



# CONFRONTING INEQUALITY AND LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

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TURNING THE UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM INTO THE  
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S  
'EQUALITY ENGINE'

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PART OF THE 'HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLEMENTATION  
AND IMPACT' SERIES OF REPORTS

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January 2026



UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP



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January 2026

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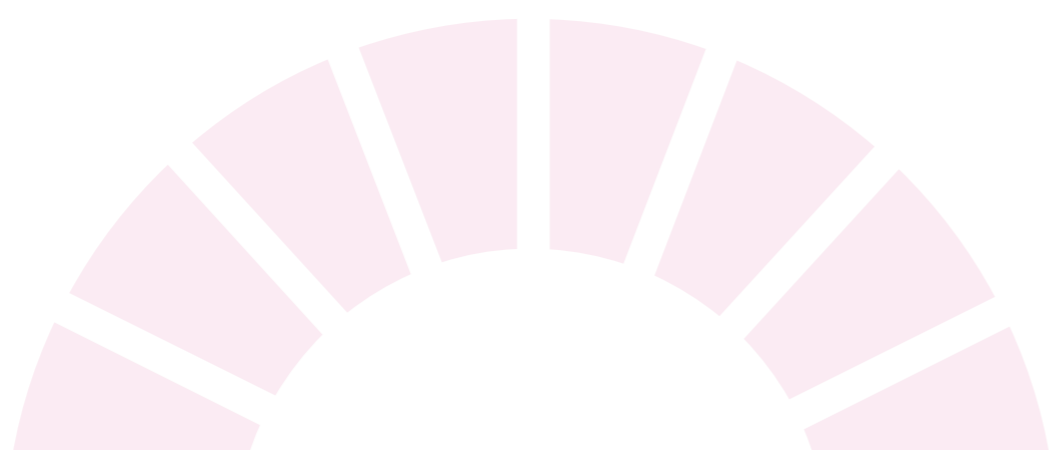
## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AG</b>	African Group (UN)	<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>APG</b>	Asia-Pacific Group (UN)	<b>NHRI</b>	National human rights institution
<b>CAT</b>	Convention against Torture	<b>NMIRF</b>	National mechanism for implementation, reporting, and follow-up
<b>CCA</b>	Common Country Assessment	<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child	<b>UNCT</b>	United Nations Country Team
<b>CERD</b>	Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination	<b>UNDAF</b>	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
<b>CRPD</b>	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>EEG</b>	Eastern European Group (UN)	<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>EU</b>	European Union	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>GRULAC</b>	Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (UN)	<b>UNSDCF</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
<b>HRC</b>	UN Human Rights Council	<b>UNSDG</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	<b>UPR</b>	Universal Periodic Review
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights	<b>URG</b>	Universal Rights Group
<b>LNOB</b>	Leave no one behind	<b>WEOG</b>	Western European and Others Group (UN)
<b>MGF</b>	Marrakech Guidance Framework		

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acronyms and abbreviations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 1   Leaving no one behind – human rights and (In)equality</b>	<b>11</b>
Understanding inequalities	12
Human rights and inequality	17
Inequalities and the human rights system	18
<b>Chapter 2   Inequalities and human rights recommendations numbers and patterns</b>	<b>25</b>
Characteristics of recommendations	26
Universal Periodic Review recommendations	31
Special Procedures recommendations	34
Treaty Bodies recommendations	37
<b>Chapter 3   Case studies</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Brazil: Income inequality</b>	<b>43</b>
Background	43
Summary of engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms	44
Summary of recommendations	44
Implementation and impact	46
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina: Material inequality and social protection reform</b>	<b>51</b>
Background	51
Summary of engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms	52
Summary of recommendations	52
Implementation and impact	56

<b>Jordan: The progressive and equitable realisation of economic and social rights through increased investments in public services (to the maximum of available resources)</b>	<b>60</b>
Background	60
Summary of engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms	61
Summary of recommendations	61
Implementation and impact	65
<b>Kenya: Inequality and resource allocation – health, education, and youth employment</b>	<b>69</b>
Background	69
Summary of engagement with the UN human rights systems	70
Summary of recommendations	70
Implementation and impact	73
<b>The United Kingdom: Education inequality</b>	<b>77</b>
Summary of engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms	78
Summary of recommendations	78
Implementation and impact	83
<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Annex 1 : Methodology for country case studies</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>91</b>



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leave no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It represents the unequivocal commitment of all UN member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole.

LNOB thus includes two key elements: combatting discrimination, and combatting rising inequalities within and amongst countries, as well as their root causes. This policy report focuses on the second of those – combatting inequalities, particularly socio-economic inequalities (often multiple and intersecting).

Many of the barriers people face in accessing services, resources, and opportunities are not simply accidents of fate or a result of insufficient resources, but are rather the result of deliberate government choices, policies, and law-making that create or perpetuate inequalities, or of social practices and norms (that governments either fail to confront or actively encourage) that leave particular groups of people further and further behind.

Inequality is defined as an unfair state of unequal status, rights, and opportunities. It is typically analysed in terms of inequality of outcome, which refers to the unequal distribution of material wealth, and inequality of opportunity, which refers to the unequal access to resources due to circumstances at birth. Furthermore, a distinction is made between horizontal inequalities, which

manifest between socially defined groups such as gender or race, and vertical inequalities, which are variations between individuals or households (distribution of income and wealth). While the international human rights system has made significant strides in addressing horizontal inequalities and poverty reduction, it has historically paid less attention to the drivers of vertical or socio-economic inequality.

With the increasing realisation of the terrible human rights impacts of inequality, and the ‘flip side’ that human rights (especially economic and social rights) cannot be realised without adequately resourced public health systems, housing policies, social security policies, etc., there is a growing imperative for the Human Rights Council, and the wider human rights system, to engage in more depth with the issue, and become the ‘equality engine’ of the UN, especially at a time of contestation, crisis, and reform in the multilateralism system.

This report then presents empirical data showing the degree to which the UN human rights system, especially the main human rights mechanisms, are currently engaged on questions of vertical or socio-economic inequality.

That analysis shows that the UN human rights system, especially certain mechanisms such as the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Special Rapporteur on human rights and extreme poverty, is already engaged to a significant degree, on issues of inequality. Between them, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Treaty Bodies, and the Special Procedures have extended nearly 20,000

recommendations to States in this area (between 2007 and 2023), representing approximately 8 per cent of all recommendations issued by the mechanisms over the sample period. The Treaty Bodies have issued 49 per cent of these inequality-relevant recommendations, the UPR 41 per cent, and Special Procedures 10 per cent. These recommendations have *inter alia* urged States to adopt more equitable laws and policies, especially with regard to taxation, social protection, and public service provision. This represents a solid base, yet if the human rights machinery is to truly become the UN’s ‘engine of equality,’ and a key driver behind international efforts to ensure no one is left behind, it will need to significantly upscale its efforts – in terms of both the number and ambition of recommendations issued.

The report then presents a number of country case studies to understand the degree to which these UN recommendations are leading to real-world change, through national implementation measures, including with UN and bilateral development support. The five case studies show that where UN member States engage constructively with the UN human rights mechanisms (the case for all five States covered by the case studies), and where the UN mechanisms extend strong and ambitious recommendations to States to reduce inequalities and address the root causes of inequality, such recommendations can and do lead to important budgetary, legislative, and policy shifts at national level, with positive implications for the equal enjoyment of human rights across society. Specifically, the case studies provide evidence that States, by leveraging their engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms, have been able to:



- Reduce income inequality and extreme poverty in Brazil;
- Reduce inequality through social security reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Strengthen the progressive and equitable realisation of economic and social rights through increased investments in public services (to the maximum of available resources) in Jordan;
- Strengthen the delivery of key social services through improved and more equitable national resource allocations to the health, education, and youth employment sectors in Kenya; and
- Begin to reduce inequalities in access to quality education in the United Kingdom.

The report concludes by affirming that securing urgent reductions in all forms of inequality, both between and within countries, is central to the success of the 2030 Agenda, to the full realisation of human rights, to the promotion and protection of human dignity, and to long-term peace and stability. The human rights machinery represents a potentially powerful engine of equality, which, when fully mobilised, could make a significant contribution to ensuring that no one is left behind. Notwithstanding, the system's effectiveness relies on all States recognising that socio-economic inequality is a human rights concern, on States engaging constructively with the UN human rights mechanisms to target the root causes of inequality, and on the UN human rights mechanisms extending more and increasingly ambitious recommendations to States.



**This report then presents empirical data showing the degree to which the UN human rights system, especially the main human rights mechanisms, are currently engaged on questions of vertical or socio-economic inequality.”**

## CHAPTER 1.

# LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND – HUMAN RIGHTS AND (IN)EQUALITY

Leave no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup> It represents the unequivocal commitment of all UN member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

LNOB thus includes two key elements: combatting discrimination, and combatting rising inequalities within and amongst countries, as well as their root causes.

This policy report focuses on the second of those – combatting inequalities, particularly socio-economic inequalities (often multiple and intersecting).

The UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) recognises that LNOB is grounded in the [...] principles of the Charter of the United Nations, [as well as] international human rights law.<sup>3</sup> Flowing from and in concert with this point, this policy report argues that LNOB is, at its heart, a human rights vision – equality and non-discrimination are core principles that cut across all human rights, civil and political, as well as economic, social, and cultural, including the right to development.

Many of the barriers people face in accessing services, resources, and opportunities are not simply accidents of fate or a result of insufficient resources, but are rather the result of deliberate government choices, policies, and law-making that create or perpetuate inequalities, or of social practices and norms (that governments either fail to confront or actively encourage) that leave particular groups of people further and further behind.

Pupils at a UNICEF-supported school in Sindh province, Pakistan. UNICEF is one of several UN agencies that depend on voluntary funding from the US.

Credit: UNICEF/Fahad Ahmed

## Understanding inequalities

Traditional definitions of inequality describe it as ‘the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities’<sup>4</sup> or as ‘the unfair situation in society when some people have more opportunities, money, etc. than other people.’<sup>5</sup> Inequality can be understood merely from an economic perspective, that is, in terms of income or wealth, or it can be conceived in a broader sense to encompass disparities in living conditions.

Development theory differentiates between inequality of outcome, which mostly deals with the unequal distribution of material wealth, and inequality of opportunity, which accounts for unequal access to resources, and which dictates a person’s material and personal well-being. Inequality of opportunity is largely determined by an individual’s circumstances at birth, but it is also influenced by choices and capabilities that shape an individual’s living conditions. Inequality of outcome is, therefore, easier to measure objectively, and traditional approaches to assessing it have tended to focus on income as a proxy for well-being. Conversely, inequality of opportunity is more difficult to quantify, as it places more emphasis on a person’s socio-economic context.

Another distinction can be drawn between horizontal and vertical inequalities. The former applies to inequalities between socially constructed groups, e.g., those determined by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, or religion. In contrast, vertical inequality refers to variations between individuals or households, and is therefore assessed in terms of the distribution of income and wealth, most often through measures like the Gini coefficient (which measures income

distribution by comparing the cumulative income distribution of a population to a perfectly equal distribution), and the Palma ratio (which measures income distribution by comparing the income share of the richest and poorest portions of the population).

Historically, the human rights system has leaned towards addressing horizontal inequalities. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, its articles 2 (non-discrimination), 6 and 7 (equality before the law), or 21 (equal access to public services), among many others, embraced protection from discrimination in a horizontal manner, as it enshrined the equal protection of rights across social groups (article 2 of the Universal Declaration recognises the protection of rights without distinction of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status).<sup>6</sup>

Over the course of the following decades, the convergence of different processes – including post-war reconstruction, the rise of the welfare state, decolonisation, and the emergence of international development – led to a rise in policies focused on poverty reduction and the fulfilment of basic needs. In 1966, the adoption of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),<sup>7</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>8</sup> expanded the recognition of rights (food, housing, education, or living conditions in the former, protection from the law, fair trial, and freedom of the expression in the latter) vis-à-vis potential horizontal inequalities, by enshrining non-discrimination in the promotion and protection of those rights.



**Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt of the United States holding a Declaration of Human Rights poster in English. [Exact date unknown]**

Credit: UN Photo

This was complemented by the provisions under the ICESCR regarding the State's duty to dedicate the maximum of its available resources to the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, and to cooperate with other States to provide assistance toward the progressive realisation of those rights.

International human rights law thus recognises minimum core obligations of States to ensure the realisation of rights regardless of the level of resources at their disposal. However, the level of equality they guarantee is horizontal, and they do not speak to how inequalities between vertical groups of society may impact the enjoyment of rights. Furthermore, the human rights treaties focus on realised outcomes (i.e., access to housing, education, employment), instead of the drivers behind inequality.

In the final decades of the last century, the rise of development theory brought with it increased national and international attention to inequality of living standards, and unequal access to opportunity, as well as heightened focus on inequalities between countries of the Global North and those of the Global South.

This trend was not, however, fully reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),<sup>9</sup> adopted in September 2000. The MDGs (2000-2015) rallied countries around a common, unified cause – ending extreme poverty in all its forms – and in that regard they were extremely successful. Between 1996 and 2011, the share of people living in poverty around the world was reduced by half.

Poverty eradication, and the socio-economic development that powered it, did not always, however, lead to a reduction in inequalities. In fact, generalised global growth was often accompanied by rising income inequalities at

domestic level. During the 15 years of the MDGs (2000-2015), the incomes of the bottom 40 per cent of the population in developing countries grew slower than the average national growth. In 2014, the then Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, Magdalena Sepúlveda, noted that economic growth in developing countries had failed to reduce inequality, stressing the need for adequate taxation and redistribution.<sup>10</sup>

Increased international attention focused on the causes and consequences of socio-economic inequalities, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, was reflected in the MDGs' successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched in 2015. The SDGs took a broader approach to development, including a heightened focus on addressing inequality. Most notably, under SDG10, States committed to 'reduce inequality within and among countries.'<sup>11</sup>

Reflecting a significant shift in international understanding of sustainability in the context of development, SDG10 includes targets designed to promote both vertical and horizontal equality. Regarding the former, Target 10.1 calls on States to reduce income inequalities: by 2030, States should aim to 'progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average,'<sup>12</sup> while Target 10.4 urges them to 'adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.'<sup>13</sup> Regarding the latter, under Target 10.2 States committed to 'empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status,'<sup>14</sup> while under Target 10.3 States committed to 'ensure equal opportunities, and end discrimination.'<sup>15</sup>

What is more, SDG10 also included targets designed to reduce inequalities *between* countries. For example, Target 10.5 aims to improve the regulation of global financial markets and institutions,<sup>16</sup> Target 10.6 aims to 'enhance the representation of developing countries in financial institutions,'<sup>17</sup> Target 10.a calls for 'special and differentiated treatment for developing countries,'<sup>18</sup> and Target 10.b 'encourage[s] official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries, African countries, small island developing States, and landlocked developing countries.'<sup>19</sup>

This push to address inequality as a key component of achieving sustainable development leaving no one behind, is essential in the context of four decades of predominantly neoliberal or liberal economic doctrine.

As Andrew Fagan has noted, liberalism is built on the moral foundation stone of the promise of equality. Yet, like the international human rights system they helped build, the world's liberal democracies have always tended to focus their attention on promoting horizontal equality, that is to say, on confronting discrimination and inequality

between social groups (i.e., based on race, sex, age, ethnicity, etc.). All the while, according to Professor Fagan, they have 'simultaneously and systemically ignor[ed] other forms of mostly class-based [or socio-economic] inequality and discrimination.' This selective amnesia is, he continues, 'the greatest political challenge' faced by today's liberal democracies, and the 'Achilles' Heel' of national liberal economic policy.<sup>20</sup> It has also, moreover, permeated international economic, development, and human rights policy.

Those international policies, predicated on liberal and neoliberal economic doctrine, have promoted an understanding of inequality as both an inevitable cause of growth and an incentive driving innovation, risk-taking, and – ultimately – more growth. Underlying these ideas is the notion that when resources are allocated it is not possible to make one person better off without making someone else worse off. Inequality has therefore been seen as the consequence of rational choice, instead of as a result of asymmetries in the allocation of resources. These ideas of efficiency have largely led to a binarization of resource distribution – i.e., policies may either provide for commodities or human rights, private property or common property, free markets or State regulation, market value or community value.



In order therefore to adopt a human rights-based approach to reducing inequalities both within and between countries, it is first necessary to overcome mindset barriers to this goal. This includes making the case that securing equality and non-discrimination between socio-economic groups (in a vertical sense) is as much a matter for the international human rights system as is reducing inequality and discrimination across horizontal groups (i.e., based on sex, race, etc.). This will not be easy. To this day, some Western States (especially those that have not yet ratified the ICESCR) hold that promoting socio-economic equality is matter of political choice (e.g., socialism versus liberalism) rather than of human rights, while most Western States hold that the international human rights system is only relevant to equality *within* countries (i.e., between individual rights-holders), not equality *between* countries (because States are not rights-holders). (This latter view ignores

the fact that international human rights law, especially article 2.1 of the ICESCR, makes clear that greater equality between States is an essential precursor to the enjoyment of economic and social rights, in a manner consistent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination, in all countries).<sup>21</sup>

Should such a shift in mind-sets prove possible, it will allow States, individually and collectively, to strengthen their engagement with the UN human rights system as a means of, and as a contribution to, overcoming structural barriers to equality, and thus of promoting the full enjoyment of human rights, mainly through more progressive taxation, redistribution, and social security policies, but also through policies aimed at strengthening governance and accountability systems to tackle tax evasion, corruption, etc.

## Human rights and inequality

Vertical inequalities slow the pace of poverty reduction and create ‘intergenerational poverty traps through uneven access to health and education.’ This is due to a ‘vicious circle’ that exists between horizontal and vertical inequalities: research shows that vertical inequalities drive disparities in social cohesion (e.g., economic inequalities cause under-investment in education and health), cripple faith in democratic government (e.g., economic inequalities foster political exclusion and social discontent), and undermine social progress and well-being (e.g., economic inequalities are correlated with higher rates of physical and mental health problems, shorter life expectancy, higher rates of use of illegal substances and crime, lower rates of educational achievement, and as a result of these asymmetries, lower social mobility).

Equality is therefore both a core value inherent to human rights and an essential means to their fulfilment. As noted above, to-date, the international human rights system has been mostly concerned with issues of non-discrimination and horizontal inequality, as illustrated by the mandates and work of certain human rights mechanisms (e.g., Special Procedures mandates focusing on peoples of African descent, persons with disabilities, and laws that discriminate against women and girls). However, the enjoyment of human rights cannot

be understood in a vacuum; their effective realisation is dependent on both income and wealth, but also on the political, social, and economic context, as well as the State’s available resources. This was recently illustrated by the worsening of inequalities, domestically and internationally, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also manifested in rising inequalities *vis-à-vis* emerging challenges, from unequal access to new technologies to the lack of access to essential services and rights in the context of climate change.

Among human rights scholars and practitioners, much of the debate surrounding the question of inequality has focused on whether the UN human rights frameworks can be leveraged to help address economic inequalities. While some have argued that human rights only provide a ‘floor of protection, not a ceiling for inequality,’ there is growing consensus that even if human rights do not explicitly address economic inequalities or prohibit them, those inequalities still hinder the realisation of all human rights – civil and political, as well as economic, social, and cultural. Inequality is therefore a human rights issue, and States have an obligation to enact policies and take action to reduce it. In this sense, vertical inequality is also a legitimate matter of concern and scrutiny for the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms (UPR and Special Procedures), as well as the human rights Treaty Bodies.

**10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES**



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## Inequalities and the human rights system

In a human rights context, including in the context of the work of the UN human rights system, inequality and its human rights implications can be broadly grouped into four interlinked clusters: the progressive realisation of and access to economic, social, and cultural rights; equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of human rights; redistribution and taxation; and corruption, transparency, and accountability.

States have a duty under international human rights law to provide an environment conducive to the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, including through the provision of international assistance, and through international cooperation. To this end, the international human rights system holds a unique position to provide assistance and guidance towards the fulfilment of those obligations. Yet, for the human rights mechanisms to better contribute to the reduction of inequality, it is important that they integrate, in a more comprehensive manner, policy guidance on addressing the root causes of inequality into their recommendations – to *all* States (developed and developing).

To-date, the Treaty Bodies have been the mechanism most engaged on the issue of vertical inequality, and how States should confront it. Unsurprisingly, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has been the most active of the committees. The Special Procedures as a whole have been far less focused on vertical inequality, its drivers, and consequences for human rights,<sup>22</sup> though one mandate in particular – the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty – has been particularly vocal, championing calls for a strengthened focus on economic and social justice, and on the human rights violations caused by inequality, and has regularly criticised States, especially rich States, for failing to adopt tax and social policies to address the matter.<sup>23</sup>

The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty have also offered some of the most progressive proposals for change, calling on States, *inter alia*, to analyse the distributional impact of tax policies on different population groups, to establish progressive tax systems, and to increase social security expenditure and investment. For example, in 2018, the then Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, issued a landmark report after a visit to the UK in which he underscored the high rates of poverty (one-fifth of the population) in the context of the world's fifth largest economy. That same year, after a visit to the US, he argued that 'the persistence of extreme poverty is a political choice made by those in power.' Similarly, in 2020, following a mission to Spain, he highlighted the 'shockingly high' inequality in the EU's fourth-largest economy. The current mandate-holder, Olivier de Schutter, has likewise been a staunch advocate of reforms to change the current economic paradigm, calling, for example, for an employment guarantee to ensure the realisation of the right to work, the creation of a global fund for social protection to support low-income countries, and the reinforcement of minimum living wages.<sup>24</sup> More recently, he has begun calling for 'abandoning growthism' and transitioning 'to a post-growth development trajectory,' focused on realising human rights in order to tackle poverty and inequality.



Campaigners advocating for debt cancellation and tax reform during the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) in Seville, Spain.

Credit: UN Photo/Marišcal

The Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2012, state that poverty is not ‘solely an economic issue, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses a lack of both income and the basic capabilities to live in dignity,’ and recognise that ‘social, political, economic and cultural’ systemic inequalities often remain unaddressed and further entrench poverty.<sup>25</sup> Though the Guiding Principles fall short of establishing any further links between poverty and inequality, they may nonetheless serve as a basis for greater engagement from the human rights system on the issue of inequality, as they recognise that poverty is at least partially created, enabled, and perpetuated by the acts and/or omissions of States. The Principles further recognise that poverty – like inequality – is not inevitable, and thus, tools exist and, moreover, remain within reach to tackle it.

While the Guiding Principles are useful, it is important that the human rights system move beyond viewing and understanding socio-economic inequality purely through the prism of poverty, to directly address both the structural drivers underlying inequality in the distribution of material wealth and access to resources, as well as its impact on the enjoyment of economic, social,

and cultural rights. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as an accelerator for this shift, bringing debates in the Human Rights Council more into line with political discussions held in other forums such as the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, as well as conversations on the reform of the international financial architecture, debt and development financing, and tax justice (including the ongoing negotiations for a UN Tax Convention).<sup>26</sup> Even though the UN has traditionally held only a limited role in such areas, particularly in terms of conversations on global tax governance, over recent years it has started to become more assertive, spearheaded by Secretary-General António Guterres’ efforts to tackle an issue (inequality within and between countries) that in June 2025 he called ‘the defining challenge of our time.’ As part of those efforts, in mid 2023, Guterres published a report advocating for an enhanced role for the UN in international taxation ‘norm-shaping and rule setting.’ These moves towards greater multilateral engagement on issues that have traditionally been seen as the prerogative of individual States (or, at best, small groups of States such as the G7), are driven by interlinked concerns over the achievement of the SDGs’ ultimate objective of leaving no one behind, and the realisation of human rights for all, without discrimination.

As noted above, the creation of SDG10 as a standalone goal to reduce inequality was a landmark development within the post-MDG framework. Its indicators include both vertical (income growth, household expenditure) and horizontal inequalities (social, economic, and political inclusion, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status). According to data collected by the Danish Institute for Human Rights<sup>27</sup> and the Universal Human Rights Index, around 10 per cent of recommendations issued by the UN human rights mechanisms can be directly linked to SDG10, making it one of the most linked SDGs, behind only SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), SDG5 (gender equality), and SDG8 (decent work and economic growth). Yet, as of mid-2024, SDG10 is among the goals least on track to meet their respective targets, and the majority of progress, even where it exists, has been only marginal, (in other cases progress has stagnated or even gone into reverse). While there has been some progress in reducing the share of persons living with less than half the median income,

inequalities among countries continue to rise, as the income gap widens between the world’s 75 most vulnerable countries (those that qualify for concessional lending from the World Bank, and within which almost 2 billion people live), and the world’s wealthiest States. In light of these trends, in 2023, a group of leading economists and development experts sent an open letter to the UN Secretary-General calling for a re-evaluation of how SDG10 is conceived and measured, for the strengthening of its targets, and for a shift to indicators that measure both wealth and income inequality, both between countries and within them.<sup>28</sup>

With the increasing realisation of the terrible human rights impacts of inequality, and the ‘flip side’ that human rights (especially economic and social rights) cannot be realised without adequately resourced public health systems, housing policies, social security policies, etc., there is a growing imperative for the Human Rights Council, and the wider human rights system, to engage in more depth with the issue.

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**The Guiding Principles fall short of establishing any further links between poverty and inequality, they may nonetheless serve as a basis for greater engagement from the human rights system on the issue of inequality, as they recognise that poverty is at least partially created, enabled, and perpetuated by the acts and/or omissions of States.”**

**A view of the SDG Moment 2022.**

Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten



The Surge Initiative, established in 2019 by then-High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, is one of the key efforts in this regard.<sup>29</sup> It links human rights and macro-economics at the country and regional levels, in an effort to place human rights at the centre of policymaking, including by providing financial and technical support to in-country and regional OHCHR presences for ‘seeding-change’ country projects. Through the Surge Initiative, engagement between OHCHR’s field presences, UN Country Teams, States, NGOs, and international financial institutions have allowed countries like Kenya, Jordan, Lao PDR, Argentina, and Eswatini to strengthen participatory decision-making processes (for national budgets), align State revenue with development priorities, increase the centrality of economic, social, and cultural rights in the design and monitoring of economic policies and budgetary allocations, and build the capacities of civil society and other national and local stakeholders to make informed decisions with regard to international development projects. The current High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has made the scaling up of the Surge Initiative, which is currently funded from OHCHR’s core bu-

dget as well as by donors including Bahrain, China, Ireland, and Switzerland, one of his main priorities. In 2023, he announced that the mainstreaming of Surge within the work of OHCHR would be a key element in the expansion of the Office’s work on economic, social, and cultural rights, by moving from a pilot of 10-12 States to a wider range of country contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Since taking office in 2022, Türk has dedicated considerable effort to mobilising the UN’s human rights system to address inequality more effectively. In particular, he has pushed the concept of the ‘human rights economy,’ which tries to measure and highlight the human rights impacts of economic policies, and position human rights as being central to policy design and decision-making processes. According to Türk, this includes developing ‘budgets, taxation, trade policies, consumption and production patterns, investment decisions and business models that fully comply with every country’s human rights obligations, including the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.’<sup>31</sup> By placing inclusive participation and social dialogue over profit in deci-

sion-making, ‘human rights economies’ intend to go beyond gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of success and well-being. Instead, they aim to ‘deliver better results for people and planet’ by advancing economic, social, and cultural rights, and contributing to a fair distribution of resources.

To institutionalise human rights economies, a change is needed in the public financing paradigm. Redistributive policies, progressive taxation, inheritance and wealth taxes, must be accompanied by international cooperation that makes global taxation fair, fights tax evasion and corruption, and enables lower-income countries to collect revenue. In late 2023, Global South countries, led by the African Group, secured a major victory when they secured the adoption of General Assembly (GA) resolution 78/230, which set up intergovernmental negotiations for a binding tax convention.<sup>32</sup> In order to effectively counter inequalities between countries, this, and other initiatives like the proposal by the Brazilian G20 presidency for a global billionaire tax, should be further advanced and agreed upon multilaterally. Moreover, the international

financial system must also be reformed to make it truly democratic and representative, for instance by revamping the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s quotas and voting rights, which disproportionately favour rich countries of the Global North, and/or by doing away with the practice of the institutions always being led by an American and a European, respectively. In an important step towards the integration of human rights into efforts to ensuring more equitable global fiscal frameworks, in July 2024, in the context of the negotiations of the UN Tax Convention, the revised terms of reference for the Convention incorporated human rights into its key principles, noting that the Convention should be ‘fully aligned with international human rights law and States’ existing commitments under human rights conventions to respect, protect and fulfil all human rights for all people in all countries.’



Credit: Pexels

In line with the High Commissioner's efforts, and with the rising calls for increased multilateral cooperation to address inequality, the Human Rights Council is also ramping up its engagement with both vertical and horizontal inequalities. Council resolution 52/14 on the 'Promotion and protection of human rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,' recognised the key role of the Surge Initiative and called on OHCHR to elevate its support for the integration of human rights in the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>33</sup> Later, resolution 59/19, on the 'Contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights,' took note of the concept of human rights economies as a tool that 'seeks to redress root causes and the structural barriers to equality, justice and sustainability, placing emphasis on inclusive participation and social dialogue, including the delivery of better results for people and the planet, grounded in economic, civil, political, social and cultural rights,' and called on OHCHR to reinforce its work and initiatives on fighting poverty and addressing inequality.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Council resolution 60/14 on 'Promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities,' presented by China, Bolivia, Egypt, Pakistan, and South Africa, and adopted by consensus, stressed the need to prioritise social spending and enhancing States' fiscal space with a view to promoting the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights.<sup>35</sup> The resolution further highlighted the need to reform the international financial architecture, and enhance the representation of developing countries in the decision-making of global economic and financial institutions.

As the 2030 Agenda deadline draws closer, the entire human rights machinery has a major role to play in helping put progress towards SDG10 back on track, and in addressing growing inequalities. The Council and its mechanisms, the Treaty Bodies, and OHCHR can and must work to understand the normative relationship between human rights and inequality, can and must extend more and better recommendations to States to address the key drivers of inequality, and can and must share information on the relationship between human rights and inequality with other relevant parts of the international system, including international financial institutions, development institutions, and the international debt and global tax architectures.

The following chapter of this report assesses the UN human rights machinery's current level of engagement on the issue of inequality, with a particular emphasis on vertical or socio-economic inequality. It does so by analysing relevant recommendations extended by the three main UN human rights mechanisms. Chapter 3 then takes some of the key clusters of recommendations identified in Chapter 2, and follows them down to national level (in five cross-regional UN member States) to track implementation and measure impact.

## CHAPTER 2.

# INEQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS RECOMMENDATIONS - NUMBERS AND PATTERNS

UN Member States are engaged in a continuous and interlinked process of review by the three main human rights mechanisms. Each of the three mechanisms uses a different methodology and plays a distinct but complementary role in the UN human rights system, but their ultimate purpose is the same: to review State progress with the implementation of their human rights obligations and commitments, and provide recommendations to the State concerned as an outcome of the review. Implementation of those recommendations should lead to improved compliance in the future. This chapter provides a brief analysis of the recommendations produced by the three main UN human rights mechanisms relating to socio-economic (or vertical) inequalities and human rights.

## Characteristics of recommendations

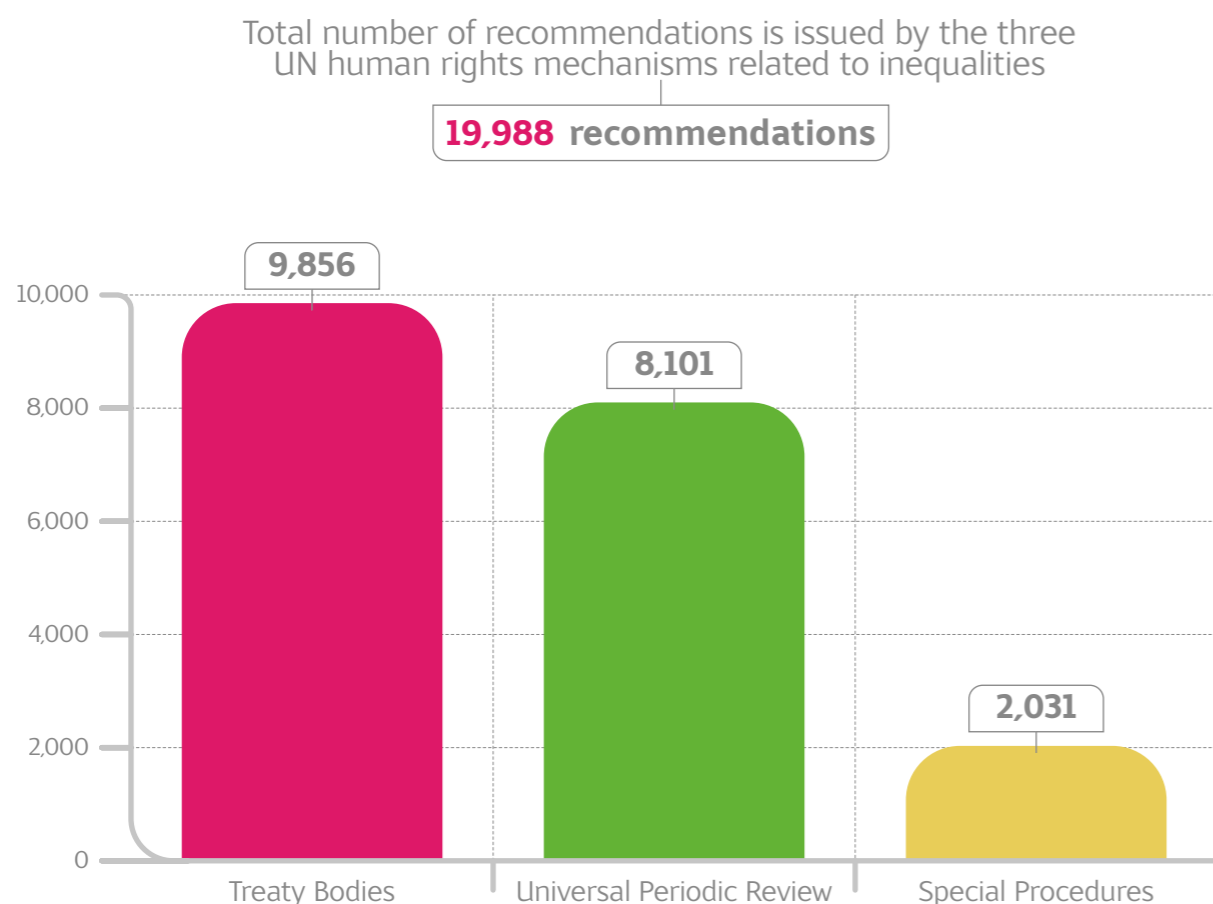
The engagement of States with human rights mechanisms provides an important ‘window of opportunity’ for UN entities and other development partners to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with the State-under-review on human rights challenges identified by the mechanisms. Because of their direct engagement, States feel a sense of ownership of the process and the resulting recommendations. As a result, recommendations carry significant political as well as technical weight. What is more, the recommendations extended by the UN human rights mechanisms, when clustered by theme or objective, are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

For the purposes of this report, URG focused on the three main human rights mechanisms: the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Treaty Bodies, and the Special Procedures. All socio-economic/vertical inequality-related recommendations issued by these three mechanisms were included in the analysis. In total, URG identified 19,988 relevant recommendations, representing approximately 8 per cent of all recommendations issued by the mechanisms during the sample period (2007-2023).<sup>36</sup>

Of these 19,988 recommendations, 8,101 (41 per cent) were issued by the UPR mechanism; 9,856 (49 per cent) by the Treaty Bodies; and 2,031 (10 per cent) by the Special Procedures. See Figure 1.

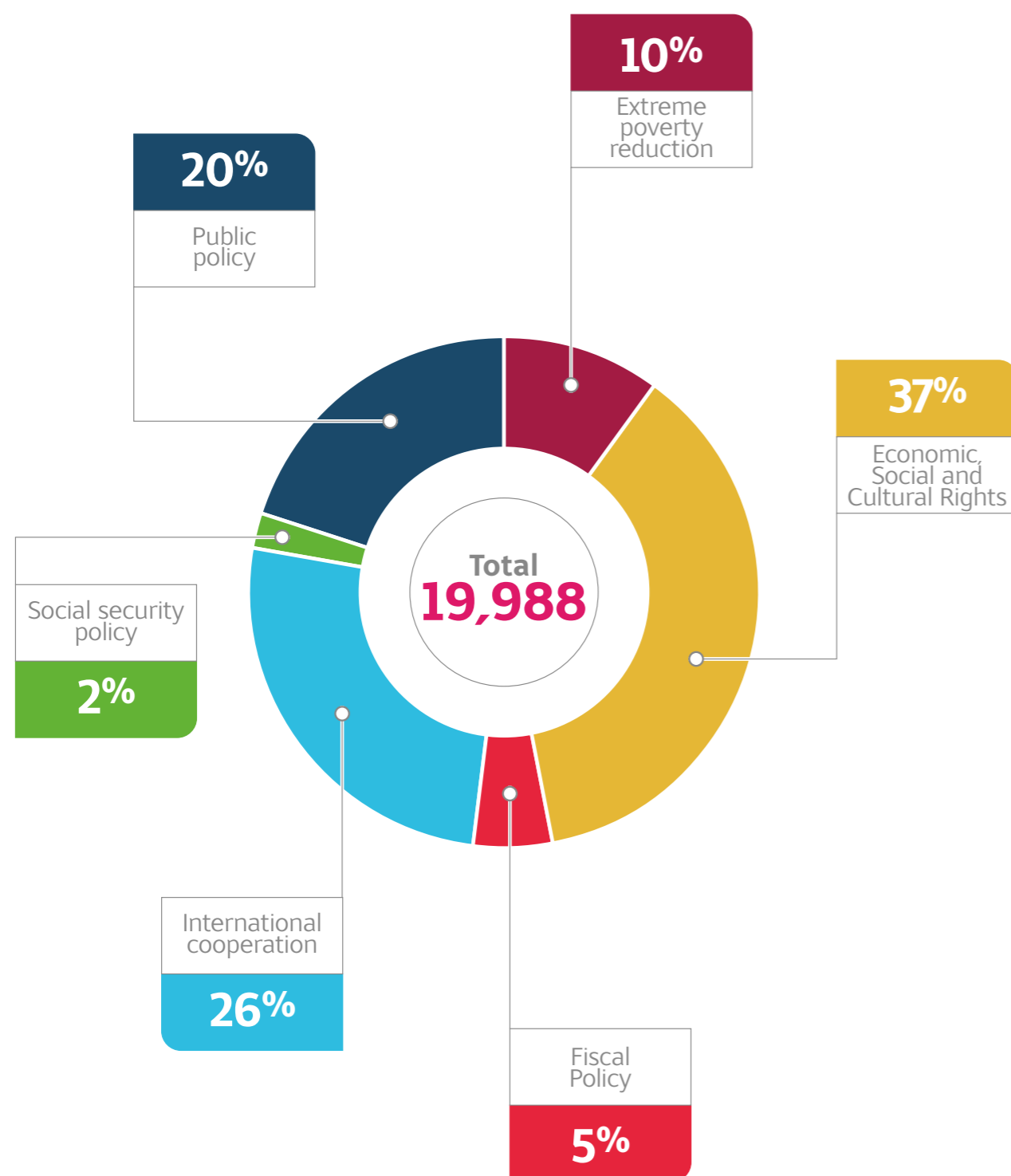
From this initial filtering, URG then identified major clusters of recommendations in terms of the means they recommend in order to reduce inequality. Recommendations were tagged according to six main thematic clusters and multiple sub-thematic clusters:

**Figure 1:**  
**Inequality-focused recommendations by mechanism**



1. **Reducing extreme poverty/ensuring safety nets:**
  - a. Poverty reduction/alleviation programmes and plans;
  - b. Social assistance programmes.
2. **Realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights:**
  - a. Education spending;
  - b. Health spending;
  - c. Access to employment (job programmes, vocational training);
  - d. Labour rights;
  - e. Housing policy;
  - f. Improved living standards;
  - g. Tackling the rural/urban divide;
  - h. Improving gender equality.
3. **Fiscal policy:**
  - a. Taxation, including progressive taxation;
  - b. Redistribution of wealth;
  - c. Resource mobilisation and allocation;
  - d. Transparency.
4. **Social security policy:**
  - a. Income and employment support: unemployment benefits, pensions, maternity leave;
  - b. Health and basic needs support: insurance, disability benefits, housing aid;
  - c. Social protection schemes and policies.
5. **International cooperation:**
  - a. Aid and finance mechanisms - overseas development assistance, loans, debt relief, fair trade, development finance institutions;
  - b. Multilateral/bilateral cooperation and support;
  - c. Ratifying or signing international agreements and treaties.
6. **Public policy:**
  - a. Policy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation;
  - b. Legal and institutional frameworks;
  - c. Other recommendations that are not applicable to the above sub-themes and clusters.

**Figure 2:**  
**Main themes addressed by inequality-focused recommendations**



URG’s overall analysis (see Figure 2) found that the largest cluster of equality-related recommendations (37 per cent) were those focused on encouraging the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights at national level (e.g., equality in education, in healthcare, in housing, and in living standards). This was followed by recommendations calling for greater international cooperation to address inequality between and within States (26 per cent), those calling for legal and policy interventions by governments (20 per cent), and those recommending poverty alleviation and reduction programmes (10 per cent). Disappointingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, very few UN human rights recommendations since 2007 have focused two of the key levers at the disposal of governments to reduce socio-economic inequalities, namely national fiscal policy (taxation and redistribution) (only 5 per cent of relevant recommendations, and a tiny proportion of all UN human rights recommendations analysed), and social security policy (2 per cent of inequality-related recommendations).

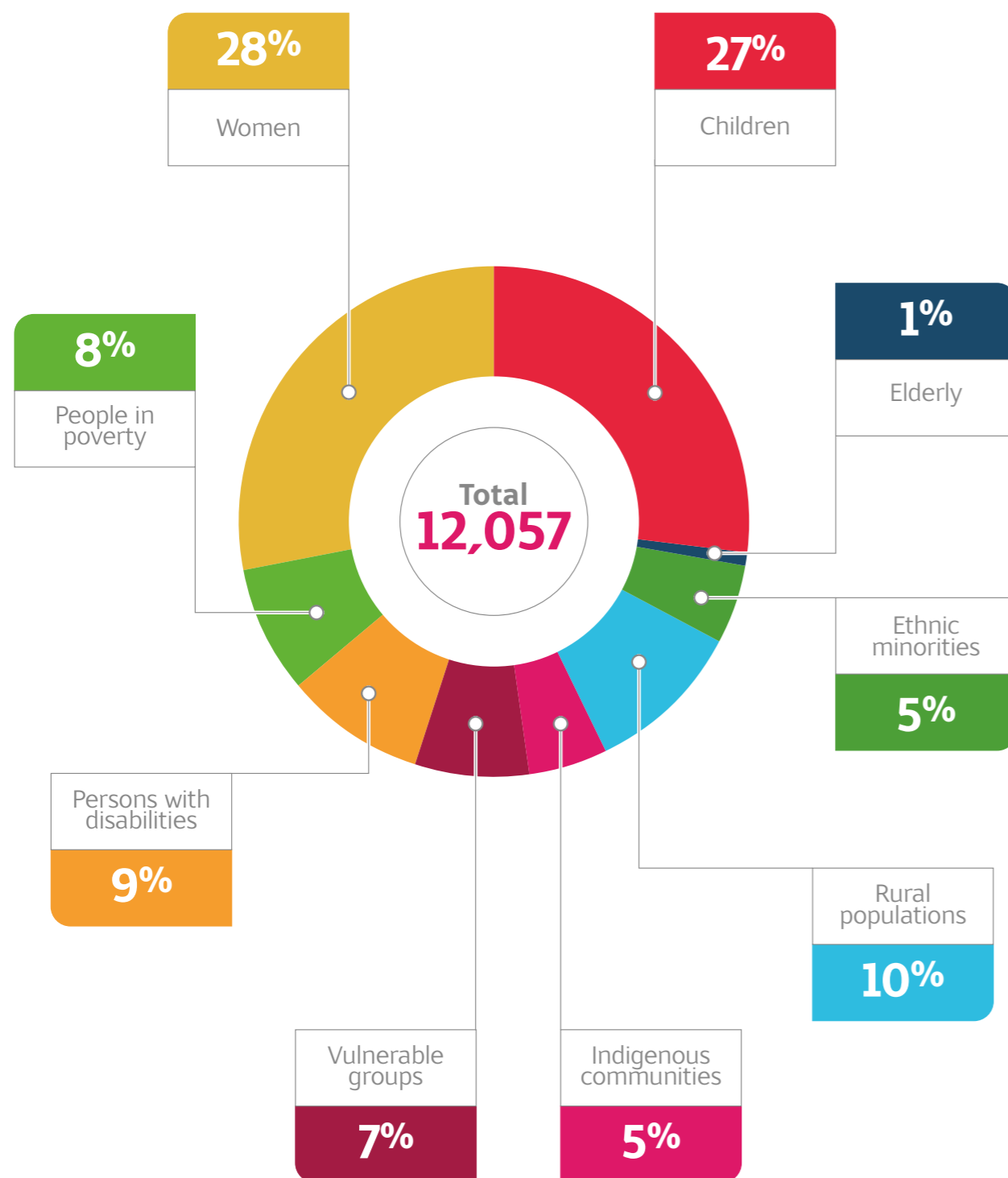
Of the 7,458 recommendations addressing the equitable realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, a large number were relatively vague and did not address any particular right or aspect of economic, social, and cultural rights. One example is a 2008 UPR recommendation extended by Cuba to Zambia, which urged the State to ‘continue its efforts in economic, social and cultural rights to further build upon the progress it has already made.’<sup>37</sup>

Of the recommendations that did address a particular economic, social, or cultural right, a significant proportion (2,265, or 30 per cent of all recommendations tagged under the economic, social, and cultural rights theme) focused on the right to education, while 1,743 (23 per cent) touched on the right to health, and 1,002 were related to labour rights (13 per cent). Other economic, social and cultural rights received less attention: the right to housing was raised in only 365 recommendations, the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in only 284 recommendations, and the right to an adequate standard of living in only 201 recommendations. The right to social security has received very little attention.

Turning to the 5,128 recommendations pushing for greater international cooperation to address inequality, nearly half (2,511) focused on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and support. A high number (1,864, or 36 per cent of these recommendations) encouraged States to accede to or ratify international treaties, while a relatively small number touched on development aid and finance.

Each recommendation was also tagged according to the main ‘target’ population group. URG identified recommendations focused on strengthening socio-economic or vertical equality for the following groups: children, the elderly, ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, rural populations, vulnerable groups, and women. If a recommendation did not mention any specific group, it received the tag ‘none.’

**Figure 3:**  
Focus population groups (all mechanisms)



## UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Of the 19,988 inequality-focused recommendations issued by the three main human rights mechanisms, 12,057 mentioned a specific population group (i.e., referenced both vertical and horizontal inequality). Advancing equality for women and for children were a major focus, together accounting for over half of all population group-focused recommendations (28 per cent and 27 per cent of equality-focused recommendations respectively). 10 per cent of recommendations aimed to improve socio-economic conditions and opportunities for rural populations, while a similar proportion (9 per cent) addressed the rights of persons with disabilities. People living in poverty received slightly less attention, accounting for 8 per cent of recommendations. Ethnic minorities and indigenous communities were each the subject of 5 per cent of recommendations, while older persons were the subject of only 1 per cent of relevant recommendations.

For the purposes of this report, URG analysed the outcomes of the UPR reviews of all 193 UN member States for the first cycle (2008-2011), second cycle (2012-2016), and third cycle (2017-2022). The outcome reports of the 41 States that had completed their fourth cycle review (2022-2027) before the cut-off date (the 43rd session of the UPR working group in May 2023) were also included in this analysis.

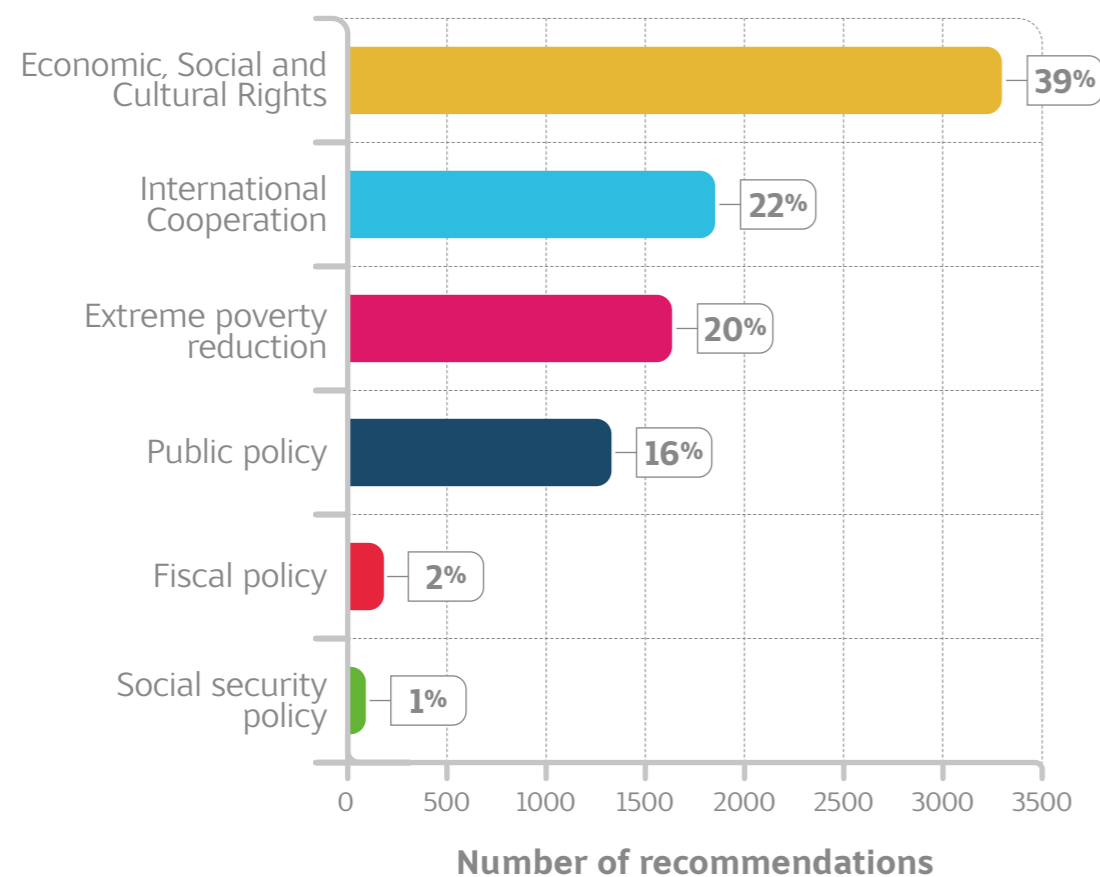
### Findings

Over the course of the 43 reviewed sessions of the UPR, reviewing States extended 8,101 recommendations regarding socio-economic or horizontal inequality and human rights, accounting for approximately 7 per cent of all UPR recommendations extended during this period.

“**Advancing equality for women and for children were a major focus, together accounting for over half of all population group-focused recommendations (28 per cent and 27 per cent of equality-focused recommendations respectively).**”

Of the six key themes identified (see Figure 4), the largest cluster of equality related UPR recommendations were those urging governments to promote the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights (3,188 recommendations, 39 per cent of all relevant UPR recommendations). International cooperation was the second most prevalent theme, with 1,788 recommendations (22 per cent), followed by the eradication of extreme poverty, with 1,586 recommendations (20 per cent). As with the overall analysis (see above), very few recommendations focused on either fiscal policy (181) or social security policy (77).

**Figure 4:**  
**Main themes addressed by inequality focused UPR recommendations**



Of the 3,188 UPR recommendations focused on the equal enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights, equality in the context of the right to education was the most frequently cited, appearing in 611 recommendations (19 per cent). For instance, during the UPR Working Group’s 2015 review of Guyana, the Philippines extended a recommendation calling on the State-under-review to strengthen equal access to quality education by ‘increasing resources for educational infrastructure,’ with a particular focus on dealing ‘with the issue of high dropout rates.’<sup>38</sup> The right to health was the second most prevalent subtheme, addressed in 457 equality-related UPR recommendations (14 per cent). Most such recommendations were focused on ensuring equal access to healthcare. For example, in 2019 Montenegro extended a UPR recommendation to

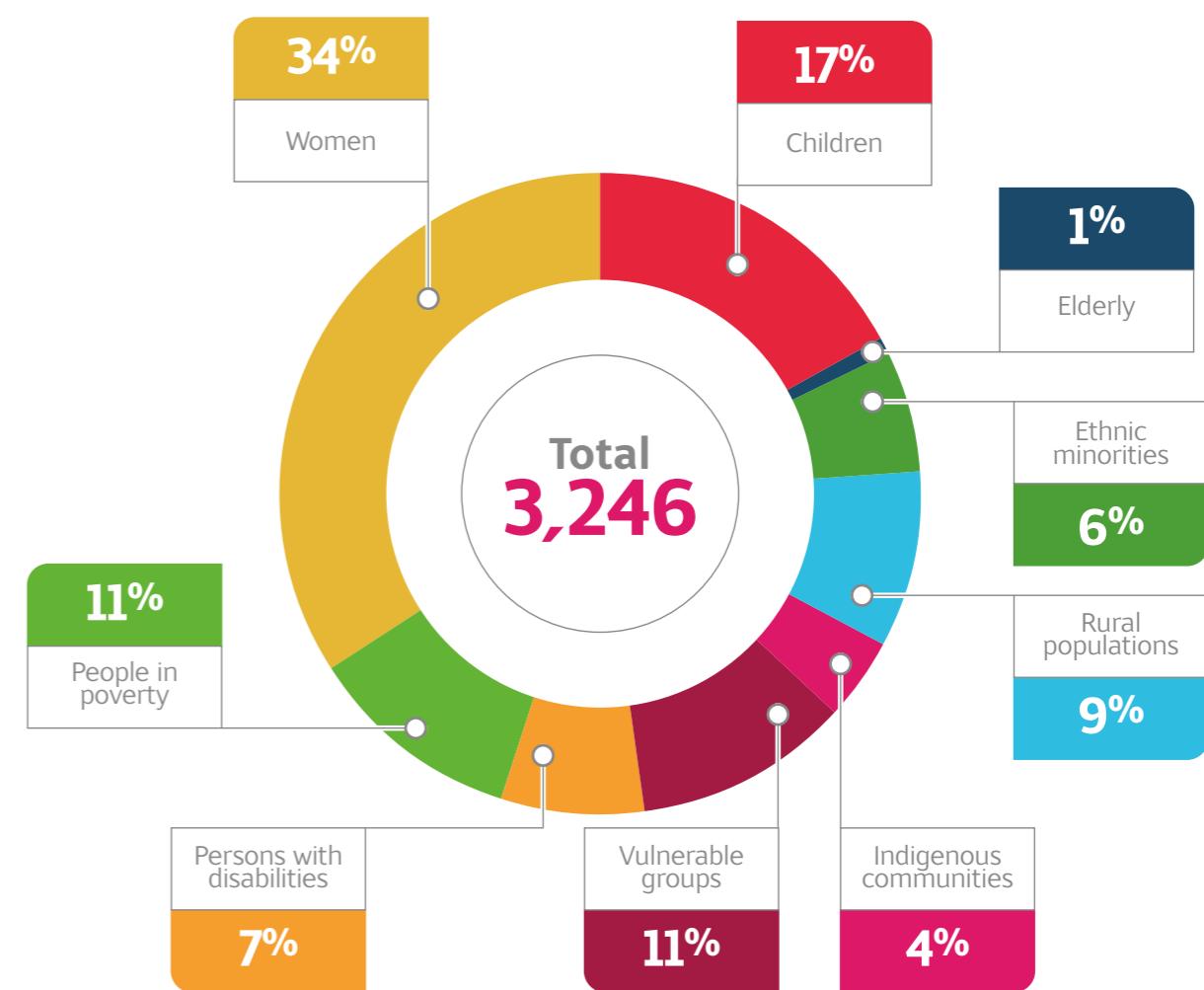
Madagascar urging the State to ensure the equal enjoyment of the right to health for women and girls, including by increasing their access to ‘basic healthcare services,’ and by ‘ensur[ing] sufficient resources are deployed.’<sup>39</sup>

Of the 22 per cent of inequality-focused UPR recommendations that addressed the issue of international cooperation, most (1,123) simply urged States to accede to or ratify international human rights treaties (especially the ICESCR), or other relevant instruments. For example, in 2019, Nepal extended a recommendation to Malaysia urging it to ‘consider early ratification of core international human rights instruments, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.’<sup>40</sup>

A very small number of inequality-focused UPR recommendations addressed key drivers of equality / root causes of inequality such as national fiscal policy (2 per cent) and social security systems (1 per cent). For example, in 2010 Canada recommended that Equatorial Guinea ‘set up, in consultation with civil society, a clear and transparent fiscal policy for managing oil revenues,’ in 2016, Cuba recommended that Tanzania ‘combat tax evasion and strengthen the

tax collection system in order to fund development projects and improve the delivery of services,’ and in 2021, Maldives recommended that Sierra Leone ‘allocate more funds towards establishing a comprehensive social protection system.’ If the Human Rights Council and its UPR mechanism is to become a key UN engine for combatting inequality, and ensuring no one is left behind, far more reviewing States will need to take up these themes in the future.

**Figure 5:**  
**Focus population groups (UPR recommendations)**



Of the 8,101 inequality-related UPR recommendations identified, 3,246 (40 per cent) referred to specific population group. The most frequently mentioned groups in this regard were women and

girls (34 per cent), children (17 per cent), people living in poverty (11 per cent), rural populations (9 per cent), persons with disabilities (7 per cent), and ethnic minorities (6 per cent). See Figure 5.

## SPECIAL PROCEDURES RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purposes of this analysis, URG examined over 847 reports by 57 Special Procedures mandate-holders, covering the period 2007 to 2023.

### Findings

Between 2007 and 2023, the 57 Special Procedures mandate-holders extended approximately 19,313 recommendations to States; of these, 2,031 (10.5 per cent) addressed socio-economic or vertical inequality.

The Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples issued the highest number of recommendations touching on inequality reduction, with 148 recommendations (7.3 per cent of relevant Special Procedures recommendations). This was followed by the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, which extended 119 recommendations (5.9 per cent), and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to food (118 recommendations, 5.8 per cent).

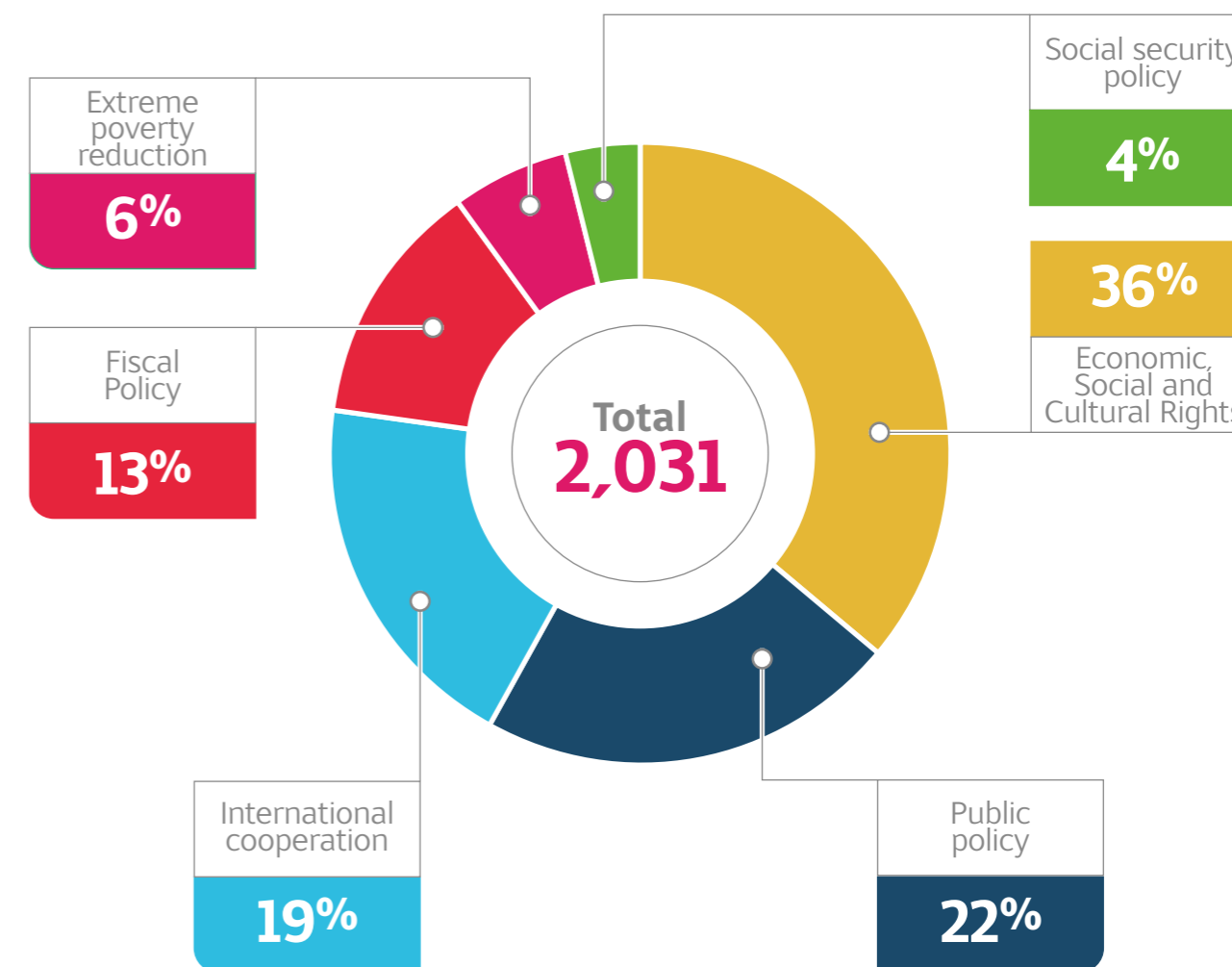
Regarding the main themes covered by those recommendations (see Figure 6), the largest cluster again focused on inequality in the context of the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights (737 recommendations, 36 per cent of inequality-focused recommendations). The second largest cluster were recommendations calling on States to introduce legislative and/or policy measures to address inequality (435 recommendations, 22 per cent). This was followed by recommendations focused on international cooperation (385 recommendations, 19 per cent).

Unlike the other two main UN human rights mechanisms, Special Procedures were found to have extended a relatively large proportion of recommendations calling on States to introduce new or amended fiscal strategies to reduce socio-economic inequalities (255 recommendations, 13 per cent) – especially compared to the UPR mechanism. For example, following his visit to Spain in 2020, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights recommended that the State ‘make the tax system more progressive and raise total fiscal revenues so that they more closely align with the European Union norm, thus providing the resources needed to adequately fund social protection,’ and ‘stop hiding the effective corporate tax rate and invest in more effective programmes to combat tax evasion and fraud.’ Other mandate-holders have called on States to ensure that budgetary spending is consistent with their human rights obligations, and the needs of vulnerable groups. For example, in 2016, following a visit to Moldova, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities recommended that the State ‘develop a mechanism to redistribute public funds from institutions to community services, and allocate sufficient resources from the central budget for the development of support services in local communities.’

Conversely, only 4 per cent of inequality-focused Special Procedures recommendations addressed social protection gaps. Notable examples include two recommendations extended by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty following his visit to Spain in 2020, in which he called on the State to ‘adopt a national minimum income scheme,’ and to introduce ‘a means-tested national child benefit and a universal, non-contributory child and family benefit scheme.’

Figure 6:

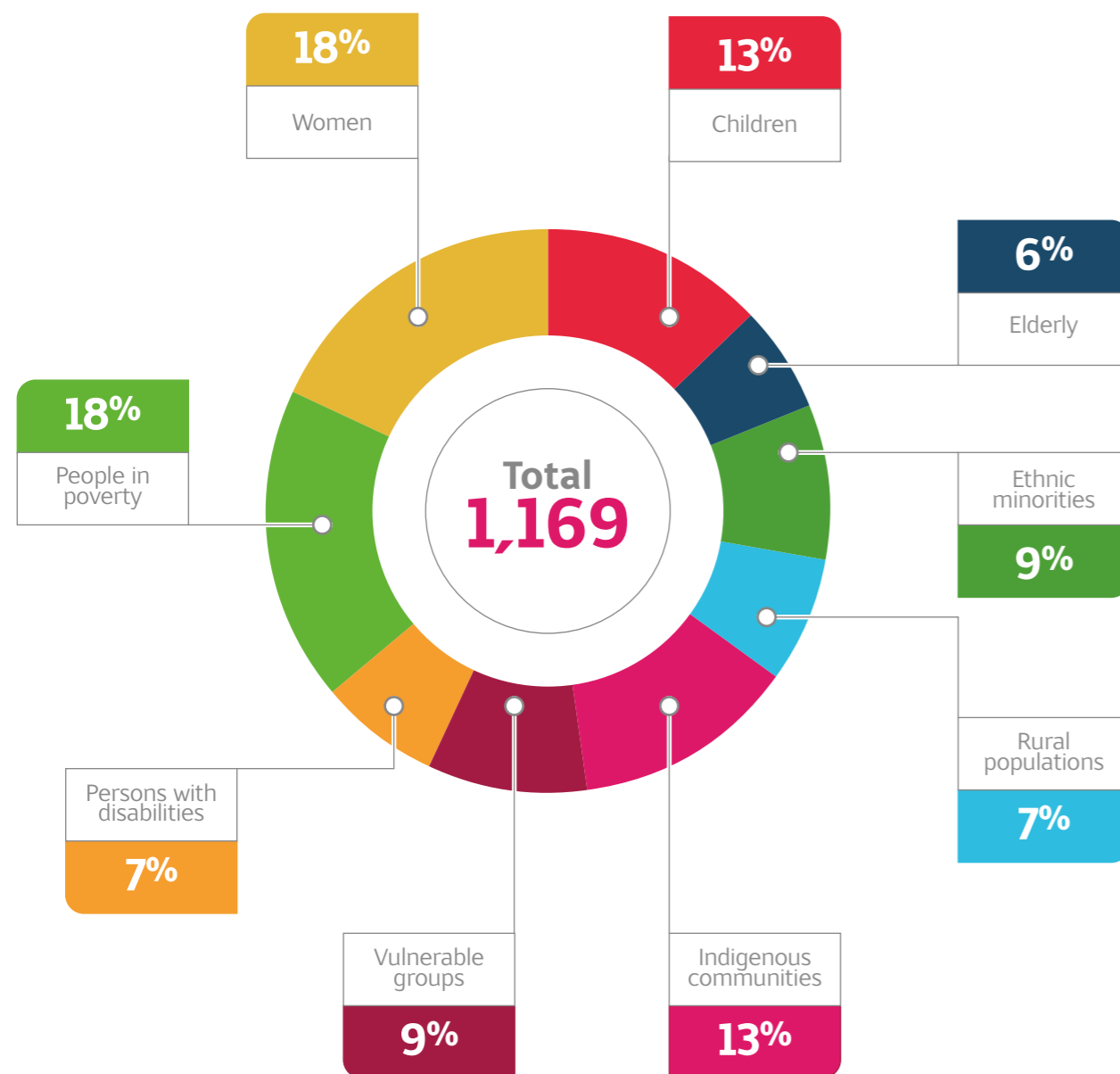
### Main themes addressed by inequality-focused Special Procedures recommendations



Of those recommendations addressing inequality in the context of the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights, those focused on unequal access to healthcare were the most numerous (200 recommendations, 27 per cent), followed closely by those focused on inequality in education (199 recommendations). For example, in her 2015 country report following a mission to Guinea-Bissau, the then Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights recommended that the State ‘strengthen programmes to ensure healthcare provision in remote areas, [and]

ensure that healthcare centres in rural areas are well resourced, including by establishing a mechanism of incentives to ensure the provision of good quality medical staff in rural areas.’<sup>41</sup> Similarly, following a visit to Kazakhstan in 2012, the Special Rapporteur on the right to education urged the State to ensure quality education ‘in minority-language schools, guarantee adequate funding and resources, and ensure equality of access to university education for students from all groups.’<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 7:**  
Focus population groups (Special Procedure recommendations)



Of the 2,031 Special Procedures recommendations focused on vertical or socio-economic inequality, 1,169 (57 per cent) referenced a specific population group. URG’s analysis found that, unlike the other two mechanisms, Special Procedures recommendations did not focus heavily on any

particular group, but were rather fairly evenly balanced (between women and girls, people living in poverty, children, and indigenous persons). Persons with disabilities, rural populations, and older persons received less attention. See Figure 7.

## TREATY BODIES RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purposes of this report, URG analysed the recommendations included in the concluding observations of all (ten) UN human rights Treaty Bodies to all States Parties between 2007 and 2023.

### Findings

States Parties to the UN human rights treaties received a total of 9,856 recommendations related to socio-economic or vertical inequality during the period of analysis. This represents approximately 9 per cent of all recommendations extended by the ten Treaty Bodies between 2007 to 2023.

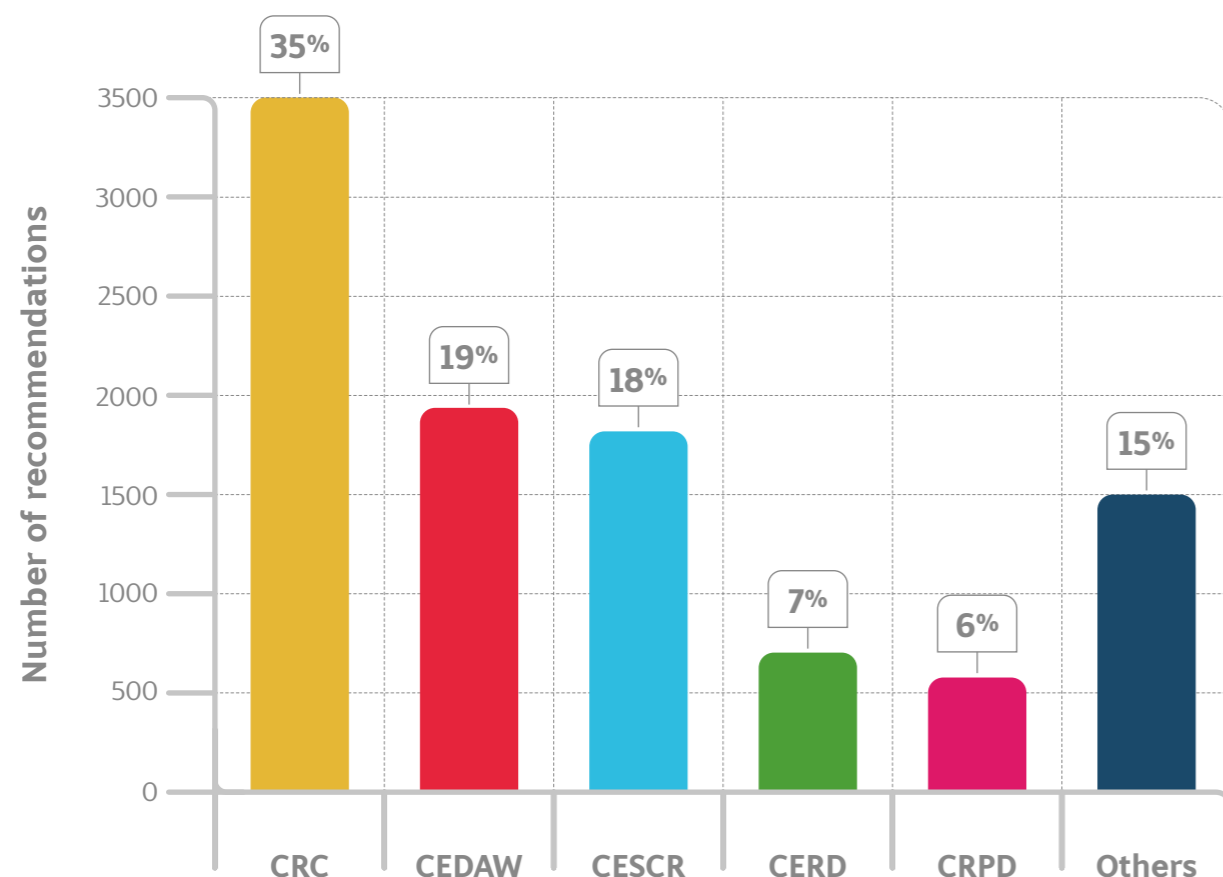
Of these 9,856 recommendations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child extended the most - 3,425 recommendations (35 per cent or all relevant Treaty Body recommendations). This was followed (see Figure 8) by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1,850 relevant recommendations, 19 per cent), the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1,819 recommendations, 18.5 per cent), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (713 recommendations, 7.2 per cent), and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (577 recommendations, 5.9 per cent). It is perhaps surprising that the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has extended relatively few recommendations on socio-economic inequality, and ways to combat it, as the issue is so central to the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights.

Notwithstanding, while more might have been expected of the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in a quantitative sense, as noted in the introduction of this report, in a qualitative sense it remains, alongside the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, one of the mechanisms that extends the most precise and ambitious recommendations related to inequality and its root causes. For example, in 2018, the Committee urged Argentina to ‘take the necessary measures not only to preserve the redistributive capacity of the tax system but also to strengthen it, including the possibility of reviewing the reduction of the tax burden on high-income sectors, [and] carry out a transparent assessment of the various tax exemptions in order to identify their benefits and impacts and allow for public scrutiny to determine which ones are not justified and should be eliminated.’<sup>43</sup>



**In 2018, the Committee urged Argentina to ‘take the necessary measures not only to preserve the redistributive capacity of the tax system but also to strengthen it, including the possibility of reviewing the reduction of the tax burden on high-income sectors.’**

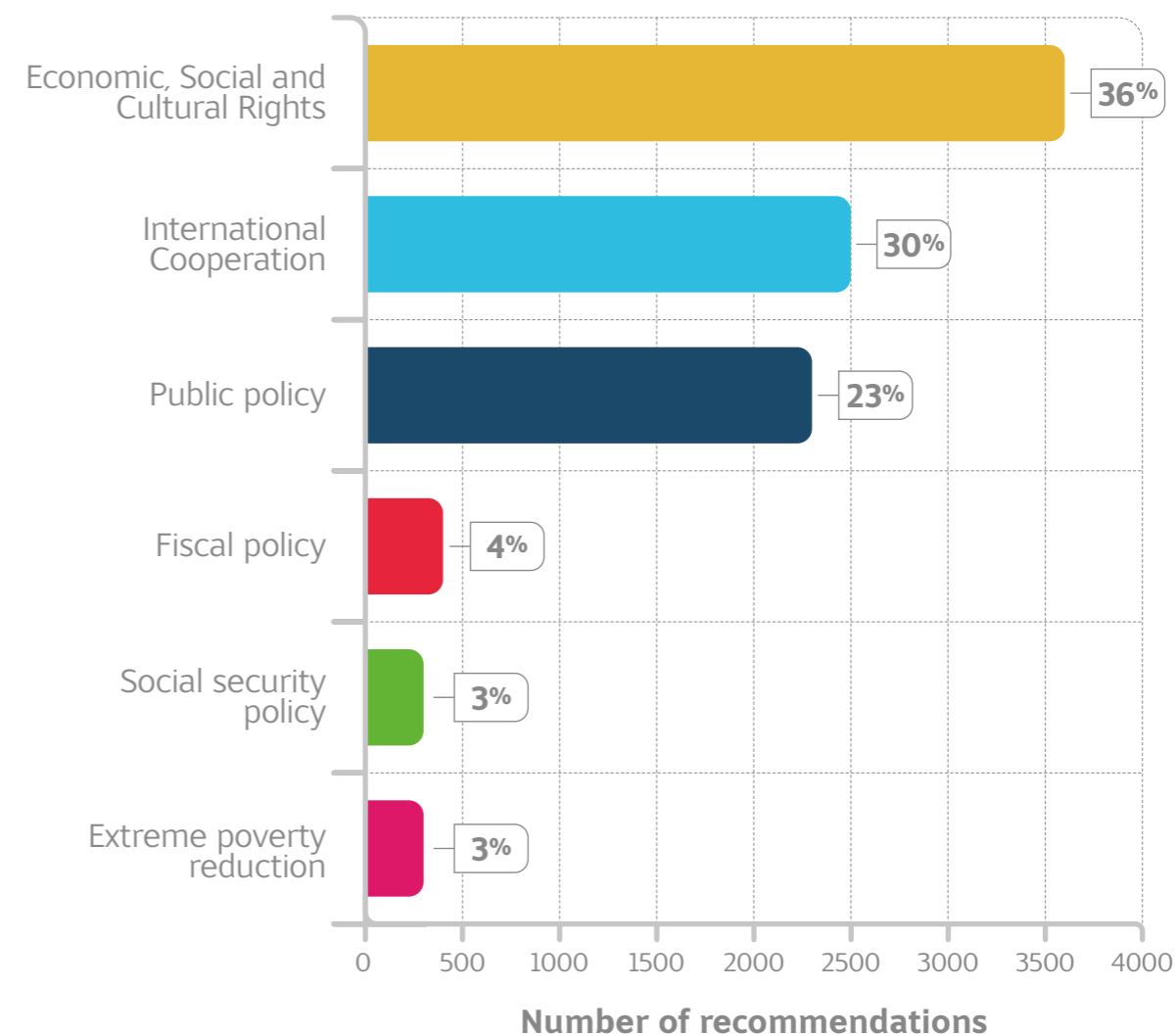
**Figure 8:**  
Main Treaty Bodies extending inequality-focused Treaty Body recommendations



Turning to the main themes covered by those recommendations (see Figure 9), as with the UPR and Special Procedures, the largest cluster of recommendations have been those urging States to address inequality through better laws, policies, and practices to secure the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights (3,533, 36 per cent of inequality-focused recommendations). The second most addressed

theme was international cooperation, with 2,955 recommendations (30 per cent), followed by general recommendations on public policy (2,244 recommendations, 23 per cent). Again, there were relatively few recommendations calling on States to reform fiscal (415 recommendations, 4 per cent) or social security (327 recommendations, 3 per cent) policies, as a means of reducing inequality.

**Figure 9:**  
Main themes addressed by inequality-focused recommendations



Looking in more detail at the recommendations on equality in the context of the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, the right to education subtheme again (as with the other mechanisms) accounted for the highest number of recommendations (1,495, 42 per cent). This is due to the Committee on the Rights of the Child's relative activism on questions of inequality. For example, in 2016, the Committee urged the Philippines to 'strengthen its public education

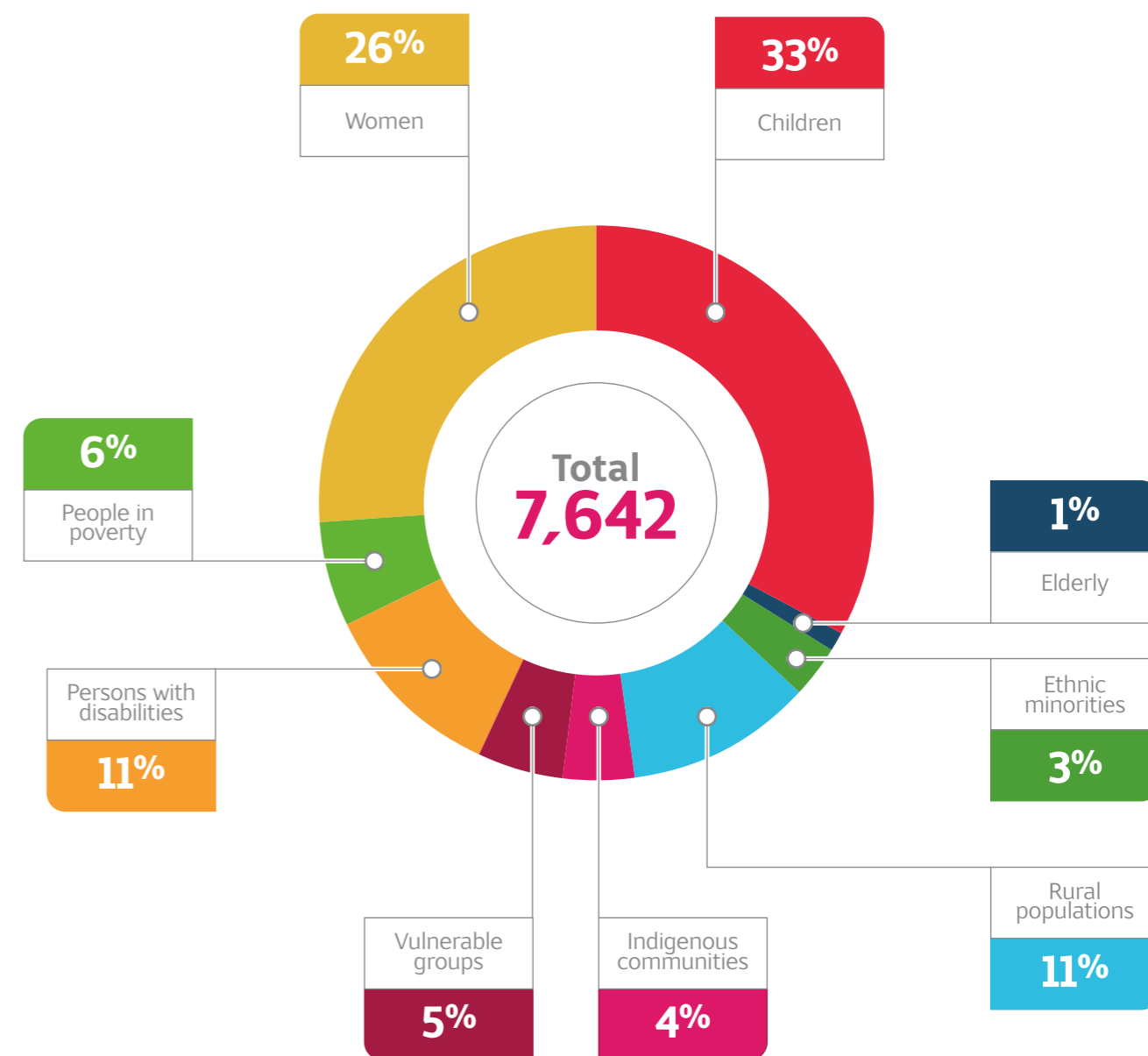
sector, including by increasing the budget allocated to primary and secondary education with a view to improving access to, and the quality of, primary and secondary education for all, without hidden costs, particularly for children of low-income families, and children living in rural areas.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding, relatively few recommendations on inequality in education have addressed the critical matter of private versus public schooling.

As was the case with UPR recommendations, Treaty Body recommendations covered under the international cooperation theme, for the most part, touched on States' engagement with international treaties and legally binding instruments. Although many recommendations called on States to sign or ratify relevant conventions, others provided guidance on strengthening their compliance with those treaties, and included specific directions on periodic reporting to Treaty Bodies. For instance, in its 2016 concluding observations, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities extended a recommendation to Lithuania calling on the State party to 'provide, in its next periodic report, updated information on public spending demonstrating how social protection for persons with disabilities has been increasingly prioritised.'<sup>45</sup>

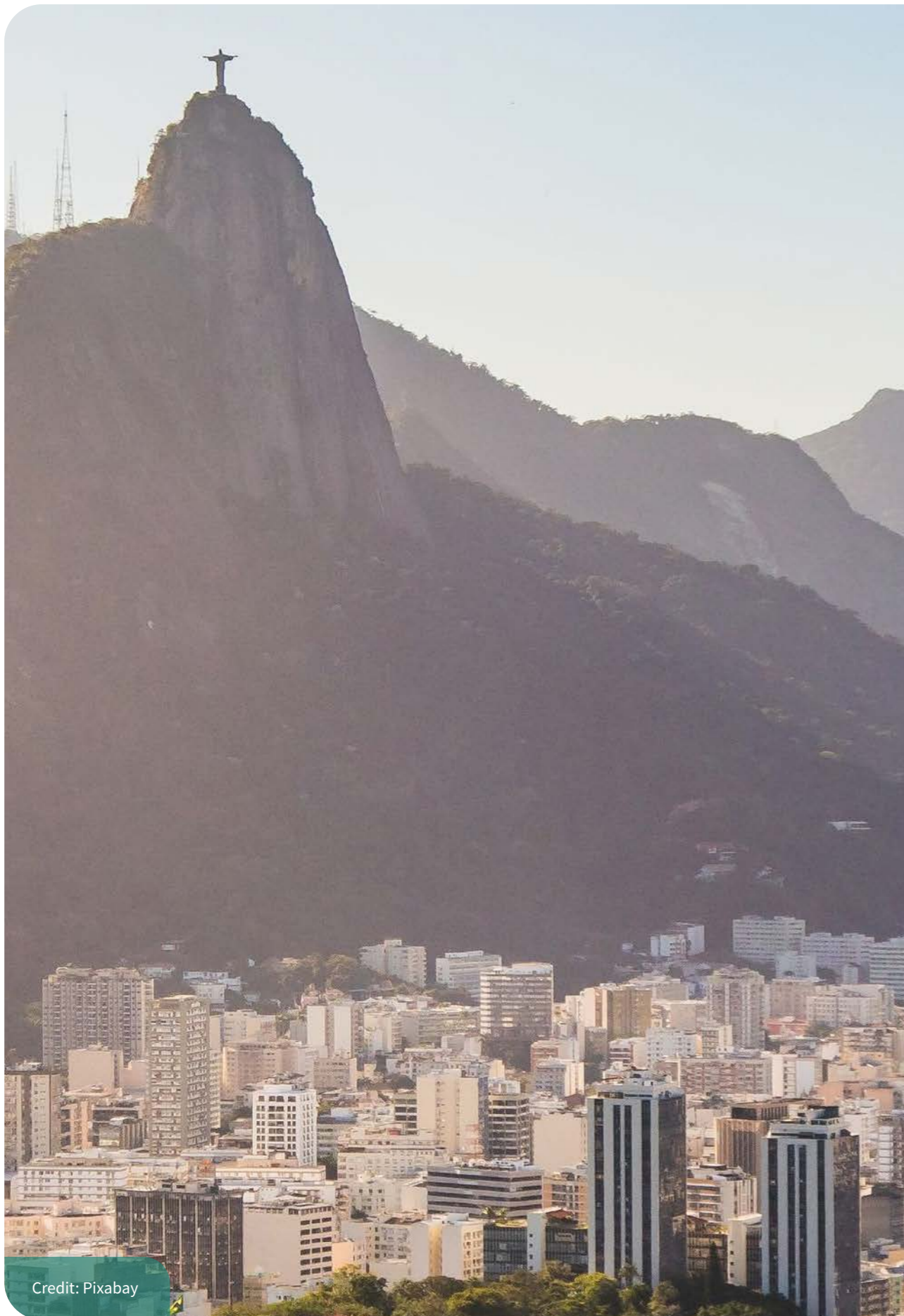
Finally, while key drivers of and possible solutions to rising inequalities such as taxation and redistribution, and social security, were again underrepresented amongst Treaty Body recommendations analysed for this report (just 4 per cent and 3 per cent of inequality-focused recommendations, respectively), where the committees have extended such recommendations, they have tended to be detailed and insightful. One example is the aforementioned 2018 recommendation extended by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights to Argentina. Others include a series of recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child to Montenegro in 2018, calling on the State party, 'in accordance with its general comment No. 19 (2016) on public

budgeting for the realisation of children's rights [to] establish a budgeting process that includes a child rights perspective and specifies clear allocations to children in relevant sectors and agencies, including specific indicators and a tracking system, to monitor and evaluate the adequacy, efficacy and equitability of the distribution of resources allocated for the implementation of the Convention,' 'guarantee sufficient budget allocations in all areas, in particular those relating to health, education and child protection,' and 'take measures to combat corruption [...], including by strengthening the public financial management system in order to avoid diverting resources from the implementation of the Convention.' Turning to social security, in 2023, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recommended that Lithuania 'reform its social protection system, with a view to alleviating inequalities and eliminating discriminatory effects of the system on disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups, including by unifying or harmonising different social security benefits at the local level and ensuring that an equitable and sufficient level of public funding is allocated to the social protection system,' while in 2025, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women urged Luxembourg to 'continue its efforts to address the root causes of pension discrepancies between women and men and adopt targeted measures to reduce the gender pension gap, [and] extend the coverage of social protection, such as minimum wages, paid leave and maternity leave, to women in the informal economy and self-employed women.'

**Figure 10:**  
**Focus population groups (Treaty Body recommendations)**



A significant majority (78 per cent) of inequality-focused Treaty Body recommendations have targeted specific population groups, especially children, women, and disabled persons (33, 26, and 11 per cent respectively).



Credit: Pixabay

## CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDIES

# BRAZIL. INCOME INEQUALITY

### BACKGROUND

After several decades of extreme levels of economic inequality, Brazil saw a remarkable decline in its income inequality levels at the turn of the century. According to the World Bank, 28.6 million people were lifted out of poverty between 2004 and 2014, while the country's Gini coefficient fell from 0.54 to 0.49.<sup>46</sup> The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics revealed that between 2022 and 2023, the percentage of the country's population living below the poverty line fell from 31.6% to 27.4%.<sup>47</sup> However, Brazil remains one of the most unequal nations in the world, with very high levels of income disparity. Over recent years, its Gini coefficient has crept back up, standing at 0.52% in 2022. In 2015, the richest 1 per cent of Brazilians accounted for 28.3 per cent of the country's total income.

Brazil introduced The Bolsa Família (Family Grant) scheme in 2003, a social assistance programme providing monthly cash transfers to the nation's poorest households.<sup>48</sup> The initiative has been hugely successful in helping reduce extreme poverty and inequality, reaching millions of Brazilian families in the lowest income quintile, including some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded segments of society. However, as this case study demonstrates, while the Bolsa Família and other similar programmes have made important contributions to poverty reduction, they have done little to address deeper structural drivers of income inequality.

## SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

- Brazil is party to eight of the nine core international human rights treaties, including the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.<sup>49</sup>
- The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights has issued three concluding observations on Brazil (in 2003, 2009, and 2023), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women four (in 2003, 2009, 2021, and 2023), and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination two since the turn of the century (in 2004 and 2022).<sup>50</sup>
- The State has undergone four reviews under the UPR mechanism (in 2008, 2012, 2017, and 2022).<sup>51</sup>
- Brazil extended a standing invitation to Special Procedures in 2001. Since 2006, it has received 20 visits by mandate-holders, including the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples (2008, 2016), the Special Rapporteur on the right to food (2009), the Working Group on peoples of African descent (2013), the Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation (2013), and the Special Rapporteur on racism (2024). A first country visit by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights is scheduled for 2026.<sup>52</sup>

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Treaty Bodies, especially the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, have paid considerable attention to poverty and income inequality in their reviews of Brazil, extending a large number of detailed recommendations on the subject.<sup>53</sup> For example, in its 2009 concluding observations on Brazil, the Committee emphasised the need for greater social security coverage for the poorest and most marginalised citizens. It called on the State Party to ‘take all necessary measures to extend the Bolsa Família [Family Grant] programme to cover the large number of families that do not receive the benefit.’ It also suggested that the State ‘improve the efficacy of the programme by reviewing targeting mechanisms to ensure equal access for the poorest families, particularly indigenous families.’

Importantly, the Committee has also issued recommendations to strengthen Brazil’s fiscal policy, in order to better fund social security programmes such as Bolsa Família. In its 2023 concluding observations, the Committee expressed concern at the inadequacy of Brazil’s fiscal policy in addressing socio-economic and racial inequalities, and expressed concern about ‘the excessive proportion of total State revenue raised from indirect taxes.’ Consequently, the Committee issued several recommendations urging Brazil to adopt a more equitable, socially progressive tax system, and to ensure that resources are used more effectively in order to reduce inequality. One such recommendation urged the State to ‘conduct a thorough assessment, with the participation of social stakeholders, on the effects of its fiscal policy on economic, social and cultural rights, including an analysis of the distributional consequences and tax burden on different sectors and marginalised and disadvantaged groups.’

A third equality-related challenge highlighted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in addition to taxation and redistribution, is the heavy concentration of rural land ownership in the hands of a small number of wealthy individuals. This, according to the Committee, severely limits rural workers’ and indigenous communities’ economic opportunities. In its 2003 concluding observations, the Committee urged the State to ‘take immediate remedial action to reduce the persistent and extreme inequalities and imbalances in the distribution of resources and income and access to basic services among various geographical regions, states and municipalities, including speeding up the process of agrarian reform and of granting land titles.’

Other Treaty Bodies have focused on other dimensions of inequality and extreme poverty. For example, in 2022, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern regarding the ‘disproportionate and persistent poverty experienced by most of the Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous and Quilombola communities within the State party,’ and called on Brazil to address the discrimination and inequality faced by these groups by ‘ensuring that effective and sufficient cash transfer programmes are in place,’ and by improving employment conditions by inter alia introducing a minimum living wage. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has also extended recommendations to improve equality in employment. In 2012, it called on Brazil to ‘adopt effective measures to [...] narrow and close the wage gap between women and men, and to ensure the application of the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value, and equal opportunities at work.’

The UPR Working Group has also focused to a significant degree on reducing inequalities and eliminating poverty – thanks in part to the self-reflections and inputs of Brazil itself. Ahead of its first UPR review in 2008, for example, Brazil acknowledged (in its national report) ‘serious inequality in terms of income distribution.’ During the review, Belgium extended a recommendation urging Brazil to take steps to reduce socio-economic inequalities. During its second UPR review in 2012, Brazil received a further 17 recommendations related to extreme poverty and socio-economic inequality. This trend continued into the third and fourth review cycles. In 2017, Singapore recommended that Brazil ‘continue to invest in poverty alleviation policies and ensure more effective and targeted implementation, so as to reduce social and economic inequality, in particular for rural populations and indigenous peoples,’ while in 2022, Pakistan recommended that Brazil ‘reinforce further the social protection and welfare programmes, initiated to alleviate poverty and ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the most vulnerable groups.’ Brazil supported these recommendations.



## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

Brazil has consistently demonstrated its commitment to engaging with the UN human rights mechanisms in order to support its efforts to address income inequality in the country. A defining aspect of this engagement has been its willingness to acknowledge the implications of income inequality for the country's poorest and most marginalised groups.

As noted above, while poverty has been steadily decreasing, reaching the lowest level in the country's history in 2024, significant income inequality remains a persistent challenge. Brazil has engaged closely with the UN human rights system, especially the three main human rights mechanisms, in order to inform and support its domestic efforts to reduce income inequality. To do so, the State has inter alia focused on reform of the taxation system in the country, and on improving redistribution policies, especially for those in poorer or marginalised situations.

Regarding taxation, the existing system poses a major challenge to advancing income equality. It remains heavily reliant on indirect taxes, while taxation on personal income and wealth is relatively low, thus placing a disproportionate burden on the poorest households and reducing their purchasing power. The overall redistributive impact of Brazil's fiscal system therefore remains limited as indirect taxation undermines the

effects of cash transfers. Despite the average per capita income of the wealthiest decile being over 30 times greater than that of the poorest decile, in 2017-2018 the latter was subject to a tax rate of 26.4% compared to just 19.2% for the former.<sup>54</sup>

This has a doubly negative impact on income inequality. First, it means the poorer parts of society face a heavier tax burden relative to their wealthier fellow citizens. Second, it creates a drag on tax revenue, with negative implications for redistribution through, for example, social security schemes.

In line with the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights' 2023 concluding observations, which expressed concern about 'the excessive proportion of total State revenue raised from indirect taxes,' and recommended that Brazil reflect on the human rights impacts of its current fiscal policy, including an analysis of the distributional consequences and tax burden on different sectors and marginalised and disadvantaged groups.<sup>55</sup> In March 2025, the Brazilian Government presented a draft Bill to Congress proposing significant changes to its dividends taxation framework as part of a broader income tax reform strategy.<sup>56</sup> This followed a similar effort in 2021, which was rejected by the Senate.



**While poverty has been steadily decreasing, reaching the lowest level in the country's history in 2024, significant income inequality remains a persistent challenge.**



A key aim of the new Bill would be to alleviate the tax burden on low-income Brazilians by exempting those earning under 5,000 reais per month from income tax, while offsetting the revenue loss through a minimum tax on individuals earning over 600,000 reais annually, as well as a 10 per cent withholding tax on dividends distributed both domestically and abroad. If adopted, these fiscal reforms would provide a significant boost to the disposable incomes of the poorest Brazilians, and would ensure the State has adequate resources to promote the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, including through redistributive social protection policies.

As noted above, one such policy is the Bolsa Família programme (launched in 2003). The importance of this programme as a policy tool to reduce poverty and income inequality cannot be overstated. Empirical evidence shows that it accounted for 21 per cent of the reduction in the country's Gini index between 2003 and 2004, and led to a decrease of between 12 per cent and 21 per cent in income inequality by 2014. Its targeted cash transfers not only provided immediate

financial relief to low-income families but have also had positive spill over effects in educational and health outcomes.

As noted above, in its 2009 concluding observations, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights urged Brazil to 'take all necessary measures to extend the Bolsa Família programme to cover the large number of families that do not receive the benefit.' In line with this and related (though vaguer) UPR recommendations (e.g., Belgium's 2008 recommendation on reducing inequality), in 2011 Brazil launched the Brasil Sem Miséria (Brazil Without Extreme Poverty) plan.<sup>57</sup> The plan has three main objectives, namely, to expand income transfers (mainly through the Bolsa Família), to promote the improved integration of adults into the labour market, and to deliver improved public services. To guide the delivery of the first objective, the plan also initiated the Busca Ativa (Active Search) programme, which, in just six months, was able to locate and identify an additional 500,000 families in need of income support (325,000 of these immediately began to receive Bolsa Família support).



Credit: Federal Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA)

While 72 per cent of Brazil's poor live in urban areas, where they face significant obstacles to sustainable development including high rates of informal employment, and disparities in access to healthcare, education, and housing, those living in rural areas are at particular risk of being left behind. The extremely high levels of inequality in rural areas are in large part caused, as noted above, by the high concentration of land ownership in the hands of a small number of rich families (a by-product of colonial era policies). In Brazil, roughly 1 per cent of landowners own almost half of all arable land, with the wealthiest individuals and companies reaping the majority of the benefits from Brazil's enormous agribusiness sector.

This concentration of land ownership represents a significant barrier to economic mobility for the majority of Brazil's rural population, mostly small landowners or landless workers, who are unable to build sustainable livelihoods or to accumulate wealth.

As noted above, in its 2003 concluding observations, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights called on Brazil to 'take immediate remedial action to reduce the persistent and extreme inequalities and imbalances in the distribution of resources and income and access to basic services among various geographical regions,' with a particular emphasis on those living in rural areas. One such action, proposed by the Committee, was to speed up 'the process of agrarian reform and of granting land titles.'

In line with this and other UN recommendations, in 2009 the Brazilian Government launched the Terra Legal programme, designed to reduce land inequality and strengthen land rights for smallholders. Unfortunately, implementation challenges, combined with the political and economic power of wealthy landowners and businesses, have meant that the Terra Legal programme, as well as other policies with similar goals, have enjoyed limited success.<sup>58</sup>

A final area of focus for the UN human rights mechanisms has been on the particularly acute levels of socio-economic inequality and extreme poverty faced by minority groups (e.g., Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous and Quilombola communities), as well as by women. Treaty Bodies in particular have extended a number of recommendations in this regard. For example, in 2022, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on Brazil to ensure that effective cash transfer programmes are in place to reach these groups, and to introduce a minimum living wage.

In its report submitted to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination ahead of its 2022 review, Brazil outlined a number of affirmative action programmes developed between 2004 and 2017 to respond to this challenge. Yet, despite noting some progress, the State Party acknowledged the persistently high-income inequalities between different racial groups, and the particularly marginalised situation of women from those groups. The State reported that Afro-Brazilians earn only 58 per cent of the average income of the white population, while Afro-Brazilian women earn only 41 per cent of the average income of a white man. There is also some evidence that racial and ethnic minorities benefit less from redistributive and social security programmes such as Bolsa Família. Research shows that per capita cash transfers have been higher for white people than non-white.



United Nations Development Programme in Europe and CIS. A brighter future for children... and their nannies. December 24, 2013.

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# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA. MATERIAL INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION REFORM

## BACKGROUND

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina has operated under a highly decentralised political structure comprising two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska, as well as the self-governing Brčko District.<sup>59</sup> This complex constitutional framework has deeply influenced the country's governance systems, including its social protection architecture.

Social protection services, including access to welfare benefits, disability support, and child allowances, are primarily administered at the entity and cantonal levels, leading to substantial disparities in coverage, adequacy, and quality. While certain urban areas and wealthier cantons have been able to provide relatively comprehensive welfare services, rural areas, post-conflict regions, and ethnic minorities continue to experience severe gaps. Structural inequalities between regions, between rural and urban populations, and between different ethnic groups have persisted and, in some areas, deepened.

Despite constitutional guarantees and international legal obligations to ensure the progressive realisation of economic and social rights, fragmented policy frameworks and inconsistent implementation have constrained the State's efforts to universally realise these rights. Marginalised groups, particularly persons with disabilities, Roma communities, and residents of underdeveloped rural areas, face significant barriers to accessing essential social services. Recognising these systemic inequalities, Bosnia and Herzegovina has cooperated closely with the UN human rights system, especially the three main mechanisms, and has received considerable guidance (i.e., through recommendations) on how to reform national social protection systems to ensure equity, inclusivity, and consistency across all administrative units.



## SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

- Bosnia and Herzegovina is party to all nine core international human rights treaties, including the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.<sup>60</sup>
- The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights has issued three concluding observations on Bosnia and Herzegovina (in 2006, 2013, and 2021), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women three (in 2006, 2013, and 2019), the Committee on the Rights of the Child three (2005, 2012, and 2019), and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities two (in 2017, and 2024).<sup>61</sup>
- The State has undergone four reviews under the UPR mechanism (in 2010, 2014, 2019, and 2025).<sup>62</sup>
- Bosnia and Herzegovina extended a standing invitation to Special Procedures in 2010. Since 2006, it has received 10 visits by mandate-holders, including the Special Rapporteur on the right to education (2007), and the Special Rapporteur on minority rights (2012).<sup>63</sup>

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

As can be seen from the foregoing, Bosnia and Herzegovina has cooperated closely with the main UN human rights mechanisms, and has received a range of important recommendations to guide the State in strengthening its social protection systems, reducing regional disparities, and ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups.

As with the previous case study on Brazil, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina the mechanisms, especially the Treaty Bodies, have extended recommendations both to strengthen the collection of financial resources through improved and more progressive taxation systems, and then to use those resources effectively to secure the progressive realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights, including through strengthened social protection systems.

For example, in its 2021 concluding observations, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recommended that the State party ‘review its fiscal policy with a view to improving its capacity to mobilise domestic resources and to making it progressive and non-discriminatory so as to increase its redistributive effect,’ and ‘assess the impact of consumption taxes, including value-added taxes, particularly on low-income households, and take corrective actions as necessary.’ The Committee also expressed concern at the ‘persistently high level of corruption in the State party, which effectively impedes access to health care, education, and other public services, particularly by disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups,’ and recommended Bosnia and Herzegovina to adopt a new anti-corruption strategy.<sup>64</sup>



Credit: Pixabay

On the basis of the increased government revenues that such measures should bring about, the Committee furthermore recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina ‘increase the level of social spending, paying particular attention to disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and regions with high levels of unemployment and poverty.’

As noted earlier, one persistent concern for the Committee is the effects of the fragmented governance framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This has resulted in discrepancies in social security provision between different parts of the State (e.g., differences in eligibility criteria, in coverage, in the duration and level of benefits, in the level of contributions made by the insured, and in the level of the public budget allocated to the social protection system). This, according to the Committee (2021), ‘has rendered the social protection schemes incompatible, fragmented, and ineffective and resulted in large inequalities among different regions in the enjoyment of the right to social security.’

With this in mind, the Committee recommended that the State party ‘unify[...] and/or harmoniz[e] different social security benefits at the local level and ensuring that an equitable and sufficient level of public funding is allocated to the social protection system.’

Another persistent concern of the UN mechanisms has been that social security benefits are not sufficient to provide beneficiaries and their families with a decent living. In this regard, for example, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, in its 2021 concluding observations, expressed concern that, despite recent measures taken by the State party, ‘a large number of workers cannot access social security benefits, including health insurance, due to the failure of their employers to register them in the social protection system or to pay their contributions to the funds.’

With this in mind, the Committee recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina ‘reform its social protection system, with a view to alleviating regional inequalities and eliminating discriminatory effects of the system on disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.’ It also recommended that the State ‘expand the coverage of social security benefits, particularly to the self-employed and workers in the agricultural sector and the informal sector, and increase the level of those benefits in order to provide workers and their families with a decent living.’

Other Treaty Bodies have extended recommendations focused on ensuring that certain population groups are not left behind by the State’s social security systems. For example, in its 2017 concluding observations to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities called on the State to ‘ensure equal access to community-based support, rehabilitation and assistive technologies,’<sup>65</sup> while the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its 2019 concluding observations, urged Bosnia and Herzegovina to ‘strengthen its child protection system to ensure that all children, particularly those in vulnerable situations including Roma and children with disabilities, enjoy equal access to social and protection services across all regions.’<sup>66</sup>

Despite Bosnia and Herzegovina’s strong levels of cooperation with the UPR mechanism, including through the submission of evidence-based national reports, reviewing States in the UPR Working Group have rarely extended recommendations on the matter of socio-economic inequality and the role of social protection or welfare systems in confronting it. There are, however, some

notable exceptions. For example, in 2014, Malaysia recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina ‘step up its measures in combating poverty, including by providing adequate funds for its social protection system and its national employment strategy to reduce unemployment,’ while, also in 2014, Venezuela recommended that the State ‘strengthen programmes for the promotion of work, food, and social assistance aimed at national minorities and other vulnerable sectors of the population in the fight against poverty and social inequality.’

With time, the number of relevant UPR recommendations remained relatively low. Though there were still some during later cycles. For example, in 2020, Switzerland and Ireland urged Bosnia and Herzegovina to ‘ensure equitable access to social protection across all entities and strengthen administrative coherence,’ while in 2025, Georgia recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina ‘continue its work on enhancing access to healthcare and social protection services, including through the effective implementation of the Development Strategy for 2021–2027.’

Other UPR recommendations mentioning social security or welfare services have focused on the inclusion of women, Roma, and persons with disabilities. For example, in 2014 Venezuela urged the State to ‘continue consolidating the social protection programmes for the application of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,’ while in 2010, Kazakhstan recommended that the State ‘ensure that women have access to adequate health and social services.’



Credit: Pixabay

## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

Bosnia and Herzegovina have made notable progress in addressing social protection challenges by implementing key recommendations issued by UN human rights mechanisms. These actions have translated into legislative reforms, administrative restructuring (particular to reduce disparities between national entities), improved data monitoring, and expanded coverage for marginalised groups. Much of this implementation progress has been supported by the UN Country Team under the 'Quality, accessible and inclusive education, health and social protection' chapter of the 2021-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). Outcome 3 of that chapter states that UN support will aim to create conditions for more efficient, fair, and inclusive healthcare, social protection, and social welfare systems and services by 2025. It also clarifies that 'efforts to analyse and find efficiencies in spending and services and equity for vulnerable groups will be a major focus of cooperation.'

On the issue of harmonising social protection across the different entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in line with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' 2021 concluding observations on the matter (which called on Bosnia to 'harmonise social protection systems throughout the State party [...] to guarantee equal access and ensure equitable allocation of resources,' as well as Ireland and Switzerland's 2020 UPR recommendations, in 2021 the federal Government passed amendments to the Law on Social Protection introducing uniform eligibility criteria for benefits across cantons, as well as automated benefit recalculations based on inflation and income thresholds. The cantons can also appear to have responded to these UN recommendations. During this period (i.e., after the extension of the 2020 UPR recommendations, and 2021 Treaty Body recommendations), the Republika Srpska moved to revise its Law on Social Welfare. With these reforms, Republika Srpska expanded the definition of social need, and introduced a consolidated application process for benefits.



Credit: Adnan Bubalo / UNDP Bosnia and Herzegovina

The UN human rights mechanisms have also urged Bosnia and Herzegovina to increase budgetary allocations for social protection services. For example, a 2020 UPR recommendation urged the State to 'increase public expenditure on social services, particularly for children and persons with disabilities.' In line with these recommendations, between 2018 and 2022, total public spending on social protection rose by approximately 18 per cent, with the largest increases directed toward child allowances, disability support services, and rural welfare.

What is more, those funds are now being redistributed in a fairer and more equitable manner, based on social needs and impact/results. For example, following a recommendation by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 2019, the federal government decided to introduce performance-based budgeting for social programmes, linking funding to results (e.g., increased school attendance among beneficiaries). At the same time, several municipalities, supported by UNDP, adopted participatory budget frameworks, incorporating feedback from marginalised groups into the design of local social protection budgets.

To help inform this performance- and needs-based social budgeting, and ensure that it promotes equality, but also to measure the impact of social protection reforms, including those recommended by the UN human rights mechanisms, from 2019 onwards, the State established a national framework of social protection indicators through the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This reform was in line with and guided by recommendations extended by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (for example, its 2021 recommendation to improve 'the availability of disaggregated data on access to social protection by region, disability, and income level'), and the Committee on the Rights

of the Child (for example, its 2019 expression of concern over the 'lack of comprehensive data collection systems for children in vulnerable situations'), and implemented with the support of UNDP, UNICEF, and UNFPA.

Indicators have now been developed to measure, inter alia, coverage of social cash transfers, access to early childhood education, disparities in benefit adequacy by region, and budget allocations for social protection programmes, and have been applied at both federal and cantonal levels for performance monitoring and future planning purposes.

For instance, the Civil Society Forum on Child Rights, supported by UNICEF, became a formal consultative mechanism for child-related policy discussions. Following Forum recommendations, Republika Srpska increased its universal child allowance and expanded eligibility to children with chronic illnesses. Similarly, CSOs representing persons with disabilities participated in the monitoring and evaluation of the new disability assessment system, contributing to continuous improvement in assessment quality and beneficiary outreach.

As noted above, these improvements in disaggregated data gathering have also allowed Bosnia and Herzegovina (and the UN) to measure the impact of legislative and policy steps taken to implement UN human rights recommendations. For example, in 2019, the State received a recommendation from the Committee on the Rights of the Child to 'strengthen access to education and social services for children in rural and marginalised areas,' and data gathered between 2019 and 2022 show that consequent policy interventions at cantonal level led to a 12 per cent increase in early childhood education enrolment in rural municipalities of Republika Srpska.

As noted in the preceding section, Bosnia and Herzegovina has also received numerous social protection-related recommendations aimed at reducing inequality for marginalised or vulnerable groups, including children, women, Roma persons, and persons with disabilities. In 2017, for example, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recommended that the State adopt 'a functionality-based disability assessment in place of the medical model,' and improve access to community-based services. In line with this recommendation, between 2019 and 2023, the federal government introduced a new interdisciplinary assessment system. This was based on functional limitations in daily life rather than diagnostic categories. Under this reform, over 30,000 individuals were reassessed, with more than 6,000 people newly qualifying for disability benefits. Many of these had been unfairly excluded from redistributive support under the previous restrictive medical model.

Finally, and again in line with UN recommendations (e.g., the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights' 2021 recommendation to 'ensure meaningful civil society participation in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of social protection policies,') the federal and cantonal governments have established a number of consultative mechanisms to guarantee the participation of NGOs, including those representing vulnerable or marginalised groups, in the legislative and policy reforms mentioned above, as well as in performance and impact monitoring. For example, a Civil Society Forum on Child Rights, supported by UNICEF, has been established, as well as a similar forum for persons with disabilities. Moreover, a Social Protection Feedback Portal has been launched by the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (with UNDP support) in order to allow social security beneficiaries to provide feedback. Between 2021 and 2022, over 2,000 complaints were registered - with a resolution rate exceeding 70 per cent.



Credit: UNICEF/Panjeta



**An Old Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina.**

Credit: Necip Durman

# JORDAN

## THE PROGRESSIVE AND EQUITABLE REALISATION OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS THROUGH INCREASED INVESTMENTS IN PUBLIC SERVICES (TO THE MAXIMUM OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES)

### BACKGROUND

Jordan, a lower-middle-income country with limited natural resources, has faced persistent structural economic challenges, including high public debt, elevated unemployment, and significant pressures on public services due to hosting large refugee populations. These constraints have limited the State's fiscal space to invest in economic and social rights such as health, education, and social protection. Nevertheless, the Constitution of Jordan enshrines the rights to education, health, and social security, and successive governments have acknowledged their obligation to progressively realise these rights in accordance with international standards.

Over the past decade, Jordan has increasingly sought to integrate economic and social rights into its policy and budgetary processes. This has included gradually reforming its taxation system to improve fairness, phasing out regressive subsidies, and redirecting spending toward targeted social protection and essential public services. Notably, Jordan has made efforts to expand the reach of its cash transfer programmes, broaden

health insurance coverage, and raise public investment in the education and health sectors. While fiscal consolidation remains a challenge, these policy shifts represent incremental steps toward a more inclusive and equitable economic model.

Jordan's engagement with the UN human rights system has played a key role in this shift. Through its interaction with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other Treaty Bodies, as well as the UPR and Special Procedures, Jordan has received important guidance to reform national law, policy, and practice in line with its international human rights obligations (see below). If implemented, these recommendations should help ensure that budgetary allocations are rights-based, equitable, and sufficient to meet the needs of marginalised populations. This sustained international engagement has encouraged a stronger focus on fiscal justice and social spending as essential instruments for reducing inequalities and realising human rights in the country.

### SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

- Jordan is party to seven of the nine core international human rights treaties, including the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights has issued three concluding observations on Jordan (in 1987, 1990, and 2000 – the State party's next periodic report was due in 2003 but is yet to be submitted), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women four (in 2000, 2007, 2012, 2017), the Committee on the Rights of the Child five (in 1994, 2000, 2006, 2014, and 2023), and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities one (in 2017).
- The State has undergone four reviews under the UPR mechanism (in 2009, 2013, 2018, and 2024).
- Jordan extended a standing invitation to Special Procedures in 2006. Since then, it has received 7 visits by mandate-holders, including the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities (in 2022).

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Through its positive engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, Jordan has received consistent (yet numerically few) recommendations urging the State to strengthen the progressive and equitable realisation of economic and social rights through increased investment in public services – to the maximum of available resources. The recommendations have inter alia focused on fiscal reform (with a particular emphasis on vulnerable population groups), improving budgetary investments in key sectors, expanding social protection, and enhancing access to quality healthcare, education, and employment, particularly for persons with disabilities, women, children, and other vulnerable or marginalised population groups. The relatively small number of recommendations received is likely down to the fact that Jordan has not reported to the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights since 2000, and has never received a visit from relevant Special Procedures mandate-holders such as the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, (it has received a visit request from the Independent Expert on international solidarity, but that mission has yet to be confirmed).

The UN human rights mechanisms have extended a limited number of nevertheless important recommendations to Jordan on the need to increase budgetary resources allocated to key public services, especially to the benefit of vulnerable or marginalised population groups, and others at risk of being left behind.

For example, in its 2014 concluding observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (in line with its general comment No. 19 (2016) on public budgeting for the realisation of children's rights), called on Jordan, 'on the basis of the model budget developed by the State party,' to 'use a child-rights approach in the elaboration of the State budget by implementing a tracking system for the allocation and use of resources for children throughout the budget, thus providing visibility to the investment in children.' Committee members further recommended that the State party 'define strategic budgetary lines for children in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations that may require affirmative social measures,' and to ensure that any national strategies aimed to reducing the country's fiscal deficit include a 'child-rights impact assessment' to ensure that relevant policies do not 'negatively affect children.' The Committee then went on to encourage Jordan to allocate those budgetary resources, to the maximum extent possible, to promote 'the implementation of children's rights, in accordance with article 4 of the Convention.'<sup>67</sup>

The Committee extended similar recommendations in 2023, when it urged Jordan to 'continue to increase and prioritise budgetary allocations to ensure the implementation of the rights of the child at all levels, including allocations for health services and early childhood education,' and to 'define specific budget lines for all children, paying special attention to those in disadvantaged situations, including children with disabilities.'<sup>68</sup>

The Treaty Bodies have also called for increased budgetary allocations to reduce gender inequalities in Jordan. For example, in its 2017 concluding observations, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women called on the State party to 'allocate sufficient resources for the implementation of strategies, such as outreach and support programmes, creation of quotas and other proactive measures aimed at achieving the substantive equality of women and men in all areas, in particular employment and vocational training.'

The importance of sufficient budgetary allocations to progressively realise the economic and social rights of persons in vulnerable or marginalised situations has also been raised by Special Procedures mandate-holders. For example, in 2022, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, following his visit to Jordan, called on the State to 'ensure that sufficient financial resources are budgeted for the Ministry of Education each year to quickly and effectively implement the Ten-year Strategy on Inclusive Education,' and to increase investments in social protection generally, and in social protections to persons with disabilities in particular (in view of their higher cost of living), in order to 'address the economic imbalance between persons with and without disabilities.'<sup>69</sup>

Finally, reviewing States in the UPR Working Group have made similar points, though – again – such recommendations have been few in number. For example, in 2024, Sudan recommended that Jordan 'continue efforts to promote the rights of persons with disabilities by expanding the allocations to them in the State's general budget and providing health, educational and social services.'<sup>70</sup> Singapore extended a similar recommendation that same year, calling on Jordan to 'allocate sufficient resources to ensure the effective implementation of the National Policy to Guarantee the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020–2030), and the 10-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education.'

During an earlier UPR review (in 2009), Cuba offered a more general recommendation (i.e., without focusing on any particular population group), urging Jordan to increase budgetary allocations, to the maximum of available resources, to the country's public health system, in order to widen coverage and improve quality. If possible, this should be done, according to Cuba, by earmarking more financial resources of the total national budget and through the training of specialised personnel.'<sup>71</sup>



**A one-to-one or group meeting on AIDS prevention in a factory in Amman, Jordan. Workers meet an employee of the Ministry of Health.**

Credit: UN Photo/G. Pirozzi

## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

Jordan has taken measurable steps in recent years to align its fiscal and economic governance with the human rights recommendations it has received, particularly in relation to expanding and improving social protection, including by replacing subsidies with direct support, increasing budgetary resources to health and education, and focusing redistribution and welfare investments on the most marginalised or vulnerable parts of the population. While progress has been incremental and subject to fiscal constraints, these reforms reflect a conscious effort by the State to realise economic and social rights through budgetary policy.

In line with different UN human rights recommendations calling on Jordan to move towards a more progressive taxation system, in order to reduce the burden on vulnerable population groups or groups at risk of being left behind, and increase resource allocations for social investments, especially for women, children, persons with disabilities, etc., in September 2018 the Government introduced a revised draft of a tax reform bill (protests against the earlier draft had contributed to the fall of the previous government in June). The new tax law was approved by Parliament and adopted in December 2018. One of the stated objectives of the new law was to reduce the tax burden on poorer parts of society by reducing indirect taxation and replacing it with income tax, though independent analyses have questioned whether the new law will achieve such a progressive result.<sup>72</sup> Notwithstanding such doubts, a 2021 World Bank study did find that Jordan's fiscal system, post the 2018 reforms, is now 'modestly progressive,' even if 'more could be achieved,'<sup>73</sup> while a 2023 report by the International Monetary Fund found that Jordan has 'made more progress' in expanding its tax base and combatting tax evasion.<sup>74</sup>

As noted elsewhere in this case study, this expanded tax base has allowed Jordan to better fund social security, education, and health programmes, especially for vulnerable or marginalised groups. In its 2021 study, the World Bank concluded that such 'social assistance programmes [are] making Jordan's fiscal policies more equalizing, and there is scope for other reforms which would both close the fiscal gap while further reducing poverty and inequality.'

Also in 2021, Jordan took a further step in aligning fiscal policy with the rights of vulnerable or marginalised groups - in this case women - when the Ministry of Finance adopted new guidelines, developed in cooperation with UN Women and national civil society, on gender-responsive budgeting. After a successful pilot programme covering five ministries, all ministries are now required to integrate gender impact assessments into their budget proposals.

Turning to the implementation of UN recommendations on how tax revenues should be spent, Jordan has taken a number of important steps forward, with positive implications for combatting poverty and inequality, and progressively realising economic and social rights.



A view of an informative poster and the sustainable development goals at the health centre in the Wihdat Camp for Palestine refugees in Amman, Jordan.

Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten

For example, in line with various Treaty Body, Special Procedures, and UPR recommendations (see above), calling on Jordan to align fiscal policy more closely with the economic and social rights of vulnerable or marginalised population groups, and progressively increase the proportion of budgetary expenditure allocated to the social sectors, particularly education, health and social security, in 2018 Jordan announced the removal of generalised fuel and bread subsidies, and the establishment instead of the Unified Cash Transfer Programme under the National Aid Fund. This direct support to those who need it the most now benefits over 300,000 low-income households.

A 2021 World Bank assessment found that this one reform alone has significantly improved the redistributive impact of Jordan's fiscal system, and helped reduce income inequality. According to the World Bank, the new cash transfer programme has contributed to a reduction in the Gini coefficient by approximately 1–1.5 percentage points among the lowest income quintiles.

As noted above, in addition to proposing reforms of the country's social security system, the UN human rights mechanisms have also called for improved resource allocation to the health and education sectors, in order to progressively realise the right to an adequate standard of physical and mental health, and the right to education, and do so in a manner consistent with Jordan's obligations to promote equality and ensure non-discrimination.

For example, in line with Cuba's 2009 UPR recommendation, in 2022 Jordan amended its Civil Health Insurance Act, extending public health insurance to all remaining uninsured citizens. The reform particularly benefits informal workers, the elderly, and those living in rural areas, and helps move the country closer to universal health coverage.

Moreover, in line with this and other recommendations calling on Jordan to increase budgetary allocations to key social sectors – to the maximum of available resources, between 2018 and 2021, Jordan increased public spending on health from 6.7 per cent of GDP to 7.3 per cent. This improved resource allocation has directly supported improvements in access to maternal and child health services, new and improved rural health clinics, and higher subsidies for essential medicines. In so doing, Jordan has also made progress with the implementation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2023 recommendation to increase budgetary allocations to children's education, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's 2017 recommendation to 'allocate sufficient resources for the implementation' of policies and strategies relevant to the enjoyment of women's and girls' rights.

Also in line with UN human rights recommendations, such as those extended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the allocation of resources to the education sector, between 2017 and 2023 total public expenditure on education rose from 3.1 per cent of GDP to 3.5 per cent. These additional resources have been used to hire additional teachers, renovate overcrowded schools, especially in refugee-hosting communities, and expand early childhood education programmes.

Such measures have had a clear and measurable impact on the progressive realisation of the right to education in Jordan. By 2021, according to data gathered by UNESCO, Jordan's primary school completion rate had reached 97 per cent. What is more, and again in line with UN human rights

recommendations (e.g., the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's 2017 recommendation to ensure equal access to education and training for women and girls), by the same year (2021), UNESCO found that Jordan had achieved gender parity in school enrolment.



**A view of staff members in the pharmacy at the health centre in the Wihdat Camp for Palestine refugees in Amman, Jordan.**

Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten



KUAP Pandiperi, Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) measurements help determine if a child is malnourished. Kisumu, Kenya April 16, 2015



# KENYA: INEQUALITY AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION – HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

## BACKGROUND

While Kenya's annual gross domestic product economic growth had averaged 4.84 per cent during the decade 2006-2015, in 2016, Kenya was still striving to become a prosperous society for all – at that time Kenya was still among the 25 percent of countries with 40 per cent of its population living below the poverty line.<sup>75</sup>

Inequality has thus been, and remains, a persistent concern in Kenya, especially for youth, women, and rural populations, and is closely linked to the way public resources are distributed. Despite advancements in infrastructure, technology, and governance, many citizens still face major barriers in accessing essential services like healthcare, education, and employment. These challenges have been acknowledged by the State, which has cooperated closely with the UN human rights system, including the main human rights mechanisms, in order to help

overcome them. In particular, the State has pledged to make progress towards a more equitable society, and promote sustainable development leaving no one behind, through inter alia targeted investments in sectors that directly uplift marginalised communities, such as health, education, and youth training.

Kenya's Constitution, particularly article 43, guarantees social and economic rights, yet public budgeting has often struggled to match these commitments. Health and education sectors receive less funding than international standards recommend, while youth unemployment continues to rise. Notwithstanding, as this case study shows, Kenya has made solid progress in addressing these concerns, including through its engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms, and with the support of UN agencies and programmes.

## SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEMS

Kenya is party to seven of the nine core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has issued two concluding observations on Kenya (in 2008, and 2016; Kenya submitted a third period report in 2022, and replied to the list of issues in 2024, with the dialogue with the Committee expected in 2026), the Committee on the Rights of the Child three (2001, 2007, and 2016; Kenya submitted a fourth periodic report in 2024), and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women five (in 1993, 2004, 2007, 2011, and 2017; a sixth periodic report was submitted in 2024, with the dialogue to take place in 2025).

Kenya has undergone three reviews under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism (in 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2025).

Kenya extended a standing invitation to Special Procedures in 2015. Since 2006, it has completed 8 visits, including the Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation (in 2014). The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights requested to visit in 2007, but the mission did not take place. The last visit by a Special Procedures mandate was in 2018.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past two decades, Kenya has received a substantial and evolving set of recommendations from the UN human rights mechanisms, including the Treaty Bodies, the UPR Working Group, and various Special Procedures mandates, urging it to increase investments in public services as a strategy to reduce inequality. A consistent thread across these recommendations has been a call for adequate, equitable, and transparent budgetary allocations to essential social services, especially health, education, and employment/training, with a particular emphasis on addressing the systemic marginalisation of youth, women, and rural populations.

The Treaty Bodies, notably the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, have each recognised important progress in Kenya, in reducing poverty and inequality, yet have also urged the State to allocate further budgetary resources to strengthen healthcare and education, and to address youth unemployment.

For example, in its 2016 concluding observations, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recommended the State party ‘take all the measures necessary to combat illicit financial flows and tax avoidance with a view to raising national revenues,’ and use those revenues to ‘increase the level of public funding, at both the national and county level, to ensure the progressive realisation of economic, social and cultural rights, particularly the rights to housing, water and sanitation, social security, health and education.’



A street scene in Nairobi, Kenya, near the Kenyatta International Convention Centre, site of the fourteenth session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 17-22 July 2016.

Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Reviewing States in the UPR Working Group, for their part, have tended to focus on how Kenya should use those national revenues to increase levels of public spending to programmes that will help strengthen the enjoyment of economic and social rights, and reduce inequality, especially programmes focused on health, education, and youth employment. For example, during Kenya's 2015 and 2020 UPRs, South Africa (2015) and Indonesia (2015) recommended that the State-under-review 'continue [...] allocating sufficient national budget for those programmes that impact directly on the lives' of the people of Kenya.

Kuwait and Angola (also in 2020), for their part, urged Kenya to use those national resources to ensure access to basic health care, education, food, and other social welfare systems, in a manner that promotes equality and non-discrimination.

Others reviewing States focused, in particular, on providing adequate resources for the country's healthcare and education systems. In 2015, Slovenia, for example, urged Kenya to 'increase the health budget allocation to the recommended minimum of 15 per cent of gross domestic product, in line with commitments under the Abuja Declaration, and expedite the process of implementing universal health-care coverage (the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women would extend a similar recommendation in 2017). Eritrea also extended a related recommendation in 2020, but urged Kenya to focus, in particular, on investing in healthcare facilities in remote areas, while Djibouti (2020) urged the State to expand health insurance cover to all citizens, and Singapore and Cuba (2020) recommended that Kenya expand universal health coverage 'throughout the country.'

Still other reviewing States in the UPR Working Group have recommended that Kenya increase the allocation of budgetary resources to boost youth and women's employment. In 2020, for example, Vanuatu urged Kenya 'take measures aimed at ensuring the economic and social rights of women and increase their employment,' while in 2015, Singapore recommended that Kenya 'continue to prioritise resources to equip its young people with the necessary education and skills to thrive in the global economy.'

The Treaty Bodies have also, predictably, been actively engaged with calls for Kenya to increase available resources for key socio-economic sectors such as education, health, and employment. In 2016, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights expressed concern 'at the inadequate budget allocation to the health sector, very limited coverage of the National Health Insurance Fund, and the significant share of out-of-pocket payments in health expenditure, which limit access to health for disadvantaged and marginalised persons.' The Committee therefore recommended that the State party 'take concrete measures to enhance access to health services, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups, including through increasing budgetary allocation to the health sector and expanding the coverage of the National Health Insurance Fund.' It also recommended that the State party expeditiously adopt the Health Bill 2016. The Committee likewise (also in 2016) expressed concern 'that the State party has not dedicated sufficient resources to financing school facilities and qualified teachers, and to ensuring effective enjoyment of the right to free primary education for all,' and called on Kenya 'to improve access to and the quality of primary education for all without hidden costs, particularly for children living in informal settlements, and arid and semi-arid areas.'

Finally, in 2016, the Committee also expressed concern 'that the unemployment rate remains high, particularly among youth, women and persons with disabilities, and that the majority of work opportunities are in the unregulated informal economy,' and recommended that 'the State party

intensify its efforts to upgrade the vocational skills of the workforce to meet the needs of the labour market and to create decent job opportunities, including through implementation of the National Employment Policy and Strategy of Kenya.'

## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

Kenya has made important progress in taking steps to reduce inequality through improved resource allocation, especially in the health, education, and youth employment sectors, in line with recommendations received from the UN human rights mechanisms, yet significant implementation gaps remain. While the country has adopted numerous progressive legal and policy measures to enhance access to health, education, and employment, the implementation of those laws and policies has sometimes fallen short due to factors including insufficient financial capacity, coordination challenges across government, and the deep-rooted nature of structural inequalities. Notwithstanding, over recent years, often with UN support, Kenya has begun to take steps to overcome these barriers, and thus better align national laws, policies, and practice, with the State's international human rights obligations and commitments.

As noted above, Kenya has received a number of UPR (e.g., extended by Slovenia, South Africa, and Indonesia in 2015, and by Eritrea in 2020) and Treaty Body (e.g., extended by the Committee

on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 2016, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2017) urging it to increase national budget allocations to the health system, specifically 'to the recommended minimum of 15 per cent of gross domestic product, in line with commitments under the Abuja Declaration,' (recommendation by Slovenia in 2015).

Reviewing States in the UPR Working Group have also offered guidance on how those enhanced resources should be used, for example, to put in place a universal public healthcare system (recommendations by Slovenia in 2015, and by Djibouti, Singapore, and Cuba in 2020), or to 'expand the coverage of the National Health Insurance Fund,' (Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 2016). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2017) has made similar recommendations, but in addition urged Kenya to focus its interventions on certain vulnerable or marginalised groups, while Eritrea (2020) urged Kenya to focus investments on healthcare in remote areas.

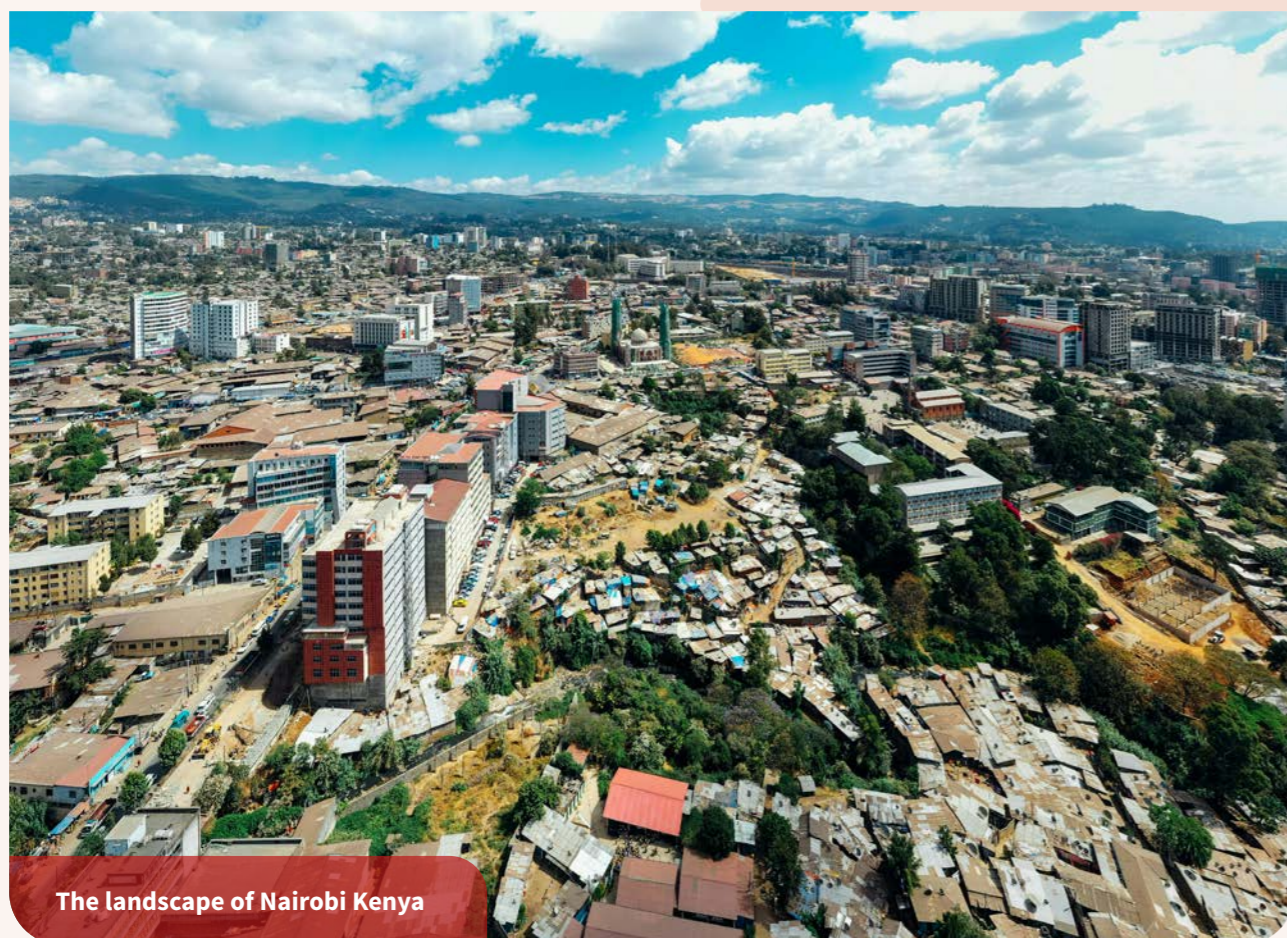
In line with these recommendations, in 2018 Kenya launched the Universal Health Coverage pilot in four counties (Kisumu, Isiolo, Nyeri, and Machakos). Building on this pilot, in 2023 the Government enacted the Social Health Insurance Act, which aims to expand access to quality, affordable healthcare for all.

In 2025, the Kenyan Government announced a major increase in its national budgetary allocation to the health sector. The increase of 8.74 per cent (on the previous budget) is, according to the Government, 'the largest health budget boost in the country's history.'<sup>76</sup> According to BDO East Africa consulting, the 2025-2026 budgetary allocation for health represents a 35 per cent increase on 2020 levels.

Moreover, and again in line with UN human rights recommendations, a key focus of this increase in allocated resources (which moves Kenya closer to meeting its commitments under the Abuja

Declaration), is to expand and ultimately achieve Universal Health Coverage, thereby securing a reduction in treatment costs, improving access to healthcare for vulnerable or marginalised population groups, and for the poor, improving healthcare facilities (upgrading hospitals and health centres, including in rural areas), and supporting health workers (including through training).

The new budgetary allocations for healthcare have a particular focus on ensuring equal access to healthcare, non-discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to health, and that no one is left behind. For example, under the new budget, tailored support to vulnerable populations has been increased in order to provide health cover for 'provide health cover for orphans, the elderly, and people with disabilities, ensuring no one is left behind in the journey towards universal health coverage.'<sup>77</sup>



The landscape of Nairobi Kenya

The education sector likewise received a significant boost in the 2025-2026 budget. Year-on-year increases since 2000 amount to 37 per cent growth in budgetary allocations to education since the turn of the century. The allocation to education in the new budget – 702.7 billion Kenyan Shillings – represents 16.6 per cent of the total national budget for 2025-2026. Significant parts of the increased budgetary allocation are earmarked for teacher training and infrastructure development, for both primary and secondary schooling, as well as for student loans and scholarships for tertiary (university) education. A key goal of these steps is to boost equality in access to education, and thereby boost equal opportunities for all Kenyans.

These major increases in the national budget allocations to education since 2020 will enable Kenya to continue and scale up important education sector reforms undertaken over the past decade. For example, during that time, the Government has significantly expanded the Free Primary Education, and Free Day Secondary Education, programmes, increasing enrolment rates and student retention. In 2017, Kenya introduced the Competency-Based Curriculum, marking a significant shift in the national curriculum and aligning it more closely with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the 21st century workplace.

These and other reforms have had significant positive impacts on the enjoyment of the right to education. For example, between 2014 and 2022, the primary school net enrolment rate rose from 82.4 per cent to 94.5 per cent. Over the same period, Kenya moved to secure near perfect gender parity in both primary (0.98) and secondary (0.95) education, while more than 15,000 teachers were trained on the delivery of the new Competency-Based Curriculum (in many cases with support from UNESCO and UNICEF).

Finally, responding to recommendations from the UPR Working Group and Treaty Bodies calling on Kenya to invest in youth employment schemes, and improve opportunities for young people, including in rural and informal settings, in 2016, the State launched the Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP), with support from the World Bank. The programme has reached over 350,000 young people, providing skills training, small business support, and work placements. Another example is the Ajira Digital Programme, through which over 300,000 young people have received training in digital literacy and skills.

Yet despite these and other initiatives, youth unemployment has long remained a persistent challenge. To illustrate the scale of the challenge, it is worth noting that while 3 million youths arrived at working age between 2009 and 2013, the economy was able to add only 2.6 million jobs, most of which in the low-productivity informal sector.<sup>78</sup> As a result, many youths became discouraged and have left the labour market entirely. In 2012, the inactivity rate for people aged 15 to 24 in Kenya reached 60.5 per cent – an increase of 5 percentage points since 2000. The problem has been particularly acute among young women, whose rate of inactivity is 8 percentage points higher than that of young men. In 2025, despite the aforementioned projects and programmes, it remains the case that 6 out of every 10 Kenyans aged 15 to 34 are unemployed.

To address this persistent challenge, the Government has committed to further enhance job opportunities overseas (e.g., Germany, UAE, US), anchor a plan for job creation in the Government's affordable housing programme (based on government data, 320,000 young people have already been employed, and the aim is to double this), and to continue to create jobs in the education sector (the Government has hired 76,000 teachers and intends to recruit 24,000 more by January 2026).<sup>79</sup>



Happy primary asian, india, Chinese, africa & american Caucasian student, kids, pupils & teacher carrying school bags on their way in rain winter day, with red maple leaves.

Credit: Adobe Stock/James Jiao

# THE UNITED KINGDOM- EDUCATION INEQUALITY

## BACKGROUND

Educational achievement is one of the key foundations of inequality in the UK. A good part of the inequality in people's educational opportunity and achievement stems from their socio-economic background. However, the country's school system, especially the resource and opportunity gap between private (fee-paying) and state schools, acts as a catalyst and accelerator driving ever-wider inequality. With access limited by ability to pay, there exists a stark socio-economic segmentation of pupils between the sectors, yielding in effect a two-tier system.

The private schools in total are quite small, if measured by the proportion of the pupil population (6.4 per cent in England in 2021, some 4 per cent in Scotland, 2 per cent in Wales, and less than 1 per cent in Northern Ireland). Yet they deploy some 15 per cent of the resources devoted to schools.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the privately educated have a disproportionate presence at Cambridge, Oxford, and other high-status universities. This formidable presence is magnified still further by the extensive reach of private school alumni in public life. For example,

studies have shown that in 2019, some 39 per cent of the cabinet (government), 34 per cent of the chairs of companies listed in the FTSE stock market index, and 44 per cent of media columnists were privately educated. These factors suggest that the UK's private schools are no minor issue for the understanding of inequality, as well as potential remedies.

These educational disparities have far-reaching implications for social mobility: individuals educated in the private sector remain overrepresented in senior roles across a range of sectors, including politics, the judiciary, media and civil service. At the same time, state schools have come under mounting strain due to public spending constraints and rising child poverty, which have limited access to resources and support for the most disadvantaged pupils. Taken together, these structural inequalities contribute to persistent gaps in academic attainment and access to opportunities between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, raising ongoing concerns about fairness and equality within the UK's education system.

## SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

- The UK has ratified seven of the nine core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The UK has reported seven times to the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, with the most recent concluding observations issued in 2009, 2016, and 2025, and five times to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with the most recent concluding observations issued in 2008, 2016, and 2023.
- The UK has completed four cycles under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism (2008, 2012, 2017, and 2022).
- The UK extended a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures in 2001, and since 1995 has hosted 21 visits by mandate-holders. This has included two missions by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education (in 1999 and 2002), and one by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (in 2018).

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

During its early reviews of the UK's compliance with the Covenant (e.g., 2002, 2009), the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights focused on horizontal inequality in the education sector, in other words, on addressing discrimination against pupils from racial, ethnic, or religious minorities. However, in later reviews (e.g., 2016, and 2025), the Committee expanded its focus to include tackling inequalities in educational attainment among students from low-income families, and on encouraging social mobility. In 2016, for example, it urged the UK to 'take all necessary measures to reduce the attainment gaps, particularly among children belonging to low-income families, including by reconsidering the austerity programmes adopted, and [by] effectively implementing measures aimed at reducing de facto discrimination and segregation of students based on their religion, national or social origin, as well as their economic background,' [emphasis added].

During the UK's 2025 review, the focus on addressing socio-economic inequality and discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education was further sharpened. This appears to be due to a number of civil society shadow reports submitted to the Committee ahead of the review. Those reports raised specific concerns about unequal educational opportunities for low-income students, and drew attention to the effects of regional disparities on educational achievement. For example, one report called on the State to 'explicitly allocate educational resources strategically to low-income groups,' and to 'set out details of support measures in practice which

ensure the right of young people to access higher education, particularly ensuring the removal of barriers for low-income young people [...]. These alternative reports appear to have significantly influenced the Committee's deliberations. For example, in their 2025 concluding observations on the UK, Committee members called on the State party to 'evaluate, in a comprehensive manner, the impact of [...] existing programmes [...] on improvements in [bridging] educational attainment gaps,' and to 'adopt effective measures, with a view to raising the educational attainment levels of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from low-income families, [in order] to promote social mobility.'

Regarding the public education sector, the Committee expressed particular concerns as to socio-economic inequalities leading to and being exacerbated by unequal access to early childhood education 'between different regions and different income groups.' The Committee thus recommended that the State party 'guarantee high-quality and affordable early childhood education for all children, across all jurisdictions, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.'

The Committee did not, however, in either 2016 or 2025, offer any observations or recommendations on the particular issue of equality and non-discrimination in the context of disparities between children in private education and those in public education. Indeed, the only mention of inequalities in educational achievement caused by differences between public and private schools

was made in the context of UK international development cooperation. Specifically, the Committee's 2016 concluding observations expressed concern at UK financial support to 'private actors for low-cost and private education projects in developing countries, which may have contributed to undermining the quality of free public education and created segregation and discrimination among pupils and students.' It is curious that the Committee should make such an observation about the effects of the UK's allocation of resources in third countries, but not in the UK itself.

Another important set of recommendations extended to the UK by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 2025 focused on the importance of a moving towards a more efficient, progressive, and socially just fiscal policy, in order to improve the allocation of resources to key public services, including the state education sector. In its 2025 concluding observations, the Committee recommended that the UK:

Adopt a more efficient, progressive, and socially just fiscal policy by ending the income tax thresholds freeze introduced in 2022 and by reviewing the share of corporate, capital gains, inheritance, and property taxes in total State revenue to broaden the tax base and fiscal space for realising economic, social, and cultural rights.

As part of such fiscal reforms, the Committee furthermore urged the UK to ‘assess the impact of fiscal policy on economic, social, and cultural rights, including its distributional effects on disadvantaged groups, in consultation with social partners,’ and to ‘increase the budget allocated to food programmes, social security, housing, health, education, employment services, and other areas related to Covenant rights.’

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has also regularly expressed concern over differences in educational outcomes among British children according to their socio-economic background. In its 2023 concluding observations on the UK, for example, it called on the State party to ‘strengthen measures to address inequalities in educational attainment and improve educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged situations, including children in socio-economically disadvantaged situations.’

In other ways, however, specifically on the question of inequality between children in private and public education, this Treaty Body has gone further than the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. As far back as 2002, Committee members advised the UK to ‘evaluate the impact of privatisation of schools on the right of children to education.’ To this day, this remains, however, the only Treaty Body recommendation on the subject.

The UPR and Special Procedures mechanisms have likewise focused considerable attention on both horizontal and vertical inequality in access to education, but, as with the Treaty Bodies, have largely failed to extend such analyses to the critical issue of private versus public education.

Regarding horizontal discrimination and inequality, for instance, one UPR reviewing State, Colombia, recommended the UK to ‘continue the implementation of measures against racial disparities in [...] education’ (Barbados extended a similar recommendation - both were supported by the UK), while Eswatini encouraged the State to ‘further strengthen laws that ensure that all children within the education system are afforded quality education, especially children living with disabilities,’ (a similar recommendation was extended by Armenia - both were merely noted by the UK). Lithuania and Paraguay, meanwhile, urged the UK to ensure equality and non-discrimination for women’s and girls’ education, especially those living in rural areas (both recommendations were supported by the UK).

Only two reviewing States, Botswana and Romania, have offered recommendations touching on vertical inequality in the context of the right to education. In 2022, the former urged the UK to ‘take deliberate and robust measures to ensure equitable access to quality education opportunities at all levels,’ while Romania urged it to ‘ensure equitable access to education in public schools for all children [...]’. Both recommendations had the support of the UK.

All the aforementioned UPR recommendations, and indeed almost all UPR recommendations on the right to education in the UK, were extended during the State’s most recent UPR review (in 2022).

There have, however, been no UPR recommendations to the UK specifically (and explicitly) on the subject of the impacts of socio-economic background or class on the enjoyment of the right to education, or on the related question of private versus public schooling.

This is despite the fact that, ahead of UK reviews before the UPR Working Group, civil society organisations have regularly (in ‘other stakeholder reports’) voiced concern over the influence of socio-economic background, and which ‘school [the pupil] attended’ (i.e., private or public), on educational attainment and an individual’s life chances.

Of the three main UN human rights mechanisms, the Special Procedures have offered the most focused critiques and targeted recommendations on the issue of socio-economic inequality and the right to education in the UK, but – again – have been strangely silent on the issue of private versus public education.

Following a 1999 visit to the UK, for example, the Special Rapporteur on the right to education expressed concern over the varying quality of education between schools, noting a ‘rigid stratification within the educational system,’ and the influence of social class on educational performance. Importantly, she complained that growing inequalities between children and between schools (here she likely meant differences between schools in more affluent areas compared to those in poorer areas, and perhaps between public and private schools – though she did not make this explicit) is ‘not perceived as a human rights issue’ in the UK. Her recommendations called for a more inclusive approach to education in order to eliminate individual and structural forms of inequality.



Credit: Pexels

Finally, a report produced by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, following an official visit to the UK in 2018, underscored the ‘tragic social consequences’ of the then government’s austerity policies on the country’s poorest and most vulnerable people, including the detrimental impact of such policies on children and their right to education. He noted that the erosion of social safety nets and increasing financial pressure on families, as well

as cuts to public spending and infrastructure, affected children’s school performance and access to quality education, citing, for example, instances of ‘children [...] showing up at school with empty stomachs.’ The Special Rapporteur’s recommendations emphasised the need to reverse austerity measures, restore local government funding, and address the ‘systemic disadvantages’ faced by vulnerable groups, including children.



The Special Rapporteur hears from children in Scotland.

Credit: Bassam Khawaja 2018

## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

While the UK has introduced some important policies to reduce vertical inequality in access to quality education, it remains the case that educational inequalities between social classes in the UK remain significant, with the working class underperforming significantly compared to their middle- and upper-class peers. More than 70 per cent of children from the richest tenth of families earn five good GCSEs, compared with fewer than 30 per cent from the poorest households. Additionally, children who are eligible for free school meals in England perform significantly worse at every stage of schooling. There are multiple reasons for this disparity, the first being financial resources, which allow parents from wealthier backgrounds to have the option of sending their children to private schools, as well as being able to better provide educational materials, technology support, personal tutors, and even a better diet - all of which have been shown to contribute to a better educational attainment.

Policies introduced over the past two decades, in line with UN human rights recommendations (e.g., the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights’ 2016 recommendation to take measures to reduce attainment gaps, particularly among children from low-income families), include early intervention programmes such as Sure Start, which provides universal early education for three- and four-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, expanded universal childcare, and the ‘Family Hubs programme,’ as well as programmes aimed to reducing socio-economic inequalities in access to education for school children such as ‘Pupil Premium,’ which directed funding specifically to schools with students from lower-income backgrounds to help close the achievement gap. Other relevant policies have included the academies and free schools programme (launched in the early 2000s and expanded from 2010 onwards), which aims to

close the gap between public and private schools by providing the former with greater autonomy from local authorities, ‘Teach First’ (launched in 2002), which aims to attract talented graduates to teach in schools in deprived areas, ‘Excellence in Cities,’ and the ‘Opportunity Areas’ programme (later expanded to the ‘Education Investment Areas’ programme).

The devolved governments have also introduced important policies. For example, the Scottish Government introduced the ‘Scottish Attainment Challenge,’ a policy explicitly focused on reducing the poverty-related attainment gap, as well as the ‘Attainment Scotland Fund,’ (between 2019 and 2020, the Fund provided over £180 million to schools and local authorities most in need.

The UK-wide programmes, many of which were initiated by the New Labour Government in the early 2000s, were designed to improve educational attainment in urban and deprived areas by improving resources and teaching standards. Notwithstanding, the resources provided to such policies and programmes declined during subsequent Conservative-led governments (especially as a result of the austerity policies criticised by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in 2018). For example, funding for Sure Start programme decreased significantly following the 2010 elections, with over 1,340 centres closing by 2022. The ‘Pupil Premium’ has also decreased significantly.

Despite these policy efforts, a 2022 analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) showed that educational attainment gaps between different socio-economic groups remain a persistent challenge. According to the IFS, ‘despite decades of policy attention, there has been virtually no change in the ‘disadvantage gap’ in GCSE attainment over the past 20 years.’<sup>81</sup>

What is more, evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened inequality in educational outcomes. For example, the share of pupils leaving primary school meeting literacy and numeracy benchmarks fell from 65 per cent in 2018–19 to 59 per cent in 2021–22, (the UK's 'levelling up agenda' aims to see this reach 90 per cent by 2030).<sup>82</sup>

The UK has therefore taken some steps in line with relevant recommendations received from the UN human rights mechanisms, however, despite some progress in reducing inequality in education during the first decade of the century, these have largely failed to sever or even weaken the link between socio-economic background and educational achievement.

One reason for this is that questions of poverty, socio-economic inequality, and class are highly political in the UK, one of the wealthiest member States of the UN. Linked with this point, and as noted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education in her 1999 report on the UK, many policymakers do not perceive inequality in access to quality education as a '[...] human rights issue.'

This acute political sensitivity (especially on the part of right-wing parties and politicians) can be seen in the then Conservative Government's reaction to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights' 2018 report on the UK, which it rejected as 'inflammatory,' and of an 'overtly political tone.'

This political sensitivity can also be seen in the reaction of right-wing parties and politicians to recent UK Government policy announcements aimed at creating a more level playing field between children in public education and those in private education. In 2024, the UK Government announced, as part of the 2024-2025 national budget, the end of tax breaks for private schools, 'to enable better investment in state education.' This was in line with the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights' 2025 recommendation calling on the UK to 'adopt a more efficient, progressive, and socially just fiscal policy [...] to broaden the tax base and fiscal space for realising economic, social, and cultural rights.'

Specifically, and in line with the Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2002 concluding observations on inequalities between children attending private and state schools, the UK announced its decision to remove 'the exemption so that 20 per cent VAT will be added to education and boarding fees charged by private schools from January and, from April, removing charitable business rate relief.' The extra budgetary resources raised (estimated to be around £1.725 billion a year) would be used, according to the Government, to 'improve standards and opportunities for the nine out of ten children who attend state schools.'<sup>83</sup>

The new law has been heavily opposed by right-wing political parties and media commentators, some private schools, as well as by some of the parents of children in those schools. For example, in early 2025 some independent schools and parents filed a High Court challenge to the new law (interestingly, partly on human rights grounds). The case was, however, dismissed in June 2025, and the UK Government continues to implement the new law and related redistribution policies.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As argued in chapter 1 of this report, reducing inequalities (along with combatting discrimination) is central to the 2030 Agenda's promise to 'leave no one behind,' and is a core principle running through international human rights law. By extension, if the international community is to realise the SDGs leaving no one behind, and if it is to reduce inequalities within and between countries (with critical benefits for democratic resilience, and peace and security), then the UN human rights machinery must necessarily be a (if not the) central weapon in its armoury.

This will not be easy. Many governments see addressing and reducing inequality as a matter of political choice (right versus left, or liberalism versus socialism), rather than as a legal obligation under international law.

In reality, many of the barriers people face in accessing services, resources, and opportunities are not accidents of fate (e.g., where a person is born, and into which family) or a lack of availability of resources, but are rather the result of deliberate government decisions over policy- and law-making, or of social practices and norms - that governments either fail to confront or actively encourage.

A central message of this report is that, instead of this scenario, governments must instead take decisions (especially economic and social policy decisions), consistent with their obligations under international human rights law, that aim and serve to reduce inequalities. Such a shift - consistent with the current UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' concept of 'human rights economies' - will not be easy. But it is necessary if States are to realise the goals of the 2030 Agenda, and if they are to restore public trust in democratic process (which socio-economic inequality is eroding).

In navigating this shift, in line with their international legal obligations, States should be guided by the UN human rights mechanisms (the UPR, Treaty Bodies, and Special Procedures). As this report demonstrates, where States engage constructively with those mechanisms by providing detailed, accurate and timely national reports (or by welcoming Special Procedures mandate-holders), where they encourage other national stakeholders (e.g., NHRIs, and NGOs) to also provide information and analysis, and where they cooperate with the mechanisms to receive and implement tailored recommendations, then it can have a significant positive impact on eliminating discrimination and reducing inequality.

Unfortunately, because (as noted above), many governments (especially in the global North) do not see socio-economic or vertical inequality as a human rights concern, but rather as a political choice, and because – by extension – the international human rights system has been shaped by those States, it remains the case that the UN mechanisms have been relatively inactive (see chapter 2) on matters of vertical inequality.

Flowing from this, and the central recommendation of this report, is that in response to the current crisis of multilateralism, and as part of the UN reform processes initiated in response (e.g., UN80), States – and by extension the UN – must pivot towards a human rights-powered approach to sustainable development. As part of that pivot, States – and by extension the UN – must sharpen their focus on the promise to leave no one behind by mobilising the Human Rights Council and the human rights mechanisms to address and reduce vertical as well as horizontal inequality.

In addition to these overarching conclusions and recommendations, the research presented in this report also reveals several other points with implications for international efforts to reduce inequality and leave no one behind, to better promote and protect human rights more generally, and thus to boost the credibility and effectiveness of the UN (including as part of the UN80 reforms):

“  
**Many of the barriers people face in accessing services, resources, and opportunities are not accidents of fate or a lack of availability of resources, but are rather the result of deliberate government decisions over policy- and law-making.**”

- A central reason why the UN human rights system works is that it is premised on the full involvement and engagement of States – the primary human rights duty-bearers. It is States themselves that sign and ratify the treaties and that submit periodic reports on compliance. Likewise, it is States that submit national reports to, and appear before, the UPR Working Group and Treaty Bodies, and that solicit and welcome visits by Special Rapporteurs. This is important, as it means that States feel ownership of the process, have a stake in its success and are more likely to implement the mechanisms’ recommendations than would otherwise be the case.
- This basic point also holds true for socially or culturally sensitive topics in a given national context. Here, because the work of the UN human rights mechanisms is based on cooperation with States themselves (including the State’s own reports and its dialogue with Treaty Bodies or the UPR Working Group), the output of those mechanisms (recommendations) can have a powerful influence on national laws, policies, and practices.
- Linked with this, it is important to understand governments not as unitary entities, but as a function of different ‘moving parts’ with different interests and priorities. In other words, even if the government as a whole may be unwilling or unable to implement certain recommendations on the grounds that they touch on culturally or socially sensitive issues, individual ministries may be open to cooperate, or, for example, individual parliamentarians.
- National mechanisms for implementation, reporting, and follow-up (NMIRFs) are an increasingly prominent means through which governments can improve coordination across different ministries and state agencies, to strengthen engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms, including through timely periodic reporting, as well as the implementation of resulting recommendations. NMIRFs should be established and/or strengthened in a manner consistent with the Marrakech Guidance Framework (MGF), and should share good practices with other NMIRFs via the International Network of NMIRFs (established with the Marrakech Declaration, and Asunción Declaration).
- Where possible, human rights implementation should be seen and pursued as a democratic rather than a bureaucratic process, involving parliamentarians, judges, NHRIs, and civil society. Effective NMIRFs, consistent with the MGF, systematically involve and consult with parliaments, the judiciary, NHRIs, and national NGOs.
- Real human rights change does not happen overnight. It takes time and is usually based on taking incremental steps towards a final objective.
- In addition to domestic stakeholders, the case studies in this report reveal the benefits of States, and country offices of United Nations agencies and programs, working with bilateral donors present in the country.
- This report also demonstrates the importance of engaging with all the United Nations human rights mechanisms (i.e., all relevant Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures mandates, and the UPR), as well as the importance of engaging with each stage of the review–implementation–reporting cycle, on a perpetual basis. Regarding the first point, the case studies in this report show that the different mechanisms are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Where States engage with several different mechanisms on a given subject, those mechanisms tend to share information and analysis, and provide stronger recommendations.



UN Photo, Girls Learning to Weave in a Community Centre in Karachi, 1 January, 1983.  
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- That said, each of the mechanisms has different strengths (and weaknesses). Treaty Body recommendations, being based on a State's human rights obligations, carry greater legal weight, and tend to be more detailed and nuanced. Special Procedures recommendations, being based on country visits (including meetings with government ministers, parliamentarians, and NGOs), tend to be more politically realistic and astute. Meanwhile, UPR recommendations, which are a function of intergovernmental dialogue, tend to carry more political weight.
- Linked with the above points, this study illustrates the value of generating more and better recommendations on inequality and its root causes from the mechanisms to States. The quantitative analyses and case studies presented in the report show some good practices in this regard. However, more needs to be done. For example, more reviewing States in the UPR Working Group (and from all regions) should consider extending equality-related recommendations to States-under-review. Independent experts in Treaty Bodies or the Special Procedures mechanism should likewise focus far more attention on inequality and its drivers. Moreover, in line with the High Commissioner's 'human rights economy' proposals, the mechanisms' recommendations should not shy away from addressing macro-economic concerns or matters of high politics (e.g., national fiscal policy).
- The case studies in this report suggest that an increasingly effective strategy for UN agencies and programs, as well as national civil society organisations, is to use reporting to Treaty Bodies to influence the content of 'lists of issues prior to reporting.' These list of issues inform States Parties' dialogues with Treaty Bodies, and can be used to focus those dialogues on, for example, State progress with the implementation of previous recommendations, or new policy ideas to further strengthen implementation.
- The case studies also showcase the value of continuously tracking and measuring implementation of UN human rights recommendations, to accurately report back to the mechanisms, and inform future recommendations.
- Linked with this point (i.e., tracking implementation to inform further recommendations) a number of the case studies highlight the importance of data collection, both (at the outset) to assess the scale and nature of a given human rights challenge (and feed that information into the mechanisms, and inform relevant United Nations strategies and plans), and to evaluate the impacts of human rights implementation measures on the enjoyment of human rights – and in-so-doing inform further interventions.

## ANNEX 1 . METHODOLOGY FOR COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Based on an analysis of Special Procedures, Treaty Body, and UPR periodic reports, outcome reports, and recommendations to the States concerned, as well as relevant UNDAFs, UNSDCF, CCAs, UNFPA reports, plans and other documentation, and using the theoretical framework of the review-implementation-reporting cycle with its three phases, the analysis covers:

1. The States' national reports to the UPR and relevant Treaty Bodies, as well as civil society and/or UNCTs so-called shadow reports to these mechanisms (when available). These reports are further complemented by shadow reports submitted to the mechanisms by NHRIs. Taken together these reports provide comprehensive (and objective) information on the contemporary situation of the rights of persons with disabilities in the country concerned, and on the degree to which recommendations issued during previous reviews have been implemented by the State.
2. The degree to which civil society and UN Country Team engagement with the mechanisms, e.g., the submission of shadow reports, briefings to the mechanisms, and or support to civil society organisations participating in the review process, have influenced the mechanisms' reviews of domestic compliance and progress, and therefore the recommendations that were issued to the State-under-Review (i.e. how closely those recommendations match the country-specific information, needs assessments and proposals presented by independent sources).
3. The level of support provided by UN Country Teams and bilateral development partners to the States concerned to help them implement specific recommendations, and thereby strengthen the enjoyment of human rights at the domestic level. This might be direct support to the government (e.g., capacity building, consultancies, assistance with development of guidelines and national action plans) or indirect support via cooperation with other relevant stakeholders, for example, parliamentarians, civil society organisations, or the media.
4. The impact of implementation measures (e.g., new policies, laws, practices) and the support provided by the UN and bilateral partners in that regard, on human rights, based on the degree to which progress could be tracked and measured (i.e., data).



UN Photo, Maternal Health in Developing Countries. June 14, 2010.

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