Glion Human Rights Dialogue 2018 (Glion V)

'The place of human rights in a reformed United Nations'

Background paper for break-out group III:
'Delivering on-the-ground impact, and communicating success and relevance'

Immediately after taking Office in January 2017, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced his intention to introduce wide-ranging reforms to the way the UN works and how it delivers on its mandate.

The Secretary-General's reforms focus on three key areas: UN management (Secretariat); the UN development system; and the UN's peace and security architecture. Through these reforms, the Secretary-General aims to create a '21st century UN' that is better equipped to address the complex contemporary challenges facing humankind. This means reducing and eventually eliminating the fragmentation between the UN's three pillars, and striving for a more flexible and efficient Organisation.

In parallel to the Secretary-General's broad reform plans, Member and Observer States at the UN Human Rights Council, together with NGOs and NHRIs, have been engaged in discussions about how to strengthen the international human rights system's efficiency, effectiveness and impact. These reflections, in particular those driven by Dutch-led discussions on Council strengthening and (in the context of efficiency) a Council Bureau-led process of consultation, include proposed actions in the short, medium and long-term to improve the work and delivery of the human rights pillar, and in particular of the Human Rights Council. They also seek to reflect upon and strengthen the interconnectedness of human rights with the other two pillars of the UN. Moreover, the next intergovernmental review of the Human Rights Council's status, which will decide whether it should become a main or remain a subsidiary body of the UN, is due to take place between 2021 and 2026.

Showing impact, communicating success and relevance

Global human rights crises and concerns are always at the front pages of the world's major newspapers or part of prime time news. Yet a recent study of global media trends, conducted by the Universal Rights Group (URG) with the support of the Federal Republic of Germany, shows that the UN Human Rights Council and the wider human rights pillar have a relatively low public profile, both in absolute terms and compared with other major UN bodies (e.g. the Security Council, the WHO). Moreover, global media coverage of the human rights pillar tends to focus on a quite narrow range of stories (e.g. the conflict in Syria or the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories), and be dominated by just a handful of 'spokespeople' (most notably the High Commissioner for Human Rights).

Moreover, populist politicians and commentators are increasingly using social media (and, too often, traditional media as well) to disseminate messages that either go against universal human rights principles, seek to pervert those principles, or openly reject them. These same politicians often dismiss the UN and the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms as irrelevant, and reject their findings and pronouncements.

Does this matter?

Short answer: YES, of course! At a time when universal values appear to be under threat in many parts of the world and when the ability of the UN to respond to these threats is being openly questioned, it is absolutely vital that the international community effectively communicates the continued relevance and importance of the international human rights system. The relevance of the universal norms (e.g. the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights and the Covenants), and the mechanisms set up to promote and protect those rights; UN human rights impact and success; and a their compelling vision for the future have to be constantly underlined.

The international community must, in other words, engage in this new global 'battle of ideas,' show relevance and impact, confront disinformation and 'fake news,' and present an accurate, forward-looking and compelling 'story' of universal human rights and the institutions that underpin them.

As part of this, the international community must get better at identifying, collating and celebrating human rights 'success stories'. It must also learn from those success stories – what were the 'secrets of success' in those cases, and how might they be replicated on a more systematic basis. In short: what worked and why?

Moreover, it is essential that national populations be armed with the information they need to hold their governments to account against the commitments they make, and actions they take, at international level. The media can play a crucial role in providing that information, translating UN jargon into the everyday language of the world's rights-holders and, eventually, transposing universal norms into local reality.

Unfortunately, to-date, the international human rights community, either due to a lack of political will or a lack of resources, has too often shied away from this global battle of ideas.

How can this be changed?

With political will, more resources, and a coherent and visionary strategy:

First, URG's media analysis shows that, compared with the proportion of UN resources attributed to human rights (a paltry 3% of the regular budget), the Organisation's human rights pillar

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punches well above its weight in terms of media voice share.

Second, certain parts of the international human rights system are effective global 'spokespeople.' A considerable number of press articles across 2016 were generated by, or directly referenced, the Special Procedures (26% of all Council media coverage) or the High Commissioner for Human Rights (24%).

Thirdly, while the press tends to focus much of its attention on a fairly narrow range of concerns (e.g. Syria, the OPT); scratch beneath the surface and it becomes clear that the media - and the public - take an interest in a notably wide array of issues and questions: from torture to terrorism, and from religion to climate change. The URG survey furthermore shows that the geographic spread of that interest extends from East to West and from the Global North to the Global South.

This has to be better used!

The survey therefore shows that a strong baseline exists from which the international community can take steps to strengthen the visibility, credibility and dynamism of 'UN human rights.'

It is vital as we look ahead to 2018 – the 70th anniversary of UDHR and the 25th anniversary of the established of the OHCHR, that all stakeholders – including OHCHR, but also Council Members and Observers, Special Procedures mandate-holders and civil society – seize the opportunity to improve communication and public relations, and leverage global public interest and scrutiny, to power improvements in the UN human rights system's effectiveness and impact.

Key questions to be considered during the break-out group session include, *inter alia*:

1. Where has the human rights pillar (Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, Treaty Bodies, OHCHR) had a positive impact on the enjoyment of human rights on the ground, and also, by extension, on peace and security and sustainable development?
   In this regard, delegations, OHCHR and other UN representatives, and NGOs are encouraged to come to the meeting 'armed' with at least one human rights 'success story' – an example of where the States, with the support of the UN human rights system, has made notable progress with the implementation and realisation of international human rights obligations and commitments.
2. What lessons can we glean from such positive impact case studies in terms of how the international community can improve the human rights pillar's ability to generate and measure on-the-ground human rights impact, and to communicate success?
3. How can UN wide coherence be further strengthened so that the entire UN system, especially those parts operating at national level (e.g. the Resident Coordinator system and UN Country Teams), is delivering as one in the field of human rights?

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