

Minutes from the talks

Collective protection of individuals and groups defending human, environmental and territorial rights and the right to defend human rights in the countries of Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras.



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Organized by:



Acknowledgments

To each of the collectives that were present at the talks and that are fighting to promote and protect environmental, territorial and women's rights in the midst of such complex realities in these countries that are marked by multiple violations of the right to defend rights: we honor the lives of defenders and all processes of resistance and collective resilience that promote transformative, emancipatory and hopeful proposals for everyone.

We will continue on this path together.

We, the Latin Americans.
(Ferreira Gullar)

We are all siblings,
but not because we have
the same mother and father:
we have the same partner
who betrays us.

We are all siblings,
not because we share
the same roof and the same kitchen table:
we see the same sword
over our head.

We are all siblings,
not because we have
the same arm or the same surname:
we have the same path
of fury and hunger.

We are all siblings,
not because it is the same blood
that we carry in our bodies:
What is the same is
how we spill it.

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1. Objective

Contributing, through dialogue and exchange, to the creation of spaces for critical reflection on issues related to collective protection organisations /collectives who defend human rights¹, based on different ways of thinking and implementing protection actions.

2. Cross-cutting approaches

- Collective action in defense of environmental, territorial and women's rights.
- Intersectional dialogue with the notion of human rights and the protection of individuals and organisations defending human rights.
- Gender and ethno-racial perspectives as essential approaches to understand the collective protection of human rights defenders.

3. Topics covered

- Central ideas to consider other paradigms related to human rights using feminist, intersectional and ethnic-racial perspectives.
- Violations of the right to defend human rights.
- Limitations in assuming a linear concept of human rights defenders and how this affects the protection of the right to defend human rights.
- General approach to the concept of collective protection,

¹ Collectives, whether they are groups, organizations, communities, or social movements that defend human, land, territorial or environmental rights. This category includes the individual and collective dimension of the right to defend human rights. This definition places the act of defending these rights at the center and takes into consideration the diverse identities of the people who defend human rights.

based on the exchange of practices and knowledge that contribute to strengthening the capacity of human rights defenders and transforming the correlation of forces, helping to generate safer environments for the defense of human rights.

- Communication as a dissuasive and persuasive strategy for the protection of human rights defenders².
- Collective protection of human rights defenders and their collectives in dialogue with political emotions and pedagogies for care.

4. Concepts used in the discussions

- Collectives that defend human rights: Beyond the legal definition of collective human rights defenders, the protection approach featured in the discussions was related to the action of defending human rights by collectives. With the concept of collective subjects that defend and promote human rights, we understand that this includes a range of organizational processes such as social and popular movements, women's organizations, community organizations, trade unions, peasant communities, indigenous peoples, organizations defending sexual and gender diversity, black activism, and others.
- HRD - Human Rights Defenders: Refers to diverse individuals that defend human rights with a special focus on women who act in the defense, promotion and vindication of human, territorial and environmental rights.
- HR: Human Rights.
- RDHR: Right to Defend Human Rights.

² Individuals and groups that defend human rights, with a particular focus on women defenders

5. Intersectionality

A few years ago, intersectionality became within feminism one of the most widespread analytical concepts (theoretical and practical) for discussing and analyzing the intersection of multiple social inequalities, especially the structural relation amongst racism, patriarchal machismo, and class conditions. This concept includes the possibility of connection with other kinds of oppression and other sources of social inequality such as LGBTphobia, xenophobia, age, disability, religion, and others.

The need for deeper analyses based on the intersections and combinations of different systems of power and domination has always been a guideline for social movements in several Latin American countries. Intersectionality is a concept widely used and developed by intellectual women and activists of Black Feminism.

According to Professor Gabriela Sá³, one of the guests at the first discussion, who spoke on the topic of “Central ideas for thinking other paradigms related to human rights using a feminist, intersectional and ethnic-racial perspective”, black feminism has the power to denounce that the place that black and indigenous women occupy is a convergence of diverse oppressions and it is these women who are responsible for managing life in the territories. “The presence of the native and African population in the territory is our history, and we have to write our history, rename things and give names to our rights,” she says.

As an example, the right to ancestry, a rhetoric of shared struggles in Latin America, has the potential to expand the conception of human life and what we want to defend. This includes the right

³ Gabriela Sá is a professor at the State University of Feira de Santana and researcher on the following topics: Critical Theory of Law; History of Law; Law and Race Relations; Black Feminism; African Diaspora in Latin America.

to say how we want to live and the power to say how far our territory goes based on ancestral aspects.

Another concept that contributes to thinking in new paradigms related to the struggle in the defense of human rights, is that of Amerindianness coined by the intellectual and activist Lélia Gonzalez⁴. Amerindianness referring to the experiences of the African Diaspora and colonization in the American continent that resulted in the fusion of African peoples and cultures with the original peoples of the Americas.

In this sense, beginning with an ancestral and Atlantic vision⁵, we began to discuss the protection of human rights defenders, altering this universalist framework with a general approach to the limitations of a linear approach to the concept of human rights defenders and how this can affect the protection and implementation of the defense of rights.

It is important to understand that attacks on HRD individuals and collectives are not isolated events. There are relationships with class, ethnicity/race, territory and gender; issues that need to be considered and incorporated into collective protection processes. So how can we think about the collective protection of HRD individuals and collectives in their daily struggles that put the intersectional perspective into practice? How can we take advantage of the contributions of the intersectional approach to provoke reflections on human rights and the concepts related to defenders? And how can we ensure that our ideas combat precariousness in the lives of those who defend human rights?

⁴ Lélia González, intellectual, activist, politician, professor and philosopher, in addition to being a Brazilian anthropologist, she is recognized as a pioneer in the discussions on the relationship between gender, class and race in the world.

⁵ Refers to the thought of the historian and black activist Beatriz Nascimento who focused on the topics of racism and quilombos in the experiences of long socio-spatial displacements of Africans and their descendants through the notions of “transmigration” and “transatlanticity”.

Regarding the concept of advocacy and how it influences protection, Enrique Eguren⁶ was the facilitator of this panel and opened it with a question: is there such a thing as an individual advocate? Inviting the audience to examine the concept of advocate, he asked: are we honoring the autonomous, isolated, self-made, visionary, eloquent or heroic individual?

Thinking of HRDs as individuals is a problem; the defense of human rights is a collective matter. The individualization of the defense of Human Rights and the idealization of those who defend them is a way of hiding the form and the struggle of the real defenders and their collectives. The defense of peoples, territories, and rights in favelas cannot be separated from the struggle in defense of human rights.

It is necessary to challenge the myth of “the human rights defender” as a universal human being, which is still predominant in the discourse and practices surrounding the defense of human rights, as it plays to a neoliberalizing vision of individualization of the struggle and of HRD subjects. Using an intersectional approach, it is possible to discuss the protection of human rights defenders by altering this universalist framework and recognizing diversity.

The social dimension, including the defense of human rights, is a relational and collective practice. This should be the objective and field of work for the protection of HRDs and their actions. But, in order to think of more effective protection strategies, it is necessary to recognize the multiple identities and consider the realities of these people and collectives. Identities as defenders should not be substituted or be to the detriment of their other identities, for example, being a woman, black, trade unionist, peasant, etc.

⁶ Consultant on public policies for the protection of HRDs and different issues related to the protection of HRDs. Senior Consultant at Protection International.

Increasingly poor, racialized, ethnic minority defenders who have been discriminated against for centuries in all countries, are being killed. It is necessary to recognize who they are, or else we will never be able to think about how to respond to them. The challenge, therefore, is the application of an intersectional approach based on what the diversity of people and collectives think and feel, which can inform the way we guide our actions, especially for those who act from “outside”, for example, from Europe and international organizations. This is not just a political and ethical imperative, but also a practical and realistic necessity for organizations seeking to contribute to the struggle for social justice everywhere.

We shift our gaze then to an open field, often unknown to many of us, of HRDs immersed in networks, relational and collective subjects situated in political and power struggles, of gender, of ethnic differences, affective subjects who feel indignant and who get tired, who cry, dance and tremble. Individuals whose struggles already existed before the 1998 Declaration of Human Rights Defenders.

6. Common risk scenarios identified for the defense of Human Rights in participating countries

Representatives from four countries that lead the world in the sad rating of attacks against defenders participated in the talks. According to a report from the international NGO Global Witness in 2019 a total of 212 environmental and territorial defenders were killed and two thirds of the murders occurred in Latin American⁷ countries.

The State in these countries, either through its ineffectiveness in

⁷ More information is available from: <https://www.globalwitness.org/es/blog-es/colombia-leads-number-killings-2019-global-witness-reports-es/>

the investigation of cases, complete absence of investigation, or by direct action, appears as one of the aggressors and violators of the human rights of communities defending territories and the environment. These violations range from the expulsion of communities from their territories and the non-implementation of land demarcation and titling policies to the use of military forces against rural and urban peripheral populations, resorting to a policy of repression, criminalization, imprisonment and death. In Brazil, the concept of necropolitics⁸ is used to describe the realities faced by HRD, a policy of ostensive death against the Afro-Indigenous population and the role of the police forces in the process of destabilizing community organizations.

In addition, in these countries in recent years there has been an unstoppable advance of ultroliberal policies and social setbacks with the dismantling of human rights institutions by States and the formulation of laws that attack human rights, especially those of indigenous and black people. The cooperation agreements between governments, agrobusiness corporations and financial markets, which appropriate territories in the countryside and cities and use common assets such as land, water, and forests, prevent the consolidation of policies to guarantee the rights and recognition of peoples. Added to this, there is the advance of ideological fundamentalisms spouted by members of governments and parliaments that are based on systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, impoverishment, and other historical inequalities.

At the same time, the negligence and omission by the State to guarantee impunity in cases of assassinations, aggressions, threats, and violations of HRDs and the barriers created for the full implementation of the right to defend rights are still operating.

⁸ The term “necropolitics” comes from the work of the Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist and historian Achille Mbembe. It refers to the power of deciding who can live and who must die, the implementation of a necropolicy that is primarily based on racist criteria.

In all participating countries, the prosecution and criminalization of HRDs is highlighted, but there are also other types of attacks and threats, including those less visible, with the aim of isolating organizations and defenders and diluting collective processes for the defense of territorial and environmental human rights. In addition, public misinformation campaigns and mass media outlets are used to defame and stigmatize struggles for rights.

The discussion highlighted how the participation and protagonism of women defenders is challenged by patriarchal machismo rooted in the structures of their own organizations and families. Often women are not protected in their own families and it is common that this is seen as a private matter and not an issue for collective protection. The actions of women defenders are also hindered by defamation and stigmatization, socially constructed discourses of "women defenders going crazy", actions to deliberately silence their voices and intimidate their struggles with threats made against their families (especially their children). These women face fear, attacks and violations of their physical, sexual, moral and mental safety.

In addition to this risk scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased difficulties for the defense of rights along with a serious social crisis, increasing the vulnerability of territories and the population. The onslaught of economic power during the pandemic has continued to be intense, financing and orchestrating State and illegal policies to promote violent evictions in the territories and damaging the right to health and safety measures. During this time the digital environment also became the scenario of attacks, aggressions and surveillance of individuals and human rights organizations.

Given these reflections, it is necessary to evaluate and reflect on the extent to which our struggles are being effective in guaranteeing human rights and what new forms and mechanisms could strengthen these struggles.

7. Summary of the discussions

The struggle for the promotion, consolidation and protection of human rights has always been present throughout history. These include different social struggles that have involved the search for emancipation, freedom, equality, social justice, collective and territorial rights, and many others, which have allowed us to advance toward the aspiration of a dignified life for all, a concept that goes beyond humans.

For centuries rural and urban communities have resisted to defend their lives, their ways of living, their land, territories, and nature, which have been disputed by different actors with power. For these communities, integrated and collective protection has proven to be more effective than simply individual protection. In addition to being a relational action, collective protection encompasses protecting the lives and safety of individuals and collectives, but it also incorporates the territory as a place of action where life occurs. International organizations and agencies are important in this cooperation process, but only the protection articulated by a collective is capable of developing more effective responses. For this reason, protection actions and measures must emerge from the territories and be situated in the realities of the defenders. They must take into account the different causes and sources of the attacks that are linked to the oppressions of HRDs. In addition, it is essential to strengthen the awareness of civil society and achieve its direct involvement in public policy for the protection of HRDs.

Economic issues, which include elements of racism, machismo, Eurocentrism, LGBTphobia and other forms of oppression, impose large projects and undertakings that ignore the experiences and ways of life of communities and generate

expulsions, forced displacements, submission to exploitative labor that is similar to slavery, underemployment, the imposition of cultural and hegemonic values, threats and aggressions, and many other types of rights violations. These processes that attack human rights follow the same logic used to dispute territories and natural wealth on a continental scale. The capitalization process of land and territories affects black, indigenous, river dwelling, peasant and peripheral communities, and other social groups defending human rights, intensifying and diversifying the risks they face.

The historical capacity for resilience and the development of techniques, technologies and resistance processes have made it possible for different peoples to survive until today by developing their ways of life and own protection mechanisms. This implies knowing and taking control of their territories, recognizing ancestry, strengthening community governance experiences, establishing own historical frameworks, building collective memory and strengthening protective practices. Sharing this ancestral wisdom and facilitating the exchange of experiences between collectives creates possibilities for the construction of broader networks, solidarity and more effective collective protection mechanisms.

The mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders must include physical, mental, emotional and spiritual care practices, considering that subjective impacts do not just include threats and aggressions, but also the historical process that takes up the colonization, enslavement and extermination of thousands of African and native peoples of the Americas. These populations have psychosocial trauma from invasions in the case of indigenous peoples, for the African diaspora through the intersection of capitalism with machismo and racism, both of which feed relations of domination and violence. The achievement of this system is the naturalization of racism,

inequality and discrimination, which have psychoemotional effects and crystallize these oppressions.

In the case of individuals and collectives defending human rights, the emotional and psychological attacks are intentional. These threats are used to destabilize not just the defender, but also the process of the collective struggle. Aggressors use different ways to attack subjectivities and mobilize intense political emotions. These include direct threats, physical violence, sexual violence against women, and other threats that are subtle, hidden and not always immediately perceived. When leaders or communities are threatened, political emotions are mobilized such as fear or solidarity, which in turn influence collective decisions. The term political emotions refers to the fact that people share the same social fabric and are influenced by political decisions that have an impact on collective and social projects. These emotions can have an impact on both mobilizing and slowing down social and community struggles, especially in countries where the defense of human rights is a dangerous job.

Many activists and rights defenders are experiencing fatigue, weariness and despair, often as a result of the feeling that the struggle does not advance and there is difficulty to achieve a more widespread social transformation. Discussing this point, the voices and experiences shared in the fourth conversation spoke of the urgent need to celebrate joy, results and micro-victories.

It is in these contexts where the defense of rights takes place, which means that it is not possible to be negligent with subjectivities in the struggles for rights. We consist of hope, fear, tiredness and joy. This means that pedagogies of care with an emphasis on the field of mental and emotional health should be thought of as a means to promote collective protection and support the right to defend human rights in safer environments, including the emotional one. Collective care pedagogies should strengthen or

help create self-care practices, integrated therapies, community meeting and exchange spaces, stimulus for the preservation of collective memory and ancestral knowledge, among other possibilities. Different ways of acting in the field of political emotions will emerge from territories, local cultures and the needs of HRDs and organizations that defend human rights.

One of the main strategies to overcome isolation and expand the potential of acting in networks is the use of media and communication tools. Communication is power and in its different forms it amplifies collective voices and enables networking, information sharing and the transmission of diversity and multiculturalism. It is also essential to highlight the role of art in its different expressions because it mobilizes different emotions and encourages other ways of absorbing and understanding reality.

As a means of persuading and dissuading audiences regarding what it is said about contributions to the collective protection of HRDs and organizations that defend human rights, the technical and technological appropriation of the media promotes the production and exchange of content in different languages. These involve narratives that resist hegemonic discourses and highlight the realities faced by peoples, territories, and the defense of human rights. This work facilitates the transformation of imaginaries about human rights defenders and their collectives, resolving stigmas and achieving political influence in favor of these struggles. It is important to tell stories that unite different generations, generate cohesion and collective memory, transform internal relationships and environments, generate empathy in relation to HRDs and collectives that defend human rights, overcome isolation, strengthen networks and report threats and violations in order to force aggressors to retreat, increasing the political cost of their actions.

Dialogue, collaborative spaces, exchanges and solidarity

between different struggles and organizations with a long history in the defense of human rights can generate autonomous territorial proposals that include food security, health and good living and the creation of collective protection networks that guarantee the right to defend human rights.

8. Powerful collective protection practices and identified strategies

- Formation of solidarity networks and a broad agenda of articulation between human rights organizations.
- Production and exchange of content, understanding communication as an instrument for engaging in political advocacy, dissuasion and persuasion that raises awareness in society, institutions and organizations, as well as to reverse the impacts of narratives that stigmatize HRDs and communities.
- Organized and networked reporting of threats and aggressions.
- Visibility of the collective struggle to overcome the isolation of communities through the use of communication tools and artistic expressions.
- Collective care and self-care practices based on the notion of political emotions through the use of community and therapeutic popular education methodologies.
- Actions to rescue and strengthen ancestral practices, technologies of resistance and the defense of territories following the example of indigenous, black people, community, women's, and youth organizations.
- Territorial defense practices based on the knowledge of local characteristics and the production of information about specific territories.

- Collection of information, photographs, images, texts, and narratives of struggle to strengthen memory, belonging, and community reference points.
- Leadership rotation as a protection strategy.
- Encouraging organization, political training and strengthening of the participation of women and young people.
- Confronting gender-based violence in communities and movements.
- Actions to strengthen community ties that are primarily intergenerational.
- Education and political training that is specific to the territories as a strategy for organizational strengthening and to understand the dimensions of the collective struggle.
- Stimulate diversity, respect and solidarity in and among struggles in the defense of rights.
- Collective consultations to strengthen local and popular power.
- Actions to preserve the environment and achieve food sovereignty.
- Building egalitarian relations in human rights organizations and movements.
- Spaces for sharing and celebrating achievements and nourishing joy and hope.

9. Conclusions

The reflection and proposals for collective protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and organizations in Latin American countries point to a paradigm shift in relation to the idea of

who these defenders are. This process contributes to progress with protection plans that are tailored to their realities, risks, vulnerabilities, and capacities, which also seek to guarantee the right to defend human rights and not just protect people at risk. This is imperative within the current times. The intersectional approach offers conceptual and practical elements for some of the challenges of the protection of HRDs and collectives that defend human rights, such as the ways of life and social, cultural and community practices carried out in the territories.

The shared rhetoric of struggles in Latin America has the potential to broaden concepts related to life and rights. These concepts are based on the autonomy and self-determination of peoples to define how they want to live in their territories. For example, defending the right to ancestry and guaranteeing its continuity, or ensuring the protection of nature and the right to communication as part of collective protection.

In the creation of collective protection mechanisms, it is essential to understand that these actions are carried out in a participatory manner, involving all of those who are affected by specific risks, so that both risk analyses and protection plans must be increasingly situated and articulated with a set of actions that involve different actors. This involves protection strategies that effectively incorporate gender and intersectional approaches and that must be culturally, contextually and territorially situated so that they can be adjusted to the real conditions faced by individual HRDs and the HRD community.

It is possible to combine strategies in different areas of collective protection, including territorialized actions in individual, family, community and organizational environments. This requires strengthening links and internal solidarity networks for immediate, strategic and emergency actions, as well as the creation of external support networks that contribute to the strengthening of protection practices for individuals and groups of HRDs.

Although the role of the State was not discussed during these talks, it is essential to evidence and demand that States have the highest level of responsibility for the protection of HRDs and their communities. This involves implementing effective measures to ensure the right of people to defend human, territorial and environmental rights and women's rights so that HRDs and their communities can participate and express themselves freely and safely, as enshrined in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Promote and Protect Human Rights and other obligatory international mechanisms.

