



Between policy and aspiration

Has Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's flagship human rights policy been allowed to 'wither on the vine', or does it live on in another form?

Lunch discussion on the current status of the UN's Human Rights Up Front initiative

28th November 2019, 13h00 – 15h00

Restaurant Vieux Bois, Avenue de la Paix 12, 1202 Genève

In 2013, in response to a damning internal review (the 'Petrie report') of the UN's failure to defend human rights and prevent war crimes and crimes against humanity during the closing stages of Sri Lanka's civil war, the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched his flagship 'Human Rights Up Front' (HRuF) policy. Grounded in the UN Charter, HRuF called for the recognition of a collective responsibility across all UN departments and agencies to fully represent the three pillars of the UN – human rights, peace and security, and development.

Put simply, a key conclusion of the Petrie report had been that UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams, when dealing with host governments, were routinely prioritising development cooperation over and above (often more sensitive) engagement on human rights concerns. Therefore, with HRuF the Secretary-General instructed all parts of the UN that, in the future, they must place human rights concerns 'up front' in their work with host governments and, equally, promised that UN headquarters would provide necessary political support and cover for them to do so. This, it was hoped, would help prevent similar conflicts and atrocity crimes in the future - in line with the UN's 'never again' promise.

However, HRuF did not lead to the 'change in culture' at the UN, especially at country-level, that Ban Ki-moon had hoped for. This fact, long suspected, was laid bare by the UN's failure to put human rights 'up front' in its dealings with the Government of Myanmar in 2016-2017 – a failure that directly contributed (according to yet another internal report into its own failings) to the UN's inability prevent the campaign of ethnic cleansing subsequently launched against the country's Rohingya minority.

The internal review into the UN's failure in Myanmar was commissioned by the current Secretary-General, António Guterres. However, rather than responding to its findings by reinforcing HRuF, he has been accused by some States and NGOs of neglecting it or letting it 'wither on the vine.' Others, however, argue that the Secretary-General has simply recognised that policy solutions like HRuF will never succeed in bringing about meaningful and lasting changes to how the UN operates and delivers on its mandate. What is needed instead are deep structural reforms of the Organisation. In this sense, supporters of the Secretary-General argue that the spirit and objectives of HRuF are central to the current UN reform process (covering the development system, the security pillar, and UN management).



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So what has happened to HRuF? Has it been allowed to ‘wither on the vine’ or does it live-on as a key part of the Secretary-General’s reformed UN?

Universal Rights Group New York’s (URG NY’s) new policy report, which was funded and supported by the Jacob Blaustein Institute, seeks to answer these crucial questions. The report details the development of HRuF from its birth to its current incarnation, seeks to understand the current status of the initiative and its objectives, and provides recommendations to the Secretary-General, States and civil society about reinforcing efforts to place human rights at the centre of the UN’s work, including in the context of prevention. The lunch policy dialogue will provide an opportunity to present the new policy report and delve further into some of the key recommendations and questions raised.