

“Prevention is better than cure”, 26 Nov 2019 – UN Forum on Business & Human Rights 2019. Kl. 15.00.

Statement from State Secretary, Marianne Hagen.

Let me start out by thanking the organizers for the important work you do for human rights defenders across the world, and for the positive cooperation and dialogue between us. Your work is important, and it makes a difference.

For instance, you have supported our work with the latest UN resolution on human rights defenders. After leading long negotiations, we were very happy that the resolution was adopted by consensus in the General Assembly’s 3rd committee last week, with a record high number of co-sponsors.

This happened at a time when human rights are under increasing pressure. Therefore, I am very happy that a united UN calls for strengthened protection of human rights defenders.

In 2018 – as we marked the 20th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders – we also marked the highest number of killings of human rights defenders so far recorded. On average, more than one person a day lost their life for their peaceful human rights work.

As we know from reports by Front Line Defenders and others, a majority of those killed (77%) were defending land, environmental or indigenous peoples’ rights.

Resolution on environmental human rights defenders

Against this backdrop, Norway presented a draft resolution focusing on environmental human rights defenders to the Human Rights Council earlier this year.

The fact that the resolution was passed by consensus, should allow us all – state and non-state actors – to get involved in its implementation with confidence.

The resolution clearly recognizes the importance and legitimate role of human rights defenders in raising awareness of human rights risks in development projects and business operations.

This includes their right to criticise or dissent against government policy or business activity.

Beyond tolerating criticism, States have a positive duty, as part of their human rights obligations, to safeguard space for public dialogue and participation.

While all human rights are equal, indivisible and inalienable, the resolution puts particular emphasis on the importance of protecting human rights defenders who exercise their rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Norwegian efforts to protect HRDs:

The protection of environmental human rights defenders is a key priority in Norwegian climate and foreign policy.

As part of Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative, we support measures to protect environmental human rights defenders on the ground across the tropical forest in countries we are involved.

We expect the governments, private companies and financial institutions we work with to follow the Guiding Principles and publicly recognize environmental human rights defenders and protect their rights, including through grievance and redress mechanisms.

Generally, the Foreign Service is actively promoting responsible business conduct and the Guiding Principles as a basis for sustainable and inclusive economic growth worldwide.

Another important institution I would like to mention is the National Contact Points, the NCPs. All countries adhering to the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises are obliged to establish NPCs.

In addition to promote and train business on due diligence, the NCPs shall handle complaints on alleged failure to comply with the OECD guidelines. Complainants can be human rights defenders, organisations or other interested parties.

This is an effective low-threshold complaint mechanism where the contact points will offer good offices and mediation between parties on issues related to business and human rights.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also supported a new, user-friendly digital tool to guide businesses through gender responsive human rights due diligence. A pilot, called “SheDil”, will provide practical advice on what to look for in the different steps of a gender responsive Human Rights Due Diligence in different industries.

This tool can help the private sector to work strategically when applying a gender perspective in their business conduct.

The Government expects Norwegian companies and financial institutions to comply with the Guiding Principles.

One interesting case in this regard is Norway’s national wealth fund. It works independently of the Norwegian government and has the opportunity to block investments in companies based on environmental or other ethical concerns.

For instance, just a few weeks ago, the Norwegian wealth fund blacklisted shares from a security company due to incidents of grave human rights concerns and systematically ill-treatment of migrant labour.

The Norwegian wealth fund’s blacklisting illustrates how financial institutions can contribute to the same agenda as human rights defenders are striving for.

Ensuring better protection of human rights defenders is one of the main priorities in Norway’s human rights work. We give high importance to the continued development of standards and norms in the UN, through the resolutions that we facilitate.

More than 80 countries signed up as co-sponsors to the Norwegian-led resolution on human rights defenders. As with the resolution on environmental human rights defenders, the role of non-state actors, including businesses, is clearly recognized.

I want to encourage you to use these resolutions actively in your advocacy work, and to hold us as governments accountable for their follow-up.

This is also crucial for our common commitment to Agenda 2030, and for the development of just and peaceful societies in which we all can prosper and thrive.