

## **Call for Input: Views of youth-led and youth-focused organizations and institutions on the future of human rights for the development of the Human Rights 75 Youth Declaration**

### **Background**

This submission is prepared by the [Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund \(SAIH\)](#). We are a solidarity organization working to promote and strengthen the right to academic freedom, quality and inclusive education, and protection of students and scholars at risk. With partnerships across seven countries in Latin America, Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia, we support local grassroots organizations that work on strengthening access and quality of higher education, rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, intercultural education, and protection of student activism.

### **1. What are the challenges the world is facing now, how they will affect the future of human rights, and what future do you want for human rights?**

Increasingly, civil liberties, rights, and freedoms are under extreme pressure globally. A surge in inequalities, aggravated by economic and social disparities and uneven access to public goods such as education, as well as persistent crises such as COVID-19 and conflicts around the world, pose a significant obstacle to the realization of basic human rights for all. Together with this, the world is witnessing an increase in authoritarianism, with a mere 13% of the global population living in liberal democracies, according to the 2023 Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) report<sup>1</sup>. The report further highlights that academic and cultural freedom and freedom of expression and opinion are among the main rights targeted and attacked by state and non-state actors.

Oftentimes, discussions and policy developments as well as investments/financing at the national, regional, and international levels on the right to education fail to include enough focus on higher education institutions, systems, and communities. Higher education plays an important role in our societies. It not only helps build a skilled workforce for a country but also drives social, political, cultural, and economic development. Universities are centers for the development of knowledge, transmission of ideas, and critical debate. As a result, higher education communities are often at significant risk of experiencing threats and physical violence by state and non-state actors.

University students are at the forefront of the fight for human rights as seen in the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, the political demonstrations against Lukashenko in Belarus, and the recent protests in Iran. They challenge and confront worrying global trends such as the privatization of education, colonial legacies and racist practices in education, and disruptive university policies that curtail student expression and organizing. Such discourse and activism are critical to advancing social justice, socio-economic and technological developments as well as democracy and good citizenship around the world. However, we observe that there is an increasing crackdown on student activists and movements around the world due to their activism. Such repression must be seen in the context of shrinking democratic space, a phenomenon where a growing number of governments are actively

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<sup>1</sup> [2023 Varieties of Democracy Institute \(V-Dem\) report](#)

curbing fundamental rights and freedoms and clamping down on critical voices, including student activists.

The latest Scholars at Risk report<sup>2</sup> (2022) documents that from the 391 attacks on higher education communities across 65 countries, attacks on student activism and expression are the highest, accounting for approximately 41% of the incidents reported. However, attacks on student activism go beyond physical harm and damage. It is the subtle forms of repression that over time result in physical oppression across all contexts, including the most open and democratic countries, as argued in the Activism Under Attack 2023 report<sup>3</sup>. The report notes that state and non-state actors utilize four subtle mechanisms of repression to shut down student dissent:

1. *Lawfare*: the use of laws to prohibit disturbance or terrorism to contain students from organizing;
2. *Delegitimization*: the use of rhetoric to discredit student activists through negative labelling;
3. *Co-option*: empowering government-controlled or -aligned student groups or incentivizing student groups in ways that neutralize student opposition; and
4. *Factionalization*: the inflammation of broader political or social tensions within the student population.

We want increased protection and support for student activism by states, civil society, higher education institutions, and the media. These stakeholders play an important role in strengthening, protecting, and promoting student activism and collective rights in order to cultivate a thriving civil society for our collective present and future.

## **2. What are your recommendations to decision-makers and policymakers, including governments, civil society, international organizations, the United Nations, and others, to advance human rights in the future?**

Stakeholders at the national, regional, and international levels should:

- Acknowledge student activists and movements as key stakeholders in civil society, by engaging in direct dialogue with them and implementing mechanisms for student participation in policy discussions concerning the right to education, academic freedom, and other human rights issues.
- Raise awareness and publicly acknowledge human rights violations experienced by student activists and movements, including by better documenting and analysing these violations as well as undertaking and coordinating relevant advocacy efforts.
- Establish and promote necessary proactive and reactive protection and support mechanisms such as scholarships, grants, emergency funds, and legal assistance at the national, regional, and international levels, for at-risk student activists such as the Student at Risk program<sup>4</sup> and humanitarian visas.

## **3. What commitments and actions can young people take towards advancing human rights in the future?**

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<sup>2</sup> [Free to Think 2022 | Scholars at Risk](#)

<sup>3</sup> [https://saih.no/assets/docs/SAIH-rapport\\_170323\\_v3.pdf](https://saih.no/assets/docs/SAIH-rapport_170323_v3.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.studentsatrisk.no/>

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- Build knowledge and seek out capacity-building on international, regional, and national human rights mechanisms and frameworks and other topics.
- Engage with other student activists and movements, relevant civil society organizations, and higher education institutions and contribute to national, regional, and international initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of student activism.
- Ally and strengthen existing regional and global student representation bodies like the Global Student Forum<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.globalstudentforum.org/>