



AHRI Conference 2023

Human Rights Defenders Under Siege

September 7-9, 2023 | University of Deusto - Bilbao, Spain

➤ PRESENTATION

In 2023 we will commemorate the 75th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the 25th anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the UN of 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* (UNGA Res. 53/144, 10 December 1998), also known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In spite of these legal instruments, and many others at domestic and regional levels, human rights defenders (HRDs) are increasingly under risk, as it has been dramatically underlined by the UN Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders. In light of this worrying situation, the European Union (EU) has developed Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (adopted in 2004 and revised in 2008), and the recently adopted EU Action 2 Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 proclaims as one of its priorities the achievement of an independent civil society and the support and protection of human rights defenders.

The Human Rights Institute of the University of Deusto and many other members of AHRI participate in a number of both local and global initiatives to support the work of HRDs. The AHRI Conference wants to offer a space for exchange of critical views and best practices among the relevant actors in the field, from local NGOs and academia to institutional bodies such as the European Parliament or the United Nations. In this regard, HRDs themselves will be active participants and key drivers of the Conference.

➤ SUBMISSION OF PAPERS

The present call for papers invites scholars, human rights defenders, and institutional representatives to contribute to reflect on the above topics by submitting an abstract on the following 4 thematic panels:



PANEL 1

Who is Afraid of HRDs? Tacking Stock of the Achievements and Shortcomings of the UN Declaration on HRDs

Human Rights Defenders is an umbrella term which encompasses very heterogeneous people and conditions for action, access to resources, exposure, political influence, or organisational capacity in national and international alliances.

In spite of the adoption of the UN Declaration on HRDs 25 years ago, the situation of human rights defenders is plagued by rising levels of violence towards them, shrinking civic space, and criminalisation; yet, there are also international alliances and forums; programmes to enhance capacity and impact; examples of resistance practices and strategies; human rights victories in courts, in Parliaments, in social transformations in the representation of traditionally excluded or marginalised groups, such as women or LGBTBI groups.

This panel aims at gathering interventions about the role played by the UN Declaration and other regional initiatives such as the EU Guidelines on HRDs or the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (the Escazú Agreement, 2018). Additionally, this panel will reflect on the defence of human rights, its main actors and their relevant activities:

- Self-organisation and resistance
- Agency and resilience as neo-liberal discourses
- Vulnerable groups and collective subjects
- HRD's networking and international action/alliances



PANEL 2

Shrinking Space for Civil Society: barriers and drivers for the defense of human rights

Participation in public life by rights holders and organizations that represent them is a fundamental principle of human rights. Each advance in protecting civic space has a positive ripple effect for communities and individuals and their rights. Yet civil society actors are facing a push back across the world. Attacks on human rights defenders continue and in many places are worsening. For historically marginalized groups, space that was already limited is shrinking further. While new technologies and interconnectedness have helped civil society networks of human rights defenders to grow, including across borders, they have also created new excuses to control their movements and speech, often under security pretexts.

The aim of this panel is to identify barriers and opportunities to resist attempts to restrict civic space and promote public recognition of the legitimacy and contributions of human rights defenders.

Possible subthemes for breakout sessions are:

- Barriers and opportunities for civil society space for the defence of human rights
- Narratives that hinder or promote the role and legitimacy of human rights defenders
- Access to justice for civil society actors

- Civil society initiatives to advance in the protection of civic space
- Criminalisation of human rights defenders and solidarity
- New laws that restrict the rights and capacities of HRDs



PANEL 3

The Role of Academia in the support to HRDs

The objective of this Panel is to reflect on the role that Academia can play in the support of the activities developed by HRDs. While teaching and research are our main goals as academic institutions, new roles have recently emerged such as logistic support to HRDs under the Scholars at Risk programme, specific training programmes for HRDs, cooperation with the United Nations (UN), Organization of American States (OAS) and relevant bodies of the European Union (EU) dealing with HRDs...

Possible sub-themes for the breakout sessions are:

- Roles of Academia in support of HRDs:
 - ✓ Teaching to HRDs and other key stakeholders
 - ✓ Applied research around HRDs' activities and the defense of human rights
- Cooperation with governmental and inter-governmental bodies that support HRDs
- Collaboration with NGOs
- Training programmes for HRDs
- Welcome programmes such as the Basque Programme for HRDs, Scholars at Risk...
- Engaged research and co-participative methodologies



PANEL 4

Public policies and normative frameworks for the protection of HRDs

The creation of national protection policies for HRDs and around the right to protect human rights is a consistent recommendation in the reports of the Special Rapporteurs and during the sessions of the Human Rights Council. In the last years there has been a sharp growth of norms and protection policies (more than 40 countries have either discussed or enacted one), but it is difficult to assess to what extent they have had an impact in the situation of HRDs.

This panel aims to discuss this sharp growth in national protection policies and their different facets, such as the main trends around them; their possible impacts on the protection of HRDs and the respect to the right to defend rights; and which should be the next steps to make sure that existing and forthcoming norms and national protection policies are fit for their purpose.

Possible sub-themes for the breakout sessions are:

- Wicked problems and complexity in national public policies: How should a protection policy be designed?
- The political will to enact national protection policies: Is it about waiting for it, or rather building it?
- Participation of HRDs in the design and governance of national public policies for their protection: networked, deliberative governance and beyond.

- Diversity of HRDs: gender, ethnic origin, intersectionality and equal access to national protection policies
- Existing gaps in the local implementation of national protection policies: State structures, officials' attitudes and power games. What can be done?
- Evaluation of national protection policies: Are they evaluable? (evaluability discussion) For whom to evaluate, what for? And how can they be evaluated?

APPLICATION PROCESS

Please submit an abstract of 500 words to ahri2023@deusto.es, indicating the Panel in which you would like to participate. The following information must be provided with each abstract:

- Name and affiliation of the author(s)
- Contact details, including email address and phone number
- A Short Bio

The deadline for submission of abstracts is **Friday 21 April 2023**. Applicants will be informed of the Scientific Committee's decision no later than Friday 12 May 2023. Successful applicants are expected to submit a paper of 4.000-6.000 words no later than 30 June 2023, and will be expected to present their topic for no longer than 15 minutes in their respective breakout sessions during the Conference. Papers from the panels will be selected for an Edited Book within the AHRI Series with Edward Elgar Publishing. Additionally, some papers will be published in an Special Issue of *Deusto Journal of Human Rights*.