



Activity Report April 2014-April 2015

I. The Universal Rights Group

The Universal Rights Group (URG) 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 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 to bring it into closer orbit with, policy-makers at regional, national and local levels, as well as with human rights defenders and the victims of human rights violations.

Mission

'To generate progress towards the full realisation 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 URG is guided by eight core values – the eight 'Is':

- **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.

Our approach

The URG 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 an open, inclusive and independent platform for information-sharing and fresh thinking on human rights policy, the URG helps to identify, understand and find solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing the international human rights community.

In order to be inclusive and representative, the URG Board, Advisory Group and secretariat all strive for geographic balance, while the URG aims to work with countries and NGOs from all regions and all political groups.

Stakeholders

The URG seeks to inform and influence the full range of relevant stakeholders at international, regional, national and local levels.

The UN in Geneva, home to the Human Rights Council and key human rights mechanisms, is of course central to the URG's outreach. This includes all diplomatic missions (members and observers of the Council), OHCHR, Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, civil society, business and the media. It also includes other international organisations that might not be focused solely on human rights but which (can) play a key role in promoting and protecting rights, such as the ILO, WTO, IOM, UNHCR, WIPO, IPU, and UNEP.

Notwithstanding, a principal objective of the organisation is to break 'the Geneva bubble' and the notion that 'what happens in Geneva stays in Geneva'. This means reaching out to policymakers in the General Assembly, in other (non Geneva-based) relevant UN organisations and bodies, in the regional human rights mechanisms, in foreign ministries and relevant line ministries, in national human rights institutions, in parliaments and in local civil society.

It also means working with these stakeholders to understand the effectiveness of human rights policies and mechanisms, so that the URG's work contributes to understanding and improving impact.

Programme of work

The URG's work is organised around four broad programmes. Individual projects are organised under these four programmes. The Board of Trustees, meeting at least once a year, sets the programme of work. The four programmes are:

1. In focus: human rights and religion
2. International human rights institutions, mechanisms and processes
3. Contemporary and emerging human rights issues
4. Beyond the Council – human rights protection outside the main Geneva-based international human rights institutions and mechanisms

In addition to these main programmes, URG also undertakes a number of other stand-alone projects designed to support the UN human rights pillar. These include the organisation of the Glion Human Rights Dialogue - a two-day retreat for senior policy-makers; pre Human Rights Council session press breakfasts; regular inter-sessional retreats and brainstorming sessions with Council members; 'Council reports' summarising the outcome of regular Council sessions; and the publication of opinion-editorial style articles by senior policymakers.

Finally, URG is occasionally contacted by third parties (e.g. governments, international organisations, NGOs) to undertake a specific project on a 'consultancy' basis. URG accepts such commissions where the project is consistent with its principles and programme of work. In 2014-2015, URG accepted to undertake:

- One project on human rights and climate change, for the Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice (MRFCJ).
- One project on human rights mainstreaming for the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

II. Institutional developments

The URG was officially registered with a permanent address on 1st April 2013. Its statutes had been adopted earlier by a provisional constitutive general assembly, as per Swiss law. The goal was to create a not-for-profit association that would be small and cost-efficient, and produce work that would be relevant, useful, accessible and impactful.

The URG's main office is located at *chemin du Grand-Montfleury 48*, 1290 Versoix, just outside Geneva. In April 2013, the Canton of Geneva decided to cover the rental costs of the URG for a period of two years. That period came to an end in April 2015.

Governing bodies

The URG's strategy and programme of 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 Group, made up of respected human rights scholars, civil society leaders and journalists advises the secretariat on substantive content.

As far as possible, the URG looks to implement its projects with Board or Advisory Group members, thus fulfilling its goal of acting as an interface between human rights expertise and human rights policymaking.

Board of Trustees

The URG has been able to gather an extremely distinguished group of experts to sit on its Board. They are:

Honorary President, President Ramos-Horta (Timor-Leste), former President of Timor-Leste and recipient of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize; Chairperson, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed (Maldives), UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives; Vice-Chair, Professor Michael O'Flaherty (Ireland), former Vice-Chair of the UN Human Rights Committee; Ms. Asma Jahangir

(Pakistan), former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion, former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions; Sir Nigel Rodley (UK), Chair of the UN Human Rights Committee, former UN Special Rapporteur on torture; Dr. Nazila Ghanea-Hercock (Iran), professor at the University of Oxford; Professor Juan Mendez (Argentina), UN Special Rapporteur on torture; Professor John Knox (US), UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment; Professor Abdullahi An Na'im (Sudan), senior fellow at the Centre for the Study of Law and Religion, former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch (Africa); Justice Sophia A. B. Akuffo (Ghana), President and Judge of the African Court of Human and People's Rights; Professor Dan Magraw (US), President Emeritus of the Centre for International Environmental Law; Professor Paul Hunt (NZ), former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, former member of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Ms. Yasmin Sooka (South Africa), Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights in South Africa; and Professor Heiner Bielefeld (Germany), UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion.

In October 2014, Ms. Catarina de Albuquerque, former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation agreed to join the Board of Trustees as its 14th member. The Board of Trustees approved this decision on 7th October 2014.

Advisory Group

The Advisory Group (formerly known as the Advisory Committee) is a network of eminent scholars, thought-leaders and opinion-formers from around the world. Its membership includes:

Dr. (Ms.) Basak Cali (Turkey), Associate Professor at Koç University, Turkey; Mr. Malcolm Langford (Norway), Director of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Programme at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, Oslo, Norway; Professor (Ms.) Elizabeth Griffin (UK), Professor and Executive Director at Global Jindal University, New Delhi, India; Mr. Rolf Ring (Sweden), Deputy Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at Lund University, Sweden; Dr. (Ms.) Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (Chile), United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights; Professor (Mr.) Frans Viljoen (South Africa), Director at the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, South Africa; Mr. Scott Sheeran (New Zealand), Senior Lecturer and Director of the LLM in International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law programme at the University of Essex, UK; Mr. Roland Chauville (France), Executive Director of UPR Info (NGO), Geneva, Switzerland; Dr. (Ms.) Elvira Dominguez-Redondo (Spain), Senior Lecturer in Law at Middlesex University, UK; Ms. Julie de Rivero (Peru, UK), Geneva Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch; Mr. Nick Cumming-Bruce (UK), Geneva-based journalist contributing to the IHT and the New York Times; Dr. (Ms.) Rosa Freedman, author of *The United Nations Human Rights Council: an early assessment* (March 2013); Mr. Peter Splinter (Canada), Amnesty International Representative to the United Nations in Geneva; Professor (Mr.) George E. Edwards (USA), Director of the Programme in International Human Rights Law, Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law; and Dr. (Ms.) Rose Nakayi (Uganda), Director, Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPEC), School of Law, Makerere University, Uganda.

In 2014-2015, four additional individuals joined the Advisory Committee: Ms. Julie Gromellon (France), former Permanent Representative of FIDH to the UN; Professor Michael Ramsden (UK), Chinese University of Hong Kong; Dr. Sejal Parmar (UK), Central European

University, Budapest; and Ms. Heather Blake (UK), former UK Director, Reporters without Borders.

Secretariat

The URG's programme of work is implemented by a small secretariat made up of former UN diplomats and former NGO representatives. The secretariat aims to achieve geographical and gender balance.

In 2014, Ms. Pooja Patel left the URG and was replaced as a permanent staff member by Ms. Hilary Power, who had formerly completed an internship at URG. The secretariat is now the following:

Mr Marc Limon (UK), Executive Director, former Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of the Maldives to the UN in Geneva

Mr Subhas Gujadhur (Mauritius), Director, former Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Mauritius to the UN in Geneva

Ms Hilary Power (UK), graduate, University College London

URG also has an internship programme, organised in cooperation with members of the Advisory Committee. So far, it has employed twelve people (eight women and four men) on internship contracts of between three and six months. Effort is made to provide internship opportunities for people outside Western Europe. So far this has included individuals from Turkey, Mauritius, China, US and Romania.

Presence in the Global South

In order to ensure that its work is inclusive and reflective of perspectives from all regions and from developing as well as developed countries, in 2013-2014 URG established small hubs or offices (at no cost) in Mauritius and Turkey. In 2014-2015 one further hub was added for Asia – at Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Such hubs are generally arranged through *memoranda of understanding* with academic institutions linked with the URG's Board or Advisory Group. Students and researchers in these hubs contribute to URG research, and also have the possibility to undertake internships. In 2015-2016, URG will look to establish hubs in Latin America and, ideally, an antenna in New York to help cover the work of the General Assembly and Security Council in the field of human rights (including the important relationship between these bodies and the Human Rights Council).

Fundraising

As a new organisation in a difficult financial climate, URG continues to do reasonably well in securing financial support from a range of donors. In 2014-2015, the support was received from the following governments and public entities:

- Norway – core funding.
- Denmark – core funding.
- Switzerland – programme funding.
- Germany – project funding.

- Qatar – project funding.
- Eugen Biser Foundation – programme funding.
- Baden-Württemberg Foundation – programme funding.
- *Etat de Genève* – support for URG office costs.
- Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice – consultancy.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union – consultancy.

In addition, in order to complete the URG-Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) project on business and human rights, URG secured funding from a number of businesses including Eli Lilly, Telenor, Mazars, and DLA Piper, as well as other entities including Global Business Initiative (GBI) and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Communication and marketing

The URG aims to be ahead of the curve in terms of its use of communications (public affairs and public relations) to ensure that its work is inclusive, accessible and has impact.

In 2014-2015, URG continued to work with a design company, mydearagency.com, to develop its website, emailers, brand, reports, etc.

URG's website, universal-rights.org, went live in late November 2013. It has been extremely well received, securing nearly 25,000 individual visits (60,000 pages viewed) by 15,000 different individual users.

URG has also created, in early 2014, accounts on Twitter (782 followers, 1,699 tweets) and Facebook (1,335 Likes), and has a page on Wikipedia.

eDelivery

In line with its founding principles, URG seeks to leverage information technology to ensure that its events, information notes, opinion pieces and policy reports are available and accessible to a wide-range of people in all regions of the world. Its events (except Policy Dialogues) are public events and are also recorded and accessible via the website and YouTube. Its 'e-blasts' notifying stakeholders about URG events, reports, opinion pieces etc., are sent electronically to over 2,525 individuals. These notifications are sent every two weeks. And its policy reports and policy briefs are published electronically as well as in print, and can be read on-line in normal PDF and in interactive PDF. URG also produces weekly blog articles addressing key issues of the day.

Due to demand from its stakeholders, URG now, as a matter of course, also publishes all its reports in hard copy. These are mailed to all missions in Geneva and New York, to selected foreign ministries, NGOs, international organisations, businesses and the media.

SIM

In line with its founding principles, URG has put in place internal systems to ensure that, for each project, it will be possible to 'Show Impact & Measure' (SIM). This includes an impact analysis across relevant UN bodies, governments, NGOs and the media.

III. Implementation of the Programme of Work

Since June 2013 (when URG began substantive work), the organisation has been working to implement its first two-year programme of work. That programme of work will be completed by the end of August 2015.

The URG's programme of work consists of seventeen individual projects across the four programmes described above. As of today, the URG has begun all seventeen projects, undertaking desk research and empirical analyses, organising policy dialogues, undertaking interviews and disseminating questionnaires. In line with its objectives and values, URG seeks to implement its projects in partnership with international experts and other relevant institutions (often represented on its Board or Advisory Committee).

Below is a summary of the activities undertaken between May 2014 and end April 2015, in connection with the implementation of the programme of work.

Programme 1 - In Focus: Human rights and religion

Project

Combatting religious intolerance: implementation of resolution 16/18

Project leaders

Dr. Nazila Ghanea, Oxford University and member of the URG Board; Marc Limon, URG secretariat; Ms. Hilary Power, URG secretariat.

Context

Council resolution 16/18 on combatting religious intolerance is considered one of the most important resolutions yet adopted by the body. The resolution contains an action plan of measures to be undertaken by states. The text also has important implications for freedom of religion and freedom of expression (e.g. in the context of blasphemy laws). Yet disagreements persist as to whether resolution 16/18 is being effectively implemented. URG is currently finalising a review of its implementation across 20 UN member states.

Impact

On 24th-25th March 2014, URG was invited by the Government of Qatar to present initial conclusions and recommendations during the 4th meeting of the Istanbul Process. Marc Limon from the URG secretariat chaired the opening high-level panel, and Dr. Ghanea then presented (during the same panel) URG's ideas to assembled domestic policymakers, thought-leaders and religious community leaders.

In January 2015, URG published its Policy Report on 'combatting global religious intolerance: the implementation of Council resolution 16/18.' On 12th February 2015, URG hosted a launch event and dialogue, with a panel consisting of the ambassadors of the US, UK, Pakistan and Turkey, and chaired by Mr Limon. Dr. Ghanea presented the key findings from the Policy Report. Over 100 Geneva policymakers participated in the panel debate. In the run-up to the event, it appeared that consensus on resolution 16/18 was at breaking point – partly as a consequence of the fall-out from the *Charlie Hebdo* attack – with, for example, Saudi Arabia ready to re-table its counter-resolution on 'defamation of religions.' The 12th February event succeeded in bolstering consensus around resolution 16/18. As a consequence, consensus was maintained during the March session, and Saudi Arabia did not

table a counter text. Also, the 12th February event saw the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Government of Chile announce two further meetings of the Istanbul Process. This was extremely important for the future of UN efforts to combat religious intolerance.

Finally, in May 2015, the OIC invited URG to chair the first panel discussion at the 5th meeting of the Istanbul Process in Jeddah (June 2015), and to present the findings of its report. URG is also working with the governments of Turkey, Chile and the OIC to establish informal institutional arrangements to ensure the future sustainability and success of the Istanbul Process. In this regard, on 27th May URG and the Mission of Turkey will organise an ambassadorial breakfast meeting to preview the 5th meeting of the Istanbul Process.

Next steps

Between 2nd-4th June, URG will participate in the 5th meeting of the Istanbul Process in Jeddah. Mr. Limon will chair the first panel discussion and Dr. Ghanea will present the URG's report findings during the second panel. URG is also working with key governments to set up informal institutional arrangements for the Istanbul Process – for example, a 'troika' of past, current and future hosts.

Project

Understanding and reconsidering religion-based reservations to the main international human rights conventions

Project leaders

Dr. Basak Cali, Koç University, and member of the URG Advisory Group; Scott Sheeran, University of Essex, and member of the URG Advisory Group; Marc Limon, URG secretariat.

Context

A number of states maintain reservations to the core human rights conventions because they consider some parts of the treaties to be incompatible with prevailing religious beliefs or values. Such reservations have significant negative implications for the enjoyment of human rights. Other states, supported by international experts, disagree, holding that there is no inherent incompatibility between universal human rights norms and religious values. Indeed, some states (e.g. Morocco) have been able to establish domestic processes that have led to the lifting of all religion-based reservations to key conventions.

Impact

URG has mapped all religion-based reservations to the core human rights conventions, has looked to question the assumptions underpinning them, and has drawn attention to 'best practice' domestic processes such as Morocco's. In February 2015, URG and Koc University convened a two-day Policy Dialogue in Istanbul with countries (both Christian and Muslim) that maintain such reservations or have experience in lifting them. This included Algeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Ireland, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Malta, EU, Poland and the Holy See. Other participants (around 25) included academics, UN staff and UN mandate-holders.

Next steps

Information from the Dialogue will be fed into a final Policy Report, due to be published in July 2015. Thereafter, URG will work with the above-mentioned states, other states, relevant Special Procedures and members of Treaty Bodies, to discuss steps that can be taken at the national level to establish inclusive national processes to reconsider these reservations. URG

will also work with regional organisations such as the OIC's Human Rights Commission to promote dialogue on these important yet sensitive issues.

Project

Religion, inter-religious dialogue and women's rights

Project leaders

Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur and URG Chair; Subhas Gujadhur, URG secretariat; Professor Heiner Bielefeld, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and URG Board member

Context

Many of the most important and intractable human rights challenges facing the world today are closely interlinked with religion and belief. These challenges often stem from misunderstandings about the nature of the relationship between human rights and religion. The URG project seeks to confront such misunderstandings and misrepresentations by bringing together religious leaders and thought-leaders who argue that human rights and religious belief are inherently compatible, with human rights policymakers. In particular, it will look at women's rights as a prism through which to view and understand the practical implications of the universalist-relativist debate on human rights.

Impact

On 18th February 2015, URG organised a two-day Policy Dialogue in Germany at the Global Ethics Institute, University of Tübingen, in collaboration with the Centre for Islamic Theology, Eugen Biser Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation, Baden-Württemberg Foundation and the Weltethos Foundation on the compatibility between religion and human rights, with a particular focus on women and children's rights. The meeting saw around 70 participants including representatives of the OHCHR, Special Rapporteurs, UN experts, academics, religious theologians, and representatives of civil society discuss issues around religion and the universality of human rights.

Next steps

URG will present a report of the meeting in July 2015, and will build on the outcome by organising a further project on this issue in its next programme of work.

Programme 2 – Human rights institutions, mechanisms and processes

Project

The evolution and future sustainability of the UN Special Procedures

Project leaders

Ted Piccone, Brookings Institution; and Marc Limon, URG secretariat

Context

The Special Procedures are a crucially important human rights mechanism. Much of what the international community does and seeks to do in the field of human rights depends on the work of these independent experts. And yet, as the number of Special Procedure mandates passes the 55 mark, it is important to recognise the challenges the system faces and to identify ways to strengthen its impact.

Impact

In March 2014, URG published a joint Policy Report with the Brookings Institution. The Report presents the most detailed and comprehensive analysis ever undertaken into the contemporary effectiveness of the Special Procedure system, and makes a series of policy recommendations for all stakeholders. In late March 2014, URG, the Brookings Institution, Norway and Turkey hosted a launch event to present the Report's main conclusions and recommendations. Over one hundred policymakers attended the event. OHCHR also shared the URG-Brookings Policy Report with all mandate-holders and placed it on the mechanism's intranet site.

Building on the report's recommendations, during the Council's 25th session, a group of Latin American states delivered a joint statement (see annex 1) taking up some of the Policy Report's key themes and ideas. This statement directly cited URG research and ideas. Thereafter, this group evolved into a Group of Friends of Special Procedures. The Group of Friends has so far met on three occasions (with URG in attendance) and has delivered cross-regional statements during each March session.

In April 2014, URG and the Brookings Institution presented a copy of the Policy Report to Chaloka Beyani, the Chairperson of the Special Procedures Coordination Committee, and also launched the report at a high-level event in Washington DC. In February 2015, URG presented the report to the new Chairperson, Francois Crepeau, during a meeting of the Group of Friends at the Costa Rica Mission.

During the 28th session of the Council in March 2015, URG follow-up activities saw key recommendations from its Policy Report implemented. First, the Special Procedures produced a system-wide Annual Report of activities (previously it was just a report of the annual meeting), including information on cooperation and follow-up. Second, the Chairperson of the Coordination was allowed, for the first time ever, to present a new expanded Annual Report to the Council. And third, a number of States responded to the report's statistics on cooperation and follow-up, to help strengthen the mechanism's impact.

Finally, in late 2014, URG was invited to present the Policy Report, and especially its recommendations for the UN secretariat, to the Special Procedures Branch of OHCHR. URG also presented the report's findings at an academic conference on Special Procedures held at the University of Nottingham.

Next steps

URG will continue to work with Special Procedures mandate-holders, Coordination Committee, OHCHR, states and NGOs to work towards the implementation of the project's recommendations.

Project

Growth, effectiveness and impact of Council resolutions

Project leader

Subhas Gujadhur, URG secretariat

Context

Since the establishment of the Human Rights Council in 2006, there has been a prodigious increase in the body's output. For example, in 2014 the Council produced 112 resolutions.

And yet insufficient attention has been paid to whether the Council and its methods of work have the capacity to deal with and adequately follow-up on this output, and to whether they are having a qualitative impact on the ground.

Impact

In October 2013 and in January 2014, URG hosted two Policy Dialogues on the issue of the methods of work of the Council, and the growth and effectiveness of Council resolutions. Subsequent to the Dialogues, during the 25th session of the Council, URG organised an event with Norway and Turkey on methods of work and output of the Council. This was also addressed by the President of the Council and attended by over one hundred delegations. URG also joined OHCHR in speaking at an event (13th March) on methods of work convened by Egypt, Russia, Indonesia and Ecuador. As a result of these and related efforts, during the 25th session, 63 countries from all regions and all political groups joined a consensus-based joint statement delivered by Norway and Turkey on methods of work and the growth, effectiveness and impact of Council resolutions (see annex 2). URG played a key role in providing content and generating cross-regional support for the statement. One year later, at the 28th session, 74 states joined a further cross-regional statement on Council methods of work. Again, URG provided input for the statement and helped garner support.

In January 2015, URG launched its Policy Report on the Council's resolutions system at an event hosted by the Permanent Mission of Australia. The event included a panel discussion with the President of the Human Rights Council, the Chief of the OHCHR research division, FIDH and the Ambassador of Australia. There were around 100 participants. URG has also presented the findings of the Report at events in New York (April, with the Chair of the Third Committee and the President of the Council) and Washington DC (also April, with US-based NGOs, think tanks, US State Department officials, and congressional staffers). URG also participated in private roundtable discussions at the US Mission in Geneva and the residence of the Mexican Ambassador on the subject. Finally, URG was invited to present its findings and ideas on the Council and its output to the African Group and the Like Minded Group (LMG).

The Policy Report and its findings have made a significant contribution to changing thinking about Council resolutions and methods of work. The so-called 'efficiency' of the Council and its outputs is now a major area of work in Geneva and New York, and is one of the three priority issues for the German Presidency of the Council. The issue featured prominently in the three policy dialogues held ahead of Glion II (see below), and was the focus of an informal ambassadorial retreat hosted by the Government of Germany in Berlin in May 2015. URG presented its ideas and recommendations at that retreat. Some of those ideas (e.g. inter-sessional briefings by the High Commissioner, a voluntary pledge on methods of work, a multiannual calendar of initiatives, and an new informal consultation process on the 'review, rationalisation and improvement' of mandates) are being taken forward by relevant stakeholders.

URG has also been asked to write op-ed style articles about the Council and its output for media such as Opendemocracy.net.

Next steps

URG will continue to work with relevant states, such as Norway, Turkey and Germany, to take forward recommendations from the project, and thus strengthen the output and impact of the Council. Moreover, as a follow-up, URG is expected to work with FIDH on a further

project looking at the impact of item 10 resolutions, especially in the context of providing capacity-building support to African states.

Project

Treaty Body Reform: what does it mean for you?

Project leaders

Christen Broecker, Jacob Blaustein Institute; Professor Michael O'Flaherty, URG Vice Chair

Context

In April 2014, the General Assembly adopted a resolution marking the close of an intergovernmental process of review and reform of the international human rights Treaty Bodies. This built on a wider process of review and reform initiated by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The outcome of the reform exercise has significant implications for the functioning of the Treaty Body system and thus for the fulfilment of the obligations contained in the international human rights conventions. It is important for all stakeholders (states, Treaty Body members, NGOs, victims) to be fully aware of these implications.

Impact

In June 2014, URG published its Policy Brief on: 'the outcome of the GA's Treaty Body strengthening process: an important milestone on a longer journey,' by Professor Michael O'Flaherty and Christen Broecker. The Brief is designed to help delegations in Geneva, as well as other stakeholders, understand the implications of the reforms. In January 2015, key themes from the report were discussed at the 2015 Wilton Park conference.

Next steps

OHCHR's Treaty Body Division has approached URG to organise, in autumn 2015, a seminar on the implementation of the GA resolution on Treaty Body reform, especially in the context of capacity-building and national implementation.

Project

UPR, Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures: A Connectivity Study

Project leaders

Roland Chauville, UPR Info; and Subhas Gujadhur, URG secretariat

Context

The establishment of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was one of the key innovations of the Human Rights Council. The UPR is generally seen to have been a success, although the second cycle and the degree to which it focuses on and encourages implementation of recommendations will be key to its long-term effectiveness (this is the focus of another URG project). The success of UPR has raised a number of questions about its relationship with other main mechanisms of the human rights system, especially Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures. For example, is UPR supporting or undermining these other mechanisms, and what is the evidence for this?

Impact

URG and UPR Info are in the process of completing a major research programme looking at the multifaceted interactions between the three main human rights mechanisms.

Next steps

A joint URG-UPR Info Policy Report will be published in September 2015.

Project

Towards the UPR third cycle: lessons learned from the mechanism's formative years

Project leader

Subhas Gujadhur, URG secretariat

Context

The UPR's first cycle, in which the human rights situation in all countries was reviewed and recommendations for improvement made, is generally considered to have been a success. However, many observers believe that the future credibility of the mechanism will be determined by the second cycle, which is supposed to focus on the implementation of first cycle recommendations. This raises the question: is the second cycle living up to this expectation and what lessons can we draw to inform any reforms that need to be brought ahead of the third cycle?

Impact

In March 2014, URG presented initial views and findings on the UPR second cycle at an international human rights seminar in Rabat, organised by the Government of Morocco. In November 2014, URG addressed a further event in Marrakesh during the World Human Rights Forum with parliamentarians. At both events, URG provided best practice examples and advice to participants, including governments, members of parliament, national human rights institutions and NGOs, on how to approach second cycle reporting and implementation. In early April 2014, URG also addressed a seminar in Moldova organised by the Organisation Francophone, explaining to around forty states and thirteen NHRIs about the UPR second cycle and offering information, empirical statistics and advice. URG has also organised various side events at the Council on the effectiveness of UPR with, for example, Morocco, Mauritius, Thailand, Finland and the UK. In May 2015, URG organised a seminar on best practice in UPR second cycle with the Permanent Mission of Denmark and the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

Next steps

URG will publish its Policy Report on the UPR's third cycle in June.

Other projects

In addition to the above projects under the 'Human rights institutions, mechanisms and policies' programme, URG has also begun to implement (including conducting primary and secondary research) the following:

- **Communicating with the international human rights system: a victim's perspective**, (co-authored by Hilary Power, URG secretariat and Elvira Domínguez-Redondo, URG Advisory Group member).

Programme 3 – Contemporary and emerging human rights issues

Project

Environmental human rights defenders: emerging challenges and solutions

Project leaders

Marc Limon, URG secretariat

Context

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, environmental and land use human rights defenders (EHRDs) are a group of growing importance and at particular risk. A Global Witness report in April 2014 noted a sharp rise in the number of deaths of EHRDs around the world.

Impact

On 12th-13th March 2014, URG organised a regional consultation at UNEP Geneva bringing together 18 EHRDs from Africa and Europe, plus relevant international organisations, mechanisms and NGOs including the UN Independent Expert on human rights and the environment, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, the UN Special Rapporteur on toxic waste, OHCHR, UNEP, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, WWF International, Article 19, Amnesty International, the International Service for Human Rights, Global Witness, International Land Coalition, Earthjustice, Justlaw and Waterlex. During the consultation, EHRDs delivered personal testimonies relaying their experiences and the challenges they face. Participants then discussed possible international policy responses to better support EHRDs and their work.

URG's project has already begun to result in the situation of EHRDs receiving greater policy attention. From 21st-23rd October, URG participated in the 13th Informal Asia-Europe Ministerial seminar in Copenhagen, which focused on the intersection between human rights and the environment. URG Director Marc Limon's work in this area was cited in the briefing paper for ministers and other participants, and URG also worked with the UN Independent Expert on human rights and environment and UNEP to conduct a consultation session with Asian EHRDs, governments officials and national human rights institutions. This focused on the situation of EHRDs and best practice in terms of using human rights law and mechanisms. Then in March 2014, at the 25th session of the Human Rights Council, the UN Independent Expert, Professor John Knox, presented a norm-setting report that directly cited the URG's project on EHRDs. The Independent Expert noted that he was working 'with the Universal Rights Group to develop a programme of meetings and reports highlighting the issues facing environmental human rights defenders.'¹

At the conclusion of the 25th session, states adopted a UN resolution on human rights and the environment which explicitly 'recognizes the important role played by human rights defenders working on environmental issues in trying to promote sustainable development and finding a balance between economic and social development and environmental protection, and urges States to create a safe and enabling environment in which these human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity, in the whole country and in all sectors of society, including by extending support to local human rights defenders.'²

Next steps

URG will publish its Policy Report on the situation of EHRDs in August 2015.

¹ Report of the Independent Expert on human rights and the environment to the 25th session of the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/25/53, paragraph 6, page 4.

² Resolution on human rights and the environment, A/HRC/25/L.31, operative paragraph 8.

Project

Human rights, climate change and cross-border displacement

Project partners

Professor Jane McAdam, University of New South Wales; Marc Limon, URG secretariat

Context

In December 2015, states will meet in Paris to agree a new binding international treaty on climate change. That agreement will potentially have a major impact on the enjoyment of human rights around the world, including in the context of displacement caused by natural disasters (slow- and rapid-onset). URG is supporting efforts to ensure that the new agreement is informed by international human rights standards.

Impact

In March 2015, URG's Marc Limon chaired a meeting, convened by UNEP, UNDP, the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and the Mary Robinson Foundation (MRFJ) on the human rights implications of a 2-degree temperature rise. URG has also supported the MRFJ in its efforts to integrate human rights into the Paris agreement, including by providing information.

URG has also supported Costa Rica in strengthening the mandate of the UN Independent Expert on human rights and environment. During 2015, the Independent Expert and other mandate-holders published a number of press statements and open letters to the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC to press for a rights-based approach to climate policy. A group of 15 Special Procedures also made an official submission to the COP UNFCCC outlining the human rights implications of climate change and urging States Parties to limit global average temperature rises to not more than 1.5 degrees.

Next steps

URG will publish its Policy Report on human rights, climate change and displacement in July 2015. It will organise an event with the CVF during the 29th session of the Council, and further events in Geneva and Bonn later in the year.

Project

Human rights and the post-2015 development agenda

Project partners

Subhas Gujadhur, URG secretariat

Context

In September 2015, states are expected to adopt the post-2015 development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The mainstreaming of human rights into this agenda has been a long-term goal of the international human rights community.

Impact

URG has provided regular update information and analysis about developments in New York for the Geneva human rights community. URG is also part of the Human Rights Caucus coalition pressing for the inclusion of human rights principles in the SDGs. Finally, URG

organised a side event on human rights in the SDGs with CIVICUS during the 28th session of the Council.

Next steps

When the new co-chair text is published on 1st June 2015, URG will publish an update on progress. URG will also organise a stocktaking event in June in Geneva. URG will use information from the mainstreaming effort to inform a new project: a critical analysis of the Council's mainstreaming mandate.

Project

Human rights and business

Project partners

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Government of Norway, Government of UK, Mazars, DLA Piper, GBI, Telenor, Eli Lilly

Context

Promoting respect for human rights among businesses has been one area where the Council, building on the work of the Commission, has made considerable progress in responding to a new or emerging human rights challenge. That progress culminated in the adoption of UN Guiding Principles and the establishment of a new Working Group to promote observance. However, in 2014, Ecuador and South Africa used doubts as to the implementation of the Guiding Principles to press for a new binding treaty on business and human rights.

To contribute to these debates, and to support the full implementation of the 'Protect, Respect, Remedy' framework, it is important and useful to have a regular assessment of what multinational businesses are doing to integrate human rights into their business strategies, the importance that they attach to human rights, and what more they can and would like to do. Such assessments provide useful information for UN and national policymakers, help promote awareness of the Ruggie Principles and promote deeper implementation through highlighting best practice and creating positive competition among businesses.

In 2014 URG and its partners launched, together with the EIU, a major international survey of business perceptions about human rights. The aim is to show what major multinationals and other corporate leaders think about human rights, whether they work to implement the Guiding Principles, and what more they may do in the future.

Impact

In December 2014, the EIU presented the initial findings of the global survey at the opening plenary of the UN Annual Forum on business and human rights. The same week, URG together with the Governments of Norway and the UK convened a reception for ambassadors and business leaders, where the preliminary results were again promoted.

In March 2015, EIU published its final Insights report: 'the road from principles to practice: today's challenges for business to respect human rights.' The report, which was distributed to all governments and other stakeholders, was launched at events in London (March), Hong Kong (May) and Washington DC (May).

Next steps

URG and partners will look to repeat the process so as to keep a regular check on the evolution of business opinion on and commitment to human rights.

V. Other projects

In addition to actions implementing its programme of work, URG also undertakes other activities designed to strengthen the UN's human rights pillar and to improve transparency and public accountability in the human rights system – bringing it closer to the people it is mandated to protect.

Project

Glion Human Rights Dialogue

Context

In January 2014, URG began work on the organisation of a new retreat-style meeting on human rights in the Lake Geneva region. The Glion Human Rights Dialogue, organised in partnership with the Governments of Norway and Switzerland, brings together senior human rights decision-makers and international experts to discuss 'big picture' human rights policy issues in an informal, off-the-record setting. The Dialogue is designed to understand and bring fresh thinking to bear on key challenges and generate practical and implementable ideas and recommendations for future action.

The 2014 Dialogue was held in Glion, Switzerland, from the 13th-14th May. It marked the 20th anniversary of the creation of OHCHR and focused on 'OHCHR and the international human rights system: the next 20 years.'

The 2015 Dialogue was held from 5th-6th May and focused on the 'Human Rights Council at 10: improving relevance, strengthening impact.'

Impact

The Glion Human Rights Dialogues have become, in a short space of time, the main informal retreat-style forum for discussing the challenges of the Human Rights Council and the wider UN human rights pillar. By including all relevant decision-makers and stakeholders, the Dialogues also now have a track record of seeing ideas and proposals from the retreat actually implemented. For example, ideas developed during the 3 policy dialogues organised in preparation for the 2015 Glion Dialogue included: convening regular informal Council briefings with the High Commissioner; expanding the annual calendar of human rights initiatives; developing a voluntary pledge on methods of work; and creating a process for the regular review, rationalisation and improvement of mandates. These ideas are now being implemented and realised.

Next steps

Norway, Switzerland and URG will publish a report from the 2015 meeting in September, and will hold an event to promote its conclusions and proposals ahead of the 30th session of the Council.

Project

Pre-Council press breakfasts

Partners

URG and United Nations Office at Geneva Correspondents Association (ACANU)

Context

Media awareness and, as a consequence, public awareness of the Human Rights Council is notably low. To a significant extent, this is the result of the often technical and inaccessible nature of the Council's programme of work and a traditional low-level of interaction between correspondents and diplomats. In order to respond to both challenges and in-so-doing improve public interest in and awareness of the work of the Council and its mechanisms, URG organises (in partnership with ACANU) before each session of the Council, a press breakfast bringing together around 15 journalists and 5 states (different states each time). During the breakfasts, state representatives brief journalists on 3-4 of the key issues to watch out for during the Council session, and then answer questions. The meetings are off-the-record, designed to provide journalists with a sense of the key issues to monitor and report on during the session.

Impact

URG and ACANU have now organised four press breakfasts, with the participation of a range of ambassadors including from: EU, UK, US, Mexico, Indonesia, Egypt and Pakistan. The breakfasts tend to be heavily oversubscribed by journalists, demonstrating their desire for more information on the Council and their enthusiasm for covering sessions in more detail. The following media outlets regularly participate: Mexican News Agency, Reuters, Anadolu Agency, NHK, The Yomiuri Shimbun, Asahi Shimbun, Le Temps, International New York Times, Weldreporter, FAZ, Estado Sao Paolo, AP, AFP, and Voice of America.

Next steps

Further press breakfasts will be organised before the 29th and 30th sessions of the Council.

Project

Survey of public perceptions (refracted through the media) about the Human Rights Council (pilot)

Partners

Precise media

Context

In October 2014, URG conducted a first global survey of public perceptions of the Human Rights Council as refracted through the world's media. The survey was published in October and was widely read and commented upon in Geneva.

Next steps

The 2014 survey was a pilot project. URG would like to make the survey an annual one.

Project

Executive Reports on Human Rights Council sessions

Context

Until now, no NGO has produced a concise, fact-based and neutral assessment report on the key debates and outcomes of regular sessions of the Human Rights Council. After URG's establishment, many Council delegations, especially from developing countries, approached the secretariat and said such an independent analysis and report would be useful for them. Thus, at the end of the 25th session, URG produced such a report and distributed it electronically to all missions in Geneva and New York, and to NGOs, the media, etc. It has continued to produce and refine these executive reports following subsequent sessions.

Impact

Many delegations, including from Africa, Asia and the West, have contacted URG after the distribution of reports to note their utility and to say that they had used it as a basis of their reports to capital.

Next steps

URG will produce similar reports, slightly expanded, for future sessions of the Council.

Project

Opinion-editorials by international human rights policymakers and thought-leaders (URG Insights)

Context

URG seeks to provide a platform for policymakers and opinion-leaders to share information and ideas with other stakeholders and to generate debate. In 2014-2015, it therefore constituted its 'By Invitation' series of opinion-editorial style articles. These are published on the URG website and distributed electronically to over 3,000 people around the world.

Impact

In 2014-2015, URG published 'By Invitation' op-eds from, *inter alia*: the Council President; UN Special Rapporteurs; government ministers, Council members (ambassadors and experts); NGO leaders; Mary Robinson; etc.

Project

Human Rights Council members' retreat

Context

With the Permanent Missions of the UK, France and *Francophonie*, URG has begun organising biannual half-day retreats for members of the Council. These are held between sessions (January and May) and are designed to provide an informal space to discuss key issues expected to come up at the Council.

Impact

The first retreat, organised with the UK Mission, took place in January 2015. The second, with France/*Francophonie*, will take place in June 2015.

Project

Resolutions portal

Context

To support transparency and accountability at the Human Rights Council, URG undertook a major project to put all Council resolutions in an easily searchable database – accessible via the URG website.

Impact

This has proved to be a unique and hugely popular resources – with hundreds of hits every week and regular positive feedback from delegations and NGOs.