

Together, we achieve positive change: Recent developments in 2020

23.11.2020

As we enter the final weeks of 2020, ISHR's Executive Director Phil Lynch shares an update on developments at ISHR, which have been enabled or supported thanks to the financial and diplomatic support of key donors and partners.



Dear friends and supporters,

I hope that this finds you, colleagues and loved ones well.

As we enter the final weeks of 2020 I wanted to give you some updates on developments at ISHR and thank you for your continuous support.

Innovating and expanding support to human rights defenders

With widespread restrictions on international travel, the coronavirus pandemic has required significant development and innovation in the ways in which ISHR supports national-level human rights defenders. In this regard I'm delighted to report that we recently concluded our first ever fully virtual Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme (HRDAP) – providing training, strategic advice and advocacy support to 19 defenders over a 12 week period. 100% of participants reported that they were satisfied with the programme, with over 70% saying they were 'very satisfied'. In the words of one defender: *'My experience with HRDAP during the pandemic was fruitful and rewarding. I think that besides the excellent content of training it taught me how we have to improvise when the environment is not in our favour. The ISHR team led by example how we get human rights work done during challenging times.'* Applications for [HRDAP 2021 are open now!](#)

In addition to HRDAP, we've recently expanded our online support to defenders with [new modules in additional languages on the ISHR Academy](#). In the hope of additional resources we have a number of new modules and language options in the planning.

Enabling participation by national-level defenders

Restrictions on travel and gatherings have also presented challenges to the vital participation of defenders in meetings and sessions of international and regional human rights bodies. With crises, however, come some opportunities, and ISHR has advocated extensively and successfully to enable national-level defenders to participate in and address bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council and the African Commission on Human & Peoples' Rights virtually.

At the last Human Rights Council session alone, we supported and enabled statements directly to the Council from the [wife of a detained defender in China](#), [defenders working on accountability for crimes against humanity in Venezuela](#), [partners in Guinea](#), and [anti-racism defenders from France and Switzerland](#), among others. We also participated actively in the [first ever virtual review of a country, Mauritius](#), by the African Commission on Human & Peoples' Rights.

I'm really proud of the role that ISHR played, together with the ACLU and others, in successfully pushing for the Human Rights Council to convene an urgent debate on systemic racism and police violence, and the centering of the voices and experiences of victims and their families in that debate. Together with partners, we recently hosted a virtual seminar on anti-Black racism and police violence, which you can [watch on Youtube](#) if you missed it.

Strengthening international accountability for repression of defenders

In October, 15 new members were elected to the UN Human Rights Council in New York. Regrettably, most

regional groups put forward the same number of candidates as vacancies, meaning there were only 16 candidates for 15 seats. Positively, however, [Saudi Arabia was defeated](#) while China, although elected, suffered a massive slump in support of over 20% compared with last time it stood as a candidate. This follows extensive advocacy by ISHR and partners regarding the widespread repression and arbitrary detention of [women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia](#), as well as the need for independent [international investigation and accountability for abuses in China](#), particularly Hong Kong and the Uyghur region.

With membership of the Council comes responsibility, as well as an opportunity and imperative for advocates and supportive States to subject repressive States to heightened scrutiny and accountability. So, although disappointed by China's election, over the next three years ISHR will intensify our support to defenders from the country to enable them to push for greater international accountability, just as we have done over the last few years [in partnership with defenders from Venezuela](#). The UN Secretary-General's [new Guidance Note](#) on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, adopted following sustained advocacy by ISHR and partners, provides an important tool in this regard.

ISHR governance and strategy

Despite the challenges, I've been inspired by the commitment, agility, adaptability and resilience of the ISHR staff team over the year. We've also benefited from the strategic guidance and support of the ISHR Board under the leadership of Indian human rights lawyer and activist Vrinda Grover, who took over as Chair from the fabulous Lucia Nader earlier this year. Lucia remains a Board member.

Our final Board meeting for 2020 was held last week. It was the last meeting for Maryam Al Khawaja and Pierre Avanzo, who have provided invaluable insights and expertise over six years, and the first meeting for new Board member Mona Sabella (Palestinian women human rights defender and Programme Coordinator for Corporate Accountability with ESCR-Net). Among other things, the meeting discussed and adopted a new Strategic Framework for 2021-25 which we're really excited to share soon!

With thanks again for your important and impactful support throughout 2020 and, I hope, beyond!

Phil Lynch
Executive Director
International Service for Human Rights