

New Narratives | We are ready to take the next step!

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Since 2017, we have been building our abilities to use positive and values-based narratives to drive more understanding for how human rights defenders, and the human rights they defend, matter to each and every one of us. We are now ready to take the next step!



Year after year, we at ISHR meet human rights defenders in their own communities or when they visit us in Geneva and New York. Repeatedly they stress the need for recognition of their vital role in our societies. For ISHR, it has long been obvious that public awareness and understanding of defenders as well as political support from decision makers are crucial elements contributing to their protection and to a safe, open and enabling environment for their work at both the national and international levels.

More than two decades ago, we first tried to generate recognition by creating awards and prizes. We also publicised their amazing stories, presenting them as heroes, but soon realised that this was not enough and that the whole narrative - how we talked about defenders, but also the ways we delivered it - had to be changed. We learned that narratives based on shared values can be more effective to change mindsets and drive individuals to be more positive towards others.

Since 2017, we've participated in workshops, connected with researchers, worked with coalitions and tested messages online to understand what resonates best with our supporters. But we still need to dig deeper! [When working to change people's minds, understanding our audiences is crucial](#). We must invest in audience research and make sure that our narrative and tactics to deliver our messages are based on this research. We also need to ensure our narrative is shaped, used, adapted and amplified by the main change agents: human rights defenders themselves!

This process has not been tested in the UN context. Yet, there too, human rights defenders are silenced and stigmatised by some governments. As the United Nations celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2020 and struggles to find solutions to the coronavirus pandemic and climate crises, human rights defenders are key partners. They are essential agents of change who promote dignity, peace and justice in their communities and countries and hold accountable decision-makers. Now more than ever, we need multilateralism, the UN and an international order founded on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Resolutions negotiated by diplomats and adopted at the international level can substantially influence narratives and understandings at the regional and national levels. This fact is paradoxically illustrated by the extent to which States such as China, Russia and Saudi Arabia invest in and seek to control international narratives. The change we are seeking is for State representatives at the UN to listen to human rights defenders and support their presence and work. This can ultimately contribute to protecting defenders in their countries and allow them to have a greater impact at national level. In order to achieve this broad and long-term vision, we need to shift the negative perception that some diplomats have or propagate in relation to defenders. We believe we can achieve that by researching, testing, developing and disseminating a more compelling narrative on human rights defenders to activists and decision makers.

As a start, we need to better understand diplomats and source data that is currently non-existent: (1) What are the characteristics and moral values of our audience (diplomats from UN permanent missions in New York and Geneva)?; (2) What are the predominant narrative(s) and presumptions in use at the UN regarding defenders?; (3) What constitutes a positive counter-narrative compelling enough to displace the current dominant narrative?; (4) Which would be the most effective channels/messengers to disseminate the compelling narratives?

We plan, over a period of 6 months starting from June 2020, to source insights through the review and analysis of relevant UN documents and in-depth interviews and surveys with diplomats. We will then develop a prototype of a winning narrative and a strategy to deliver it that will be tested and validated through focus groups with diplomats and human rights defenders.

How can we make sure this winning narrative is owned, adapted and amplified by human rights defenders who engage and campaign at the UN? This must happen to bring the behavioural change we aim to see in decision makers at the UN level. ISHR plans to work on three lines of action to respond to this challenge.

First, the insights collected during the audience research will be shared with activists through the production and launch of a practical guide. The research tools (surveys and interviews guides, bibliography etc) will also be shared online and remain accessible for other activists, academics and campaigners to adapt to other contexts.

Second, we aim to include the findings and learnings of this project in ISHR's flagship Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme which each year trains up to 20 human rights defenders on how to campaign more effectively at the UN. We also want to promote them on our [ISHR Academy](#), our e-learning website dedicated to strengthening advocacy skills for defenders engaging with the UN (accessed by over 2,000 defenders each year). We would like by the end of 2021 to have a dedicated module on new narratives in practice there.

Finally, as a co-chair of Vuka!'s narratives action team, ISHR has been contributing together with MobLab, the Solidarity Center and Vuka's Secretariat to the development of an online campaign design workshop to support Vuka! allies in responding to negative narratives about civil society. The objective is to capacitate a diverse range of organisations to develop and implement their own narratives campaigns. Over a 6 week period beginning in May 2020, we will pilot this initiative in Uganda. ISHR will replicate this workshop with human rights defenders engaging with the UN in the second half of 2020.

We currently have some core funding from the Ford Foundation that allows us to start the project. Additional support is needed and welcome at this stage! Tools to deepen and maintain our audience research over time, such as social listening platforms and media landscaping apps are expensive. Investing in the development of online learning is costly, but could also deliver a vital return in the form of enhanced understanding, protection and support for defenders!

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