

The Universal Rights Group

The Universal Rights Group is a small, independent think tank dedicated to analysing and strengthening global human rights policy. It is the only such institution in Geneva and the only think tank in the world focusing exclusively on human rights.

The goal of the organisation is to support and strengthen policy-making and policy-implementation in the international human rights system by providing rigorous yet accessible, timely and policy-relevant research, analysis and recommendation, a forum for discussion and debate on important human rights issues facing the international community, and a window onto the work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms – a window designed to promote transparency, accountability, awareness and effectiveness.

A key aspect of this goal is to make the international human rights system more accessible to, and bring it into closer orbit with, policy-makers and other stakeholders at regional, national and local-levels.

Mission

“To generate progress towards the full realization of the rights and freedoms contained in the universal human rights instruments through solutions-based policy research and forward-looking policy prescription, and through offering a respected platform for information-sharing and dialogue”.

Core Values – the 8 Is

The Universal Rights Group is guided by a series of core values:

Integrity, Independence and Impartiality – in order to have impact, the Group's work must be respected and credible.

Impact – everything the Group does is premised on generating impact, on supporting and strengthening human rights policy-making.

Innovation – the Group aims to be 'ahead of the curve' in responding strategically to important and emerging issues in order to provide policy-makers with timely guidance.

Insight – the Group also aims to help policy-makers understand and get to the heart of a particular issue, by offering new strategic thinking.

Inclusivity – the Group aims to engage all stakeholders in its work. It promotes cross-regionalism and gender-balance in everything it does.

Integration – the Group's work is premised on contributing to, supporting and improving the policy output of existing human rights structures and standards.

Programme of Work

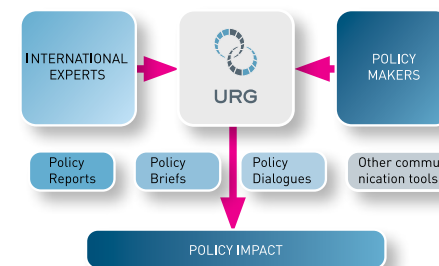
The Universal Rights Group's work is organized around four broad Programmes:

- 1 In Focus: Human rights and religion
- 2 Contemporary and emerging human rights issues
- 3 International human rights institutions, mechanisms and processes
- 4 Beyond the Council – human rights protection outside the main UN human rights mechanisms

Under each of these four broad Programmes specific projects are set by the Board, meeting at least once a year.

Our Approach

The Universal Rights Group is designed to act as an interface for the transfer and distillation of knowledge between international human rights experts (e.g. academics, human rights defenders) and human rights policy-makers.



By bringing these two groups together and providing a platform for information-sharing and fresh thinking on human rights policy, the Group helps to identify, understand and find solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing the international human rights system.

Through a combination of policy reports, policy briefs, policy dialogues and other tools, the URG seeks to build consensus around proposed solutions at international, regional and local-levels. In all of this, the Group looks to harness the power of information technology and social media both to generate policy impact and to bring the human rights system closer to people on-the-ground who need support and protection.

Organisational Structure

The Universal Rights Group is foreseen as a small, dynamic organisation, focused on qualitative impact.

Its strategy and work is developed in consultation with a Board of Trustees. The Board is composed of eminent experts and thought-leaders from around the world. An Advisory Committee made up of respected human rights scholars, civil society leaders and journalists advises the secretariat and the Board of Trustees on substantive content. The Group's programme of work is implemented by a small secretariat based in Geneva. All parts of the Group's organisational structure strive for geographical and gender balance.

The Challenge

The international human rights system faces significant challenges if it is to fulfil its crucial protection role. It has changed and developed enormously since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and with the establishment of the Human Rights Council in 2006 the speed and the significance of that change has only increased.

After an uncertain start, the Council is generally seen to have strengthened its performance over recent years. Yet belief in this qualitative improvement is largely based on anecdotal evidence and on the proactive role of the body in responding to crises such as those in Libya and Syria. There is a distinct lack of empirical research that might prove (or disprove) the perception that the Council is gradually beginning to deliver on its mandate. The relative lack of independent and widely-accessible policy analysis and advice also impacts negatively on the effectiveness of the various instruments, mechanisms and processes that make up the international human rights system. And finally, the gap exacerbates the already-existing disconnect between policy-making at international level and its implementation at regional, national and local levels.

At the same time, the power of human rights as a universal language and set of values has never been greater. This has been evident most recently during the Arab Spring when interlinked issues of human rights, accountability, justice, religion and the spread of information technology have combined to drive change. These, and related 'big-picture' questions of universality, diversity and cultural relativism; the complexity, resource-intensiveness and effectiveness of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms; and the politicisation of human rights arguments, are both sensitive and complex. Human rights policy-makers and other stakeholders at all levels need to be able to identify, understand and formulate responses to such issues.

The International Human Rights System

In March 2005, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, presented plans for UN reform which elevated human rights, along with economic and social development and peace and security, to be one of three "pillars" of the United Nations.

The reforms outlined by Kofi Annan led to the establishment of the Human Rights Council as the main body within the UN system responsible for promoting universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Council met for the first time in June 2006 in Geneva.

The Council is a central part of wider international human rights protection system which includes Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review, the human rights Treaty Bodies, various individual complaint or petition procedures, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. But it also extends far beyond Geneva - to the General Assembly's Third Committee and the Security Council in New York, and to the regional human rights systems.



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UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP



working together to protect universal human rights