

Protecting the protectors- broadening the definition of Human Rights Defenders

K.N. Liyanapathirana*

Department of Law, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
**kanchanaliyanapathirana@yahoo.com*

In the past two decades the world saw the beginning of a new era of human rights which created changes in the understanding and perception of human rights'. Within this context "Human rights defenders" emerged as a heated academic debate all over the world. Within the Sri Lankan post war context this term has been used on several occasions yet without any reference to the ordinary civil society, which is an essential category of human rights defenders. This research focuses on exploring the definition of human rights defenders and seeks to discuss how the term could be used as a protection mechanism towards building a sustainable future.

A combination of primary and secondary qualitative research methods were deployed. The research, at the outset, involves a comprehensive domestic and international literature review. Coupled with this a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out with human rights defenders to understand the protection mechanisms available under the United Nations protection regime.

The UN General assembly in 1998 passed the 'Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms', which became the main instrument and agent of human rights defenders. It is clear with the relevant findings that the definition of a human rights defender must be broad and inclusive. This will result in a vast majority of civil actors like trade unions, student unions, journalists, academics and a whole host of other actors working for the rights of the others to be recognized as human rights defenders. This will in turn positively affect their human rights activities under the human rights regime. It will strengthen the civil society against social injustice and to drive the society towards building a sustainable future.