

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