Right Livelihood Award Laureates and Riksdagen: A Shared Honour

We, the undersigned, have dedicated our lives to protecting human rights and fighting for democracy, equality and sustainability in different parts of the world. We all share the enormous honour and distinct privilege of having received the Right Livelihood Award – the “Alternative Nobel Prize” in the Swedish Parliament (Riksdagen) in the presence of parliamentarians, members of Swedish society and journalists from all over the world.

It is with great concern that we have learned that the 30-year tradition of hosting the Right Livelihood Award ceremony in the Swedish Parliament may come to an end. Our acceptance of this prestigious prize in Parliament showed the world that the Swedish people and their elected representatives care about democracy and human rights globally and stand up for human rights defenders both near and far.

We still recall our interactions with Swedish policymakers and parliamentarians at the award ceremony. These conversations gave resonance to our work in our home countries and strengthened our own resolve to continue. Given Sweden’s international reputation as a major humanitarian power, the impact of receiving the award in the Swedish Parliament was immediate and long lasting.

Let us share three examples from our personal experiences:

• When Helen Mack-Chang, a human rights defender from Guatemala, investigated the killing of her sister Myrna Mack, she came to the conclusion that her murder was political; backed by high-ranking Guatemalan military officials. As the case went to trial, Mack-Chang was subject to immense harassment, including death threats. She is of the firm opinion that receiving the Right Livelihood Award in the Swedish Parliament in 1992 saved her life and sustained her efforts to bring human rights violators to justice over the next 25 years.

• Elena Zhemkova, a human rights defender from Russia, received the prize on behalf of the independent NGO Memorial founded by Andrei Sakharov. Since its establishment, Memorial has documented Soviet human rights abuses, such as the terror unleashed by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s. The endorsement and protection afforded to Memorial by the Right Livelihood Award and the ceremony in the Parliament has bolstered their work to set straight the human rights record in Russia, Ukraine and beyond. It also opened doors for Memorial’s engagement with Swedish civil society, as well as scientific and research institutions, which continues to this day.

• Ruth Manorama, a social activist from India, has since the 1980s worked to empower marginalised Dalit women across India. Awarding Manorama the prize in Parliament highlighted the ongoing discrimination occurring against Dalits in India and demonstrated Swedish people’s solidarity with her cause of empowering downtrodden sections of society. Extensive support from Swedish parliamentarians redoubled Manorama’s commitment to continue working to improve the lives of Dalit women in India over the past decade.
It is hard to overestimate the impact of receiving the Right Livelihood Award in the Swedish Parliament has had on our lives and our work. We are deeply concerned that if the Parliament Board decides, at its next meeting on 8 June, against continuing to host the award ceremony in Riksdagen, it would have a very negative impact on future Laureates’ security and work. It would weaken the Laureates’ possibilities to create change on the ground at a time when civil society actors’ space to act is shrinking in many different ways, often as a result of actions by governments all over the world, including in Europe. And it would equally weaken the link between Swedish parliamentarians and some of the world’s most important changemakers.

It was very befitting to have the Right Livelihood Award presented in the Swedish Parliament. We hope that future Laureates, especially human rights defenders who take immense personal risks in pursuit of justice and accountability, will be able to experience a truly life-changing ceremony in Riksdagen like we did before them. And that this honour will indeed be a shared one.

**Alan Rusbridger**, United Kingdom, 2014 Laureate  
**Amy Goodman**, USA, 2008 Laureate  
**Basil Fernando**, Hong Kong, 2014 Laureate  
**Bill McKibben**, USA, 2014 Laureate  
**Denis Mukwege**, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2013 Laureate  
Elena Zhemkova for **Memorial**, Russia, 2004 Laureate  
Fernando Rendón for the **International Poetry Festival of Medellín**, Colombia, 2006 Laureate  
**Helen Mack-Chang**, Guatemala, 1992 Laureate  
**Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera**, Uganda, 2015 Laureate  
Lena Ag for **Kvinna till Kvinna**, Sweden, 2002 Laureate  
**Ruth Manorama**, India, 2006 Laureate  
**Sima Samar**, Afghanistan, 2012 Laureate  
**Zafrullah Chowdhury**, Bangladesh, 1992 Laureate