

Has the UN Declaration made a difference to the lives of human rights defenders?

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In 1998 the world made a commitment to promote and protect the rights of defenders. Twenty years on, what real difference has the UN Declaration - and subsequent UN resolutions and recommendations - made to the lives of human rights defenders in Colombia and Tunisia? A new report by ISHR and partners provides insights and proposals for change.



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The UN Declaration on human rights defenders provides an important articulation of the right to defend rights and State obligations to ensure the right is upheld. Subsequent resolutions and recommendations from UN human rights mechanisms have provided policy detail and a push for action.

The new report from ISHR, the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) looks at whether commitments made in NY and Geneva have been translated into positive changes in policy and practice on the ground in Colombia and Tunisia.

'Declarations, resolutions and recommendations mean little if rights-holders experience ongoing violations and abuses,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'A primary focus of our research was on whether States had systems in place for ensuring effective implementation.'

Tunisia

In Tunisia, the establishment of a body focused on follow up of recommendations, bringing together people from relevant ministries, has been a key development since the revolution. However, defenders believe it must be strengthened to be impactful.

'Despite good will to implement recommendations, there is still an inexplicable lack of urgency on the part of the Minister in charge of Human Rights,' noted Bassem Trifi, of the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme. 'In addition, there is a lack of involvement of civil society in the formal implementation processes.'

Colombia

In Colombia - a country where attacks against defenders have been relentless over many years - recent positive changes are limited in their impact by the continued lack of presence of State entities in large areas of the country.

In a recent visit to the country, the UN Secretary-General Guterres called on the Colombian government 'to accelerate the active presence of the State across the country.'

'Colombia has passed a number of measures and established mechanisms to counter violence against human rights defenders,' said Ana Maria Rodriguez, of the Colombian Commission of Jurists. 'Unfortunately, the State has not looked at nor adopted an integrated and comprehensive approach to protection. The international community must continue pressing Colombia to address the structural reasons for the risks human rights defenders face.'

The report provides a raft of recommendations for State officials, as well as UN bodies and mechanism in

the country and in Geneva and New York.

'Effective implementation of international commitments requires clear laws, policies and protocols to inform, monitor and regulate the action of State officials, effective coordination amongst State entities and, ultimately, the political will and courage to make that happen,' said Openshaw.

The 2017 [UN General Assembly resolution](#) on human rights defenders focuses on implementation of the Declaration. There will be a General Assembly high-level event this December - under the presidency of Ecuador - where risks, challenges and good practices regarding protection will be discussed.

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