

Panel discussion on the protection needs of defenders working on economic, social and cultural rights

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Defenders play a critical role in securing the right to housing, pushing for adequate health care and ensuring community voices are heard in development projects. Despite this, economic, social and cultural rights defenders are among the most isolated and stigmatised defenders. At a side event organised by ISHR and seven international NGOs, human rights defenders and international experts discussed the risks faced by economic, social and cultural rights defenders and good practices in furthering their protection.



On 7 March ISHR held a joint side event on the protection needs of human rights defenders working on economic, cultural and social (ESC) rights, along with Protection International, CIVICUS, Amnesty International, The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, PBI, the Observatory for the Protection of HRDs, Forum Asia and East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project.

The event highlighted the risks faced by ESC rights defenders (ESC rights defenders), drawing on the [report of the Special Rapporteur presented at this session of the Human Rights Council](#) to discuss good practices in furthering their protection.

Panellists included:

- Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders;
- Navi Pillay, former High Commissioner for Human Rights;
- Allo Awol, human rights defender from Ethiopia;
- Arutchelvan Subramaniam, founder of Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas (Oppressed Peoples Network); and
- Pedro Tzicá, Consejo de Comunidades de Cunén.

The event was moderated by Catarina de Albuquerque, former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

ESC rights defenders

Panellists discussed the work of ESC rights defenders. Work that is [essential for the promotion, protection and realisation of ESC rights](#) - such as the rights to food, water, housing, health, work, and social security.

Panellists spoke about the crucial work of ESC rights defenders in their countries, including defenders in Ethiopia protesting illegal land grabs to prevent the displacement of communities; defenders in Malaysia working towards inclusive and sustainable development and to oppose corruption; and defenders in Guatemala working to protect indigenous rights and ensuring that companies consult with affected communities.

Navi Pillay reflected on the 'skewed emphasis' often placed on defenders working on civil and political rights, particularly when she became the High Commissioner in 2008. In agreement, other panellists highlighted that one of the main challenges for ESC rights defenders is the lack of recognition and the prevailing stigma against ESC rights - that they are often seen as 'aspirations', rather than rights.

Risks faced by ESC rights defenders

Panellists highlighted the significant risks these defenders face. The [murder of human rights defender Berta Caceres](#), shot in her home on 3 March, was referred to as a horrific but clear example of the risks faced.

Panellists discussed the risks and challenges faced by ESC rights defenders. For example, particular risks as a result of their work to expose corruption and challenge major business, as well as particular risks faced by women defenders of ESC rights - including stigmatisation, sexual abuse and attacks on their families. Restrictive laws which violate international human rights law were also highlighted - as they are often used to

accuse defenders of acting 'illegally'. Collusion between States and business actors was emphasised as a factor which exacerbates the risks ESC rights defenders face, including by enabling restrictions to be imposed on protests, and by facilitating judicial harassment. Finally, high levels of impunity for attacks against ESC rights defenders was identified as one of the biggest threats and impediments to their work.

Protecting ESC rights defenders - good practices

In discussing [seven good practice principles to protect defenders](#) set out in his new report presented to the Council last week, Michel Forst highlighted the need to work together; including the need for different Special Procedures to collaborate to report more comprehensively on risks and threats faced by defenders.

Allo Awol built on this idea of collaboration, stating that aid donors and international financial institutions should insist on the protection ESC rights defenders.

Collaboration was a central theme to the good practices in the defence of ESC rights defenders that were discussed - including the need for meaningful consultation by both governments and corporations with ESC rights defenders; and strong networks between ESC rights defenders.

Navi Pillay highlighted that good practice for the protection of defenders requires investigation of and accountability for threats and attacks against them. In reflecting on what is required to ensure these defenders are protected, she stated:

'Civil society and States need to work together towards the implementation of specific national laws and mechanisms for the protection of these defenders, to investigate violations against them, and to create accountability for those violations.'

In the discussion on good practices, Michel Forst identified the resolution being negotiated during the current Human Rights Council session as a critical opportunity.

'States have the opportunity at this session of the Council to adopt a strong resolution on the promotion and protection of ESC rights defenders.'

In this regard, Navi Pillay called on States to ensure the resolution contains concrete calls on both States and business to protect, support and enable the work of ESC rights defenders.

ISHR shares these calls, urging all delegations at the Council to participate constructively in the negotiations and support the adoption of a [strong and substantive resolution](#) for the protection of ESC rights defenders. Such a resolution could, through its effective implementation at the national level, contribute not only to the protection of human rights defenders but ultimately to the promotion, protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights on the ground.