

## **Director's Update - July 2013**

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### **Supporting human rights defenders**

Undoubtedly one of the highlights for me since joining ISHR earlier this year was our work in June to support 19 leading national human rights defenders from six different continents to attend the 23rd session of the UN Human Rights Council. Over an intensive two week period, ISHR's expert staff worked with grassroots human rights defenders to bring international attention to issues such as the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria and the widespread discrimination and harassment faced by people in all parts of the world because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many of these activists came to Geneva despite suffering [attacks, arbitrary detention and reprisals](#). It is critical that the Council hear directly from human rights activists who work at the grassroots – such as [Anthony Oluoch from Gay Kenya Trust](#) who delivered a statement on behalf of ISHR – and it has been truly inspiring to support their courageous and important work.

The Human Rights Council session itself produced mixed results. Disappointingly, the Council did not adopt a resolution on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. More positively, it did adopt two resolutions in relation to atrocities in Syria and a [record number of resolutions](#) recognising the need to protect and support the work of human rights defenders, including women defenders.

We were also very pleased at the positive response to ISHR's [agenda-setting efforts](#) to support and strengthen the work of [human rights defenders working on issues of corporate accountability](#), which resulted in a [joint statement on this emerging area of concern led by Norway](#).

For more information and analysis on recent achievements, challenges and the road ahead for the UN Human Rights Council, I encourage you to check out the recent [blog post by ISHR expert Dr Heather Collister](#). You may also be interested in an [interview with Mario Domingo](#), a leading national human rights defender from Guatemala supported by ISHR and working on issues of corporate accountability for human rights violations.

### **Strengthening human rights systems**

ISHR's work to support human rights defenders is complemented by our work to strengthen human rights systems, ensuring they are accessible to civil society actors and can be used by advocates to ensure accountability for violations and to create and maintain pressure for positive change.

The last few months have been very busy in this regard, with ISHR leading and coordinating civil society efforts to strengthen the [UN human rights treaty body system](#) and the work of the Human Rights Council's [independent experts and special rapporteurs](#). We are heartened that, albeit incrementally and slowly, [the UN is also opening its doors](#) to human rights defenders that have previously been excluded.

Regrettably, there appears to be an increase in attacks, threats and reprisals against human rights defenders, often in retaliation for seeking to voice their concerns at the UN and on the international stage. Together with other key actors such as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ISHR has demanded that human rights defenders in States including [Russia](#) and [China](#) be protected from reprisals and that those responsible be held to account.

### **Looking ahead**

Although summer has finally arrived here in Geneva and New York, the coming months promise to be just as busy for the ISHR team.

At the international level, we're working on a major new report on reprisals to be launched at the September session of the UN Human Rights Council and lobbying for the establishment of a high-level UN focal point to prevent and take action against reprisals. We're also working with NGO partners around the world to begin the development of a draft model law on human rights defenders. Both of these ISHR initiatives were unanimously [endorsed by a major international expert conference](#) held in Vienna last month which recognised the clear and urgent need for better recognition and protection of human rights defenders by human rights laws and systems.

At the regional level, we're delivering training to human rights defenders in the Mano River region of West Africa in August. We're also conducting research and advocacy to ensure that the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights takes concrete action in relation to women defenders and the prevention of reprisals.

### **Organisational developments**

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to update you on two significant developments within ISHR.

First, I am delighted to advise that ISHR recently elected [three new Board members](#) – Sir Nicolas Bratza (past President of the European Court of Human Rights), Hina Jilani (former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders) and Egbert Myjer (former judge of the European Court of Human Rights). It is very gratifying that three such eminent human rights advocates have agreed to take up leadership roles with ISHR and support the work of ISHR's exceptional staff.

Second, I am also pleased to advise that ISHR recently adopted a Strategic Framework for 2013 to 2016. Through its implementation, the Strategic Framework will ensure that our work becomes even more relevant, focused and impactful and that our financial supporters receive an even better return on their human rights investment. This Framework is summarised in a [new promotional brochure](#), which also provides an overview of ISHR's history, vision and human rights impact. I'm sure you'll recognise some familiar faces – all of whom are ISHR trainees who have gone on to become leading national, regional and international human rights advocates in their own right. I hope that the brochure inspires you to continue your support for ISHR and encourage you to share it with friends and colleagues who share your commitment and your passion for human rights.

Yours sincerely

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