

MARTIN ENNALS AWARD
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Narrative Report

2021

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MEA 2021 in Numbers

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MEA 2021

60+



nominees
to the Award

IN NUMBERS



25

HRDs trained in fundraising



+260

students completed
education project

1

urgent
appeal



115

participants to
advocacy event

21

original
articles

+8,000

online
ceremony
viewers



5

Languages for our
defenders' survey

+14K

New visitors
to our website



+200

followers on new
MEA Instagram account

Care
packages
to HRDs



32

Message from the Foundation

2021 was a year that tested Martin Ennals Foundation's (MEF) resilience. Pandemic confinements and travel bans around the world prompted us to convert our Jury process, the annual Award Ceremony and the Geneva Residency into virtual formats – a challenge compounded by the difficulty of communicating with our honoured defenders 2021, all of whom were in some form of detention at the time of their nomination. Our work went from being technology-enabled, to technology-dependent, in record time.

This shift brought some important learnings. We made increased use of digital technologies to connect the network of Martin Ennals Award (MEA) winners around the world. Time-zones and borders were no impediments to the conversations and burden-sharing amongst defenders which occurred in the framework of our new peer-coaching project. Not only our annual Award Ceremony, but at least 3 other virtual events co-hosted by MEF took place online, successfully.

But the pandemic also exacerbated the digital divide. Where the internet is expensive or unstable, MEA defenders found themselves more isolated from human rights networks and information. Covid closed embassies and reduced modalities for civil society participation

at the United Nations. Several MEA winners faced severe crackdowns in their countries, as governments took advantage of the COVID distraction to crush civil society.

Against the spectre of the terrible pandemic, we could feel helpless at times. The theme of our ceremony was chosen specifically to deflect the mood and lift morale: *"Nothing can stop us from celebrating human rights defenders!"* And we are confident that these experiences serve to build our resilience.

In 2021 we've begun to think of ourselves and act as a multilingual, multi-time zone, multi-cause hub for a network of exceptional activists. Our long-standing ambition to catalyze meaningful connections between defenders is taking shape – for example, in the sharing of pandemic-survival advice and fundraising contacts amongst the Martin Ennals Defenders.

Being part of something larger than ourselves, sharing the journey with many human rights defenders, Jury members, donors and partners, keeps our motivation high. All of us at the Foundation and the Board of the Martin Ennals Award are galvanized to face the challenges ahead and transform adversity into advantage.

1. Overview 2021

1.1 Martin Ennals Foundation: Who we are

The Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders (MEA) honors individuals and organizations that have shown exceptional commitment to defending and promoting human rights, despite the risks involved. It strives to provide them with much needed protection, raising their public profile and gathering international support for their work.

The Award was named in honor of the human rights entrepreneur and Secretary General of Amnesty International, Martin Ennals. An independent Jury of ten leading human rights organizations selects the recipients to the Award.¹ The Martin Ennals Foundation (MEF), based in Geneva (Switzerland), acts as a secretariat to the process, organizer of the Award ceremony and publicity, and lead for the supporting activities offered to defenders. There are currently over 60 defenders associated to the Martin Ennals Award in more than 37 countries.

What does the Award do for defenders?

At its core, the MEA was designed to provide protection to defenders at risk. The Award consists of a substantial financial prize (between CHF 20,000 – 50,000), as well as tailor-made opportunities for advocacy, training and networking hosted by the MEF. The resulting publicity surrounding the Award provides a boost to defenders and significantly improves their profile, which contributes to positive outcomes for fundraising, personal wellbeing, and coalition-building. The Foundation's ambition is that, through the galvanization of support, the MEA protects not only specific HRDs but also strengthens all HRDs who work in hostile and dangerous environments.

1.2 What were our objectives in 2021?

Our primary objective in 2021 continued to be to enhance the influence of HRDs on the international scene and in policy-making. Key strategic goals in 2021 included:

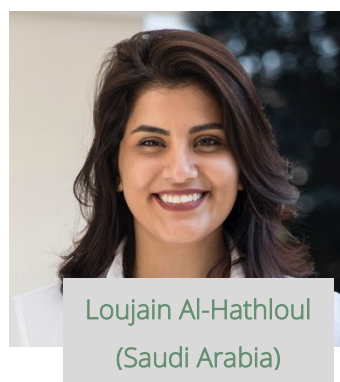
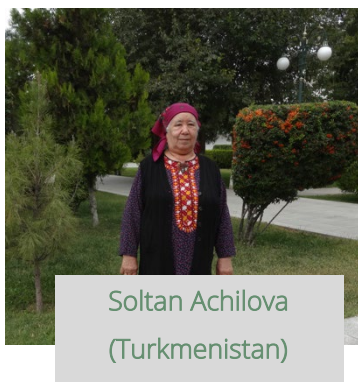
- ✓ Consolidation of the Geneva Residency offering advocacy support and skills-building opportunities for defenders

¹ Amnesty International, Bread for the World, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, Frontline Defenders, HURIDOCs the International Federation of Human Rights, the World Organization Against Torture, the International Service for Human Rights, and the International Committee of Jurists

- ✓ Launch of the peer-coaching project with the Martin Ennals Defenders Network
- ✓ Harnessing opportunities to contribute more to local life in the City of Geneva.
- ✓ Raising awareness amongst local youth about human rights and human rights defenders through our education project.

2. Martin Ennals Award Finalists 2021

Almost 60 applications to the MEA2021 were received through our open call and network of Jury members. After a two-month period for due diligence on top candidates, in September 2020 the Jury selected three Finalists to the Award – all of them based in authoritarian countries:



- In **Turkmenistan**, one of the world's most isolated countries, freedom of speech is inexistant and independent journalists work at their own peril. **Soltan Achilova** (71), a photojournalist, documents the human rights abuses and social issues affecting Turkmen people in their daily lives. Despite the repressive environment and personal hardships, she is one of the very few reporters in the country daring to sign independent articles.
- In **Saudi Arabia**, women still face several forms of gender discrimination, so much so, that the Kingdom ranks in the bottom 10 places according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020. **Loujain AlHathloul** (31) was one of the leading figures of the *Women to drive* movement and advocated for the end of the male guardianship system. She was imprisoned in 2018 on charges related to national security together with several other women activists. Tortured, denied medical care, and subjected to solitary confinement, Loujain was sentenced to 5 years and 8 months in prison on 28 December 2020.
- In **China**, more than 300 human rights activists and lawyers disappeared or were arrested in 2015 during the so called *709 Crackdown*. A successful

business lawyer, **Yu Wensheng** (54) gave up his career to defend one of these detained lawyers, before being arrested himself in 2018. Yu Wensheng's right hand was crushed in jail and his health is failing.

The authoritarian nature of the home countries of the 2021 Finalists prompted MEF to adjust its expectations of impact; for example, release from prison for Yu Wensheng in China would be unlikely; instead, improvements in his prison conditions and support to his family and network would be more reasonable objectives. With all three Finalists practically impossible to reach directly, we partnered closely with the nominating organizations to represent their interests.

3. Protective Publicity Strategies 2021

Protective publicity

Protective publicity aims to raise visibility or awareness of a person to the point where the consequences of harming them, for those opposed to their work, become too costly. Efforts are made to draw specialists and policymakers into the conversation, for example, through targeted meetings or participation in campaigns in the framework of the Geneva Residency. Essential to the model is the notion of a jury of ten leading human rights organizations standing behind a single defender, which affirms the defender to a broader international audience.

3.1 Martin Ennals Laureates 2021 Film Portraits

One of our primary AV tools are short film portraits (4-5 minutes) on each of the MEA Finalists. The films aim not only to raise awareness about the contexts and human rights objectives advocated for by the defenders but also illustrate their humanity and struggles. After a call for proposals took place in June-August 2020, the production company [Noor Images](#) was selected to develop the 2021 films.

Impact of COVID and detention of Finalists: The Covid pandemic, combined with the status in detention (Yu Wensheng and Loujain) or incommunicado (Soltan) of the three 2021 Finalists, made it impossible to physically film them. Therefore, in

consultation with Noor images a decision was made to use of animation to depict the personal stories and objectives of the defenders.



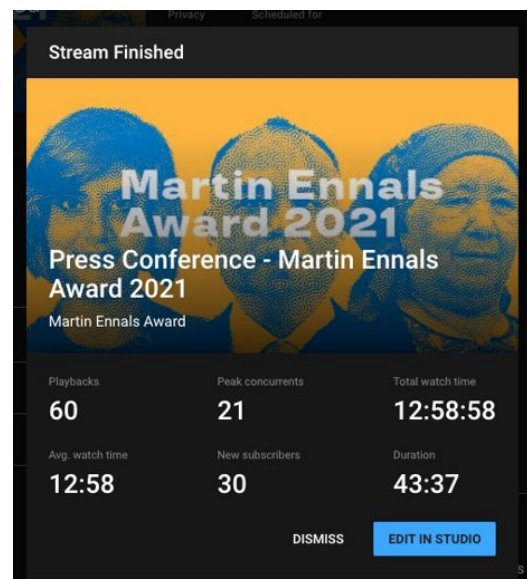
Film portrait for Yu Wensheng 2021

The animated films produced by Noor combine meticulous realistic elements (for example, exact details of decoration in a person's home or dress) with recreations of scenes that regular films could not have recorded.

3.2 Online press conference

With COVID-measures severely limiting physical interactions, the annual press conference announcing the winners of the Award was adapted to the online format completely. Instead of holding an invitation-only gathering for the press, the Foundation livestreamed the press conference from social media.

This format triggered a new and larger audience, with the press conference viewed more than 500 times and substantial engagement on our social media platforms.



Following the press conference, more than 100 articles on the Finalists were published in Swiss and international media, such as RTS, Le Temps, euronews, AFP and Reuters, only to name a few.

3.3 Media strategy

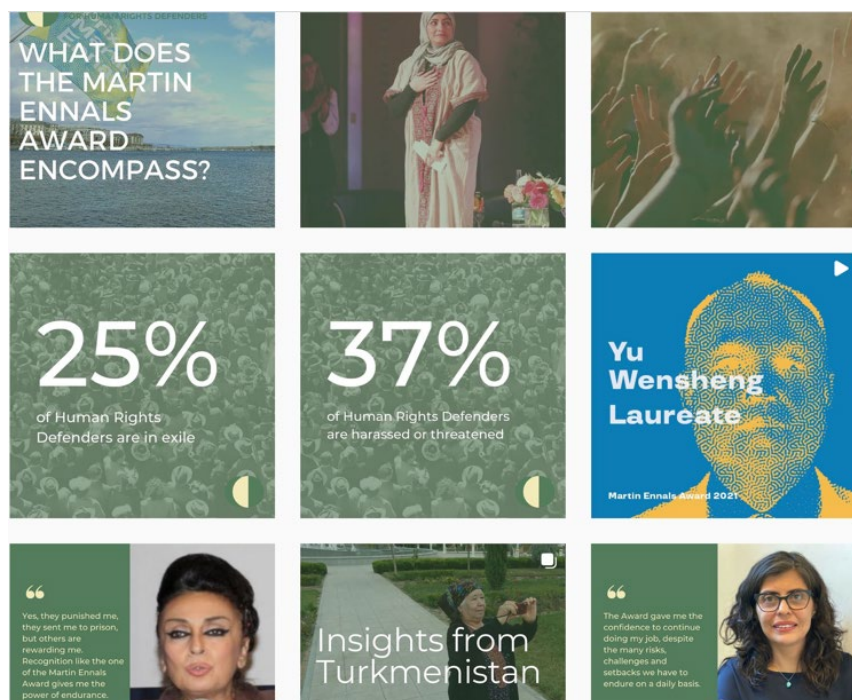
Over **330 articles** were published about the Award winners following the ceremony. Particularly satisfying were articles published around Soltan Achilova and Turkmenistan, which contributed to circumventing the near complete throttling of information by Turkmenistan's internet shutdown. The notoriety of Loujain ALHathloul also provided an important boost to media interest in the Award.

3.4 Social media

Given the virtual nature of the ceremony 2021, it was the digital media strategy which replaced traditional outlets as the battle horse for protective publicity. The Foundation invested in creating original articles to diversify its content and attract more followers. Several original posts per week were boosted on each social media platform. Investments were made in creating GIFs, video clips, and animated posts to attract the eye of potential viewers. An innovation in 2021 was the creation of an Instagram account with the aim of connecting to younger audiences.

Results to
December 2021
on Instagram
include:

- +200 followers
- 160 posts
- Almost 800 engagements

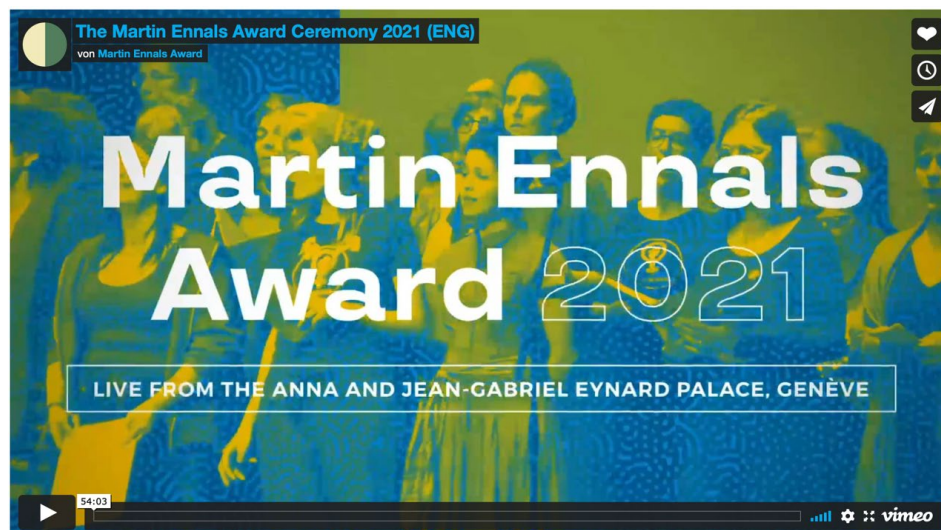


Lessons learned

Social media success depends primarily on scale, as well as good content. Martin Ennals Foundation did not yet have an enormous social media audience established in advance of the digital ceremony, but we did have high-quality content. We were therefore more reliant on cooperation from other players who could reshare our content, and the potential enthusiasm of their audiences, to enhance 'MEA buzz'. This dependance requires coordination and good will between organizations which can be time-intensive.

3.5 Livestream of the ceremony

COVID conditions imposed the adaptation of most events in 2020 and into 2021, the MEA ceremony included. The Foundation and its partners in the City of Geneva were thus challenged to learn quickly how to design, develop and deliver a virtual ceremony that would capture online audiences.



There were two primary consequences of the digitalization of the ceremony: first the cost structure of the event was quite different, with no investments needed for

physical elements (chairs, security, catering); while more investment was required to pre-film segments of the ceremony, livestream effectively, and advertise online to the audience. A second consequence was the format of the ceremony: to engage with an online audience, all elements had to be compressed into short bite-sized pieces, and a variety of types of content (interviews, films, artistic contributions, cameo appearances, speeches) were set against a faster-paced rhythm.

Digital security also became a concern. A more sophisticated livestreaming plan was put into motion with our livestream partner, Visualive, ensuring transmissions spread across multiple platforms (from the MEF and City of Geneva websites, on YouTube channels, Facebook pages, and MEF Twitter). MEF requested assistance from the Digital Defenders Partnership (DDP) – a collective of digital security specialists – to establish what risks the online ceremony faced.

Finally, the City of Geneva arranged to retransmit the ceremony for a local audience over the weekend with local TV channel LemanBleu. A media partnership with euronews was similarly agreed which advertised the ceremony to a broader European viewership.

The results of the virtual ceremony experience are extremely rich. On the one hand, viewership was not overwhelming: with **8000** dedicated views online the night of the ceremony and in following days, a modest audience, perhaps fatigued of COVID online events, tuned in.



On the other hand, the high-quality content offered by the ceremony was a welcome innovation. By engaging with local Geneva artists, such as Chappatte, the Ballet Junior, and Gaspard Sommer, the ceremony included artistic tributes to each of the award winners.

Pictures of support sent from all around the world and video messages delivered from Mexico, Botswana, from Genevan high-school students, and from the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights delivered the traditional moral and diplomatic

support offered by the Award to its winners. The retransmission on LemnBleu also reached several tens of thousands of viewers on February 13-14, 2021.



The Foundation recognizes that these innovations occurred, in part, 'thanks to Covid'. Nonetheless, one of the unexpected results of the digital ceremony came from an unfortunate digital security incident, which led to a shutdown of the ceremony by Facebook at the time of transmission. Exchanges with Facebook executives after the fact suggested that an incomplete copyright process for music used in a clip of the ceremony, triggered automatic 'bots' on the Facebook platform who autonomously censored the ceremony. Despite MEF's production of the copyright in question and our vociferous protests, no redress was offered by Facebook.

4. Geneva Residency

By focusing on the many resources available to support HRDs in Geneva or Switzerland, the Geneva Residency strives to deliver tailored advocacy, training and personal care opportunities to the MEA Finalists. The Foundation hosted a first conference call with the proxy organizations (or individuals representing the Finalists) in October 2020 to learn more about their needs and objectives with the MEA. We followed up with a written survey where the proxies could indicate their interest and priority to pursue different offerings of the Geneva Residency. Some of the highlights of 2021's efforts include:

Soltan: With Soltan silenced by the internet shutdown of Turkmenistan, communicating with her for training or advocacy was next to impossible. MEF

approached several embassies based in Turkmenistan to ask for their assistance providing internet for Soltan. None of those approached were able to assist. Notwithstanding, the MEF found a way to conduct a communications training workshop with Soltan by dividing it into three exercises conducted by email and pre-recorded in 10 second increments.

Digital security and fundraising training was instead provided to the proxy organization – Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) – who leveraged the sessions to refresh their online security practices, and prepare three projects for fund-raising. MEF worked with the Digital Defenders Partnership and our Jury member, the World Organization Against Torture – OMCT – to offer these trainings, respectively. Facing the departure of their main donor, we decided it was critical to reinforce TIHR's fundraising capacity with two more tailor-made sessions offered by the fundraising consultants, A.Community.



A welcome collaboration was the decision of the Geneva Human Rights Film Festival and Forum (FIFDH) to name Soltan their *honorary defender* for the 2021 edition in March. As a result, Soltan's case and human rights work were made visible to the dedicated audience of the FIFDH and her film shared widely. On International Freedom of the Press Day in April, MEF and FIFDH jointly published an [original piece](#) by Soltan which describes the farcical press

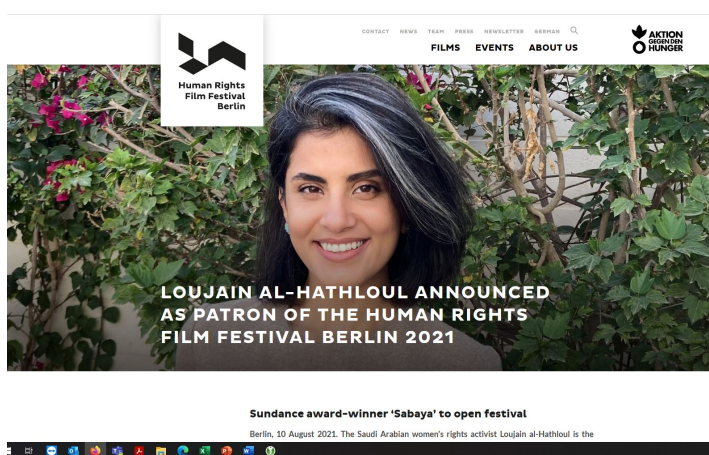
environment of Turkmenistan.

At the time of writing, MEF has raised half of the amount needed (EUR 10,000.00) for the development of a website to host Soltan's memoirs and life's work. The project was developed by MEF staff with Noor images (the 2021 filmmakers) upon acknowledgement that the primary obstacle to Soltan's human rights work is the lack of access to information and knowledge of what really happens in Turkmenistan. A website to house her investigative journalism and memoirs, therefore, would again be a workaround the internet throttling of her country.

Lessons learned

An interesting initiative which did not come to fruition was the possibility offered by the OHCHR to include a submission from the TIHR to a special report on freedom of expression. The MEF learned of the opportunity and liaised with the TIHR to encourage their submission, intent on ensuring greater visibility for Soltan. With resources squeezed and facing a funding crisis, the staff of TIHR was unable to dedicate the time and research to this exercise. A follow-up exercise of this nature, on behalf of Yu Wensheng, was instead led by MEF with support from the proxy organization.

Loujain: The international campaign #freeLoujain is run by her sister, Lina AlHathloul, and a professional advocacy manager based in Geneva. Communications training and digital security support were delivered to both of Loujain's proxies in advance of the ceremony.



In Q2 2021, the Foundation invited the campaign manager to present the story of Loujain at the UNIGE's new Business and Human Rights Centre and Geneva public high schools.

In mid-June, MEF together with the Gulf Center for

Human Rights and ALQST submitted a report to the relevant offices of the OHCHR and 16 Geneva-based diplomatic missions, with 5 recommendations to the Saudi mid-term UPR from the point of view of Loujain's experience in detention and her sentencing, which stand as examples of what dozens of other women human rights defenders have experienced at the hands of the Saudi regime.

At end of September, the Berlin Human Rights Film Festival featured Loujain as the 'Honorary Patron' of the 2021 edition. Lina Al-Hathloul represented her sister at the Festival's opening panel discussion.

Wensheng: As our Laureate's health declined in prison, MEF focused its attention on supporting and promoting his biggest advocate – Xu Yan, Wensheng's wife. Xu Yan worked on her acceptance speech and talking points with our communications coach, Claire Doole, and a safe filming of her remarks was arranged in advance of the ceremony. A digital security clinic was offered by DDP with the assistance of a Chinese consultant. This support was extended to the China Concerned Lawyers Group, based in Hong Kong, who acted as a go-between for Xu Yan and the MEF.

However, by April 2021, Yu Wensheng's health in jail had so declined, that MEF with the assistance of Jury member, ISHR, and the Geneva Bar Association (ODAGE) submitted an urgent appeal to the May 2021 session of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. The appeal called on this body to use all of the tools at its disposal to ensure China would follow-up on its commitments to safeguard the dignity and health of Yu Wensheng in detention.



On June 24th, the MEF together with the the Geneva Human Rights Platform, ODAGE and Jury member ISHR, jointly hosted an event on **“Defending human rights lawyers in authoritarian times”**. The event, which was attended by more than 115 people worldwide, featured testimonies from Xu Yan on her husband's case, the UN Special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Mr. Diego García Sayán, and Baroness Helena Kennedy, MOP of the United Kingdom. The conversation between panelists resulted in a list of 5 actions which can be taken to push back on bullying of lawyers by authoritarian states.

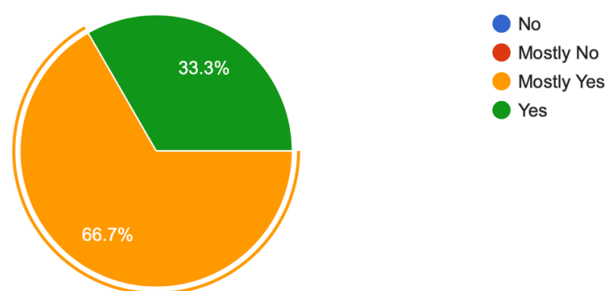
Note: at time of publication of this report, and following a broad campaign by hundreds of organizations and leaders applying pressure, Yu Wensheng was released from prison and returned to his wife and family in Beijing.

5. Evaluation of impact and updates on the MEA2021 Defenders

The most important measure of success from our project are the opinions of the defenders themselves. In 2021, MEF collected feedback from the winners through an anonymous survey which touches upon many aspects of our collaboration, such as the films, the overall effectiveness of the protective publicity strategy and Geneva Residency activities. We include results from the survey and qualitative feedback gathered from the proxy organizations to gauge our impact.

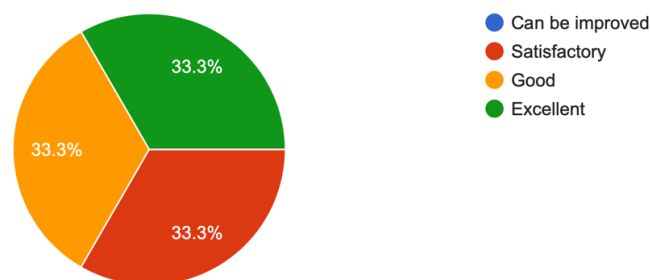
Do you believe you were able to effectively communicate your message during the Ceremony?

3 responses



How would you rate the exposure you gained from the Martin Ennals Award communication campaign, through traditional media and social media?

3 responses



Qualitative feedback is added to the results of the survey. For example, in May 2021, we learned that Yu Wensheng was allowed two family visits from his wife and son. He was also taken to a doctor and prescribed medication for his hand. A Jury member organization with an operative in China observed: *"I would venture to say the MEA Award and other international advocacy on his case have together contributed to these modest but nevertheless important developments."*

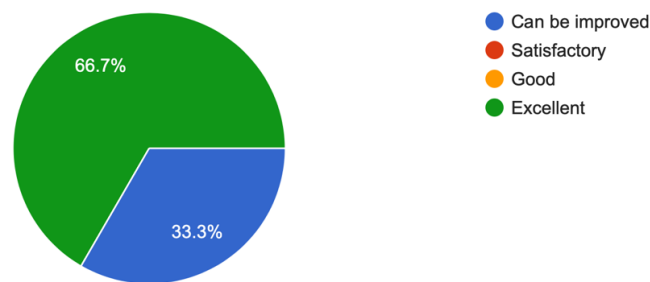
Xu Yan derived immense encouragement from the MEA win. She wrote to us:

The Martin Ennals Award ceremony was at night Beijing time. This is the incomparable honor of Lawyer Yu Wensheng. I am very happy, very grateful, very excited, and deeply responsible. Lawyer Yu Wensheng, including me, must work hard to carry everyone's encouragement, help and this responsibility. We request that you continue to protect, give guidance and support to Yu Wensheng in the future.

Soltan Achilova in Turkmenistan has been unable to communicate freely with MEF. However, a few weeks after the ceremony, Soltan posted [a video of herself](#) sharply criticizing the Turkmen President. In this manner, Soltan relayed her feeling of empowerment by the Award. She remains in relative safety and has not described increasing harassment or threats against her person.

How do you rate the film portrait commissioned by the Foundation?

3 responses



The TIHR, who liaised with MEF on Soltan's behalf, has for its part seen some increased pressure since Soltan's win. In May 2021, TIHR **reported being under a cyber-attack**, via their website. By mid-summer, their website was still not functioning normally and their YouTube channel was taken offline.

Of all the MEA2021 Finalists, Loujain AlHathloul has had the most dramatic change of fortunes following her nomination to the Award. Just before the ceremony on Feb. 10th, and in anticipation of the change of course which the incoming

Biden-Harris administration represented for Saudi Arabia, Loujain was released from prison after 1000 days in detention.



The supervising court did not pardon her crimes, instead they released her under the pretense of ‘time already served’ against her 5-year sentence. She is now at home with her family and even appeared again on Twitter in a smiling photo. On March 10th Loujain’s appeal against her sentence was denied by a Saudi court. Her

family members in Saudi Arabia remain under travel ban. In Q3 2021, it was revealed that Loujain’s phones were compromised by the Pegasus software, apparently hired by the Saudi authorities. The #freeloujain campaign continues to call for a full pardon of Loujain and an investigation into the abuse and torture she suffered while in prison.

How would you rate your personal motivation to continue her work as an HRD?

3 responses



Perhaps the best indicator of the MEA2021’s contributions is the Finalists’ self-reported level of motivation – at the close of 2021, the 3 honoured defenders and their proxies described feeling ‘highly motivated’ to continue their human rights defense.

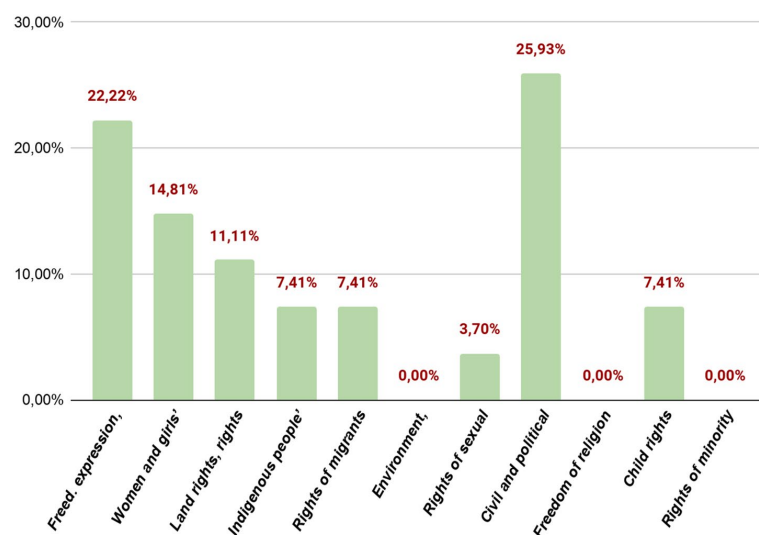
Feedback indicating need for improvement were also welcomed by the team, particularly in regards to better management of the film production process. One defender with very high visibility prior to their nomination, did not perceive any significant improvements derived from the protective publicity strategy, for example, and did felt the film development process was stressful.

6. MEA Defenders' Network

Building on the first steps to rally former winners of the MEA in 2020, the Board of MEF approved initial objectives for the development of an MEA Defenders' Network in 2021:

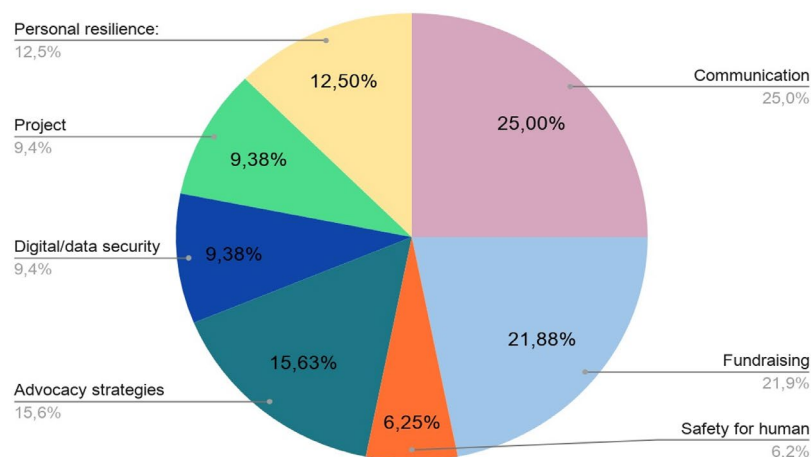
- Offer a safe space to defenders for exchange, mutual support and growth.
- Provide continuity to MEA's initial support through the creation of a mentorship and a peer-coaching platform for HRDs by HRDs.
- Facilitate the exploration of needs, motivations, skills and strategies to empower the network's members in their endeavours for lasting change.
- Legitimize the defenders' work through continuous advocacy in Geneva using the United Nations mechanisms, academia, Swiss authorities and institutions.

To inform these objectives and future activities, the executive team undertook the design and collection of a survey of the 60 former winners of the Award, in 5 languages, through the months of October 2020 - January 2021. The survey was responded to by 52% of the group of defenders.



26% of MEA winners focus on civil and political rights, followed by freedom of expression, and women's and girls' rights.

The areas in which MEF's defenders are more willing to receive training and support, in order of interest are depicted in the chart: particularly communication and fundraising.



90% of the respondents of the survey indicated their interest to engage in a peer-coaching program. Similarly, most respondents considered it of value to be in contact with other defenders outside their countries (56%). The main obstacles to increasing their exchange with other HRDS include 1) the fear of reprisals and 2) the challenge of travelling outside the country. 37% of the respondents affirmed being harassed due to their human rights work (and an additional 25% have left their country because of such persecution). In spite of the challenges, 81% of the respondents described themselves as fully motivated to pursue their work, with a smaller group (12,5%) expressing helplessness due to the human cost and the lack of results.

Personal and professional growth for defenders by defenders:



Launch of the MEA peer-coaching programme, March 2021

Throughout 2020, the MEF developed the bases for a peer-coaching pilot program with the support of professional coaches at Leaders Today Coaching and Consulting, a

Geneva-based company. The program began in March 2021 with 2 half-days of online training to learn the fundamentals of self and peer-coaching. Over 7 months, participants conducted **a regular monthly meeting** to peer-coach each other on all topics relevant to their careers or to their personal well-being with intermittent support from the professional coaches in Spanish, Arabic, French and English.

Given the high levels of stress and dangers that HRDs face, a priority of the program is to develop self-care strategies. Expectations and suggestions were discussed during a **mid-term review** meeting where the whole group has the chance to exchange with MEF's staff and the professional coaches.

Progress

Over the second semester of 2021, the level of responsiveness from the majority of participants increased. Some who had never shared challenges associated with their work were willing to do so via their mentor coaches. Some defenders realized the levels of stress and fatigue they had accumulated. Some of the peer-coaching teams strengthened their bonds of trust and solidarity. In these groups, the regularity of their encounters was higher, and the exchange of information and contact took place in a more spontaneous and frequent way. A survey during the online mid-term meeting captured the defenders' sentiments about their experience of peer-coaching:



Setbacks

The primary challenge to manage in fostering resiliency skills and practices amongst activists is the lack of time and attention from the target population to their health, generally-speaking. The approach requires an equilibrium between encouraging defenders to make the investment of time into their health, without adding an additional burden and stressor to their lives. The search for this balance can be

illustrated by some of the 'set-backs' we encountered along the way, including:

- Not every participant completed the mentoring sessions as planned.
- A few participants required disproportionate attention from the peer(s) and/or the mentor coach.
- The individual catch-up sessions on skills (for those who missed the workshops) were not practical for the learning process which should be interactive

MEF will incorporate the learnings from the pilot experience into a follow-up edition for 2022. A second group of 10 defenders will be invited to sign-up for peer-coaching, while the first group can opt-in for 3-4 periodic coaching sessions with their professional mentors and peer-groups.

Skills-building for MEA winners

Based on the results of the MEA defenders' survey, fundraising emerged as a topic of interest for further skills-building. MEF engaged the fundraising consultants A.Community to deliver a package of 3 fundraising skills workshops virtually to the defenders' network. The trainings were open to staff of the organizations founded by or associated to MEA winners.

25 participants signed up for the experience which began with the "Fundamentals of Fundraising", followed by "Developing your pitch", and concluded with "Building a project proposal". The experience concluded with the establishment of a shared database of fundraising contacts for human rights defense organizations.

COVID travel restrictions and overcoming the digital divide

While restrictions to freedom of movement related to the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately spurred many organizations and households to embrace digital technologies, and therefore provoked important advances in digital connectivity, it was also true that COVID-19 exacerbated the digital divide for those who already had poor connectivity. Activities, meetings, informational sessions, presentations to the UN, an unending list of tasks formerly conducted in person by human rights defenders, became digitalized and virtualized almost overnight. Many defenders found themselves suddenly deprived of access to the tools to communicate, gather information and ultimately conduct their important work.

Travel restrictions and complications pushed MEF to cancel plans for regional gatherings of MEA winners in Latin America and the MENA region. Instead, and with support from the Norwegian Human Rights Fund, MEF opted for a 1.0 approach to reaching our network of winners: all defenders who agreed to MEF's proposal, were sent a small 'care package' by mail with an inspirational book, pictures of the MEA defenders, and chocolates to convey the warm wishes from the Foundation in Switzerland.

Supporting defenders under duress

2021 saw a continued pattern of harassment and persecution against human rights

activists generally, including several former winners of the MEA.



Robert Saan Aung, MEA Finalist 2015, was forced to flee Myanmar shortly after the February 2021 coup against the civilian government by the military.

Since the mid-1980s, Aung defends Myanmar's most marginalised, including political protestors, child soldiers and student activists through his law practice, the Hygienic Legal Clinic. In early March, a group of soldiers arrived late at night at the offices

of the Hygienic Legal Clinic, searching for Robert. When they did not find him there, they took his daughter and brother-in-law. Video footage from cameras outside and inside the offices record their search and destruction of his offices. A few weeks later, Robert's family members were charged under section 505^a of the colonial-era Penal Code of Myanmar, relative to high-treason and sedition.

In consultation with the USA Embassy in Yangon, Civil Rights Defenders, and his remaining family in Myanmar, Robert decided to flee for Bangkok and accept safe passage to the USA. Since August 2021, he has relocated and applied for asylum. Civil Rights Defenders in partnership with Martin Ennals Foundation obtained a 12-month temporary relocation grant for Robert from the Protectdefenders.eu mechanism.

Reprisals

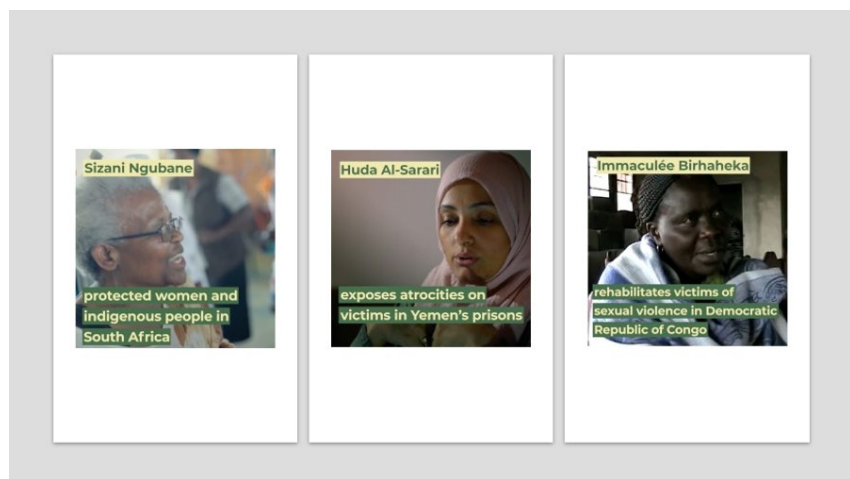
Illustrating the persistence of attacks against activists, the **Report of the**

Secretary-General on Cooperation with the United Nations, its Representatives and Mechanisms in the Field of Human Rights, published in September 2021, detailed cases of reprisals – meaning punishment or negative consequences – against activists who cooperate with the United Nations.² No less than five MEA winners were mentioned in this report: Luon Sovath (Cambodia, MEA 2012); Adilur Rahman Kahn (Bangladesh, MEA 2014); Ahmed Mansoor (UAE, MEA 2015); Loujain Al-Hathloul (Saudi Arabia, MEA 2021) and Yu Wensheng (China, MEA 2021).

Protective publicity for defenders, by defenders.

As part of its strategy to enhance the Defenders' visibility through digital communications, MEF has identified several overarching human rights topics and planned several short social media clips, drawing attention each time to several defenders' work. The clips are meant to be released throughout the year, on important dates and milestones for the human rights community around the world.

A first clip was produced in support of Women Human Rights Defenders and broadcast on MEF's social media platforms on November 29th to mark the International Day of Support of Women Human rights Defenders.



The one minute clip highlights the challenges they face, features them as champions of social justice and calls attention to their protection.

The clip was shared on our four social media platforms with a global score of **6k reach** (number of time this content has been seen online), a generally positive result, given it was achieved mostly with an organic audience.

² For more information:

<https://humanrightsdefenders.blog/2021/09/30/reprisals-on-the-agenda-of-the-un-and-the-new-ishr-campaign-to-end-reprisals/>

In a similar vein, original articles written by former winners of the Award were published on our website and social media platforms throughout 2021. Articles by Adilur Rahman Kahn, Mona Seif, Kasha Nabagasera, and Alejandra Ancheita shone a light on the human rights challenges in their countries and the Award winners' recommendations on what to do about it.

Enhancing access and influence of defenders over international human rights mechanisms:

MEF is constantly on the look-out for opportunities to reconnect the former winners of the Award with ongoing policy-making processes at the United Nations, or other influential outlets which form part of our network as a foundation based in Switzerland.



In that spirit, Martin Ennals Foundation teamed up with the Right Livelihood Foundation to support the submission of joint observations by winner Kasha Nabagasera (MEA Laureate 2011) to the Universal Periodic Review of Uganda, scheduled for January 2022 in the UNHRC calendar.

The submission highlights the shortcomings in Uganda's implementation of human rights guarantees for the LGBTI community, and suggests recommendations regarding 4 specific core international human rights obligations of states with regards to LGBTI persons. Kasha presented the findings during the official UPR Uganda 'pre-session' hosted online by UPR Info in December 2021 with diplomatic missions.

Additionally, in September 2021 within the framework of the Berlin Human Rights Film Festival, MEF co-hosted a screening of the documentary “La Vocera” about Mexican human rights activist and indigenous politician Marichuy, featuring as expert panelist MEA Laureate 2014, Alejandra Ancheita and Silke Pfeiffer, MEA Jury member and Director for human rights and peace, Bread for the World.



Following the screening, the speakers and audience explored the progress made in Mexico to ensure businesses operating in rural and indigenous areas meet their human rights obligations.

During the University of Geneva’s “Human Rights Week 2021” hosted in late November 2021, Venerable Luon Sovath, MEA Laureate 2022, was invited to give a Master Class open to students and the public on the topic “*Social Media: A double-edged sword in Human Rights Defence*”.



Venerable Luon Sovath with professors and students of the UNIGE, November 2021

7. Human Rights Education Project

Based in the world capital of human rights, MEF is committed to raising awareness of human rights issues among the youth of the Canton of Geneva. To this end, starting in 2019, the Martin Ennals Foundation partnered with the [Department of Public Education \(DIP\)](#), [Amnesty International Switzerland](#) and [True Heroes Films](#) to set up its Education Project “**Defending human rights, abroad and at home**”.

The goal of our education project is to familiarize students with the concept of human rights and the causes promoted by our Defenders. Students participate in workshops to learn about what can be done to uphold fundamental rights in Switzerland and around the world and how to become advocates for human rights themselves. They also meet Martin Ennals Finalists and attend the Award Ceremony.

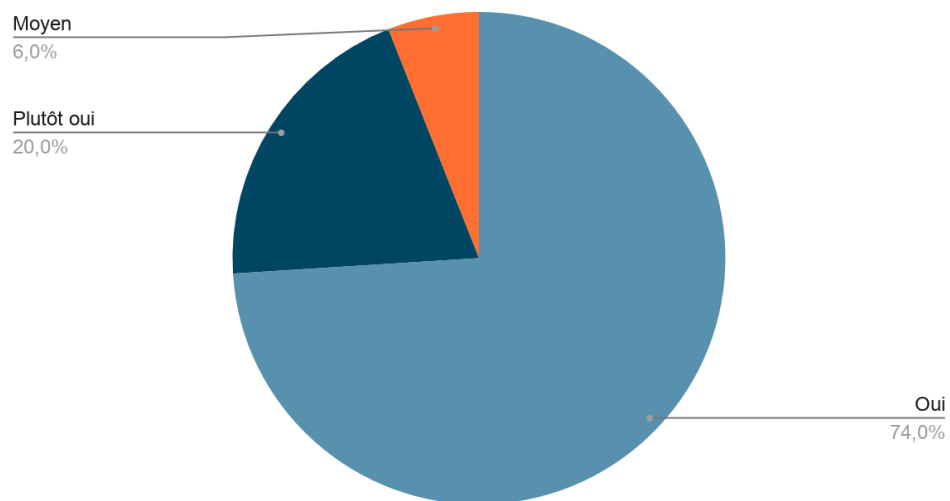
The project was extended in 2020/21, with the Foundation enrolling 13 high-school classes in four schools, for an approximate coverage of 260 students. Together with Amnesty International Switzerland and True Heroes Films, the curriculum for the project was updated and sharpened with the addition of one more workshop.



As our 2021 Finalists could not travel to Geneva, students met with Uma Mishra (Campaign manager for Loujain AlHathloul, MEA Finalist 2021), with Aziz Abdul Mohamed (MEA Laureate 2019) and Karla Avelar (MEA Finalist 2017), as well as with Martin Ennals Laureate 2012, the Venerable Luon Sovath from Cambodia.

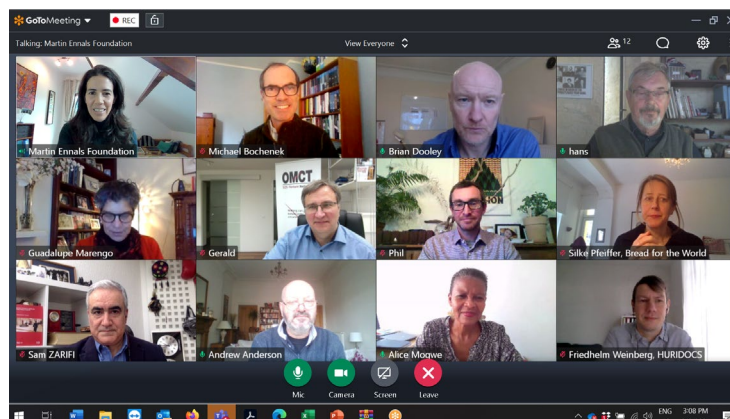
A separate evaluation of the education project is annexed to this report.

Avez-vous apprécié le projet éducatif dans son ensemble?



8. MEA Jury and Regional Panel

The Jury of the MEA conducted all of its work virtually throughout 2021, which did not ultimately prove a problem for the quality of the nomination and selection process. Two new members were welcomed: Friedhelm Weinberg, Executive Director of HURIDOCs, and Sam Zarifi, Secretary General of ICJ, assumed their roles in time for the September 2020 meeting to select the year's winners.



MEA Jury in a virtual meeting, January 2021

However, the lack of regular meetings face-to-face has impacted on the Jury's attention to other issues outside of the core business of selecting winners to the Award.

Throughout 2021, MEF strived to strengthen ties with organizations of the Regional Panel. Outside of the collaboration to spread the news about the nominations period, MEF jointly published two articles with regional Panel members Forum Asia and Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies. For the 2022 nominations cycle, MEF reached out to several Latin America-based human rights organizations, including IMDefensoras, CELS and CEJIL. The initial contacts may result in the establishment of partnerships so that MEA achieves greater coverage in the LATAM region.

9. Institutional updates

In late 2020, we welcomed two new members to the Martin Ennals Board – Patrick Chappatte, the celebrated Swiss-Pakistani-Lebanese cartoonist; and Alejandra Ancheita, MEA Laureate 2014, founder of ProDesc in her native Mexico.

Starting in January 2021, MEF adopted a new **Employee Handbook** which includes **Ethical Guidelines and a Code of Conduct**. This was the result of several months of consultations between Board members and the Foundation's pro-bono lawyers, as

well as with other human rights organizations in Geneva. The Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct are particularly important for the employees in that they articulate our values as an organization and provide a firmer framework for how to operate. Likewise, they bring MEF up to 'industry standards' for charities and allow us to more clearly communicate on our values to potential nominees to the Award.

Together with our Board Chair and Treasurer, MEF undertook to establish **financial management rules** which guide the day-to-day financial transactions of the Foundation. The rules provide further orientation to the staff on financial transparency and processes, while clarifying responsibilities for oversight and governance with the Board.

One step further was taken to improve management of our finances with the establishment of an **investment policy**. After agreeing with a long-time donor of the Foundation to reorient left-over project monies to a new fund for advocacy and training of HRDs, MEF will take its first steps to invest these monies in relevant financial products which can earn a return for the Foundation. Our new investment policy establishes the values and steps needed to responsibly place investments for our fund.

9.1 Financial updates: MEF closed the fiscal years 2019 and 2020 with consecutive deficits, which largely consumed the remaining reserves of the Foundation. The negative results could be partially due to the COVID pandemic, which affected fundraising efforts of most human rights organizations, and diverted funds away to health-related causes. On the other hand, the second deficit in 2020 is also related to the drop-off of two core donors, who have not yet been supplanted by new donors. The Foundation staff and Board tripled efforts to raise funds in 2020 and into 2021. Our efforts paid off: we were successful in balancing our finances for 2021 with three new donors joining our projects – Fondation Pluralisme, Heinrich Boll Foundation and Oak Foundation. At close of 2021, MEF's finances returned to balance.

The Foundation was also pleased to welcome the publication of an impact evaluation of the Award's 30-year history. The research paper "**Building on the Martin Ennals Legacy**" was authored by Profs. Tony Bryant and Eddie Halperin, both based at UK universities. Based on 25 interviews with members of the MEA family, including 10 former winners, the research offers anecdotes, case studies,

and data through which to understand the impact of the Award on 60 winners and in 37 countries. The impact evaluation also offers 21 recommendations or proposals for consideration of the MEF Board and Jury.



Wife of MEA Laureate 2022, Xu Yan

**Thank you
for your continued support
to human rights defenders!**
