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DE OBSERVACION Y DEFENSA
DE LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS
ZACATE GRANDE.

Implementation of the Swiss Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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Human rights defenders (HRDs) put their own lives and the lives of their families at very high risk in order to promote and protect the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of another individual, or group of individuals, in various contexts. For instance, in Guatemala, HRDs can be criminalized when they try to stop the state and international companies from exploiting natural resources on community land; in Sri Lanka, they are arrested as soon as they publicly claim the political rights of minorities; and, in Russia, organizations are blacklisted if they are too critical towards the government. Although these incidents seem to be far removed from what is happening in Switzerland, we all have a responsibility and a role to play in protecting HRDs. In acknowledgement of this fact, in December 2013, the Swiss Government issued the Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (hereafter: the Swiss guidelines). This initial step in the fight against human rights violations, which is warmly welcomed by all partners, is only meaningful if the guidelines are put into practice. For successful guideline implementation, two things are crucial: a) all partners (government, civil society and the private sector) must work together and assume their respective responsibilities; b) the guidelines have to be contextualized and adapted to country-specific realities and characteristics.

On 12 June 2014, the Centre for Peacebuilding (KOFF) at swisspeace organized a conference on the protection of HRDs, which brought together HRDs from Guatemala, Honduras, Serbia, Russia and Sri Lanka, Swiss government officials and representatives of Swiss civil society in order to share information and lessons learned from these contexts, and to give consideration to the different challenges that exist when it comes to HRD protection and, in particular, implementation of the Swiss guidelines. The key questions considered within

the country-specific workshops at the conference were: What are the main challenges for HRDs? How can the Swiss guidelines be contextualized? How can different partners reinforce implementation of these guidelines?

The Swiss guidelines cannot be put into practice by one actor alone; they have to be taken forward by all actors together, each playing their respective role(s).

The KOFF conference proved that such occasions, where different partners share their points of view and sometimes agree to disagree in an engaged dialog, are a necessary step in implementing the Swiss guidelines. The latter cannot be put into practice by one actor alone; they have to be taken forward by all actors together, each playing their respective role(s).

This edition of the KOFF Essential gives a summary of opportunities and challenges for the implementation of the Swiss guidelines from a civil society perspective. The country-specific, practice-informed as well as practice-oriented recommendations are addressed to government representatives, Swiss civil society, local partners and HRDs. The Essential builds on a wealth of experience from the conference participants, including the courageous actions of HRDs themselves.

Sidonia Gabriel
Project Director KOFF

2 The Protection of Human Rights Defenders in a Global Context

2.1 Global challenges in the protection of human rights defenders

HRDs are subject to violations of their human rights in every region of the world, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Their situation is often especially precarious in countries where there are legal restrictions on the work they do; when legal and/or institutional protections and guarantees of human rights are not fully assured or do not exist at all; and in case of armed conflict or severe civil unrest. Violations most commonly target HRDs directly, or the organizations and mechanisms through which they work. Occasionally, violations target family members, as a means of applying indirect pressure. Some HRDs are at greater risk because of the nature of the rights they seek to protect. Women HRDs can confront risks that are gender-specific and are, therefore, more exposed than other HRDs.

Participants at the KOFF conference identified the following areas in which HRD protection is particularly challenging: transitional justice and the fight against impunity; women's rights; the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people; minorities and refugees; economic, social and cultural rights, especially in relation to large-scale development projects, such as the extractive industry, which affect the right to land, water, health, among others. The HRDs present at the conference emphasized that people working in these areas are at great risk of being the target of killings, torture, beatings, death threats, harassment and defamation, arbitrary arrest and detention, as well as restrictions on their freedom of movement, expression, association and assembly. Normally, these acts of aggression are in violation of both international and national law. However, some countries adopt restrictive domestic legislation that hinders the work of HRDs and is often used to criminalize their activity. Therefore, an increasing risk for

HRDs is to become victims of false accusations and unfair legal trial and conviction. Aggressions are often supported by a hostile public discourse and very negative images in the media that depict HRDs as stupid, anti-development, traitors or terrorists. All of these violations against HRDs come with a high psychological and social cost, which cannot be underestimated when referring to challenges and risks inherent in these situations.

Due to the variety of challenges in HRD-related contexts, protection needs to be adapted to a particular context or situation and should encompass a broad range of activities at different levels.

Due to the variety of challenges in HRD-related contexts, protection needs to be adapted to a particular context or situation and should encompass a broad range of activities at different levels. Policies and legislation, including their enforcement, are as important as concrete and practical support for HRDs in difficult circumstances. Different actors can play differing roles, complementing each other's efforts to enhance effective HRD protection all over the world.

2.2 The role of different actors

Even though the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders emphasizes that everyone has duties towards and within the community, and encourages everybody to be a HRD, it stresses: "that

the prime responsibility and duty to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms lie with the State.” The responsibilities of states include a non-discriminative legislation, jurisdiction and administration that ensures that all persons are able to enjoy all civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights and freedoms in practice; the creation and development of independent national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights; prompt and impartial investigation of alleged violations of human rights; remedy for victims of human rights violations; the promotion of public understanding of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; and facilitation of the teaching of human rights at all levels of formal education and professional training.

The elaboration and publication of guidelines on the protection of HRDs is, therefore, an expression of political will and a first step towards assuming these responsibilities. Guidelines on the protection of HRDs were issued by the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), by Norway, and in December 2013 by Switzerland (see chapter 3). Although guidelines indicate that a policy exists, they do not protect HRDs per se. Implementation is needed in order for them to be effective. However, guideline implementation is not a task that can be fulfilled by state actors alone. There is a need for co-operation with other actors such as multilateral institutions, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs), and national and local civil society organizations (CSOs). Whereas multilateral organizations and NHRIs provide a broader framework for HRD protection, as well as room for exchange and common learning related to overarching opportunities, challenges and developments, NGOs/CSOs are able to provide in-depth, context-specific, knowledge and experiences as well as close contacts with HRDs.

3 The Swiss Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

3.1 Developing a systematic approach towards the protection of human rights defenders

The Swiss Government has been engaged in HRD protection for a long time and at different levels. A representative of the Swiss administration participating in the KOFF conference explained that efforts are being made to raise awareness of HRD issues through internal mainstreaming of the topic, integration of the subject into bilateral talks and into the human rights dialogs that Switzerland has established with several countries, as well as through activities conducted by Swiss representations abroad. The Swiss guidelines are, therefore, a systematization of what has been done until now on an *ad hoc* basis dependant on the commitment of individual staff in the Swiss administration.

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The guidelines should contribute to bringing HRD issues forward within the Swiss administration, emphasizing their importance among different competing priorities in Swiss foreign policy. Even though the protection of HRDs as a long-term goal is not in contradiction to other Swiss objectives and interests,

it can be sensitive to take a stand in favour of HRDs in specific contexts and cases, especially in relation to conflicting human rights and economic or migration policy interests. In this regard, Switzerland tries to balance different priorities, and increase dialog with non-state actors.

In order to be a visible actor in the field of HRD protection, partnerships are important. Therefore, from the perspective of the Swiss Government, cooperation by all actors is paramount in order to implement the Swiss guidelines and, thereby, improve HRD protection. Furthermore, since the content of the Swiss guidelines is based on the experience of several Swiss representations, and has been drafted in consultation with several Swiss NGOs, it is important for these stakeholders to report back in order to keep the guidelines up to date.

3.2 Effective implementation of the Swiss guidelines: recommendations and good practice

In four workshops at the KOFF conference, actors from the Swiss Government, Swiss and international NGOs, national/local CSOs and individual HRDs discussed the relevance and implementation of the Swiss guidelines in the context of Guatemala/Honduras, Russia, Serbia and Sri Lanka. During the workshops, it became clear that guideline implementation can only be effective if it is context-specific. Policies and actions that contribute to HRD protection in one context can be harmful to HRDs in another context; actors playing a positive role in HRD protection in one region can be involved in human rights violations against HRDs in another region; instruments available in the guidelines may be used successfully in one area without being applicable in another area. Even though the situations, challenges and actors in HRD protection differ according to the context, quite a few recommendations for effective guideline implementation identified in the workshops are similar.

3.2.1 Recommendations to Swiss representations abroad

Context analysis for targeted implementation: In order to be able to protect HRDs in a given context, it is important to be aware of the historical background; relevant actors and institutions; power relations and dynamics within the political system and society; prevailing human rights violations and threats to HRDs; and other relevant dynamics and structures. It is, therefore, necessary to conduct a thorough context, conflict and human rights analysis in order to identify the needs on the ground, entry points for Swiss actors and collaboration possibilities.

Dissemination and information: In order for the Swiss guidelines to be an effective instrument for HRD protection, all relevant actors (embassy staff, international and Swiss NGOs, national and local CSOs, and HRDs) need to be aware of their existence and content. Dissemination and information about the guidelines among all relevant actors is, therefore, crucial. This includes the translation of the guidelines into national and local languages.

Information sharing and collaborative network: Information exchange and analysis should be based on a reliable network able to provide sound information on the prevailing HRD situation in a specific context, relevant actors and their relations, as well as incidents and dynamics that affect the life and work of HRDs. The Swiss representations abroad should contribute to the creation of such information networks by collaborating with: other foreign representations, multinational organizations such as the UN or OSCE, NHRIs, international and Swiss NGOs, national and local CSOs and individual HRDs from different parts of the country in question. Special emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of marginalized actors with few contacts with the international community.

Legitimation of human rights defenders' work: In many regions of the world, HRDs are increasingly stigmatized and criminalized through the medium of a very negative discourse spread by public officials and the media. In order to counter any negative narratives and give legitimation to the work of HRDs, it is important to make support for human rights visible in the public domain. Staff from Swiss representations abroad can, for example: visit HRDs and their organizations in their local contexts; invite HRDs to speak at meetings or conferences; attend court hearings against HRDs and issue related public statements in the media. In order not to exacerbate social divisions, all of these measures should be based on a strategic and holistic approach, which pays particular attention to HRDs from rural areas that are difficult to access - who are often less out-spoken and less familiar with human rights proceedings and language - as well as HRDs at special risk due to the nature of the rights they defend.

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Practical and concrete support: Besides the legitimation of their work on a discourse level, HRDs in difficult situations need practical and often financial support. The funding for small projects available at Swiss

embassies could be used to support projects that promote protection by, for example, providing legal assistance to criminalized HRDs, or offering psychological support to HRDs and their families. Local initiatives should be given priority in order to strengthen capacities and promote the involvement of grassroots civil society.

3.2.2 Recommendations to the Swiss administration in Bern

The ability and capacities of the Swiss representations abroad to protect HRDs depend on the support and backing received from the Swiss administration in Bern.

The ability and capacities of the Swiss representations abroad to effectively protect HRDs depend to a large extent on the support and backing received from the Swiss administration in Bern. The following recommendations are, therefore, addressed to employees at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) in Bern:

Dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building: With the elaboration and publication of the Swiss guidelines, Switzerland has taken a first step towards effective protection of HRDs. However, the process has only just begun. In order to achieve coherence in Swiss

foreign policy, it is important to raise awareness among government actors about HRD issues and strengthen their capacity to comply with the guidelines. This is especially important for actors outside the Human Security Division (HSD), who are not in touch with these issues automatically (e.g. those within the political directorates, foreign trade policy or migration sectors). Further dissemination of the Swiss guidelines and related awareness raising and capacity building of Swiss foreign policy actors should be promoted through institutionalized mechanisms such as the incorporation of a chapter on HRDs in the annual report compiled by embassies for the Swiss administration in Bern, or the inclusion of HRD issues in the training afforded to future diplomats.

Revision and adaption of the guidelines: In light of the fact that global HRD situations are country-specific and dynamic, the guidelines should be open to modification in response to the experiences and recommendations of different actors. The regular meetings held between actors of the Swiss administration and NGOs/CSOs should provide an open space for sharing experiences on guideline implementation and engaging in discussion on the need for guideline revision, or adaptation, according to changing circumstances and/or priorities.

Allocation of financial and human resources: In order to create the necessary institutional structures to make the Swiss guidelines a useful instrument for HRD protection, an appropriate allocation of funds and human resources is indispensable. The amount of resources needed for dissemination, implementation, monitoring and revision/modification of the Swiss guidelines, as well as for exchange and collaboration between different actors, cannot be underestimated. The need for context-specific implementation gives further weight to this point. Staff from the Swiss administration in Bern, as well as staff in the Swiss

representations abroad, must dedicate time to conducting a thorough context analysis and, thereafter, take practical steps on the ground, adapted to context-specific needs and in collaboration with relevant actors. It is proposed that a selected number of countries be equipped with the required resources to pilot implementation of the Swiss guidelines. The experiences in these pilot countries could then serve as lessons learnt for HRD protection in other places.

3.2.3 Recommendations to civil society actors

Civil society actors should seek to create spaces for exchange and cooperation at all levels in order to act coherently and use their mutual strengths in the most fruitful way possible.

Exchange and cooperation: In some contexts, civil society is rather fragmented and does not cooperate sufficiently to define and achieve a common goal. In particular, there seems to be a gap between international and national/local human rights organizations, both of which have special roles and opportunities that are essential for effective HRD protection: international NGOs usually have better access to international and multilateral institutions and actors, and are able to raise awareness at a global level about the difficult situations faced by HRDs; national and local organizations on the other hand, have close contacts with HRDs in specific contexts and can provide first-hand information about the situation on the ground. Civil society actors should,

therefore, seek to create spaces for exchange and cooperation at all levels in order to act coherently and use their mutual strengths in the most fruitful way possible.

Investigation and information sharing: The decision by Swiss representatives to become active in a specific HRD case depends very much on the existence of reliable information or previous contacts with HRDs at risk. Civil society actors should focus on making well-investigated information available, sharing their experiences on the ground with Swiss state representatives and other like-minded diplomatic actors. It is also important for HRDs with close relations to Swiss and other foreign representatives in their country to support less known peers, facilitating contact between them and foreign state actors.

Monitoring and accountability: NGOs and CSOs should participate in monitoring the implementation of the Swiss guidelines and, if necessary, their revision and potential modification. In a constructive dialog with the Swiss administration in Bern and representations abroad, civil society actors can play a crucial role by exchanging experiences, insisting on the implementation of the guidelines and asking for coherence in Swiss foreign policy.

3.3 Implementation of the guidelines: Context-specific recommendations

The four context-specific workshops at the KOFF conference – on Guatemala/Honduras, Russia, Serbia and Sri Lanka – are one step in an ongoing long-term process that needs to involve all relevant actors and aims to improve protection of HRDs in these countries. The selection of the four contexts was based on three criteria: 1. Diversity of challenges: covering a broad range of social, political and economic situations,

linked in diverse ways to the issue of HRD protection; 2. Window of opportunity for Switzerland: providing special opportunities and entry points for Switzerland to engage in HRD protection; 3. Engagement of Swiss civil society: existing special interest and active engagement by Swiss NGOs. The workshops brought together HRDs from the four contexts, Swiss government officials and representatives of Swiss civil society in order to share information and lessons learned from these countries. The participants discussed the different opportunities and challenges for the work of HRDs in the four contexts, as well as the relevance of the Swiss guidelines and the contextualization needed for effective HRD protection. As an outcome, workshop participants made recommendations to the different actors on how to reinforce implementation of the Swiss guidelines in the four specific contexts.

At the workshop on Guatemala and Honduras, one HRD from Guatemala and two from Honduras, members of Swiss NGOs working on human rights issues in these two countries, as well as one representative of the Swiss administration, discussed the situation and major challenges for HRDs in the two countries and formulated recommendations to enhance protection through effective implementation of the Swiss guidelines.

4.1 Background and context

The institutional panorama for implementation of the Swiss guidelines is promising: the Swiss ambassador to Guatemala and Honduras is committed to HRD protection and takes initiative e.g. meeting personally with HRDs to present the guidelines and embassy staff attending court hearings in which HRDs are being prosecuted. Even though in Honduras there is no Swiss diplomatic representation, staff at the office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in that country are in a position to promote implementation of the guidelines in collaboration with the Swiss Embassy in Guatemala. In both countries, there are active CSOs, as well as many Swiss and international NGOs ready to support the efforts of government actors to promote more effective HRD protection.

4.2 Main challenges and experiences

While the institutional setting for the implementation of the Swiss guidelines is favourable, the political, social and economic situation in Guatemala and Honduras is concerning. HRDs working in the following political and social sectors, or defending very specific rights, are especially at risk:

Economic, social and cultural rights: In Guatemala and Honduras, some local - often indigenous - communities defend their territory against large-scale development projects such as mines, hydro-electric dams or

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monocultures for the production of biofuels. These projects are part of national development strategies, which focus on extraction, exploitation and export of natural resources. People and groups who are against these projects are at risk if they defend their economic, social and cultural rights, such as the right to water, land, food and health; or their indigenous rights, such as the right to self-determination, including the right to information and consultation.

The right to truth, justice, reparations and non-recurrence: Transitional justice, dealing with the past and the fight against impunity are ongoing struggles in both countries. Actors within the judicial system, such as lawyers and judges, as well as individuals and organizations working in these thematic areas, are often threatened and at risk.

Sexual and reproductive rights: Individuals and organizations defending women's rights and the rights of LGBTI people are particularly affected by stigmatization and the normalization of violence. In both countries, increased violence against women and its legitimation through a discriminatory discourse and culture have been evidenced.

Right to freedom of opinion and expression: Journalists working on sensitive issues such as land and resource conflicts, or corruption, are at high risk of becoming victims of violent acts, especially in Honduras. The right to free expression and freedom of the press are reduced to a minimum both in Guatemala and Honduras. People who work on these issues live in great danger.

Patterns and strategies in the obstruction of the work carried out by HRDs can be summarized as follows:

Threats and physical attacks: Individuals defending human rights and the collective rights of indigenous peoples often receive death threats and become victims of physical attacks - either directly themselves or their family members. Furthermore, in strategically important rural areas, families and communities are confronted with increasing militarization and are often victims of forced eviction and expropriation. The lack of investigation and the climate of impunity increase the vulnerability of HRDs and communities affected by these kinds of violations.

Criminalization of social protest: In both countries, there has been an intensification of stigmatization, criminalization and prosecution of HRDs. Moreover, legal reforms have been introduced that legitimize the criminalization and prosecution of social protests. Generally, HRDs are disadvantaged compared to plaintiffs because the latter, belonging to powerful groups in most cases (national and transnational companies or wealthy land owners), have more financial resources to file lawsuits. For most HRDs, such legal processes imply a financial and time investment, as well as psychological cost, that are beyond their capacities.

Public defamation through the media: The media transmit a very negative narrative about HRDs using a distortion of facts and defamation. For example, HRDs

are depicted as members of radical and destabilizing groups, and are labelled as stupid, anti-development, traitors, manipulated by foreigners; some are even called terrorists. Since economically powerful groups have a monopoly on the media, this negative discourse against HRDs dominates and room for alternatives is minimal. Even officials at the highest levels make public statements that delegitimize the work of HRDs.

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4.3 Recommendations for the implementation of the Swiss guidelines

4.3.1 Recommendations to the Swiss representation in Guatemala and Honduras

Analysis and information: There is a need for a thorough situation analysis to identify trends in the obstruction of work carried out by HRDs and define the most important and effective entry points for strategic interventions. Swiss actors should cooperate more actively in establishing a reliable information network in order to share experiences and assessments rapidly in the event of an emergency, as well as to contribute to the adoption of a strategic approach to HRD protection. In addition to

Swiss actors, this network should include the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and local, national and international organizations dedicated to HRD protection.

Intervention and accompaniment: When the civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights of HRDs are violated, it is important that the Swiss authorities - in coordination with other international actors - intervene with the instruments listed in the Swiss guidelines. These include accompanying HRDs in their activities; visiting communities and people under pressure; attending court hearings and/or making public statements on specific cases. These actions should be given adequate visibility in order to contribute to the legitimation of the work done by HRDs and counteract the negative discourse in the national media. Conflict-sensitive actions require that special consideration be given to the particular vulnerability of HRDs in rural areas and indigenous communities that have little knowledge of human rights proceedings and language and few contacts with the international community.

Conflict-sensitive actions require that special consideration be given to the particular vulnerability of HRDs in rural areas and indigenous communities.

Financial assistance: Using funding available for small projects at the Embassy in Guatemala, Switzerland can support local and national initiatives that promote HRD protection e.g. legal assistance for HRDs who are being criminalized or psycho-social support.

4.3.2 Recommendations to the Swiss administration in Bern

Resources and capacity building: For effective implementation of the Swiss guidelines, it is essential to allocate the necessary resources to the relevant sectors of the Swiss administration in Bern, as well as to the Swiss representations in both countries (Embassy in Guatemala, SDC in Honduras). It is important to have competent staff at all levels with sufficient resources to facilitate a thorough situation analysis and, subsequently, to implement context-appropriate measures. The following activities could support implementation of the Swiss guidelines: dissemination and discussion of the guidelines among Swiss actors and their allies in Guatemala, Honduras and Switzerland; a strategic focus given to HRDs in Central America by the HSD and the appointment of a Human Security Advisor to the region; stronger involvement of SDC in Honduras in the implementation of the guidelines.

Coherence: In both Guatemala and Honduras, Switzerland is well known for its commitment to human rights and peace. The various actors in Swiss foreign policy should act coherently, applying standards and values related to human rights protection in all of their activities, especially with regard to public security forces and economic issues, such as free trade agreements and large investment projects. The establishment of internal mechanisms in Swiss government institutions can support the promotion of institutional coherence.

4.3.3 Recommendations to Swiss NGOs and national/local CSOs

Operationalization of implementation: The workshop participants from CSOs and NGOs working in and on Guatemala and Honduras have committed themselves to elaborating a strategic work plan – to be finalized in the next six months – which will lead to a project on implementation and monitoring of the Swiss guidelines. Key organizations and networks in the project are: the International Platform against Impunity and the Forum of International Non-Governmental Organizations (FONGI) in Guatemala; the International Cooperation Agencies (ACI), specifically ACI – Human Rights, in Honduras; the Swiss Forum for Human Rights and Peace in Guatemala and the Honduras Forum Switzerland in Switzerland. There will be dialog and close collaboration, on the conceptualization and implementation of the project, with national/local actors in Guatemala and Honduras as well as with Swiss authorities in Bern and their representatives in both countries.

5 Serbia

In the workshop on Serbia, two Serbian HRDs, four representatives of the Swiss administration, one OSCE representative and six members of non-Serbian NGOs working in Serbia sought to address the following questions through in-depth discussions: What kinds of human rights violations prevail in Serbia, and which sectors/topics/activities are especially risky for HRDs? Which experiences and insights exist in relation to HRD protection, in particular with regard to cooperation between different actors? What challenges do different actors (HRDs, CSOs, NGOs, FDFA) face?

5.1 Background and context

The Serbian HRDs participating in the workshop welcomed condemnations by the international community of attacks on Sonja Biserko, chair of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. Unfortunately, the only publicly visible response to these calls of protest came from Switzerland. The Swiss Embassy in Belgrade has organized a visit to Serbia by Swiss journalists, who will also take part in an OSCE Task Force event. These activities can facilitate an exchange of information on human rights issues.

The Serbian HRDs participating in the workshop agreed that Switzerland could do even more and make use of its current unique position in the country. Having an ambassador and heading the OSCE mission in Serbia gives Swiss actors access to Serbian government officials. However, the contacts and interactions of Embassy personnel are often limited to other international and diplomatic actors, with few links to national and local organizations. Moreover, sometimes they neglect human rights issues in favour of economic interests.

Representatives of the Swiss administration at the workshop explained that personnel in Serbia enjoy little room for manoeuvre, let alone initiative. The Swiss representation in Serbia receives instructions from Bern, especially when an issue is controversial and Swiss interests are deemed to be at stake. In terms of funding the work done by HRDs, it should be recognized that Swiss representations operate under financial constraints. Swiss funding possibilities will never approach those of the United States (US) or UN.

5.2 Main challenges and experiences

Serbia presents a particularly important and complex case study as far as HRD protection is concerned, which can help observers to understand other countries in transition. Serbia characterizes itself today as a democratic state for all its citizens and an integral part of the international community. The reality is that HRDs are harassed, threatened and abducted in a way that is more sophisticated and subtle than in other less developed countries. Moreover, this aggression is not necessarily evident to outsiders, with the consequence that the international community is not always fully aware of what is going on in Serbia.

[The reality is that HRDs are harassed, threatened and abducted in a way that is more sophisticated and subtle than in other less developed countries.](#)

The newly elected ruling party in Serbia gives the appearance of having changed government policies for the better on several key issues, including its attitude toward the EU. However, the reality is different. The last months have seen an escalation in human rights violations and attacks on HRDs. Human rights abuses are committed at the national level easily and with impunity. There is no debate in parliament and political opposition is silenced.

The national media is now completely state-controlled. Not only is it flagrantly censored, but campaigns against HRDs are also organized via the media. HRDs are portrayed as traitors or terrorists acting against the interests of the Serbian nation. The majority of social media voices inside Serbia are against HRDs and openly threaten them. Non-state actors support government policy. Some highly influential non-state representatives or organizations (such as professors or churches) function as government spokespersons, taking a nationalistic and conservative line. Not surprisingly, the general public has a negative opinion of HRDs.

HRDs and CSOs are in danger of being targeted by the government. When they broach politically sensitive issues, or criticize government policies, or when important political decisions are pending, attacks on HRDs are almost inevitable. Government officials maintain that if they deem it necessary, they are willing and able to shut down a given activist or organization at any time.

The introduction, in 2009, of the Law on the Prohibition of Racial Discrimination in the Republic of Serbia was a positive development for HRD protection. The actual prosecution of cases is, however, long drawn out or non-existent. The ombudsman, equality commissioner and information commissioner are reliable because they implement legal dispositions and their

work is in support of HRDs. They are, however, notoriously overworked and deliberately under-funded, and their recommendations are ignored. Without reform of Serbia's police, security system and independent public institutions there will be no real protection of HRDs. And there is a lack of political will to implement such reforms.

Those HRDs most often subject to threats and reprisals are women and LGBTI activists.

Those HRDs most often subject to threats and reprisals are women and LGBTI activists. HRDs in small, rural communities are also extremely vulnerable because they have no access to protection mechanisms.

5.3 Recommendations for the implementation of the Swiss guidelines

Representatives of the Swiss administration at the workshop noted that although the Swiss guidelines were only issued in December 2013, efforts have already been made to promote them. The Swiss administration is seeking to develop a coherent, country-specific approach to the protection of HRDs in Serbia, but implementation is still in its early stages.

5.3.1 Recommendations to the Swiss representation in Serbia

Draw up an implementation strategy for the Embassy in Belgrade: That is not dependent on individuals committed to HRD protection but, rather, is grounded in administrative structures and processes. The initiative should include close collaboration with international NGOs, as well as national and local CSOs and HRDs.

Maintain direct and permanent contact with HRDs and CSOs: On the ground in order to identify HRDs at risk (persons/organizations) and prevent them from being attacked. Switzerland should strive to protect HRDs not only in Belgrade, but in other parts of Serbia where they are particularly at risk, giving special attention to women and LGBTI activists.

Promote protection of HRDs publicly: By putting pressure on the Serbian Government not to repress civil society and to ensure freedom and plurality of the media. Switzerland should react rapidly and publicly against attacks on HRDs, condemn impunity and/or delays in enforcing punitive measures against attackers, and show respect for HRD work officially by, for example, monitoring legal proceedings.

Organize regular meetings: As well as informal low-key exchanges, between diplomats, HRDs and CSOs in Serbia in order to facilitate information flow and discuss next steps in the implementation of the Swiss guidelines.

Involve OSCE and other multilateral organizations: By arranging meetings with OSCE representatives in order to keep them informed about the HRD situation.

5.3.2 Recommendations to the Swiss administration in Bern

Allocate resources to the Embassy: Providing the Swiss representation in Serbia with sufficient authority and means to monitor the HRD situation and, if necessary, intervene to protect. Building coalitions and pooling funds with other representations in Serbia is important in order to support projects that defend common human rights values and interests.

[Sensitize and train diplomats in HRD issues](#): Based around the Swiss guidelines before sending them to Serbia, or other representations abroad. This includes becoming better aware of non-state actors who act as proxies for the Serbian Government in attacks on HRDs.

[Set up a review process](#): to monitor implementation of the Swiss guidelines and measure their impact. The guidelines should be considered as a work-in-progress and be subject to revision in line with developments and experiences in Serbia and Switzerland.

[Keep human rights issues separate from politics and business](#): By defining some human rights violations as red lines for diplomatic interventions, regardless of the political or commercial consequences to Switzerland.

5.3.3 [Recommendations to Swiss NGOs and national/local CSOs in Serbia](#)

[Establish a Serbian civil society / HRD working group](#): tasked with reviewing implementation of the Swiss guidelines in Serbia and holding the Embassy accountable.

6 [Russia](#)

Participants of the Russia workshop included five Russian HRDs based in Russia and two HRDs living in the *diaspora* in Switzerland, two representatives from the Swiss administration and six from Swiss NGOs working on issues related to human rights in general with a particular focus on Russia. Their reflections and recommendations can be summarized as follows:

6.1 [Background and context](#)

Over the past few years, work in the field of human rights in Russia has become increasingly difficult. The human rights organizations present at the workshop described increasing state control of civil society and the disappearance of democratic institutions. Political opposition and media critical of the government are often suppressed under the pretext that they are exploited by the West, in particular by the US. Since the crisis in Ukraine, Russian state media has repeatedly warned against a rife, overly Western-minded civil society, which they portray as the nurturing ground for a civil war. Although in Moscow HRDs are relatively protected due to the presence of bilateral partners and international NGOs, the situation has become very difficult for organizations in the peripheral regions and smaller towns.

In light of the crisis in Ukraine and Switzerland's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2014, the Swiss administration's relations with the Russian Government have been constructive. Switzerland holds an annual, bilateral, high-level dialog with Russia, based on a joint memorandum of understanding (MoU). In the framework of this dialog, HRD-related issues are raised with the relevant Russian ministries. The MoU, however, only covers intergovernmental dialog - civil actors are neither included in discussions nor regularly updated.

6.2 Main challenges and experiences

During the workshop, three inter-linked main challenges for HRDs were identified:

The law on foreign agents has dramatically reduced the space for freedom of expression and other fundamental human rights.

Legislation on foreign agents: In 2012, following the re-election of President Putin and related post-election protests, a package of restrictive laws was passed, including a law on foreign agents. The legislation was set up to control not only potential foreign interests channeled through CSOs, but also – and in particular – to prevent civil activism from within the ranks of Russia’s own population. The enacted legislation interferes with the independence of CSOs. It requires all national/local CSOs that receive foreign donations and engage in so called “political activity” to register as foreign agents, and undergo administratively complicated procedures, including extensive auditing processes. Furthermore, their activities have to be announced to the Ministry of Justice and other supervising authorities. Criminalization and administrative penalty policies are also used to restrict advocacy activities and freedom of speech. The law on foreign agents has dramatically reduced the space for freedom of expression and other fundamental human rights. HRDs are defamed and stigmatized because of their work. CSO offices are raided and then fined and forced to register under the law. The legislation also touches on the freedom of assembly and movement as certain

conferences and demonstrations are prohibited. Recently, the Ministry of Justice was given the legal power to forcefully put a CSO on the list of foreign agents without any prior court proceeding. The law has already led to the closure of many organizations, which find it impossible to continue with their daily work once they have been labelled (stigmatized) as foreign agents. Some of these organizations continue as informal organizations or as full-profit businesses; others decide to leave Russia.

State control of the media: Many independent media providers have been closed down. Those that remain – mainly state media – are very restricted in their criticism of government policies. Often, the media portrays independent human rights organizations as working in the interests of the US. The constant negative campaigning against HRDs has impacted their public reputation. Civil society has limited access to credible information. Even journalists and bloggers who use social media are arrested. Under the increasing pressure of the foreign agents’ law, many CSOs are undergoing a form of self-censorship that further weakens their role.

Intimidation and arbitrary arrest of individual HRDs: Over the past few years, intimidation of HRDs has increased. There have been several cases of physical attacks (some of them leading to death); forced disappearances and arbitrary arrest, especially in the North Caucasus; torture, and even death, while under arrest.

6.3 Recommendations for the implementation of the Swiss Guidelines

The Swiss guidelines are a useful instrument; however, they need to be adjusted to align with the socio-political context in Russia in order that areas for improvement can be identified. The following recommendations were proposed by workshop participants:

6.3.1 Recommendations to the Swiss representation in Russia

In the current situation, where it is challenging to talk publicly about human rights violations and impunity, information exchange between bi- and multilateral partners is crucial.

Institutionalize exchange with CSOs: To link the ongoing high-level human rights dialog between Switzerland and Russia with information gathered by CSOs at the grassroots level in order to create an exchange of information between civil society - in Moscow and the regions - and the Swiss Embassy, bringing accountability into these bilateral consultations. In the current situation, where it is challenging to talk publicly about human rights violations and impunity, information exchange between bi- and multilateral partners is crucial. It is also important to connect CSOs to this information flow in order to help them to plan appropriate responses. Switzerland should request information from CSOs, meet them before consultations and debrief them after consultations (debriefing could also be by Russia). Switzerland should organize regular informal meetings with HRDs in Moscow and other cities.

Issue public statements: On human rights violations in Russia. Statements should be issued by the Embassy in a timely manner. Switzerland should make use of diplomatic pressure, putting HRD protection on the agenda in all meetings, including when high-level Swiss

officials visit Russia (with photos and statements); and cooperating with Russian HRDs in multilateral organizations.

Offer physical protection: By issuing express visas (free and easy multiple-entry visas to Switzerland for HRDs and their relatives); providing temporary shelter and asylum in Switzerland in the event of serious threats. The Swiss administration can also create safe haven conditions in Switzerland for Russian HRDs and CSOs by facilitating the registration of legal entities, providing visas for HRDs and their family members, etc. The guidelines should specify more concretely which actions officials should take in extreme circumstances to ensure HRDs are protected.

Regularly attend court hearings of prosecuted HRDs: Not only in Moscow but in other regions too. Swiss representatives should be well-informed, have an overview of HRDs who are potentially in danger and be ready to assist them; and visit HRDs at risk and those in detention. In addition, Swiss representatives should attend NGO conferences, demand prison and pre-trial detention visits together with ICRC, and assist with health rehabilitation and medical treatments.

Organize high-level meetings/events with HRDs: Whenever Swiss ambassadors, ministers, parliamentarians visit Russia, preferably with media presence, public photos.

Give awards to HRDs: Including holding an official award ceremony with press coverage. These awards should be symbolic in nature and should not necessarily come with any monetary component. Preferably, these awards would be issued by NGOs, universities, rather than by FDFA (or other foreign ministries / state bodies).

Support lawyers working on foreign agent cases: Both financially and with public, political endorsement of the work of HRDs who are being prosecuted. Lead a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council, requesting that the High Commissioner for Human Rights reports on legal developments in Russia and how these affect HRDs.

Offer other forms of support: Including study tours to Swiss universities, participation in bilateral cultural events (also at the level of twin cities), patronage by parliamentarians of persecuted HRDs and CSOs, etc. Involve Swiss non-state actors in supporting Russian CSOs (banks, commercial companies, universities, and trade and professional associations) by providing premises for their work, including contributions to their activities, etc.

7 Sri Lanka

Participants of the Sri Lanka workshop included two Sri Lankan HRDs living in the diaspora in Switzerland, one Sri Lankan HRD based in Sri Lanka, three representatives from the Swiss administration and three from Swiss NGOs working on issues related to human rights in general with a particular focus on Sri Lanka. Participants shared their experiences and provided a wide range of perspectives on the issue of human rights in Sri Lanka and how different actors can support HRDs using the Swiss guidelines. Their reflections and recommendations can be summarized as follows:

7.1 Background and context

The Swiss guidelines integrate some important values and have the potential to be an effective tool to ensure that HRDs are protected.

Workshop participants expressed the view that the Swiss guidelines are important as they give credibility and priority to HRD protection activities, increasing their leverage. The Swiss guidelines integrate some important values and have the potential to be an effective tool for Swiss government representatives, and other actors, to ensure that HRDs are protected. They also promote a coherent, transparent strategy on HRD issues by highlighting the different roles Swiss representatives can play. Although actions to give greater prominence to the guidelines must be carried out by the Swiss administration in Bern, particularly, through the HSD, concrete guideline implementation needs to be done in collaboration with staff in Swiss representations on the ground. The Swiss Embassy in Colombo has made important

efforts in the past. The guidelines could even be seen as *capturing*, to a large extent, what the Swiss Embassy has been doing for some years already. Switzerland is the only mission that has a permanent presence in the north of Sri Lanka, which enables Swiss representation staff to work effectively with local partners.

7.2 Main challenges and experiences

Workshop participants explored some key human rights challenges within the Sri Lankan context vis-à-vis the freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association. These three challenges are overlapping issues that need to be better addressed in Sri Lanka. There continue to be major challenges in protecting human rights in general, and these three freedoms in particular. Increased militarization, an inadequate institutional framework, gaps in legislation and justice mechanisms leading to impunity, continue to be major obstacles to protecting these three fundamental freedoms. Many human rights need to be better addressed, for example, the protection of journalists who offer critical perspectives. Although there is an interest on the part of the Sri Lankan *diaspora* to return to the country, trust continues to be a key problem.

In the view of the workshop participants, the Swiss guidelines enshrine important values as a framework for action for Swiss representations. However, there is the potential for a variety of actors (Swiss and non-Swiss) to work better together to ensure effective implementation. One workshop participant argued that the broad definition of HRDs in the Swiss guidelines weakens the impact in the Sri Lankan context, raising the question of how the guidelines can be used effectively if the target group remains vague. Other participants felt that it was important to maintain a broad understanding of the concept of a HRD in order to prevent the exclusion of some people by definition and to ensure that people who might be less well known by international actors are

included. Some workshop participants asked about the next steps that different actors could take to move forwards with implementation of the Swiss guidelines. What has already been done? What more can be done? Which roles can different actors play?

7.3 Recommendations for the implementation of the Swiss guidelines

A coherent, transparent strategy is important to ensure the Swiss guidelines are implemented effectively in practice. Workshop participants indicated entry points in line with the interests and capacities of three main actors: Swiss representation in Sri Lanka, Swiss administration in Bern, Swiss NGOs and national/local Sri Lankan CSOs.

7.3.1 Recommendations to the Swiss representation in Sri Lanka

Support ownership of guidelines: To ensure effective guideline implementation, Swiss representations (in different countries) need to feel ownership of them and consider the impact of the guidelines on their activities. Ownership and understanding can be nurtured through concrete discussions on the guidelines as well as trainings on implementation options (see below).

Build capacity: The Swiss Embassy could provide two types of trainings on guideline implementation: 1) for Swiss Embassy staff in Colombo; 2) for CSOs and HRDs in their local languages. These trainings should be organized in close cooperation with actors from civil society.

Translate the guidelines into Tamil and Sinhala: In order to raise awareness of the guidelines and their possible application in the Sri Lanka context, they need to be translated into Tamil and Sinhala. This will ensure they

can be widely disseminated, including on websites and through newsletters.

Strengthen the role of the Human Security Advisor: It is important to strengthen the role of the Swiss Human Security Adviser (within the HSD) in Colombo as a focal point for HRDs on the ground. This would also facilitate more effective communication and the raising of awareness on the challenges faced by HRDs.

Clarify the Swiss policy on humanitarian visas: Switzerland's policy on HRDs who are seeking asylum needs to be better clarified and communicated. The current benchmark that a HRD needs to be facing "concrete and immediate danger" remains challenging to assess. Information on application procedures and requirements for a humanitarian visa should be made available online by the Embassy. This information would also need to be translated into Sinhala and Tamil.

Engage more with rural organizations: Although it is acknowledged that the Swiss representation in Colombo actively engages with both Colombo-based and rural CSOs, greater efforts need to be made to reach out even more to rural HRDs, who do not always have high media visibility and may be less well known. Staff of the Swiss representation needs to make more visits to rural areas and engage further with HRDs (individuals and organizations) that may be less accessible due to geographical location, language and cultural norms and practices.

Share information and knowledge: Swiss representation staff could engage more with actors from universities and media outlets in Switzerland to raise their awareness of HRD issues. This type of exchange could help to support research, and share information on human rights and the opportunities and challenges faced by HRDs in Sri Lanka.

Report back: A certain level of reporting on the implementation of the Swiss guidelines should be systematized. For example, this could be in the form of an annual reporting process that reflects on the level of guideline implementation, including challenges faced, in the specific context of Sri Lanka.

A certain level of reporting on the implementation of the Swiss guidelines should be systematized.

7.3.2 Recommendations to the Swiss administration in Bern

Prioritize the guidelines: While the Swiss guidelines put the HRD topic on an important platform, the priority given to them by the different actors within the Swiss administration is uncertain. How coherent is support for the guidelines? It is important to clarify the priority given to the guidelines by the different Swiss government departments in order to ensure that they are promoted and implemented effectively.

Clarify future engagement in Sri Lanka: Implementation of the Swiss guidelines in Sri Lanka needs to be considered within the broader overview of the Swiss government strategy in the country. How do Swiss government actors plan to engage in Sri Lanka in the near future? There is a need to clarify the Swiss commitment to Sri Lanka i.e. the planned investment in the country in terms of human and financial resources.

Allocate funds for security issues: The Swiss administration could make an emergency fund available to NGOs/CSOs, which could be used to cover security

related ad hoc costs/needs of human rights projects that support and protect HRDs. In addition, a budget line could be created in existing and future projects conducted in Sri Lanka to address *ad hoc* security issues such as emergency relief or training.

Fund local organizations and networks: The Swiss administration could provide financial and in-kind contributions to national/local HRDs (individuals, organizations, networks), thereby strengthening them by helping to ensure they can continue with their activities.

Clarify humanitarian visa policies: The Swiss visa policy in relation to HRDs should be made more liberal to facilitate HRD protection. Less well known HRDs face challenges in obtaining humanitarian visas despite their justified needs. The issue of visas for HRDs needs to be situated within a longer term strategy that includes, for example, educational opportunities, employment options, etc.

7.3.3 Recommendations to Swiss NGOs and national/local CSOs in Sri Lanka

Support exchange platforms: Swiss NGOs have a role to play in supporting the creation of platforms, such as roundtables for discussion, in Switzerland and abroad. Such exchange platforms provide different actors with the opportunity to find common points for collaboration in order to enhance HRD protection.

Provide access to information: Swiss NGOs can provide Sri Lankan HRDs (individuals, organizations, networks) with information on HRD issues, by providing access to specific documents, producing and disseminating reports and newsletters on relevant topics, or through regular, informal communication with different actors. Furthermore, many HRDs fear for their lives and in some cases fleeing may seem their only option if they wish to remain safe. Swiss NGOs and some local civil society

actors can act as facilitators to help ensure that there is better access to information on the visa process for HRDs wishing to leave the country or seeking asylum in Switzerland.

Collaborate with local partners: Swiss NGOs can engage with national/local Sri Lankan HRDs (individuals, organizations, networks) through joint projects, financial support or the setting up of formal/informal partnerships.

Engage with the Swiss administration: Swiss NGOs are not always up to date on the activities of the Swiss representation in Sri Lanka. There is a need for better communication and more regular meetings between Swiss NGOs and Swiss government representatives. This would facilitate the identification of guideline implementation areas that need to be addressed and also provide the opportunity to connect with different networks.

Ensure accountability: Swiss NGOs can play an important role in observing and holding Swiss government representatives accountable for their roles and responsibilities in relation to the implementation of the guidelines.

There is an interest on the part of the Sri Lankan diaspora in Switzerland to support HRDs in Sri Lanka.

Engage with the diaspora: There is an interest on the part of the Sri Lankan diaspora in Switzerland to support HRDs in Sri Lanka; however, they face challenges in doing so. For example, there continues

to be a lack of trust between some members of the Sri Lankan diaspora and actors in Sri Lanka. Local Sri Lankan CSOs can act as important facilitators to support links between persons in the diaspora and HRDs in need of protection in Sri Lanka.

Clarify future engagement: There needs to be a clear understanding of the future engagement of Swiss NGOs in Sri Lanka, including which ones will continue to have a presence there, how they will obtain funding and what their interests and capacities are.

Disseminate the guidelines: Local CSOs can play an important role in ensuring that translated versions of the guidelines are made publicly available, by sharing them with other civil society actors and HRDs in Sri Lanka so that they can explore how to use them as a tool for their activities. National/local CSOs could also be involved in trainings on context-specific implementation of the guidelines for civil society actors in Sri Lanka.

Raise awareness on human rights issues: National/local HRDs (individuals, organizations, networks) have an important role to play in ensuring that the Swiss Embassy is well informed on key human rights issues in Sri Lanka and how these might be addressed or supported. In particular, it is important to promote a more gender-sensitive approach to HRD protection.

Raise profile of less well known HRDs: The Swiss Embassy tends to limit its support for HRDs to those persons who are well known. As a result, HRDs who engage through low-key networks are less likely to receive support or acknowledgement. In order to remedy this situation, national/local CSOs can engage with the Swiss Embassy to increase the level of knowledge on all the HRDs (individuals, organizations, networks) present in Sri Lanka.

7.4 Conclusions and follow up

The establishment of the Swiss guidelines is an important landmark, guiding stakeholders in identifying entry points for HRD protection in different contexts. In order to move forward with an effective implementation strategy in Sri Lanka, all actors - Swiss administration in Bern (particularly the HSD), the Swiss Embassy in Colombo, national/local CSOs in Sri Lanka and Swiss NGOs in Switzerland - need to work together more coherently and in a way that prioritizes the protection of HRDs from different geographical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

It is important for different actors to work towards a more open and constructive engagement that is based on the sharing of their experiences, including the challenges they face.

Although workshop participants expressed different perspectives, expectations and recommendations on how to implement the Swiss guidelines in the context of Sri Lanka, all agreed that further engagement on the topic would be an important starting point. This could be in the form of small discussions, or larger roundtables, on the applicability of the guidelines in the Sri Lankan context. Some participants requested a follow-up workshop meeting in one year's time to discuss what was achieved in the 12-month period by different actors, which challenges they faced and what

8 Way Forward

could be further opportunities for additional engagement. It is important for different actors to work towards a more open and constructive engagement that is based on the sharing of their experiences, including the challenges they face. In this sense, there needs to be an investment in trust-building activities and better communication channels to ensure that different actors are open to working together towards the common goal of protecting HRDs.

The political will of Switzerland expressed in the Swiss guidelines, as well as the commitment of numerous NGOs/CSOs in Switzerland and abroad offer promising opportunities to take this process further.

The promotion of human rights, including HRD protection, is an ongoing long-term process that requires the commitment and intervention of different actors at all levels of society. The publication of the Swiss guidelines and the KOFF conference are two concrete steps meant to further dialog, engagement and work in this area.

In summary, the four workshops at the conference, on Guatemala/Honduras, Russia, Serbia and Sri Lanka, demonstrated that the situations, challenges and opportunities faced by HRDs, as well as the role of different actors, vary from context to context. Effective protection of HRDs is, therefore, an endeavor that requires a context-specific approach, including a thorough analysis and, thereafter, measures adapted to the findings.

Consequently, the Swiss guidelines can only be effective if implementation is context-specific, which implies the need for close cooperation between all relevant actors – in Switzerland and abroad. In Bern, regular meetings with actors from different

departments of the Swiss administration, as well as with CSOs/NGOs, can provide an open space for sharing general experiences on the implementation of the guidelines and the need for revision and/or adaptation in light of changing circumstances and/or priorities. Furthermore, joint analysis and strategic discussions between context-specific actors from relevant Swiss administration and civil society representatives can strengthen in-country HRD protection. In addition, Swiss government actors abroad - representations or development cooperation offices - can promote information sharing and cooperation with Swiss NGOs and national/local CSOs.

It is clear that the protection of HRDs is a challenging task and there is still a long way to go. However, the political will of Switzerland expressed in the Swiss guidelines, as well as the commitment of numerous NGOs/CSOs in Switzerland and abroad offer promising opportunities to take this process further.

About the Author

Anna Leissing holds a MA in Social Anthropology of Transnationalism and the State from the University of Bern. At the swisspeace Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF), Anna is responsible for the Latin America and Natural Resource Conflicts Roundtables, the nexus between conflict transformation and human rights, and coordination of KOFF roundtables in general. Before joining swisspeace in 2013, Anna worked for the Society for Threatened Peoples as a campaigner and project manager with a focus on Sri Lanka, as well as for HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in the Latin America Division as an executive assistant. She gained experience in Central America working in a community forest management project run by Helvetas Guatemala in the western highlands of the country, as well as doing the research for her MA thesis in this region; and she participated in several discussion forums and workshops on the fragile socio-political situation in different countries of the region. Besides her current engagement for KOFF, she is the coordinator of the Guatemala Solidarity Network, concentrating on human rights in resource conflicts in Guatemala.

About swisspeace

swisspeace is an action-oriented peace research institute with headquarters in Bern, Switzerland. It aims to prevent the outbreak of violent conflicts and to enable sustainable conflict transformation.

swisspeace sees itself as a center of excellence and an information platform in the areas of conflict analysis and peacebuilding. We conduct research on the causes of war and violent conflict, develop tools for early recognition of tensions, and formulate conflict mitigation and peacebuilding strategies. swisspeace contributes to information exchange and networking on current issues of peace and security policy through its analyses and reports as well as meetings and conferences.

swisspeace was founded in 1988 as the “Swiss Peace Foundation” with the goal of promoting independent peace research in Switzerland. Today swisspeace engages about 40 staff members. Its most important clients include the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the Swiss National Science Foundation. Its activities are further assisted by contributions from its Support Association. The supreme swisspeace body is the Foundation Council, which is comprised of representatives from politics, science, and the government.

swisspeace is an associated Institute of the University of Basel and member of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAHS)

About KOFF

The Centre for Peacebuilding (KOFF) mission is to strengthen coherence in Swiss peacebuilding activities by stimulating joint policy and dialogue processes between state and non-state actors.

KOFF organizes roundtables, joint learning processes, training courses and publishes a monthly newsletter. With a diversity of 49 Swiss member organizations, KOFF supports integrated approaches at the nexus of peacebuilding, human rights and development.

KOFF was founded as a project at swisspeace in March 2001 by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and various Swiss non-governmental organizations (NGOs).