

# OSLO+5

Meeting of development partners on:

**Ensuring effective results at a time of change:**

Human rights-based approach to development and accelerating progress towards gender equality and women's and girls' rights

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UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP



Ministry for Foreign  
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## Introduction

On 29-30 September 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, supported by the Universal Rights Group, and the Oslo+ Steering Group (consisting of Norway, Sweden, and the European Commission), hosted the fifth Oslo+ meeting of bilateral and multilateral development experts to share good practices in evolving [human rights-based approaches \(HRBA\)](#) to international development cooperation (Oslo+5). The meeting brought together over 40 representatives of major donor States (e.g., from development agencies and foreign ministries), UN senior experts, the World Bank, and human rights and development civil society organisations.

Oslo+5 followed an inaugural meeting hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oslo in 2018, a second meeting organised in cooperation with SIDA and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm in 2019, a third meeting held in Montreux in 2022, hosted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, and a fourth meeting held in Brussels in 2024, organised in cooperation with European Commission's HRBA expert group and the United Kingdom Mission to the European Union. Additionally, a digital meeting (Oslo+Digital) supported by the Permanent Missions of Denmark and The Netherlands to the UN in Geneva was organised in the summer of 2020, specifically focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These informal meetings aim to provide bilateral and multilateral development agencies with a space to share good practices regarding the evolution of 'human rights-based approaches to development,' while also adding, each time, new thematic dimensions (e.g., the contribution of HRBA to the prevention of crises and conflicts, at Oslo+3).

The fifth in-person meeting reflected on the heightened importance of HRBA at a time of significant geopolitical change, change that has important implications for international cooperation in the areas of both human rights and sustainable development, as well as the heightened importance of measuring and showcasing the impacts of HRBA on the lives and wellbeing of rights-holders, especially those at risk of being left behind. In this sense, Oslo+5 aimed to provide an opportunity to consider the implications of, and how to respond to, important shifts in human rights and development financing, as well as related trends such as the pushback against universal norms and values in certain areas, such as gender.

After considering these broad global trends, challenges, and opportunities, the meeting moved to consider their implications in a particular policy area: gender equality, and women's and girls' rights, especially in the context of the ongoing Beijing+30 review. Participants discussed good practices in, and the results of, the application of a HRBA in this area, and considered ways to strengthen HRBA's contribution in the future by further mobilising the UN human rights mechanisms.



*Oslo+5 aimed to provide an opportunity to consider the implications of, and how to respond to, important shifts in human rights and development financing, as well as related trends such as the pushback against universal norms and values in certain areas, such as gender.*

Across the sessions, participants highlighted:

- The heightened relevance of HRBA amid long-term financial and political pressures.
- The need to demonstrate HRBA impact on development results more clearly through evidence and communication.
- The importance of local engagement and translating universal norms into local realities.
- Good practices in, and the results of, the application of a HRBA in gender equality, and women's and girls' rights, and ways to strengthen HRBA's contribution in the future by further mobilising the UN human rights mechanisms.
- Opportunities and risks presented by the UN80 reform proposals, and the need for a better articulated common vision on human rights in this regard.

The meeting concluded with several forward-looking commitments: strengthening collaboration on evidence-gathering; enhancing communication to support rules-based multilateralism; developing joint inputs to the UN80 process; exploring mechanisms for continued exchange; and improving HRBA application across evaluation, programming, and financing.

The report summarises the discussions in line with the Chatham House principle, in a non-attributable manner, reflecting the Chatham House Rule under which the meeting was held.

The report was produced with funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, but it does not necessarily represent the positions of the Ministry or those of any of the participants. Rather, it offers a non-exhaustive collection of ideas, views, good practices, and next steps shared during the meeting.



## Part I:

### THE HEIGHTENED IMPORTANCE OF HRBA AT A TIME OF FINANCIAL CHALLENGE, POLITICAL CHANGE, AND REFORM OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The human rights-based approach (HRBA) is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind.<sup>1</sup>

Early efforts to build a HRBA to development programming emphasised procedural rights (e.g., access to information and decision-making for affected populations) and 'do no harm.' Over time, partners in the Oslo+ process have emphasised the importance of, in addition to the foregoing, to proactively integrate States' international human rights obligations and commitments into development programming in HRBA. This is done by leveraging country engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms (UPR, Treaty Bodies, and Special Procedures) to generate more and better recommendations to States, and then integrating those recommendations, as appropriate, into bilateral and multilateral

development programming. This HRBA, often referred to as a HRBA 2.0, or a 'human rights-powered approach to sustainable development,' enhances developing country ownership of development cooperation (being based on their own human rights obligations and commitments, and their own engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms), and promotes the participation of all parts of society (i.e., governments, parliaments, NHRIs, civil society, etc.).

For the purposes of simplicity, 'HRBA' will be used throughout this report, to refer to all of the aforementioned dimensions and/or stages in the approach's evolution.

1. <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

## The current international context

Participants at Oslo+5 described today's geopolitical and financial shifts as long-term transformation, not temporary. This 'no business as usual' period represents a 'new normal' or 'systemic crisis' requiring lasting change in how the UN human rights system operates.

Key challenges highlighted included reduced funding for human rights across the developed world; declines in ODA; shifting political priorities; and a general trend whereby human rights become secondary, often subordinated to security or political considerations.

Participants emphasised that responses must adapt to a new reality by 'changing the way we work not only for a little time, but forever' and premised on the principle that 'we need to do more and better with what we have or less, without lowering ambitions.'

This principle underpins the [UN Secretary-General's UN80 reform process](#), designed to rationalise and strengthen the efficiency of the UN (e.g., through a review of the more than 40,000 mandates accumulated over time) and reorientate the Organisation from the normative debate to on-the-ground operations, impact, and the implementation of universal norms at the national level, particularly in developing countries.

## HRBA as a strategic and cost-effective tool

HRBA was widely recognised as a key tool to respond to these shifts. The widespread application of HRBA, with a greater focus on implementation and impact in line with UN80 reform proposals, could help rejuvenate the UN, which currently faces a 'crisis of confidence,' particularly in the global North, where the value of the UN is being questioned in some quarters. By strengthening progress towards the SDGs and promoting human rights enjoyment, HRBA can help address these doubts.

Participants emphasised that HRBA:

- **Promotes cost efficiency and cost effectiveness** by integrating human rights into development programming, strengthens both policy areas, and leads to more sustainable outcomes.
- **Leverages State engagement with UN human rights mechanisms** to generate actionable recommendations that are integrated into country programming by bilateral and multilateral development partners.

- **Proves particularly useful in politically polarised contexts**, where some governments may resist engagement on sensitive issues — such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) — but are open to development approaches incorporating those human rights obligations that they have accepted (by ratifying relevant treaties). While HRBA is not a 'magic wand' and has limitations, there was consensus that it is a core imperative rather than an optional policy choice.

While the importance of national-level actions was highlighted, participants also noted that donor States must focus not only on national-

level measures, such as integrating human rights recommendations into development programming, but also on supporting stronger actions at the global UN level. UN human rights mechanisms must be preserved and strengthened; otherwise HRBA approaches cannot succeed. Donors should continue to support the multilateral system, ensuring that human rights mechanisms become more operational and impact-focused in line with UN80 reform proposals. HRBA should be regarded, many thought, not as 'good practice' but as 'standard practice.' Continued support for UN human rights advisors in-country was considered critical, as they help systematically integrate human rights recommendations into country programming.



## Messaging and communication

While there was broad agreement among participants at Oslo+5 that adopting HRBA has become even more important and valuable in the context of current challenges to the international system, there was also recognition that it remains difficult to persuade those outside the human rights world of its value. As several participants observed, human rights budgets are often the first to be reduced or cut entirely.

Discussions highlighted a notable shift over the past five years. In addition to identifying addressing human rights violations, international human rights mechanisms are increasingly being recognised as part of the solution, helping to power sustainable development, and leave no one behind through cooperation and dialogue with developing States to support their implementation of human rights obligations.

The key approaches identified focused on strengthening communication - especially for developed States and UN agencies - and included:

- Avoiding a lecturing tone on human rights and acknowledging that all countries face human rights challenges.
- Listening carefully to others' perspectives, understanding their situations and challenges, and demonstrating empathy.
- Engaging at the local level, where implementation takes place, by communicating with and involving community leaders, civil society organisations, and other local stakeholders.
- Finding common ground with those who may hold different views, building mutual understanding and trust, and focusing on positive outcomes where HRBA has made a tangible difference, rather than only highlighting failures or gaps.



## Showing impact through evidence

Building on the previous discussion, participants emphasised that one of the most effective ways to communicate about human rights, the UN human rights system, and the effectiveness of HRBA is by demonstrating impact — showing in practical terms that HRBA works.

Recent development system reforms under the current Secretary-General have enabled UN Agencies to take a leading role in integrating UN human rights recommendations into development programming. More broadly, UN Agencies have leveraged State engagement with UN human rights mechanisms to drive domestic progress on human rights and sustainable development. Global surveys demonstrate both the cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness of HRBA, as well as its measurable impact on human rights enjoyment and progress toward the SDGs. UN Agencies have been at the forefront of this work, with bilateral development partners increasingly working to catch up.

At a time of crisis, when resources are increasingly scarce, promoting a HRBA remains essential, as it focuses on making better use of what we already have (i.e., the UN human rights compliance mechanisms).

Participants agreed, however, that more needs to be done to systematically gather and communicate evidence of HRBA's impact. Historically, evidence often focused on the consequences of not applying HRBA. Today, there is growing emphasis on highlighting positive and concrete examples where human rights has been effectively integrated into development programming, leading to better outcomes and accelerating progress toward the SDGs.

Participants also noted that impact should not be understood solely in terms of data. Lived evidence from human rights defenders, NGOs, community leaders, and others shows how HRBA helps people secure real change on the ground. Currently, this type of evidence rarely reaches policy tables or informs program design and evaluation. **Strengthening the collection and communication of both data-driven and lived evidence is therefore critical to demonstrating the effectiveness, relevance, and transformative potential of HRBA.**

“UN Agencies have leveraged State engagement with UN human rights mechanisms to drive domestic progress on human rights and sustainable development.”

## Ensuring local ownership

Building on the previous discussion, participants noted that local ownership has the added advantage of making the international human rights system relevant for rights-holders. For too long, the universal system has appeared distant. Yet by translating universal norms into local realities, it becomes clear that the system does matter and helps people on the ground understand what human rights mean *for them* — meanings that can differ significantly from external expectations.

Participants stressed that discussions on human rights concern people's lives. According to one participant, 'if we cannot persuade people back home of the importance of investing in human rights, as a strategic investment in peace, stability, and prosperity, then the situation will not improve.'

It is therefore critical not only to gather evidence of the impact of the human rights system around the world, but also to use that information to forcefully advocate with our own domestic audiences.

Another advantage of HRBA more broadly, is that it encourages bilateral and multilateral development partners to engage with national stakeholders — governments and communities — in developing countries on equal terms, based on universally agreed human rights standards. Rather than imposing external views about what a country's human rights priorities should be, HRBA emphasises the importance of governments national human rights commitments and the important responsibilities of national duty bearers.



## Political vs. technical

Participants agreed that HRBA has been demonstrated to work, as shown by surveys conducted by organisations such as URG.<sup>2</sup> The evidence exists, which raises the question of why more is not being done to gather it and use it systematically. A key challenge identified is that human rights are often seen as inherently political, which can make some bilateral donors - and historically even UN development agencies - hesitant. These actors were seen to sometimes prefer to focus on the technical aspects, such as building public health systems, but not focusing on addressing the discrimination that determines who actually has access to them.

Participants observed that this dynamic has created a negative cycle: developing countries can be wary of human rights engagement because they anticipate criticism from stakeholders in the global north, which in turn makes bilateral and UN development partners cautious so as not to jeopardize their development-focused relationships with those countries. As a result, there has been limited incentive to collect evidence on the effectiveness of HRBA. Participants also noted that an emphasis on "safer" technical approaches has led development partners to recruit technicians rather than personnel able to navigate local political contexts and work with local decision-makers.

Participants agreed that breaking this cycle requires actively convincing others within broader development systems by systematically gathering and strategically using evidence that HRBA works, rather than assuming that its value will be self-evident.

<sup>2</sup> URG & UN Women (2025). A Human Rights Powered Approach to Gender Equality. <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/a-human-rights-powered-approach-to-gender-equality-leveraging-state-engagement-with-un-human-rights-mechanisms-to-accelerate-progress-in-advancing-the-beijing-declaration-and-platform-for-action/>

URG & UNEP (2024). Realising Human Rights as a Critical Contribution to Confronting the Triple Planetary Crisis. <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/human-rights-triple-planetary-crisis/>

URG & UNFPA (2023). Advancing Rights, Transforming Lives. <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/advancing-rights-transforming-lives-2/>



## Part II: THE CONTRIBUTION OF HRBA TO GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

During this part of the meeting, participants discussed the application of HRBA in a specific policy area: gender equality and women's and girls' rights. The discussion focused on the role of the international human rights system in securing progress in gender equality; good practices and lessons learned; evidence of impact; and ongoing steps to further apply and promote a HRBA.

### HRBA to gender equality

Participants emphasised the key contribution of the UN human rights machinery to the realisation of commitments under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). This contribution has taken two main forms: further elaboration of normative commitments contained in the BPfA, and support for implementation through the system's compliance mechanisms, including Treaty Bodies, the UPR, and Special Procedures.

Specific examples illustrated the impact of a HRBA in driving stronger international responses. Maternal mortality and morbidity (MMM), long treated primarily as a health issue, has been reframed over the past 15 years by OHCHR and the Human Rights Council to promote an understanding of the issue from a human rights perspective. This has helped States address the root causes of MMM. Another example where the human rights system, especially the compliance mechanisms, has played a key role in driving progress is child, early, and forced marriage.

Participants noted that HRBA provides a legal and principled framework for achieving gender

equality by ensuring equal rights. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming were recognised as core components of HRBA. In this sense, gender equality, including through the realisation of the BPfA and SDG5, offers an important opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of HRBA.

Participants also stressed that HRBA, by empowering women, promotes a wide range of human rights and accelerates progress towards all SDGs, leaving no one behind. In this sense, beneficiaries of development assistance - in this case, women and girls - should be seen as active agents of change. For example, evidence shows that economically empowered women drive inclusive growth, benefiting families, communities, and entire countries. They invest more in their households, improving health and education outcomes for children, strengthening household resilience, and contributing to national progress toward the SDGs. Still, many noted that focusing on only the economic benefits of gender equality may distract from a focus on fulfilment of the rights of women and girls as a specific goal.

## Funding crisis for women's rights and gender civil society

There was broad agreement that focusing on gender equality provides a clear way to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of HRBA, making a compelling case to decision-makers in donor States. HRBA offers value for money, addresses root causes as inequality, and leads to more sustainable outcomes.

Although tools and methodologies exist to measure HRBA's impact - including in gender equality - they are not always effectively used or communicated. For example, recent evaluations conducted on HRBA's effectiveness and impact have yielded broadly positive results, yet these findings have not been fully leveraged or shared. Evidence on HRBA's impact is already available. Organisations such as UN Women, UNFPA, and the World Bank collect human rights and development indicator data, often disaggregated, but much of this information remains unused.

Discussions at Oslo+5 highlighted that the impressive gains in gender equality since the BPfA, much of it powered by the international human rights system, are today at risk. Human rights civil society and human rights defenders are facing an unprecedented funding crisis worldwide - especially at grassroots level. The situation is particularly acute for actors working on gender equality, due to for example the increasing influence of anti-rights actors. Overall, there is a growing perception that parts of the international community are stepping back from human rights in general, and from women's rights and gender equality in particular.

Data presented during the meeting showed that the average budget of feminist organisations is only \$22,000, a figure that has barely changed over the past 15 years. Currently, 14% of feminist organisations report having no budget at all; 17% operate with budgets under \$5,000, and 60% with budgets of less than \$30,000. Funds are frequently no longer reaching these organisations, placing them at heightened risk and reducing the impact of their work. This also means that evidence of their impact is not being communicated to decision-makers in donor capitals, contributing to a HRBA 'downward spiral,' while anti-rights movements remain far better funded.



The discussions underscored the need for bilateral donors to raise awareness within their governments and to prioritise renewed investment in human rights and gender equality. It was also stressed that donors should simplify engagement with local actors and civil society by adjusting the language of calls for proposals, streamlining communication, and ensuring that funding modalities do not exclude those most affected. Initiatives such as the *Who Can Fund Me* database,<sup>3</sup> which connects feminist organisations with grassroots actors, were highlighted as useful tools.

Evidence was also shared of the immediate impacts of funding cuts on human rights defenders working on gender equality at national level, contributing to a rapid contraction of civil society space, particularly for those advocating for SRHR and LGBTI rights. Sixty-three countries still criminalise same-sex marriage, and only nine have enacted legislation protecting intersex persons. In this context, concerns were raised about the ability to confront these trends when donor countries appear to be reducing their engagement.

Even in areas that are, on the face of it, less 'sensitive' such as reducing socio-economic inequalities faced by women and girls, the influence of women's rights NGOs is being rapidly eroded.

Alongside the effects on national and local organisations, significant impacts on international civil society were noted. This is having a multiplier effect, making it increasingly difficult to pursue a HRBA. For example, the ability of international NGOs to support human rights defenders in leveraging their State's engagement with the UN human rights machinery has been significantly reduced. One visible indicator of this is the sharp decline in the number of shadow reports submitted to Treaty Bodies over the past year.



<sup>3</sup> AWID, Who Can Fund Me? Feminist Funding Database. <https://www.awid.org/wcfm-feminist-funding-resources#learnmore>



## Part III:

### EVIDENCE OF IMPACT FROM THE APPLICATION OF A HRBA IN EFFORTS TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY, WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS, AND LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS: WHAT HAS WORKED AND WHY

Part III of the Oslo+5 meeting looked to build on the previous segments, which recognised the urgent need to gather more evidence of the positive impact of HRBA, by sharing and reflecting on examples of impact in the area of gender equality, and women's and girls' rights.

#### UN Country Team (gender group) cooperation with developing States to better leverage their engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms

The session reviewed findings from the recent report, 'A human rights-powered approach to gender equality,'<sup>4</sup> produced by UN Women and the Universal Rights Group. The report considers the historic role of the UN human rights mechanisms in driving progress in the area of gender equality, assesses the current output of the UN human rights mechanisms in terms of recommendations to States, and then looks at a regionally balanced cross section of country case studies to understand:

- The degree to which the concerned States have been able to implement those recommendations, thereby strengthening legal and policy frameworks to strengthen the enjoyment of women's rights, and contribute to sustainable development.
- The degree to which UN Country Teams, UN agencies, and bilateral development partners have been able to support implementation measures, track progress, and measure impact, including by integrating recommendations into UN country programming.

4. URG & UN Women (2025). A Human Rights Powered Approach to Gender Equality. <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/a-human-rights-powered-approach-to-gender-equality-leveraging-state-engagement-with-un-human-rights-mechanisms-to-accelerate-progress-in-advancing-the-beijing-declaration-and-platform-for-action/>

- The degree to which UN agencies have been able to feed information on progress, as well as new policy ideas to strengthen progress in the future, into State, UN, and shadow (civil society) periodic reporting back to the UN mechanisms.

‘connect the dots’ across the UN system, breaking down silos, and more squarely integrating human rights into its development strategy.

UN Women’s current Strategic Plan already commits to strengthening partnerships with women human rights defenders and local women’s organisations. Through its Humanitarian Fund and other dedicated mechanisms, UN Women continues to support civil society directly. Moving forward, the focus will remain on demonstrating how this integration and collaboration not only strengthen the UN system, but also delivers tangible results for women and girls everywhere.

The report provides further evidence that leveraging developing States’ engagement with UN human rights mechanisms is a cost-efficient and effective means of advancing human rights -including women’s and girls’ rights - and accelerating progress towards the SDGs while leaving no one behind. A key goal of the project is to ensure that UN Women is better able to



## Bilateral approaches to human rights and gender equality

One participant explained that human rights are a **guiding principle** of German development policy. Especially in times of multiple crises and threats, human rights serve as a compass and guideline for international action. The [Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development \(BMZ\)](#) is aware of its international responsibility and is prepared to take on a leading role. The ministry is committed to a human rights-based development policy at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

The discussion evolved around how BMZ and [GIZ](#) – as one of its implementation agencies – have been able to develop and implement an ambitious [Human Rights Strategy](#) and a practical guide for its implementation. The ministry also developed a [Feminist Development Policy](#) and the [LGBTI Inclusion Strategy](#) of the German government. The HRBA and Gender equality are key parts of the mentioned strategies and are mainstreamed across all dimensions of GIZ’s development programming. Institutional structures in GIZ have been strengthened to advance human rights, gender equality and diversity. This includes a [Gender Strategy](#) and a [Diversity Charter](#), with explicit recognition of LGBTI inclusion – providing a stronger framework than previously existed. Human rights and gender risk analysis are mandatory for all projects exceeding €1 million.

## Mobilising the UN human rights mechanisms to further promote gender equality

It was discussed that the UN human rights mechanisms, particularly the Treaty Bodies, are being affected by the ongoing UN liquidity crisis. Resource and capacity constraints have reduced work output by approximately 15%, affecting follow-up, implementation, and the handling of individual communications and inquiries under the Optional Protocol.

Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to ensure that the mechanisms remain accessible to State Parties and to local and national civil society. For example, all Treaty Bodies have proposed a mechanism to ensure a predictable calendar for State Party reviews, which is currently under consideration by the Third Committee of the General Assembly.

Funding cuts to UN-level human rights promotion and protection mechanisms are already having a significant impact on women’s rights, with regressive legislative trends observed globally. These include the withdrawal of free legal aid for women seeking access to justice, attempts to lower the legal age of marriage, and efforts to reverse bans on female genital mutilation. Backsliding is most visible in areas such as SRHR and gender-based violence, where women’s rights are under direct attack.



Even in this challenging context, participants believed that HRBA remains both cost-efficient and effective. Impact is maximized when implementation measures - such as new national laws and policies to implement UN recommendations - are supported by UN agencies and programmes, by bilateral development partners, and by multilateral and bilateral actors actively feeding data and policy ideas into the mechanisms, particularly in coordination with local civil society.

### A civil society perspective - accelerating progress towards gender equality, and the full enjoyment of women's and girls' rights

It was emphasised that HRBA is not just a matter of principle, but also a matter of self-interest and practical common sense: when human rights are recognised and upheld, societies prosper. Evidence shows, for example, that investments in SRHR yield strong economic returns. Ending child marriage through law reform and advocacy generates measurable gains as girls remain in education and participate in the economy. Globally, advancing gender equality could add \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025.<sup>5</sup>

Progress, however, will not happen organically; it requires constant work and attention. Despite considerable achievements, implementation often remains challenging and progress fragile. Examples provided by the speaker include:

- In Kenya, the Constitution guarantees SRHR, yet preventable maternal deaths continue.
- In Mexico, the Supreme Court decriminalised abortion in 2023, but access remains uneven across States.
- In India, universal rural tap-water coverage was achieved in eight years, yet only a third of households meet broader SDG targets.

These examples underscore that progressive laws are essential but insufficient without accountability. Moving forward requires:

- Ensuring results-based implementation and publishing evidence so citizens can hold institutions accountable, for example tracking how police protect women in Malawi.
- Safeguarding and funding rights protection, including safe abortion, water policy, and gender-responsive national plans.
- Treating gender as a cross-cutting, time-bound priority with measurable indicators.

<sup>5</sup> McKinsey Global Institute (2015). The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>



“The goal is to create enabling environments for inclusive and sustainable growth, while ensuring that human rights principles guide every stage of engagement.”

## Part IV:

### OPEN EXCHANGE ON EVOLVING APPROACHES, GOOD PRACTICES, AND LESSONS LEARNT IN APPLYING A HRBA TO DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

- **The EU Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) Toolbox**,<sup>6</sup> in place since 2014 and updated in 2021 to further strengthen its integration across EU development and external action.

- HRBA comes with a specific implementation approach, requiring significant investment and coordination. It is designed to ensure that all EU development cooperation is grounded in sustainability, equal partnerships, and the catalysing power of private sector investment. The goal is to create enabling environments for inclusive and sustainable growth, while ensuring that human rights principles guide every stage of engagement.

- **New guidance is being developed on integrating civil society into the Global Gateway initiative**, the EU's flagship investment strategy. The objective is to provide local NGOs and community actors with meaningful opportunities to engage with the EU meaningfully influence policy discussions related to Global Gateway's priority sectors, including energy, transport and digital projects. These guidelines have

been finalised and are expected to be implemented over the next two to three years.

- **NORAD recently commissioned an independent evaluation of Norway's work on cross-cutting issues**<sup>7</sup> - including human rights, women's rights and gender equality, climate change, and 'Leave No One Behind.' Key findings include:

- Integration of these priorities remains uneven.
- Conceptual and practical challenges were identified, particularly among staff involved in casework, who often face difficulties in combining or differentiating between HRBA, gender equality, and other cross-cutting principles.
- There is growing recognition that projects need to be designed not only to 'do no harm' across these four areas but also to actively 'do good.'

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2021). Human Rights Based Approach – HRBA Toolbox. [https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/human-rights-based-approach-hrba-toolbox\\_en](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/human-rights-based-approach-hrba-toolbox_en)

<sup>7</sup> Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) (2024). Evaluation of Cross-cutting Issues in Norwegian Development Cooperation. Report 5/2024. [https://www.norad.no/globalassets/filer/evaluating/norad\\_ev-rapport\\_evaluation\\_of\\_cross-cutting\\_issues.pdf](https://www.norad.no/globalassets/filer/evaluating/norad_ev-rapport_evaluation_of_cross-cutting_issues.pdf)

- Cross-cutting issues are typically considered during project design but weaknesses remain when it comes to follow up in later stages.
- Partner responsibilities are sometimes perceived primarily as reporting risks rather than preventing or mitigating them, leading to a compliance-focused approach rather than substantive integration of cross-cutting principles.
- A communication gap between human rights (policy-focused) and development practitioners (results-focused) was identified. This difference in language can lead to misunderstandings, hence, developing clearer communication and shared metrics is essential for more effectively embedding human rights across development cooperation.



*The clinics saw the full engagement from entire country teams, including Country Representatives, who view the process as both technically useful and politically empowering.*



#### ▪ **Good practice examples from Member States:**

- A five-year global partnership to advance LGBTIQ+ rights, involving civil society and grassroots initiatives, designed and implemented using HRBA, with civil society oversight in place to ensure accountability.
- Targeted investments – such as the [Global Disability Fund](#) – addressing gaps in care and support for persons with disabilities, with a focus on women, emphasizing participation, inclusion, and accountability.
- [An Indigenous Fellowship Programme](#) – created and embedded within OHCHR – offering six weeks of practical training on human rights.

#### ▪ **UN Agencies' reported progress in applying HRBA:**

- UNDP launched a revised and updated guidance on HRBA in 2025,<sup>8</sup> after a long process to understand HRBA within the organization. The guidance emphasizes HRBA as a problem-solving tool; links human rights standards directly to programme improvement, political action, and risk reduction; and pushes HRBA as a practical entry point to strengthen both results and accountability.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2025). The Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Programming: HRBA Toolkit. [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp\\_human\\_rights\\_based\\_approach\\_programming\\_toolkit.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp_human_rights_based_approach_programming_toolkit.pdf)

- UNFPA launched a series of regional human rights clinics (initially with URG) to accompany country and regional offices in the preparation of country programme documents (CPDs). The clinics use human rights mechanisms as both data sources and process frameworks. Given that SRHR continues to face significant opposition, the engagement cannot be only technical - it must also be political. Human rights mechanisms create vital political space for dialogue on sensitive issues. Each half-day clinic begins with a thematic overview of relevant human rights recommendations to the country in question - specifically those related to agency's mandate. Participants then discuss how these recommendations have been addressed through programming and partnerships. The experience with the clinics showed that when human rights mechanisms are leveraged and recommendations systematically integrated into programming, they provide not only technical guidance but also the political leverage and legitimacy we need to advance SRHR and gender equality in increasingly challenging contexts. The clinics saw the full engagement from entire country teams, including Country Representatives, who view the process as both technically useful and politically empowering. It allows them to link concrete recommendations - such as those on maternal mortality - to national dialogue and advocacy efforts.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The templates used for the clinics are available here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16xvgrvGTHvaAkmGLW4L2oLrxm0rHb-Bum?usp=sharing>



- UNFPA is also developing a database to integrate human rights mechanisms' recommendations directly into country programming processes, so that those recommendations can inform planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

- Another UN agency is currently conducting a comparative, language-focused analysis of its country programme documents (CPDs) over time to assess year-on-year trends.

#### ■ Internal and external advocacy for HRBA

- Strong internal communication is essential to advance HRBA, but external advocacy by partners and civil society also reinforces human rights internal discussions at senior levels.
- Practical case studies demonstrating where HRBA has delivered concrete results are critical for evidence-based advocacy (i.e., showing that HRBA works and offers value for money) and mutual learning.

#### ■ System-wide efforts

- The [UN Inter-Agency Network on Human Rights, LNBO, and Sustainable Development](#) which brings together more than 19 UN entities working to 'strengthen the integration of human rights in development programming across the UN system.'

- ▶ In 2022, the Network conducted a review of how human rights are integrated into the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) and the Common Country Frameworks (CCFs). That review revealed several gaps, including limited leveraging of the UN human rights mechanisms, and weak engagement on specific rights issues, such as the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- ▶ A second review of HRBA application is currently being undertaken, with results expected in 2026. Preliminary insights highlight:

- ◆ Most colleagues work on HRBA in addition to their regular duties.
- ◆ The discontinuation of the Human Rights Mainstreaming Trust Fund reduces leverage and capacity to promote the integration of human rights across UN entities.

- In the current resource-constrained environment, it has become even more important that UN Country Teams and bilateral donors (i.e., embassies) work more closely together on joint programming – i.e., cooperation to support the integration of UN human rights recommendations into development programming. 'So, we are all pushing in the same direction.'

#### ■ Linking HRBA with gender mainstreaming and with development finance:

- An important point raised is that HRBA and gender mainstreaming should not be seen as competing approaches, as they sometimes have in the past, but as parts of a common goal: strengthening development programming through the integration of UN human rights recommendations, including those focused on gender equality, and women's and girls' rights. Positive examples from Tanzania and Venezuela illustrate the value of successful integration when HRBA and gender equality groups work jointly.

- Another promising area is linking human rights and development finance. With ODA declining, there is a strong case for bringing human rights principles into discussions with international financial institutions and other development finance actors.

#### ■ Data monitoring

- DCO collects annual data from all Resident Coordinators to assess the integration of human rights across the UN development system. It operates through an integrated management system that gathers information as part of the data collection cycle. The mechanism includes a normative component through which DCO tracks performance across UN Country Teams. Among the key tools used are the UNCT Gender Equality Scorecards and UPR indicators. Notably, 75% of these indicators have a human rights dimension, while approximately 15 indicators directly measure human rights-related performance across UN Country Teams.

- DCO also collects data on participation, follow-up, and use of UPR recommendations in country-level programming.

- During the Common Country Analysis process, Resident Coordinators are asked to report on how they are:

- ▶ Drawing on human rights recommendations from Treaty Bodies, the UPR, and Special Procedures.

- ▶ Engaging with national human rights institutions (NHRIs), and

- ▶ Establishing mechanisms to support human rights defenders.

## Advancing HRBA

Representatives highlighted that, since the launch of the EU HRBA Toolbox in 2014, the international community has gained greater conceptual clarity on human rights-based approaches. However, translating this understanding into practice remains a significant challenge. Key points raised include:

### 1. Applying HRBA in evaluation and learning

- HRBA should be embedded into evaluation frameworks: programmes that do not advance human rights or sustainable change cannot truly be said to have impact.
- We must also re-think how we learn – as Ban Ki-moon once suggested, 5–10% of all budgets should go to monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Yet, too often evaluations are treated as tick-box exercises, serving donors rather than rights-holders. We need fewer evaluations - but deeper learning.



*When EU Member States fund the Commission, which in turns funds a UN agency, the HRBA obligations must remain intact at every level – accountability cannot be broken simply because of institutional complexity.*



- Monitoring has become synonymous with ‘reporting,’ and programme officers often lack the capacity or training to use M&E as a human rights tool. Even in institutions with mandatory gender mainstreaming, such as the Council of Europe, there remains a shortage of technical expertise.

### 2. Ensuring HRBA remains central

- It was noted that HRBA obligations should be maintained throughout the funding chain. For example, it was suggested that when EU Member States fund the Commission, which in turns funds a UN agency, the HRBA obligations must remain intact at every level – accountability cannot be broken simply because of institutional complexity.
- Recently, resource constraints and a focus on results-based management have often sidelined HRBA in practice. HRBA is still officially a guiding principle, but it should be treated as a foundational approach rather than a peripheral one.

### 3. Need for practical tools and guidance

- Some representatives highlighted the need for clearer, more practical HRBA tools. Existing guidelines, developed over a decade ago for bilateral cooperation, are often complex and difficult for implementing organisations receiving development support from Ministries of

Foreign Affairs, to apply, particularly at the national level in developing countries.

- Many civil society actors, especially those working at national level in developing countries, continue to seek guidance on how to operationalise HRBA effectively and how to understand Governments’ guidelines.





## Part V:

### CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS: STRENGTHENING HRBA AS A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO FUNDING CUTS, SHOWING IMPACT AND BUILDING A BUSINESS CASE FOR HRBA, SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY THE UN80 REFORMS, AND ENSURING SUSTAINABLE AND PREDICTABLE FINANCING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

#### UN80

Many participants underscored the importance of the UN Secretary-General's UN80 reform proposals. These could provide a significant boost to HRBA by: driving greater efficiencies, reducing duplication, and streamlining UN work that does not have a direct impact on human rights, sustainable development, and security at national level; strengthening investments in those UN actions that are likely to have an impact at national level; and breaking down silos between the UN's work on human rights, development, and peace and security.

It was noted that the reform proposals bring both opportunities and risks.

**Opportunities** identified by participants include:

- Improved prospects for cross-pillar collaboration.

- Recommitment to international human rights law, with the possibility of applying a comprehensive HRBA to new and emerging challenges.
- A framework for further promoting HRBA.

**Risks** discussed include:

- In the name of efficiency, gender equality and human rights could be compromised. Too often, these principles are treated as cross-cutting themes rather than being placed at the core of the UN's work.
- Human rights are not always seen as a shared responsibility and silos remain a challenge. Unfortunately, the current UN80 report does not state clearly enough that human rights are a shared responsibility.

## Key UN80 proposals relevant to HRBA

Participants drew attention to the following proposals, which call for the establishment of a:

- **Prevention Platform:** Recognises that prevention has become more crucial than ever and would allow the UN to undertake *regional reviews of crises* through a prevention lens, ensuring that human rights are put on the map when anticipating and responding to threats.
- **Regional Integrated Platforms:** Bringing together regional leaders across the UN's three pillars to act with a single, unified voice. Such mechanisms align perfectly with OHCHR's efforts to decentralise its work, strengthen regional offices, and enhance collaboration across the UN system.
- **Strengthened Resident Coordinators system:** Acting as single-entry points for cross-pillar coordination and accountability.
- **Enhanced support to the UN Special Procedures system:** Recognises the important contributions of Special Procedures mandate-holders to advancing HRBA, and calls for States to increase support to the system to ensure they have the necessary administrative and logistical capacity to fully implement their mandates, including undertaking country visits.
- **UN Human Rights Group at principal-level:** which would finally provide a dedicated forum for system-wide discussion on human rights - similar to existing mechanisms for peace and security, humanitarian affairs, and development. One speaker encouraged other participants to see this recommendation as part of a broader coherence effort: 'It should not be read in isolation.'



## Final reflections

At the end of the meeting, the facilitators of the various sessions offered several overall conclusions and reflections:

- There was broad agreement that **the UN faces a particularly acute crisis** - a crisis of confidence across both the development and human rights systems. While multiple responses were discussed, one message was clear: any solution must include reinforcing and strengthening the human rights pillar as a central part of HRBA. The notion that 'human rights are the first thing to be cut' must be challenged, especially given that 92% of the SDG targets are based on human rights. Upholding human rights is also the foundation of resilience in times of crisis.
- On a positive note, participants observed that **since the first Oslo+ meeting, there has been remarkable progress in how UN agencies are applying HRBA**, in collaboration with national actors and civil society. What was once a small, upstream initiative has now become a much broader and more coordinated effort across the system.
- **Participants agreed on the importance of returning to basics, to counter misinformation and misinterpretation around human rights and HRBA.** 'We do not need more HRBA tools but rather the political will to use and finance the ones we already have,' said one participant. 'Too many competing conceptual frameworks risk overwhelming practitioners,' said another.
- **Participants also highlighted the need to engage not only in technical circles but also to reach out to broader groups,** including those outside the traditional human-rights community.
- Speakers stressed the **critical role of civil society**, which continues to deliver significant impact despite limited resources and shrinking civic space - including challenges in producing shadow reports.
- **Calls were made for direct support and stronger documentation of results, and for greater political leadership and will.** As one participant put it: 'Fund us like you want humanity to win.'
- The discussions also underlined the **need for technical assistance and capacity-building for staff, as well as the importance of owning and communicating results more effectively.**
- Finally, participants reflected on the gaps that remain and the opportunity to co-create a future where everyone has a stake — a challenge, but also a shared responsibility.

## Agreed next steps

Participants identified several concrete followup actions:

- **Prepare coordinated speaking points to the UN80 process:** Partners suggested to collaborate on a unified contribution that underscores the importance of a HRBA and clearly articulates how HRBA should guide a shared vision for a renewed and strengthened UN. If participants agree, URG as the Oslo+ secretariat could support this coordination effort.
- **Enhance collaboration among Oslo+ partners including through online meetings (the Oslo+ technical working group):** Continue information-sharing on evidence, good practices, and lessons learned, including through the online HRBA Expert Group. URG was asked to ensure that all Oslo+ partners/participants are included in the mailing list for these online meetings.
- **Develop a centralised HRBA evidence platform:** Create a dedicated platform to compile, organise, and showcase evidence of HRBA's impact. URG was asked to develop proposals for the platform.



# OSLO+5

Meeting of development partners on:

**Ensuring effective results at a time of change:**

Human rights-based approach to development and accelerating progress towards gender equality and women's and girls' rights

# Helsinki 2025



UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP



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