

## Human Rights Defenders Working Group Meeting – Oct. 27

-The Observatory- a report that monitors the current situation of Human Rights Defenders work.

-Definition of Human Rights Defenders: Political Agents

-Less of a label and more of an activity.

-Core issues:

### **-Arab Spring**

-Enormous encouragement for what defenders have been addressing.

-More needs to happen in region to alleviate oppression.

-“Human Rights defenders are actors of change, not just status”

-Political/ Advocacy support is needed from the international community

--Responsibility should not just be left to the EU/America

### **-Oppression of social dissent**

-Human Rights Defenders are defending newer issues.

Ex. Land Rights, Indigenous populations, LGBT, etc.

-Diversification of roots of oppression

-Oppression does not always originate from the state. Sometimes from private corporations or security companies.

### **-Rather than helping defenders, the law has become a weapon against them**

-Laws and regulations exist that prevent foreign funding, negatively affecting international donors.

### **-Impunity**

-Any attack on a Human Rights Defender that is part of a broader climate

-Problem: How can we ensure accountability for these attacks?

### **-Election Period – a time that creates certain risks for Human Rights Defenders.**

-Protection needs to be more than physical, it needs to be “Holistic”

-Mental and social factors must be taken into account

-Paradox: Attention received but implementation creates a problem.

-Challenges:

1.) States adapting to international Human Rights criticisms

2.) Distortion of law

-law as a tool for oppression

Example: Criminalizing protest/Homosexuality

3.) Diversification of authors

-Most powerful actors have become corporations and organized crime families.

4.) Social vulnerability

-economic crisis has caused a major shift in the balance of power. There is a wider gap between rich and poor.

-There is a dilution of the protection capacity of the UN and laws.

Elements for discussion: To protect Human Rights Defenders:

- "Don't just protect the messenger, but also the message."

-Adapting tools:

1. The internet, Social networking
2. De-clustering agents of change (NGO's, trade unions)
3. Develop more structures and mechanisms that protect defenders
  - Investigations on terrorism that lead to accountability
4. Develop interaction between local and international NGO's.
5. Widening targets
  - Influence non-state actors
6. Take into account that it is not just about money.
  - Unity is of the utmost importance

**THE DEFENDERS** – Represent Mexico, Guatemala, and Uganda. Each speaker highlighted different issues for Human Rights Defenders in their respective countries.

### **MEXICO**

- Human Rights Defenders fighting for adequate housing for communities (specifically for migrant workers) are killed.
- The killing of activists is perpetual because there are no prompt investigations that lead to punishment.
- List of those undertaking the killings:
  - 1.) Government officials whose interests are affected
  - 2.) Criminals who see activists as obstacles
  - 3.) Corporations who want to undermine the effectiveness of a community.
- HR Defenders and Journalists must be protected so they can:
  - 1.) Work in litigation for Human Rights
  - 2.) Conduct educational processes in all different parts of the country
  - 3.) Work to establish laws that protect Human Rights Defenders.

### **GUATEMALA**

- Speaker works in litigation cases that include violations of human rights during armed conflict
- Guatemalan Peace Accords were signed, but peace has not been achieved.
  - 2700 violent deaths a year related to the use of firearms
- When a HDR is killed, it is blamed on general assault.
- Huge problem with misappropriation of funds by public officials.
  - “Honor” of organizations are attacked by public officials
- Laws, in the guise of “defending the state”, are used to accuse and capture Human Rights Defenders
- For state to change, Human Rights Defenders need international advocacy.

### **UGANDA**

- Resources such as oil and gold are high in demand.
  - Exploration to find more of these resources has been at the expense of the people.
  - People are displaced, “Government doesn’t care”
- Uganda is still an agrarian society.
  - Displaced refugees are returning to find that their land and livelihoods have been taken.
- Land taken away from refugees and given to companies (sometimes for sugar production) with the legal permission of the government.
  - Refugees receive no type of compensation
- Police kill people fighting at a national level
  - Law: No bail for demonstrators charged with treason
  - Disappearances of HDR’s is common
- Problem: HR violations documented by NGO’s then shelved.

- International actors and indigenous activists need to use partnerships to navigate through difficulties.
- Boost empowerment and freedom to act

- Networking between NGO's

- Stay in touch
- support local NGO's with international support so they can establish themselves with credibility.
- Defend Human Rights Defenders in legal arena and education
- “Think globally, act locally”