

The Human Dimension Implementation Meeting



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“Two decades after the fall of the

Berlin Wall, we continue to face challenges to human rights and democracy in the OSCE region — Europe, Central Asia and North America. The HDIM can make an important contribution to taking stock as to where we stand in putting commitments into practice, identifying areas that need further improvement and engaging in dialogue on how best this can be done. Civil society plays an important role in this endeavour — in the spirit of the Helsinki movement, civil society groups have full access to the meeting and can discuss issues with government representatives on an equal footing.”

— *Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, ODIHR Director*

“Not only have we managed to establish

ourselves, make ourselves known amongst the key organizations in this field, we feel that we are [no longer] delivering statements that are immediately forgotten. We feel that we are taken seriously.”

— *Andrei Arjupin, Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, Estonia*

Every autumn in Warsaw, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) hosts the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), Europe’s largest human rights conference. The HDIM has been held for over fifteen years and was established shortly after the OSCE set up the ODIHR (then the Office for Free Elections) in 1990 as the OSCE’s main institution in the human dimension. The two-week event attracts hundreds of government representatives, international experts, non-governmental organizations, and human rights activists to the Polish capital.

What is the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting?

For the uninitiated, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting can sound like a daunting event — deciphering its meaning requires an understanding of the workings of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the world’s largest regional security organization.

In OSCE parlance, the term “human dimension” describes the set of norms and activities related to human rights, the rule of law, and democracy that are regarded within the OSCE as one of the three pillars of its comprehensive security concept, along with the politico-military and the economic and environmental dimensions.

The HDIM is primarily a forum where OSCE participating States discuss the implementation of human dimension commitments that were adopted by consensus at prior OSCE Summits or Ministerial Meetings. These commitments are not legally binding norms and principles; instead, they are politically binding — a political promise to comply with the standards elaborated in OSCE documents. Follow-up meetings to review the implementation of the commitments contained in those documents are based on the principle that compliance with OSCE commitments is a matter of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and does not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.

Giving NGOs a seat at the table

One of the most significant features of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is that it is open to the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Civil society has a vital function both in combating human rights violations and as a voice in the debate on such issues. The participation of NGOs at the HDIM on an equal footing with government representatives is crucial as it enriches the debate and makes the exchanges more relevant and constructive.

The value placed on NGO participation is one of the things that sets the HDIM apart from other high-level human rights conferences. For NGOs from states where civil society is weak and constrained, the HDIM can be one of the few opportunities they have to make their voices heard before an international audience.



HDIM Participants

Year	Total Participants	NGO representatives
2008	1013	438
2007	1020	443
2006	1031	433
2005	945	433
2004	768	300
2003	790	280
2002	754	259
2001	475	155
2000	598	200
1998	700+	186
1997	441	135
1995	484	187
1993	380	N/A (58 NGOs represented)

Bringing the OSCE together

As there are over twenty field operations and institutions spread across the OSCE region, the HDIM also provides an opportunity for OSCE staff members working on human dimension issues to meet, exchange ideas and experiences, and build links with the ODIHR in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the Organization as a whole. The OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities take a particularly active role in the HDIM, chairing sessions or organizing side events. The Special Representatives of the Chairman-in Office on tolerance-related issues and on anti-trafficking also attend.

“These two-week meetings ... allow

[participants] to support and develop an understanding of international standards in various areas of human rights and thus to confront attempts to manipulate ideas and concepts, which are often made by authoritarian regimes and dictators.”

— *Yevgenii Zhovtis, Director of the Kazakhstani International Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law, Kazakhstan*

ORGANIZATION

The plenary sessions of the conference review the progress made over the past year by participating States and remaining shortcomings with respect to realizing their human dimension commitments. They are a forum for participating States, OSCE institutions and field missions, other international organizations, and non-governmental organizations to discuss the situation in the 56 participating States and important thematic issues in a forward-looking manner.

The OSCE Permanent Council sets the agenda for the HDIM, choosing three issues to be treated in depth on the three “special days” of the conference. In order to allow participants to prepare most effectively for the discussions, an annotated agenda provides a list of suggested issues for each session; discussions are not, however, limited to these topics. To permit a broad and open discussion, contributions in the plenary sessions are limited to five minutes each and are uncensored.

ACTIVITY ON THE MARGINS

In parallel to the structured sessions, a great deal of activity takes place on the sidelines of the HDIM. Side events on a particular topic can be organized throughout the conference by any interested party, be it an NGO, a delegation, or an ODIHR department. In contrast to the more formal plenary sessions, these smaller meetings enable more in-depth and lively discussions. Many of the ideas generated at these meetings feed back into the work of the ODIHR’s departmental programmes. NGOs can also use side events as a platform to make major announcements.

Equally important for many participants is the chance for informal briefings. For many NGOs, the HDIM provides a unique opportunity to meet with members of the delegation to the OSCE from their respective countries. It also enables an exchange between NGOs and OSCE delegations, which can bring support and encouragement for new and ongoing projects. NGOs from across the region also use this meeting place to form networks with similar organizations and exchange ideas and experiences.

With about a thousand participants, the HDIM is an ideal place to disseminate information on human rights. A wealth of information is available at the conference, including all recent ODIHR publications, as well as printed documents brought by participants. In addition, the ODIHR’s electronic document distribution system provides immediate and online access to all contributions submitted in electronic format — in 2008, over five hundred documents were submitted by participants.



“What is a talkshop? If it is a place

where legal obligations are reiterated, where moral questions are being asked, where heads of governments are held responsible, solidarity expressed and views exchanged, then this is a talkshop. But it is also more — it is an opportunity to present our opinion and challenge the states on their human rights practices. It gives us an opportunity to meet other NGOs, share experiences, attend side events which explore the issues more thoroughly, and engage in real debate.”

— Anne Marit Austbo, Advisor for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee

“The HDIM tended to be quite formal

in its early days. This was partly due to the fact that the meetings were held in a military centre, but also due to the format of prepared statements read out by participants and lack of spontaneous debate. To promote dialogue during the meetings, we initiated breakout discussion groups and tried to follow up on suggestions for seminars made during the meetings. This was particularly useful in two instances, one focusing on Roma issues, and the other on religious tolerance. Both led to concrete action: the recommendation to establish a Roma Contact Point in the ODIHR, which later became a reality. A group of mixed faith experts, who were involved in the discussions on religious freedoms at a seminar on that topic are still consulted in the UK.”

— Ambassador Audrey Glover, ODIHR Director 1994-1997

Turning words into action

The HDIM was established in 1992 in the wake of the 1990 Copenhagen and 1991 Moscow Documents that came out of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the then-CSCE. These two standard-setting documents remain key texts for the OSCE’s commitments in the human dimension. Although the fact that the 56 OSCE states have signed up to these principles of democracy and human rights is a remarkable achievement, commitments do not implement themselves, and the focus of the Organization began to shift from creating standards to upholding them. Every two years, a review conference that covered all of the OSCE’s work was organized, and to keep attention focused on the human dimension in the years in between, the HDIM was born.

Over the past decade, the HDIM has grown in size and strength from a meeting held every other year to the annual event of today, and with the participation of both NGOs and government representatives more than doubling.

Each year, hundreds of recommendations come out of the HDIM, which are all recorded in the final report. Many of these remind states of their obligations under existing commitments, highlighting areas of particular concern, while others suggest methods for more effective and efficient implementation. Far from being just a talking-shop, the ideas and recommendations discussed at the conference have achieved real results over the years.

To take just a few examples, concerns raised at successive HDIMs about the increase across the OSCE region of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance towards faith groups led to the establishment of the ODIHR’s programme on tolerance and non-discrimination in 2004. Detailed recommendations for activities such as collecting data on hate crimes, training law-enforcement officers, promoting freedom of religion, and developing education programmes on diversity and combating anti-Semitism were taken on board, and projects in these areas now form the backbone of the ODIHR’s Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme.

With regard to elections, a 1997 recommendation to train Roma in election monitoring, and a 2001 recommendation to pay particular attention to national minorities in elections have been followed up: ODIHR election observation missions now routinely appoint a national minorities analyst to their core teams in countries with sizeable national minorities, including Roma, and the ODIHR seconds Roma as short-term observers through its fund for the diversification of election observation missions. A handbook on assisting the participation of national minorities was also published in 2001.

In 1997, conference delegates expressed the need to train OSCE mission members in human rights. The ODIHR responded by introducing periodic human dimension induction training tailored to the specific needs of OSCE mission members.

Recommendations for action can be made both to the OSCE and to participating States. The fact that all participants can make recommendations gives the event a valuable sense of reciprocity and shared responsibility. Rather than being simply a platform to attack particular states for shortcomings, the HDIM seeks to review the implementation of all participating States, highlight problem areas, and find constructive ways forward. At the same time, states are fully aware that they may be called upon to explain situations in their own countries when there are allegations that human dimension commitments have been breached.



Follow-up

The recommendations made by NGOs and participating States alike are presented to the OSCE's Ministerial Council Meeting in December of the same year. The decisions made there will prepare the Organization's policy for the year to come. Recommendations provide input for discussions and decisions in the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna. Many important issues raised at HDIMs are also followed up with their own dedicated Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting in Vienna, or Human Dimension Seminar in Warsaw. These shorter meetings are also organized by the ODIHR, in co-operation with the OSCE Chairman-in-Office. Likewise, the implementation of recommendations made at other OSCE meetings can also be reviewed at the HDIM. The HDIM is therefore one important and integral part of the larger and continuous OSCE process to bring all participating States closer to the ideals of freedom and democracy.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

Being such an important event in the OSCE calendar, the HDIM has undergone close scrutiny and attracted both praise and criticism over the years. In 2002, it was revitalized and given new modalities by a working group under the leadership of Norwegian Ambassador Kai Eide, who claimed that the HDIM had become "an event instead of a tool."

Recently, participating States have been criticized for being ever more timid in their willingness to air instances of non-compliance with OSCE commitments in public. It has been suggested that discussion at the HDIM is being stifled by an increasing reluctance on the part of states to criticize those states with which they have some close alliance — whether it be as a members of the European Union, NATO, or the CIS. Harm Hazewinkel, formerly with the Dutch delegation to the OSCE, has commented in this context that "the participants at HDIMs should return to the heart of the matter, focusing on discussing the implementation of, and compliance with, human dimension commitments, with the overall aim being to improve the human rights record of all OSCE participating States."

This is a reminder of the truth that the success of the HDIM — as with the OSCE as a whole — depends on the willingness of participating States to engage in open and constructive debate, and to play their part in following up on recommendations. What the HDIM can and must continue to do is to provide the optimum conditions for just such a discussion.

"This kind of forum lets us talk about our needs, the overall situation in our country, and where we want the Organization to focus."

— *Mira Karybaeva, of the women's NGO Social Technologies Agency, Kyrgyzstan*

"Accountability and change succinctly

sum up the purpose of the HDIM, a valuable tool focused on our commonly agreed commitments. Beyond identifying gaps between word and deed, the meeting offers a unique opportunity for delegations and NGOs alike to present the face of the human dimension and give a voice to those denied their fundamental freedoms and human dignity. Not surprisingly, the HDIM is an irritant to violators and others willing to turn a blind eye to abuses. If their energies were directed toward eliminating existing gaps in implementation, we would all benefit and the HDIM would no longer be needed. Until then, we patiently labour in this sometimes painstaking effort that can be richly rewarding when change does come."

— *Ronald McNamara, International Policy Director, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*



Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings

2009

- Hate Crimes - Effective Implementation of Legislation (4-5 May)
- Freedom of Religion or Belief, Vienna (9-10 July)
- Gender Equality, with a Special Focus on Combating Violence against Women (5 - 6 Nov)

2008

- National Institutions against Discrimination in Combating Racism and Xenophobia (29-30 May)
- Sustainable Policies for Roma and Sinti Integration (10-11 July)
- Democratic Lawmaking (6-7 November)

2007

- Combating Sexual Exploitation of Children (18-19 October)
- Protection and Promotion of Human Rights: Responsibilities and Effective Remedies (12-13 July)
- Freedom of Assembly, Association and Expression: Fostering Full and Equal Participation in Pluralist Societies (29-30 March)

2006

- Democratization: Strengthening Democracy Through Effective Representation (2-3 November)
- Freedom of the Media: Protection of Journalists and Access to Information (13-14 July)
- Rights Defenders and National Human Rights Institutions: Legislative, State and Non-State Aspects (30-31 March)

2005

- Role of Defence Lawyers in Guaranteeing a Fair Trial (3-4 November)
- Human Rights and the Fight Against Terrorism (14-15 July)
- Challenges of Election Technologies and Procedures (21-22 April)

2004

- Internally Displaced Persons (4-5 November)
- Electoral Standards and Commitments (15-16 July)
- Human Rights Education and Training (25-26 March)

2003

- Prevention of Torture (6-7 November)
- Freedom of Religion or Belief (17-18 July)
- Roma and Sinti (10-11 April)

2002

- The Role of Community Policing in Building Confidence in Minority Communities (28-29 October)
- Prison Reform (8-9 July)
- Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women (18-19 March)

2001

- Human Rights: Advocacy and Defenders (22-23 October)
- Promoting Tolerance and Non-Discrimination (18-19 June)
- Freedom of Expression: New and Existing Challenges (12-13 March)

2000

- Migration and Internal Displacement (25 September)
- Trafficking in Human Beings (19 June)
- Human Rights and Inhuman Treatment or Punishment (27 March)

1999

- Roma and Sinti Issues (6 September)
- Gender Issues (14-15 June)
- Freedom of Religion and Belief (22 March)



Human Dimension Seminars

2009

Strengthening the Rule of Law in the OSCE Area
(12-14 May)

2008

Constitutional Justice (14-16 May)

2007

Effective Participation and Representation in Democratic
Societies (16-18 May)

2006

Upholding the Rule of Law and Due Process in Criminal
Justice Systems (10-12 May)

2005

Migration and Integration (11-13 May)

2004

Democratic Institutions and Democratic Governance
(12-14 May)

2003

Participation of Women in Public and Economic Life
(13-15 May)

2002

Judicial Systems and Human Rights (23-25 April)

2001

Election Processes (29-31 May)

2000

Children and Armed Conflict (23-26 May)

1999

Human Rights: The Role of Field Missions (27-30 April)

1998

Ombudsmen and National Human Rights Protection
Institutions (25-28 May)

1997

Promotion of Women's Participation in Society
(14-17 October)
Administration and Observation of Elections (8-11 April)

1996

Constitutional, Administrative and Legal Aspects of the
Freedom of Religion (16-19 April)

1995

Rule of Law (28 November-1 December)
Building Blocks for Civic Society: Freedom of Association
and NGOs (4-7 April)

1994

Roma in the CSCE Region (20-23 September)
Local Democracy (16-20 May)
Migrant Workers (21-25 March)

1993

Free Media (2-5 November)
Case Studies on National Minorities Issues:
Positive Results (24-28 May)
Migration, Including Refugees and Displaced Persons
(20-23 April)

1992

Tolerance (16-20 November)

OSCE ODIHR second edition 2009

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