Amnesty International Scotland

Response to the Scottish Parliament’s European and External Relations Committee Inquiry ‘Connecting Scotland’ – How Scottish Organisations Engage Internationally

12 May 2015

Amnesty International Scotland

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all. We reach almost every country in the world. There are more than 20,000 Amnesty members and 123 local, youth and student groups in Scotland.

Human rights are the fundamental entitlements and freedoms that we can, and should, expect in our lives. These rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

Since Amnesty International was founded in the UK in 1961, we have expanded globally from our original London base. We have headquarters in London and offices in cities across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, which constitute our International Secretariat. These offices are major hubs for our research, campaigns, education, outreach, and communications. They strengthen the work of Sections, who already work at the national level in more than 70 countries. Amnesty International UK (AIUK) is one of those Sections. Amnesty International Scotland is part of AIUK, and based in Edinburgh.

Amnesty International is independent of any government or religious affiliation and maintains a politically neutral stance. We hold governments to account across the world, including the UK Government and Scottish Government. However, we also work constructively with governments, wherever possible, to progress human rights.

Amnesty International Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the European and External Relations Committee Inquiry ‘Connecting Scotland’.

International Activities

Through our detailed research and campaigning, we help to fight abuses of human rights worldwide. As a global organisation, our work is focused internationally. Amnesty International Scotland connects to a wide range of international activity as part of our global movement, through Amnesty offices, supporters, and activists around the world.

Shining a light on human rights abuses worldwide

Amnesty International is a campaigning organisation. We investigate and report on the facts, whenever and wherever human rights abuses happen. Our role is to shine a light on human rights abuses. We campaign on a number of issues, from the death penalty and torture, to freedom of expression, and sexual and reproductive rights.

Earlier this year, Amnesty published satellite images that revealed the extent of the destruction caused by Boko Haram in North East Nigeria. Those images caught the attention of the world’s media, and verified the testimonies of survivors of the
attacks. The satellite images were crucial to both verify the attacks and the scale of destruction as the region is isolated and largely controlled by Boko Haram. Without images such as these, atrocities like this can be ignored by the media and indeed the wider world. We provide evidence that cannot be ignored.

Similarly, last year Amnesty published satellite images that exposed the scale of prison camps in North Korea, which are part of the continuing systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights throughout the republic. This was released along with harrowing footage of testimony from survivors of these brutal death camps.

Our campaign work comprises evidence-based research, first-person accounts, and tangible proof of human rights abuses. Our researchers spend time in the countries they cover (if it is possible to gain entry) and have a network of contacts in these countries, including local human rights defenders. Many of our researchers undertake this work at great personal risk: they travel to conflict zones, which others are desperate to flee, to meet the victims of human rights abuses and record their testimony. This includes speaking to the victims of ISIS attacks in Iraq, people struggling to survive in Gaza, and refugees fleeing war-torn Syria.

AIUK’s Director, Kate Allen, frequently travels to areas affected by grave human rights violations. In the week that more than 1000 people drowned in the Mediterranean, she travelled to the Italian island of Lampedusa to meet shipwreck survivors, the coastguard and officials. As well as hearing eyewitness testimony, she also highlighted our campaign calling on EU governments, including the UK Government, to extend the search and rescue operation in an effort to stem the tide of unnecessary deaths in the Mediterranean.

Defending human rights of individuals

By telling the powerful stories of individual people, we mobilise millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change, and stand in defence of activists on the frontline.

In 2014, 27-year-old mother Meriam Ibrahim was sentenced to death in Sudan for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. She gave birth to her second child on death row, while heavily shackled. Over a million people supported Amnesty’s campaign for her release – sending letters, emails and texts to the Sudanese authorities. Six weeks after she was sentenced, the Sudanese authorities released her from death row and dropped the charges. International pressure and media coverage put the spotlight on Meriam’s case, and the authorities could no longer justify her execution. Her freedom is proof that appropriate pressure on authorities at the right time works.

In January 2015, Saudi blogger and free speech activist Raif Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes for simply exercising freedom of expression. Over a million people have so far supported Amnesty’s campaign calling on the Saudi authorities to cease flogging and release Raif Badawi. He has not been flogged since he received the first 50 lashes of his sentence earlier this year and we believe the ensuing international outcry has saved him from further floggings, but we continue to receive weekly updates on whether or not he has been flogged and are continuing our campaign to free him.

Campaigning for Change

We use our strength as an international organisation to campaign for change and for justice.

We campaigned, with other partners, for an Arms Trade Treaty to help stem the supply of illegal arms and weapons to conflict zones and regimes where they are used to commit human rights abuses. A global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) became international law on 24 December 2014.

In Nigeria, two oil spills in 2008 destroyed thousands of livelihoods. Oil poured from faults in the Trans-Niger Pipeline for weeks, covering the area in a thick slick of oil. Amnesty and our partner, the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development, worked with the community to hold Shell accountable and lobby them to clean up environmental damage and pay compensation. Finally in December 2014, the Bodo community won a long-awaited victory when Shell paid out an
unprecedented £55 million in compensation after legal action in the UK.

Amnesty has exposed countless instances when corporations exploit weak and poorly enforced domestic legislation with devastating effect on people and communities. There are few effective mechanisms at national or international level to prevent corporate human rights abuses or to hold companies to account. Amnesty is working to change this. Here in Scotland, we have campaigned for and are helping to deliver through SNAP, a national action plan on business and human rights.

Last year, Amnesty led a campaign for the UK to accept refugees from Syria. After months of pressure on the UK Government, it reversed its policy and announced plans to settle some of the most vulnerable refugees from the Syrian conflict. 10,000 Amnesty supporters emailed their MPs in one week as part of this campaign, and 94% of MPs in the UK received an email from a supporter in their constituency asking them to support a UK resettlement scheme. An Amnesty International local activist group in Perth successfully lobbied their local council to accept Syrian refugees.

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Our campaigns mobilise people across the world to take action in a number of ways. Whether that is a letter of solidarity to a prisoner of conscience, an email to a US Governor asking them not to execute a prisoner on death row, signing a petition by text to pardon a young woman jailed in El Salvador because of a miscarriage, attending a protest in support of freedom of expression or generally spreading the word about our campaigns on social media, collectively we can make a difference. Amnesty International Scotland highlights all of this international work throughout our networks in Scotland, and engages a Scottish audience in these campaigns.

As well as engaging the general public in our global campaigns, we also work with organisations such as charities, trade unions, faith organisations and the media to highlight our campaigns. In Scotland, Amnesty works with a range of partners on different campaigns. We worked with Oxfam Scotland on the campaign for an Arms Trade Treaty, and we work with SCIAF, the Scottish Human Rights Commission, and others to influence the Scottish Government’s international agenda.

Amnesty International Scotland provides briefings and guidance to the Scottish Government in advance of and during the Commonwealth Games. This was a positive opportunity to influence the bilateral discussions between the Scottish Government and visiting officials, and to raise the most urgent human rights concerns at that time.

We recently briefed the Scottish Government on the refreshed International Framework, and individual country plans such as the recent work on the revised India Plan – facilitating input from Amnesty International India.

We proactively brief Members of the Scottish Parliament on international human rights issues.

Amnesty International Scotland was also a partner in the drafting of Scotland’s first National Action Plan for Human Rights (SNAP), and we are a key partner in the delivery of SNAP. We sit on the SNAP Leadership Panel, and we co-convene the Action Group on Our International Obligations, along with the Scottish Government and Scottish Human Rights Commission.

Amnesty International Scotland provides a gateway to Amnesty International’s global network of contacts and expertise. We have worked closely with International Secretariat colleagues to provide briefings to the Scottish Government, and part of that work involves informing them of developments in Scotland – therefore we are raising awareness of the Scottish Government’s international work across our global network.
Maximising Scotland’s impact internationally

There is a great deal of valuable and effective work being done to improve human rights across the world by a number of Scottish organisations. However, there is potential for these collective efforts to be brought together more effectively as part of an international human rights strategy. In our previous submission to the Connecting Scotland inquiry, we highlighted the case for such a strategy.

A dedicated international human rights strategy would embed and formalise the work of the Scottish Government in this area, and ensure a more strategic, coherent and transparent approach across government to promoting human rights issues internationally. However, such a strategy would also have the potential to effectively coordinate and highlight the impact of the work being done by a wide range of organisations beyond government, from public bodies to the third sector. If that were to be achieved, Scotland could make an important contribution to improving human rights internationally.

An international human rights strategy would provide an explicit statement of Scotland’s values and approach to the promotion of human rights. It would demonstrate real commitment to being a good global citizen – a document that can be taken around the world to promote Scotland’s values and help progress human rights elsewhere. It would also be a document that could be used by organisations across Scotland to coordinate and progress human rights work.

The strategy would provide an opportunity to formalise current mechanisms such as IHRAP, and build on that approach across government and include a wider range of organisations in that work. It should also include measures to support all levels of government in Scotland, civic society, and business to integrate human rights considerations into international engagement.

Scotland has a wealth of legal and practical knowledge of implementing human rights that could be of significant benefit to other states, their non-governmental organisations, and individual activists. As part of the international human rights strategy these should be made available, alongside humanitarian and economic aid, to help other countries develop and embed a strong and resilient human rights culture and framework. It should also recognise the importance of supporting and building capacity for individual human rights defenders and local organisations working in the field of human rights. The Scottish Government has a wealth of information and expertise in Scotland to draw upon in delivering its human rights agenda.

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