



## Activity Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 - 31<sup>st</sup> December 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 UNDP Geneva, ILO, IOM, UNHCR, IPU, ICRC 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 the Security Council, 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, in national media, 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 greater understanding and impact.

## **Programme of work**

The URG's two-year programme of 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 second year of the URG's first two-year programme of work ended at the end of December 2015.

The four programmes during URG's first two-year programme of work were:

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; 'Inside Track' pre-Council briefing papers; 'Council reports' summarising the outcome of regular Council sessions; the construction of the yourHRC.org web-portal designed to increase transparency around the work and voting of Council members, and around Council elections; the development of URG online tools, including resolutions and voting portals; 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 2015, URG accepted to undertake:

- 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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. At the beginning of April 2015, the members of the Board were:

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; Professor Heiner Bielefeld (Germany), UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion; and Ms Catarina de Albuquerque, former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation.

In early 2016, Professor Abdullahi An Na'im resigned from the Board. Dr. Shaheed sent a letter thanking him for his service.

In April 2016 (after the period covered by this annual report), Dr. Shaheed, as chair of the Board of URG, wrote to all Board members to inform them of Professor An Na'im's resignation, and to propose extending an invitation to Professor Christof Heyns to join the Board.

Professor Heyns is a highly respected human rights expert and practitioner. In addition to those posts he has held at the UN, he is Professor of Human Rights Law and Director of the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa at the University of Pretoria. He has advised a number of international, regional and national entities on human rights issues. He also teaches human rights law at Oxford and at American University, Washington DC. He has been a Humboldt Fellow in Heidelberg, Germany, and a Fulbright Fellow at Harvard Law School.

The Board of Trustees approved this invitation in April and Professor Heyns officially joined the Board at the end of that month.

The URG Board met on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2015, and 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015. An update letter, on the activities of the URG, was also sent to the Board in April 2015.

## **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. Members receive URG publications and information, and have the possibility, on an *ad hoc* basis, to contribute to projects of interest. 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), former 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), former 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), former 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; Dr (Ms) Rose Nakayi (Uganda), Director, Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPEC), School of Law, Makerere University, Uganda; Ms Julie Gromellon (France), former Permanent Representative of FIDH to the UN; Professor (Mr) Michael Ramsden (UK), Chinese University of Hong Kong; Dr (Ms) 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.

As of end December 2015, the composition of the URG secretariat was as follows:

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), Policy Analyst, graduate, University College London

URG also has an internship programme, organised in cooperation with members of the Advisory Committee. So far, it has employed over twenty people (fifteen women and five 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, Hong Kong/China, Denmark, Colombia, UK, 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 2015 URG maintained small hubs or

offices (at no cost) in Mauritius, Hong Kong (at Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Turkey (Koç University). In 2015, efforts were made to add one further hub: in Latin America.

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, URG also increased its activities in New York, with a view to establishing a permanent presence there in 2016.

## **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 2015, support was received from the following governments and public entities:

- Norway – core funding.
- Denmark – core funding.
- Switzerland – programme funding.
- Germany – project funding.
- Singapore – project funding.
- Spain – project funding.
- Morocco – project funding.
- UK – project funding.
- Canton Geneva – project funding.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union – consultancy.

## **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 2015, URG continued to work with the design company mydearagency.com to develop its website, emailers, brand, reports, etc.

URG's website, [universal-rights.org](http://universal-rights.org), went live in late November 2013. It has been extremely well received, securing over 41,000 individual sessions by 25,000 different individual users, from April 2015 to March 2016. This is a significant increase on the previous 12 months.

Regarding social media, URG maintained accounts with Twitter (over 1,500 followers, 5,400 tweets) and Facebook (1,781 Likes).

## **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.

URG sends out information on new policy reports, 'By invitation' blogs, and events on a regular basis. It also sends out a monthly e-newsletter summarising all relevant information about publications, events, blogs, and tools. Emailers are sent electronically to over 5,000 individuals. URG's 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.

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 members of the URG Board, 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 worked to implement its first two-year programme of work. That programme of work concluded at the end of 2015.

In the last quarter of 2015, the URG secretariat consulted with members of the Board, ambassadors and other diplomats, NGOs and UN officials to gather ideas for its new two-year programme of work (2016-2017). A new draft programme of work was presented to the Board at the end of 2015, and was also the focus of a working dinner with selected Board members and senior Geneva ambassadors, hosted by the Permanent Representative of Turkey in December 2015. The new programme of work, presented as a 'Global Strategic Plan' (as per a decision of the Board), was adopted by the Board in late 2015.

The 2014-2015 programme of work consisted of seventeen individual projects across four programmes. 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).

The new 2016-2017 programme of work includes nineteen projects across the same four broad programme areas. Notwithstanding, for the 'In focus' programme, the new programme of work focuses on 'domestic implementation,' replacing 'human rights and religion.'

Below is a summary of the activities undertaken between April 2015 and end December 2015, in connection with the implementation of the 2014-2015 programme of work, and the commencement of work on the new 2016-2017 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**

In early 2015, URG published its Policy Report on 'combatting global religious intolerance: the implementation of Council resolution 16/18.' On 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

Since the publication of the report, URG has worked with States and other stakeholders to implement the recommendations. For example, it has worked with the Governments of Turkey, Chile, Singapore, UK, US and Pakistan (OIC) to establish informal institutional arrangements to ensure the future sustainability and success of the Istanbul Process. In that regard, on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015, URG and the Mission of Turkey organised an ambassadorial breakfast meeting to preview the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process.

In June 2015, Marc Limon and Nazila Ghanea, from the URG, presented on two different panels during the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process in Jeddah. They used their talks to present the findings of the URG report and to promote relevant recommendations.

In February 2016, URG, together with the delegation of the European Union, organised a major intergovernmental meeting in Geneva ('16/18: a way forward') to discuss key issues around resolution 16/18, the Istanbul Process, and freedom of religion or belief. The aim of the meeting was to help maintain consensus and drive progress ahead of the March 2016 session of the Human Rights Council. During the meeting, Singapore announced it would host a 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process (in 2016). There were also suggestions that Argentina may host a 7<sup>th</sup> meeting.

Throughout the reporting period, URG published articles/blogs with comments on 16/18 and the Istanbul Process. Examples include: 'The road to Istanbul passes through Rabat,' (June 2015, Marc Limon); 'Implementing resolution 16/18: the role of Rabat and the importance of civil society space' (February 2016, Andrew Smith, Article 19); and 'How to move forward with the implementation of resolution 16/18' (March/April 2016, Marghoob Saleem Butt, Executive Director, OIC Human Rights Commission).

### **Next steps**

In July 2016, URG will participate in the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process in Singapore. URG will also work with Singapore to prepare a report of the meeting, and to bring information from the meeting back to Geneva for further discussions.

### **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.

In March 2015, URG, together with the Permanent Missions of Germany, Norway and Tunisia, organised a Council side event / reception on: 'Religious reservations and what they tell us about universality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.'

### **Next steps**

A policy report containing the findings and conclusions of the project is ready for publication. The launch is planned for autumn 2016. Thereafter, URG will work with 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

URG presented a report of the meeting in July 2015.

In April 2015, one of the participants at the Tübingen meeting, Professor Mouez Khalfaoui, published a comment articles on URG's website entitled: 'Islam, human rights and universality.'

### **Next steps**

URG will publish a short policy brief on this issue, in late 2016.

## **Programme 2 – Contemporary and emerging human rights issues**

### **Project**

#### **Environmental human rights defenders: emerging challenges and solutions**

#### **Project leader**

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 2015 noted a sharp rise in the number of deaths of EHRDs around the world.

### **Impact**

In 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 work on EHRDs has coincided with increasing attention to the issues they face on the part of a wide range of stakeholders: State delegations in Geneva; UN Special Procedures; Treaty Bodies; and NGOs.

### **Next steps**

URG will publish its Policy Report on the situation of EHRDs in September 2016. URG will also launch a new web portal on EHRDs in September 2016.

### **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 met in Paris to agree a new binding international treaty on climate change. That agreement will 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 has supported 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 also supported the MRFJ in its efforts to integrate human rights into the Paris agreement, including by providing information, analysis and counsel.

URG has also supported Costa Rica and Slovenia 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.

In March 2015, the UN Independent Expert published a URG blog on how the Human Rights Council should contribute to a rights-based Paris Agreement.

In October 2015, URG organised, together with UNEP and the Geneva Environment Network, a 'brown bag' lunch on human rights, climate change and displacement. The meeting featured around 80 diplomats, UN officials and NGOs.

In August 2015, URG published its Policy Report on human rights, climate change and displacement. The report was circulated to all policymakers at the Human Rights Council and at the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC.

In March 2016, the Independent Expert was changed into a Special Rapporteur, with a greater focus on climate change.

### **Next steps**

URG will continue to work with and support the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, as he continues his work to highlight the links between human rights and climate change, including the impacts on human displacement.

### **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 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.

### **Next steps**

URG will publish a Policy Brief on human rights in the post 2030 Development Agenda during the autumn of 2016.

### **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/April 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 (April), Hong Kong (May) and Washington DC (May).

### **Next steps**

No further actions planned.

### **Other projects / new 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 project from the organisation's *second* two-year programme of work:

- **Corruption and human rights**, (Marc Limon, URG secretariat).

## **Programme 3 – 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 presented the most detailed and comprehensive analysis ever undertaken into the

contemporary effectiveness of the Special Procedure system, and made a series of policy recommendations for all stakeholders.

Building on the report's recommendations, during the Council's 25<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> sessions, a group of States delivered joint statements taking up some of the Policy Report's key themes and ideas. The statements directly cited URG research.

The group of States evolved into a permanent 'Group of Friends of Special Procedures.' The Group of Friends has so far met on four occasions (with URG in attendance) and has delivered cross-regional statements during each March session.

During the 28<sup>th</sup> 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 Committee 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.

Marking these important steps, in April 2015, URG published an op-ed entitled: 'HRC28 and Special Procedures: celebrating three steps forward, avoiding one step back.'

During the 31<sup>st</sup> session of the Council, a new and improved version of the Annual Report was presented by the Chairperson to the Council. Again following URG recommendations, the report contained more information on levels of State cooperation with the Special Procedures.

Throughout 2015, URG worked with the President of the Council to try to put in place a regularised process of 'review, rationalisation and improvement' of mandates.

In April 2015, Marc Limon and Hilary Power, from the URG Secretariat, presented some of the key findings and recommendations from the Policy Report to the Special Procedures Branch of OHCHR.

On 11 November 2015, Marc Limon presented information on the history and contemporary reality of Special Procedures at an ambassadorial breakfast for States that were the focus of the first Special Procedures mandates in the 1960s and 1970s. The meeting was hosted by Costa Rica, and is expected to feed into a new project (part of the new two-year programme of work).

### **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. 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 25<sup>th</sup> 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 (13<sup>th</sup> March) on methods of work convened by Egypt, Russia, Indonesia and Ecuador. As a result of these and related efforts, during the 25<sup>th</sup> 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 28<sup>th</sup> 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. 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. For example, the issue was the focus of an ambassadorial-level Human Rights Council 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 a new informal consultation process on the 'review, rationalisation and improvement' of mandates) are being taken forward by relevant stakeholders.

URG has also written op-ed style articles about the Council and its output for social media such as Opendemocracy.net.

Across 2015, URG's efforts to promote the efficiency and effectiveness saw important results. For the first time in the history of the Council the number of resolutions adopted dropped across all three regular sessions. There was also a significant increase in focus, on the part of States, NGOs and OHCHR, on issues of implementation and impact.

In 2016, the new President of the Council (the Ambassador of South Korea) pledged (in a URG blog and in his inaugural address) to continue work on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council.

### **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. In 2016, it is continuing to work with the President of the Council and OHCHR on these issues, and in September 2016 will co-organise a second Human Rights Council retreat (in Evian) on issues related to methods of work and efficiency.

### **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.

#### **Next steps**

OHCHR’s Treaty Body Division has approached URG to organise, in autumn 2016, 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**

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 is in the process of completing its research on the complex interactions between the three main human rights mechanisms.

### **Next steps**

A URG Policy Report will be published in September 2016.

### **Project**

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

### **Project leaders**

Subhas Gujadhur and Marc Limon, 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 May 2015, URG, together with the Permanent Missions of Denmark and Canada, and the Danish Institute for Human Rights, organised a seminar on 'sharing national experiences of the UPR.'

In February 2016, URG, together with the Permanent Mission of Turkey, organised a policy roundtable (lunch) with a cross-regional group of 16 ambassadors, to consider the achievements and weaknesses of the UPR during the first two cycles, and to look ahead to the third cycle.

As the third cycle draws near (it will begin in early 2017), URG will promote the findings and recommendations flowing from the project, in order to influence decision-making and thereby strengthen the mechanism. It is important to note, in that regard, that many modifications and improvements are possible within the current institution framework.

### **Next steps**

In June 2016, URG and partners will organise a policy dialogue on the third cycle of the UPR.

In July 2016, URG will publish its Policy Report on: 'Looking ahead to the third cycle of the UPR: stick or twist?' The report will also be presented during the September 2016 Human Rights Council retreat.

### **Project**

#### **Communicating with the international human rights system: a victim's perspective**

**Project leader**

Hilary Power, URG secretariat

**Partner**

Dr. Elvira Domínguez-Redondo, Associate Professor of Law at Middlesex University

**Context**

The system of communicating with international human rights mechanisms has evolved steadily over many decades. Today, the system is highly complex and lacks proper coordination. There are serious questions as to its accessibility for people on the ground and as to its effectiveness in actually helping people.

**Impact**

In June 2015, The URG co-hosted a policy dialogue with the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights (JBI) on the “accessibility, responsiveness and effectiveness” of the UN human rights individual communications procedure, with a view to generating ideas for possible reform. The roundtable discussion was attended by representatives of the OHCHR, key diplomatic missions from all regions, Special Procedures mandate-holders and Treaty Body experts.

**Next steps**

In Autumn 2016, the URG will publish the results of this two-year research project, drawing heavily on the input of the above mentioned policy discussion, as well as over 40 interviews with a range of key stakeholders, including the victims of human rights violations and HRDs.

A launch event will allow for the discussion of the findings, and the URG will work with relevant stakeholders to take some of the key recommendations generated forward.

**Other projects / new 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 project from the organisation’s *second* two-year programme of work:

- **UN Commissions of Inquiry**, (Marc Limon, URG secretariat; Ted Piccone, Brookings Institution; Michael Kirby, COI DPRK).

**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 ('Glion I') was held in Glion, Switzerland, from the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> May 2014. It marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of OHCHR and focused on 'OHCHR and the international human rights system: the next 20 years.'

The 2015 Dialogue ('Glion II') was held from 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> May 2015, and focused on the 'Human Rights Council at 10: improving relevance, strengthening impact.'

Ahead of Glion II, URG organised a series of 3 preparatory policy dialogues, designed to allow for initial discussions and to feed ideas into the retreat.

### **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; improving the Council's website; presenting 'hybrid' resolutions; 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**

The 2016 Dialogue ('Glion III') will be held from 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> May 2016 and will focus on 'Human rights implementation and compliance: turning international norms into local reality.' Glion III also addressed the issue of 'prevention.'

Norway, Switzerland and URG will publish a report from the Glion III meeting in September 2016, and will hold events to promote key conclusions and proposals ahead of the 33<sup>rd</sup> session of the Council and the autumn 2016 session of the Third Committee in New York.

### **Project**

#### **Pre-Council press breakfasts**

### **Partners**

EU 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 the EU and 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 seven press breakfasts, with the participation of a range of ambassadors including from: EU, China, UK, US, Mexico, Indonesia, Egypt, Switzerland 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 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> sessions of the Council.

### **Project**

#### **Media engagement with the Human Rights Council and survey of public perceptions**

#### **Partner**

Germany, Canton Geneva

#### **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**

Throughout 2016, URG will conduct a major media engagement project that will see journalists from around the world travel to Geneva to follow regular sessions of the Human Rights Council. The visits will include capacity-building and training elements. URG will also, in 2016, conduct a full media perception survey, building on the pilot project.

### **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, from the 25<sup>th</sup> session onwards, URG has produced end of session reports and distributed them electronically to all missions in Geneva and New York, and to NGOs, the media, etc.

#### **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 continue to improve and refine the end of session reports.

**Project**

**'Inside Track' pre-Council briefing papers**

**Partner**

Singapore

**Context**

In order to improve transparency and accessibility, especially for Small State delegations and NGOs, URG began to produce, in September 2015, regular pre-session primers or briefing papers, to explain key issues, debates and initiatives expected at the session. URG has so far produced three such 'Inside Track' primers: in September 2015, December 2015 (ahead of the Special Session on Burundi) and March 2016.

**Impact**

URG and Singapore have received positive feedback from delegations, especially Small State delegations.

**Next steps**

URG will continue to improve and refine the primers. URG will also look to produce a similar briefing paper ahead of Third Committee sessions in New York.

**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 4,000 people around the world.

**Impact**

In 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 Presidency retreats**

**Partner**

Presidency of the Human Rights Council, OHCHR

**Context**

In 2015, the German Presidency of the Human Rights Council initiated a new annual retreat for members of the Human Rights Council (ambassador level). URG was engaged to provide substantive input into the retreat and to facilitate the discussions.

**Impact**

The first retreat focused on the issue of improving the 'efficiency and effectiveness' of the Council's working methods.

**Next steps**

The Korean Presidency is expected to maintain this new informal work format in 2016.

**Project**

**New Human Rights Council members' retreat**

**Context**

With the Permanent Mission of the UK, URG organises an annual half-day retreat for new (incoming) members of the Council (expert level). These are held each January and are designed to provide an informal space to share information on the Council, and to look ahead at key issues expected to come up at the Council that year.

**Impact**

The first retreat took place in January 2015, and the second in January 2016.

**Project**

**HRC 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 popular resource – with hundreds of hits every week and regular positive feedback from delegations and NGOs.

**Project**

**HRC voting portal**

**Context**

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

**Impact**

This has proved to be a unique and popular resource, and has facilitated a wide range of related initiatives to improve transparency and accountability.

**Project**

**yourHRC.org**

**Partner**

Norway

**Context**

To support transparency and accountability around the actions, engagement, cooperation and voting of members of the Human Rights Council, in thereby to improve the functioning of the Council, URG, in partnership with Norway, has developed a new web portal: 'yourHRC.org.'

Through yourHRC, users can search for and analyse the performance of every Council member, past and present.

Linked with yourHRC.org, URG and Norway also produce two related products: a Human Rights Council election guide (providing information about candidates); and a Human Rights Council end of year report (containing objective information about the Council's work and output).

**Impact**

YourHRC.org and the election guide were launched in the company of Norwegian ministers and a wide range of diplomats in both Geneva and New York. The 'HRC in 2015' report was launched in Geneva in the presence of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who made a short intervention. URG has widely circulated the web portal and associated guides digitally via its email circulation list of over 3,000 contacts, and on social media. As at 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016, 4,427 users had clocked around 11,649 page views on the website. The reports have also been sent to all missions and other key stakeholders in Geneva in hard copy.

For the first time, it is now possible for all interested parties to access centralised information about how Council member States are engaging and cooperating with the Council and its mechanisms.

**Next steps**

URG will improve yourHRC.org over 2016, and will develop regular email alerts: 'Know yourHRC members' and Know yourHRC candidates.'

Though its election guide, URG will continue to seek to increase transparency surrounding elections to the HRC, through its publications and events in both Geneva and New York.