Thank you Dear Colleagues,

We appreciate today’s chance for exchange and thank Norway, Chair Jonas Ebbesson and Special Rapporteur Michel Forst and NGOs for sharing their experiences. Support and protection for human rights defenders is one of the human rights priorities of the Netherlands and we recognize the need for specific attention to the position of environmental defenders. We are deeply concerned with the high amount of reprisals and killings that this specific group of defenders face.

The Netherlands would like to take the opportunity to emphasize the significance of the work of human rights defenders and express our concerns regarding the shrinking space for human rights defenders – and civic society in general. We strongly condemn all forms of reprisals against defenders and stress the importance of recognition, protection, safety and capacity building of defenders and the responsibility of States to ensure a safe environment for those who stand up for human rights.

Via the Shelter City Programme, Twelve Dutch Shelter Cities offer human rights defenders (HRDs) a possibility for rest and respite by letting them escape temporarily from a threatening situation. The programme’s objective is to offer the human rights defender a shelter for three months, during which she/he will rest (‘while being off the radar’), build up capacity, extend her/his network and raise awareness about the situation in their country and is not meant for human rights defenders at immediate risk. At the end of the three-month programme, participants return with new tools and energy to carry out their work at home.

With the Shelter City Programme, we aim to support and protect all individuals that promote and protect human rights, in recognition of Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights, that stresses that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, we underline that all human rights defenders should be protected, regardless of whether they stand up for the freedom of religion or belief, the rights of LGBTI persons, gender equality or whether they fight for land rights or a healthy environment for their communities.
Let me conclude by stressing that the primary responsibility to protect human rights lies with States. But all of us, every person, can and should play their role and as such be a Human Rights Defender.