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Local Governments protecting Human Rights Defenders

The international human rights obligations of a State extend to all levels of government — national, regional, and local — and to any exercise of governmental authority. Many cities and local governments around the World have taken meaningful initiatives for protecting and promoting human rights. These practices are examples for local, regional and city officials and decision-makers for establishing local laws and policies that are in line with State obligations, promoting equality, participation, sound governance, building trust with inhabitants and addressing local and global challenges in a sustainable way.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk

In 2021 alone, 358 human rights defenders (HRDs) were killed in 35 countries, including environmental and women human rights defenders. The severity and scale of human rights violations against defenders calls for the attention of and action from multiple actors, including international organizations, private entities, and governments.

HRDs are all persons, who individually or in association with others, act peacefully to promote or protect human rights. HRDs include individuals and members of groups and associations that can act locally, nationally and/or internationally.

Human rights defenders are active in every part of the world, trying to promote and protect human rights of all often in difficult situations. In many countries, they have been the target of killings, torture, beatings, arbitrary arrest and detention, threats to them and their family, harassment, and defamation, as well as restrictions on their freedoms of movement, expression, association, and assembly. HRDs have also been the victims of false accusations and unfair trials and convictions. The world has witnessed a shrinking of civic space and an increase in attacks on human rights. Human rights defenders have been subject to threats, intimidation, and violence online and offline.

“... all members of the international community shall fulfill, jointly and separately, their solemn obligation to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction of any kind...”

Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

Cities acting to protect human rights defenders

Many cities and local governments have been active in ensuring the safety of HRDs through temporary relocation inside their own country or in another country. The goal of these programs is to shield HRDs against threats and harassments allowing for their physical and psychological recovery and continuing their work in a safe environment.

Temporary relocation can be used as a pre-emptive or an emergency measure but should be used as a last resort when the threats to life and physical integrity is too high. It also allows HRDs to continue their critical work in a safe environment, while enhancing their skills and competency to face their return home. Therefore, these programs not only provide accommodation and livelihood, but also different kinds of support, including training courses in security, advocacy, and self-care, most of the time delivered by civil society organizations and academia. Other types of support may include personal accompaniment, psychological support, and opportunities for expanding their network.

While cities and local governments' engagement in this field has a moral dimension, it is also in direct compliance with international human rights norms and the provisions of the “Declaration on Human Rights Defenders”. Temporary relocations can complement other initiatives for protecting HRDs and ultimately contributing to strengthening civic space globally.



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UTRECHT, A “SHELTER CITY”

The City of Utrecht (the Netherlands) has adopted a wide range of policies that promote and protect human rights, including offering temporary relocation to HRDs at risk. In 2016, the municipality of Utrecht established a “Shelter City” program in collaboration with civil society organizations, the National Human Rights institution, and academia. Since then, the city hosts 3 human rights defenders every year. During their stay in Utrecht, human rights defenders are offered physical and physiological support from trained professionals to strengthen their work.

KRAKOW: A WELCOMING CITY FOR ARTISTS AND WRITERS AT RISK

Krakow (Poland) has welcomed several artists and writers at risk since 2014. It was the first city in Central and Eastern Europe to join the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), an independent organization of cities and regions offering relocation possibilities to writers and artists at risk and aiming at advancing freedom of expression, defending democratic values and promoting international solidarity. Krakow provides accommodation and a safe place for continued creative and literary activity at Villa Decius, a historic landmark in the city.

Creating programs to protect HRDs at local level and benefitting from them

Relocation assistance is one of the useful initiatives that can be undertaken to protect human rights defenders. As a relevant stakeholder, local governments should support the development of holistic protection projects, including relocation initiatives that allow for relocation both inside and outside countries.

Cities, local and regional governments should initiate and support initiatives for sheltering human rights defenders as a concrete way of protecting and promoting human rights nationally and internationally.

At the same time, cities can benefit from establishing a relocation program for HRDs by

- Gaining international visibility and recognition for their initiative action, while increasing cooperation, knowledge sharing and networking opportunities.
- These initiatives are an opportunity for improving and establishing sustainable human rights mechanisms within local governments which is crucial for good governance and meeting the inhabitants' expectations.
- The activities that can be associated with relocation initiatives can lead to processes of awareness on human rights within the population and lead to a better understanding of how situations elsewhere and renewed sense of humanity. The work and knowledge of HRD can make important contributions to shaping the human rights landscapes in the community as well.



Elements to consider for establishing a HRDs hosting program

Offering temporary and safe relocation is one of the ways in which HRDs can be meaningfully supported by local governments and cities. While there may be some operational questions for local authorities, many organizations and municipalities can share their experience and support the development of a temporary relocation program.

Establishing a “shelter” programme for HRDs necessitates a number of elements:

1

A strong and sustainable engagement of local government at the highest level

Welcoming HRDs needs a clear commitment to establishing a program that is logistically and financially sustainable. While some municipalities are vocal about these programs, others can prefer a more discreet approach.

In the Netherlands, 12 cities receive HRDs throughout the year through the “Shelter City” initiative. The decisions to become a shelter city in these cities were initiated at municipal councils.

2

A safe environment and enabling environment

Welcoming a HRD is about providing a safe and friendly environment conducive to physical and psychological rest after having faced difficult situations. An open and inclusive civic space that enables inhabitants to be active in the community in a safe environment, is fundamental. Depending on the cases, various actions can reassure the HRDs’ safety and wellbeing including security checks, counselling, and keeping the links between HRDs and their families.

3

Adequate resources

Hosting HRDs requires sufficient and adequate resources, such as professional support staff, accommodation, and funds for travel and livelihood. Nevertheless, some of those can be fulfilled in kind. Accommodation is usually provided by local governments. Other costs can be covered from various sources, including local, national, international and donors funding. There are also emergency funds for HRDs which can be requested for covering core expenses. Sustained funding is necessary to cover operational and administrative costs made by the implementing organization.

Lacking financial resources and capacity at local governments does not pre-empt establishing a program. A wide range of organizations can help local governments to think and initiate funding options by different means.

In many places, the decision to initiate a temporary relocation program is decided and supported by local authorities but the implementation is done by partners. A crucial aspect of the relocation program’s success is to establish partnerships with civil society organizations, government agencies and international organizations. Coordination among local authorities and partners is key for an effective program and finding operational and financial solutions.

4

Establishing partnerships

The majority of programmes to host HRDs are a collaborative effort between local authorities and civil society organizations. Yet other entities are key including national authorities in particular the ministry of foreign affairs, national human rights institutions, local ombudspersons, foreign representations, and academia.

Local governments will need to work closely with the national administration and ministries to deal with important logistical issues such as expediting visa processes and easing travel requirements.

A number of organizations can support local governments in developing these programs, including the following networks:

FORUM-ASIA's Human Rights Defenders Programme

FORUM-ASIA is the largest network of human rights organizations in Asia, with 85 member organizations across 23 countries. The HRD Programme aims at protecting HRDs in Asia and promoting an effective environment for conducting their work. It also pursues to provide HRDs at risk of practical safeguard guidelines to reduce both actual and perceived threats stemming from their work and activities.

International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN)

Since 2006, more than 70 cities worldwide have joined ICORN, giving shelter to no less than 200 writers, artists, and journalists. ICORN protects and promotes an increasingly wide range of creatives and human rights defenders, enabling them to continue to express themselves freely in a place where they are safe, but not silent.

Protect Defenders

ProtectDefenders.eu is the European Union Human Rights Defenders mechanism, led by a Consortium of 12 NGOs active in the field of Human Rights. It operates a permanent response mechanism to provide urgent assistance and practical support to Human Rights Defenders in danger, their families, and their work. It also supports the creation of shelters for HRDs at risk and coordinates an exchange platform for stakeholders working on temporary relocation for Human Rights Defenders (EUTRP), among various other tasks.

Shelter Cities

The Shelter City initiative was founded in 2012 by Justice & Peace Netherlands as a concrete and accessible way to support human rights defenders at risk. The different hosts of Shelter City offer HRDs at risk a safe and inspiring space where they re-energize, receive tailor-made support and engage with allies to reinforce their local actions for change. Currently, there are a total of 21 local Shelter Cities around the globe, including various cities in the Netherlands; San Jose, Costa Rica; Cotonou, Benin; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; York, UK and Tbilisi, Georgia. Altogether, they have supported over 400 human rights defenders from all over the world..

The Ubuntu Hub Cities

The Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative is a city-based relocation initiative, coordinated by AfricanDefenders, for human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk across Africa. The initiative enables HRDs who have been subject to threats, violence, and extreme pressure as a consequence of their human rights work to temporarily relocate. Relocation allows them to be safe and to take a break from their highly stressful and dangerous environment. The initiative has supported over 120 human rights defenders in cities across Africa: Tunis, Abidjan, Accra, Kampala, Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. In August 2022, Praia in Cape Verde also became an Ubuntu Hub City to host Lusophone HRDs at risk from the continent.



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