

Agenda Item 4: Practical use of the Declaration

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Madam Chair, distinguished delegates, thank you for this opportunity to share some civil society good practices regarding the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities](#), shortly before its 20th anniversary next month.

The Declaration is central to the work of Minority Rights Group International (MRG) for at least three reasons:

Firstly, as the UN text that elaborates on Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration provides essential guidance to the contents of that Article.

Secondly, its brevity is important. In a few Articles, the Declaration outlines the principle tenets of minority rights. This makes it particularly accessible for use by grassroots minority rights activists.

Thirdly, the fact that the Declaration was adopted by a consensus vote in the UN General Assembly gives it a particular scope. This means that minority representatives in all parts of the world can hold their governments to account.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the Declaration provides a platform for engagement by minority communities and civil society organisations with governments and international agencies.

So, how does MRG use the Declaration?

In virtually all of our capacity-building training work with minority rights activists, we incorporate at least an introductory session on the Declaration and the meaning of its various Articles. Of course, knowing one's rights is a first and critical step towards empowerment and making one's voice heard.

In addition, MRG has translated the Declaration into numerous languages, making these versions available for minority rights activists to use in their own communities. We have also supported its translation by a number of partners. As a result, we can now offer the text in 29 languages.

Madam Chair, let me now describe how a few of MRG's partner organisations are using the Declaration in their advocacy work. For this, I draw on a new publication which MRG is launching today, namely [Know Your Rights: a Community Guide to the UN Declaration on](#)

[Minorities](#). This publication will be the centrepiece of our own celebration of the 20th anniversary.

In Vietnam, ethnic minorities face widespread prejudice. [Minority groups](#) make up over 14 per cent of Vietnam's population. Many minorities – the Tay, Khmer, Mong and other smaller groups – live in remote mountainous areas. Despite positive initiatives, the government has struggled to deliver health and education programmes in these areas.

With support from MRG, the [Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment](#) (iSEE) has conducted a campaign during 2012, advocating for the inclusion of minority groups in development planning. iSEE has run workshops for journalists on rights-based approaches to development and combating discrimination in the media. Translating and distributing the Declaration was a crucial step in the campaign. iSEE has also published policy briefs based on the Declaration and drawing on key recommendations made by the UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues. iSEE's campaign has already resulted in some positive outcomes. The media has started to expose stereotypes and cover issues of cultural identity and language loss.

In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Organization for the Youth in Politics (ZOYP) [has been using the Declaration](#) to lobby policymakers to ensure that marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Kalanga and Tonga, can participate in the country's political system. ZOYP translated the Declaration into the Tonga language and used it during workshops with local community organizations. ZOYP has also been using the Declaration when holding the government accountable with respect to minority rights. These advocacy activities have paid off. ZOYP, in collaboration with other local groups, has successfully campaigned for the appointment of the first Tonga Minister in the current government.

In Moldova, the government has already taken steps to protect the rights of minorities by incorporating provisions of the Declaration into national legislation. Nevertheless, people belonging to minority groups continue to face discrimination related to employment, education, access to health care and expression of opinion. There has been an increase in hate-speech against minorities, especially Jews and Roma. Recognising the particular challenges faced by minority women, the [National Institute for Women of Moldova](#) ("Equality") holds ["training of trainers" sessions on interethnic tolerance](#), targeting especially university professors and school teachers. The participants are introduced to the new minority rights legislation and the Declaration. Teachers are then expected to incorporate what they have learned into their own course plans.

Madam Chair, these are three examples from three continents.

I believe that these examples demonstrate a few key lessons concerning civil society advocacy based on the Declaration: first, is the importance of introducing minority

communities to its principles, so that they own the Declaration themselves; second, is the value of translation and dissemination; third, is how central training has been in all three examples; fourth, is the usefulness of packaging the Declaration in various ways, such as policy briefs or guides, depending on the audience; and finally, is how critical the choice of target audiences can be.

In Vietnam, iSEE targeted journalists as key opinion-formers. In Zimbabwe, ZOYP focused on community groups and government officials. And in Moldova, the organisation Equality is training professors and teachers. Each of these choices was strategic and was driven by the needs of minorities themselves. And the Declaration has been equally relevant for each of these audiences.

In conclusion, I should mention that there are other case studies described in our Guide, which we are pleased to make available to participants here after today's Session. We will be showcasing further examples of successful use of the Declaration on our website. MRG sincerely hopes that both the Guide and this online resource will assist minority representatives around the world, as they continue to be inspired by the words contained in the Declaration.