

29 September 2016



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE

WORKING SESSION 5. FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

As delivered by Counsellor Hilde Austad,
Warsaw, 21 September 2016

Mr Moderator,

It is primarily the duty of states to implement their human rights obligations. However, human rights defenders play a key role in documenting and calling attention to situations where states do not fulfil this duty and human rights violations are committed. Human rights defenders are people who stand up for other peoples' rights.

We see many of them in this room.

The international community has in UN resolutions expressed deep concern for the difficult situation of defenders as they face threats, attacks and acts of intimidation, with severe, negative impacts on their work and safety. This is unacceptable under any circumstances. Intimidation, harassment, threats and violence against human rights defenders, or their families, must never be condoned.

Governments do not have to agree with human rights defenders, but they must allow them to speak, and allow for an open debate in our societies.

Freedoms of expression and association are essential for the promotion and protection of economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights. Creating a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders should therefore be a fundamental objective of any country.

Norway is deeply concerned that in several participating States we see a large gap between the protection provided by law and the daily experience of human rights defenders. There has been a growing trend in recent years to justify restrictive measures against human rights defenders as legal counter-terrorism measures.

Human rights activists may also be under attack from non-state actors, including armed groups, who disagree with their opinions. It is the responsibility of states to protect peaceful assemblies and associations. However, impunity for such attacks is a problem in many countries. The inability or unwillingness to investigate attacks on human rights defenders may be seen as acceptance of such attacks by the authorities.

Supporting human rights defenders is a priority for Norway. My government has issued guidelines for the Foreign Ministry and the embassies' work with this aim. This can include

contact and exchange of information with human rights defenders, contacts with host governments, trial observation and economic support for human rights organisations.

We welcome ODIHR's work on these issues, including the guidelines on freedom of association.

Supporting human rights defenders is an investment in the rule of law and democracy. As governments, we must take effective and practical steps to ensure their protection. This does not imply the creation of new rights or privileges for human rights defenders, but allowing them to exercise the rights that apply to all.

Thank you, Mr Moderator