



Activity Report 1st January - 31st December 2019

I. Universal Rights Group impact in 2019

2019 saw the Universal Rights Group (URG) continue to consolidate its central position in influencing and shaping international human rights policy. In 2019, URG projects introduced in its last two 'global strategic plans' continued to help inform the **priorities** of the Human Rights Council (Council), the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, the wider UN human rights pillar, and the Secretary-General. Moreover, URG's wider work on Council reform, on strengthening the connections between the UN's human rights pillar and its security and development pillars, on integrating human rights into the Secretary-General's UN reforms, and on developing a more 'positive narrative' about UN human rights within and outside the UN, also played a key role in **shaping the debate** in 2019 in Geneva, New York and in capitals. Finally, in 2019, URG continued to scale-up its human rights **capacity-building and technical assistance** work, both for developing countries – especially Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) – and for local human rights NGOs and human rights defenders.

At the beginning of 2016 URG published its second two-year global strategic plan/programme of work. That document proposed projects in a number of key areas that were not, at that time, on the Council's agenda – or even on the Council's radar. Those issues were:

- Building a new global human rights 'Implementation Agenda' - driving progress in national systems for the implementation of UN human rights recommendations, and for reporting thereon; exploring the roles of other national actors (e.g. parliaments, NHRIs, civil society); and mobilising international support for implementation.
- Operationalizing the Council's prevention mandate (paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251), and strengthening the links between the UN's human rights pillar and its security pillar.
- Reforming the delivery of international human rights technical assistance and capacity building support.
- Demonstrating that States' human rights obligations and their sustainable development commitments (i.e. the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs) are complementary and mutually reinforcing, and strengthening links between the UN's human rights pillar and its development pillar.
- Measuring and showing the impact, on the ground, of the UN human rights system; and using evidence of impact and 'impact case studies' to help build a new 'positive narrative' about the work and delivery of the Council and the wider international human rights system.
- Reform and strengthening of the Council/UN human rights pillar – both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness/impact.
- Improving transparency and public accountability regarding State cooperation with the UN human rights system.

- Improving the membership of the Council, in particular by making the body more accessible to Small States.
- Driving normative progress in 'new' or emerging issues, such as human rights and climate change, environmental human rights defenders, and corruption and human rights.

URG continued to address and promote these themes in its 2018-2019 global strategic plan, and also added new complementary subthemes and ideas (e.g. on human rights measurement). Today, with the completion of these global strategic plans, each of these issues/ideas has moved to the top of the UN human rights agenda.

Regarding **implementation**, in 2019 URG continued to work with over 40 States - members of the Group of Friends on national implementation/NMIRFs – to power the global development of 'national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up' (NMIRFs), and to involve other national stakeholders (e.g. parliaments) in the process of implementation. This 'implementation agenda' is now a top priority of the Council and of OHCHR – as is the link between improved human rights implementation and reporting, and the realisation of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind.'

"Issues of substance raised during the UPR often mirror the recommendations issued by the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, as well as by my Office. Together, they form a cross-section of critical human rights gaps at the country level, which, if addressed, will build more resilient societies, and sustain development and peace. There is great potential for better and more focused use of human rights recommendations in system-wide action across the UN; such concerted action is supportive of the Secretary General's emphasis on prevention, as well as the 2030 Agenda."

Address by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the 74th session of the Third Committee of the General Assembly (15 October 2019)

The latter point (i.e. the contribution of improved human rights implementation to prevention) was also a central theme of the Secretary-General's most recent report to the GA and Security Council on 'Sustaining peace.'

"[To ensure] improved policy and operational coherence among all three pillars in support of member States [I call for] a better use of human rights mechanisms [...] and their recommendations by the peace and security and development pillars. [In that regard] I welcome the continued efforts of the Human Rights Council to work effectively and efficiently with all pillars of the UN system, in support of member States."

Report by UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on 'Peacebuilding and sustaining peace' (30 May 2019)

During 2019, URG scaled up its work on the quantitative and qualitative development of **NMIRFs**. On the qualitative side, it remains that case that, as a new type of mechanism, there are no widely agreed norms to guide the establishment, legal basis, composition or functioning of NMIRFs (as was also the case with NHRIs before the Paris Principles were adopted). For that reason, in 2019 URG, with the Pacific Community, organised a two-day conference for Pacific States in Nadi, Fiji. During the meeting States, NHRIs, parliamentarians, judges and NGOs shared best practice on the integrated implementation,

tracking, impact measurement and reporting of recommendations from the Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies and UPR. On the basis of evolving good practice, especially on the part of those States (e.g. Samoa) with functioning NMIRFs, URG and the Pacific Community secretariat drafted the 'Pacific Principles.' These aim to guide States on how to set up and run effective, transparent and accountable NMIRFs. The Principles were adopted in late 2019 and are now open for signature. To build on this step, in September 2019 URG worked with Paraguay to draft and secure the adoption of Council resolution 42/30 on 'Promoting international cooperation to support NMIRFs.' This establishes a global process of five regional meetings based on the 'Fiji template.' On the quantitative side, in 2019 URG received a number of requests from States to help them establish or improve NMIRFs, or to install the 'IMPACT OSS' implementation coordination and reporting software.¹ That included Fiji, Marshall Islands, Gambia, Grenada, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia, Ethiopia and Maldives. For budgetary reasons, URG was only able to provide assistance to Fiji, Gambia and Zambia.

Regarding the link between human rights and the SDGs, in 2019 URG continued to work with Denmark, Chile and the group of friends on '**human rights and the 2030 Agenda**' on the organisation of the first two UN platforms to help States, especially developing States, leverage the mutually-reinforcing nature of human rights and the SDGs. This initiative also helped bridge the 'Geneva-New York divide' in 2019. For example, in the late summer, the Chair of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the Permanent Representative of Norway in New York, came to Geneva to brief the Council on the outcome of that year's HLPF. Finally, the Council's growing work on implementation, and the link between human rights and sustainable development, has also helped change perceptions about the UN human rights system among developing countries, especially in New York, by showing that the system is there to help States secure improvements - not only to criticise them when they fall short.

This link between human rights and the 2030 Agenda has also become one of the main priorities of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Secretary-General in 2019. It has regularly featured in high-level speeches by the two leaders, and in early 2020 human rights implementation, prevention and the SDGs were key themes in the Secretary-General's new 'Call to Action on Human Rights.' For example, part 1 of the Call was entitled: 'Rights at the core of sustainable development.'

"The 17 SDGs are underpinned by economic, civil, cultural, political and social rights, as well as the right to development [and only when] everyone has equal access to opportunity and choice, and can claim their human rights [will] no one [be] left behind [...] All of this means that human rights obligations, in effect, underpin and underwrite the political commitments made in 2015."

"Human rights considerations are central to the [prevention agenda]. Indeed, there is no better guarantee of prevention than for member States to meet their human rights responsibilities [...] There is a well-documented correlation between a society's enjoyment of and commitment to human rights – including non-discrimination – and its resilience to crisis."

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres,
in 'A Call to Action on human rights' (February 2020)

¹ Developed by URG, Singapore and IMPACT Group.

Regarding **prevention**, in 2018 Norway, Switzerland, Colombia and Sierra Leone, working with URG, secured agreement on a new UN resolution on the operationalisation of the Council's prevention mandate (resolution 38/18). With the resolution, States decided to appoint three independent experts to lead a process of consultations to shape a new prevention strategy at the Council and across the UN human rights pillar. Those consultations took place over the course of 2019 in Geneva and New York – and URG was closely involved in all meetings, including by convening sessions with NGOs. At the end of 2019, URG completed its new policy report, 'The Prevention Council – placing human rights at the heart of prevention,' which includes an economic or 'business' case for prevention. An early (pre-publication) version of the report was shared with the group of three experts in December. The final report of the experts, presented at the Council's 43rd session, contains proposals that, if implemented, could transform the body's ability to address situations of violations.

As noted above, prevention has also become one of the top priorities of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (indeed, her entire 2019 strategy is placed under the overall theme of prevention) and of the Secretary-General. Throughout 2019, both leaders used keynote speeches to draw attention to the Council's prevention mandate. Also in 2019, URG organised events in New York designed to link the Council's prevention mandate with the Secretary-General's wider prevention agenda, and with his development system and security pillar reforms.

"Our focus must be on preserving human dignity, preventing human rights violations and responding promptly and effectively when such violations occur."

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres,
in 'A Call to Action on human rights' (February 2020)

"The strong value of the early warnings generated by human rights monitoring has been amply demonstrated [...] But, and I want to emphasise this point, the human rights system is not a Cassandra, correctly predicting crises yet unable to prevent them. It is a force for prevention. When it is backed by the political will of key actors, effective, sustained human rights work prevents, mitigates and helps to resolve conflict: this is the essence of what we do."

Speech by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the Third Committee of the GA (15 October 2018)

Finally, in 2018-2019, the interlinked issues of human rights implementation, SDG implementation and prevention have also developed into a priority for the international development community. Today, bilateral development agencies and multilateral organisations including the World Bank, UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNICEF, in some cases working with URG, are all deeply involved in efforts to support human rights implementation, and thereby to help achieve the SDGs by 2030. In April 2018, Norway and URG organised a first meeting of development partners in Oslo, on the issue of how to better mobilise ODA in support of human rights/SDG implementation. A second meeting of the group (Oslo+1) was held in Stockholm in May 2019.

Regarding **item 10 reform**, this idea, first pushed by URG in December 2017 as part of the 'Human Rights Council strengthening' conference, and also discussed at the third and fourth Global Human Rights Dialogues, gained increased traction during 2019. Indeed, when the

new Austrian Presidency of the Council conducted consultations with members of the Council in late 2019, to understand their priorities for the year ahead, 'item 10 reform' was the most common issue of interest. In that regard, in late 2019 URG, Norway and Singapore sent out invitations for a first-ever 'item 10' platform – a voluntary space where States can express their human rights achievements and challenges, and express their capacity-building needs, and where other States and UN agencies can pledge support. The first such platform was convened in February 2020. Demands for change in the way the Council delivers capacity-building support also featured prominently during the consultations on prevention under Council resolution 38/18. As a consequence, the final report of the three experts proposes that the Council create an 'implementation facility' to help States implement human rights recommendations, thereby building national resilience.

"The UN must increase support to member States, including through enhanced capacity-building efforts to national and regional human rights institutions and mechanisms"

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres,
in 'A Call to Action on human rights' (February 2020)

Through these and other projects, including the organisation of the annual Glion Human Rights Dialogue (with Switzerland), URG played a central role in **shaping the international human rights debate** in 2019. In particular, URG helped shape the current priorities of the High Commissioner, the Secretary-General and States at the Human Rights Council (and in the GA) to build a 'positive narrative' about the work, delivery, and on the ground impact of the UN's human rights pillar. Identifying positive 'human rights stories' is also a priority of the 2020 President of the Council and was a prominent feature of the 43rd session of the Council – before its suspension.

URG's work in this area emphasises the objective or empirical measurement of progress (via indicators), and the identification of case studies highlighting national improvements. It is also designed to help 'bridge' the Geneva-New York divide by improving understanding, in New York, about the multifaceted work of the UN's human rights pillar. As one participant noted at the fifth Glion Human Rights Dialogue in May 2018: 'it is necessary to change perceptions of the Council in New York, especially among developing country delegations, from one of trouble causer to one of trouble shooter.'

At a normative level, priority issues for the URG, including human rights and climate change; protecting environmental human rights defenders; universal recognition of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; combatting religious intolerance and on-line hate speech; the intersectionality between gender, religion and human rights; human rights and corruption; and technology and human rights, have all moved to centre stage in 2018-2019, both in terms of the Council's agenda and relevant strategy documents of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. These '**emerging issues**' were also the focus of discussions at the sixth Glion Human Rights Dialogue, the 2019 President's retreat, and the analytical sections of the Secretary-General's new 'Call to Action.'

"[In the years ahead] we will seek greater understanding of the human rights dimensions of climate change; the digital space; inequality; corruption; and the displacement and movement of people. And we will focus strongly on the 2030 Agenda, highlighting the human rights of women, young people, and persons with disabilities."

Speech by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the Third Committee of the GA (15 October 2018)

Through its work on making the Council more accessible for developing countries, especially LDCs and SIDS, URG has helped re-orientate the body and the UN human rights system as a whole towards a greater focus on **practical on the ground delivery**, towards leveraging ODA to help **developing countries** comply with their international human rights obligations, and towards securing real improvements in the enjoyment of human rights in the developing world. Moreover, and linked to this point, in 2019 URG undertook a significant expansion of its 'in-country' work and engagement, especially (again) in developing countries. This included capacity-building workshops and other activities for State officials, NGOs and human rights defenders, in countries including: Fiji, Gambia, Thailand, Tunisia, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Samoa and Zambia. In addition to providing technical assistance to support the establishment of NMIRFs, much of this 'fieldwork' was focused on building the capacity and strengthening the protection of **environmental human rights defenders** (EHRDs). This is part of URG's on-going strategy to 'break the Geneva bubble' and to make universal human rights and the UN human rights system understandable, relevant and protective to individual rights-holders on the ground.

In another example of URG's impact, in 2019 its policy report 'Vision 2021,' which provided recommendations on the conduct and content of the GA's **2021-2026 review** of the Council and 'Geneva's contribution' thereto, helped guide States as they began to consider this important opportunity for the reform and strengthening of the UN's human rights pillar. An open informal consultation by the Council President in February, policy discussions during the sixth Glion Human Rights Dialogue in May, and various events (also organised by URG) on the 2021-2026 review in New York (in April and December), all included ideas and proposals set out in 'Vision 2021.'

URG's work to maximise the opportunities presented by the 2021-2026 review, in addition to its work on human rights and the SDGs, and on the human rights dimensions of the Secretary-General's programme of UN reforms, provided an important avenue, in 2019, for the organisation to help bridge the long-standing '**New York-Geneva divide.**' Over the course of the year, URG NY organised a large number of events (on human rights and the SDGs, human rights and climate change, transitional justice, UN reform, and the 2021-2026 review) on subjects that require close cooperation and coordination between Geneva and New York. Traditionally, civil society space is more restricted in New York than Geneva, especially on human rights concerns. However, URG's approach/reputation as a think tank and an independent convener meant that it was able to bring delegations from all regions together to have substantive discussions on human rights. In one example, URG's policy dialogue in New York on the 2021-2026 review, organised with Iceland in the context of Glion VI, attracted over a 110 States and NGOs and generated some important outcomes.

Lastly, building on the December 2017 Council strengthening conference, in 2019 URG worked with the Netherlands and the UK to establish and develop a new 'contact group' of States on **Council membership**. The Group works to improve the diversity and inclusivity of the Council and its membership by making the body more accessible to Small States, especially LDCs and SIDS. Improvements in membership are crucial to the Council's credibility and delivery. In that regard, in 2019 the contact group, and related initiatives such as the SIDS-LDC Trust Fund, and the yourHRC.org election guide, continued to have an important impact. More Small States are now establishing missions in Geneva, are becoming involved in the Council and its work, and are running for membership. In 2019, Fiji and

Bahamas took seats on the Council for the first time. In 2020 they were joined by the Marshall Islands. In 2020, Maldives and Seychelles announced their candidatures.

II. Endorsements

The following are quotes from representatives a few of the many countries, especially developing countries, and civil society organisations with which URG has worked, in Geneva, New York and at national level, during 2019:

“As a Small Island State elected to the Human Rights Council less than a year after opening its Permanent Mission in Geneva, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is grateful for the invaluable support and resources provided by URG. During our campaign for membership, URG lent its expertise as we developed our campaign, and provided us with numerous opportunities to present our candidature. Following our election, URG has provided invaluable information on the Council's history, mechanisms and key trends, and has continued to provide advice and guidance as we plan our membership. Finally, I know that RMI is not alone. URG has helped many Small Island States and LDCs establish in Geneva and become more engaged with the Council and its mechanisms, and has encouraged and supported them as they have run for membership. For all this help, and for empowering Small States to play our part at the Council, we say ‘kommol tata’ – thank you.”

H.E. Ms Doreen de Brum, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Marshall Islands

“URG makes a commendable contribution to supporting the enjoyment of human rights in developing countries, especially by promoting the participation and empowerment of Small States in the UN human rights system. We especially value URG’s academic input on Council resolution 16/18 on ‘Combatting religious intolerance’ and its follow-up mechanism - the Istanbul Process. URG policy reports are valuable resource tools – providing important substantive detail, analysis and insight.”

H.E. Mr Khalil-ur-Rahman Hashmi, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan

“URG provides crucial support to Small States like Seychelles, in our interactions with the Human Rights Council. URG’s tools help us navigate the procedures and mechanisms of the Council, and its analysis provides us with crucial insights into the work and delivery of the international human rights system. URG support for developing countries, especially Small States, helps us engage with the Council and the wider UN human rights pillar in a sustained and effective way – and this in turn allows us to use that engagement to power human rights progress back home.”

Ms Gayethri Pillay, Counsellor, Chargé d’Affaires of the Seychelles

“URG is an exceptionally important voice, standing up for human rights and the work of environmental human rights defenders globally. In the particular case of environmental and other human rights defenders in Colombia, URG has brought light during one of the darkest times for human rights activism in the country.”

Cata Martinez, Centro de Alternativas al Desarrollo - CEALDES

“URG plays an instrumental role in making the international human rights system more accessible to Small States. That includes being one of the few civil society organisations that focuses on, and tries to raise awareness about, those human rights issues of most concern to SIDS and LDCs, such as climate change and the right to a healthy environment. They have assisted in raising Maldives’ visibility at a time when its engagement with the UN’s human rights pillar is being renewed and revitalised by President Solih. In the past year, Maldives has actively worked with URG to strengthen inclusivity, universality and diversity at the Council – with important results in terms of the body’s membership. Finally, URG-Maldives cooperation also helped pave the way for the State’s recent decision to withdraw all reservations to CEDAW and to begin a parliamentary review of any remaining discriminatory provisions in Maldivian law.”

H.E. Ms Hawla Didi, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of the Maldives

“Singapore is delighted to collaborate with the URG on ‘The Inside Track,’ a publication that has been jointly produced since 2015 (in digital copy). Starting in 2020, we have decided to also publish limited print copies of The Inside Track in response to feedback from readers, and to launch a digital version in French. The Inside Track is meant to enable delegations, in particular Small States, to better engage with the work of the Council. In 2020, we were also pleased to collaborate with the URG and the Permanent Mission of Norway on a pilot capacity-building support forum to explore new ways of matching capacity-building needs with available support.”

H.E. Mr Umej Singh Bhatia, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Singapore

“The Universal Rights Group contributes to critical assessment of the work of the Human Rights Council by providing data and quantitative analysis. It also facilitates strategic thinking and thought-provoking discussions, during which new ideas are given life and solutions to some of the world’s most important human rights challenges are identified. URG is a highly important and relevant actor in multilateral diplomacy at the UN in Geneva and New York.”

H.E. Ms Socorro Flores Liera, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Mexico

“URG is an indispensable partner for States at the Human Rights Council, and The Bahamas is most grateful for the meaningful support it provides. Throughout our journey from an observer State to a candidate State, and now as one of only five Small Island Developing States to have ever served on the Council, The Bahamas has greatly valued the work of the URG. We especially appreciate its work to ensure that the voices of States, both large and small, are heard at the Council, and that the body focuses on issues of importance to Small States.”

H.E. Mr Frank Davis, Chargé d’Affaires, Permanent Mission of The Bahamas

“The Universal Rights Group has been the source of great support for SIDS missions in Geneva. The Human Rights Council’s programme of work places significant burdens on small delegations, and the URG provides a vital resource base and source of analysis. Without the URG and its work, it would be very difficult for Small State missions, with their resource and capacity constraints, to access and engage with the Council. The ability of the URG to understand and empathise with these capacity concerns has also been a key to its effectiveness in Geneva.”

H.E. Ms Nazhat Shameem Khan, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Fiji

"I greatly appreciate the work of the URG, and its support on helping States, especially developing States, engage more effectively with the UN human right system, especially the Human Rights Council. Its policy reports, website, tools and meetings are essential resources both for new diplomats and for well-established delegates."

Mr Yibza Aynekullu Tesfaye, Minister-Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Ethiopia

"URG is an important partner for the secretariat of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and does vital work at the UN in Geneva, especially in promoting the implementation of the UN action plan to combat religious intolerance, hatred and discrimination as set down in Council resolution 16/18 (through the Istanbul Process). URG's studies, reports, expertise and experience in this area are very much appreciated by the OIC."

H.E. Ms Aissata Kane, Deputy Permanent Observer of the OIC in Geneva

"What I find interesting and welcome regarding the work of the URG is that while endeavouring to contribute to the promotion of human rights worldwide it also tries to involve all stakeholders and to listen to all views without distinction. I believe this is a commendable way to establish fruitful dialogue on different issues related to human rights."

H.E. Mr Walid Doudech, former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of
Tunisia

III. Sustainability and lessons learnt

All URG projects are designed to have a sustained impact both at international-level and on-the-ground.

At **international-level**, URG's work is premised on **changing mindsets** at the Human Rights Council and across the wider UN human rights system; and on improving the **long-term efficiency, effectiveness and delivery** of that system. As an example of the former point, URG's ongoing work on prevention is designed to re-orientate or rebalance the Council's responses to situations of violations from the *status quo ante* – essentially a 'wait and see' approach, to one premised on 'upstream' investments in national human rights resilience and early engagement where a State begins to experience patterns of violations. This has required – and continues to require – significant efforts directed towards changing the mindsets of diplomats, NGO representatives and UN officials, people who have long seen the UN's human rights pillar as two dimensional – focusing either on normative/thematic work, or – in a few cases – on passing condemnatory resolutions and establishing *post-facto* accountability mechanisms. More broadly, as recognised by numerous UN Secretaries-General, governments and political leaders have likewise found it far easier to invest financial and political capital in 'putting out fires' rather than preventing their outbreak in the first place. Changing such entrenched views is not easy – and has been the focus of much of URG's work on prevention (including efforts to build a 'business case') over the past few years. To offer a few example of the latter point (i.e. improving the **efficiency, effectiveness and delivery** of the human rights system), nearly every URG project has this goal in mind, from the organisation's work (with Norway) on efficiency and rationalisation, to its work (also with Norway) on improving the Council's membership (which will have major long term benefits); and from its work on reorienting the country programming of bilateral and multilateral development partners to better integrate human rights recommendations (the Oslo+ process), to its growing work on helping developing countries establish 'national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up' (NMIRFs).

The latter two examples (the Oslo+ process and URG's work on NMIRFs) also demonstrate the **national-level sustainable impact** of URG's work over the past five years. These projects – together with other related projects on, for example, 'human rights and the SDGs,' have the potential to transform the delivery and impact of the international human rights system in the long-term – finally bridging the long-standing 'implementation gap' and bringing demonstrable improvements to the enjoyment of human rights and in progress towards the SDGs 'leaving no one behind.' A key objective of URG's 2020-2021 programme of work/global strategic plan will be, in coordination with States such as Norway, Denmark and Germany, to empirically measure the impact of these reforms on the enjoyment of human rights across UN member States (e.g. URG's proposed projects on 'State of the World' human rights report, on the implementation of child rights recommendations – with UNICEF, and on the implementation of sexual and reproductive health and rights recommendations – with UNFPA). Finally, URG's capacity-building work with developing countries (e.g. helping them build effective NMIRFs and providing 'implementation and reporting software'), with women human rights defenders (e.g. its work in Muslim-majority States to address women's rights violations linked to religion or belief), and with environmental human rights defenders (with UNEP and the Special Rapporteur on human rights and environment in Latin America and Africa), will all have significant and long-term impacts, especially in the Global South.

A **final point on sustainability** is that URG projects do not stop on the official 'end date' of the relevant programme of work. Rather, URG has continued to work on a large number of the issues covered in previous programmes of work. This reflects both URG's commitment to these issues, and the fact that the organisation's analysts have positioned themselves as recognised experts in these fields. For example, URG addressed the issue of combatting religious intolerance, stigmatisation, discrimination and hate speech during its very first programme of work - yet has continued to be closely engaged with this issue over the years since. This has included working with Qatar, the OIC, Singapore, Denmark/EU, and the Netherlands to co-organise the past five meetings of the 'Istanbul Process.'

Turning to lessons learnt, URG received some criticism during its early life (mainly from Western human rights NGOs) for working closely with States, and emphasising cooperation and dialogue over public criticism and advocacy. To some extent this was inevitable due to the fact URG is a think tank rather than an advocacy NGO, and because of its long-held belief that real human rights change can only be secured, especially in a multilateral context, by listening to and working with all relevant stakeholders (States, NGOs, UN officials, NHRIs, human rights defenders, companies). Against this background, one important lesson learnt (or, at least, a lesson reinforced) over the past two years has been that, while the above still holds true, URG has had the greatest impact where it has worked with **developing countries**, and stakeholders in **developing countries** (e.g. parliamentarians, human rights defenders). There has long been an implicit understanding at the UN that where a developing country experiences serious human rights challenges, including patterns of violations, it is because that country does not have the political will to uphold its international human rights obligations and commitments. While in some cases this may be correct, URG has learnt (or, rather, has had this lesson reinforced) – and tried to leverage the fact – that a large majority of developing countries *do wish* to secure improvements in the enjoyment of human rights, but often lack the capacity to efficiently and effectively implement the many recommendations they receive from the UN human rights machinery.

Building on this point, URG has also learnt that what happens in Geneva (e.g. Human Rights Council sessions, UPR sessions, Treaty Body reviews) is only one stage in a continuous '**reporting-implementation-reporting cycle**' that extends from the national level to UN level and back again. The key to having long term and sustainable impact is to engage with the *entire cycle* – to help set norms/recommendations and strengthen mechanisms/processes at the UN, and then to follow those norms/recommendations down to national level and work with governments and other national stakeholders to pursue implementation, monitor impact and eventually report back on progress.

Finally, again linked to this broad point, URG has learnt that it is not enough for the international human rights system to deliver better and generate more on-the-ground impact; rather, it must also **measure and show that impact** if it is to keep improving and remain credible. For example, URG has learnt, through its work on implementation and prevention, that today there is simply no comprehensive and objective system in place to empirically measure human rights change (and the impact of States' engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms) across UN member States and for a range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Indeed, when it comes to using indicators to measure change, the human rights pillar is around two decades behind other parts of the UN (e.g. the development pillar with its 'Human Development Index'). This lesson learnt explains why URG has begun work with the 'Human Rights Measurement Initiative' (a global academic network) to build a 'State of the World' human rights report and portal. This will be the first

time such a comprehensive global effort to measure human rights change and impact has been attempted.

IV. The Universal Rights Group

The URG is a small, independent think tank dedicated to analysing and strengthening global human rights policy, improving the effectiveness of the international human rights system, and securing improved implementation and impact at national level – thereby contributing to the full enjoyment of human rights, to sustainable development and to the prevention of crises. Now with offices in Geneva (UN Office at Geneva), New York (UN headquarters), and Bogota (regional office for Latin America), the URG is the only think tank in the world focusing exclusively on human rights.

The goal of the organisation is to strengthen policy making, implementation and impact across the international human rights system, by providing rigorous yet accessible, timely and policy-relevant research, analysis and recommendation, an inclusive platform for dialogue and debate on important human rights issues facing the international community, and a window onto the work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, as well as the wider UN human rights pillar (in Geneva, New York, and domestically) – a window designed to promote transparency, accountability, awareness and effectiveness.

The URG is increasingly focused on the question of how to better translate universal norms into improved local reality by strengthening the implementation by States (especially developing States) of their international human rights obligations and commitments; and by empowering national human rights stakeholders, including human rights defenders, civil society, national human rights institutions (NHRIs), and parliamentarians to monitor State progress and hold governments to account.

A key aspect of this goal is to make the international human rights system more accessible to, and to bring it into closer orbit with, policy-makers at regional, national and local levels, as well as with human rights defenders and the victims of human rights violations.

Mission

'To generate progress towards the full realisation of the rights and freedoms contained in the universal human rights instruments through solutions-based policy research and forward-looking policy prescription, by helping to build the human rights capacity of States (especially developing States), and through offering a respected and inclusive platform for information-sharing and dialogue.'

Core values

The URG is guided by eight core values – the eight 'Is':

- **Integrity, independence and impartiality** – in order to have impact, the Group's work must be respected and credible.
- **Impact** – everything the Group does is premised on generating impact, on supporting and strengthening human rights policy-making.
- **Innovation** – the Group aims to be 'ahead of the curve' in responding strategically to important and emerging issues in order to provide policy-makers with timely guidance.

- **Insight** – the Group also aims to help policy-makers understand and get to the heart of a particular issue, by offering new strategic thinking.
- **Inclusivity** – the Group aims to engage all stakeholders in its work. It promotes cross-regionalism and gender balance in everything it does.
- **Integration** – the Group’s work is premised on contributing to, supporting and improving the policy output of existing human rights structures and standards.

Our approach

The URG is designed to act as an interface for the transfer and distillation of knowledge between international human rights experts (e.g. NGOs, academics, human rights defenders) and human rights policy-makers.

By bringing these two groups together and providing an open, inclusive and independent platform for information-sharing and fresh thinking on human rights policy, URG helps to identify, understand and find solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing the international human rights community.

In order to be inclusive and representative, the URG Board, Advisory Group, and Secretariat all strive for geographic balance, while the URG aims to work with States and NGOs from all regions and all political groups.

Support for developing countries

As an independent think tank (as opposed, for example, to an advocacy NGO), URG seeks to work *with* States (usually via their missions in Geneva and New York) *from all regions*, to provide them with objective information, analysis and recommendation, and thus help them strengthen their engagement with the international human rights system, and thereby work effectively with that system to improve the enjoyment of human rights on the ground.

Because it is often premised on making the UN human rights system accessible to all States, as well as on building State capacity to engage fully with the system, URG’s work is particularly popular among developing countries, including Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). URG produces a number of tools specifically designed to support Small States (e.g. the ‘Inside Track’ pre-Council primer) and regularly delivers training seminars in Geneva and New York for LDCs and SIDS delegations.

Moreover, as well as working with these States in Geneva and New York, URG is increasingly engaging them at national-level, via the organisation of capacity-building workshops in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Fiji, Gambia, Mexico, Nepal, Samoa, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Uruguay. URG also increasingly organises in-country capacity-building workshops for human rights civil society / human rights defenders, across Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

URG is unique among human rights NGOs in this focus on helping developing countries, especially LDCs and SIDS, to engage more fully and effectively with the international human rights system – thereby improving the enjoyment of human rights on the ground, driving progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and preventing human rights crises and conflicts.

Geneva, New York and beyond

The UN in Geneva, home to the Human Rights Council and key human rights mechanisms, is of course central to the URG's outreach. This includes all diplomatic missions (members and observers of the Council), OHCHR, Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, civil society, business, and the media. It also includes other international organisations that might not be focused solely on human rights, but which (can) play a key role in promoting and protecting rights, such as the UNDP Geneva, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, ILO, IOM, UNHCR, IPU, ICRC and UN Environment.

The URG is also increasingly active at UN headquarters in New York, especially in the context of the work of the General Assembly's Third and Fifth Committees, the Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, and the High-Level Political Forum for the SDGs. In 2017, URG established a small permanent office in New York to coordinate this outreach.

Notwithstanding this UN-focused work, a principal objective of the URG is to break 'the Geneva bubble' and the notion that 'what happens in Geneva stays in Geneva'. This means reaching out to policymakers and other stakeholders at national level (especially in developing countries), including foreign ministries and relevant line ministries, national human rights institutions, parliamentarians, journalists, human rights defenders and local civil society representatives, to ensure that universal norms are effectively translated into improved local realities, that universal human rights obligations and commitments are translated into better national laws, policies and practice, that human rights defenders are supported and protected in their work, and that the victims of human rights violations receive remedy and redress. This increasing URG focus on the national level reality of human rights explains URG's decision, in 2017, to establish an office in Bogota, Colombia, to cover the Latin American region.

Programme of work

As per the URG's Statutes, the Board of Trustees, meeting at least once a year, sets the organisation's programme of work.

The URG's first two-year programme of work ran from 2014-2015, and ended in December 2015. In January 2016, URG began a new programme of work covering 2016-2017 and, upon a decision of the Board, was restructured as a 'Global Strategic Plan.' In January 2018, URG adopted a new two-year Global Strategic Plan. This is structured around four broad programmes. Individual projects are organised under those programmes.

The four programmes for 2018-2019 were:

1. In focus: human rights implementation and impact
2. International human rights institutions, mechanisms and processes
3. Contemporary and emerging human rights issues
4. Beyond the Council – human rights promotion and protection outside the main Geneva-based international human rights institutions and mechanisms

In addition to these main programmes, URG also undertakes a number of other stand-alone projects designed to support the UN human rights pillar. These include the organisation of the Glion Human Rights Dialogue - a two-day retreat for senior policy-makers; quarterly

'Friday Exchange' cross-regional roundtables (in Geneva and New York), held under the Chatham House rule, to consider and find common ground on especially sensitive or controversial human rights issues; pre-Human Rights Council session press breakfasts; regular inter-sessional policy dialogues with Council members; 'Presidential retreats' organised with the presidencies of the Human Rights Council; annual retreats for new members of the Council; 'Inside Track' pre-Council briefing primers; end-of-session 'Council reports' summarising the outcome of regular Council sessions; the construction of the yourHRC.org web-portal and associated reports, designed to increase transparency around the work and voting of Council members, and around Council elections; the development of URG online tools, including resolutions and voting portals; and the publication of opinion-editorial style articles by senior policymakers.

Finally, URG is occasionally contacted by third parties (e.g. governments, international organisations, NGOs) to undertake a specific project on a 'consultancy' basis. URG accepts such commissions where the project is consistent with its principles and programme of work.

V. Institutional developments

The URG was officially registered with a permanent address on 1st April 2013. Its statutes had been adopted earlier by a provisional constitutive general assembly, as per Swiss law. The goal was to create a not-for-profit association that would be small and cost-efficient, and produce work that would be relevant, useful, accessible and impactful.

The URG's main office was originally located at *Chemin du Grand-Montfleury 48, Versoix* (outside Geneva). In April 2013, the Canton of Geneva decided to cover the rental costs of the URG for a period of two years. That period came to an end in April 2015. In late 2017, due to the increased demands on its Analysts to participate in meetings and events in Geneva (in and around the UN), URG decided to move offices – securing a new, improved and better-located space at the *Maison de la Paix* in Geneva (close to the UN). URG Geneva's new address as of (officially) 1st February 2018 is: *Maison de la Paix, Building 5, Chemin Eugene-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva*.

In 2017, URG entered into an agreement with the *Ralph Bunche Institute (RBI) for International Studies, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY)*. As part of that agreement, which also covers collaboration in research and events, the RBI agreed to provide URG with permanent office space in New York. This meant that, as of January 2017, URG has had a permanent presence in New York – to help the organisation cover the General Assembly, Security Council and other UN organisations based at headquarters. The address is: *Graduate Center of CUNY, 365 5th Avenue, New York, NY10016-4309*.

By having offices in both Geneva and New York, it is hoped the URG will help bridge the 'New York – Geneva divide.'

Also in 2017, Ms Mariana Montoya Pineda, a URG consultant, began work to establish an office and permanent presence in Bogota, Colombia. In 2018, the new offices, created to help engage and empower national-level stakeholders and rights-holders across the Latin American region, was formally constituted under Colombia's freedom of association law, with a permanent address at: *Calle 69 A # 5-59, Casa 69, segundo piso, Bogotá D.C., Colombia*.

This first permanent regional presence is designed to enable URG to focus on the domestic impact of the UN human rights system – starting with the Latin American region; and to work closely with human rights defenders – especially environmental human rights defenders – from the region.

In 2016, URG made a formal application for UN ECOSOC consultative status. The application was approved by ECOSOC's NGO Committee in February 2018, and confirmed by ECOSOC member States in April 2018.

Governing bodies

The URG's strategy and programme of work is developed in consultation with a Board of Trustees. The Board is composed of eminent experts and thought-leaders from around the

world. An Advisory Group, made up of respected human rights scholars, civil society leaders and journalists advises the secretariat on substantive content.

As far as possible, the URG looks to implement its projects with Board or Advisory Group members, thus fulfilling its goal of acting as an interface between human rights expertise and human rights policymaking.

Board of Trustees

The URG has been able to gather an extremely distinguished group of experts to sit on its Board. At the beginning of January 2019, the members of the Board were:

Honorary President, President Ramos-Horta (Timor-Leste), former President of Timor-Leste and recipient of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize; Chairperson, Dr Ahmed Shaheed (Maldives), UN Special Rapporteur and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives; Dr Nazila Ghanea-Hercock (Iran), professor at the University of Oxford; Professor Juan Mendez (Argentina), former UN Special Rapporteur on torture; Professor John Knox (US), UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment; Justice Sophia A. B. Akuffo (Ghana), President and Judge of the African Court of Human and People's Rights; Professor Christof Heyns (South Africa), member of the UN Human Rights Committee, former Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions; Professor Dan Magraw (US), President Emeritus of the Centre for International Environmental Law; Professor Paul Hunt (NZ), former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, former member of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Professor Heiner Bielefeld (Germany), former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion; Ms Catarina de Albuquerque (Portugal), former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation; and Dr Pablo de Greiff (Colombia), former UN Special Rapporteur on truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

In February 2019, the Board invited Dr (Ms) Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (Chile), former UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, to join the Board. The invitation was accepted.

In October 2019, the Board invited Ms Marta Mauras, former Permanent Representative of Chile to the UN in Geneva to join the Board. The invitation was accepted.

Former Board members are: Professor Abdullahi An Na'im (Sudan), Sir Nigel Rodley (UK), Ms Asma Jahangir (Pakistan), Professor Michael O'Flaherty (Ireland), and Ms Yasmin Sooka (South Africa).

During 2019, the Board met officially (annual meeting) on 7th November and, *inter alia*, formally adopted 2018 annual report and audited report. Both had been sent to Board members by letter six months earlier, and provisionally adopted via a 'silence procedure.' During its annual meeting, the Board also made proposals for and debated issues to be included in the new 2020-2021 programme of work/Global Strategic Plan. In December 2019, the secretariat circulated an end-of-year letter updating the Board on important developments in 2019.

Advisory Group

The Advisory Group (formerly known as the Advisory Committee) is a network of eminent scholars, thought-leaders and opinion-formers from around the world. Members receive URG publications and information, and have the possibility, on an *ad hoc* basis, to contribute to projects of interest. Its membership includes:

Dr (Ms) Başak Çali (Turkey), Associate Professor at Koç University, Turkey; Mr Malcolm Langford (Norway), Director of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Programme at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, Oslo, Norway; Professor (Ms) Elizabeth Griffin (UK), Professor and Executive Director at Global Jindal University, New Delhi, India; Mr Rolf Ring (Sweden), Deputy Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at Lund University, Sweden; Professor (Mr) Frans Viljoen (South Africa), Director at the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, South Africa; Mr Scott Sheeran (New Zealand), former Senior Lecturer and Director of the LLM in International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law programme at the University of Essex, UK; Dr (Ms) Elvira Dominguez-Redondo (Spain), Senior Lecturer in Law at Middlesex University, UK; Mr Nick Cumming-Bruce (UK), Geneva-based journalist contributing to the IHT and the New York Times; Dr (Ms) Rosa Freedman, author of *The United Nations Human Rights Council: an early assessment* (March 2013); Mr Peter Splinter (Canada), former Amnesty International Representative to the United Nations in Geneva; Professor (Mr) George E. Edwards (USA), Director of the Programme in International Human Rights Law, Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law; Dr (Ms) Rose Nakayi (Uganda), Director, Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPPEC), School of Law, Makerere University, Uganda; Professor (Mr) Michael Ramsden (UK), Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Dr (Ms) Sejal Parmar (UK), Central European University, Budapest.

Secretariat

The URG's programme of work is implemented by a small secretariat. The URG Secretariat aims to achieve geographical and gender balance.

As of end December 2019, the composition of the URG secretariat was as follows:

- Mr Marc Limon (UK), Executive Director (Geneva)
- Ms Charlotte Marres (Belgium), Policy Analyst (Geneva)
- Ms Mariana Montoya Pineda (Colombia), Consultant (Bogota)
- Ms Danica Damplo (US), Policy Analyst (New York)
- Mr Louis Mason (UK/France), Fellow (Geneva)

In 2019, URG Latin America took on one additional consultant, Camila Marquez Leiva, to support a project, funded by a US foundation, to protect environmental human rights defenders in the region.

URG also has a paid internship programme, in Geneva and New York, organised in cooperation with members of the Advisory Group and partner universities. So far, under the Geneva paid internship programme, it has employed over 40 people (25 women and 15 men) on internship contracts of between three and six months. Efforts are made to provide internship opportunities for people outside Western Europe. So far, URG interns have hailed from the following countries: Turkey, Mauritius, Hong Kong/China, India, Kenya, South Africa, Denmark, Colombia, France, Greece, Spain, Ireland, UK, US and Romania. URG New York has so far employed 4 interns (all from the US).

In 2017, URG initiated a new 'Fellowship' programme in Geneva, designed to provide entry-level professional opportunities for recent university graduates (minimum master's level). The Fellowship provides work experience in the field of international human rights and allows the Fellows to 'learn by doing'. So far, four Fellows have been employed, one from Peru, one from Belgium, one from France and one from the UK. In 2018, this Fellowship programme was also rolled out in New York.

Presence in the Global South

As noted above, in 2016, URG took steps to establish a permanent office in Colombia. The office was formally opened in 2017, under the name Universal Rights Group Latin America and the Caribbean (URG LAC), and aims to improve knowledge and awareness about the UN human rights system in countries of the Latin American region, to help understand and strengthen the implementation/impact of international human rights obligations, commitments and recommendations at national and local levels, and to better support human rights defenders in the region. URG LAC focuses, in particular, on the issues of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), and corruption and human rights.

Furthermore, in order to ensure that its work is inclusive and reflective of perspectives from all regions and from developing as well as developed countries, in 2017 URG maintained small regional hubs (at no cost) in Mauritius, Hong Kong (at the Chinese University of Hong Kong), and Turkey (Koç University).

Such hubs are generally arranged through *memoranda of understanding* with academic institutions linked with the URG's Board or Advisory Group. Students and researchers in these hubs contribute to URG research, and also have the possibility to undertake internships.

Fundraising

As a relatively new organisation in a difficult financial climate, URG continues to do reasonably well in securing financial support from a range of donors. In 2019, support was received from the following governments and organisations:

- Norway – core funding.
- Denmark – core funding and project funding
- Switzerland – project funding.
- Germany – project funding.
- Netherlands – project funding.
- Singapore – project funding.
- UK – project funding.
- CTI – project funding.
- Commonwealth – consultancy.
- World Resources Institute (WRI) – project funding (LAC office).
- CODECA – consultancy (LAC office).
- Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) – project funding (LAC office).
- Ralph Bunsch Institute – project funding (NY office).
- Jacob Blaustein Institute (JBI) – project funding (NY office).
- University of Bristol – project funding.

Communication and marketing

The URG aims to be ahead of the curve in terms of its use of communications (public affairs and public relations) to ensure that its work is inclusive, accessible and has impact.

In 2019, URG continued to work with the design company mydearagency.com to develop its website, emailers, brand, reports, etc.

URG's website, universal-rights.org, went live in late November 2013. In the meantime, it has become one of the world's key online resources for those interested in human rights. In 2018, there were 34,459 individual users (up from 25,000 in 2017), showing that the site has become a key resource for those interested in international human rights policy. These users participated in 47,951 individual sessions (up from 45,400 sessions in 2017). There were over 74,000 individual page views in 2018. Unfortunately, there is no data for 2019 because of a hack during the course of the year.

In 2017, URG expanded the universal-rights.org website into three versions or editions – one for URG Geneva, one for URG New York, and one for URG LAC (in Spanish).

In 2019, URG undertook a major redesign of its website (covering all three editions). This was completed in November 2019, and the new-look site is now live. In 2019, URG also rebranded its policy reports and other communications.

In addition to news, new policy reports, information on events, etc., the website offers users, free of charge, a set of useful human rights tools including: a resolutions portal (where users can search for and access thousands of UN human rights resolutions); a voting portal (to review the voting patterns of Council members); and Inside Track. The website also links to two other URG administered sites: www.environment-rights.org and www.yourHRC.org.

yourHRC.org went live in late October 2015. In 2019, yourHRC.org secured 2,424 new users and over 5,000 individual users overall. There were 9,599 individual page views, with particular peaks in September and October – the period of the Human Rights Council elections. This suggests that the yourHRC.org website is being used to help inform voting decisions during Council elections, and is helping improve transparency and awareness around those elections.

URG is increasingly producing short videos to explain key human rights issues and present URG research. The aim is to make the universal human rights system more accessible and understandable to non-experts. A first video, introducing the international human rights system, was released in 2017, and a second, about implementation, in 2018. In 2019, URG distributed two new videos: one on prevention, and one on digital technology and human rights.

Regarding social media, URG maintains accounts with Twitter (over 4,700 followers across the three offices, and nearly 20,000 tweets and retweets) and Facebook (2,679 followers, 2,601 likes). In 2017, URG's New York and Colombia offices also established their own Twitter accounts (the URG LAC account tweets in Spanish). Separate Twitter accounts and Facebook pages have also been established to promote and strengthen the impact of www.yourHRC.org and www.environment-rights.org.

URG translates some of its policy reports and articles into Spanish and French. Inside Track is now routinely translated into French.

URG in the press

In 2019, URG, its work and ideas featured regularly in major newspapers, magazines and newswires, including the Economist, the New York Times, the Guardian, and Reuters. Some of the articles can be read here:

<https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-in-the-press/>

eDelivery

In line with its founding principles, URG seeks to leverage information technology to ensure that its events, information notes, opinion pieces and policy reports are available and accessible to a wide range of people in all regions of the world. Its events (except policy dialogues such as the Friday Exchange or pre-Glion preparatory dialogues) are public events and are now made available to people around the world in 360-degree interactive streaming via Periscope and Facebook.

URG sends out information on new policy reports, 'By invitation' blogs, and events on a regular basis. It also sends out a monthly e-newsletter ('URG Update') summarising all relevant information about publications, events, blogs, and tools. Emailers are sent electronically to over 5,000 individuals. URG's policy reports and policy briefs are published electronically as well as in print, and can be read on-line in normal PDF and in interactive PDF.

Due to demand from its stakeholders, URG now, as a matter of course, also publishes all its reports in hard copy. These are mailed to all missions in Geneva and New York, to members of the URG Board, to select foreign ministries, NGOs, international organisations, businesses, and the media.

SIM

In line with its founding principles, URG has put in place internal systems to ensure that, for each project, it will be possible to 'Show Impact & Measure' (SIM). This includes an impact analysis across relevant UN bodies, governments, NGOs and the media.

VI. Implementation of the Global Strategic Plan

The 2018-2019 GSP comprises 17 projects across four broad programme areas.

Below is a summary of the activities undertaken between January 2019 and end December 2019, in connection with the implementation of the current GSP.

Programme 1 - In Focus: human rights implementation and impact

Project 1

National mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up (NMIRFs): how do States translate international human rights norms into local reality, and how to measure progress?

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Context

The project adopts a 'bottom-up' approach to understanding how, and to what extent, States implement international human rights obligations and recommendations at domestic level. The project also aims to provide a space for States to share – and replicate - good practice, and aims to provide advice to States (especially developing countries), UN mechanisms and development agencies, about how to strengthen domestic implementation, reporting, impact and measurement.

Impact

One of the main *rationales* for the establishment of the URG was to 'break the Geneva bubble' and promote the impact and relevance of international human rights systems and policy at national/local level. With this in mind, Programme 1, including Project 1, continues a long-standing commitment on the part of URG to understand and strengthen domestic effectiveness and impact.

Through these and other URG activities, improving 'human rights implementation and impact' has become a main policy objective of the Council and the wider UN system. The third Glion Human Rights Dialogue, and URG's 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 GSPs, have been key drivers of this new global human rights 'Implementation Agenda' – now referred to regularly by senior UN figures including the UN Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the President of the Human Rights Council.

URG's project 1 – together with projects 2 and 3 - is designed to capture, understand and further promote this new 'Implementation Agenda,' especially focusing on the global development of NMIRFs. As part of that effort, during 2019, URG co-organised a major international meeting in Nadi, Fiji, for countries of the Pacific region, to share good practice with the domestic implementation of international human rights obligations and commitments, including as a contribution to the SDGs, and to negotiate a first-ever set of international principles for the establishment and operation of NMIRFs – the 'Pacific Principles.' Building on the example of that meeting, between July and September, URG worked with Paraguay to draft and help secure the adoption, by consensus, of a truly

important UN resolution: Human Rights Council resolution 42/30 on 'Promoting international cooperation to support NMIRFs.' This is a first-ever UN resolution on the subject of how to scale-up human rights implementation at national level, finally bridge the decades-long 'implementation gap,' and provide a major boost to progress towards the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. With the resolution, the Council decided to launch a process of five regional meetings, covering all UN member States, to drive the quantitative and qualitative development of NMIRFs.

URG also expanded its support during the year for developing countries that wish to establish or strengthen NMIRFs. In 2019, URG conducted capacity-building missions to the Pacific, to South-East Asia, and to Africa; including dedicated bilateral support for Gambia, Tanzania, Thailand, and the Marshall Islands. In November 2019, URG delivered a training session at the UN's regional office in Bangkok for all countries of the Asia-Pacific region, including ASEAN States, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India. As part of this capacity-building work, URG has also developed, with partners, 'implementation and reporting support software' (IMPACT OSS). This is now used by Samoa, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Singapore and others.

Finally, in 2019 URG continued to work with Portugal and around 40 other States (mainly developing countries), to further develop a 'Group of Friends' on human rights implementation and impact/NMIRFs. In 2019, the Group of Friends (of which URG is a member) organised regular meetings in Geneva to exchange good practice in the establishment of NMIRFs, delivered joint statements on implementation at the Council, delivered advanced questions and recommendations on NMIRFs to all reporting States under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and supported the adoption of resolution 42/30.

Next steps

In 2020, URG will work closely with OHCHR and the 'Group of Friends' on the organisation of the five regional meetings on NMIRFs, will launch the 'Pacific Principles' in Geneva and New York, and will upscale its support for developing countries to establish/strengthen NMIRFs – to the benefit of human rights, sustainable development, and prevention.

Project 2

Strengthening the role of development partners (including UN Country Teams, bilateral donor States) in the implementation of UN human rights recommendations and the SDGs: what is a rights-based approach to overseas development assistance and programming, and how could it work better?

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, Charlotte Marres

Context

The project aims to map emerging strategies adopted by development partners to promote sustainable development by supporting countries with the implementation of priority recommendations received from the UN human rights mechanisms (often in concert with the implementation of SDG goals and targets). The project seeks to identify, understand, and promote the replication of good practices in this regard.

Impact

In May 2019, URG organised, with the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), and in coordination with the Norwegian Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, a second meeting (the first was held in Oslo in April 2018) of bilateral and multilateral development partners in Stockholm, Sweden, to share good practices in the development of 'rights-based approaches' to ODA, to exchange information on new international development strategies that seek to integrate a human rights perspective, to discuss the human rights implications of the UN Secretary-General's development system reforms, to discuss how human rights obligations and 2030 Agenda commitments are mutually-reinforcing, and to look at how emerging techniques to measure the human rights impact of ODA might be expanded in the future.

The meeting included representatives from the development agencies of Australia, Denmark, EU, France, Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK; and from international agencies and programmes including OHCHR, UNFPA, UNDP, UNDOCO, OECD and the World Bank. It also included UN Resident Coordinators, and NHRI and civil representatives. URG published a report of the meeting in November 2019.

It was evident at the meeting that the 'Oslo+' process, as it has become known, has been part of, and has helped catalyse, a remarkable shift in attitudes and approaches vis-à-vis 'rights-based approaches to development.' The traditional idea of such approaches, i.e. that they were essentially limited to the notion that ODA should be delivered in a manner that respected procedural rights (e.g. the right to information and the right to participation), has given way to a far more sophisticated concept whereby development assistance should be informed and guided by recipient countries' own international human rights obligations and commitments, and should aim to help those countries implement the recommendations they receive from the UN human rights mechanisms. As well as strengthening the enjoyment of human rights in the countries concerned, this provides a significant boost to achievement of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind,' (because over 90% of SDG targets are grounded in international human rights law).

At the meeting, participants heard from countries such as France, which has just passed a new international development strategy that this new concept at its heart; and representatives of the UN development system who explained how the reforms of the Resident Coordinator system and of the UN Development Assistance Frameworks (now called UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks) are premised on integrating human rights recommendations into national development planning.

Finally, the Oslo+ meetings have been a key part of a global push to ensure that national civil society, including human rights defenders, and NHRIs, are part of domestic efforts to strengthen implementation of human rights obligations and SDG commitments. This point was reflected in Council resolution 42/30 which affirmed that international development cooperation, 'including cooperation for the purpose of strengthening the follow-up to and effective implementation of their international human rights obligations and commitments, should promote an inclusive exercise that engages and involves all national stakeholders, including government agencies, national human rights institutions and civil society, at all stages.'

Next steps

A third meeting (Oslo+2) will be held in Montreux, Switzerland, in June 2020, hosted by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and URG. This third meeting of the group will look, in particular, at the contribution international development assistance can and should make to helping States build national resilience, and thereby preventing crises and conflicts.

Project 3

The role of national parliaments, human rights institutions (NHRIs), and local civil society in promoting, monitoring and reporting on domestic compliance with international human rights norms

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Project partners

Commonwealth

Context

At present, the national implementation of UN human rights obligations and commitments (via the implementation of recommendations from the UPR, Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies) is usually driven by bureaucratic processes within government. Yet for these recommendations to be effectively implemented (and reported on), all relevant national stakeholders must be involved. For example, over 50% of UPR recommendations require new legislation or legislative amendment in order to be implemented, meaning parliamentarians must be consulted and involved. Likewise, in order to have transparent, balanced and objective reporting on progress with implementation, NHRIs and NGOs must necessarily be involved at every stage of the 'implementation-reporting cycle.'

URG's project 3 is designed to fully understand and leverage the roles of parliamentarians, NHRIs and NGOs in the human rights implementation-reporting cycle, as a key means of developing strong and inclusive NMIRFs and driving progress with the domestic enjoyment of human rights, and the realisation of the SDGs.

Impact

In November 2018, URG, together with the Commonwealth, launched a policy report outlining the results of its analysis of the role of parliaments in implementation, oversight and reporting. The research covered parliaments and parliamentarians in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, and included draft regional principles on the role of parliaments in implementation and oversight. The report was launched in Geneva and London, alongside the Commonwealth, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), OHCHR and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

During its 38th session in June 2018, the Council considered a report by the High Commissioner on 'The contribution of parliaments to the work of the Council and its Universal Periodic Review,' submitted pursuant to Council resolution 35/29. In the report, the High Commissioner for Human Rights proposed, for the first time, universal principles for the role of parliaments in implementation, oversight and reporting. These principles built on ideas contained in the regional principles covered in URG's policy report. URG also participated in a June 2019 workshop organised by the IPU and OHCHR on the question of how to scale-up parliamentary involvement/engagement with the UN human rights system, and with implementation. Some of the results of that workshop, including a review of the draft principles were shared with State delegations in New York in October, during the 74th session of the GA, at an event on 'Increasing parliaments engagement with human rights' organised by URG, OHCHR and the University of Oxford.

During the international meeting on NMIRFs in Nadi, Fiji during early 2019, URG secured the involvement of a number of parliamentarians, judges, and NHRI and NGO representatives; to ensure that consultation with and the involvement of these groups will be a key guiding principle for the development of NMIRFs. Indeed, this point is fully reflected in the 'Pacific Principles' as well as in Council resolution 42/30 on NMIRFs. The latter recognises 'the constructive role and contribution of all branches of State, as well as of national human rights institutions, civil society, academia and other relevant stakeholders in the strengthening of national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, and encouraging their continued participation in and contribution to these mechanisms.'

Next steps

Parliamentarians, NHRIs and NGOs will all be invited to and fully involved in the five regional consultations on national implementation/NMIRFs, to be organised under resolution 42/30. URG will also work to ensure that any emerging regional or universal principles for national implementation/NMIRFs take full account of their role in the promotion and protection of human rights and in sustainable development, including environmental protection.

Project 4

Measuring human rights impact and change

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Project partners

Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)

Context

Over the past four years, URG has worked to increase interest in, and drive progress with, the domestic implementation of States' international human rights obligations and commitments (i.e. the 'implementation agenda'). However, that leaves the question: what is the impact of implementation on the actual enjoyment of human rights? Is the UN human rights system driving improvements in human rights around the world, or are human rights 'in retreat'?

To answer this question, it is necessary to apply 'human rights indicators' and thereby enable the empirical measurement of human rights change and impact. Unfortunately, aside from one OHCHR report in 2012, the international human rights community (unlike the development community) has made very little progress in this area over the past 20 years.

Impact

To rectify this situation, in early 2019 URG signed a memorandum of understanding with the 'Human Rights Measurement Initiative' (HRMI) – a network of academic institutions around the world working to gather indicator data for all UN member States, analyse that data and show human rights change. In June 2019, URG published a report with HRMI entitled 'Is the global human rights situation improving or deteriorating - making the case for the empirical measurement of human rights change.' The aim of the report, which was presented to States and civil society in Geneva and in New York during the early summer of 2019, was to introduce the topic, explain its importance, and seek the views of States on the chosen methodology.

Next steps

In 2020-2021, as part of its new programme of work, URG will work with HRMI to build a 'State of the world' human rights report – a web portal and annual report showing the main human rights trends across UN member States. This will cover both civil and political rights, and economic and social rights. At the end of each year, interesting changes will be profiled in a 'State of the world' in 2020 report.

Programme 2 – Contemporary and emerging human rights issues

Project 5

Corruption and human rights: designing effective UN interventions

Project leaders

Marc Limon, URG, and Angela Barkhouse, Kroll

Context

Corruption is one of the most important causes and consequences of human rights violations. Yet, until now, it has been largely ignored as a human rights issue. This is particularly significant in terms of the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG16. Project 4 aims to strengthen the role of the Human Rights Council and the wider UN human rights system in the global fight against corruption, by developing evidence about the human rights consequences of corruption, by developing political narratives about the importance of human rights in the fight against corruption, by bringing businesses and sovereign wealth funds into the conversation, and by drawing attention to the emergence of 'Global Magnitsky laws' – new human rights accountability instruments (now present or under development in the US, Canada, UK and the EU) designed to secure individual accountability for serious human rights violations and corruption.

Impact

In 2018, URG worked with a private sector company, Kroll, to create and apply computer algorithms to calculate the impact of corruption across a range of internationally protected human rights (especially economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development), and across 180 UN member States. A policy brief containing the results of this analysis was published in May 2018, at an event organised with the Permanent Mission of the UK.

The policy brief was designed to 'make the case' for why the Council and the UN human rights system should take the issue of corruption seriously, and should develop real solutions/mechanisms to a) provide technical assistance to States that wish to tackle corruption but lack the capacity to do so effectively, and b) to hold those accused of serious human rights violations linked to corruption to account. Activities across both tracks, including events, articles by international thought-leaders, and *URG Insights* blogs continued throughout 2019.

In May 2019, URG invited Norway's sovereign wealth fund (Government Pension Fund Global) to speak at the sixth Glion Human Rights Dialogue about its 'Council on Ethics,' which includes controls on investments being used to fuel corruption and human rights violations. In autumn 2019, URG organised a roundtable discussion with the Swedish Minister of Trade and assembled ambassadors on how to better provide guidance to companies to ensure that private sector investments overseas likewise do not contribute to

corruption and/or human rights violations. At the meeting, URG called for concepts of 'corporate social responsibility' and 'human rights due diligence' to be replaced with a new concept – based on the premise that human rights, sustainable development, environmental protection and corruption and all interlinked – called 'comprehensive corporate governance.' Also, in the autumn URG spoke at a meeting of business leaders at the World Economic Forum (WEF) about human rights, corruption and 'environmental and social governance' (ESG) – an increasingly important private sector framework to guide investment decisions by large banks and other financial services companies.

Finally, regarding Magnitsky laws, URG has continued to push this 'new form of accountability' in Geneva, New York and elsewhere. That included the organisation of a 'Friday Exchange' on Magnitsky acts in late 2019 in Geneva. In an important new development, in 2019 the EU Council of Ministers agreed to give a mandate to the European Commission to begin work on an EU 'Magnitsky act.' The Nordic Council also expressed support for such a move.

Next steps

In 2020, as part of a project on 'A new accountability: from COIs to Magnitsky laws?', URG will work with interested States (e.g. the US, the Netherlands) to begin discussions about the emergence of Magnitsky laws around the world, and what this means for the UN human rights protection system and for accountability. Such multilateral discussions will also be important to ensure that such instruments develop and are applied in a way that respects international human rights law, due process and the rule of law.

Project 6

Human rights and sustainable development: understanding and strengthening the contribution of the international human rights system to the realisation of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind'

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Project partners

Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Danish Institute for Human Rights

Context

The Declaration on the Right to Development turned 30 in 2016 yet remains as divisive as it was at the time of its adoption. This is disappointing when one considers the importance of the basic premise of the Declaration – that individual human beings should be the central subjects of development, and should have equal access to the benefits of socio-economic progress. The 2016 agreement on the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the SDGs, premised on 'leaving no one behind,' is based upon a similar ideal. The SDGs offer a new opportunity and a common point of departure for States and other stakeholders to understand the links between human rights and development, understand the role of the UN human rights system in contributing to sustainable development and the realisation of the SDGs, and identify gaps in that contribution. Ultimately, it is important that the international community understands the complementary and mutually reinforcing nature of international human rights obligations and commitments, and the SDG targets, so that States can make progress in both areas in an integrated and 'joined-up' way.

Impact

In 2017, URG worked with a number of States, including Chile and Denmark, to build a new Group of Friends to take forward an initiative on 'human rights and the SDGs' at the Council. This Group, which now also includes Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Luxembourg, Portugal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Uruguay, OHCHR and URG, then built a programme of work to leverage the practical links between the UN human rights system and the SDGs, with the aim of maximising the UN human rights pillar's contribution to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda.

In June 2017, the Group of Friends hosted a conference (organised by URG) on this issue for over 100 States, plus relevant parts of the UN secretariat, NGOs and NHRIs. The consultation introduced the concept and then heard from a number of case studies, including China, Germany and Ecuador, about how they are working at national level to drive 'joined up' progress on human rights and the SDGs.

In March 2018, the group of friends, with support from URG, presented a new draft Council resolution on human rights and the SDGs. The draft took forward URG proposals to create an inter-sessional 'platform' or 'space' at the Council where States can share experiences on how they are taking forwards human rights implementation in a manner that also drives progress with the realisation of the SDGs; and then to link that 'platform' with the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on the SDGs in New York. The resolution was finally adopted by consensus as resolution 37/24. At the same session, a further resolution on the subject was also adopted – this called for the President of ECOSOC/Chair of the HLPF to travel to Geneva once a year to brief the Council on the main outcomes of that year's Forum.

A first inter-sessional meeting under the resolution was held at the Council in January 2019, with the participation of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Assistant Secretary-Generals, Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland and former High Commissioner for Human Rights), Jeffrey Sachs (economist), and over 500 representatives from States and civil society. The day before the inter-sessional meeting, URG, Denmark and Chile organised a welcome reception for participants. Over one hundred ambassadors and other senior officials were in attendance. The second inter-sessional was held in December 2019, again with high-level representation including Jens Wendel, the Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on UN reform. The second inter-sessional focused on presenting and sharing national experiences with the integrated implementation, tracking, measurement and reporting of human rights and the SDGs and targets.

In summer 2019, a report of the second intersessional was presented to the 2019 HLPF by the President of the Human Rights Council (the Permanent Representative of Senegal). A few months later, at the Council's September session, the Chair of the HLPF (the Permanent Representative of Norway in New York) presented the outcome of the 2019 HLPF to the Council.

URG's work under Project 5 has helped transform perceptions and understanding about the links between human rights and development at the Council and – increasingly – across the wider UN. From a situation in 2017 when those links were the cause of significant division, centred on disagreements over the 'right to development' and 'what comes first – development or human rights,' today there is wide agreement and understanding that human rights and sustainable development are interlinked and mutually-reinforcing. What is more, the growing understanding among States (including both developed and developing) that human rights implementation makes a positive contribution to SDG implementation

'leaving no one behind,' and vice versa, has helped change perceptions of the UN human rights system amongst developing countries, especially developing country delegations in New York (i.e. that the system is there to support progress, not only to criticise).

Perhaps the strongest indicator of the impact of Project 5 is that today, 'human rights and the SDGs' has become a top priority for both the High Commissioner (e.g. it has been reflected in many of her speeches in Geneva and New York) and the Secretary-General (e.g. it is one of the priority issues highlighted in his new 'Call to Action' on human rights; and is the conceptual basis of many of the Secretary-General's reforms of the UN development system (including the requirement that human rights recommendations should be systematically integrated into UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks at country-level).

Next steps

In 2020-2021, URG will continue to support the group of friends on human rights and the SDGs with, for example, the adoption of a second Council resolution – mandating a series of three inter-sessionals. URG will also work with States (developing States) and UN Country Teams to promote the integration or 'joining up' of human rights recommendations and the SDGs 'leaving no one behind' at national level, including via the development of NMIRFs.

Project 7

Environmental human rights defenders: emerging challenges and solutions

Project leaders

Marc Limon, URG secretariat, John Knox, URG Board of Trustees

Context

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, environmental and land use human rights defenders (EHRDs) are a group of growing importance and are at particular risk. Various reports by the NGO Global Witness have noted a sharp rise in the number of deaths of EHRDs around the world.

Impact

In 2014, URG played a key role in bringing the situation of EHRDs to the attention of the international community when it organised a regional consultation at UNEP Geneva bringing together 18 EHRDs from Africa and Europe, plus relevant international organisations, mechanisms and NGOs. During the consultation, EHRDs delivered personal testimonies relaying their experiences and the challenges they face. Participants then discussed possible international policy responses to better support EHRDs and their work. One proposal was to construct a web portal to provide information to, guidance for, and tools to be used by, EHRDs. This was the first ever UN-level meeting focused explicitly on the situation of EHRDs.

In 2017, URG published a major new policy report on the situation of EHRDs, authored by Professor John Knox, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment. The report was presented at a launch event at the UN Human Rights Council, with the participation of Professor Knox, EHRDs themselves, OHCHR, UNEP and around 50 States (including States, such as Brazil and Honduras, where EHRDs are at particular risk).

Later in 2017, URG launched (in English and Spanish) www.environment-rights.org - a new web portal designed to help EHRDs. The portal is sponsored by URG, UNEP, OHCHR and

various NGOs. This was the first time UNEP had ever publicly sponsored a human rights project.

During 2017-2019, URG LAC, with the support of the UN, Spain, and WRI, organised a number of regional workshops for EHRDs in the Latin American region. These were designed to inform them of their rights, explain how they can access international help and support, present the environment-rights.org web portal, and raise international awareness of their plight. The meetings also sought to identify concrete ways in which civil society organisations and the UN could contribute to create a safe and enabling environment for EHRD. The workshops have been a major success – helping to build the capacity of, and support the work of, around 70 EHRDs. URG LAC has also helped build a global network for NGOs dedicated to supporting EHRDs and their work. As a result of these efforts, since December 2018, URG LAC, with the support of local and international NGOs, has designed and built a first 'Directory of support organisations working with land and environmental defenders.' The tool was launched in 2019.

In 2019, URG redesigned environment-rights.org to make it easier to access and more useful. The new portal was launched with events at the UN in New York and in Geneva. The new web portal was also used as the basis of two further events in New York in 2019 – one with the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) on 'Supporting environmental and land rights defenders: sharing initiatives and best practices,' and one with OHCHR and UNEP on 'Safe climate and the right to a healthy environment.' Both events were held during the 74th session of the GA in October.

URG's work on EHRDs has coincided with an enormous increase in global attention to the plight of EHRDs, and a major increase in international determination to protect them and support their vital work (vital for human rights, environmental protection, and the achievement of the SDGs). The most recent illustration of this heightened interest was Norway's decision to focus its regular resolution on human rights defenders at HRC40 (March 2019) on the subject of EHRDs. During HRC40, States, UN experts and NGOs organised a range of side events on issues of human rights, environmental protection, and EHRDs. This made clear that the situation of EHRDs is now at the very top of the Council's agenda.

In 2018-2019, States of the Latin American region adopted and began ratifying a new regional (binding) agreement on environmental rights, with a particular focus on EHRDs (the Escazu Agreement). Around the same time, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued an advisory opinion, in response to an inquiry presented by Colombia, on States' human rights obligations related to the environment. These are very significant developments, driven in part by URG's work on the issue.

Next steps

Further regional workshops in Latin America – for both EHRDs and governments – are planned for 2020. Moreover, in 2019, URG entered into an agreement with the UN Environment Programme under which UNEP will provide content and tools to environment-rights.org and UNEP and URG will co-organise capacity-building workshops for EHRDs in Africa and Asia.

In 2020, URG will work with the Council's core group on human rights and environment, and the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and environment, to press for universal recognition of the right to a clean, safe, healthy and sustainable environment. This would have significant benefits for domestic protection of the rights of EHRDs.

Other projects / new projects

In addition to the above projects, URG has also continued to work on the implementation of recommendations generated through earlier projects, including:

- **Religion-based reservations to the main human rights conventions.** This policy report was published in May 2017. In early 2019, URG organised a regional meeting of women human rights defenders and women's rights NGOs from North Africa and the Middle East, to discuss how to use the international human rights conventions, including CEDAW, and campaigns against reservations to those treaties, to drive progress in women's rights. The workshop was a great success, with the participation of around 50 women HRDs. The results were shared with Geneva diplomats and NGOs during a panel discussion organised in partnership with the Permanent Mission of Germany in late January 2019.
- **Combatting global religious intolerance: the implementation of Council resolution 16/18.** In follow-up to URG's project on combatting intolerance, in 2016 and 2017, URG worked with Singapore to organise the sixth meeting of the Istanbul Process (in Singapore), and thereafter to prepare a report of the meeting for distribution in Geneva and New York. In 2019, URG continued to work with the quartet of key supporting States (Pakistan, Turkey, UK and US) to drive the implementation of the 16/18 action plan and maintain consensus at the Human Rights Council. In April 2019, to 'relaunch' and 're-energise' the Istanbul Process, URG organised a 'stocktaking' meeting in Geneva with the EU Delegation and the Permanent Mission of Denmark. Through the presentation of case studies from around the world, the meeting revealed that considerable progress has been made with the implementation of the 16/18 action over the past ten years. In November 2019, URG worked with the Netherlands to organise the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process in The Hague. The meeting brought together over 120 representatives of States, civil society, religious communities and social media companies to discuss how to build tolerant and resilient societies through, for example, social inclusion policies, and how to combat hate speech online through public-private partnerships.
- **Transitional justice.** In preparation for a new project due to start in 2020, in April URG NY organised a panel debate with the EU Delegation to the UN in New York on 'Transitional justice: Rising trends, challenges and opportunities.'

Programme 3 – Human rights institutions, mechanisms and processes

Project 8

The development of a comprehensive and coherent 'prevention policy' at the Human Rights Council: the implementation of paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Context

Thanks largely to the third and fourth Glion Human Rights Dialogues; 'prevention' became a key focus for the Council in 2018. With recognition that the international community was not able to halt or effectively respond to humanitarian disasters in places such as Syria, Yemen and Myanmar, has come a determination to act, in the future, to better *prevent* such crises from developing in the first place. Shortly after URG, Norway and Switzerland began to push for the operationalization of the Council's prevention mandate, the new UN Secretary-General announced that building a UN-wide prevention agenda would be his main priority while in Office.

Against this backdrop, URG, working with countries including Norway, Switzerland, Sierra Leone and Colombia, has taken concrete steps to operationalize the Council's prevention mandate (contained in operative paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251). URG's on-going project on prevention seeks to distil and secure agreement between States as to what 'prevention' means in practice for the Council, build an effective prevention strategy (including new processes and mechanisms) across the UN's human rights pillar, and link the Council's prevention actions to the UN Secretary-General's wider prevention strategy.

Impact

Although the potential value of prevention has long been recognised at the UN, the Council's prevention mandate was largely ignored for the first ten years of the body's existence. That changed in 2016, thanks largely to the work, in the context of the Glion Human Rights Dialogues, of Norway, Switzerland and the URG. During Glion III, a high level opening panel on prevention, featuring the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, reflected on the importance of finally implementing paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251. During further discussions at Glion IV, States identified key building blocks of a human rights 'prevention strategy.'

The outcomes of the Glion Human Rights Dialogues have in turn driven progress at the Human Rights Council itself. For example, at the 32nd and 33rd sessions of the Council, Ireland presented cross-regional statements proposing a number of 'trigger' criteria to guide Council members on which situations merit preventative action. The original draft of these 'Irish Principles' (a term coined by URG) was developed by URG analysts.

At the 36th and 37th sessions of the Council, URG supported Norway, Switzerland, Sierra Leone and Colombia to draft, negotiate and deliver (on behalf of 69 and 72 States respectively) two joint statements on the operationalization of paragraph 5f. These statements laid out the sponsors' thinking on the issue and their plans for action.

Most importantly, at the 38th session of the Council in June 2018, the core group, with the support of URG, drafted and tabled a resolution on the operationalization of the Council's prevention mandate. The final resolution put in place a process of consultations in Geneva and New York, overseen by a group of three experts. At the end of those consultations, the three experts were asked to present framework proposals for the operationalisation of the Council's prevention mandate.

The consultations by the group of three experts (two open informals in Geneva and one in New York, plus bilateral meetings with the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner and others) took place over the course of 2019. URG provided advice to the three experts (two of which are URG board members) and OHCHR on the focus, content and format of the consultations. In New York, URG organised a meeting between the experts and members of civil society. URG also participated actively in the consultations. During the first consultation

in Geneva, URG's Executive Director was a panellist during a discussion on the new systems, tools and mechanisms needed to operationalise the Council's prevention mandate. URG also presented a graphic at that meeting, visualising where and how the Council's prevention mandate 'fits' within the overall UN prevention agenda. URG delivered statements during each session of the various consultations.

Finally, in late 2019/early 2020, URG published a new policy report 'The Prevention Council: placing human rights at the heart of the UN's prevention agenda.' This report included, for the first time at the UN, an economic or 'business case' analysis showing the benefits to States of shifting to a 'human rights-first' approach to prevention. It also presented a 'five-point plan' for the operationalisation of the Council's prevention mandate.

The impact of URG's work, with Norway and Switzerland, on prevention has been profound. From a situation in 2016 where the Council's prevention mandate (i.e. paragraph 5f) was almost completely ignored, today it has become one of the very highest human rights priorities for States, OHCHR and the UN as a whole. In 2019, it has continued to dominate the speeches of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, especially at the GA, the Secretary-General, and high-level government representatives at the Council and the GA (see Part I of this report). In mid 2019 the Council's mandate and role and prevention was recognised, for the first time ever, in a report of the Secretary-General (his latest report on 'Sustaining peace'). In early 2020, the Secretary-General launched his 'Call to Action' on human rights, which included, as one of the UN's key human rights priorities for the coming years, prevention – including the central role of the Human Rights Council.

Next steps

In early 2020, URG will work closely with the group of three experts and OHCHR ahead of the presentation of their final report and proposals in March, and will use its policy report on prevention to shape thinking and improve understanding about what prevention is, and is not, and in particular what the Council's prevention mandate means in practical terms. Between March and June 2020, URG will work closely with Norway and other members of the core group on the elaboration of a draft resolution implementing key conclusions and proposals in the report of the group of three experts. URG will also continue to push, in Geneva and New York, for the human rights pillar to be given a more central role in the overall UN prevention agenda.

Project 9

Human Rights Council reform: efficiency, effectiveness and membership

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Partner(s)

Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, UK, Council Presidencies

Context

URG has continued, throughout 2018, to play a predominant role in Geneva and New York in efforts to drive **reform** of the Council and the UN human rights pillar, to make it more efficient, effective and relevant to people on the ground.

Building on URG's December 2017 conference on strengthening the Council, organised with the Netherlands and the UK, in 2019 URG continued to help guide the Council President's

reform efforts, including the adoption of new **efficiency** measures in December 2019. These efficiency measures are the culmination of steps begun in 2015 with a first efficiency drive launched by the German Presidency of the Council and URG, as well as an earlier initiative kick-started in 2014 by Norway, Turkey and the URG.

In order to shift this debate towards **effectiveness**, in 2018 URG and Switzerland developed a new policy report on the GA's 2021-2026 review of the Council. The 'Vision 2021' report sought to present ideas on the nature and scope of possible Council contributions to the GA's review, and to identify key areas where the effectiveness and impact of the Council might be strengthened in the future.

Lastly, building on the December 2017 Council strengthening conference, in 2018 URG worked with the Netherlands and the UK to begin to establish a new 'contact group' of States on **Council membership**. The Group works to improve the diversity and inclusivity of the Council and its membership, by making the body more accessible to Small States, especially LDCs and SIDS. Related to this last point, in 2019, URG continued to support the UN Trust Fund for LDCs and SIDS – providing capacity-building sessions to over 20 delegates at all three sessions of the Council.

Impact

URG is a leader, in Geneva and New York, on Council reform and strengthening, as well as on linking the UN's human rights pillar with the other two pillars of the Organisation.

In 2019, URG's efforts to improve the Council's efficiency, begun with Norway in 2014, continued to pay dividends. Improving efficiency, especially against a difficult budgetary situation for the UN, has been a central priority of the last six Council Presidents. This has scored a number of achievements, including a major drop in the number of resolutions tabled and adopted over the past six sessions (with one exception). Moreover, in late 2019, States agreed to reduce the number of general debates at the Council – finally breaking the idea that every agenda item must be addressed at every session of the Council. URG's ideas and proposals (dating back to 2017) helped shape this package of reforms, as well as a similar package adopted in December 2018.

Regarding effectiveness reforms, in particular in the context of the GA's 2021-2026 review of the Council, URG's 'Vision 2021' report helped inspire the Council President, in February 2019, to organise a first informal consultation on the body's contribution to the GA's review. This was followed, in April 2019 and December 2019 by two meetings in New York organised by URG and Iceland, to discuss the content and timing of any Council contribution, and as well as the timing and format of the GA's overall review. These latter meetings demonstrated a significant shift in thinking in New York and Geneva – in line with the recommendations presented in 'Vision 2021.' In particular, there is now wide agreement that a) the Council must contribute to the GA's review, b) that the GA must give a signal as to the timing of that contribution, and c) that 'Geneva's' contribution can include an independent review by the High Commissioner/the Secretary-General.

Finally, on the issue of membership, the contact group on membership met for the first time in Geneva in early 2019 and adopted its terms of reference. In late 2019 the group met for the first time in New York. Over the course of 2019, the contact group (with URG acting as the secretariat) met three times, held a number of side events and receptions, and organised exchanges between existing/ past members and SIDS-LDCs considering become more active at the Council. In October 2019, URG presented, with Norway, the latest edition of

the yourHRC.org guide to the Council elections – assessing each candidate against the criteria set out in GA resolution 60/251. In January 2019 and January 2020 URG organised the latest two ‘retreats’ for new members of the Council. Those retreats have now been part of the Council’s calendar for six years.

In 2019 two SIDS - Bahamas and Fiji – became members of the Council, as did another Small State – Iceland. These countries played a dynamic role in many of the Council’s key successes in 2019. Iceland and Fiji also became Vice-Presidents of the Council. In October 2019, Marshall Islands was also elected to the Council. In February 2020, Maldives and Seychelles announced their candidatures. All of these countries have engaged closely with URG over the past three years on questions of membership and Council reform – including via the ‘contact group,’ ‘YourHRC.org election guides,’ and the Trust Fund. URG helped with the campaigns of Fiji, Bahamas and Marshall Islands, including through help in drafting their ‘pledges and commitments.’

Since URG began working on the issue of improved Council membership five years ago (starting with the yourHRC.org web portal with Norway), the diversity and inclusivity (and quality) of membership has improved significantly. In 2017, only 98 UN member States had ever held a seat on the Council. Today, nearly 120 States have served for at least one term.

Next steps

In 2020, URG will work with the Council President, in coordination with the President of the GA, to put in place the modalities for the 2021-2026 review, and ‘Geneva’s’ contribution thereto.

In 2020, URG will continue to publish the yourHRC.org election guide, and generally draw attention to the importance of the criteria for membership set out in GA resolution 60/251. It will also continue to organise contact group activities, starting with a side event at HRC43 profiling the success and impact of Small State members of the Council.

Project 10

Critical analysis of UN human rights Commissions of Inquiry

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Partner(s)

Ted Piccone, Brookings Institution

Michael Kirby, former Chair, COI DPRK

Context

Since the establishment of the Human Rights Council, the number, profile and importance of Commissioners of Inquiry (COIs) has grown significantly, as they have looked into situations of violations in North Korea (DPRK), Syria, Sri Lanka, Libya, Eritrea, Palestine, Myanmar and elsewhere. URG’s project seeks to assess the impact of these new mechanisms and analyse whether they are succeeding in their stated goal of securing accountability for serious human rights violations. The project will also analyse new accountability developments, including the establishment of international, impartial and independent mechanisms (IIIM) on the situations in Syria and in Myanmar.

The project adopts a victim's perspective – i.e. are COIs delivering for victims and their families?

Impact

In 2016, URG and the Brookings Institution brought together around 60 experts on COIs, including a large number of Commissioners, ICC investigators, OHCHR officials, NGOs, as well as victims and their representatives, to consider the achievements and challenges of COIs. A key question was: are they fulfilling their key role of securing accountability of serious human rights violations? In 2017, URG undertook wide-ranging research (including interviews with victims and their representatives, NGOs and COI commissioners) into the evolution and effectiveness of COIs. URG also regularly spoke at Human Rights Council events on this subject. In 2018, URG hosted, with the Global Centre for R2P, an international conference on latest developments with COIs and other Council accountability mechanisms (including IIIMs). In 2019, URG spoke at and organised a number of events on accountability, including with a focus on 'Magnitsky acts.' In late 2019, the International Court of Justice in The Hague considered – for the first time ever by an international court – evidence gathered by a Council COI: the COI on Myanmar.

Next steps

In 2020/2021, URG will publish a new policy report on 'Towards a new accountability: from COIs to Magnitsky acts.' This will analyse the latest international developments in strengthening accountability for serious human rights violations, including the development of 'international, impartial and independent mechanisms' (IIIMs) and recent moves towards individual accountability.

Project 11

UPR, Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures: A connectivity study

Project leader(s)

Mariana Montoya and Marc Limon

Context

The UN human rights system has three main 'mechanisms of implementation' or 'compliance mechanisms': the Treaty Bodies, the Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Each of these three mechanisms has different characteristics and strengths, and all three represent complementary parts of a single UN human rights compliance system. But how do they fit together, how do they interact, and what are the main challenges they face, as a single system, in promoting implementation, reporting and accountability?

URG's 'connectivity study' is the first comprehensive assessment of the interactions between, and complementarity of, the three mechanisms.

Impact

In June 2019, URG published a new policy report showing, conclusively, that the work of the three UN human rights mechanisms are complementary and mutually-reinforcing, and that States should treat the recommendations of all three together (clustered by theme) and pursue their 'integrated implementation' at national level. This idea – the integrated implementation of all human rights recommendations, including as a contribution to the SDGs 'leaving no one behind,' and as a contribution to primary prevention (building national resilience) – is gaining increasing traction at the UN. In 2019, the concept featured in a number of speeches of the High Commissioner in New York, in the Secretary-General's latest

'Sustaining peace' report and in his 'Call to Action,' and formed a key pillar of the Secretary-General's reform of the UN development system.

Next steps

URG will continue to push the conclusions of the new policy report in the context of the ongoing human rights 'implementation agenda' – including the role of development partners.

Project 12

Towards the UPR third cycle: lessons learned from the mechanism's first two cycles

Project leaders

Marc Limon

Context

The UPR's first cycle, in which the human rights situation in all countries was reviewed and recommendations for improvement made, is generally considered to have been a success. However, many observers believe that the future credibility of the mechanism will be determined by the second and third cycles, which are supposed to focus on the implementation of earlier recommendations and the measurement of impact. This raises the question: is the UPR living up to expectations and what lessons can we draw to inform any reforms that need to be brought during the third cycle?

Impact

Four key recommendations from the URG's policy report are being taken forward by States: the use of advanced questions and recommendations to encourage States to establish single national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up (NMIRFs); the delivery of technical advice and capacity-building support to help domestic NGOs and NHRIs hold governments accountable for, and more effectively report on, the implementation of UPR recommendations; strengthening the oversight role of parliaments regarding government implementation of UPR recommendations; and moving UPR outcome adoptions out of regular sessions of the Human Rights Council and into specially-convened plenary sessions at the end of UPR Working Group meetings. This last proposal is being considered in the context of the on-going Human Rights Council efficiency process. A facilitator has been appointed to look at the option in more detail and to consult with States.

Next steps

URG will continue to promote recommendations presented in its report, especially in the context of the new global human rights 'implementation agenda.'

Project 13

Understanding and measuring the impact of country-specific Special Rapporteurs: South Africa, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala

Project leaders

Mariana Montoya and Marc Limon

Partner

Amnesty International, Jacob Blaustein Institute (JBI)

Context

Many States, especially States of the Like-Minded Group (LMG), openly question the value of country-specific Special Rapporteurs. They claim these mandates serve no useful purpose, as they do not enjoy the cooperation of the State concerned, and thus can never work. They also claim that country mandates are a tool of the West, used to attack developing countries. To respond to these arguments, the URG's project looks at the early history of the Special Procedures system, which emerged in Southern Africa and Latin America as a tool originally put in place by developing countries (not the West) to shine a light on serious human rights violations, and secure accountability for the victims.

Impact

In 2017, URG, Amnesty International and JBI, in cooperation with the UK Embassy to Uruguay, held a major international conference in Montevideo looking at the historic impact of the early UN Special Procedures in Latin America. The event brought together many of the original mandate-holders, UN officials, victims groups (e.g. victims of disappearances in Chile and Argentina) and States involved. It found that these early mandates had a major impact in Latin America, combatting impunity, driving justice for victims and, ultimately, helping to bring down a number of regional dictatorships.

In 2018-2019, URG, together with Christof Heyns of the University of Pretoria and a number of African researchers, conducted research on the historical impact of the early Special Procedures focused on Apartheid South Africa. That included, in mid-2019, a series of interviews with those involved with the early African mandates or with the anti-Apartheid struggle.

Next steps

In 2020, the research on the impact of Special Procedures in Africa and South America will be published in a combined policy brief.

Project 14

Understanding and measuring the impact of economic, social and cultural rights Special Procedures mandates

Project leader

Mariana Montoya and Catarina d'Albuquerque, URG Board member

Partner

Institute for the Study of Human Rights (ISHR-CU), Columbia University, New York

Context

Over recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Special Procedures mandates, yet relatively little work on understanding their effectiveness and impact. This neglect has been especially noticeable in the area of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). With that in mind, the URG's project will look to understand and measure the on-the-ground impact of ESCR Special Procedures mandates, with a particular focus on Latin America. It is hoped that this work will help strengthen the credibility of the Council and its mechanisms, but also allow stakeholders to learn lessons about the nature of impact and how all Special Procedures mandate-holders can strengthen their positive influence on the on-the-ground enjoyment of human rights.

Impact

In 2018, URG and Columbia University completed field research in Latin America, investigating and seeking to measure the impact of a number of ESCR Special Procedures mandates on government policy and practice, and on the enjoyment of ESCRs. Later in 2018, URG and Columbia University held an international conference in New York, bringing together a number of current and former mandate holders, academic experts, and civil society representatives – to validate the research findings and draw conclusions.

In 2019, URG and Columbia University completed further research to understand, at a deeper level, the impact of ESCR Special Procedures across a number of 'case studies' identified during initial research (in 2018).

Next steps

A new policy report presenting the results of the above research is nearing completion and will be published in the first half of 2020. This will also help boost the credibility of the Council and its mechanisms, and feed into the growing interest in 'human rights stories' to showcase the UN human rights system's impact.

Other projects / new projects

In addition to the above projects, URG began a number of new projects, including:

- **Measuring the effectiveness and impact of the UN human rights 'implementation-reporting' cycle for children's rights.** In 2019, URG began work with UNICEF to track the implementation of key clusters of children's rights recommendations (from Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies and the UPR) in seven countries, including with the support of UNICEF country offices; to measure the impact of this implementation on the enjoyment of human rights; and to assess the degree to which national stakeholders are able to feed information on levels of implementation and continued gaps back into the UN mechanisms via shadow reporting. A police brief with the findings will be published in 2020.
- **The contemporary status of 'Human Rights Up Front.'** In early 2019, URG NY began a project with the Jacob Blaustein Institute (JBI) to try to answer the question: what happened to the HRUF. HRUF was the most important human rights initiative of former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon – developed to prevent a repeat of the UN's failure in Sri Lanka. However, the current Secretary-General has been accused of letting HRUF 'wither on the vine.' The URG-JBI policy report, 'Policy of initiative: shedding light on the current status of Human Rights up Front,' based on interviews with senior UN policymakers, looks at the contemporary status of HRUF: is it now moribund, does it live on through the Secretary-General's UN reforms, or does it exist as part of the Secretary-General's prevention agenda? Following the publication of the report in October 2019, URG NY and JBI held a launch discussion in New York, and URG Geneva also held a roundtable with key ambassadors (including major HRUF donors).

VII. Other projects

In addition to actions implementing its core programme of work, URG also undertakes other activities designed to strengthen the UN's human rights pillar and to improve transparency and public accountability in the human rights system – bringing it closer to the people it is mandated to protect.

Project

Glion Human Rights Dialogue

Context

In January 2014, URG began work on the organisation of a new retreat-style meeting on human rights in the Lake Geneva region. The Glion Human Rights Dialogue, organised (from 2014-2017) in partnership with the Governments of Norway and Switzerland, and later (from 2018-) with the Government of Switzerland, brings together senior human rights decision-makers and international experts to discuss 'big picture' human rights policy issues in an informal, off-the-record setting. The Dialogue is designed to understand and bring fresh thinking to bear on key challenges and generate practical and implementable ideas and recommendations for future action.

The 2014 Dialogue ('Glion I') was held in Glion, Switzerland, from the 13th-14th May 2014. It marked the 20th anniversary of the creation of OHCHR and focused on 'OHCHR and the international human rights system: the next 20 years.'

The 2015 Dialogue ('Glion II') was held from 5-6 May 2015, and focused on the 'Human Rights Council at 10: improving relevance, strengthening impact.'

The 2016 Dialogue ('Glion III') was held from 3-4 May 2016, and focused on 'Human rights implementation, compliance and the prevention of violations.'

The 2017 Dialogue ('Glion IV') was held from 15-16 May 2017, and focused on 'The operationalization of the Human Rights Council's prevention mandate.'

The 2018 Dialogue ('Glion V') was held from 30-31 May 2018, and focused on 'The place of human rights in a reformed UN.'

The 2019 Dialogue ('Glion VI') was held from 27-28 May 2019, and considered 'Perspectives on the future of the Human Rights Council.'

Ahead of Glion II, III, IV, V and VI, URG organised a series of three preparatory policy dialogues, designed to allow for initial discussions and to feed ideas into the retreat. These were co-organised with the Permanent Missions of Mexico, Morocco/Botswana and Thailand.

In 2019, ahead of Glion VI, URG organised for the first time, in cooperation with Iceland, a pre-Glion policy dialogue in New York – on the matter of the GA's upcoming review of the Council.

URG, with Switzerland, also organises annual launch events (in both Geneva and New York) to present the outcome reports of each Glion Dialogue.

In 2020, Liechtenstein joined Switzerland as a main sponsor of the Glion Dialogues.

Impact

The Glion Human Rights Dialogues have become, in a short space of time, the main informal retreat-style forum for discussing the challenges of the Human Rights Council and the wider UN human rights pillar. By including all relevant decision-makers (including all Council member States, from all regions) and stakeholders, the Dialogues also now have a track record of generating new ideas and, crucially, of seeing those ideas actually implemented. For example, ideas developed in the context of Glion I, II, and III, included: decentralising OHCHR and creating regional hubs (leading to the High Commissioner's 'Change Initiative'); convening regular informal Council urgent briefings with the High Commissioner; developing 'trigger' criteria to guide Council members on situations that may merit prevention action; expanding the annual calendar of human rights initiatives; improving the Council's website; presenting 'hybrid' resolutions; developing a voluntary pledge on methods of work; developing a voluntary pledge for new Council members; creating a process for the regular review, rationalisation and improvement of mandates; constructing a new global 'Implementation Agenda' and encouraging States to establish national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up (NMIRFs); driving reform of the Council's capacity-building and technical assistance mandate under item 10; and operationalizing the Council's prevention mandate (under paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251). These ideas are now being implemented and realised – driving major improvements in global human rights.

Moreover, more broadly, the first six Glion Dialogues have played a pivotal role in setting the contours of the major debates and initiatives at the Human Rights Council. Important current work on prevention, on building a new 'Implementation Agenda,' on bringing greater efficiency and effectiveness to the Council's methods of work, on bringing OHCHR closer to people on the ground (i.e. the 'Change Initiative'), on reform of item 10, on human rights financing, on formulating a Council contribution to the GA's 2021-2026 review, on integrating human rights into reforms of the UN development system and security pillar, on reforming UNDAFs to more fully integrate human rights recommendations, and on strengthening the links between the three pillars of the UN, etc., all started out as discussions and ideas generated during the Glion Dialogues. Regarding prevention, discussions at Glion III and IV helped inspire the Secretary-General's, the High Commissioner's and the Council's current prioritisation of prevention.

Finally, the Glion Dialogues have inspired four of the last five Presidents of the Council to hold similar retreats, one in Berlin, one in Evian, one in Ljubljana and one in Dakar. These four retreats took the same format and covered much of the same ground as the Glion retreats, taking forward many Glion recommendations and ideas. All of these presidential retreats have been organised in cooperation or coordination with the URG.

Next steps

The 2020 Dialogue ('Glion VII') will be held later in 2020 (due to the coronavirus epidemic) and will focus on 'Making digital technology work for human rights.'

Switzerland and URG will publish a report from the Glion VII meeting in late 2020, and will hold events to promote key conclusions and proposals in Geneva and New York.

Project

Journalist capacity-building / improving global media interest in the Human Rights Council

Partners

Denmark

Context

In 2016, URG conducted a global media survey of coverage of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms. This sought to map such coverage both quantitatively and qualitatively over time, and in comparison with other parts of the UN system. The results were published in 2017.

Later in 2017, with the Canton of Geneva, URG organised a capacity-building programme for journalists from LDCs and SIDS, to attend a session of the Human Rights Council, learn about the UN human rights system, and write articles for their domestic audiences.

In 2018, URG, together with the Permanent Mission of Germany, and OHCHR, organised a retreat, with States and the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, to consider the findings of the survey and discuss how to better communicate the UN human rights system.

In 2019, URG began a new project with Denmark, announced in the context of the latter's membership of the Council, to relaunch and expand the 2017 journalist capacity-building programme. At the Council's 42nd session in September 2019, URG and Denmark brought 8 journalists to the Council, principally from Africa, and organised a three-week programme. After the session, the journalists published articles, and shared these with URG for later use in an exhibition.

Impact

Although the project has just begun, it has significant potential in terms of both improving global public awareness about the Council and its work, and in terms of building the capacity of journalists, including as human rights defenders.

Next steps

The project will continue at the next six sessions of the Council.

Project

Pre-Council press breakfasts

Partners

United Nations Office at Geneva Correspondents Association (ACANU)

Context

Media awareness and, as a consequence, public awareness of the Human Rights Council is notably low. To a significant extent, this is the result of the often technical and inaccessible nature of the Council's programme of work and a traditional low-level of interaction between correspondents and diplomats. In order to respond to both challenges and in-so-doing improve public interest in and awareness of the work of the Council and its mechanisms, URG organises (in partnership with ACANU) before each session of the Council, a press breakfast bringing together around 15 journalists and 3 States (different states each time).

During the breakfasts, State representatives brief journalists on 3-4 of the key issues to watch out for during the Council session, and then answer questions.

Impact

URG and ACANU have now organised fourteen press breakfasts, with the participation of a range of ambassadors including from: EU, China, UK, US, Mexico, Indonesia, Egypt, Switzerland, and Pakistan. The following media outlets regularly participate: Mexican News Agency, Reuters, Anadolu Agency, BBC, NHK, The Yomiuri Shimbun, Asahi Shimbun, Le Temps, International New York Times, Weldreporter, FAZ, Estado Sao Paulo, AP, AFP, and Voice of America.

In 2019, only one breakfast was organised, following a change in chair at ACANU.

Next steps

Further press breakfasts will be organised in 2020, with ACANU.

Project

Friday Exchange

Partners

Denmark

Context

In February 2016, URG with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark launched a new diplomatic initiative in Geneva: the 'Friday Exchange.' The Friday Exchange is a series of quarterly informal policy dialogues (small roundtable discussions) designed to allow States (ambassador level) from all regions to exchange opinions, bridge differences and identify common ground on some of the most difficult and intractable contemporary issues facing the Human Rights Council and the wider UN human rights pillar. The Friday Exchange aims to provide an informal 'safe space' (Chatham House rule) for States to understand each other's positions, reflect upon obstacles to consensus, and identify practical solutions. In-so-doing, the Exchange will support the work and effectiveness of the Council and the wider UN human rights system, drive progress on key human rights questions facing the international community, and promote inter-State and inter-regional understanding and cooperation. Friday Exchange meetings seek to secure the participation of delegations from each UN region, as well as from different political groups. Within those parameters, efforts are made, for each meeting, to invite those States most implicated by the issue(s) or initiative(s) under discussion.

Impact

During 2019, URG held four Friday Exchanges on a range of difficult issues facing the Council and the wider UN human rights pillar, including *inter alia*: 'Re-energising the Istanbul Process as an essential contribution to the global fight against religious intolerance, discrimination and stigmatisation, and hate speech' (in Geneva); 'The 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: How might the Human Rights Council and the wider international human rights system contribute to and leverage this important milestone?' (in Geneva); and 'Looking ahead: prospects for the Human Rights Council in 2020' (in Geneva).

Because they include all key State actors on a given issue, from all regions and all political groups, Friday Exchanges – even though they have no formal outcome – have helped shape a number of debates, and forge agreement between States on previously contentious and controversial issues. A good example was the 2016 Friday Exchange on the ‘right to development’. As a result of that meeting, States agreed that the SDGs represent a ‘common point of departure’ for understanding the relationship between human rights and development. This led to the 2018 resolution led by Chile and Denmark on ‘Human rights and the SDGs’ – and to a general thawing of this previously divisive debate. In examples from 2019, the Friday Exchange on progress with the implementation of the ‘Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action’ led to the adoption of a resolution on the subject, by Denmark and China, at the 42nd session of the Council and a high-level panel at the 43rd session, while the Exchange on ‘Re-energising the Istanbul Process’ led to the organisation of an ‘Stocktaking meeting’ on the Process in April 2019, and a seventh meeting of the Process in The Hague in late 2019.

Next steps

URG, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, will continue to host Friday Exchanges in 2020 in Geneva and New York.

Project

Support for the ratification and implementation of the UN Convention against Torture (UNCAT) in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs)

Partners

Convention against Torture Initiative (CTI)

Context

In 2019, URG continued to work with the CTI project to support the universal ratification and strengthened implementation of the UNCAT.

Impact

In 2019, the URG supported this goal by working with CTI to co-organise a High-Level Seminar for Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) in Fiji in April 2019. The seminar, which was attended by ministers of justice, attorneys-general, and other high-level delegates from eleven PSIDS, was a catalyst for the ratification of UNCAT by Kiribati and Samoa, and the withdrawal of reservations to the Convention by Fiji.

Next steps

TBC.

Project

Summary reports on Human Rights Council sessions

Context

Until now, no NGO has produced a concise, fact-based and neutral assessment report on the key debates and outcomes of regular sessions of the Human Rights Council. After URG’s establishment, many Council delegations, especially from developing countries, approached the secretariat and said such an independent analysis and report would be useful for them.

Thus, from the 25th session onwards, URG has produced end of session reports and distributed them electronically to all missions in Geneva and New York, and to NGOs, the media, etc.

Impact

Many delegations, including from Africa, Asia, and the West, have contacted URG after the distribution of reports to note their utility and to say that they had used it as a basis of their reports to capital.

Next steps

URG will continue to improve and refine the end of session reports.

Project

What are the human rights priorities of world governments?

Context

Each year, the High-level Segment of the Human Rights Council's March session, and the High-level Segment of the General Assembly, offer an unparalleled opportunity to assess the key priority human rights issues and situations for world governments.

Impact

Each year, URG analyses the content of hundreds of speeches given by world leaders (presidents, prime ministers, ministers, etc.) at the General Assembly and the Council – identifying key themes and situations. URG then produces 'word clouds' summarising those priorities.

Project

'Inside Track' pre-Council briefing papers

Partner

Singapore

Context

In order to improve transparency and accessibility, especially for Small State delegations and NGOs, URG began to produce, in September 2015, regular pre-session primers or briefing papers, to explain key issues, debates and initiatives expected at the session. URG has so far produced fourteen such 'Inside Track' primers ahead of Council sessions in Geneva, and two ahead of Third Committee sessions in New York.

Impact

URG and Singapore have received positive feedback from delegations, especially Small State delegations. 'Inside Track' is now considered to be *the* go-to resource for stakeholders ahead of Council sessions.

URG conducted a redesign in February 2019.

Next steps

In early 2020, URG undertook a further redesign and began to print Inside Track before every session – for distribution to all delegations. Inside Track is now also translated into French.

Project

Opinion-editorials by international human rights policymakers and thought-leaders (URG Insights)

Context

URG seeks to provide a platform for policymakers and opinion-leaders to share information and ideas with other stakeholders and to generate debate. In 2014-2015, it therefore constituted its 'By Invitation' series of opinion-editorial style articles. These are published on the URG website and distributed electronically to over 5,000 people around the world.

Impact

In 2019, URG published 'By Invitation' op-eds from, *inter alia*: the Council President; UN Special Rapporteurs; government ministers, Council members (ambassadors and experts); NGO leaders; academics; etc.

Project

Human Rights Council Presidency retreats

Partner

Presidency of the Human Rights Council, OHCHR

Context

In 2015, the German Presidency of the Council initiated a new annual retreat for members of the Human Rights Council (ambassador level). URG was engaged to provide substantive input into the retreat and to facilitate the discussions.

In 2016, the Republic of Korea Presidency of the Council decided to continue the tradition, and organised a retreat in Evian, France. URG was again engaged to support the event and provide substantive input.

In 2018, Slovenia organised a retreat in Ljubljana in coordination with URG, and taking forward many of the debates and ideas from Glion V.

In 2019, Senegal organised a retreat in Daka, offering a space for further consideration of the issues covered at Glion VI.

Impact

The first retreat focused on the issue of improving the 'efficiency and effectiveness' of the Council's working methods. The second focused on 'strengthening dialogue and cooperation at the Council.' Both helped drive reforms of the Council and have fed into the Council's current strengthening process. The 2018 retreat continued discussions on Council efficiency reforms and on preparations for the GA's 2021-2026 review.

Next steps

The Austrian Presidency of the Council will host a retreat in Vienna in mid-2020.

Project

New Human Rights Council members' retreat

Context

With the Permanent Mission of the UK, URG organises an annual half-day retreat for new (incoming) members of the Council (expert level). These are held each January and are designed to provide an informal space to share information on the Council, and to look ahead at key issues expected to come up at the Council that year.

Impact

The first retreat took place in January 2015, the second in January 2016, the third in January 2018, the fourth in January 2019, and the fifth in January 2020 (also with the Netherlands).

Project

HRC resolutions portal

Context

To support transparency and accountability at the Human Rights Council, URG undertook a major project to put all Council resolutions in an easily searchable database – accessible via the URG website.

Impact

This has proved to be a unique and popular resource – with hundreds of hits every week and regular positive feedback from delegations and NGOs. In 2016, URG expanded the portal to also include resolutions of the Third Committee of the General Assembly.

Project

HRC voting portal

Context

To support transparency and accountability at the Human Rights Council, URG undertook a major project to put all votes on Council resolutions in an easily searchable database – accessible via the URG website.

Impact

This has proved to be a unique and popular resource, and has facilitated a wide range of related initiatives to improve transparency and accountability.

Project

YourHRC.org

Partner

Norway

Context

To support transparency and accountability around the actions, engagement, cooperation and voting of members of the Human Rights Council, in thereby to improve the functioning of the Council, URG, in partnership with Norway, has developed a new web portal: 'yourHRC.org.'

Through yourHRC, users can search for and analyse the performance of every Council member, past and present.

Linked with youHRC.org, URG and Norway also produce two related products: a Human Rights Council election guide (providing information about candidates); and a Human Rights Council end of year report (containing objective information about the Council's work and output).

These two publications have been key reference documents for those interested in the Council and in Council elections.

Impact

YourHRC.org and the election guides have been launched in the company of Norwegian ministers and a wide range of diplomats in both Geneva and New York. The 'HRC in 2019' report was launched in Geneva with speeches from the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and a poem by the UK Permanent Representative. The yourHRC.org 'Guide to the Human Rights Council elections – 2019' was also launched with events in Geneva and New York (hosted by the Permanent Mission of Iceland).

URG has also published the guides digitally via its email circulation list of over 5,000 contacts, and on social media.

For the first time, it is now possible for all interested parties to access centralised information about how Council member States and candidate States are engaging and cooperating with the Council and its mechanisms.

YourHRC.org has also powered heightened interest in Council elections and membership amongst States and in OHCHR. The High Commissioner for Human Rights now regularly uses her update at the start of Council sessions to offer a yourHRC.org-type assessment of the performance of member States and candidates. Moreover, the on-going Council strengthening process seeks, *inter alia*, to build on yourHRC.org by focusing attention on the membership and election criteria set down in GA resolution 60/251; while in 2019, URG and the Netherlands established a new Contact Group on membership.

Next steps

URG will further improve yourHRC.org over 2020, improving its regular email alerts: 'Know yourHRC members' and 'Know yourHRC candidates.'

Though its Election Guide, URG will continue to seek to increase transparency surrounding elections to the Council, through its publications and events in both Geneva and New York.