



INGOs and Human Rights Abuses in Eritrea

National and international non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs) are banned in Eritrea. Those that still operate in the country do so at the discretion of the Government of Eritrea in a highly-restricted space. Only three INGOs are still working in Eritrea: Finn Church Aid (FCA), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Irish NGO Vita. As their legal status is uncertain, the execution of their work depends on their personal relations with the government. **Their presence supports the government and its policies and legitimises the actions of the Eritrean government, which has been accused by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea of widespread, systematic and gross violations of human rights and crimes against humanity.** As they work as extensions of the government, they cannot guarantee that their work does not contribute to the human rights abuses committed by the Eritrean government, thereby violating the principle of 'do no harm'. **This policy brief presents the evidence on the role of INGOs in human rights abuses in Eritrea.**

Enabling government policies

The INGOs operating from within Eritrea – FCA, NRC, and Vita – work in education, vocational training and agriculture. To do so, they have to work in close contact with the Eritrean government and navigate its restrictive policy framework. Proclamation No. 145/2015 allows the Eritrean government to expel organisations at will, which it has done frequently over the last 15 years. This proclamation also ensures that the organisations' programmes all have a component of training and capacity building, which strengthens the government's capacity. The finances for programmes depend on government currency exchange, which economically benefits the government.

Surveillance of organisations

It is impossible for any foreign organisation operating in Eritrea to work independently, as they are subjected to control and surveillance by the Eritrean government. This means that their work and activities are constantly under scrutiny. INGOs must accept these restrictions if they wish to work in Eritrea. Local staff working for these INGOs are at risk, as they are also under surveillance by the Eritrean government, which inherently mistrusts foreign organisations and believes that local staff may be working as spies. This can lead to arrest of the workers, which contradicts the principle of 'do no harm'.

Recommendations

INGOs in Eritrea are at great risk of doing harm, as they operate under the control of the government, which has been accused of violating human rights. It is important for INGOs operating in Eritrea to adhere to their own codes of conduct and not to facilitate human rights violations. Accordingly, the following recommendations are made:

- All INGOs should withdraw from Eritrea until it can be guaranteed that their work does not contribute to a system of human rights abuses.
- INGOs should be fully transparent about the conditionality of their work, especially in relation to international events.
- INGOs in Eritrea must operate impartially and independently from the government and adhere to the principle of 'do no harm'.
- INGOs should advocate for the empowerment of local civil society in Eritrea.

Finn Church Aid

FCA is accused of operating against its own code of conduct in developing the school system in Eritrea, as this is linked to National Service (under the government's Warsay Yikaalo Development Programme, all students do their final year of school at Sawa Military Camp). FCA has signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Commission of Higher Education, which reports directly to the Office of the President. FCA is also obliged to answer to high-ranked officials of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PDJF), Eritrea's ruling party. Accordingly, the FCA is operating directly under the control and supervision of the government.

Norwegian Refugee Council

The NRC is oriented towards training young people who are not in school to start a business. However, business licences in Eritrea are only available to those who have completed National Service, which is indefinite in duration. This leaves young people who graduate from NRC's programme with limited options, which include starting a business through illicit means or joining the National Service.

Vita

Vita has been accused of legitimising the Eritrean government by co-organising meetings and side events at the European Union and the United Nations, as well as

Finn Church Aid:

- FCA works on education in the context of the Eritrean school system, which is linked to national service.

Norwegian Refugee Council:

- NRC helps youth to start a business – but in order to start a business in Eritrea, one must have completed National Service.

Vita:

- An Executive Officer of Vita legitimised mining companies working in Eritrea, even though they are accused of using forced labour through National Service.
- Vita has legitimised the Eritrean government abroad in meetings and side events at the EU and the UN.

by allowing employees of Vita to participate in events coordinated by the Eritrean government. Furthermore, the Executive Officer of Vita supported the position of the government that mining companies do not use forced labour, despite the fact that multiple credible reports have confirmed that miners in Eritrea are from National Service, which has been labelled by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea as forced labour and tantamount slavery. The use of forced labour in mining is currently being investigated in the Canadian courts in the case against Canadian mining company Nevsun.



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