

Human rights defenders:

**We need them
more than ever!**



States worldwide must protect Human Rights Defenders in the current COVID-19 crisis

At a time when some of our human rights have been restricted in order to implement public health measures, **human rights defenders** are more crucial than ever in our struggle to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that no one is left behind.

Human rights defenders are all those individuals who uphold the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments and strive for those rights to be implemented and expanded. Their role is recognized in the [Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), adopted by consensus by states back in 1998. The Declaration acknowledges that everyone's right to defend human rights is fundamental if our human rights are to be respected and protected.

Crisis like this one put these commitments to the test. It is paramount that states around the world recommit to protect and recognize those who individually or collectively take action to protect our human rights, including in the context of the pandemic. In particular, states must ensure that all measures restricting the right to defend human rights, including those imposing limitations on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, are strictly necessary and proportionate for the protection of public health.

The authorities must not use restrictions imposed during the pandemic to suppress relevant information uncomfortable for the government or use the situation as a pretext to crack down critics and human rights defenders. States must recognise that human rights defence is an essential activity during emergency periods and ensure that **human rights defenders** can exercise their work free from reprisals, intimidation or threats, so that together we can all face up to this crisis.

Defending human rights in a pandemic



Human rights defenders, including those working in the field of research, health and social care, journalism and other areas, have been key in informing the public about the challenges posed by COVID-19 at all stages of the crisis. Their work is essential in ensuring states provide accessible and reliable information in a fair and transparent manner and can raise the alarm when measures are damaging or inadequate. Governments must ensure that those carrying out this role can continue to do so. They must respond by being accountable and open to scrutiny as well as by providing evidence-based and accurate information as the pandemic unfolds.

Other activists, including women and LGBTI **human rights defenders**, trade unionists, environmental and land defenders, refugees and migrants' rights defenders and indigenous rights defenders, are also helping the public understand the impact and implications of COVID-19 in their communities and how it affects different sectors of society, particularly the most marginalized and at risk.

Human rights defenders play a key role in watching that the measures taken by authorities do not infringe unduly on human rights - for example on the right to freedom of expression, on the right to privacy, or on the rights to health, housing and to an adequate standard of living - and speak out when this happens.

Human rights defenders raise the alarm and demand action when marginalized groups or individuals are being disproportionately affected or forgotten by the new measures, that is those historically discriminated against: people in the informal economy, people at risk of domestic violence, refugees and migrants, or people in detention, for example.

Human right defenders keep a check on the misuse of power of non-state actors. For example, they raise their voice against abuses by businesses and corporations, including when they fail to uphold labour and human rights standards in their responses to the pandemic, or when they shift the economic impact on workers, or when they fail to provide adequate protection from contagion for workers at risk.

Health and social care workers are at the frontline of this pandemic, continuing to deliver services despite the personal risks to them and their families, including contracting COVID-19 while doing their jobs, working long hours, enduring psychological distress and fatigue. At the same time, thousands of individuals are volunteering to help those in need and provide crucial services. Many others, such as those involved in cleaning, sanitation and domestic work, in running transport systems, in the production of food, and other key workers, are also providing critical services, sometimes without adequate protection for themselves. All these individuals are not only doing their jobs, they are also protecting everybody's right to health despite serious challenges and risks. They should be given with urgency adequate and quality tools, protection measures and any other support they need to carry out their work in safety.

Without all the individuals and collectives who defend our human rights worldwide, it would be almost impossible to tackle COVID-19 and save as many lives and livelihoods as possible. It is



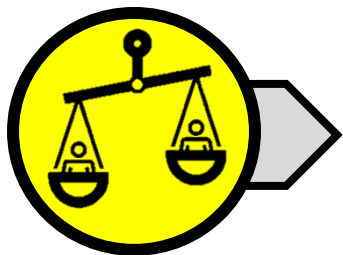
therefore not just states' obligation, but it is in the interest of states and society at large to recognise, protect and enable **human rights defenders** to carry out their crucial work so that the harshest impact of the crisis can be mitigated and ensure that no one is left behind.

Recommendations



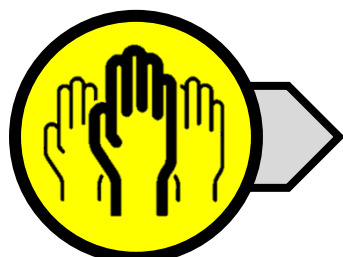
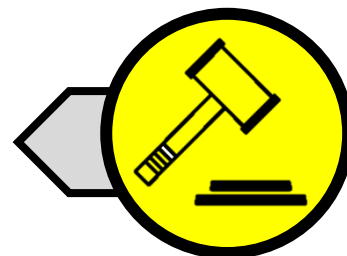
In the weeks since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have seen a flourishing of solidarity and empathy towards people in need and those most at risk, including a revival of community initiatives and self-help groups. It is time for those in power to recognise and protect **human rights defenders**, who are precisely those leading the way in showing how to include all sectors of society in the effort against the pandemic. **Human rights defenders** have long led the way in delivering justice, equality and rights for all without discrimination, with their empathy, activism, passion and hope. They must be protected!

Authorities worldwide must send a clear, unequivocal message in all their communications stating that:



Human rights defenders are key allies to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore will be recognised and protected without discrimination at all times

Physical or verbal attacks against **human rights defenders** will not be tolerated and, where applicable, those responsible will be brought to justice in fair trials



Human rights defenders are key to overcoming the pandemic in a way that is inclusive and respectful of human rights, and therefore need to be included in any collective actions to tackle it

Those **human rights defenders** on the frontline of the pandemic must be given the necessary information, the tools and the protective equipment they need to carry out their human rights activities in safety

