

Leaving ISHR: thanks for 14 years of purpose, inspiration and learning

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Today, almost 14 years after joining “the service” I'm saying farewell to the International Service for Human Rights.

When Corona changed the rhythm of the world in the last 7 weeks - which I spent in semi-lockdown, juggling family life, home schooling and remote work - I was at first sad to be leaving in these circumstances. But in the end, having had plenty of time to reflect on my time at ISHR, I'm leaving with a deep sense of gratitude, inspiration and achievement.



I joined ISHR as an intern in 2006. Fresh off university, with a baby underway while fellow interns were spending their non-existent salaries on drinks by the lake. I was expecting to find a job, but found a purpose, a second family, and inspiration for a lifetime.

With my academic notion of “international human rights”, I knew very little of the reality experienced by the human rights defenders who struggle every day for more just, rights-respecting and equal societies.

Back then, I was yet to be inspired by the courage, dedication, pain, doubt, joy and laughter of the many human rights activists I had the privilege of meeting over the years. I was yet to be appalled by the human rights violations and abuses of governments and unscrupulous companies, and the brazen efforts of some diplomats and governments to hide the truth from the eyes of the world, or somewhat reassured by the equally sustained efforts of others to create space for civil society and push for accountability.

In the last 14 years, there was not one week when I did not draw inspiration from one or more of the many human rights defenders ISHR works with. You are the reason this organisation exists.

Among the stories which marked me the most, and which illustrates both the tremendous solidarity and deep frustration of engaging with international human rights mechanisms, is that of Chinese defender Cao Shunli.

She campaigned for something that most of us take for granted: independent civil society input into her government's human rights report to the UN. As a result of her activism, she was blocked from travelling to Geneva, and - having been denied medical treatment - passed away in detention. Together with many civil society activists, I wanted to observe a moment of silence at the Human Rights Council in her memory. But the Chinese delegation was outraged, and interrupted the meeting for more than an hour.

To this day, Cao Shunli's death remains unaccounted for, and six successive Human Rights Council Presidents have failed to fully resolve this most emblematic case of reprisals. So much for the deep frustration.

However, there's also solidarity. Instead of stifling opposing views, with its heavy handed response even in the HRC, the Chinese delegation attracted massive attention to Cao Shunli and her struggle, and triggered an intense moment of global solidarity. Every member of civil society in the room was standing up - with Cao Shunli, and the human rights movement as a whole. Afterwards, every diplomat in Geneva knew Cao Shunli, and her story contributed significantly to the creation of a stronger UN response to reprisals. And, years later, Chinese human rights activists whom I've never met in my life look at me with a hint of recognition, saying “I know you. You're the guy who stood up to our government, and made the UPR meaningful. We all watched behind the firewall.”

Hers is but one of the many stories I take with me, as I open a new chapter in my professional life. There are many others, happy and sad, of human rights defenders who have extended their trust to ISHR and myself. From Alphonsus to Ziad, I will always be grateful for the chance to reflect together on using the opportunities of international advocacy towards our common human rights struggle.

My gratitude also goes to my colleagues at ISHR. You have been much more than colleagues, and I consider myself very fortunate for having been part of our collective effort.

This unique organisation has enabled me to learn many things about what makes a great organisation, having had the joy of working with colleagues, supervisors, NGO colleagues, supporters and donors who share a common purpose to advance human rights and social justice.

I've seen times when donors trust in the track record, dedication and commitment of a civil society organisation like ISHR, or conversely when they insist on wasteful and narrow-minded administrative processes.

I've seen what good, trustful leadership feels like and how motivating and empowering this can be. I've also seen how not to lead an organisation.

And I've seen how a strong focus on solidarity, well-being and passion can bring teams and an entire organisation to punch well above their weight.

And finally, the last 14 years have been a period of immense personal growth – not always easy and smooth, but I've grown as a father, husband and person. And I thank ISHR for being 100% supportive along the way.

As I look forward to opening a new chapter in my professional life by joining Amnesty Switzerland, I wish ISHR – Phil, the amazing team of staff, its dedicated board and the human rights defenders community it works with and supports – all the best for navigating these challenging times. You have and will continue to profoundly shape the human rights world, and I am proud and grateful to have been a part of the team.

Merci velmol!

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