

With the environment for civil society deteriorating in many countries across the world, it has become vital that human rights defenders develop new networks and alliances to safeguard and support their work. Throughout 2018, ISHR worked to make the recognition and protection of defenders a priority for the UN, and an imperative for multinational business and associations.

» SNAPSHOT

World Economic Forum: Mounting human rights violations a major global risk

Each year, the World Economic Forum publishes an influential report on major global risks, informing the thinking, strategy and planning of heads of government and business. For the last three years, ISHR has been invited to contribute its expertise to this report. The 2019 Report, released in advance of Davos in January, includes mounting human rights violations and a diminution in respect for the international rule of law, together with closing civil society space at the national level, as among the most significant strategic threats and challenges facing the world. Vibrant civil society at the national level, supported by relevant and effective multilateral bodies at the international level, are among the essential ingredients for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future for all. ●



» IN FOCUS

Shared space under pressure: Increasing business support for civic freedoms and human rights defenders

In September 2018, ISHR and the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre released an important report, *Shared Space under Pressure*.

The report documents the global decline in civic freedoms and worsening restrictions and attacks on human rights defenders.

More hopefully, it also documents an increase in corporate activism for civic freedoms, and provides concrete guidance to companies as to the steps they can and should take to protect and support defenders.

The report sets out why declining civic freedoms should be of grave concern to business and articulates three key imperatives for business to play an active role, both individually and collectively, in supporting human rights defenders and a safe and enabling environment for their work.

The first imperative is the economic or business case imperative.

Put simply, all the evidence shows that businesses operate more profitably and sustainably in environments characterised by higher levels of equality, including both gender equality and income equality, and higher levels of respect for the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, access to information, public participation and due process.

These enabling rights are essential to creativity, innovation, productivity, economic participation and



“ The time is now for responsible business to act to defend civic freedoms and protect human rights defenders. This is not just the expectation of human rights defenders, and a moral and legal imperative, but, as the guidance shows, is also in companies’ best interests.

Michael Ineichen,
ISHR Programme Director

the fulfilment of human potential, all of which benefit business.

Coincidentally, these rights are also essential to human rights defenders, the work of whom is vital to ensure that we can all live with freedom and dignity, in communities that are fair, just and sustainable.

The second reason for business to be concerned and to act is the normative imperative. More than an imperative, it is a duty.

Building on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, norms and frameworks at the company, national, regional and international levels increasingly recognise that business associations and enterprises have more than a duty to do no harm and not interfere in the work of defenders. They have a responsibility to respect and protect that work.

There are some positive developments in this regard.

At an international level, for example, with the assistance of ISHR, FIFA has adopted a new protection policy and established a complaints mechanism for human rights defenders and journalists.

At the regional level, the recently adopted Escazú Agreement in Latin America obliges States to take all necessary legislative and other steps to recognise, protect and promote the work of environmental human rights defenders, including in the context of business operations and major development projects.

At the national level, a small but growing number of States have enacted National Action Plans which include

specific provisions on human rights defenders.

Meanwhile, Canada has set the standard in its diplomatic guidelines on defenders by linking support for Canadian companies abroad with their respect for defenders in the host country.

At the business level, companies like adidas have adopted corporate human rights defender policies, although the recently released Corporate Human Rights Benchmark shows that many more companies need to step up in this regard.

The third reason for business to support human rights defenders is the moral imperative.

Put simply, businesses should support defenders because it’s the right thing to do.

This recognition is at the core of the establishment of the Business Network for Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders.

Facilitated by ISHR, together with the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and the B-Team, the Network is a group of over 20 companies committed to increased private sector support for the protection of civic freedoms and human rights defenders.

Our vision is that business and civil society thrive when working together with governments to create positive and enabling operating environments characterised by good governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights, equality and diversity. ●



Business and human rights defenders: Landmark joint commitment to support defenders and the rule of law


10 December 2018 marked the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Historically, it also marked the first occasion on which a group of multinational companies, working across sectors, have come together to issue a joint statement and make a joint commitment to support and protect those who make the promise of the Declaration a reality – human rights defenders.

‘The protection of civic freedoms and respect for the rule of law are vitally important for both civil society and business,’ the statement says. ‘Free, open societies enable well-functioning markets, stable financial systems and good governance. In contrast, efforts to limit civil society and civic freedoms undermine open societies, foster corruption, limit competition, critical thought and innovation.’

Crucially, the statement recognises that business enterprises, including investors, have not only an interest but also ‘a duty to respect human rights and human rights defenders’ and, in so doing ‘help respond to the challenges of our time, including rising inequality, xenophobia, discrimination, climate change, and polarisation.’

Companies signing the statement – which range across the mining, apparel, banking, finance, jewellery and footwear sectors – commit to, among other things:

- respect and not interfere with the work of civil society and human rights defenders; and
- positively contribute to situations where civic freedoms and human rights defenders are under threat.

The statement was developed through the Business Network for Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders, which is facilitated by ISHR, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and the B-Team. 

“ In situations where human rights defenders speak out against a particular project and are persecuted, responsible companies face a choice. Stay silent, which may be perceived as being complicit in or colluding with the abuse or victimisation of defenders, or reject actions taken against those individuals or groups and clearly signal support for their legitimate right to freely express their concerns.

Nicky Black, Director of Environmental Stewardship and Social Progress, International Council on Mining and Metals