

[COVID-19 | Human rights defenders are essential workers](#)

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For the UN chief, in the era of Covid-19 one message is clear: human rights are critical to response and recovery; and this he argues in a new briefing paper aimed at inspiring new and better practices. The Secretary General could have gone further, however, in foregrounding the critical role of human rights defenders in shaping human rights solutions.



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In '[Covid-19 and Human Rights, We are all in this Together](#)' the UN Secretary General delivers six messages as to why human rights are central to responding to Covid-19 and how the relevance of key human rights principles has been made all the clearer during the pandemic.

'The Secretary General has drilled down to essential arguments for why human rights provide a means to navigate a crisis, and provide a foundation for fairer and more resilient societies in the future,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw.

'He points to how during a crisis such as Covid-19 it becomes all the more evident how discrimination, for example, is wrong and counterproductive when everyone's lives are shown to be interconnected,' she added.

One of Guterres' key messages relates to the importance of inclusion and participation in keeping people informed and engaged. Civil society organisations, he argues, contribute to disseminating information and advice, as well as to providing front-line responses, and - critically - seeking to scrutinize the effectiveness of government actions. Despite the value of this manifold contribution, however, some States are using the crisis opportunistically to crack down on activists, notes Guterres, a practice ISHR has heard confirmed by partners.

'We've heard of defenders detained for reporting on Covid-19, and one arrested on the basis of there being a 'Covid19 case' in the house,' noted Openshaw. 'When defenders are critical, too frequently they're silenced.'

Despite important references to the work of civil society and risks they face, Openshaw argues that the Secretary General could have gone further in his report in foregrounding the importance of human rights defenders, including during Covid-19.

'If human rights are central to dealing with this crisis - as the Secretary General so aptly says - then human rights defenders are essential workers,' noted Openshaw. 'Even as measures are taken to deal with the pandemic, attention must be given to enabling defenders' work.'

The Secretary General's human rights briefing is part of a [series of policy briefs](#) produced in response to

Covid-19, and is in line with his recent '[Call to Action for human rights](#)' taking a deeper dive into how a human rights lens can and should guide UN and State action.

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