

Declaration on Human Rights Defenders
The Declaration on human rights defenders in different languages



General Assembly Resolution A/RES/53/144 adopting the Declaration on human rights defenders

Elaboration of the Declaration on human rights defenders began in 1984 and ended with the adoption of the text by the General Assembly in 1998, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A collective effort by a number of human rights non-governmental organizations and some State delegations helped to ensure that the final result was a strong, very useful and pragmatic text. Perhaps most importantly, the Declaration is addressed not just to States and to human rights defenders, but to everyone. It tells us that we all have a role to fulfil as human rights defenders and emphasizes that there is a global human rights movement that involves us all. The Declaration's full name is the "Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" – with this longer title is frequently abbreviated to "The Declaration on human rights defenders".

1. Legal character

The Declaration is not, in itself, a legally binding instrument. However, it contains a series of principles and rights that are based on human rights standards enshrined in other international instruments that are legally binding – such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Moreover, the Declaration was adopted by consensus by the General Assembly and therefore represents a very strong commitment by States to its implementation. States are increasingly considering adopting the Declaration as binding national legislation.

2. The Declaration's provisions

The Declaration provides for the support and protection of human rights defenders in the context of their work. It does not create new rights but instead articulates existing rights in a

way that makes it easier to apply them to the practical role and situation of human rights defenders. It gives attention, for example, to access to funding by organizations of human rights defenders and to the gathering and exchange of information on human rights standards and their violation. The Declaration outlines some specific duties of States and the responsibilities of everyone with regard to defending human rights, in addition to explaining its relationship with national law. Most of the Declaration's provisions are summarized in the following paragraphs. [1] It is important to reiterate that human rights defenders have an obligation under the Declaration to conduct peaceful activities.

(a) Rights and protections accorded to human rights defenders

Articles 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 13 of the Declaration provide specific protections to human rights defenders, including the rights:

- To seek the protection and realization of human rights at the national and international levels;
- To conduct human rights work individually and in association with others;
- To form associations and non-governmental organizations;
- To meet or assemble peacefully;
- To seek, obtain, receive and hold information relating to human rights;
- To develop and discuss new human rights ideas and principles and to advocate their acceptance;
- To submit to governmental bodies and agencies and organizations concerned with public affairs criticism and proposals for improving their functioning and to draw attention to any aspect of their work that may impede the realization of human rights;
- To make complaints about official policies and acts relating to human rights and to have such complaints reviewed;
- To offer and provide professionally qualified legal assistance or other advice and assistance in defence of human rights;
- To attend public hearings, proceedings and trials in order to assess their compliance with national law and international human rights obligations;
- To unhindered access to and communication with non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations;
- To benefit from an effective remedy;
- To the lawful exercise of the occupation or profession of human rights defender;
- To effective protection under national law in reacting against or opposing, through peaceful means, acts or omissions attributable to the State that result in violations of human rights;
- To solicit, receive and utilize resources for the purpose of protecting human rights (including the receipt of funds from abroad).

(b) The duties of States

States have a responsibility to implement and respect all the provisions of the Declaration. However, articles 2, 9, 12, 14 and 15 make particular reference to the role of States and indicate that each State has a responsibility and duty:

To protect, promote and implement all human rights;

To ensure that all persons under its jurisdiction are able to enjoy all social, economic, political and other rights and freedoms in practice;

To adopt such legislative, administrative and other steps as may be necessary to ensure effective implementation of rights and freedoms;

To provide an effective remedy for persons who claim to have been victims of a human rights violation;

To conduct prompt and impartial investigations of alleged violations of human rights;

To take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration;

To promote public understanding of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights;

To ensure and support the creation and development of independent national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights, such as ombudsmen or human rights commissions;

To promote and facilitate the teaching of human rights at all levels of formal education and professional training.

(c) The responsibilities of everyone

The Declaration emphasizes that everyone has duties towards and within the community and encourages us all to be human rights defenders. Articles 10, 11 and 18 outline responsibilities for everyone to promote human rights, to safeguard democracy and its institutions and not to violate the human rights of others. Article 11 makes a special reference to the responsibilities of persons exercising professions that can affect the human rights of others, and is especially relevant for police officers, lawyers, judges, etc.

(d) The role of national law

Articles 3 and 4 outline the relationship of the Declaration to national and international law with a view to assuring the application of the highest possible legal standards of human rights.

[1] A more detailed commentary on the Declaration was provided in the report of the Secretary-General to the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-sixth session, in 2000 (E/CN.4/2000/95). The report also contains proposals for the implementation of the Declaration. Furthermore, in July 2011, Margaret Sekagya issued a Commentary to the

Declaration on human rights defenders, a key document mapping out the rights provided for in the Declaration based mostly on information received and reports produced by the mandate.