

# CHANGE AGENTS IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES 2016-2019

## SUMMARY

In authoritarian and totalitarian states, civil society has a critical role to play in promoting democratization and organizing people who want to change their society. Civic groups have the potential to function as schools of democracy, not least through their ways of being and acting. They can counteract discriminating attitudes and values, create alternative models and channels for the opinions and interests of individuals and groups, and act as a force for change. This program focuses on empowering change agents who work for reforms with the goal of broadening the democratic scope of society and increasing the respect for human rights.

A consequence of the authoritarian context is that the organizations or networks of people who want to see reforms are often poorly organized and have little knowledge about organizing. Even the knowledge of democratization processes and the role of civil society in a democracy are limited. As a rule, there are few opportunities for change agents to share experiences with agents in other countries.

The long-term developmental goal of this program is that *change agents in authoritarian states be confirmed in their striving for democracy and human right*. The Palme Center and our member organizations can help empower change agents by supporting increased knowledge about democracy, human rights, and organizing. The step from knowing how to organize to implementing that knowledge is an essential task. We can also contribute by reducing the isolation of change agents by offering exchange and contact with the rest of the world and by speaking for our partners to others.

Supporting change agents in authoritarian states demands a highly developed risk and security awareness from all parties involved, which characterizes this program in a unique way. The security and risk consciousness is a prioritized theme for the continual exchange of experiences and development.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES

In countries that are members of the program there is a closely controlled political climate — in some cases occupation or armed conflict with severe restrictions on the rights of freedom of opinion, expression, assembly, and association. The scope for different ways of thinking, opposition, and organizing for change are very restricted. Civil society participants who challenge the existing power structures and strive to change society in a democratic direction are often subjected to persecution, threats, and other forms of repression. Assessing risk is difficult and complicated while the need to provide persevering support to our partners in their democratizing and organizing efforts is greater than ever.

In authoritarian and totalitarian states, civic groups have an especially important role in the promotion of democratization and organizing of people who want change in their society. Their behavior and actions have the potential to serve as a school of democracy and are a force for change in the long term. In some cases, civic associations are the only functional channel for people to fulfill claims to fundamental rights such as health and education. In contexts characterized by conflict, even armed conflict, participants from civic groups can contribute to establishing norms and attitudes for peaceful coexistence. They may be able to work for, participate in, and influence initiatives and negotiations in a peaceful direction and help ensure the observation of principles for participation, such as in the United Nations resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. Lessons from successful democratization processes in countries that have previously had authoritarian forms of government demonstrate that peaceful nongovernmental organizations in society play an important part for change, especially in when cooperating with political groups. The Palme Center supports organizations and movements in society that have the goal of working for democracy and respect for human rights. When it is possible, the Palme Center takes advantage of synergies with interest groups to provide widespread support for political parties and programs.

Change agents are defined by the Palme Center to be the networks, loosely knit organizations, and groups that work for reforms in authoritarian states with the goal of broadening the democratic scope and increasing respect for human rights. Sometimes these networks and organizations have ties to a workplace or been created to champion the rights of a specific group. Their efforts to strengthen respect for human rights and increase the ability of people to demand their rights in specific areas makes them important potential change agents in authoritarian states. In other cases, networks or organizations may argue for nationwide reforms including demands for democratization and respect for human rights.

The Arab Spring of 2011 demonstrated the power of protests in civil society and led to the fall of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Moving toward democratization turned out to be very difficult, however, in these societies so long been characterized by authoritarian structures. The lack of democratic leadership and fundamental structures of civil association was obvious. In countries such as Iran and Syria, conflict has become more intense between the democratic movements and the regimes with an increased repression as a result. Armed groups, such as the Islamic State (IS), have taken advantage of the power vacuum that arose when old authoritarian governments fall, which complicates the context even more.

Worldwide developments in the past decade have been counterproductive for organizing in civil society. Nearly 50 countries have created more stringent legislation intended to limit the right to association and restrict the scope of civil society. Indoctrination and a lack of dependable information are key aspects of authoritarian regimes that repress the freedom of expression. The right to freedom of expression has suffered setbacks in several countries in the past decade. The worst countries for the limitations on freedom of the press, with the imprisonment of journalists and censure as a result, can be found in the most authoritarian states such as Belarus, Iran, China, and Syria. Armed conflict makes the situation more difficult for journalists, which is clearly the case in Syria. According to the 2014 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders, over 130 journalists and news providers have been killed since the conflict began.<sup>1</sup> The Internet, social media, and mobile telephones have created opportunities for greater access to information that supports organizing and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reportrarutanganranser.se/nyheter/20140212/pressfrihetsindex-2014-terroristjakt-paverkar-pressfriheten>

networks around the world. At the same time, authoritarian regimes in recent years have developed their abilities to block access to the Internet and social media and censor media content. The surveillance of Internet correspondence also involves a risk that change agents will be noticed and repressed by the regime. More knowledge about the tools of communication has been and will continue to be a prioritized theme for cooperation with partners in the program.

People who want to work for reforms in authoritarian states are often isolated from influences and shared experiences with the rest of the world. Restrictions often limit opportunities to travel in and out of the country or to travel around and make contact with groups in society. One result of this repression is that the organizations or networks of people who want reform are often poorly organized and have little knowledge about organizing. Knowledge about processes of democratization and about the role of civil society in a democracy is limited for change agents in some countries. Words such as democracy and organizing are so charged that they may not be used when cooperating in some countries, since it means too high a risk for involved parties. Spreading false information about opposition forces is a common method used by regimes to defame and frighten potential followers, as it is to claim that all forms of organized resistance are expressions of infiltration by foreign interests.

The issue of organizing is essential yet is a great challenge in this program. To build solid and sustainable groups and organizations is both difficult and risky. The step from increased knowledge about organizing to implementing that knowledge is a constant challenge. Knowledge and sharing experiences on forms of organization and democratic leadership are highly prioritized by the partners in the program. From previous program periods there are examples of how cooperation has led to the formal establishment of organizations that have adopted statutes and democratically selected leaders. A factor of success has been in some cases to utilize examples from the region as a complement to discussions based on Swedish experience.

In its cooperation, the Palme Center always advocates methods of nonviolence and supports inclusive networks that are open to all ethnic and religious groups. Working with broad-based groups that represent a multitude of identities and experiences has proven to be valuable and is a way to create contacts, understanding, acceptance, and the conditions for peaceful coexistence and cooperation in society. It is both a challenge and an opportunity to create the conditions to gather participants that may be somewhat divided in support of a common agenda for political change. In all our work, it is important to be aware of the risk of only supporting an educated elite. For gender equality, it is in some settings an ongoing challenge to reach women to a greater extent. Among the factors of success from previous periods is the importance of consistently applying principles of gender equality in the planning and execution of all activities.

## PALME CENTER POSITIONING AND CONTRIBUTION

The Palme Center has many years experience of working in authoritarian states supporting change efforts to broaden the democratic scope and strive for increased respect for human rights. Some activities are confidential, while other activities can take place without confidentiality. The international contact network of the Palme Center and our member organizations, along with our reputation of standing for human rights without geopolitical interest has brought us a high level of credibility among democracy movements and change agents in several authoritarian countries. Ties with worker-movement values and organizations mean that the Palme Center is always seen as an ally of change agents who share these values, and we therefore have earned the trust that is necessary to provide support to change agents. Lessons taken from previous programs have demonstrated that the value of long-term and close cooperation cannot be underestimated, because the creation of mutual trust is critical for success. That the Palme Center and its member organizations can speak for and provide other international contacts is very valuable, according to partners.

In West Sahara, Belarus, and a confidential country, the Palme Center has worked long term to strengthen change agents. In Syria and another confidential country, the Palme Center has, via direct inquiries, supported change agents in authoritarian states at critical stages of the democratization process by creating meeting places in exile. The purpose of meeting places has been to reinforce networks and organizing and support the development of a common agenda. These meeting places have developed into forms for continued and more long-term, capacity-building support. When change agents in the program are receptive, the Palme Center also tries to help them share experiences with democracy movements from other countries in similar situations. Broad exchanges of experience of this type have been highly appreciated during previous program periods. Meeting places are important for the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and to make contacts. But the partners also say the feeling of collective belonging, and the hope and energy that these meeting places provide, is as valuable.

In the most authoritarian states, the Palme Center works to creatively make the most of the opportunities that exist to sustain change agents who work for increased respect for human rights. Cooperation in the toughest settings is often limited in volume, but the Palme Center believes it is important to find long-term ways to contribute to increased pluralism and support possible agents for democratization. It is urgent we maintain a presence and be able to broaden the contact base and share experiences in order to ensure that contact and fundamental knowledge about organizing and human rights are available for participants in civil society, both to support the development of these movements, but also in preparation for the day when the opportunity for change arises. Support for change agents in authoritarian states must sometimes take place beyond the country's borders. Change agents who live in exile are important for supporting change and are often involved, while it is always necessary to include participants domestically as well.

The Palme Center intends to continue long-term work in authoritarian states and to extend it to more countries. It is critical to have the capacity to respond to inquiries when support must be provided rapidly and can function as a catalyst to support democratization movements at acute stages. Some of the proposed program is therefore intended to maintain the capacity to respond to urgent future inquiries. A pilot project is currently under way in Egypt that may be expanded.

## WEST SAHARA, SYRIA AND BELARUS

### West Sahara

West Sahara has been occupied by Morocco since 1975, and is often called Africa's last colony. The Polisario Front established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) the year after Morocco invaded and declared war to obtain independence. As a result of the war, a third of the population, approximately 160,000 people, fled over the border to Algeria. Monitored by the United Nations (UN), a cease-fire was agreed to in 1991 with the goal of holding elections on the self-determination of West Sahara. The UN has made several attempts to hold elections, but without success, since Morocco rejects the conditions. Morocco continues in the meantime to violate the human rights of people in West Sahara by limiting their freedoms of expression, association, and assembly while discrimination, violence, and persecution are part of everyday life.

The Morocco-occupied parts of West Sahara are kept under strict military and police control, and the outside world gets little insight. The freedom of expression in West Sahara is extremely curtailed. Several foreign journalists have been deported from the area, and domestic journalists who report on West Sahara get in trouble if they do not toe the government line.<sup>2</sup> Freedom of association is also strongly limited. Moroccan authorities often refuse to allow civil associations, including human rights groups, the right to register as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and thereby the right to function.<sup>3</sup> Excessive acts of cruelty, including arrests for peaceful demonstrations against the Moroccan occupation, are committed by the Moroccan police and armed forces. Reports show that the arrests take place without warrants for detention, and that physical abuse and torture occur.<sup>4</sup>

In 1991, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in West Sahara (MINURSO) was given the assignment to facilitate negotiations between Morocco and occupied West Sahara. The goal was a referendum on self-determination for West Sahara. Morocco has delayed the process. MINURSO has no mandate to step in against human rights violations, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had no presence in West Sahara or the camps in Tindouf, Algeria. In spite of all the reports of injustice toward the people of West Sahara, and pressure from civil society, the mandate has not been expanded for MINURSO to monitor human rights. Morocco has effectively prevented this by putting pressure on its allies and through its own position on the Security Council in 2012 and 2013.

There is active lobbying for the cause of the West Saharans in the European Union (EU) and the UN, but so far, strong countries such as France and the United States have prevented proposals for referenda and on other issues, such as fishing quotas, so the situation remains unchanged. In latter years, West Sahara has increasingly been referred to as an insecure zone in the global war on terrorism. Morocco claims that militant extremist movements have extended their activities into West Sahara and seeks international support to fight this extremism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Afrika/~/~/~link.aspx? id=741CCB1B71E04B2C9CC5DB7E632BEF5D&Z=Z>

<sup>3</sup> <http://un-report.blogspot.dk/2014/04/un-secretary-generals-updated-report-on.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/western-sahara-o#.VGoCQOxoy70>

Many Saharans live under severe conditions in refugee camps in the Sahara desert. The number of refugees is currently estimated by the UN to be between 90,000 and 125,000 people, and dependence on international humanitarian aid continues to be considerable to meet the basic needs of food, water, and health care.<sup>6</sup> Given the trying conditions, there is nonetheless a well-functioning structure in the camps with education, health care, a legal system, and the distribution of food. The long period of time in exile has nonetheless had a negative influence on the mental and physical health of the people involved.

The refugee camps are run by Polisario. During the war of 1975–1991, most Saharan men were at the front, which meant that women had the main responsibility for the camps. Following the cease-fire, the number of men in the camps rose successively, but in spite of this, the women retain authority for managing daily life and hold important positions as teachers, doctors, administrators, and members in social groups. Access to resources has become a gender issue, however, and women are discriminated against in politics and have trouble getting leading positions in governmental agencies. This applies to SADR and Polisario. The same tendency occurs in the Sahrawi Youth Union (UJSARIO), despite the fact that young women are more involved in the activities of the group at the grass-roots level than men of the same age. There is therefore a need to support young women with fundamental education and knowledge about politics and human rights. Children and young people are a vulnerable group in the camps, where they are forced to engage in child labor, suffer corporal punishment, and engage in prostitution. A growing dissatisfaction and frustration has been reported, especially among young people in the refugee camps, because of the lack of progress in the political process and the harsh socioeconomic situation. Several factors contribute to the aggravated situation. For one thing, international humanitarian aid has been reduced, as have the opportunities for Saharans to find jobs in Europe and send home money, following recent years of financial crisis.<sup>7</sup> Opportunities to organize for change are sorely needed.

In March of 2014, SADR President Mohamed Abdelaziz decided to establish a national commission for human rights. Exactly how this commission will function is not clear, but the intent is to establish a basis for increased awareness of and respect for human rights in Saharan society and in the institutions of SADR, and to harmonize SADR laws with international human rights conventions.<sup>8</sup>

The support from the Palme Center to West Sahara is geared toward educating young women in political knowledge and reinforcing the understanding of political participation and democratic processes, with the goal of strengthening the opportunities of young women to participate in the political debate.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/algeria1014web.pdf> , p. 1

<sup>7</sup> <http://un-report.blogspot.dk/2014/04/un-secretary-generals-updated-report-on.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/algeria1014web.pdf> , p. 23

## Syria

The Arab Spring reached Syria in March of 2011 with peaceful demonstrations that eventually developed into armed conflict in the country. It is estimated that 6.5 million people are domestic refugees, and as many as 3 million refugees abroad. People are continually fleeing to neighboring countries. The Islamic State (IS) is making progress, which contributes to further complicate the already aggravated situation, as they have been able to exploit the crisis in Syria to strengthen their position in the area, resulting in the US and its allies attacking the area that is controlled by IS in order to diminish its influence.

Freedom of association is restricted, making it difficult for oppositional groups to organize any form of activity. Permits are required for all kind of association, demonstrations, and even small meetings. Syria is one of the countries in the world that has the most extensive constraints on the exercise of political and citizen rights.<sup>9</sup> The idea of human rights is relatively new to Syria. Rapid political development in the 1960s had the effect of strengthening attitudes of national independence at the expense of human rights. The first human rights organization in Syria was established in 1980.

A law limiting the formation of NGOs has since 2006 made it difficult for political and civil movements to exercise their activities. In 2006–2007 the separation of political oppositional forces and civil-society forces led to a new generation of civic group activists that were not necessarily political. These activists carried out social activities of a civic and economic nature and hoped to be more successful than their predecessors who come up against barriers. They launched campaigns and used social media to a great extent.<sup>10</sup> Before the demonstrations of 2011, most civic groups were monitored by the state. While the crisis continues in Syria, more than 1,000 civil society organizations have been registered. The majority of them focus on working for health, social security, women, and children. The difficult situation in the country has led to Syrian civil society serving as a local coordinator in cities and villages and as a local governmental structure in the lack of functional government. The Syrian opposition is very weak and divided and lacks central leadership.

Though there are many civic groups, they are disorganized and overlap and face numerous challenges, such as a lack of security, resources, and administrative capacity. Two of the greatest challenges domestically and abroad are the lack of coordination and failure to be included in formal negotiations, such as the so-called Geneva negotiations, in which they were ignored. By documenting violence, helping refugees, and increasing the awareness of the conflict, Syrian civil-society groups have become experts on what is happening on the ground level.<sup>11</sup> They are key to creating sustainable peace. Civil society is important for the future of Syria, and women form a crucial group that is often especially vulnerable in war. The need to empower Syrian women to organize for influence in the political process is very evident. The importance of introducing a gender perspective to conflicts and increasing the involvement of women in peace processes is furthermore established by UN Security Council resolution 1325, and experience shows that the participation of women contributes to a more long-term sustainable peace. The Palme Center supports Syrian women through the Syrian Women's Network. In cooperation with Workers' Educational Association (ABF) offices in Stockholm, Göteborg, Malmö, and Uppsala, Syrian civil-society groups are provided education in organizing, democracy, and human rights.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/middle-east-and-north-africa-fact-sheet#.VG3amfJox9O>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia/News/Syrian-Civil-Society-Scene-Prior-to-Syrian-Revolution>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.peacefare.net/?p=19279>

## Belarus

More than 20 years have passed since the Soviet Union collapsed, but Belarus remains an authoritarian state. Opposition members are persecuted, civil-society groups are opposed, and democracy activists are harassed. The country actively exercises capital punishment and is therefore not a member of the Council of Europe.

President Alexander Lukashenko has governed Belarus since 1994, and changes to the constitution allow him to remain in power indefinitely. The president governs by personal decree and through a cabinet. The national assembly plays a symbolic role.

By brutally crushing all political dissatisfaction and resistance, while ensuring that citizens are granted a basic — if increasing precarious — living standard, Lukashenko has succeeded in further reinforcing his authoritarian rule. The international community has not recognized the most recent presidential election because of widespread election tampering. In the most recent presidential election in 2010, Lukashenko won with 80 percent of the vote. When approximately 15,000 people participated in a peaceful demonstration, about 700 people were arrested, including the other seven candidates for president.<sup>12</sup> One of the candidates, social democrat Mikola Statkevich, is still serving time.

President Lukashenko retains extensive influence over the Belarus economy, 70 percent of which is controlled by the government. Mechanisms of transparency and demands for accountability are weak. Belarus was ranked at 123 of 175 in the Transparency International corruption index of 2013.<sup>13</sup>

Foreign government loans account for approximately a fourth of the country's gross national product,<sup>14</sup> and Belarus is highly dependent on both Russia and the EU. In spite of the difficult economic situation, support for the president has increased following the 2014 developments in the Ukraine. In preparation for the upcoming presidential election in November of 2015, there is strong support for Lukashenko's message of "stability and peace" rather than war and political chaos. Only 8 percent of the population regards demonstrations as a satisfactory method for achieving change.<sup>15</sup>

Since opposition parties have great difficulty reaching out to the population, knowledge of political alternatives is low. It is important, however, for opposition candidates to participate in the elections, since it is a legal way to meet voters, organize demonstrations, and be seen in the media. To register a presidential candidate requires a petition of 100,000 names.

The human rights situation has not improved. Although Belarus has ratified several international conventions, and the country's constitution guarantees all citizen freedom and rights, they are severely limited by presidential decrees and laws, for example, against terrorism, threats to national security, or defamation of the president.

According to the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC), Belarus is one of the countries in which the rights of employees cannot be guaranteed. It is difficult for independent trade unions to function freely in Belarus. Short-term contracts have replaced permanent

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<sup>12</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/belarus-0#.VGoGMOxoy70>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>

<sup>14</sup> *Nasha niva* 31, 2014

<sup>15</sup> Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) Vilnius, June 2014



employment so that employers can more easily get rid of inconvenient personnel, and forced labor is common.<sup>16</sup>

Trade unions and other civil-society groups must be registered to be legal. Working through an unregistered organization incurs fines and imprisonment for up to two years. Extensive and unspecific regulations along with a haphazard application of justice consume excessive resources and make it difficult to manage for Belarus civic groups. For example, an application may be refused because of an incorrect font in the registration form. Nonregistered organizations may not receive foreign funds, and breaking this law can lead to imprisonment. That is why most of the 2,200 registered organizations in Belarus are tied to the government and/or are active in other than the political and civil spheres.

Other frequently used methods to quash civil-society involvement are wire tapping, visits from the tax authorities, secret-service and fire inspections, proactive detention, property searches, civil forfeiture, and threats of being deprived of education or employment.

During the summer of 2014, Ales Bialiatski,<sup>17</sup> the leader of Viasna, the most influential human rights organization, was released after almost three years in prison. Seven other political prisoners remain behind bars. They are an important 'currency' in negotiating with the EU.

The right to protest is guaranteed in the constitution, but protests require permission that is rarely granted. Even if permission were granted, it does not guarantee that the activists will not be arrested and charged with "aggravating behavior" and "failure to obey laws of order."<sup>18</sup> Permission from the authorities is also required to disperse information or encourage participation in demonstrations.

Although freedom of the press is guaranteed in the constitution, it is illegal to criticize the government or the president. All media companies must be registered by the Information Ministry, which can forbid reporting in the media if it is "not in line with reality" or "threatens national interests." It is criminal to repeat criticism of the government made for example by political parties or volunteer organizations. In 2013, at least 45 journalists and bloggers were arrested when they tried to cover political events. Belarus therefore holds one of the worst rankings in the world for freedom of the press at number 193 in the Freedom House report of 2014<sup>19</sup>. The situation is worse only in Eritrea, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and North Korea.

More than half of the population uses the Internet daily. The Belarus secret service is said to monitor Internet communications, since the country's sole provider of Internet services is government-owned. A presidential decree from 2010 requires owners of Internet cafés to identify users and record their activities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> According to the Working Class Zero report published in 2014 by the International Human Rights Federation (FIDH) and the Belarus human rights organization, Viasna

<sup>17</sup> Ales Bialiatski was accused of tax evasion, but the suit was politically motivated by his effective human rights campaigning. He was sentenced to four and a half years of prison, but was freed in the summer of 2014 in an amnesty decreed by President Lukashenko. <http://fokusvityrystland.se/2014/06/23/ales-bjaljatski-frigiven/> (Fokusvityrystland are runned by [www.ostgruppen.se](http://www.ostgruppen.se))

<sup>18</sup> In October 2011 Östgruppen published the report "Så tystas de kritiska rösterna: En rapport om civilsamhällets ökade utsatthet globalt, i Ryssland och i Belarus". <http://www.ostgruppen.se/verksamhet/forenings-och-motesfrihet/sa-tystas-de-kritiska-rosterna/> (in Swedish)

<sup>19</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/belarus-0#.VGoGMOxoy70>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

## PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

### **Long-term developmental objective**

Change agents in authoritarian countries shall contribute to change toward democratization of their societies.

### **Programme objective**

Change agents in authoritarian states shall be strengthened in their ability to organize people in the civil society and work for democracy and human rights.

### **Intermediate objective 1**

Change agents shall improve their knowledge about organizing, democracy, human rights, and gender equality

### **Intermediate objective 2**

Change agents shall have improved access to information

### **Intermediate objective 3**

Change agents shall have improved their networks through improved opportunities to share knowledge and experience with other agents and countries.