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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I am pleased to have you here at the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are beginning the first of two sessions on the work of international human rights defenders. Of course, we are going to be recognizing Human Rights Day and Human Rights Month.

We had two speakers today. Unfortunately, Ms. Hansen had to pull out, but we are very pleased and honoured to have with us Mr. Frédéric Hareau, the director of programs at Equitas. Thank you very much for being here.

Founded in 1967, Equitas is a Canadian non-profit organization focusing on human rights education. With 40 staff, the organization has trained more than 5,000 human rights defenders from 140 countries, notably through its three-week annual international human rights training program. Equitas partners with IHRTP alumni to run education programs in Asia, Africa, the Americas, central and eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Equitas also runs programs geared towards Canadian youth, including Play It Fair! and Speaking Rights, which provide educational tool kits on human rights for use in day camps and extracurricular programs. Equitas is operated with the support of the Government of Canada, as well as provincial and municipal governments.

I can think of no better organization to have at the table, with the broad array of services you provide in the area of support for human rights defenders, both in Canada and around the world. With that, I would like to give you the floor, and then we'll do some questions.

Thank you, Mr. Hareau.

Mr. Frédéric Hareau (Director of Programs, Equitas – International Centre for Human Rights Education):

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I will do my intervention in French, and after that, I can definitely also entertain some questions in English.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, subcommittee members, first let me thank you for this invitation. I also thank you for conducting a study on the situation of human rights defenders.

As you can imagine, this is a matter that has been at the heart of Equitas' work for many years. To us, it seems particularly important in the current context.

For more than 50 years, Equitas—International Centre for Human Rights Education has been promoting human rights education in Canada and around the world. Thanks to the support of the government, our capacity-building programs have provided tools for more than 50,000 human rights defenders in more than 140 countries.

Equitas' actions are designed to bring about profound and sustainable change by confronting the inequities that marginalize individuals and the groups to which they are associated, and that prevent men and women from achieving their full potential and active participation in the social, political and economic development of their communities and their nations. Human rights defenders are the catalysts for that change.

The testimony I have for you is based on Equitas' long experience as well as that of hundreds of human rights defenders with whom we work around the world. It is also based on our collaboration with a number of international institutions, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the special rapporteurs working on the issue of human rights defenders. They include Michel Forst, the current rapporteur, whom we recently brought to Canada, and Margaret Sekkagya, from Uganda, a former special rapporteur who is now a member of Equitas' honorary board of directors.

My testimony is also based on the consultations we have held in recent months with human rights defenders as part of the review of Canada's international policy conducted by Global Affairs Canada.

In these remarks, I would like to deal with three topics. First of all, the international context that strongly influences the current reality and work of human rights defenders. I would also like to point out some of the more specific aspects of the situation for human rights defenders. Finally, I would like to make some recommendations as to the role that Canada could play internationally to support the work of human rights defenders.

In terms of the current context, I will not give an overview but I will simply highlight three important elements.

First of all, there is the emergence, or re-emergence, of conflicts in a number of regions around the world and the major humanitarian crises that result. Everyone is aware of the refugee crisis, for example. The number of refugees is constantly increasing. To the refugees fleeing their war-torn countries, we can add those displaced by natural disasters. Refugee women and children are particularly vulnerable, especially to sexual violence.

The second major element we can see is the growing insecurity in the world. This insecurity is not only linked to terrorist attacks and movements but also to the resulting repressive and militaristic measures that some countries have put in place. These often lead to flagrant human rights violations and put security issues at the heart of the work of human rights defenders.

Finally, I would like to point out that, internationally, the environment for civil society is more and more difficult. Paradoxically, the role of civil society is increasingly recognized, both internationally and in Canada, but, in certain countries, we can see that the space in which it is able to do its work is being reduced.

A 2015 study conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace revealed that, in three years, more than 60 countries around the world have adopted or drafted legislation restricting the activities of civil society organizations.

In a recent report, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights pointed out that civil society organizations were increasingly the target of attacks in many regions of the world.

In the same report, the High Commission for Human Rights also identified the five elements essential for supporting the work of civil society and for creating a safe and productive environment: a robust legal framework that conforms to international norms, protects public freedoms, and provides access to justice; an appropriate political environment; access to information; space in which civil society can participate in decision-making processes; and long-term support and resources.

However, we have to point out that those conditions are far from being fulfilled in many countries of the world. In fact, in some countries, there has been a deterioration in recent years.

Let us now examine the situation for human rights defenders, who clearly are the first to be affected by that deterioration.

In his 2015 report to the United Nations General Assembly, Michel Forst, the special rapporteur, highlighted the worsening situation for human rights defenders and the increasing complexity of the perils they face. This complexity is attributable to the many forms the perils take: physical, psychological, economic or social. He also emphasized that a number of factors are interacting, including poor governance, the absence of the rule of law, the rise of intolerance and religious fundamentalism, and tensions on matters of development. He concluded by pointing out that the threats to and the violations of the defenders' rights are coming from more and more perpetrators, whether state-sponsored, private, political or economic, or from groups of religious extremists.

Some categories of defenders are at particular risk because of their identity, the nature of their activities, or the situation in which they

operate. Among the groups most at risk, we can mention women, those defending the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered people, those advocating for minorities, those combatting corruption and impunity, those standing up for the environment or indigenous peoples, journalists and bloggers, lawyers working to promote and protect rights, and defenders working in conflict or post-conflict zones.

Because of their commitment, defenders often face numerous threats to their person. These can take the form of stigma or disparagement, restrictions on freedom of movement, abusive administrative measures, attacks on means of subsistence, threats to family, kidnapping or torture. They may even include murder.

In recent years, we have also seen the dangers they face increase and become more sophisticated. The new dangers include defamation campaigns in social media or blogs, threats to security, an increasing use of the law to the point of abuse, such as limiting the defenders' work by arbitrary detention or disproportionate penalties, and limiting the work of their organizations by making it more difficult for them to obtain funding, to become registered or to get permits allowing them to conduct activities.

Finally, it is appropriate to point out, in general, that the work of these defenders is little known and little recognized by the general public and by state authorities in a number of countries. This adds to their vulnerability.

Despite all these challenges, I cannot emphasize enough that, in recent years, we have seen the human rights movement become stronger, more diversified, more organized, and more mobilized. It continues to do remarkable work in strengthening good governance, in combatting conflicts, in giving a voice to those that have none, or in making human rights a greater reality, particularly for the most vulnerable groups.

Though the challenges are very real, the role of human rights defenders today seems to be more important than ever, if we want to build inclusive, just and fair societies.

The role of the defenders is critical if we want to make Programme 2030 and its sustainable development objectives a reality. At the heart of the program lies the struggle against the inequalities that are the fundamental causes of poverty and conflict in the world. This commitment is enshrined in the founding principle that no one must be left behind.

For Canada, a commitment to human rights defenders represents a unique opportunity to set ourselves apart by adopting innovative approaches to meet the current challenges.

The government should focus its efforts on promoting and protecting a positive, safe, environment for civil society organizations, in particular for human rights defenders.

Canada has great experience in working with civil society organizations at home and abroad. However, it seems necessary to pay more specific attention to the matter so that policies can be more consistent and results more meaningful. Canada should combine the human rights programs in its international development initiatives with vigorous political action from our government and diplomatic missions when civil society's space is threatened.

I would like to conclude by proposing some recommendations or possibilities for action for the Government of Canada.

First, it should adopt an action plan to implement the International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Civil Society Partnership Policy. This policy, developed by Global Affairs Canada, outlines the guiding principles and overall objectives of Canada's development commitment to civil society in establishing a healthy environment for, and improving the effectiveness of, its cooperation with civil society.

Second, it should develop a government-wide policy and strategy on specific help for human rights defenders, to include financial support, diplomatic engagement and emergency assistance in the possible form of relocation, legal and medical assistance, and host communities. Particular attention should be paid to particularly vulnerable groups, such as women and those defending LGBTIQ rights.

Third, we have to make sure that human rights are at the very heart of Canada's political and commercial relationships.

Fourth, we have to support programs that strengthen the capacity of human rights defenders in order to provide them with tools so that they can mobilize communities around the values and principles of human rights, talk effectively with governments, implement approaches based on human rights, develop and implement strategies to ensure their safety and, finally, to support the emergence of national, regional and international networks of human rights defenders.

We must support the creation and strengthening of protection mechanisms for human rights defenders who are particularly at risk, including support for already existing mechanisms such as the United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

Dialogue between governmental partners must be promoted on a regular basis and civil society organizations, whether local, regional or international, must also be invited to participate.

I also suggest that the pertinent focal points of defenders' issues be clearly identified at Canada's diplomatic missions abroad.

Programs that provide defenders with flexible and predictable funding must also be created, so that they are able to continue their work, even in surroundings that can sometimes be extremely difficult and complex, such as in Burundi.

Finally, the defenders' work must be better known and their actions publicly supported by communication and information campaigns and concrete initiatives.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Equitas is ready and willing to work with the subcommittee, with Parliament, and with

the government in their efforts to support the work that the defenders are doing for a more just and fair society, both here and around the world.

Thank you.

● (1320)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your remarks.

We will now move to the first round of questions, and we'll begin with MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you to our witness for being here today with us.

One of the reasons we're having this hearing is to highlight Human Rights Day. I'm just going to ask you, is there anything we have to celebrate?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Should I answer now?

Mr. David Anderson: Sure.

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: I think there are a number of things that we should celebrate in terms of human rights. I think we've seen in the last year, as I was mentioning, the strengthening of the human rights movement. There have been some developments that we haven't seen before.

For example, if you look back 20 or 25 years ago in terms of women's rights and the emergence of women's rights, you see there have been a number of developments in terms of the international framework, the concrete implementation of human rights on the ground.

Of course, I was mentioning there were a number of issues, but I think there are also a number of things to celebrate. I think it's actually very important to look at not just the challenges in front of us, but also to acknowledge what has been accomplished and the work that's taking place on the ground in many countries around the world.

Let's look at Tunisia, for example, and the role that civil society has played in ensuring a democratic transition in a very difficult period of time after the revolution. These are the kinds of things that we can celebrate in terms of the role of human rights defenders, but let's also look at some of these things we can build on.

Mr. David Anderson: Let's talk a bit about your organization.

You have had some funding, I understand, in Tanzania, Senegal, Haiti, and Colombia. Can you highlight your successes? What are you working on there and where do you anticipate success in that programming?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: In terms of the programming, we received funding for supporting the capacity building of organizations internationally through the international human rights training program that is happening every year in Montreal, and on bringing together approximately 90 to 100 human rights defenders for a capacity-building session. Then we have more specific and fuller competence in implementation of specific programming in Senegal, as you mentioned, and Colombia, Tanzania, and Haiti.

I will just use the example of Haiti. It's a very difficult context. We've been working there since 1988. We were involved there a lot after the earthquake in 2010. I think what we see happening in Haiti is the development of community engagement, community building based on human rights principles and values. We have been able to work in different communities across Haiti to support the integration of a human rights based approach at the very local level, so we start to see the different competencies of the people working together, including people with disabilities, women, and in some cases including LGBT groups, to develop a comprehensive and human rights based development plan.

It's early to say, but we hope with a new president in place that will create some space to continue the work in Haiti, and to engage with authorities. There was a lack of government there, but now we see some space in working with the community, where we can engage and understand human rights, and engage also with the authorities to ensure that this transformation is also happening in terms of the policy framework.

Mr. David Anderson: In a place like that, do you have the capacity to engage in building institutional strength, or do you focus primarily on education and then just try to....

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We focus primarily on education, but we focus also on building bridges and collaborating. For example, one of our key partners there is the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which is working intensively with the institution building in Haiti, so I think we are trying to build those bridges.

At Equitas, our strength is really human rights education and building the capacity, but in our work we are also trying to build bridges between civil society organizations and government. It is clear that the solution does not just come from civil society. It has to come from the interaction and the collaboration between government institutions and civil society.

Mr. David Anderson: I guess we've seen an example of where that hasn't been working. We've been studying Burundi over the last few weeks. One of the targets in Burundi was human rights defenders.

On a practical level, what kinds of priorities do human rights defenders have to adapt in a situation like that? How do you find yourself adapting to that? I know a lot of them have been forced out of the country now, but when that begins, how do people deal with that?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: That's a very difficult question, in Burundi particularly, because we are in such an extreme context.

The intervention has to be at different levels. I understand the former president Pacifique Nininahazwe from the FOCODE came to give testimony there. I think now he's based between Rwanda and Uganda. The human rights defenders were obliged to get out of the country. What they are doing in documenting the human rights violations, the disappearances taking place in Burundi, is critical because we need to document the situation in Burundi. They have a network on the ground, but they cannot operate openly there.

I was in a regional training session two weeks ago in Cameroon, and we had some participants from Burundi. We were building the capacity of civil society organizations. They see that there is still

some space to do some work. There is still some space to try to infuse the building of bridges among the communities, using the human rights principles and values to continue to build those bridges, because I think there is really a lot of danger in terms of division among the different communities in Burundi.

I think it is also a question of finding some space, some actors who might not engage in very politically difficult issues, but to find some space to work at the community level on a small scale. I think we need to continue to build that movement within the country too.

● (1325)

Mr. David Anderson: I'm jumping around a bit here, but Equitas has continued to partner through your International Centre for Human Rights Education in Sri Lanka. I think your project is to bring different faith communities together, to try to get them to the table and have discussions.

I have an interest in religious freedom. Can you tell us how that project is contributing to the development of religious freedom and support for that in Sri Lanka?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: I think the project in Sri Lanka has been integrating different components. One was research looking at what the deep causes of conflict are, particularly at the community level, looking at incidents of interreligious conflict in Sri Lanka at the community level, and looking at what the triggers are of this type of conflict and what the strategies are to address those. That was a big part of the components.

Then it was about looking at how we can build relations and connections between the different actors at the community level, the religious leaders, the local authorities, the civil society organizations, and put in place some early-warning mechanisms.

First, there is a dialogue that needs to take place. There is some education that needs to happen at the community level in terms of ensuring people have a different perspective of other religious groups. There is also the building of the connection between the different actors.

Mr. David Anderson: Is that going in the right direction?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We've seen some movement. For sure it's not just action by Equitas, obviously. I think it's the interaction of different factors. The change in government in Sri Lanka has also created some space for that. There is some political willingness to try to put in place some institutions that will support that process of national reconciliation: how you build the bridges and support existing efforts, not just duplicating or working in parallel.

We work at the community level in terms of capacity building, but we're working closely with the government and institutions of the government in Sri Lanka, which is trying to find solutions to build that reconciliation.

Mr. David Anderson: Here's just a practical issue. You were talking about some of the challenges on human rights defenders with threats being more sophisticated, and legislation security issues, and that.

What kind of successful strategies do human rights defenders adopt, particularly in the areas of dealing with electronic and personal surveillance? Do you have some tools that you use?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Yes. There are some very technical tools. I think there are a number of online communities that have been developing tools. Moodle, for example, is using and creating communications platforms. I think there are a number of very technical things. We are looking at that currently, how we can build the capacity of human rights defenders to use that.

I think it's a movement in development. The issue is also that the forces in terms of surveillance are moving very quickly, too, so it's a never-ending fight and competition between who's first in addressing that.

One of the things we realized also is that, even if people are aware of that, human rights defenders are taking very few measures to protect themselves on the ground. It's also about building their understanding that basically any communication you are doing can be intercepted, so really making sure you take that into consideration in the way you communicate. There are some very practical, simple measures you can take to protect yourself, but in many cases none of them are taken.

Mr. David Anderson: Is that part of your education?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Absolutely, and more and more, actually.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, good. I think I'm out of time.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Anderson.

We're now going to MP Miller.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With your colleagues present, and on behalf of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, I had the honour of announcing a grant of \$1 million in the light of your civic engagement. I was able to see your colleagues in action and to have your activities well described to me.

I would like to come back to your domestic activities, because here we are talking mostly about civic engagement in Canada.

In our study on the Yazidis, a witness mentioned that most human rights violations are committed by people known in the villages, when they were experiencing social disintegration, an erosion of the social fabric.

How can your action help to strengthen the dialogue between the parties who may be threatened where their society is being weakened, such as with the Yazidis and those around them?

• (1330)

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: First, you would have to encourage an awareness of human rights issues and bring people to reflect critically on the culture of violence that often prevails in many communities.

How could people be encouraged to think more about interrelationships, about issues of inclusion and exclusion, of discrimination and marginalization? It would have to be done

through a fundamentally community approach, by bringing various parties together.

Of course, in any community, some people commit human rights violations. There needs to be a way of managing that and some people will have to be brought to justice.

The reflection on this community engagement must also be built together. Those in the community have to be convinced that they have the power and the ability to try and maintain their objectives in the area of human rights. This is long-term work.

Mr. Marc Miller: Absolutely.

In terms of education and awareness, which specific steps have to be taken in a program in a third-world country, a developing country?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: First, it needs a realization on the part of local populations. They have to understand the values and principles on which human rights are based: the principles of inclusion and non-discrimination, and to see the consequences of human rights violations on their own communities.

Then you have to develop skills in terms of community engagement, in order to build greater knowledge of the systems of legal protection for human rights and to find ways to act that are often community-based. So all members of the community will then be encouraged to act in the event of violations of human rights, or of rights in general.

That also often requires a lot of interaction with local authorities.

Solutions will come more from the communities. Our role is to provide a framework for the reflection on what is possible for the community, in terms of communication, commitment and negotiation, in order to move its human rights objectives forward.

Mr. Marc Miller: You work with state players, not just with civil society specifically. Have you been able to bring awareness to the authorities, telling them, for example, that they cannot use the fight against terrorism as an excuse to brush aside human rights? That is certainly a very hard discussion, I agree. However, the excuse is often used by state players in order to justify human rights violations.

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Yes, it is a difficult and long-term dialogue. Often, and especially in Africa, violence and torture are used as investigative methods, simply because there is no other way to find evidence. We see that very often.

There should be several levels of intervention. First, people are not aware of existing obligations and laws. We absolutely must engage the authorities on those issues. We must also try to work with the high-level authorities and grassroots authorities. Sometimes, we may not have a very strong commitment at the national level, but we can still work at the grassroots level with the local authorities. We must try to create a dialogue about the obligations and legislation in place.

Our work with the authorities is a commitment throughout the stages of implementing our projects. This is not just a matter of dealing with a particular player outside our interventions. From the outset, we are also trying to forge ties and build relationships between state authorities and civil society actors.

Mr. Marc Miller: Do you feel that there is progress or do you feel that the state sometimes uses you as an excuse to somehow justify its actions with respect to human rights? Is there any tension on that front?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We try to do everything possible to avoid being used by the state in that way. The level of dialogue will depend on the circumstances.

Is there any progress? I think there is, as long as there is awareness and recognition of human rights. Right now, we really have to establish the context of human rights, and there is still a lot of work to do.

It will depend on the situations and issues we are working on.

• (1335)

Mr. Marc Miller: My next question is about the involvement, education and awareness of Canadians. When I spoke with your colleagues, we mostly talked about raising awareness of human rights among Canadians.

Could you briefly explain the usefulness of that initiative?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: In Canada, we work extensively with children and young people to raise awareness about the values underlying human rights: inclusion, diversity, participation, non-discrimination and gender equality. We see promoting these values as important for creating inclusive and democratic societies. Human rights education takes place at all ages. It begins with children's understanding of what inclusion means to them in everyday life, at school, on the playground, in their families, in their communities. It is therefore a matter of building, from a very young age, all this learning and understanding of values.

It is also about developing commitment, which grows progressively in children and young people, so that they become involved in their society, becoming themselves agents of change and leaders when the time comes to build those interactions. This seems particularly important in communities with great diversity. Increasingly, the reality of every country in the world, including Canada, is tremendous diversity.

How do we achieve that mutual understanding? We feel that the values underlying human rights are fundamental. As I have just said, it is important to engage children and young people in those processes as agents of change.

We are now reaching more than 100,000 children in Canada. We started with children aged 6 to 12 and we are now working with teenagers. Right now, we are working to promote those values among refugee children arriving in Canada from a number of countries around the world, as well as to develop relationships within indigenous communities.

I think we have a lot of things to build together, including ties and connections.

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, MP Miller.

MP Hardcastle, the floor is yours.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'd like to continue talking specifically about the situation in Burundi, because we are preparing our report and formulating some regulations. We did hear about the security and safety of the human rights defenders and that personnel. I know you mentioned that in your recommendations moving forward. Maybe you could give us some more examples of how you think we could formulate a plan.

[Translation]

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: I just want to point out that Equitas does not specifically monitor the situation of human rights defenders in Burundi.

In terms of prevention mechanisms, I think a number of actors are already working to ensure the safety of human rights defenders in Burundi, whether they are still in the country or somewhere else. As we know, those in countries bordering Burundi are also at risk of being murdered.

One of the main organizations, the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, is based in Uganda. It has already set up support structures for defenders. I would be pleased to share with you the more specific recommendations that those organizations have made about defenders. The United Nations Special Rapporteur, Michel Forst, is also committed to making recommendations to that end.

[English]

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you think, specifically in terms of the role of government, that it is funding that can actually address...? In terms of capacity building, how do we approach it?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Are you talking specifically about Burundi, or more generally?

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: It would be more generally about facilitating the work of a human rights defender. Maybe you can talk a bit more about the mandate. Should we be looking at the mandate and how we can be targeting civil society more, or is it merely funding? That's basically what I'm getting at.

• (1340)

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: There are different interventions that can be made for the role of Canada. When we talk about specific support on the ground, I was mentioning as a recommendation having in Canadian representation overseas a focal point for human rights defenders. That would help a lot.

As for channelling the information, when a situation arises as a threat for human rights defenders, that would be one element. Having some guidelines for what the missions also could do in support and at different levels can be the promotion of the work of human rights defenders and doing some communication activities with a specific response. If there is a threat, that can connect them with an existing mechanism, or provide them with some financial support to relocate them. That's a specific role that the mission can play.

Funding definitely is also an issue, particularly in the number of cases where the situation is difficult in a country. It is very difficult for a human rights defender who operates often at the margin of the laws, to get funding through an existing mechanism, because they don't necessarily have a well-established structure at the administration to be able to manoeuvre in that framework. Often that creates some tension for them. They are doing some very important work, but they are not necessarily in a position to go through the mainstream funding mechanism. I think looking at that and being able to provide some flexible funding could be very important for them to continue to do the work.

I think the Canadian financial local initiative that exists at the ambassador level has been very helpful in supporting some groups on the ground, but maybe it's not totally adapted sometimes for the situation of human rights defenders. Talking with human rights defenders from Burundi, who are outside the country, this is one of their main issues, because everybody there recognizes the major issue that is taking place in Burundi and the incredible risk with the potential drama that can happen in the country, but there is very limited support. I was very surprised. There is almost no support for human rights defenders from Burundi who are outside of the country. They start and they continue to try to do their work without resources. That's another element that I think could be important to look at in how we support human rights defenders.

I think that supporting the mechanism at the regional level or international level is also something that's important. I was mentioning the mandate of the special rapporteur. There are some other mechanisms that exist that can be really helpful in ensuring there is better visibility for the role of human rights defenders internationally.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I'd like you to expand a bit more on that. Is there something that's working that we should be moving forward on?

I'm not sure how we reconcile the work, how we create the space, or how we increase that space for civil society without the presence of human rights defenders, but there are places where you can't. How do they come organically, or how do we encourage the organic growth of a civil movement by increasing the space when there's such a threat to a human rights defender and where issues are evolving very quickly?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We're talking about Burundi where the situation on the ground makes it very difficult. I think the leverage you have in supporting the work on the ground is very limited.

Surprisingly, there are still some people who are able to operate in the country and continue to do some work. I think we need to find these people and to try to be able to find ways to support them. Often

it can be through, for example, capacity building at the regional level. I think that is what we try to do and what we see. The connection with other human rights defenders and other organizations at the regional level is critical in being able to put the issue on the table and to provide some network of support and solidarity.

Now, with the role that civil society can play in Burundi, I think we also have to be realistic, even in the current situation right now. The government is not very open to hearing from anybody. From the international sphere, there have been many attempts to push the government, including recently also from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. They made some strong statements. I think there needs to be very different levels and obviously, there needs to be some pressure diplomatically to push the government.

We hope that it can work, but I think there is no guarantee at this point to move forward.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Hareau, for coming in, for your testimony, and for all of your hard work on this very important issue.

You mentioned in your presentation today that the work of human rights defenders is not being publicized and the world doesn't really know the great efforts that human rights defenders go through to ensure there is an increased respect for human rights around the world. By the same token, social media is such a powerful tool to spread that knowledge, but it's a pretty interesting situation that if there is an increased presence on social media for human rights defenders, governments now use this as surveillance, perhaps to target human rights defenders.

Where do you think the balance lies so there can be a proper promotion of the great work that human rights defenders do, not just on an individual basis, but also at the organization level, and a raising of awareness of the issues that they tackle, garnering the support of the global community, while also trying to mitigate any backlash they may get from such publicity?

May I please have your thoughts on that?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: I would say first that in many countries around the world there is some space to publicize the work of human rights defenders. I think what is critical is to demonstrate the difference and the impact they make in the lives of people so that it does not stay at the level of very broad concepts and ideas, but actually leads to very concrete results. I think there are many examples we can use in terms of their work in communities and how it can change the lives of people—through laws, through the involvement of people, through making sure that the voices of the voiceless are heard and taken into consideration in developing policies or programs.

That's the space where it is.

On the more controversial issues, I think it is critical to work with the people from the country, from the place itself, who are much better placed to see what the space is, what message can resonate. I'll give an example. We are working on the LGBT rights in different countries of the world, and there is some space to publicize and to put the issue on the table. The better strategy in terms of finding the balance in creating some space to put that on the table without creating harm to the human rights defenders is with the people in the countries themselves, who are better placed. I'm thinking of Haiti, for example. In those cases we are very clear about not putting Equitas on the front line, because it is viewed then as an external imposition.

I think this is really the work, with the defenders themselves, and looking at what space exists in a country. It depends on how you frame the issue. You can sometimes frame it as a social issue rather than a human rights issue, depending on the space that exists and how the movement wants to position itself.

There is definitely some space, but it's often not taken, or it's viewed as a western imposition on the country, so how do you balance that?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: You also mentioned in your presentation five factors that must be present in order for human rights defenders to be safe and to be able to do the work that they do. You listed some factors, such as having a good legal system, having a good political system, those safeguards. The countries that do have them don't necessarily have a level of human rights violations that would require human rights defenders to have those safeguards.

In my humble opinion, education plays a huge role in getting to that grassroots level and promoting human rights and a respect for human rights.

How does your organization promote the education of human rights, if at all? How can countries like Canada help with the promotion of human rights within educational systems around the world?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: I think this is what Canada does for Equitas already, because this is really the heart of our work, human rights education and building capacity for human rights defenders, implementing that into both formal and non-formal educational systems. There are a number of initiatives undertaken by countries in terms of incorporating a human rights curriculum within their education system. Canada has a lot of expertise and experience to offer and has done that in a number of countries. I'm thinking, for example, of Senegal. It's about trying to build...and ensure that when we talk about education, we also talk about quality education. The right to human rights education is an integral part of the right to education, so it's to ensure that we integrate that.

There is a lot of curriculum that has been developed in Canada and other countries. It's really looking at how we can make those connections, ensuring that the countries that want to incorporate human rights education in their curriculum can benefit from the experiences that have been developed elsewhere. Building those network connections and ensuring access to resources is critical.

• (1350)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: In a substantial part of the world there is a complete lack of education, especially in rural areas where the

infrastructure is lacking for there to be schools at all. Does Equitas play a role in providing infrastructure in rural parts of the world?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: In formal education?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Yes.

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: No, we would do more informal education programs, looking at using spaces outside the formal education system where providing education on human rights does not exist. That's through engagement and a very participatory approach to education, and so engagement of people in implementing education within their communities.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Is any part of that education also dealing with things like mental health, specifically post-traumatic stress disorder, etc., when we're dealing with youth specifically in countries where there is a high level of violence?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We don't do this ourselves, but we definitely connect with institutions that are able to provide those types of services where people need them. In many countries there's definitely a gap. There are very limited resources to be able to provide that in post-conflict situations. We try as much as possible to provide that service, but it is not an expertise that we have at Equitas.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Sweet is next.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): We're thankful for your testimony, but more thankful for the work that you do in educating people on human rights. Today's our National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women in Canada.

One of the things I've noticed in the 10-plus years I've been on this committee is the very—how would I say it—troubling, and I'll use the term “barbaric”, use of women in warfare these days, to do the worst possible things to women to degrade them in front of their families, to demoralize their families. We didn't see this in terrorism or warfare to this degree years ago.

First, do you see the escalation that I see? Second, how are you dealing with the reality today of this terrible inhumane practice?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: In terms of the first part of your question, we see this escalation in conflict and post-conflict situations. Unfortunately, we see that type of environment growing in many places around the world. Yes, when conflict is there, we see the degradation of women, as you said, the terrible violation of their human rights. In other places that have been more stable, we've seen the opposite: an engagement of many actors in trying to address the violence against women. It has been more and more on the top of the agenda of human rights defenders around the world.

We try to incorporate the question of gender equality and violence against women as a key component of human rights when we talk about human rights education. Women's rights are human rights. That's one of the very common violations. The violence, the cultural violence that exists, that transpires toward women and children is something critical that we want to address in looking at human rights. It's not just the framework, but it's also deconstructing our mind and changing our mind in terms of violence.

It's very difficult to do a lot of human rights work in conflict situations. I was alluding to that at the beginning. How do you find the best way to engage with actors in the conflict zone? In post-conflict situations, you definitely try to ensure that the human rights framework is part of the reconstruction effort, part of rebuilding the people and addressing those, but in terms of the pure conflict, it is very difficult to do a lot of human rights work there within the conflict itself.

• (1355)

Mr. David Sweet: We've been honoured to hear from many women champions of human rights who are standing up to this kind of thing, trying also to encourage and strengthen women who are facing this. We've also seen testimony from, particularly, Yazidi women who would rather die than go through the demoralizing, degrading, and terrible violence against them.

I remember a lot of things in this committee. One of the things I remember is a press conference that we did one time. I regret that I don't remember the specific situation, but it was another human rights tragedy where we were talking about the heinous treatment of people. One reporter showed up. My colleague Irwin Cotler was posed a question. The reporter asked, "What are you going to do about it?" He's tough. He said, "Really what we want to know is what you're going to do about it."

We do so many reports and everything, yet the mainstream media does not really do it justice. When you compare it with the consequences it has on womankind and mankind, human rights violations around the world, particularly now, from Iraq to Syria, with so many displaced people, the mainstream media does a very poor job of representing just how much pain there is out there in terms of human rights violations.

Do you have any engagement with the mainstream media to educate them so that they're more responsive and they educate the broader western world about just what's going on?

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: We do a lot of media work in different countries where we operate. I fully agree with you on ensuring that the media have an understanding of human rights—let's start with that—that they look at the consequences and the impact of human rights violations, and then are able to portray that.

On the opposite side, in many situations they actually can have a very negative impact in terms of their role. We can talk about Rwanda and Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines as one of the main elements in terms of perpetrating the genocide. There are many examples around that.

How do you build that critical thinking and human rights education within the media? In the western world, we try to engage with them. We would like to do more. I would agree with you that there is still a lot to do there.

I would also echo what was said before on looking at how you can use other types of media, such as social media. There are a number of other ways now to propagate information. In terms of the human rights movement, we haven't been able to really mobilize that sphere as much as we would like to. I think it's another way to...and we know that more and more people are turning to those types of media to get information.

How can we build on that? That's a critical question for the human rights movement right now.

Mr. David Sweet: There is a lot of movement in that regard. There are a lot of groups that are using it effectively, but there needs to be a lot more use of social media.

Mr. Chair, this is my last point.

I'm just so happy with the work that is being done by this organization. If you ever decide that you want to do some town halls, I would certainly sponsor town halls in the riding I represent, just to draw attention to human rights violations and heighten people's awareness about how many human rights issues there are across the globe and how they can participate, even it's just making a simple donation or making sure their kids are aware of it as they grow up.

Mr. Frédéric Hareau: Thank you very much. We duly take note of that.

The Chair: I see we're right on two o'clock.

I want to thank you very much for being here today as we approach international human rights defenders day on December 10. It's really a focus that we've seen in this committee. You certainly took us around the world a bit with your expertise, talking about some of the fantastic work your organization is doing. Of course, that reflects on the work that international human rights defenders are doing around the world. Thank you for being here.

We're looking forward to having another two guests speak on this subject on Thursday.

With that, we shall adjourn.

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