

[HRC37 | Urgent steps needed to protect defenders of rights of people on the move](#)

05.03.2018

Everyone should be free to move and to protect those on the move. The Human Rights Council last week highlighted the importance of human rights, and human rights defenders, including in discussions of the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migrants.



The situation confronting defenders of the rights of people on the move is widespread and deeply worrying, said many stakeholders in the Human Rights Council last week.

States from around the world recognised the important role of defenders working to support people on the move, and called for the negotiations of the Global Compacts on refugees and migrants to take into account that on-the-ground experience.

A joint statement delivered by Austria, supported by Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland noted:

This report is very timely... the important role played by these defenders of people on the move, and the legitimacy of their work, cannot be overstressed.... [they] face a constellation of challenges, and are often particularly vulnerable. Their role could figure more prominently in discussions, and we therefore welcome the participation of civil society in the Compacts.

'This report by the UN Special Rapporteur brings new perspective, with a focus on the importance of human rights defenders in the context of the Global Compact on Migration, added the representative of Brazil, while the representative of Pakistan agreed, noting that there is an important role for human rights defenders, supplemented by efforts to 'reshape negative narratives' of migration that so often provide cover for xenophobia.

ISHR's advocate focused on migration, Sarah M Brooks, welcomed the diplomatic support for the report in a [formal intervention on migrant rights defenders](#).

'It sets out a compelling case for States to take concrete action to address the specific challenges faced by these defenders, and includes a range of relevant recommendations for doing so'.

'It is important', she highlighted, 'that these recommendations and the range of other relevant jurisprudence of the Special Procedures and the UN treaty bodies be clearly understood as the foundation for a rights-based Global Compact on Migration'.

Nonetheless, as another NGO representative noted during [a side event hosted by the Association on the Prevention of Torture, the International Detention Coalition, and ISHR](#), 'Ongoing efforts to protect the rights of migrants now must not stop during the negotiations. The reason these negotiations are hard is precisely the reason that they are so important'.

Brooks agrees: 'The recommendations the Special Rapporteur has made to UN agencies and bodies are essential in ensuring the participation of defenders both in international fora, and on the ground. But equally important are those recommendations to local authorities, national governments, and national human rights institutions that aim to address the range of [violations faced by migrants and by those who defend them](#)'.

In this regard, notes Brooks, many organisations are concerned that governments, including in the EU, are backpedalling on their support for fundamental freedoms, including expression, association and assembly. 'Closing down space for rights defence, and criminalising acts of solidarity, run counter not

only to these States' obligations but to their ultimate goal - the protection and promotion of the rights of people on the move'.

This was perhaps summed up no better than by one defender attending the Council: 'To a normal person, if I distribute food, it's not a crime... [but] the police doesn't see you as someone following the law'.

'Furthermore, if we as Europeans don't have protection against this stigmatisation and treatment, the refugees who are also trying to help have even less'.

Watch ISHR's statement [here](#):

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