

# SAFEGUARDING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE AND PARTICIPATION AT THE UN AND BEYOND



*In the lead up to Human Rights Council elections, ISHR worked with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to highlight the requirement of Council member States to uphold the highest human rights standards and fully cooperate with the body.*

*Jean-Marc Ferré, UN Photo.*

# IMPACT 2014

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- Coordinated NGO briefings with the UN Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Human Rights Council secretariat
- Provided accreditation and advocacy support to human rights defenders and victims of violations to address the Human Rights Council, ensuring their voices were heard by diplomats and decision-makers
- Partnered with national civil society organisations to monitor and publish briefing papers on civil society space in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Honduras, Iran, Italy, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Maldives, Laos, Spain, Turkey, and the United States
- Worked with Amnesty International to coordinate civil society engagement with the UN treaty body strengthening process, leading to an increase in resources and meeting time for these expert bodies
- Played a vital NGO coordination and leadership role in negotiation of UN resolutions on protection of civil society space, strengthening of national human rights institutions and the situation of human rights defenders
- Significantly influenced reports and recommendations of numerous States, special rapporteurs and treaty bodies in relation to protection of civil society space. Among them was a landmark report by Maina Kiai which endorsed ISHR's position that the UN and its member States have a legal obligation to strengthen civil society participation, radically overhaul the system for NGO accreditation, and combat reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN
- Worked jointly with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to shine the international media spotlight on the situation of human rights defenders in States standing for election to the Human Rights Council
- Provided strategic and technical assistance to NGOs seeking UN accreditation, leading to an increase in the number of human rights NGOs with access to the UN

**The right, and indeed the responsibility, of non-governmental organisations to critique governments, expose and pursue accountability for human rights violations, and advocate for changes in law, policy and practice should be uncontroversial. Regrettably, however, it is a right that is increasingly contested. This is the case both at the international level, where States such as China and Egypt have repeatedly interrupted and sought to silence ISHR and others at the Human Rights Council, and at the national level, where ISHR's partner organisations in those countries have faced worsening legal restrictions and physical attacks.**

In 2014, ISHR again played a leadership and coordination role in advocating for, supporting and safeguarding civil society space and participation. Our work ranged from supporting victims to testify on the international stage, to working with national partners to monitor and advocate on laws and policies – from defamation laws to tax statutes – which are increasingly used to restrict civil society space and stifle dissent. We also worked intensively and successfully to advise and assist NGOs such as ARC International to obtain UN consultative status in their own right, and to develop an ambitious but imperative reform agenda for civil society participation within international institutions.

Looking ahead, ISHR will continue to play a vital leadership and coordination role in supporting civil society participation at the UN and the African Commission, while also expanding our advocacy and law reform work on an enabling environment at the national level.



“As an advocacy organisation, we need ECOSOC accreditation to enable us to be meaningfully engaged in the UN platform, especially during Commissions under ECOSOC and General Assembly sessions to advance the status of youth and advocate for the realisation of sexual and reproductive rights.”

**Jean Ketterling**

*Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights*



“The importance of protecting human rights defenders and civil society space cannot be overstated, as the full enjoyment of human rights cannot be achieved unless the right to defend those rights is protected and respected. Indeed, the international human rights system can only succeed when the fruits of our discussions here in the Council and of course the recommendations of the UPR, Special Procedures and international Treaty Bodies are translated into law and practice.”

**Ambassador**

**Patricia O'Brien**

*Irish Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva*



*Ambassador Steffen Kongstad, Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN. ISHR has worked closely with Norway in New York and Geneva to secure the passage of key resolutions on the protection of human rights defenders and civil society space.*

# VISION 2015

- Publish an authoritative guide for human rights defenders on the UN Committee on NGOs, the body through which all NGO applications for UN consultative status must pass
- Advise and assist NGOs to obtain this consultative status, opening the UN's doors wider to human rights defenders and victims
- Work closely with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and assembly to implement recommendations from his landmark report on civil society participation in international bodies such as the World Bank and the UN
- Continue to work closely with the Human Rights Council President, NGOs such as FIDH and CIVICUS, and delegations from States such as Botswana, Chile, Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Tunisia and the United States to promote and safeguard civil society space and participation at the UN
- Monitor and advocate in relation to national laws and policies to promote a safe and enabling environment for civil society organisations, including by promoting the implementation of recommendations from our major report on good practices in the legal protection of civil society space



*In March 2014, ISHR, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists met with the UN Secretary-General to discuss the protection of human rights defenders, the prevention of reprisals, and accountability for gross violations in Syria and North Korea.*



*Throughout 2014, the US played a vital role assisting to secure UN consultative status for NGOs in New York and speaking up to defeat efforts to silence NGOs through repeated 'points of order' at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.*

*United States Mission Geneva, Flickr Creative Commons*



*UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay was bid farewell at a civil society reception in July 2014, organised by ISHR with the support of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Conectas, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, FORUM-ASIA, FIDH, and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.*