

Opinion: Ambassador Gerard Corr, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations

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This has been a long standing priority for Ireland, as we firmly believe their important and legitimate work enables civil society to grow and flourish. Human rights defenders are a critical dynamic in helping to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights. The challenge for governments is to realise their potential as facilitators and advocates of empowerment of people and communities.

Ireland has a long tradition of supporting and funding the protection of human rights defenders. We actively promote the EU 2004 Guidelines on human rights defenders and have also developed complementary guidelines for our embassies and diplomatic missions on human rights defenders. These guidelines describe practical steps that diplomatic missions can take to support human rights defenders and to seek to ensure that embassies properly monitor the situation of defenders abroad. Through our overseas development policy, we promote the participation of human rights defenders in developing countries in the planning, implementation and monitoring of their country's national development and poverty reduction strategies.

Governments have a key responsibility for creating the conditions that enable civil society to grow and flourish and ensure the protection of human rights defenders. This includes the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the right to freedom of expression. In addition, the state can create positive conditions through legislation and regulation that support the role of civil society and encourage citizens' participation. However, the introduction of legal, administrative and other restrictions in many countries undermines the work of human rights defenders and restricts the space for civil society. Legislation inconsistent with international norms and the misapplication of legislation and misuse of the legal process has often had the effect of criminalizing the work of human rights defenders.

Ensuring access to resources, including financial resources in order to carry out their important and legitimate work is vital to the work of human rights defenders. Freedom of association is central to this work and legal, administrative and funding restrictions placed on individuals and associations working for the purpose of defending human rights violate that right.

Restrictions on funding in particular undermines the credibility and value of the UN human rights structures and system - treaty-bodies, Special Procedures, Universal Periodic Review, the Human Rights Council itself - which are underpinned by the participation of civil society actors and human rights defenders through their contributions of expertise, awareness-raising, monitoring and reporting, development of new standards, mechanisms, and institutions as well as mobilisation of public support.

In order to face the challenges which lie before us, it is important for Government and human rights defenders to work together. This session presents us with an opportunity to send a strong message through the resolution led by Norway on protecting human rights defenders; that the Council will not stand for the

intimidation, harassment and persecution of human rights defenders or accept undue restriction of their activities through legal, administrative or any other measures.

Ambassador Gerard Corr, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations

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