Full-day open informal consultation

Human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:
The opportunities and challenges of convergence

Chateau des Bois, Geneva
Thursday 29th June 2017

Concept Note

During the 34th session of the Human Rights Council in March 2017, a new Group of Friends on ‘Human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ delivered a first joint statement announcing a new initiative on the issue, and setting out some initial steps, in Geneva, New York, and at regional/national level.

The statement makes clear that in order to respond to rising global inequalities, States and other stakeholders must work to leverage the inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing nature of, on the one hand, the promotion and protection of, and respect for all human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, civil and political rights, and the right to development; and, on the other hand, the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

If the 2030 Agenda is to be realised in a way that truly does ‘leave no one behind,’ then human rights obligations and commitments must be applied, implemented and protected by all UN member States. Similarly, the full enjoyment of all human rights will only be possible in the context of worldwide progress with the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets, including the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions.

As the UN Secretary-General himself remarked during his recent address to this Council: ‘human rights, including the right to development, lie at the core of the 2030 Agenda;’ while - seen the other way around – the 2030 Agenda provides States with ‘an ideal platform to demonstrate their commitment to all human rights.’
Human rights and the 2030 Agenda

Human rights lie at the core of the 2030 Agenda. The Agenda envisions a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, sex, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realisation of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity; a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.

Yet, thus far, the main body responsible for human rights at the UN, the Human Rights Council, has paid only ad hoc attention to understanding and strengthening the human rights pillar’s contribution to the implementation of the SDGs in all countries. That is important, because, simply put, without the support of the international human rights system, and without the strengthened enjoyment of human rights on the ground, it will not be possible to fulfil the promise of the SDGs to ‘leave no one behind.’

Against this background, in late 2016 a group of States, including Chile, Denmark, Ecuador, Luxembourg, Portugal, Rwanda and Uruguay; in consultation with interested NGOs, including the Universal Rights Group and the Danish Institute for Human Rights, set up a Group of Friends to consider and guide the UN human rights system’s support for the SDGs.

As the March cross-regional statement makes clear, the aim of the Group of Friends, and the initiative, is not to have an abstract theoretical debate about the relationship between human rights and development, but rather to begin a practical, action-orientated and inclusive conversation, to be followed by concerted and inclusive action, about the optimal role of the human rights pillar in making the best possible contribution to the fulfilment of the SDGs by all States. In particular: how can the UN human rights system, including the monitoring mechanisms, support States realise the SDGs at country-level, including by delivering effective human rights capacity-building and technical support, and sharing best practices?

As a starting point for the initiative, and in order to begin such a practical and inclusive conversation, the Group of Friends announced its intention to organise, just after the June 2017 session of the Council, an informal open-ended meeting in Geneva, that would offer all States, as well as UN experts, NHRIs, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, a first opportunity to provide and exchange their views and perspectives on how the human rights pillar can best contribute to the realisation of, and follow-up to, the SDGs.