



**Wednesday 18 November**  
**10:00 to 11:20**  
**Room XX (Building E)**

## **Addressing the challenges that Human Rights Defenders face in the context of business activities in an age of a shrinking civil society space**

There is a growing clampdown worldwide against human rights defenders who challenge specific economic paradigms, the presence of corporations and harmful business conduct. Too often, Governments detain human rights defenders, prevent them from raising funds, restrict their movements, place them under surveillance and, in some cases, authorize their torture and murder. Meanwhile, many companies either stand by as Governments employ tough law and order responses against defenders, or they aggressively target defenders who challenge their activities through legal or other means.

Against this bleak backdrop, a number of progressive companies recognize the need and value in communicating effectively with communities affected by their projects. Without a social license to operate, companies face many problems that can affect their operations, increase a project's costs and success and it can harm the firm's overall reputation. The freedom human rights defenders enjoy plays an essential role in ensuring the legitimacy of a company's operations. An open, secure civic space enables defenders to build inclusive, stable societies characterised by the rule of law that contribute to a favourable investment climate and operating conditions for companies.

This session will explore how to overcome the risks that defenders, who challenge business conduct, face in a world in which civil society at large fights for its place. It will showcase the experiences of prominent defenders and companies operating in complex environments. It will include contributions from Governments who are working to improve the rights of defenders. It will provide examples of what companies can do to provide meaningful, practical assistance to defenders, as well as the role that they can play in promoting laws, policies and action that supports civic space. Participants will also discuss what defenders and civil society can do to engage constructively with businesses to improve respect for human rights and what Governments need to do to allow peaceful dissent and fulfil their primary obligation to protect human rights.

Some key topics to be addressed by the speakers:

- The types of challenges that human rights defenders face in their work, as well as the physical, legal and financial risks to themselves.
- How State action restricts the work of defenders, and how certain corporate conduct facilitates this.
- What the shrinking civil society space, including the work of defenders, means for those operating in certain countries and regions, including business.
- Identifying the steps that companies can take to engage meaningfully with defenders and communities to reduce conflict and vice versa. Why this is in all their best interest.
- What Governments must do to create the right conditions for companies to gain a social license.
- The importance of international standards to restrain harmful State actions and how international civil society can help.



Moderator:

*Salil Tripathi - Senior Adviser, Global Issues, the Institute for Human Rights and Business*

Panel:

- *Dan Bross - Microsoft's Senior Director of Corporate Citizenship and Executive Director of the Microsoft Technology and Human Rights Center*
- *Alfred Brownell - President and Founder of the Association of Environmental Lawyers of Liberia*
- *Andy Hall - Human rights defender and a migrant worker specialist (based in Thailand)*
- *Geneviève Paul - Head of Globalisation and Human Rights Desk, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)*
- *Riccardo Serri - Deputy Head of Human Rights Strategy and Policy Implementation, European External Action Service (EU)*
- *Suzanne Spears, Counsel, Volterra Fietta*

Co-organisers:

- *Amnesty International*
- *Business and Human Rights Resource Centre*
- *Civil Rights Defenders*
- *Front Line Defenders*
- *Institute for Human Rights and Business*
- *International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) – Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders programme*
- *International Service for Human Rights*
- *World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) – Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders programme*
- *UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights*

---

\*See also: [BHRRC webpage](#) on “HR Defenders

Forum Twitter hashtag: [#bizhumanrights](#)

Watch live: <http://webtv.un.org/>