EU IN HONDURAS

TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE IN PARTNERING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY – THE CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Introduction
As part of the wider effort to partner with civil society in Honduras, special emphasis has been given to the promotion of human rights.

Thus, building bridges between civil society and state actors in the protection of human rights defenders has proven a valuable strategy for the EU in Honduras. Here, the EU has established a leadership role in the area of human rights and democracy by using its political strength and development cooperation programmes to protect and promote civil society space, maintaining an open door policy for Human Rights Defenders (HRD) and human rights organisations as well as through its daily behind the scenes diplomatic advocacy initiatives.

The EU is deeply committed to build upon this position by drawing on the full range of its instruments and resources and to serve also in the future as a reliable bridge builder between civil society and government and to create spaces with trust. Guided by the ideas and principles of the integrated approach, the EU and Member States apply consistently all their instruments ranging from political dialogue and trade to development cooperation.

As one of the largest donors in the country, the EU has an important leverage capacity and is widely recognised for its work in the field which include providing emergency funding and accompanying HRDs, political dialogue on emblematic cases with national authorities, statements and cooperation projects covering all stages of the cycle of conflict and crises.

“The delegation of the EU has engaged in sensible topics in Honduras, assuming protagonist and courageous positions with the aim to strengthen the respect of human rights”

Human Rights Defender Hedme Castro, ACI PARTICIPA (NGO)

EU Ambassador, Ketil Karlsen, with the mother of assassinated human rights defender, Berta Cáceres

The "Grupo Enlace" initiative
The EU committed itself already in 2012 to “intensify its political and financial support for human rights defenders and step up its efforts against all forms of reprisals. A vigorous and independent civil society is essential to the functioning of democracy and

1EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy

1
the implementation of human rights; effective engagement with civil society is a cornerstone of a successful human rights policy."

In response and in close collaboration with the ACI umbrella organisation of international NGO’s it was decided in 2014 to launch a new platform for dialogue on human rights between international and local civil society organizations, key international stakeholders and eventually state actors. Grupo ENLACE has since its creation grown into a central and very active forum for the debate and action on emblematic human rights defenders’ cases and human rights issues in general, involving not only the EU DEL and EU Member States, but also Switzerland and the United Nations. Grupo ENLACE actions are diverse and have so far yielded important results, including responses from the government to requests of information and support to human rights defenders at risk.

Integrated approach in practice

Coordinating closely political dialogue and development cooperation – bilateral and thematic civil society support alike – has proven vital for impact.

Thus, building on the experience acquired and lessons learned through the Programme Supporting Human Rights in Honduras (Programa de Apoyo a los Derechos Humanos - PADH), the EU continues to support and follow-up on the design and implementation of the 'Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Justice Operators' which was elaborated and implemented through EU support, in close cooperation and consultation with the beneficiaries of the law.

Driven by the goal to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, the EU builds on the experience acquired and lessons learned through the programme to promote fair and accessible justice in Honduras (EuroJusticia) and will continue to support the judiciary in its reform process in order to tackle the challenge of impunity and corruption in the country. Key counterparts include NGOs and civil society in general as well as the Public Prosecutor's Office, Supreme Court of Justice, Security Secretariat and High Court of Auditors.

The aim is to strengthen capacity building at national and regional level, improve accountability and transparency and increase the access to justice particularly for the most vulnerable groups, such as women, older persons, children, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, people of African descent and members of the LGBTI community.

Making EU support for the vulnerable visible

The EU has reacted very quickly to various serious human rights violations in the past years through statements, press releases, speeches, interviews, formal and informal steps to encourage the Honduran government to ensure the full respect of human rights and to end the impunity in the country.

Very shortly after the death of various prominent HRDs, such as the killing in 2016 of the prominent environmentalist Berta Cáceres, the EU reacted immediately with local statements, statements from the High Representative of the EU and the European
Parliament. Also, the Head of Delegation (HoD) attended the wake of Berta Cáceres in her hometown La Esperanza. Additionally, on this and other occasions the HoD made strong statements to the press urging the respect of freedom of expression and to bring the culprits to justice.

The EU is also a strong advocate in favour of LGBTI rights. It released several press statements on the difficult situation of the LGBTI community and provided emergency funding to members of the community in acute danger as well as to a local LGBTI organisation to improve their security infrastructure. The participation of members of the LGBTI community in the electoral process was also discussed at a high level meeting with the authorities which led to the publication of two separate statements by the Secretariat of Human Rights and the National Human Rights Commissioner. The EU and its Member States mainstream gender and LGBTI rights in all their activities and give full support to the implementation of the recommendations made by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) which Honduras accepted in May 2015. The EU was granted an award by the LGBTI community called "Pergamino Rosa" recognising its contribution in the fight against homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Also, the European Parliament in its resolution of April 2016 on Honduras specifically lauded the work done by the Head of the EU Delegation in Honduras and his team in support of Honduran human rights defenders.

"The EU Delegation in Honduras has demonstrated ample openness to dialogue with the civil society on human rights issues in the country and shown its firm commitment to the protection of human rights defenders making use of the available resources”.

George Redman, Oxfam, Honduras

Connecting Europe and Honduras

While the main effort is on the ground, the strength of the response to the human rights challenge builds on engaging all stakeholders in Honduras – state and non-state – and engaging EU institutions and member states. Thus, the association agreement, trade talks, the EEAS, the European Parliament have all supported the effort alongside a concerted effort by numerous member states.

The work on the ground by the EU delegation was furthermore followed up by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis during his visit in June 2016, which underlined once more the importance the EU gives to human rights in Honduras. Lambrinidis met with some of the key stakeholders, including the President of Honduras, key national institutions and HRDs and gave political support to an independent international investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres and reiterated the EU's position on the urgent implementation of the Law on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and the establishment of a consultation mechanism as foreseen under ILO 169. During Lambrinidis' visit the body of another prominent HRD and member of the LGBTI community, René Martínez, was found and a press statement was released on the same day.

Additionally, the EU, in close coordination with MS and like-minded partners, has conducted several formal and informal outreach initiatives towards the national authorities in several human rights related judiciary cases.