

[HRC40 | Protect defenders to address inequalities and secure sustainable development](#)

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Addressing the UN Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ISHR Director Phil Lynch today called for the UN to develop an organisation-wide policy to put 'human rights defenders up front'.

The call came in response to a [major speech by the High Commissioner](#) which made clear that respect for the work of human rights defenders is essential to address inequalities and to ensure sustainable development.

In his [statement to the Council](#), Lynch said that ISHR strongly endorses this view:

'The work of women human rights defenders is essential. Essential to combat violence and discrimination, and to promote gender equality and emancipation.'

'The work of migrant rights defenders is essential. Essential to combat racism and xenophobia, and to ensure security and dignity for people seeking protection.'

'The work of economic and social rights defenders is essential. Essential to end poverty, and to ensure that every person has access to housing, healthcare, education and a decent job.'

'The work of environmental defenders is essential. Essential to ensure we can all breathe clean air, drink safe water and rise to the challenge of addressing climate change.'

ISHR went on to say that while these truths should be uncontested and self-evident, in reality they are not:

'Migrant rights defenders are criminalised in Europe and have been held in cruel and oppressive offshore detention centres by Australia.'

'Housing rights defenders have been subject to attacks and reprisals, including arbitrary evictions and home demolitions in Egypt.'

'And environmental defenders continue to be murdered in the Philippines and Brazil.'

The statement drew particular attention to the situation of women human rights defenders who have been arbitrarily detained and tortured in Saudi Arabia and highlighted the strong leadership shown by Iceland in delivering the first ever joint statement condemning Saudi Arabia at the Human Rights Council.

'We welcome the joint statement led by Iceland and regret that States such as Switzerland prioritised political expediency and profit over their purported commitment to human rights defenders and an effective Human'

Rights Council in failing to join,' Lynch told the Council.

ISHR concluded by urging the High Commissioner, without fear or favour, to expose the hypocrisy of States like China that espouse a commitment to sustainable development and then restrict and attack the defenders whose work is essential to ensuring that no-one is left behind.

'Supporting and protecting defenders must be a paramount priority for your Office and for all UN programmes and agencies, including through the development of a UN-wide policy. If we are to truly address inequalities and achieve sustainable development, then States and the UN alike must start by putting 'Human rights defenders up front', Lynch said.

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UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré

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