

Public Defender of Rights
Mgr. Anna Šabatová, Ph.D.

Brno, 15 July 2015
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Dear Madam or Sir,

In response to the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I am sending you this letter in which I summarise the findings and experience of the Office of the Public Defender of Rights concerning the area of co-operation with civil society.

I would like to start with a brief introduction of the mission of the Public Defender of Rights. The Defender's mission as originally conceived is to defend individuals against unlawful or incorrect procedure of the authorities, or their inactivity. Since 2006 the Defender has also acted as the "national preventive mechanism" in the sense of OPCAT, which is designed to prevent ill-treatment in places where people deprived of their liberty are or may be present. Finally, since 2010 the Defender has also acted in the role of the national equality body. Currently, a draft amendment to the Public Defender of Rights Act is being discussed in the Czech Parliament; if adopted, the Defender will also be designated as the national CRPD monitoring body.

The long-term engagement of the Office of the Public Defender of Rights with the individual civil society actors as defined in the guidebook "A practical Guide for Civil Society – CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE AND THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM" comprises the following:

Human rights organisations (NGOs, associations)

The Office of the Public Defender of Rights has signed memoranda of understanding with a number of NGOs in the area of equal treatment. In addition to the co-operative framework, the memoranda also provide for regular training of NGOs' staff in issues associated with equal treatment.

The Office provides such training to NGOs' staff on a continuous basis. We target, in particular, NGOs active in the area of social counselling. The training is provided in the form of seminars and workshops and aims to convey information on the applicable legal regulations and the possibilities for defence of the clients (e.g. how to file an administrative action). The training's purpose is to assist the NGOs' staff in defending the rights of their clients. In return, the Office draws on the experience of the NGOs, which it uses to push for systemic changes (e.g. in the area of inclusive education and in the social area); the NGOs also inform the Office of cases where discriminatory conduct is suspected.

Lawyers, doctors and medical workers

The Office of the Public Defender of Rights offers and provides training for lawyers in equal treatment, as this area of law is quite complicated and lacks sufficient case-law.

In the area of prevention of ill-treatment, the Office provides training to employees of institutions where ill-treatment may occur. These employees include police officers, social workers and health care staff.

Doctors and medical workers are often invited to participate in the role of experts in the systematic visits to social services facilities, psychiatric hospitals, prisons and hospices. The Defender has also signed memoranda of understanding with several professional medical associations.

Public institutions that carry out activities aimed at promoting human rights

Since 2014 employees of the Office have visited schools where, aside from providing information on the activities of the Public Defender of Rights, they implement an educational programme in the form of interactive theatre aimed at promoting diversity.

The Office also offers internships to law students. It co-operates with two law schools in organising legal clinics. The employees of the Office lead a number of seminars and, subsequently, the students work as trainees in the Office.

Furthermore, as part of the project "We take interest in you", the Office raises the citizen's awareness of their rights through interactive theatre performances aimed not only at sharing information on the citizens' rights, but also at teaching them how to defend and exercise these rights. Meetings with citizens take place each month in a different administrative region of the Czech Republic; public libraries serve as the venue for the events and the libraries subsequently become partner libraries of the Public Defender of Rights. The partner libraries set up a stand on their premises which contains the Defender's information leaflets; the library staff is also trained to advise the visitors of the Defender's powers, how to approach the Defender's Office, where to find information on the Defender's activities, etc.

Finally, the complainants themselves are a source of valuable information for the Defender in formulating recommendations for changes in the legislation. Their experience help the Defender reveal the shortcomings of laws as they are applied in the everyday practice.



Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

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