

A guide to crafting effective narratives at the UN about human rights and the people who defend them





The International Service for Human Rights is dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights. We achieve this by supporting human rights defenders, strengthening human rights systems, and leading and participating in coalitions for human rights change.

THANK YOU



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Stephen Horsley studio@propellant.com.au Our lives are better when we treat each other with fairness and respect and when we all have the ability to make genuine choices about our lives.

Human rights make sure this understanding is embedded within the very systems, structures and rules that our societies rely on. They are the agreed standards to help all of us ensure our governments and businesses are accountable and to help create a better future where everyone can live free and be equal in dignity and rights.

People who promote and protect human rights play a key role in keeping us true to this commitment. They speak truth to power, challenge injustice, and find ways to put freedom, respect, equality and dignity at the heart of our societies' decisions and actions.

We all have the right to defend human rights and our collective actions today can create a better tomorrow for everyone.





Monique Jackson for Fine Acts

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NARRATIVES AND STORIES

Whether as community activists, NGO workers, or diplomats, most of us who support human rights are involved in putting stories out into the world. Our individual stories have different tones and emphases, but themes start to emerge over time and are reinforced in our audiences' minds. All of this output, in addition to what our opponents and others say about our work, builds up to form a dominant parrative

Think of it like creating a mosaic. Each tile we put down can be different and we'll choose particular colours based on what we need at the time. Eventually a larger picture - or narrative - starts to form. There is flexibility and the process is forgiving, but if we keep laying down tiles of a similar tone, that tone will end up dominating or distorting the bigger picture that we want to create.





Rozalina Burkova for Fine Acts

This guide is about staying mindful of the bigger picture we want to create about human rights and the people who promote and protect them.

We want to create a picture that:

- Showcases the impact achieved and the improvements delivered when people promote and protect human rights
- Demonstrates the benefits of ensuring these people's essential voices are heard
- Encourages everyone to play their part in driving positive change and creating a fairer world

A narrative takes time to form. Many voices and much repetition are required for it to take hold. It takes discipline and patience, but there is growing evidence that hope-based and values-led messaging and narratives are the most effective in changing people's minds and motivating action. Whether we are on the ground in the community, working for an organisation or a business, or representing a government – we can all help cultivate narratives that are beneficial to human rights and the people who defend them.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A BETTER TOMORROW

Our narrative should be centered around the benefits human rights provide and focus on the motivations, achievements and objectives of the people who promote and protect them – not be defined by the dangers and risks they face.

SHARED HUMANITY

Our narrative should be built on a recognition of our shared humanity. We must show that despite our differences there is more that unites than divides us and ultimately our destinies are interwoven. How we choose to treat each other should be the issue at the heart of our stories.

AGENCY AND IMPACT

Our narrative should remind and reinforce the reality that together we have the power to achieve remarkable things. We will continue to improve the lives of people all around the world, but this is reliant on people choosing to participate.

COLLECTIVE

Our narrative should be inclusive, celebrate progress made, and invite everyone to contribute - in the ways available to them - to creating a better future. DANCE TO OUR SONGS

Our narratives need to be ours. We must tell our own stories, not be minor characters in the stories of our opponents. Be sure to dedicate time and resources to setting and pursuing your own goals. Don't march to the beat of their drums, let's dance to our own music.



Sakina Saïdi

RECOMMENDATIONS SPECIFIC TO ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS



DESCRIBE BEST PRACTICE

Our stories need to familiarise our audiences with what good government or corporate behaviour looks like. Focus on explaining what you want to see from the targets of your advocacy, don't just denounce their failings. If you are a diplomat seeking to encourage another country to improve its practices, try acknowledging that work also remains in your own country to improve the protection and fulfillment of human rights.



GIVE TANGIBLE EXAMPLES OF THE BENEFITS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Our stories need to be grounded in reallife experiences and values, not abstract jargon. Explain that the people defending human rights believe in freedom, respect, equality and dignity. Provide specific examples of how they want to put these values into practice – healthcare for everyone, quality education, fairer laws, ensuring everyone has the freedom to have their say about the decisions that affect their lives.



PEOPLE WHO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS NEED TO BE HEARD

Our stories, and the way we work, should highlight the importance and benefits of ensuring affected communities and the people who defend human rights always have a seat at the table and their voices are heard.



PEACE, DIGNITY AND EQUALITY ON A HEALTHY PLANET

Our stories should remind the target audiences that advancing human rights is a foundational objective of the United Nations. The stories should prompt reflection by the audience on whether their actions are furthering that legacy or diminishing it.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The International Service for Human Rights promotes and protects human rights. We achieve this by supporting and acting in solidarity with human rights defenders in their work for freedom, dignity, equality and justice. A key component of our work is helping defenders navigate and utilise the United Nations' human rights system.

We also improve and strengthen that system and what it does and says about defenders. We do this because we understand that international engagement and advocacy can contribute significantly to national level change, and because the stories and narratives that are told about defenders at the UN have a major impact on how they are understood and supported on the ground. The UN is clearly the forum most associated with human rights defenders; forty percent of news stories which referenced human rights defenders over the last year also referred to the UN.



Pietro Soldi for Fine Acts

Much of our efforts involve working with diplomats at the UN. As such we are keen to better understand both the messages that best increase support for human rights in general, and those that are most likely to motivate diplomats to progress and adopt beneficial human rights narratives themselves, particularly as they relate to people who defend human rights.

Thanks to the Ford Foundation we were able to conduct research and consult with key stakeholders to assess prevailing narratives and inform the creation of a new narrative strategy that we believe will be more effective.

This guide is for anyone working within or engaging with the UN system to promote and protect human rights – whether they be diplomats, frontline community activists and leaders, or advocates with organisations. We hope it will help all of us develop winning narratives that highlight the valuable contributions made by people who defend human rights towards real, positive change at the UN and on the ground in their home countries.

A central recommendation of this report is that the narrative focus of the human rights movement should be on the motivations, objectives and achievements of the people who defend human rights, rather than the dangers and risks they face.

We want everyone to recognise the need for and benefits of ensuring people who defend human rights always have a seat at the table. To do this we need to talk more about the better tomorrow we are trying to create. Yes, too many of us are facing a grim reality today, but we mustn't lose sight of our desired destination – the reason we push on and ask others to join us: a better tomorrow.

We also advise, whoever your audience, to give frequent reminders that we can all contribute to fulfil the promise of human rights – that creating a world in which everyone enjoys freedom, justice, equality and dignity requires a collective effort. It needs to be universally understood that everyone has the right to advance and defend human rights.

Values-based messages might not convince everyone of your cause, but they have been shown to be the most effective way to expand the range of your support. We're not suggesting that our stories should ignore the many and serious dangers faced by people who promote and protect human rights, but we want to make sure violations never overshadow the inspiring stories about our

shared motivations, successes and positive visions and ideas for creating a better future.

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to narrative and messaging work, but we hope the ideas and principles in this guide prove useful. All of us who seek to protect and advance human rights should reflect on the stories we tell and how we can make them more effective in motivating positive change.

Please contact our team with any feedback or ideas, as our efforts to refine and sharpen our strategic messaging is ongoing. Much like the promotion and realisation of human rights, shifting narratives takes time and is an ongoing collective effort. Thank you for being part of it.





UPDATE YOUR PALETTE

Check values, vision, problem and pathway

The first step in narrative work is to consider what messages you are currently creating. Try browsing the last 10 or so public statements your mission or organisation produced. Consider the **values** evoked, the **vision** of what you are trying to achieve, how the **problem** is described and whether it articulates a potential **pathway** to success.

Does your message lead with appropriate values?

For human rights this means values related to universalism – such as peace, equality, wisdom, fairness, along with open-mindedness, freedom, self-direction and agency. If your audience understands and supports the values that guide your cause, they are more likely to trust your motivation and the integrity of your policy details or asks – so make sure the appropriate values are front and centre in your messages. If your messages place importance on wealth, security, power, tradition or conformity, then they are not priming your audience to support human rights.

Does your message include a <u>vision</u> or explanation of what you are trying to achieve - of what life looks like after you have succeeded?

Your audience likely knows what you are **against**, but do they understand what you are **for**? We feed what we fight, so try not to spend all of your time responding to your opponents' agendas. Present a clear vision of your destination. Rather than focus on the mechanics or details of the policy you are promoting, highlight the outcome of the policies or actions you are advocating for.

Does your message clearly describe the <u>problem</u> you are trying to address and appropriately assign responsibility?

Without a clear problem, our narratives can lack relevance and risk being dismissed as platitudes. Likewise, if we fail to highlight who or what is causing the problem, our audiences are less likely to have confidence that the problem can be addressed and won't know where to direct their energy.

Does your message show people that there is a <u>pathway</u> to success and remind them of our collective agency to determine our future?

This is less about detailing how a desired reform will work and more about explaining the steps required to win support for the reform and have it implemented. Describe what needs to happen between the audience reading your message and victory – what is the 'call to action' and why or how will it have an impact? Remind people that we all have a choice to take action – celebrate our agency and collective power, and reach for relevant examples of when and how people have made life better by advancing human rights. Try to keep your tone upbeat, determined and confident.

In summary, ask yourself: What are your values, what is your vision, what problems are you seeking to solve, what's your solution, and what do you need to succeed? Make sure you have clear answers to each of these questions.



Fonzy Nils for Fine Acts

CHANGE THE TONETurn up the volume on good news

Over the last few decades, the stories that we in and around the human rights movement have been telling, have largely focused on the undeniable fact that defending human rights can be dangerous work – that the people who defend human rights are consistently being marginalised, punished, silenced and even killed. This is part of the tragic and unacceptable reality, but it doesn't tell the whole story. People defending human rights have also collectively delivered profound positive change around the world.

Human rights defenders have organised communities to resist regression and hold those with power to account, and have secured countless reforms for the benefit of millions of people around the world.

From anti-racism and solidarity activists dismantling apartheid and segregation to feminists winning women the right to vote, from democracy campaigners bringing down tyrannical regimes to the recognition of marriage equality thanks to LGBTIQ+ rights defenders – the human rights movement has much to be proud of. There have been setbacks and progress is not always linear, but our recent history is overflowing with victories and plentiful reasons to have hope about our ability to create a better future for everyone.

Let's try to stop depicting defenders as victims that have bad things "done" to them...

Land defenders are being harassed and violently attacked due to their protests against a proposed mine that will cause pollution and threaten the livelihoods of local residents.

→ And instead position them as actively working in the community's interest to defeat opponents who "do" the bad things

Communities are taking action to prevent Company X's construction of a harmful mine. The company has tried to intimidate with violence those speaking out, but they are determined to protect the land which provides their community with food, water and employment.

We need to continue calling out injustices and atrocities, but to gain support for our efforts, we must contextualise these within a narrative of all that we do, dream and deliver. We must increase the volume of our positive and hopeful stories to remind people that together we can – and do – make a difference.

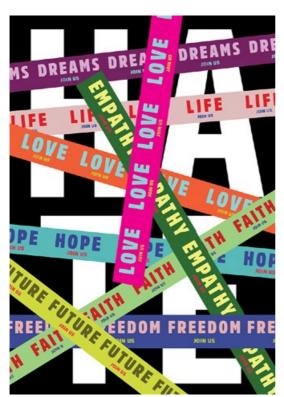
If most of our stories are "positive" and showcase how people who defend human rights can help solve problems and deliver positive change, then when we do need to tell "negative" stories

about violations, attacks and reprisals, these are more likely to be noticed and have impact.

Just as importantly, we'll stop normalising human rights abuses and unwittingly conditioning people to expect and accept that people who defend human rights will be persecuted.

Changing our habits won't happen overnight, but by being mindful of the need to shift a larger narrative we can start to amend our day-to-day messaging.

We can start to shift the broad public narrative about human rights and the people that defend them. We can stop feeding negative narratives that have too often alienated people or prOmpted them to look away. Instead, we can all contribute to narratives that celebrate the collective power we share and clearly articulate the tangible benefits of human rights, the value and values of people who defend them, and the promise of the fairer future we are building together.



We need to talk less about what our opponents are doing to us and talk more about what we are doing and what we want to achieve.



BEGIN WITH STRONG FOUNDATIONS

Remind people of our shared humanity

To build a compelling and effective narrative, we need to start with the foundations – a widely shared belief, value or world view that rings true for the topic, primes our audience in helpful ways, and upon which we can build our stories.

At their core, human rights are about what we do to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and with respect.

Although conversations about human rights often focus on our rights and freedoms as individuals, ultimately human rights are about the type of societies we want to live in – communities that are diverse and inclusive, just, sustainable and peaceful. We want our societies to take particular steps and uphold certain standards in the hope that in doing so, one day every human being will be free and equal in their dignity and rights.

Human rights offer a wonderfully bold and positive vision, yet it's remarkable how infrequently we as a movement seem to talk about it.

The concept hinges on the idea that all humans – simply because they are human – are entitled to the same rights. Therefore, it is paramount that we remind and reinforce in people's minds the fact that we are all human, that we share a common humanity, we have similar needs and aspirations. Despite our differences or disagreements there is more that unites than divides us, and ultimately our destinies are interwoven.

Our effort to emphasise that we share common bonds is not to gloss over the power imbalances, structural inequality or intersectionalities that create multiple forms of oppression – on the contrary, we will want to name examples of such things when we 'define the problem' as explained further on. But here we remind people of our shared humanity in order to highlight the interconnected nature of our existence and establish a moral obligation, desire or a mutual benefit in working together.

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all have similar needs and aspirations. We all want to learn, to live in peace and have good health, to provide for our loved ones, and to live free and dignified lives, without discrimination on any grounds.

PRIME APPROPRIATE VALUES

Talk about peace, equality, fairness, freedom and dignity

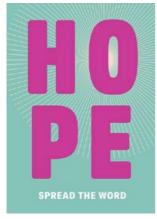
We like to think we are purely rational beings who when presented with clear facts, sensibly assess them and come to a reasonable conclusion. However, emotion and our personal values play a huge role in forming opinions and beliefs, greatly impacting the decision-making process of all human beings.

An overwhelming body of evidence tells us that exposure to certain stimuli will influence our responses to subsequent information. Exposure to value-laden messages has significant "priming" influence on our subsequent actions.

For example, someone who has just been listening to messages about the importance of tradition, honouring elders, self-discipline and social order, is more likely to accept or agree with a statement against marriage equality than if they had been asked to respond to the statement cold – without the values priming. On the other hand, someone who has just listened to messages highlighting the importance of having the freedom to choose your own path in life and the benefits of curiosity, creativity and innovation, is more likely to accept and agree with the same statements supporting marriage equality. This is the priming effect.

It's not necessarily that one particular set of values is better than another – they are all part of the human experience. But the objectives of human rights are better served by priming values of **universalism** like equality, wisdom, broad-mindedness, social justice, etc along with values of **self-direction** like freedom and independence and innovation.

Likewise, our willingness to trust other people and our motivation to cooperate are increased when we have a positive







Ingeborg Bloem

perception or understanding of human nature. If we believe people are mostly kind and compassionate, we are more likely to act in kind and compassionate ways.

If we reflect on the values-priming that occurs in much of the news cycle and popular culture – mainly a mixture of conflict, violence, wealth and consumerism, it's clear

that the values that actually benefit human rights are at risk of being drowned out. If we in the human rights movement don't prime those beneficial values, who will? Let's tip the scales with our own materials and content by making sure we're not reinforcing, engaging with, or amplifying the sets of values that best serve our opponents' objectives.



Joey Guidone

PROMOTE THE DESTINATION

Provide a clear vision of the future you want to create

Too often the stories of the human rights movement are defined by what we are opposing, not what we are proposing or striving to achieve.

For certain audiences and in certain circumstances, trying to "prevent conflict" can be very motivating, but if that becomes the dominant narrative then our movement will be associated with conflict.

Whereas if we spent more time talking about our efforts to "building peace" our audiences are likely to have a more positive emotional response that they will associate with our movement.

There is of course a time and place for our fear, sorrow and anger. We shouldn't erase them from our stories, but we can't let them define our narrative. Hope, love, empathy, justice, peace and the promise of a better tomorrow are ultimately a more motivating and a more sustainable fuel for our movement.

So instead of primarily focusing on human rights defenders being silenced or locked out from the discussion, try to paint a picture of what things look like when their voices are heard in the important discussions. What would the world look like if everyone's human rights were understood, respected and upheld? Talk more about your answers to this question.

If you work on health issues, describe how great it would be if everyone could get the free medical care they needed when and where they needed it – what would that mean for a parent looking after a sick child? If you're an environmental defender, talk about how looking after our environment means we can enjoy the mountains, forests and rivers and the environment we depend on, and that the water we drink and the air we breathe is clean and healthy. People yearn for a good life in a world of peace. We need to ensure they associate these things with our work.

Of course, the policies and actions that you seek to promote need to be seen as a credible way to deliver on your promises, but when it comes to messaging that change opinions, policy details or the political mechanics of "what" are far less important in your narrative work than the "why".

They say...

These human rights organisations and charities are puppets for foreign agendas. They do nothing but poison the conversations on social media and stand in the way of progress for our country. This law will eradicate foreign influence from our politics.

We want to avoid trying to negate the attack by repeating it (ie don't say "We are not foreign agents") as this will only serve to reinforce the word association ★ We could engage, but try instead to shift the focus of the conversation

Politicians might not enjoy hearing criticism, but it's part of their job in a democracy.

Charities and human rights organisations have experience and ideas to share that will benefit the community – they shouldn't be locked out of public policy debates.

Issues to concerns and tries to understand the community's needs and desires. Ensuring charities and community groups can be part of policy discussions is the right thing to do and it benefits everyone.

→ Or we could essentially ignore their attack, and tell our own story...

We all want to live in communities where we look after each other and we're all free to have a say about the decisions that affect our lives.

Whether it's running a homeless shelter or advocating for women's rights – charities and human rights organisations have important insights and experience of how government policies can harm or help our communities.

Unfortunately, politician X wants to avoid scrutiny and accountability and is trying to lock charities out of public discussions and gag them from criticising government policies.

Can you help ensure that communities have a voice in our democracy?

DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Assign responsibility for a problem to make clear that it can be fixed

Without a clear problem, our narratives can lack meaning and relevance and can risk being dismissed as platitudes. We need to name a tangible problem that people can understand and see as unfair, yet "fixable".

Saying things like "democracy is in decline around the world" risks making it sound like some bigger unstoppable force is at play. Just like we can't stop the tides of the ocean, it suggests there's not much we can do about this decline. Whereas the people, organisations and corporations who are actually chipping away at democracy or perpetuating systemic racism have their names on ballot papers, headquarters with addresses, and shareholders who attend Annual General Meetings. By naming them, they will feel the pressure of responsibility and our audience is reminded that they too can take action to help persuade or hold to account the people. organisations, governments or corporations causing the problems.

The stakes are higher with advocacy that names individual governments, parties, politicians or corporations etc, so consider carefully whether you want to name names or if a more diplomatic approach of hiding behind generic descriptions and titles would be more effective for your strategy, or safer in terms of both avoiding physical reprisals and legal risks. But either way, make it clear where the responsibility for the problem lies and who has the power to fix it.

The other advantage of being specific about responsibility for the problem is you're less likely to tarnish the institution of government in a broad sense. For example "the

government is doing x'' risks eroding faith in governments in general – it becomes yet another story about yet another government failure. Whereas "politician X or CEO Y is doing Z'' means the potential reputational damage rests with the key decision maker.

If the problem in your narrative is explained in a way that resonates, or is at least compatible, with your audience's world view it will likely build more trust and a sense that you or your organisation understands them

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."

ARUNDHATI ROY

or 'gets it'. This is where it's helpful to be familiar with your target audiences and their grievances and hopes.

If we fail to highlight who or what is causing the problem, then our audiences are less likely to have the needed confidence that the problem can be addressed and they won't know where to direct their energy.

The 'problem' in narratives about human rights often boils down to power dynamics – who has it and who doesn't, how it is wielded. Our job is to win support for reforms to ensure power is shared, that people and communities are free and empowered.

Use less abstract jargon...

Civil society space is shrinking.

And more specific examples of the power dynamics at play

Powerful corporations and the politicians who do their bidding (like President/Company/Government X) are trying to avoid scrutiny and accountability by limiting public debate.

PROVIDE A PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Explain the tasks, inspire agency, celebrate collective power



A captain of a football team who only talks about how much bigger, stronger and faster the other team is and reminds you that you've lost every single game of the season, is unlikely to inspire you to enthusiastically run out onto the field. Likewise, your pre-match speech has to motivate your audience – highlight their strengths and skills, remind them of the importance of teamwork, explain the proposed strategy. A clear and inspiring game-plan will give your teammates the confidence to win.

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

ALICE WALKER

Firstly, people need to be reminded that the outcome of the match isn't predetermined – whether they win or lose depends on their involvement and how much effort they put in. So highlight the fact that they have agency, that they can play an active role in advancing your cause and the choice is theirs for the taking.

Secondly, celebrate our collective power by reaching for relevant examples of human rights progress as proof of what is possible and as a prompt for your audience to reflect on which side of history they want to be – what their legacy will be.

Thirdly, explain the pathway to victory that you are encouraging them to take. What needs to happen between reading your message and securing victory? If victory lies at the end of a long and winding path, it is usually best to break it up into smaller wins or milestones that need to be achieved on that longer journey.

Your vision might be of a justice system free of systemic racism where everyone is treated fairly and with respect, but what are the specific reforms that need to occur for that to happen and what is your theory of change for prompting the relevant decision makers to agree? Spell it out.

At a narrative level, this is always going to be broad – people and communities getting organised, speaking up, being voters, etc – but at a campaign level your messages will need to be more specific – about the policy ask or how your actions will secure the outcome.

Never make the amount of work look too daunting – break the invitations to participate into small digestible steps. For a campaign, the more discrete the advocacy call to action, the more readily it can be supported both publicly and politically. Taking a "stepping stones" approach to campaigning for larger reform can often be easier both in generating support and securing the reform.

Align your actions and tactics with the narrative you want to promote

With discipline and practice we can get better at translating this advice into our day-to-day work. But even when we're familiar with the theories and try to remain mindful of the large narrative mosaic we want to make, our intentions can be overwhelmed by the reality and challenges of our work.

How can we proactively advance our own agenda when we're facing attacks or struggling to respond to many urgent human rights crises? Ultimately a lot of this work needs to begin at a strategic and structural organisational level. Buy-in from all levels of an organisation is needed to create the space and capacity to develop new narratives and resource the production of content and opportunities to carry and amplify it. But embracing proactive mindsets and strategies will put our movement on the front foot.

Let's dance to the rhythm of our own songs, not march to the beat of our opponents' drum.

An additional consideration is the tactics you use to conduct your work. If your organisation or campaign brings a clear value-add to the movement and you are confident that the mode of work is having impact, then of course don't jeopardise that by doing anything that undermines your brand positioning. But we know that the 'medium is the message' and that often the most effective messaging relies on a complete package.





For example, if you want your narrative to be about grassroots communities, a seasoned Geneva-based advocate delivering a statement laden with UN jargon behind closed doors is unlikely to be the best vehicle for that message. Even within the confines of what is allowable within the UN systems, we must be able to find ways to bring relevant voices into the debates.

In Australia efforts to reduce Indigenous over-imprisonment are often put in the "too hard/too complex" basket, but a current campaign is gaining momentum by picking one small and simple reform that will have a big knock-on effect: if each State was to 'raise the age' at which children can be sent to prison from 10 to 14 (as required by international law) it would dramatically reduce the number of Indigenous children within the prison system and future offending rates.



While recognising the need to give space for and amplify the voices of affected communities, it's important to note that different messengers will be more effective in convincing particular audiences with regards to different issues. Some will feel like natural choices, others might surprise, so don't be afraid to experiment.

For example, after years of messages from scientists and imagery of polar bears, it's teenage girls who are proving to be the most effective messengers for changing attitudes and tipping people to take climate action. Of course, the way your work is generated, crafted and led, should also be true to your organisation's values and philosophy – for example, do the affected communities you aim to serve have a seat at your table?

The way we are seen to work and organise carries meaning in and of itself, so consider your role and decide what actions will best reflect or amplify the value-add that you or your organisation brings to the collective efforts



HUMAN RIGHTS

Creating a better tomorrow with freedom, respect, equality and dignity

Human rights are based on an idea that everyone – no matter who we are or where we come from – should be treated fairly and with respect. They are the standards we insist our governments, institutions and businesses uphold so we can create a future in which everyone can live freely and be equal in their dignity and rights.

THEMATIC RIGHTS

Human rights are fantastic, but it's remarkable how as a movement we often fail to talk enough about our actual "products" – shelter, freedom, work, equality, health, respect, fair treatment, education etc. Nearly everyone agrees that these are important things that provide tangible benefits to our lives, but not everyone associates them with the term "human rights". The more often we can include these things and the words "human rights" in the same sentence, the better.

People have been conditioned from news reports to associate the term human rights with conflict, violations or unpleasant contexts – prisons, terrorists, torture, war and so on. Our task is to turn up the dial on associating human rights with the various benefits they deliver in everyday life. The fact that we have hospitals and schools for example, or that we have the freedom to come together and speak up about the things we're passionate about.

Even if we're in a context in which we can't enjoy certain rights, we can still talk about how much better life would be if we could enjoy them.

Of course the people who defend human rights play a vital role in providing these things – so let's make the mental association stronger. Join the dots for your audiences.

A recent analysis by ISHR of over 26,000 media articles mentioning human rights defenders found that the words most associated with them include 'crimes', 'violence' and 'violations'. 'Freedom' was one of the few positive words among the top 100 most associated with defenders, while words such as 'dignity', 'equality', 'fairness' and 'justice' weren't found in the top 100.

Be on the lookout for ways to link conversations about human rights to popular and positive topics like healthcare, education, equal opportunity etc. When you're not sure if you're on particularly strong ground with an individual right, try bundling it with other rights that you are confident are popular with your audience. Place the one right within a suite of rights to reinforce the concept that human rights come as a package and we can't let politicians just pick and choose which rights they want to respect.

At their heart, all human rights are popular. At times our conversations might be had in unpopular contexts, but with human rights there's always a shared principle or value that we can bring the conversation back to.

Criminals might not be popular, but respecting someone's dignity likely is, so we can explain that routine strip searching of prisoners is a humiliating and unnecessary experience. Likewise we can explain that by treating people fairly and with dignity we increase the chance that they will in turn treat others fairly and with dignity. We also invite the decision makers to reflect on what their decisions and actions say about themselves and provide them with an opportunity to show, with this example, that they believe in the principle of redemption and second chances



There will be times when we don't have specific thematic examples to draw on or when we want to talk about human rights from more of a 'big picture' perspective. For example, how to answer general questions like "what are human rights?"

As discussed, in essence human rights are based on the idea that everyone – no matter who they are or where they come from – should be treated fairly and with respect. In practice, they are the standards we seek to uphold – we use them to hold our governments and businesses to account and to create a future in which everyone can live freely and be equal in dignity and rights.

Note the emphasis here on human rights as a tool that we can all use to make things better – not merely as a tool to stop bad things from happening.



Sebastian Rubiano for Fine Acts

While human rights provide a necessary check on government power, we don't want to reinforce the unhelpful notion that government is inherently a malign force that always needs to be opposed. Instead, we want people to know that, with citizens' participation, governments can have a significant and positive role in improving our lives. Our task is to explain that this is done best when governments respect and further the realisation of human rights, and involve civil society in designing solutions.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Making our world a better place by delivering the promise of equal rights

Human rights defenders are people who are trying to make the world a better and fairer place by promoting and protecting human rights. We can all be human rights defenders by seeking to ensure concepts such as freedom, respect, equality and dignity are reflected in our laws, policies and practices.

The term "defender" itself is a little problematic in that it alone is likely to evoke the notion of being under attack and puts the audience in a conflict-orientated frame of mind. But it is a vital term within international, regional and national legal systems that carries particular meaning and – theoretically – protection, so it's a term we can't avoid. However, there are some small changes we can make to how we use it.

For example, let's try to avoid "othering" human rights defenders as being in a class of their own. We can talk about "people who defend human rights". (Yes, people, just like you and me.)

We can also add other verbs like "extending", "protecting" and "promoting" when talking about defenders or the defending of human rights. This is consistent with the language used in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.



"Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels."

ARTICLE 1, UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS

We also want to foster the idea that we can all promote and defend human rights. Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Greta Thunberg – these people weren't born with special powers, they chose to take action, they chose to defend human rights. We mustn't suggest to our audience that the 'doing' of human rights can be left to other people. Human rights need tending to – they need to be nourished and nurtured, and we can all be the gardeners.

"The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it."

ROBERT SWAN

From

With protests bringing the city to a stand still, there are fears the military is poised to violently disperse the massive crowds of human rights defenders who are protesting against the coup.

Emphasis is on the military and the terrible things it will do.



Hundreds of thousands of people determined to see democracy restored in their country, are braving the risk of violent reprisals from the military by holding rolling protests against the coup.

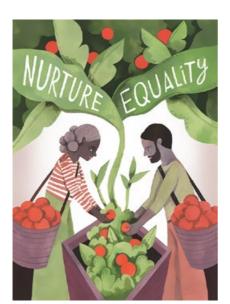
Emphasis is on the motivation and actions of the people.

We want to shift the attention from negative experiences of being a human rights defender and move it towards the many benefits that defending and expanding human rights produces or seeks to produce.

Again, we are not suggesting anyone glosses over the fact that activists are persecuted in certain countries, but try to place more emphasis on their motivations and aspirations

- how do they believe things

should be, what is the change they are pushing for? These are likely to be worthy objectives that people will understand and be willing to support. Then explain the powers, privileges and prejudices they are challenging or seeking to hold to account.



Luisa Rivera for Fine Acts

"I am a teacher, a municipal deputy, a politician who advocates for nonviolent change, for honest political competition, for a decent life for people. I am proposing a future in which each person in our country, wherever they live, would be able to live with dignity: earn decent money, buy good food and clothes, travel, heal their relatives, and teach their children. And while feeling free and safe.... It's precisely for this... that I'm on trial."

We also need to invest more time in discussing the benefits people who defend human rights bring to society. In that same way that we value the contribution that teachers make to a society or various other professions, we want to suggest

that defending and advancing human rights is vital for the health of any society. Similarly, people working against poverty or homelessness are generally accepted and respected figures within our communities – we want to associate such efforts with the defence and realisation of all human rights.

We should aim to normalise and mainstream the defending of human rights, and remind people that these are a beneficial and tangible part of their lives, even if they don't happen to label them as human rights.

Remind people of the positive changes made to society by people who actively sought to defend or advance human rights. Everything from ending slavery to establishing the weekend – these advances were won and secured by the people who weren't willing to accept injustice, but were willing to agitate and push to change policy settings, laws and social attitudes to improve the world.

People who in their time were branded trouble makers, naive or negative are often judged by history far more favourably. Without over-glorifying the human rights defenders of today with grandiose comparisons from the past, we do want to make clear that people who defend or advance human rights today are continuing that work - we're building on the successes of those who came before us, and we'll pass the baton to those that come after us. We want to emphasise that all of the positive change and progress we've seen over the years hasn't just happened by itself. It took people to make it happen - people who defend and advance human rights.

"Her killers tried to silence her with bullets, but she is a seed, a seed that is reborn in all men and women. She didn't die, she multiplied."

SALVADOR EDGARDO ZUNIGA CÁCERES, SON OF INDIGENOUS LAND RIGHTS DEFENDER BERTA CÁCERES



Making people aware of where they sit on that continuum of progress is helpful. We can remind our audiences that people do have a shared power to improve the world, that progress has been made, but that we still have more to do. And importantly if we can prompt members of our audience to reflect about their own position on that timeline, they should realise that what comes next depends on the choices they make here and now. We want to simultaneously appeal to their desire to do the right thing and touch on the potential guilt if they feel there's a risk they might not be on the right side of history.

We want people to feel motivated to be active participants in supporting human rights and we want it clear that the objective is to deliver a better tomorrow.

The contributions different people will make to the collective effort will be varied, but they will all help. Even if our audience is reluctant to see themselves as human rights defenders, we want them to at least know they can support human rights defenders.





Nuño González Rojo

So again, although the trials and tribulations faced by people who defend human rights are a significant part of their story, we want to avoid the challenges becoming the defining aspect.

Think of the narratives surrounding classic heroes' journeys – yes, a story in which our main characters face no adversity would be dull, but it's not their losses or failures that we remember, it's their determined, daring and innovative efforts to overcome the adversity that we love and remember.

Where possible though, we want to present defending human rights as a group effort. Even comic book heroes usually have an ensemble of companions, side-kicks and helpers. So don't forget to make reference to the broader communities, movements, survivors and supporters that individual human rights defenders are usually representing and are supported by.

We'll discuss below some points about the need to highlight the legitimacy of the role of human rights defenders, or the status of individual defenders when trying to gain access or increase support amongst diplomats, but with all audiences, we urge efforts to link the work and experiences of human rights defenders to the communities and issues they seek to serve.

Above all else, seek to make your objectives the centrepiece of your narratives and stories. Be clear what you "are for", not just what you are "against" or are trying to prevent.

Focus on the desired outcome that the desired reform would deliver and less on the details of how mechanisms of the reform would work. Tell your audience what the world, their country or their community will look like if the reform or changes are won.



UNITED NATIONS

Coming together to work through our differences, ensure accountability, and craft solutions to shared challenges

The United Nations is a place for us to come together to work through our differences, seek accountability, and craft solutions to shared challenges. Ultimately its purpose is to foster friendship between peoples and to promote peace on a healthy planet.

The UN is an ideal setting for promoting a narrative that celebrates our shared humanity and is focused on creating a better future. This should be used to our advantage. Similar to how we build our thematic arguments upon a particularly relevant value or principle, the very core purpose of the UN can be utilised in a similar manner.

If your advocacy is aligned with the objectives of the UN itself, then your opponents will find themselves in the unenviable position of effectively being against the virtuous objectives of the UN. So, seek to set the parameters of the conversation within the frame of the UN's overall human rights mission. Position those who fail to engage on those terms as not being team players dedicated to creating a better future, and suggest they are letting self-interest undermine the worthy mission.



WE ARE NOT FREE UNTIL EVERYONE IS FREE

The UN is the big table everyone can sit around. It's inefficient, not at all perfect, but it's the only table that's big enough for everyone. It's the only place to create a dialogue in the hope that it can counter misunderstanding and conflicts.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

A rather unhelpful but particularly dominant narrative that persists about the UN is that it's an ineffectual 'talk fest' – nothing gets done, everything gets 'watered down' or compromised, nothing delivers change on the ground. Although frustrations with any large organisation are understandable, feeding these narratives is not beneficial for our cause.

Key to replacing this unhelpful narrative is not to excessively dwell on the UN's failings but to make an effort to also recognise and celebrate its good work and impact. Of course, honest critical feedback is key to improving any organisation but failings attributed to 'the UN' are often failings of individual member States (eg, the failure of a State with veto power to support a vital resolution on peace and security at the Security Council).

Our advocacy at the UN relies on a belief that the UN can help deliver accountability and justice, can foster understanding and peace, and does set standards that are worthy of following. We must project our faith in the system to our audience.

We're not suggesting in any way to turn a blind eye to the UN's shortcomings, but urging you again to **think of the mosaic that you are trying to create.** What is the overall picture of the UN that you would like to present to the world? We think overall, it should be a positive one. And where you do need to address problems with the UN, emphasise the solutions you want to see.

We can also try to remind people that the responsibility for the quality of the UN and its work ultimately lies with its members, who more times than not are the very targets of our advocacy. Don't let people blame an amorphous entity – point out that the UN is only as good

> as its members. It's their decisions and consistency which determine the quality of the UN's work.

> The UN provides many opportunities to share stories that frame the conversations with an interconnected world view. People are at the UN because they recognise our destinies are inseparable.

"If you don't establish it at the UN first then I have nothing to translate locally. The more firmly it's established at UN level, the better I can advance my arguments back in my country and say: I need to establish this as a right here because the UN has established it as a norm."

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT



Ashwin Chacko

INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

Listening, crafting and delivering solutions

Diplomats seek out and listen to various views and concerns and explain to their governments the possible solutions.

Although not the ultimate decision makers, they can influence the shape of discussions and have a responsibility to ensure the options on the table respect human rights.

Everything discussed so far is relevant when you talk to general audiences about human rights and the people who defend them, and it's equally applicable if your target audience consists primarily of diplomats. However, there are some additional things to note which may be beneficial when specifically communicating with diplomats – even if you are a diplomat yourself talking to other

diplomats. These recommendations are drawn from ISHR's research and consultations, conducted specifically for this guide with serving and former diplomats as well as UN human rights experts and special rapporteurs.

There will be times when your messages are not intended to engage or persuade, but about giving voice to the righteous and meaningful outrage felt by your communities. As a diplomat, this might be about expressing the concern or disappointment of the government you represent. Sometimes your tactics will involve 'naming and shaming' governments that are violating human rights. Sometimes you will be seeking action from other governments. These are all legitimate options, and especially desirable if they are aligned with your strategy and theory of change. However, such approaches are unlikely to help if your objective is to engage with particular diplomats or governments in the hope of opening a meaningful exchange.



"The classic human rights approach has been denunciation: the rights holder denounces the duty bearer and perpetrator again and again so they have to act. It's a conceptual shift for activists to move away from denunciation as your main tactic, to building allies."

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Like anyone in a professional role, there are obvious limitations to what a diplomat can achieve in their role. At the end of the day, diplomats are there to represent and advance the policies of the government they serve and to feed-back information and advice for consideration. However, the majority of the diplomats consulted for this project reported a belief that they do have some scope to influence outcomes. Having supportive diplomats on-side who are motivated enough to promote the human rights cause within their circles can give you an advantage in securing the desired outcome.



Pietro Soldi for Fine Acts

RELEVANCE

No time is wasted on reconnaissance, so do your homework ahead of meetings. What do you know about their position on your topic, has it shifted in recent times, what are the key domestic drivers of that position etc? Are there any obvious historical, cultural or business links between your topic and the nation or government you are seeking to engage? If so, highlight them in your briefing materials and consider their relevance and how they might be leveraged.

Does that nation have any celebrated examples of progress from its history that might provide useful parallels to your cause? For example, could New Zealand, as the first nation where women won the right to vote, or Namibia or Rwanda, which both recently ranked in the top 10 countries in the world in a gender parity index, be more readily persuaded to build on that legacy by supporting resolutions on gender equality?

Diplomats deal with a wide range of topics and even a sympathetic individual will need to justify up the command chain any time they spend on the topic, so help provide them with the required relevance.

When researching, try to establish what are the bedrock policy positions of their governments that are very unlikely to shift in the short term and what topics have room for movement. Even searching for the topics where they have a level of indifference can be useful as shifting a person or government with no position on a particular topic might prove easier than budging one with an entrenched position.

LEGITIMACY

Although in our broader narrative advice we've been urging advocates to present people who advance and defend human rights as a type of "everyday hero", our consultations with diplomats did identify a need to elevate somewhat the status of the defenders you are seeking a meeting or participation for. Understandably there was a sense that missions or the UN can't just let any person address particular forums etc. So in choosing how you describe the person's role, try to inject a little more status than perhaps you would for a



general audience. For example, you might want to elevate 'social justice activists' to 'social justice leaders'. Likewise, explain the legitimacy, standing or expertise the person has on the particular topic.

Opt for plain and clear descriptions whenever possible. If the human rights defender in question is a lawyer, journalist or union leader etc, then simply use such terms as these that are well known and understood job descriptions.

Pairing up frontline defenders or community representatives with staff from known and respected human rights organisations is likely to aid your engagement with diplomats at the UN.

"You can't parachute someone used to acting at domestic level into the UN space and use the same language, tactics. You need to read the room and know who's who, which States are on your side or not. You need specialist, technical accompaniment. It's a double act."

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

The role of human rights NGOs in these circumstances is not to act as gatekeepers or to speak for affected communities, but rather to use their privilege and networks to ensure access for defenders and enable them to speak in their own voices.

HOSTILITY AND HYPOCRISY

A fairly universal response to hostile criticism is to become more defensive and guarded. If your tactic is to inflict political pain on a particular government, then condemning them for their failures is a reliable option. But if you're seeking engagement, it's unlikely to be helpful. Instead focus your messages on what improvements need to be made or articulate a vision of what that government doing the right thing would look like.

Consider these contrasting statements – problems focused to solutions orientated. (IF SEEKING ENGAGEMENT)

Problem focus...

Government X is blatantly and knowingly breaching international law by violating the rights of refugees and asylum seekers by intercepting and dangerously turning boats back at sea.

→ Move to...

Government X needs to follow international law and ensure the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum are respected and upheld at all times

Aim for...

We are at our best when we help each other in times of need. Responsible governments provide safety and assistance to refugees and people seeking asylum, working collaboratively to provide safe pathways to protection.

Perceived hypocrisy is understandably a turn-off for most diplomats. So diplomats seeking to engage other diplomats to support a cause, should be mindful to avoid perceptions of "lecturing" the target countries.

An approach that is likely to gain more traction is including an example of where the country presenting found it challenging or was slow to reach a desired human rights outcome, ie if you are a diplomat, be more open about your own failings or where the country you represent could be doing better. Many missions will be reluctant to take such an approach in public forums, but for private gatherings this is likely to help lower participants' guards and be conducive to discussion.

No country is perfect and advancing human rights is an ongoing process for everyone – acknowledging that will likely give you more scope to draw attention, in a less confronting way, to those who are lagging behind.

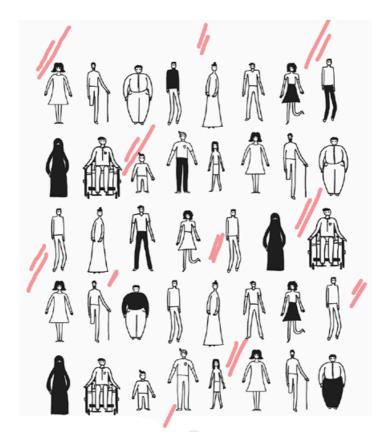
FIND COMMON GROUND

In the heat of debate it often feels like we have nothing in common with our opponents, but on most topics there will be a value or principle that most of the parties can agree on. This less controversial base is the space that you want to build your arguments from.

J-FLAG's 'We Are Jamaicans'

J-FLAG's 'We Are Jamaicans' was an initiative to promote inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people. It presented their stories, showcasing the fact that they share the same values and hobbies as all Jamaicans. It was a turning point for LGBTIQ+ advocacy which overturned the old practice of blurring out faces and distorting voices when LGBTIQ+ people appeared in the media.

For example, if you build your argument for a particular right of LGBTIQ+ persons around the idea that "everyone should be free to lead the life they want", even if someone isn't ready to embrace the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, you're still providing them with an opportunity to align values they may hold, like freedom, with your advocacy ask. (That's the carrot, the stick is they risk being depicted as being against both equality and freedom.)



"Civil society organisations need to understand that the interlocutor at the UN will listen to them but the final decision needs to be reported back to ministry. Our ministries are hierarchical and things go up and down the ladder to the mission representative and then are cabled to capital. So it can be very helpful if an NGO has a partner at capital and both are giving the same message."

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

DIPLOMATIC CABLES

Diplomatic cables – confidential dispatches exchanged between a government's embassies and foreign ministry – remain a significant source of information for diplomats. Where possible, try to ensure the government you are seeking to engage with is being made aware of similar concerns and requests both in its home country ('capital') and from its embassies in the relevant countries.

GIVE A CLEAR SET OF OPTIONS

Make sure you have a clear set of advocacy asks – what exactly would you like the diplomat you are meeting with or their government to do?

Don't expect them to research every detail and decipher excessive amounts of background material. Instead provide a short clear summary of why you need them to take action and what that action is. Where possible, suggest a set of potential actions as there might be some they simply cannot do and some that are more achievable for their government.

NOTE ABOUT SAFETY

In advance of any UN engagement work, always consider the safety of the human rights defenders you are working with. Will the activities expose them to increased risks? What are they comfortable with? What can be done to minimise the risk for them or the people they are connected with? Do your risk assessment and refer to available resources such as ISHR's Reprisals Handbook.



THE TASK AT HAND

As explained in previous sections, there's a risk that the current narrative about human rights defenders is being dominated by messages such as:

"People who defend human rights are under attack."

"Defending human rights is dangerous work."

We don't want to shy away from reporting these grim facts and demanding justice and accountability, but we also don't want these to be the 'take home message' about human rights defenders.

When people hear "human rights defender" we would prefer for them to make associations like:

"People who protect and promote human rights are making the world a better place for everyone."

As a bonus extra, we'd also like audiences to recognise that they themselves can play a role in promoting and protecting human rights, and to get a clear sense that:

"We all have the power to ensure human rights are understood and respected."



Secilia Caste

Of course we still need to explain and expose the terrible deeds committed against people defending human rights, so try bookending such details with your desired take-home messages.

People who protect and promote human rights are making the world a better place for everyone by speaking truth to power and challenging injustice.

Unfortunately, some politicians and powerful corporations try to harass, discredit, silence, imprison or even kill them for speaking out.

Together, we can all play a role in making sure people are free to promote and protect human rights

If our audiences are not yet willing to consider themselves part of the human rights movement, or perhaps are lacking a firm commitment to a particular cause, we want them to at least come to the conclusion that:

"People who defend and promote human rights are essential voices from our communities that need to be part of the conversation."

Changing a narrative takes time. People need to be exposed to similar messages many times before a narrative will start to shift or form. Our task is to be more mindful of the tiles we are placing into our mosaic. If the picture we want to create is of vibrant, diverse, inclusive, connected, healthy communities living in peace, then we need vibrant and diverse tiles to add to the mix. Here are some suggestions for when you are selecting or creating your next handful of tiles.

MESSAGING PATHWAYS

Here are possible steps for progressing your messages and arguments. Wording will vary depending on the issue and you will be best placed to navigate your own cultural and political context.

When time allows try to use as many of the tips provided as possible as you move from one messaging step to another.



The foundation of our narrative is 'We all share a common humanity' so try to ensure your messages reflect this world view.

Beliefs

We can plant the seed for this concept with phrases such as:

We're all part of the human family We all have similar needs and aspirations We might be different, but we are all equal

There's more that unites than divides us We're all in it together

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all have similar needs and aspirations. We all want to learn, to live in peace and have good health, to provide for our loved ones, and to live free and dignified lives – without discrimination on any grounds.

Equality, fairness, peace, freedom, dignity, respect, compassion - these are all powerful concepts that prompt positive emotional responses and they all happen to be the very essence of human rights. So sprinkle them liberally throughout your messages.

EXAMPLES

Our lives are better when we treat each other with fairness and respect.

We're at our best when compassion and kindness guide our decisions.

Together we can create a world in which everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights.

SHOWCASE OUR VISION OF WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE

People are comfortable making changes or taking action if they feel doing so will improve their lives. So be sure to explain what our lives and communities will be like once you have succeeded. What is the outcome?

Imagine a future where all of us can live freely and in peace with each other, equal in our rights and without fear of discrimination.

Leveryone should be free to marry the person they love and everyone deserves to feel safe walking down the street with their loved one.

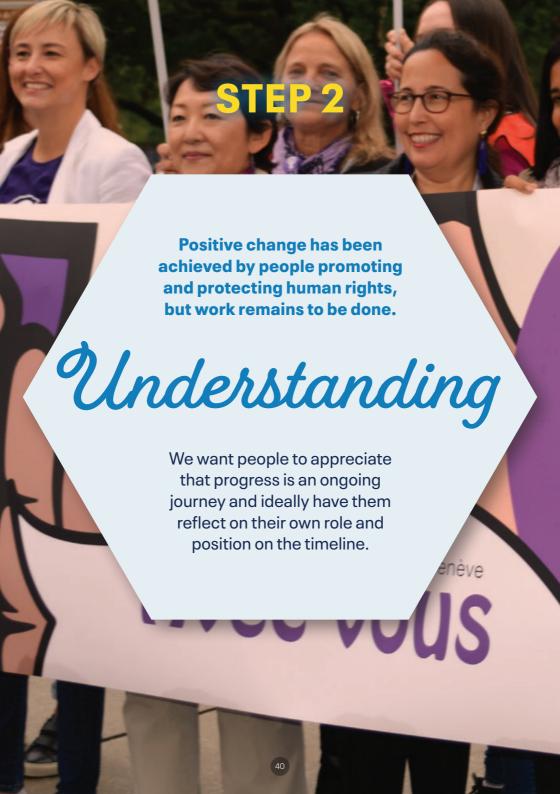
REMIND PEOPLE THAT THE FUTURE IS YET TO BE WRITTEN AND WE HAVE AGENCY OVER THE ACTIONS THAT WILL DETERMINE IT

Highlight that our actions today determine our tomorrows. We need people to be confident that they can have an impact - the future isn't out of our control - it's what we choose to make it.

The future is what we make it

Courage, hope and each other - these are the ingredients to make change.

We have a choice to make, we can either... or we can...



⇒ HIGHLIGHT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN OUR WORK AND MAKING OUR WORLD BETTER AND FAIRER

Where possible, draw attention to the "product" ie the particular human rights in question – freedom, respect, equality, dignity, housing, health, education, safety, etc – and how that right can provide tangible benefits to people's lives.

REMIND PEOPLE THAT COLLECTIVELY WE DO HAVE THE AGENCY AND POWER TO DRIVE POSITIVE CHANGE

History is full of examples of human rights activists and movements driving and securing positive change. Reach for relevant examples for validation of your cause and proof that it can succeed and prompt your audience to reflect how history will judge their position.

BUILD THE LEGITIMACY

Flag the credentials of lived experience, connection to communities or demonstrated commitment to a cause, and explain the value and relevance of such experience. People who defend human rights will either have passion, experience or expertise to bring to the table, but they are also likely to have the trust of the communities they represent. Remind your audience that all of these things are valuable assets in any problem solving or conflict resolution efforts.

EXAMPLES

When we get sick we should all be able to see a doctor regardless of our bank balance.

(L) When we ensure children receive an education, we're providing them with an opportunity to thrive.

Women should always be free to make decisions about their lives and their bodies and we should ensure everyone can access medical services without being harassed and intimidated.

History has shown us that when people choose to get involved, when enough people choose to do what they know is right, positive change is achieved.

Cooperation and adaptation are two of humankind's defining features and our greatest asset - together we have overcome incredible challenges.

Indigenous people are best placed to talk about the needs and desires of Indigenous communities – they have the ideas and solutions that their communities will be willing to embrace

Dournalists often spend much time embedded in communities. Their knowledge and experience provides much value to the public debate.



EVERAGE THE LOCATION OF YOUR ADVOCACY AND THE WEIGHT OF THE UN'S WORTHY MISSION

The UN was established to foster peace and friendship between peoples - it's a place to come together, seek accountability and craft solutions to shared challenges. So question why people are there if they aren't willing to pursue those objectives.

EXAMPLES

Peace, dignity, equality and a healthy planet - this is the core mission of the United Nations. This is why we are gathered here today, to advance these causes.

EXPLAIN THAT WE EACH HAVE OUR ROLE TO PLAY AND URGE PEOPLE TO MAKE THEIRS COUNT

Creating positive change requires a team effort and sometimes it's the smallest of contributions that tip things over the line. We want people to know that their effort – no matter how big or small the task – is worthwhile, especially if it's being replicated by many people.

There are a number of ways to get involved and every contribution helps.

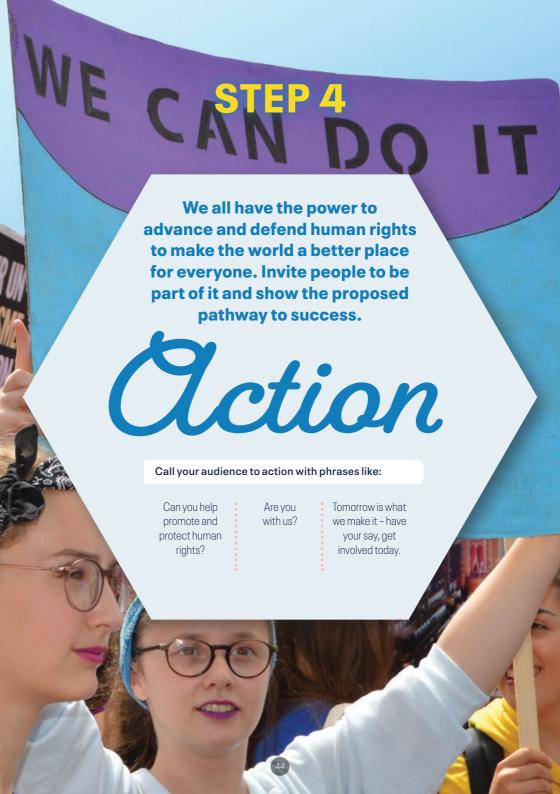
Many hands make heavy work light.

ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO BE TEAM PLAYERS AND PROMPT THEM TO THINK ABOUT THE MORALITY OF THEIR ACTIONS

Collaboration is one of humankind's key strengths – our greatest achievements are collective. We need to make the most of the social desire to be part of the team.

When we come together, we can...

How we treat each other in hard times is the true test of our character.



CENTRAL HUMAN RIGHTS NARRATIVE

Keeping in mind the advice in this guide, be sure to develop a broad 'central narrative' for your work, so your team has a common reference point to inform all of your public messages and actions. This should be a 'big picture' story that:

- Identifies the values important in your work
- · Reminds us what a good life can look like
- Defines the nature or root cause of the problem
- Names a solution or tool
- Concludes with a hopeful and inclusive outlook

Here's a central narrative that ISHR is seeking to reinforce about human rights and the people who defend them. The exact words of the central narrative don't have to be used in public communications, but everything that is said and done will seek to reinforce or fit within this broad parrative.

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all have similar needs and aspirations and ultimately our destinies are connected to one another. We all understand that life is better when we treat each other fairly and with respect.

But this doesn't happen without conscious effort – maintaining inclusive, vibrant, free, equal and peaceful communities takes commitment from everyone.

Unfortunately, some governments and corporations let us down or betray these efforts by amassing control and abusing power over others or putting profits before people. They try to discredit and silence those that speak truth to power, challenge injustice and seek equality.

That's why we have a system of human rights – a set of agreed standards to help all of us ensure our commitment to freedom, respect, equality and dignity is reflected in our laws, institutions and practices. We can all play a role in ensuring human rights are understood, respected, protected and upheld and we all have the right to do so.

When we come together to recognise our shared humanity, and ensure people who promote and protect human rights have a seat at the table, we can help hold each other to account and craft solutions to our shared challenges. This is how we create peace and a better tomorrow for everyone.

RECOMMENDED STANDARD DESCRIPTIONS

HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are based on the idea that everyone – no matter who they are or where they come from – should be treated fairly and with respect. They are the agreed standards to help all of us ensure our governments and businesses are accountable, and to help create a better future where everyone can live free and equal in dignity and rights.

THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations is a place for us to come together to work through our differences, seek accountability, and craft solutions to shared challenges. Ultimately its purpose is to foster friendship and peace on a healthy planet.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders are people who are trying to make the world fairer by protecting and promoting human rights. We can all play a role in encouraging and pushing for positive social change.

DIPLOMATS

Diplomats are people tasked to seek out and listen to diverse ideas and concerns and explain to their governments the possible solutions. Although not the ultimate decision makers, they can influence the shape of discussions and have a responsibility to ensure the options on the table respect human rights.



Anina Takeff

ADVOCATING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT THE UN

People who promote and protect human rights are an essential voice. Their perspectives, experience and expertise are vital in efforts to identify problems and find sustainable, community-owned and community-led solutions. We need to ensure they are heard and have a seat at the table.

TIPS & REMINDERS

Reacting to your opponents' agenda

REMINDERS

Try to do less of	Try to do more of
Focusing on the persecution inflicted on people who defend human rights	Focusing on what people who defend human rights are trying to achieve
Leading with policy detail	Leading with the values at stake
Focusing on what you are against	Focusing on what you are for
Talking about all of the things that are broken	Talking about creating solutions
Describing human rights defenders as a separate category of people	Explaining that anyone and everyone can help protect and promote human rights
Positioning human rights as being about an individual's rights and entitlements	Positioning human rights as an expression of how we want to treat each other or the type of society we want to live in
Focusing exclusively on government failings or corporate abuse	Explaining and describing what good government or business behaviour looks like
Talking about human rights as something which is given to people	Talking about human rights as something 'we do' or 'use' to make our lives better. They are something that we make happen, tools we develop and apply both as individuals and in groups, as well as a society at large
Talking about human rights as things that are taken away from people	Talking about authorities or corporations violating, infringing or not respecting people's human rights
Describing the UN as ineffective	Reminding people that the quality of the discussions and decisions at the UN are decided by the participants. The UN is only as good as its members
Describing trends in ambiguous terms like "shrinking civil society space"	Being specific about who or what is causing the problems
Leading with statistics or facts	Personalising examples before generalising with statistics

Making time, resources and capacity to conduct

your own proactive agenda

TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO COMMON ATTACKS

Don't try to negate your opponent's attacks by repeating them. For example, responding to accusations of foreign influence by saying "I am not controlled by foreign interests" will only serve to reinforce the suggestion. The general advice is, if a response is required, try to focus on what you are for and what you are doing – explain the rights you are defending and the benefits they deliver to people.

When statements claim that...



Respond with statements like

Human rights groups are puppets for foreign interests trying to hold us back. Human rights groups want everyone to have the opportunity to live free and dignified lives. We're working with communities to make sure government policies don't leave anyone behind, but instead benefit people and make our communities stronger.

Human rights groups are fronts for the political opposition.

Human rights groups are guided by the principles of freedom, respect, equality and dignity. It's their job to point out when laws and policies fail to uphold our shared commitment to these principles and to advocate for policies that do. Human rights are above politics – they are the agreed standards for how everyone should be treated.

Human rights defenders are nothing but trouble makers. People who defend human rights speak up for things like equality, justice, freedom, and peace. Politicians might not like hearing criticism, but making sure community views are heard and listened to is a key part of a government's job.

Human rights groups are against development and progress. We're all in this together. It's important to make sure that we're not excluding people from the benefits of development. Projects that harm people and their communities isn't development, it's corporate greed.

The LGBTIQ+ agenda is trying to destroy our families

We should all be free to be who we are, to lead our own lives in safety without discrimination, and be able to marry the person we love.

Human rights defenders are out-oftouch urban elites Human rights are all about seeking equality and fairness for everyone. Rather than let politicians divide our community, we need to recognise we're all in it together – we all want to be able to look after our loved ones and provide our children with opportunity. Whether it's ensuring free access to healthcare or quality education, human rights benefit the whole community.

Angry feminists just hate men.

All humans should be free and equal in their dignity and rights. Sexism is unfair, outdated and has no place in our community. Feminists are simply seeking a level playing field so women can enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men.

USING ACCURATE INFORMATION TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

Nothing is more infuriating than when our opponents simply lie and peddle disinformation. If it warrants a response, it needs to be a calm and careful one that doesn't reinforce or spread the disinformation you are trying to "debunk". Even traditional "myth busting" fact sheets and other similar materials have been proven to reinforce the very myths they are seeking to bust.

So what are we to do?

Rather than buy into the concept of terms like "fake news", focus on and discuss the importance of "accurate information". **The prevailing advice for correcting or reporting on false information** is to sandwich the lie between truth.

The "truth sandwich" looks like this:

SLICE ONE

Starts with the truth

Explains that a lie has been told and what it is

SLICE THREE

Returns to and ends with the truth

When we point out our opponent's tactics, some of its potency is removed – it's like exposing the trickery behind a magician's illusion. So whenever you report or talk about a lie, always flag first (not after) that you are about to say something that is a lie and where possible explain the motivations your opponents had for telling the lie.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking an interest in this guide. We hope it helps you in your endeavours to promote human rights and build support for the people who defend them.

To summarise the challenge for the human rights movement is to ensure the stories we tell:

- Are grounded in a recognition of our common humanity
- Lead with the values of the human rights movement - freedom, respect, equality, dignity, compassion and peace
- Highlight the benefits that human rights deliver
- Emphasise the motivations and objectives of people who defend human rights
- Define a clear problem and explain the relevant power imbalance
- Remind people that they do have the power to make a difference
- Provide a clear pathway to victory
- Describe the future we can create together

We might not be able to do everything each and every time, but we can steadily shift the dials in this direction. The more of us that do so, the sooner our narrative will be a more positive and forward-looking one that is more likely to build support for and participation in our movement. Good luck!



Zuo Biao Peng

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

ON FRAMING, PRIMING AND FORESIGHT

Laura Ligouri explains why messages of positive behaviour – instead of repeated exposure to accounts of abuse – could better lead to the changes we wish to see in the world.

➡ Brain research suggests emphasizing human rights abuses may perpetuate them

How psychology and neuroscience can transform human rights

Common Cause Foundation shows how exposure to value-laden messages primes our subsequent actions.

♠ A Guide to Values and Frames for Campaigners, Community Organisers, Civil Servants, Fundraisers, Educators, Social Entrepreneurs, Activists, Funders, Politicians, and everyone in between.

A FrameWorks Institute map of the frames and narratives used in the field of peacebuilding.

◆ About Peacebuilding: An Analysis of Organizational Communications

The Public Interest Research Centre surveys 200 social campaigners across Europe to tackle common framing challenges.

The narratives we need: Strengthening the stories that unite us

Simon Sinek's podcast on cognition and intention, being wired for survival and the lack of research around positive emotions.

A Bit Of Optimism: The One With Brené Brown

Krizna Gomez encourages organisations to use foresight in a bid to shift from reactive to proactive positions.

◆ JustLabs Guide to Foresight in the Social Change Field

ON NARRATIVES AND PROGRESSIVE MESSAGING

Anat Shenker-Osorio's seminal guide to understanding why the words that work, work.

Messaging this moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators

Anat Shenker-Osorio asks advocates about the vision they wish to inspire.

♠ A Brilliant Way of Living Our Lives: How to Talk About Human Rights

'The hope guy' Thomas Coombes on the five shifts involved in a hope-based communications strategy.

→ A Guide to Hope-based Communications

Illustrative advice on the pictures we want people to see when they see the words human rights.

 A Visual Communications Guide for Human Rights. Thomas Coombes, Edited by Sara Grossman and Fine Acts

Inspiring insights from a range of voices on the narrative frontlines. Curated by knowledge-broker Isabel Crabtree-Condor, with Oxfam and On Think Tanks.

- ◆ Part 1: Narrative power & collective action: conversations with people working to change narratives for social good.
- Part 2: Narrative power & collective action: conversations with people working to change narratives for social good.

Pushing the premise that what you do not simply what you say - is the narrative, this initiative counters populist strategies through culture, cooperation and community.

➡ Be The Narrative. How changing the narrative could revolutionize what it means to do human rights Krizna Gomez and Thomas Coombes, with JustLabs and The Fund for Global Human Rights

Recommendations from the UN's Human Rights Office on crafting narratives around migration

Seven key elements on building human rights-based narratives on migrants and migration

A direct and practical guide from the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights.

10 keys to effectively communicating human rights

ON CAMPAIGNS AND MOBILISATION

Compelling and effective activism from around the world on issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities (SOGI)

Sogi Campaigns

Changemakers share their creative approaches to social change, to collectively build on great campaigns.

♠ Mobilisation Lab

ON DISINFORMATION

In this 2021 report, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression examines the threats posed by disinformation to human rights, democratic institutions and development processes.

OHCHR's report on disinformation

This recent article on "The Conversation" clarifies the terminology and includes a handy infographic.

Misinformation, disinformation and hoaxes: What's the difference?

Written by experts in the fight against disinformation, this UNESCO handbook explores the very nature of journalism with modules on why trust matters, and more.

● Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism **Education and Training**

A practical guide focused on digital disinformation and how to identify and counter it.

How to fight lies, fake news, and chaos



APPENDIX: UN-SPECIFIC SENTIMENT HIGHLIGHTS

The following is a collection of insights drawn from the consultations with former diplomats, human rights practitioners and UN experts, conducted as part of the research for this guide.

With a view to gathering honest and authentic feedback, interviews were de-identified and survey participation was anonymous. As such, the guotes below are unattributed.

ENGAGING WITH THE UN

Participants generally reported that if activists wish to engage with the UN they have to be smart and strategic about it. Several also pointed out that it's the only table big enough for everyone, allowing for international dialogue in a bid to counter conflict and foster friendship. They felt that while global norms and standards always have too many cooks, it's ultimately better than to have no cooks at all.

Various participants highlighted that while States and civil society organisations may have different objectives and definitions of success, a crucial and circular relationship exists between national-level and UN-level advocacy.

"Diplomats are at the UN to represent their State's interests, but as soon as they're faced with everyone else's interests they need to adapt their mindset. My colleagues and I are constantly translating from the national to the international perspective and back"



"For activists on the ground, if the person who committed a violation is not brought to justice and no remedies are made, then there is no win. But UN resolutions are about establishing the normative framework for human rights. States will fight long and hard over phrases in a declaration. These have high symbolic meaning in the diplomatic community, but to an activist on the ground they're just words on paper. It's a different struggle.'

"If you don't establish it at the UN first then I have nothing to translate locally. The more firmly it's established at UN level, the better I can advance my arguments back in my country and say: I need to establish this as a right here because the UN has established it as a norm."

Some diplomats were negative on engaging with civil society organisations, claiming that the UN is not a space for defenders but an intergovernmental organisation, where governments alone should be negotiating issues of common interest. These participants also felt that in so far as their principal role was to represent their government's views, they should firmly hold the same views on human rights and defenders as their governments - and third parties should on no account expect them to stray from this position.

"My role as a diplomat is to represent my government and its views - that's the foundation of dialogue between States. If my government doesn't like HRDs, and I do, I should not be a diplomat for that government"

Others still were skeptical of the real accessibility given to defenders. These participants lamented that too many human rights defenders (HRDs) aren't aware they can address mechanisms like the Human Rights Council (HRC) and that, for those who do have the capacity to get to the council, the allotted speaking slots are inadequate.

"While the HRC has a very important tradition of allowing NGOs to address the Council and it is unique within the UN framework, it is not as if all HRDs have the ability to address the Council. Even with Covid-19 and virtual sessions (so no need to bear travel costs or nominate proxies) there are simply far too many defenders who don't even know about the HRC."

"The one or two-minute speaking slot is very difficult for 'non-professional' HRDs to testify and demand accountability".

UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

Defending human rights at national level and at the UN require different approaches. Most UN diplomats expressed a willingness to engage with the NGOs they perceive as trusted and credible ie those they see as presenting strong evidence from reliable sources as well as those who have some understanding of the system.

"You can't parachute someone used to acting at domestic level into the UN space and use the same language and tactics. You need to read the room and know who's who, which States are on your side or not. You need specialist, technical accompaniment. It's a double act."

International diplomacy is built on strategic alliances; participants commonly pointed out that in order to effectively engage diplomats on an issue, it is crucial advocates first understand capitals' relationship with the stakeholders involved.

"What we sometimes experience among CSOs and NGOs is a very limited understanding of how the actual work here at the UN is carried out, and of what is actually good feedback from civil society for diplomats to do their work. You can't answer a question that's built on a misperception of how the system functions."

"CSOs need to understand that the interlocutor at the UN will listen to them but the final decision needs to be reported back to the ministry. Our ministries are hierarchical and things go up and down the ladder to the mission representative and then are cabled to capital. So it can be very helpful if an NGO has a partner at capital and both are giving the same message."

For better engagement, diplomats recommended defenders give them practical information such as the scale of the problem, whether it had already been addressed domestically and with what outcome, and whether the same issue existed or had been resolved in countries with similar cultural or political contexts. Some diplomats from smaller missions with less capacity also stated they would appreciate specific training on human rights, and more guidance from civil society organisations on topics they have little knowledge of. Diplomats were often willing to receive exact suggestions from NGOs they trust for the wording of specific resolutions.

"Everyone wants to see concrete results of their work and we diplomats are no different. It would be great to be shown more on-the-ground examples to motivate us that change is possible even in a country or region such as ours."

STRATEGIES

Participants strongly urged civil society organisations (CSOs) wishing to engage with the UN to keep in mind its 'multi-layered' aspect. Several stated that a hostile or lecturing approach - whether between CSOs and diplomats or between diplomats themselves - seldom yields desired results.

"Some people are always pushing the limits, asking for more accountability mechanisms or for everyone to criticise things. Sometimes it's valid but sometimes there could be more sensitivity to thinking of context and to how we actually achieve the most. If you're always pushing the limits, you're going to lose some support along the way."

Various participants referred to the fact that all governments, somewhere, sometime, have violated human rights, pointing out that whilst some are much better than others, no government is squeaky clean and all can strive to be better. They advised that fellow diplomats wishing to advance human rights should admit when having difficulty in complying with certain conventions in their own country and be open to sharing best practices on how to overcome these.

However, participants specified that these types of conversation are only possible at private meetings and side events around the UN - where informal, back-channel diplomacy plays an essential role.

"Being honest about our own limitations helps in dialogue with other countries. It facilitates honest debate. But it's easier to create an honest space under the radar, where it's just between States and not in an open UN context."

"The relationships one creates with colleagues of other countries (friends and foes) via corridor or secretive contacts can truly assist in bettering the world."

Several participants strongly recommended adopting different communication strategies depending on who you're talking to, where you're talking and what you want to achieve.

"Civil society organisations need to learn to adapt their language. You need to be aware if you're talking in a closed forum, a UN forum, bilaterally, and what would be most effective for country X - to have constructive or more direct criticism?"

"It's audience-dependent and we're always 'consciously sloppy' with our wording – based on who we're talking with we'll know to use the terms HRDs, or activists, or environmental defenders or community leaders..."

DEFENDING AND PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS

The vast majority of the diplomats we consulted said they hope to leave the world in a better state for future generations. Almost all believe that human rights don't take care of themselves and need to be promoted and defended when they are threatened, and most of them agreed that the sustained actions of people who defend human rights have contributed to the advancement of societies the world over.

Positive associations with historical human rights movements and defenders circled around notions of quiet tenacity. Terms used included 'non-violent advocacy', 'perseverance and principled stands', 'persistence, dignity and determination'.

When we asked diplomats for the three words they associate with contemporary defenders, notions of courage and expert voice were common.

It's interesting to compare this response with a recent survey across English-language media by Media Cloud, an open-source platform that tracks the content of online news, in which the top three words associated with the term 'human rights defender' throughout 2020-21 were 'crimes', 'protest' and 'violations'.

Finally, we asked diplomats to tell us whether the individual story of a frontline defender had ever inspired them to reinforce their actions. Here's an uplifting selection of answers.

"Several stories have inspired me to push harder to see change and achieve justice, because engaging with these individuals raises awareness and helps see a reality that we are not always aware of."

"Their story showed me how one person or movement can make a difference and it was a reminder to stick to values. It also helped me focus more on those arguments and the severity of the problem."

"Authentic testimony is always more compelling than dry data and sometimes a story will have personal resonance."

"I'm inspired by any person or movement that can have an impact on the ground and raise awareness of how things are among the people, and make them be part of the change."



A SEAT AT THE TABLE

A guide to crafting effective narratives at the UN about human rights and the people who defend them



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