



Activity Report 1st January - 31st December 2020

I. Universal Rights Group impact in 2020

2020 saw the Universal Rights Group (URG) continue to consolidate its central position in influencing and shaping international human rights policy. In 2020, 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 2020 in Geneva, New York and in capitals. Finally, in 2020, URG continued its important 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 (especially environmental human rights defenders).

2020 was the first year of URG's new two-year programme period (2020-2021). The new programme seeks to build on the previous two programmes of work (2016-2017 and 2018-2019), while adding important new projects that respond to emerging global human rights challenges.

Regarding the former (i.e., building on previous priorities and workstreams), the 2020-2021 programme of work continued, and built upon, projects on:

- 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.
- Operationalising 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 empirical 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 – including by preparing States for the 2021-2026 review of the Council by the General Assembly (GA).
- 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.
- Combatting religious intolerance and discrimination, including online hate speech.
- Driving normative progress in ‘new’ or emerging issues, such as human rights and climate change, universal recognition of the right to a health environment, environmental human rights defenders, and corruption and human rights.

A useful indication of the historic and continued impact of these URG projects on the international human rights system is the fact that a number of them formed the backbone of the UN Secretary-General’s landmark ‘Call to Action’ on human rights, launched at the Council in February 2020. The ‘Call to Action’ proposed seven key ‘domains’ or priority areas for UN work on human rights. Many of them reflect and build on core URG workstreams over the past four years, for example:

- **Rights at the core of sustainable development** – this domain builds on the message, promoted by URG through projects with Denmark, Chile and others, that human rights progress is central to sustainable development. Over 90% of the SDG targets are grounded in international human rights law. Thus, human rights implementation has the potential to drive global progress with the achievement of the SDGs ‘leaving no one behind.’ This idea is also central to the Secretary-General’s ongoing UN reform process – especially his reform of the UN development system.
- **Rights in times of crisis** – this domain introduces the concept of a human rights-led approach to the prevention of crises and conflicts. Again, this builds on the work of URG, together with States including Norway, Switzerland, Uruguay and Sierra Leone, over the past four years, to operationalise the Council’s prevention mandate under paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251.
- **Rights of future generations, especially climate justice** – over the past five years, URG has been a leading civil society voice drawing international attention to the relationship between human rights and climate change, and human rights and the environment. This work has led to the adoption of resolutions on these subjects, the inclusion of human rights principles in the Paris Climate Agreement, the establishment of the UN Special Rapporteur mandate on human rights and the environment, growing attention to the plight of environmental human rights defenders around the world, and, most recently, important steps towards universal recognition of the right to a healthy environment.
- **Rights at the heart of collective action** – this domain covers a number of URG strategic priorities from the period 2016-2019, including strengthening the coherence of the Human Rights Council-Security Council relationship, human rights communication and ‘building a positive narrative,’ the interconnected power of the recommendations of the three main UN human rights mechanisms, human rights financing, and human rights as a key pillar of UN reform.
- **New frontiers of human rights** – this domain covers important emerging issues such as human rights in the digital age, and business responsibility for human rights promotion. Since 2016, URG has worked with companies such as Facebook, Twitter and the Economist (media group) to raise international awareness around these issues

and to promote a rights-based approach to tackling concerns such as online hate speech and disinformation ('fake news').

In 2020, URG continued to work on the above-mentioned projects, and continued to have a significant measurable impact on the development of related initiatives at the UN and on enjoyment of human rights. Some examples are provided below.

Regarding **implementation**, in 2020 URG continued to work with States (members of the Group of Friends on national implementation/NMIRFs, which now comprises over 40 countries) 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. For example, in late 2019, working with the Group of Friends, especially Paraguay and Brazil, URG helped draft and secure the adoption of Council resolution 42/30 on NMIRFs. Through this text, the Council decided to organise five regional seminars on implementation best practice and the establishment of NMIRFs, (the convening of those seminars was eventually postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Also, in 2019-2020, URG, working with Fiji, organised a pilot regional seminar for Pacific Island States in Nadi, Fiji. This resulted in the adoption and launch of the 'Pacific Principles of Practice' on NMIRFs during the first quarter of 2020.

Also in 2020, URG completed a ground-breaking project with **UNICEF** to, for the first time, track human rights recommendations (related to children's rights) from the UN human rights mechanisms to national level, to assess implementation levels and measure impact on the on-the-ground enjoyment of human rights.

Moreover, in 2019-2020 URG continued to receive requests from developing countries 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, Sudan and Maldives. For budgetary reasons, URG was only able to provide assistance to Fiji, Gambia and Zambia in 2019. In 2020, this capacity-building work was suspended due to the pandemic.

Finally, URG continued to work with major international donors (bilateral and multilateral agencies) as part of the Oslo+ group, to reorientate ODA to support human rights implementation (and thereby SDG implementation) in developing countries.

Thanks to these and related projects, the 'implementation agenda' is now a top priority for the Council, the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, as is the link between improved human rights implementation and reporting, the realisation of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind,' and the prevention of human rights violations.

"In a context of sharply escalating suffering and turmoil across the world, human rights principles, norms and actions offer effective solutions to build stronger resilience to shocks, and counter despair, by preventing social, economic and political instability. Policies that deliver universal and equal access to social protections and health care; institutions which promote respect for the views and rights of all members of society; and laws that require accountable policing and access to justice help to avert the escalation of tensions and grievances into violence and conflict. This human rights-based approach supports greater

¹ Developed by URG, Singapore and IMPACT Group.

social and economic resilience. It is the foundation of prosperity and political stability. And it protects vulnerable people from the worst impacts of crises.”

Address by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the 45th session of the Human Rights Council, 14 September 2020

“Support Member States to ensure that human rights principles inform implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including empowering people and creating avenues for civil society participation, as well as taking human rights-sensitive, non-discriminatory approaches to data collection, monitoring, and reporting. This is the surest way to bring the benefits of the ambitious and far-reaching agenda to all, leaving no one behind.

Encourage the full use of human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review, the human rights treaty bodies and the special procedures, as well as national human rights institutions to contribute to SDG implementation, particularly at the national and local levels.”

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, in ‘A Call to Action’ on human rights, Rights at the core of sustainable development, Actions, February 2020

“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, Rights in times of crisis, February 2020

Regarding **prevention**, in 2018 Norway, Switzerland, Colombia and Sierra Leone (core group), 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. In early 2020, URG published a 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 in March, contains proposals that, if fully implemented, would transform the body’s ability to address situations of violations.

During the second half of 2020, URG worked with the core group (Uruguay replaced Colombia) on key elements of a further draft Council resolution which aimed to take forward key proposals of the three independent experts. URG also worked closely with the core group to help inform Council delegations about the draft, and the broad concept of prevention, and to lobby for support. In September, the Council adopted resolution 45/31 on ‘The contribution of the Council to prevention.’ This is perhaps one of the most important resolutions ever adopted by the Council, and holds out the possibility of the body becoming the UN’s ‘prevention Council.’

As noted above, prevention has also become one of the top priorities of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and of the Secretary-General. Throughout 2020, both leaders used keynote speeches to draw attention to the Council's prevention mandate. Finally, in 2020, working with Germany, URG organised transatlantic events designed to better **link the Council's prevention mandate** with the prevention work of the **UN Security Council** and the Secretary-General's prevention and 'sustaining peace' agendas.

"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,' Rights in times of crisis, February 2020

"The prevention of human rights violations is essential to preventing conflicts and atrocities. Strengthening the role of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms will be crucial to help build sound societies that can resolve disputes and avert threats. The Council's mandate, in resolution 60/251, highlights two mutually reinforcing areas of work. Deep-rooted, structural prevention: the Council 'shall contribute through dialogue and cooperation, to the prevention of human rights violations.' Rapid-reaction, operational prevention: it shall 'respond promptly to human rights emergencies,' to de-escalate ongoing violations and avert specific threats of atrocities."

Speech by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, Council debate on its prevention mandate, 24 February 2020

Finally, in 2019-2020, the interlinked issues of **human rights implementation, SDG implementation, and prevention**, continued to develop 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 (e.g., as part of the Oslo+ group mentioned above), are all deeply involved in efforts to support human rights implementation, and thereby to help achieve the SDGs by 2030. Regarding Oslo+, there have now been three meetings. The first, in April 2018, was held in Oslo, a second was held in Stockholm in May 2019, and a third digital meeting was organised in June 2020 (Oslo+Digital). A fourth meeting will be held in Switzerland in 2021.

'Acknowledging that the promotion and protection of human rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and that both serve to build national resilience.'

Preambular paragraph 18, Council resolution 45/31 on the 'Contribution of the Council to prevention,' September 2020

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 Glion Human Rights Dialogues, gained increased traction in late 2019 and early 2020. Indeed, when the Austrian Presidency of the Council (2020) conducted consultations with members 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 February 2020 URG, Norway and Singapore organised a first-ever 'item 10' platform – a voluntary space where States were able to express

their human rights achievements and challenges, and capacity-building needs, and where other States and UN agencies were able to pledge support. 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, published in 2020, proposed that the Council create an 'implementation facility' to help States implement human rights recommendations, thereby building national resilience.

'Requests the Secretary-General to prepare a report analysing the current system-wide delivery and financing of, and existing gaps in, technical assistance and capacity-building that support the implementation by States of their international human rights obligations and commitments, and provided upon the request, in consultation with and with the consent of the State concerned, and to make recommendations in order to improve and scale-up the system-wide delivery and financing of technical assistance and capacity- building in the field of human rights with a view to building national resilience, and to submit that report to the Human Rights Council for its consideration at its forty-ninth session.'

Paragraph 4, Council resolution 45/31 on the 'Contribution of the Council to prevention,' September 2020

Beyond continuing and following-up on these core issues for the effectiveness of the UN human rights system, and for the enjoyment of human rights around the world, URG's 2020-2021 programme of work also includes a range of new areas of work, designed to both shape the international human rights agenda over the coming years (e.g., URG's new programme on democracy, elections and rights, and its new project on the empirical measurement of human rights change), and to respond to pressing human rights needs and gaps (e.g., new projects on digital technology and rights, and on strengthening accountability for human rights violations).

"[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)

Programme 1 of URG's 2020-2021 programme of work is focused on **democracy, free and fair elections, and human rights**. Our goal, when setting this programme (which has two component projects - one on how to use the UN human rights system to promote and ensure the integrity of elections, and one on how to manage to growing power and influence of digital technology (e.g., social media) in the context of democracy and elections), was to raise the issue of democracy and elections up the international human rights agenda (at a time of democratic 'backsliding' in many parts of the world), and to place the UN human rights system in the vanguard of a global democratic 'fightback.' In 2020, URG's work has helped secure the first of these two goals. During the 2021 Human Rights Council high-level segment (in February) democracy and elections were among the top three human rights-related priorities raised by heads of State and government ministers (see [here](#) for more information). Moreover, US President Biden has placed human rights, democracy and equality at the heart of his

administration's foreign policy, while the issues were also highlighted as priorities by Secretary of State Blinken during his high-level speech to the Council. (Though it is of course not possible to show direct causality between URG's work and the development of US policy, it is an important indicator that URG's new programme is helping to fill an important normative gap and international need). Likewise, in 2020, through its work with Facebook, Twitter and numerous governments (including in the context of the annual Glion Human Rights Dialogue), URG has helped create a regular space for dialogue, between public and private actors, to consider the implications, for human rights, democracy and elections, of digital technology, especially in relation to, for example, malicious disinformation ('fake news'), data theft, micro-targeted political campaigns, and online hate speech.

"Having taken these essential steps to reinforce the democratic foundation of our country and inspire action in others, [we] will organise and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the Free World.' Accordingly, and during his first year in office, Biden promised to 'bring together the world's democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront the challenge of nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda to address threats to our common values."

Speech by US President Joe Biden, 11 July 2019 (delivered before becoming President)

In 2020, building on past projects focused on human rights and environment, human rights and climate change, environmental human rights defenders, and environmental and climate displacement, URG was also in the vanguard of a campaign to secure UN recognition of the **right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment**. This right was left out of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and therefore the two Covenants) because it was drafted before the advent of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s and 70s. However, over recent years, there has been a growing interest and movement, at national, regional and international levels, to correct this oversight, and to declare a universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (R2E).

At the start of 2020, URG, together with UNICEF, OHCHR and UNEP, organised an expert seminar on R2E, designed to launch a final push for universal recognition. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that it was not possible to realise this goal in 2020. However, in early 2021, URG, together with the current and former UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights and the environment, published a new policy report, '#TheTimeIsNow,' which sets out the case for UN recognition and proposes the key dimensions of the substantive content of the right. The report was launched at a high-level event during the first week of the 46th session of the Council in February, which featured video messages from the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Executive Directors of UNICEF and UNEP, the Environment Minister of Fiji, and the Foreign Ministers of Costa Rica and the Maldives. In a joint statement later in the session, the core group on human rights and the environment committed themselves to push for UN recognition (via Council and GA resolutions) in 2021 – in time for the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm Declaration on the environment in 2022.

"Fiji stands in wholehearted support of efforts to secure universal recognition of the right to a clean and healthy environment for all people.' Fiji will continue to lead by example, he promised, 'but unless the right is recognised at global level, and the environment protected everywhere across the green and blue economies - all of our rights are at risk. The time to act is now."

Video statement by H.E. Dr Mahendra Reddy, Minister of the Environment of Fiji, at URG high level event on the right to a healthy environment, 23 February 2021

"This new report by the Universal Rights Group on the case for universal recognition is an important milestone for the international community. I am proud to continue to contribute to this important cause [and] am honoured to join you all in declaring that the time for UN recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is now."

H.E. Ms Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High-Commissioner for Human Rights, 23 February 2021

"We are faced with a triple environmental crisis: climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution. Rights of present and future generations depend on a healthy environment. The global recognition of the right to a healthy environment will support efforts to leave no one behind, ensure a just transition to an environmentally healthy and socially equitable world and realize human rights for all [...]"

We have come together under the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights, through the inspiration provided by the Council, and in response to the urgent call for action from all corners of the world to declare that the time for global recognition, implementation, and protection of the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is now."

Joint statement by 15 UN agencies and programmes,² 46th session of the Human Rights Council, 9 March 2021

In addition to democracy and human rights, another core new element of URG's 2020-2021 programme of work is **inequality and rights**. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inequalities between and especially within countries had become a major human rights concern, leading to protests movements in countries around the world, from Chile to the US. The pandemic has exacerbated those inequalities and laid them bare for the world to see. Socio-economic inequality, amplified by discrimination against racial, religious and ethnic minorities, women, the elderly and persons with disabilities, poses a direct threat to democracy, security and the achievement of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind.'

During 2020, URG began a new project looking at the causes and consequences of inequality, related to two social rights in particular: the right to quality education and the right to health. In the context of the former, for example, the project is exploring a number of key questions, using quantitative and qualitative techniques, such as: how do State policies related to access to quality education, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, including on the important issue of public vs. private provision, effect the enjoyment of the right to education?; do

² International Labour Organization (ILO), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (OSGEY), UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (SRSG VAC), UN Women, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization (WHO).

discriminatory educational policies lead to inequalities in the enjoyment of other rights and in society as a whole?; and in countries with strong records of ensuring equal access to quality education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, does society as a whole suffer fewer inequalities? The project also seeks to integrate a gender perspective – to understand how inequality/discrimination in access to the rights to education and health disproportionately affects women and girls. It also considers the particular situation of members of ethnic, racial or religious minorities, and persons with disabilities.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency — but it is far more. It is an economic crisis. A social crisis. And a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis [...] We have seen how the virus does not discriminate, but its impacts do — exposing deep weaknesses in the delivery of public services and structural inequalities that impede access to them. We must make sure they are properly addressed in the response.”

H.E. Mr Antonio Guterres, at the launch of his ‘We are all in this together’ report on COVID-19 response and recovery, 23 April 2020

Over the past year, URG has also continued to expand its ‘in-country’ work and engagement, especially (again) in developing countries. This has included capacity-building workshops and other activities for State officials, NGOs and human rights defenders, and the development of new tools to improve networking between, and thus the impact of, civil society organisations, UN agencies, and bilateral embassies that offer support to human rights defenders.

In 2020, much of this ‘fieldwork’ was focused on building the capacity and strengthening the protection of **environmental human rights defenders** (EHRDs), especially in Latin America. 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. At the end of 2020, URG signed a new MOU with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), to expand this capacity-building and protection work for EHRDs to Africa, Eastern Europe and South-East Asia.

During 2020, URG continued to play an important leadership role, in Geneva and New York, on UN institutional matters. This included re-issuing its policy report entitled ‘Vision 2021,’ which provides recommendations on the conduct and content of the GA’s **2021-2026 review** of the Council and ‘Geneva’s contribution’ thereto. More broadly, URG has continued to work with the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General and the Assistant Secretary-General for human rights, on the human rights dimensions of his ongoing reform agenda, as well as on the operationalisation of his ‘Call to Action’ on human rights.

At the end of 2020, URG, in partnership with Germany, organised a major transatlantic dialogue, involving States, UN officials and experts, and NGOs, on how to build a more coherent relationship between ‘Geneva’ and ‘New York,’ especially on human rights and security matters. The focus of the meeting, and of the policy report that URG will publish in 2021, is on using the UN prevention agenda as a framework to build a more coherent and effective relationship between the **Human Rights Council, the Security Council and the GA**.

Lastly, building on its December 2017 Council strengthening conference with the Netherlands, in 2020 URG continued to work with the Netherlands, the Maldives and the UK, to advance the agenda of the ‘contact group’ 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 2020 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. At the end of 2020, Fiji was elected President of the Council and Bahamas was elected Vice-President.

COVID-19 and the 'RightOn' webinars

Like all civil society organisations, URG was severely impacted by the COVID-19 health pandemic, the associated economic disruption, and the necessary sanitary and social distancing measures put in place. As explained in Part V of this annual report, one consequence was operational. URG's income was significantly reduced and donor payments frequently delayed. This fact, combined with necessary reductions in working hours due to enforced social distancing rules, meant that for most of 2020, all URG staff members were asked to accept a voluntary reduction in salary (commensurate with the reduction in working hours). Moreover, from March onwards, internships at URG were no longer paid. All hiring, including via URG's fellowship programme, was also frozen.

Of the different parts of the UN system, the Council and wider human rights pillar fared relatively well in responding and adapting to the 'new normal' imposed by the pandemic. All Council sessions were completed over the course of the year, and the work of the mechanisms also continued – ensuring that no human rights protection gap was allowed to develop. New working methods, including socially distanced in-person meetings and virtual meetings, were agreed by States, and instituted.

Moreover, the Council, the High Commissioner, Special Procedures and civil society were quick to focus international attention on the human rights dimensions of the pandemic. For example, they repeatedly drew attention to the disproportionate impacts of the crisis on those living in poverty, on children, the elderly and on persons with disabilities. They also drew attention to the consequences of pandemic response policies, such as lock downs, on women's rights (e.g., increases in domestic violence) and on mental health. Finally, human rights stakeholders repeatedly urged States to adopt rights-based approaches to response and recovery efforts.

URG was proud to play its part in the human rights system's swift and effective response to the human rights dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. From March onwards, URG, together with Diplo Foundation, Essex University Human Rights Centre, Denmark, Netherlands and Norway, organised weekly online webchats – the 'RightOn' series – to discuss the different human rights dimensions of the pandemic. This included sessions on: equality and non-discrimination; women's rights, including domestic violence; the right to physical and mental health; human rights and environmental protection; digital technology and human rights; human rights in national response plans (e.g., lock downs); the rights of elderly persons; and human rights and the 2030 Agenda as key pillars of national recovery plans. The webchats regularly secured high-level speakers including the High Commissioner, the Assistant Secretary-General for human rights, Geneva and New York ambassadors, and civil society leaders. 'RightOn' meetings regularly secured over 200 participants, from all parts of the world, and key messages and conclusions from the discussions, such as the importance of 'building

back better' and 'the virus does not discriminate but its impacts do' eventually went mainstream and informed important UN policy responses such as the Secretary-General's 'We are all in this together' report.

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 2020:

"It has been a great pleasure to join several URG events on initiatives to strengthen the Human Rights Council - from working to build national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up across Pacific Island States, to participation in the Glion Dialogues, to receiving assistance to help formulate Fiji's pledges for membership of the Council in 2018/9, URG has consistently helped SIDS to be better represented in the Council, both qualitatively and quantitatively."

H.E. Ms Nazhat Shameem Khan, President of the Human Rights Council,
Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Fiji

"URG fills a niche in Geneva – and indeed in the multilateral human rights space writ large – that no other organisation occupies. They function as a respected convenor, a source of expert opinion, and a repository of valuable information. We have worked with them on many issues across the years, from Human Rights Council reform to the Istanbul Process. Our human rights team regularly uses their database to research past resolutions and positions, and we – like many in Geneva – turn often to their experts for thoughtful analysis of human rights trends that capture dynamics beneath the surface."

Mr Daniel A. Kronenfeld, human rights expert, Permanent Mission of the United States

"UNEP commends the work of URG for mobilising support for environmental rights and the global recognition of the right to a healthy environment. We are also pleased to partner with URG in protecting and promoting the activities of environmental human rights defenders."

Ms Arnold Kreilhuber, Acting Director, Law Division, UNEP

"The Universal Rights Group has been and continues to be an essential partner in supporting, and helping us attain the goal of, the Human Rights Council's LDCs/SIDS Trust Fund: namely, of ensuring universal participation in the work of the Council. Moreover, the Inside Track, produced by URG and Singapore, which inter alia covers the work of the LDCs/SIDS Trust, is an extremely important document for all small delegations at the Council."

Ms Fatou Camara Houel, human rights officer, Human Rights Council branch, OHCHR

"I've been delighted to join forces with URG in the historic effort to secure UN recognition of the right to a healthy environment. URG's experience and expertise at the Human Rights Council is invaluable!"

Professor David Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment

"URG has a unique, in-depth knowledge of the human rights system and a strategic vision on how to best leverage that system to advance human rights. We in UNICEF were extremely

pleased with our partnership with URG on the 'Realizing Rights, Changing Lives' report in 2020."

Ms Anne Grandjean, Human Rights Specialist, Programme Division, UNICEF

"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, 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

“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, former 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 examples 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, Germany and others) on efficiency and rationalisation, to its work (with Netherlands, UK and Maldives) on improving the Council's membership (which will have major long term benefits); and from its work (e.g., with UNICEF and the Assistant Secretary-General for human rights) 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).

Another two examples of URG's long-term approach to securing sustainable change at international level are: **democracy, elections and human rights**; and **digital technology and human rights**. Regarding the former, over the past five years leaders have regularly decried 'democratic backsliding' in different parts of the world. In principle, the Human Rights Council is perfectly placed to lead the 'push back' against this trend. The ICCPR and ICESCR together represent a blueprint for functioning and equitable democracies, and for holding free and fair elections. Yet since its establishment in 2006, the Council has largely neglected these important issues. Against this background, for the past two years, URG has regularly called on the Council and its mechanisms to play a leadership role in defending and promoting democracy and credible elections – to use the systems, laws and mechanisms we already have. Finally, in 2020, there were important signs that this message is getting through. Regarding digital technology and human rights, URG has begun to secure sustainable impact by bringing together States, civil society and technology companies (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft) to identify common rights-based solutions to issues such as online hate speech and disinformation.

The above-mentioned Oslo+ process and related 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, the implementation of children's rights recommendations at country-level (with UNICEF) and 'human rights and the SDGs' (with Denmark and Chile), 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 is, 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 the relevant fields. For example, URG addressed the issue of combatting religious intolerance, stigmatisation, discrimination and hate speech during its very first programme of work (2014-2015) - 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 too 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 (a key message from URG's recent joint policy report with UNICEF). 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, at part of its 2020-2021 global strategic plan, 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, policymakers 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 policymaking.
- **Innovation** – the Group aims to be 'ahead of the curve' in responding strategically to important and emerging issues in order to provide policymakers with timely guidance.
- **Insight** – the Group also aims to help policymakers 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 policymakers.

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, but increasingly also with capitals) *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 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 with 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, Sudan, 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 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, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNEP, UN Women, ILO, IOM, UNHCR, IPU, and ICRC.

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, the High-Level Political Forum for the SDGs, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and OHCHR New York/Assistant Secretary-General for human rights. 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' (GSP). In January 2018, URG adopted a new two-year GSP (2018-2019). Most recently, in January 2020, URG's Board, based on proposals provided by the secretariat, adopted its fourth biannual GSP for the period 2020-2021. This is structured around four broad programmes. Individual projects are organised under those programmes.

The four programmes for 2020-2021 are:

1. In focus: Democracy and human rights – pushing back
2. Contemporary and emerging human rights issues
3. Translating universal norms into local reality: the operation and impact of the UN human rights pillar
4. *URG Capacity* (capacity-building and technical assistance programme).

In addition to these main programmes, URG also continues to undertake a wide range of stand-alone projects designed to support the UN human rights pillar. These include the organisation of the Glion Human Rights Dialogue – an annual 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; meetings of the Council 'contact group' on membership; 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; regular public events (in person and online); 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* (just 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 main office address (as of 1 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, RBI agreed to provide URG with permanent office space in New York. As a consequence, since 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*.

A key goal of maintaining offices in both Geneva and New York is to 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 office, 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 2020, 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; Vice-Chairperson, Dr Nazila Ghanea (Iran), professor at the University of Oxford; Professor Juan Mendez (Argentina), former UN Special Rapporteur on torture; Professor John Knox (US), former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment; Ms Yasmin Sooka (South Africa), Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights in South Africa and a trustee of the Desmond Tutu Peace Centre; 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; Dr Pablo de Greiff (Colombia), former UN Special Rapporteur on truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence; Dr (Ms) Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (Chile), former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; and Ms Marta Mauras (Chile), former Permanent Representative of Chile to the UN in Geneva.

Former Board members are: Professor Abdullahi An Na'im (Sudan), Sir Nigel Rodley (UK), Ms Asma Jahangir (Pakistan), Professor Michael O'Flaherty (Ireland), and Justice Sophia A. B. Akuffo (Ghana).

During 2020, the Board convened its main annual meeting on 30 April, during which it formally adopted the 2019 annual activity report and audited financial report. During the same meeting, the Board also approved the new 2020-2021 programme of work/Global Strategic Plan. The Board also met on 18 November, to consider an update from the secretariat on work done in 2020.

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 (HURIPEC), 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 2020, 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), Policy Researcher (Geneva)
- Ms Camila Marquez Leiva (Colombia), Consultant - environmental human rights defenders project (Bogota)

Over the course of 2020, all staff members accepted a voluntary salary reduction – and commensurate reduction in working hours – due to the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, Geneva-based staff members had part of their salary covered by the Canton of Geneva's *chomage partiel* scheme.

URG maintains 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, over 45 people (30 women and 15 men) have been employed on internship contracts of between three and six months. This includes eight (unpaid) internships in 2020. A particular effort is made to provide internship opportunities to people outside Western Europe. So far, URG Geneva interns have hailed from the following countries: Brazil, Canada, Serbia, Italy, Austria, 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 10 interns (4 in 2020) - all from the US. In 2020, again due to the additional financial stresses placed on URG by the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation was not able to pay its interns. It hopes to resume the paid internship programme as soon as possible once the crisis has abated.

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. In 2020, no new Fellows were taken on due to the COVID-19 crisis.

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), the rights to a healthy environment, 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. That said, as noted above, 2020 was a particularly difficult year for most civil society organisations around the world, including URG. Many donors were forced to reduce their contributions, and the disbursement of a number of them was delayed until the summer of 2020.

In 2020, support was received from the following governments and organisations:

- Norway – core funding.
- Denmark – project funding
- Switzerland – project funding.
- Germany – project funding.
- Netherlands – project funding.
- Singapore – project funding.
- Liechtenstein – project funding.
- Australia – project funding.
- Commonwealth – consultancy.
- UNICEF – consultancy.
- World Resources Institute (WRI) – project funding (LAC office).
- CODECA – consultancy (LAC office).
- Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) – project funding (LAC office).
- Jacob Blaustein Institute (JBI) – project funding (NY office).

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 2020, 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 and the UN. In 2020, there were 122,750 individual users (up from 34,459 in 2018). These users participated in 156,006 individual sessions (up from 47,951 sessions in 2018). There were 217,559 individual page views in 2020.

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 2019-20, URG undertook a major redesign of its website (covering all three editions). This was completed at the end of 2019, and the new-look site is now live. In 2019-20, 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); Council session reports; and Inside Track. The website also links to three other URG administered sites: www.environment-rights.org, www.yourHRC.org, and www.istanbulprocess1618.info. This last site was created, in partnership with Article 19, as part of a project with the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands on combatting religious intolerance.

yourHRC.org went live in late October 2015. In 2020, yourHRC.org secured 3,517 new users (up from 2,424 in 2019). There were 9,743 individual page views, with particular peaks in September and October – the period of the Human Rights Council elections. In 2020, the portal saw a new record, with almost 1,000 individual users visiting the page during the week of 13 October, when the General Assembly elected the Council members for the 2021-2023 term. This suggests that the yourHRC.org website is being used to help inform the voting decisions of General Assembly delegations, and the advocacy efforts of civil society. This in turn shows that the site is succeeding in its core function – to help improve transparency and awareness around the Human Rights Council elections.

URG's portal for environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), environment-rights.org, went live in 2017. The portal was initially created as a Wix page, but in 2019 URG migrated the portal to WordPress in an effort to expand it by adding more features and resources. Due to this transition, the analytics of the website are only available as of 2020. In 2020, environment-rights.org had 1,644 new users, and 3,964 page views. The portal has been visited by people from 113 countries; the majority of whom come from the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, China, Mexico, United Kingdom, Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates. This shows that the portal is being used by EHRDs and others in all regions of the world, including in places where defenders are most at risk.

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 videos: one on prevention, and one on digital technology and human rights. In 2020, three new videos were released: one on the Secretary-General's 'human rights up front' policy, one on the plight of environmental human rights defenders, and one on accountability for human rights violations.

Regarding social media, URG maintains accounts with Twitter (over 5,840 followers across the three offices, and over 26,000 tweets and retweets) and Facebook (2,965 followers, 2,837 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 (depending on available funding). 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, AFP, AP, Reuters and VOX. 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.

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, URG was quick to seize on the opportunities presented by digital meeting platforms such as Zoom, to keep the human rights conversation going, and to maintain international focus on pressing global human rights concerns. Most notably, URG, together with Diplo Foundation and Essex University, began the 'RightOn' webinar series. These were weekly webchats, with high-level speakers from around the world, and addressed a range of human rights issues related to the pandemic and its impacts. URG was regularly able to secure the participation of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Assistant Secretary-General for human rights, and senior Geneva and New York ambassadors. The 'RightOn' webchats regularly drew audiences of 200+.

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 4,000 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. As of 2020, it is now possible for people to order additional hard copies of URG policy reports.

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

Completing the 2018-2019 Global Strategic Plan

URG completed the 2018-2019 Global Strategic Plan in its entirety, with the exception of one project:

Project

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. In 2019, 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 2020, 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 2018-19).

Next steps

A new policy brief presenting the results of the above research is nearing completion and will be published in the first half of 2021. 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.

Implementing the 2020-2021 Global Strategic Plan

The 2020-2021 GSP comprises 14 projects across four broad programme areas.

Below is a summary of the activities undertaken between January 2020 and end December 2020, in connection with the implementation of the new GSP.

Programme 1 - In Focus: democracy and human rights – pushing back

Project 1

Human rights and democratic elections: how to build national capacity and resilience, and secure the integrity of the electoral process

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, URG Geneva, and Danica Damplo, URG New York

Partner(s)

Carter Center

Context

Elections are the cornerstone of democracy. Where electoral laws are sound, and where electoral commissions, processes and mechanisms are strong, a successful election can set a country on a course to long-term democracy, stability and the improved enjoyment of human rights. But where national election infrastructure is weak or open to abuse, mistrust, grievance and anger can quickly grow, especially amongst those in society who feel excluded from political office. Such situations can quickly spiral into situations marked by gross and systematic human rights violations.

Against this background, and especially in the current era of ‘prevention,’ it is imperative that the Council finds ways to work with States, especially developing countries, to strengthen national election infrastructure (e.g., election laws, election commissions, election monitoring and transparency NGOs) and democratic resilience. For the moment, no other part of the UN is doing so (other relevant departments, such as DPA, tend to react to election crises and/or coordinate, in a few cases, observation missions).

Impact

In 2020, URG focused on introducing the idea that the Council should play a more proactive and effective role in promoting democracy and free and fair elections. It published a wide range of opinion pieces by URG analysts and external experts on: why the Council and the UN human rights system more broadly (including the Treaty Bodies) are ideally placed to lead the international ‘fight back’ of liberal democracy, and strengthen the integrity of, and public confidence in, national elections; what different parts of the UN are already doing to support democracy and elections, and where the key gaps are; the key challenges to the integrity of elections and to public confidence in democracy and elections; and case studies showing the major threats to elections and democracy in the 21st century (e.g., the 2020 US elections). URG also organised multiple meetings and events on democracy and elections in 2020 – to inform and educate State representatives about the potential role of the Council and its mechanisms.

As noted in the ‘Impact’ section of this annual report, while it is not possible to demonstrate causality, URG’s growing body of work on democracy and elections in 2019-2020 has

coincided with a sharp rise in international interest in the potential of the international human rights system to reverse the current 'crisis of democracy.' Perhaps the most visible sign of that is US President Joe Biden's decision to place human rights, democracy and elections at the centre of his foreign policy agenda. At the start of 2021, a wide range of States are interested in launching a new initiative on democracy and elections at the Council.

Next steps

URG will engage with interested delegations from all regions to build a core group of interested States, to launch a new Council initiative on human rights, democracy and elections. To support and provide the intellectual foundation of this effort, URG will also publish a research report to demonstrate the centrality of international human rights law to the conduct of free and fair elections, and to the strengthening of national democratic resilience. In addition to presenting an empirical analysis of democratic standards, the report will also provide policy recommendations, including in relation to the focus, work and output of the main UN human rights mechanisms.

Project 2

Democracy and digital technology - data, misinformation and 'fake news'

Project leader(s)

Danica Damplo, URG New York

Partner(s)

Center for Technology and Democracy (CDT), Carter Center

Context

Attacks on the integrity of democratic elections are not only a problem in the Global South. In established democracies like the UK and the US, the interplay of populism and technology, coming against a backdrop of outdated election laws and mechanisms, has led to a rise in misinformation, 'fake news' and hate speech, especially online. This misinformation is often microtargeted (using/abusing the personal data) to play on individual voters' political beliefs or fears. There have been numerous parliamentary, congressional and security service reports in recent years that attest to the scale of this problem, and to the inadequacy of existing regulatory and non-regulatory (e.g., factcheck sites, 'take down' agreements) responses. Following his December 2019 mission to Ethiopia, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, David Kaye reported that online hate speech and fake news is the key concern of rights-holders in the country, especially in the context of its democratic transition and upcoming elections.

Linked with the above point, it is clear that technology can either be a force for good or a force for ill in a democracy, including in the context of elections. On the negative side, fake news (especially via online political ads) is increasingly used to confuse or manipulate voters; stolen personal data (e.g., Facebook and Cambridge Analytica) can be used to launch micro-targeted campaigns that stoke grievance and incite hatred and violence; and social media can provide a platform or 'entryway' for foreign interference in democratic polls. On the positive side, the use of some technologies (e.g., voting software linked to iPads and real-time results updates) can help improve the transparency of, and trust in, electoral processes; and can help 'open up' democratic institutions and decisions – making them more accessible and responsive to the electorate.

Impact

Throughout 2020, URG worked with interested States, digital technology companies, including Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft, and civil society organisations including CDT, to bring the idea of 'digital democracy' to the Council and to raise awareness and educate stakeholders about this major challenge-opportunity for human rights. URG organised a first ambassadorial roundtable with ambassadors and senior representatives of Facebook in early 2020, which focused in particular on the societal and democratic impacts of online hate speech and 'fake news.'

Prior to the US elections, URG co-organised a digital roundtable (as part of the Forum of Human Rights roundtable series) with Carter Center on risks posed by disinformation to human rights and credible elections.

At the 7th Glion Human Rights Dialogue in late 2020, URG introduced 'digital democracy' and the impacts of digital technology for the enjoyment of civil and political rights, onto the agenda. This included high level speeches by the High Commissioner, a senior representative of the Secretary-General, and the heads of human rights of Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft.

Next steps

In 2021, URG will organise, with CDT, the first 'Digital Democracy Dialogue' (3D), a new regular platform or space for States, NGOs and digital technology companies to come together to consider the opportunities and challenges posed by such technology for the enjoyment of human rights, democracy and free and fair elections, and to identify common policy responses (public-private partnership) to ensure that human rights are respected and protected in the digital age, and that technology is used to strengthen – not to weaken – democracy and public trust.

URG will also draft and publish a new policy report charting practices in the public and private sector to tackle threats to democracy in the digital space. This will include an analysis of good emerging practices, and recommendations for enhanced public-private partnerships in the future.

Programme 2 – Contemporary and emerging human rights issues

Project 3

UN recognition of the right to a healthy and sustainable environment: would it help?

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, URG Geneva

Project partners(s)

UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and environment, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNEP

Context

The right to a clean and healthy environment was left out of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and therefore the two Covenants) because it was drafted before the advent of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s and 70s. However, over recent years, there has been a growing interest and movement, at national, regional and international levels, to correct this oversight, and to declare a universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable

environment. Over a hundred national constitutions now recognise the right, as do many regional human rights agreements. At UN-level, the first UN Special Rapporteur for human rights and environment, John Knox, ended his term by calling for States to recognise the right to the environment at international level. This call has since been supported by the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the heads of UNICEF and UNEP.

Linked with this issue, the international community has also become far more aware, over recent years, about the plight and importance of those individuals working at the interface of human rights and environmental protection – namely environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs).

Impact

At the beginning of 2020, URG, together with the core group of States on human rights and environment, OHCHR, UNICEF and UNEP organised a one-day seminar recapping the historic push for recognition of the right to a healthy environment, looking at the practical benefits of that right in the 150 plus countries that have already recognised it, and plotting a course forward towards universal recognition. On the basis of that meeting, the core group began broad intergovernmental consultations on UN recognition of the right to a healthy environment. Moreover, in 2020 the current UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David Boyd, produced a report presenting case studies from around the world demonstrating the positive impacts of recognition, for people and the planet. Finally, in 2020 URG, working with the current and former Special Rapporteurs, began writing a new policy report setting out the case for universal recognition, explaining what benefits it would bring, and proposing the normative content of the right.

Next steps

In February 2021, URG, again with the core group, OHCHR, UNEP and UNICEF, will organise a high-level event during the 46th session of the Council, that will call for a final push for UN recognition in 2021, via twin resolutions at the Council and the General Assembly. At the same event, URG will release the above-mentioned policy report, which will be sent to all UN delegations in Geneva and New York. Finally, URG, working with other NGOs, will launch a social media campaign backing UN recognition under the hashtag ‘The Time Is Now.’

Project 4

Inequality and social rights: access to quality education and adequate healthcare

Project leader(s)

Mariana Montoya

Context

Following his visit to the US in December 2017, then UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, drew attention to the fact that despite the country being one of the world’s richest and most technologically advanced, over 40 million Americans live in poverty. The US, he said, is on course to become ‘the most unequal society in the world.’ Likewise, after his visit to the UK in late 2018, Alston argued that the Government’s austerity policies were causing the ‘systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population.’ He presented statistics showing that around one in five people live in poverty, including one in three children. All of this (for both the US and the UK), he pointed out, had enormous negative implications for the enjoyment of human rights, especially social rights such as the right to health, the right to food, the right to housing, the right to education, and the right to water

and sanitation. In other parts of the world, for example in Chile, social inequalities have driven expanding protest movements that have rocked governments and focused international attention on the issue of inequality, non-discrimination, and the importance of achieving the SDGs 'leaving no one behind.' Finally, the 2019 UN Human Development Report looked in detail at the causes and consequences, including for human rights, of rising inequality.

Impact

This new project is part of a growing international movement to draw attention to, and address, inequality – as a primary human rights concern. In 2020, thanks to this movement, and also as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has served to highlight and widen existing social injustices, and the election of US President Joe Biden, who has promised to address inequality in America, inequality has risen to the top of the political agenda. Against this background, URG's project will aim to reinforce the argument that inequality and discrimination are central human rights concerns, and that the UN human rights system should play a central role in convincing governments to address the issues as such. It will do so by focusing, in particular, on two human rights – the right to education and the right to health.

Next steps

In 2021, URG will continue to publish opinion pieces on inequality and social rights, especially the right to education and the right to health. It will also continue to research the human rights dimensions of inequality in these areas, and will publish a policy report on the subject towards the end of the year.

Project 5

Building an alliance of governments, technology companies and civil society to combat religious hatred online, and prevent radicalisation and violent extremism

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Context

Recent attacks against Muslims in Christchurch, Christians in Colombo, and Jews in America, France and Germany, are the tip of an iceberg of rising acts of hatred directed at people based on their faith, race or ethnicity. These and other acts of violence have two things in common. First, they did not happen overnight but were rather the end result of a steady build-up of resentment, grievance and hatred over many years. Second, those responsible were usually radicalised on-line through the steady drip of 'hate speech.' The UN has developed a number of key policies and tools to address religious intolerance and discrimination (e.g., the resolution 16/18 action plan) and to combat hate speech, including on-line (e.g., the Rabat Plan of Action). Individual States are also adopting increasingly progressive policies to promote tolerance and integration (e.g., Denmark and Singapore) and to deal with hate speech online (e.g., France, Germany, the EU).

Impact

In the context of URG's ongoing work to combat religious intolerance and discrimination, including by working with Council members to promote the implementation of resolution 16/18, and by working with States to co-organise the last four meetings of the Istanbul Process, URG has consistently worked to draw attention to the growing challenge of incitement to hatred and violence online, to encourage States to engage in open-minded discussions on

the key normative questions raised (e.g., what is the threshold of speech that can be prohibited), and to bring together States and technology companies to identify common solutions to address this very real threat to human rights – but through policies and laws that themselves respect human rights (e.g., freedom of expression). As noted elsewhere in this report, that has included the organisation of a roundtable with ambassadors and senior Facebook executives, the organisation of an international meeting on religious intolerance and hate speech, in The Hague (the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process) in late 2019, and the organisation of the 7th meeting of the Glion Human Rights Dialogue, on digital technology and human rights – which included a segment on addressing online hate speech.

Again, while it is not possible to prove direct causality, what is clear is that the past two years have seen an explosion in private sector and public sector initiatives to address online hate speech and other forms of damaging expression (e.g., malicious disinformation). Since New Zealand, France and others came together to adopt the ‘Christchurch Call,’ the EU, France, Germany, etc., have brought in laws and policies designed to prevent the spread of inciteful speech, Twitter has strengthened its community standards and began taking down or ‘tagging’ posts that violate those standards, and Facebook has likewise strengthened its internal policies against hate speech and has established an independent oversight board to police its decisions.

Next steps

Later in 2021, URG will organise a second ‘Digital Democracy Dialogue’ that will bring together States, technology companies and civil society to consider recent advances in addressing online hate speech, to foster cooperation and coordination between the public and private sectors, and identify new ‘public-private partnership’ policies to better manage the growing problem of hate speech and related intolerance, in a manner that fully respects core human rights principles.

Project 6

Business, corruption, rights and the environment – from CSR to Comprehensive Corporate Governance

Project leader(s)

Louis Mason, URG Geneva

Context

In May 2018, URG published a policy report which demonstrated, for the first time (using empirical evidence), that corruption has significant negative impacts on the enjoyment of human rights, and that – conversely – the best way to prevent corruption is to strengthen respect for, and the promotion and protection of, human rights (i.e., address root causes). Through the 2018 study, as well as URG’s work in support of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), it also became clear that corruption and the worst instances of human rights violations (including the killing of EHRDs) tend to happen at the intersection of government and businesses/commercial interests. On the other hand, Norway’s ‘Government Pension Fund Global’ and in particular its Council of Ethics has developed an elaborate system of checks (covering human rights, environmental protection, climate change, corruption, etc.) to guide its overseas investments; while governments (e.g. Sweden) are increasingly engaged with domiciled companies to provide guidance on how to ensure that their overseas investments comply with international human rights, anti-corruption and environmental

standards. All of this has taken place against a background of increasing private sector interest in human rights and corporate responsibility, including in the context of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and corporate 'ESG' (environment, social, governance) ethical investment initiatives.

Impact

In 2020, URG began the process of updating and expanding its 2018 policy report on corruption and human rights, to this time also include sections on business, human rights and corruption, and on the inter-relationship between corruption, human rights and environmental harm/climate change. URG also organised a 'RightOn' webinar event in late 2020, with representatives of the UN Working Group on business and human rights, and executives from firms such as Unilever, which, *inter alia*, calls on stakeholders to widen the current conversation on business and human rights, to also cover the role and responsibilities of corporations in tackling corruption and protecting the environment/climate. Following on from that meeting, the UN Working Group contacted URG to work together on this agenda.

Also in 2020 (July), URG co-organised, with the World Benchmarking Alliance, a virtual parallel event to both the Human Rights Council and the HLPF on the SDGs, on the topic: 'The 2030 Agenda, human rights and building back better: What to expect from the world's most influential companies.'

Next steps

URG will publish its new policy report in late 2021.

Other projects

In addition to the above projects, URG has also continued to follow-up 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 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.
- **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. During the first half of 2020, URG launched a report of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process during an international online event featuring senior State representatives, UN Special Rapporteurs, and members of civil society. During the same event, URG, the Netherlands and Article 19 launched a new 'Istanbul Process' website.

Programme 3 – Translating universal norms into local reality: the operation and impact of the UN human rights pillar

Project 7

The keystone of national implementation: The emergence of 'national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up' (NMIRFs).

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon

Context

A key pillar of URG's 2018-2019 GSP was to encourage, track and analyse the development of NMIRFs. Two years later and sophisticated, standing NMIRFs have been established in over 40 countries; a process of global meetings to promote their quantitative and qualitative development (including via the elaboration of universal principles) has been launched (in the Pacific, and then by a UN resolution at HRC42); software has been developed (by URG, OHCHR and others) to help NMIRFs address implementation and reporting challenges; States and senior UN officials increasingly see NMIRFs as the key means of driving progress with both human rights and the SDGs 'leaving no one behind;' the Secretary-General and High Commissioner are increasingly positioning NMIRFs as central to the UN prevention agenda; and international development partners (UN and bilateral) increasingly see NMIRFs as a key potential 'entry point' for cooperation with developing countries. During this time, URG has also assisted a number of countries in establishing/strengthening their NMIRFs (e.g., Georgia, Fiji, Samoa, Marshall Islands).

Impact

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.' Those principles were published in March 2020 during an event at the Australian Mission in Geneva, and featuring speeches from ministers from across the Pacific.

Building on the example of the meeting in Nadi, later in 2019 URG worked with Paraguay to draft and help secure the adoption, by consensus, of a vital new UN resolution: 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. Two of the five meetings were expected to take place in 2020, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic all have been postponed until 2021-2022. URG will be fully involved in all five meetings.

In 2019-2020, URG also continued to expand its technical support to developing countries wishing to establish or strengthen NMIRFs. During this time (though overseas missions were suspended after April 2020 due to the pandemic), URG has conducted capacity-building missions to the Pacific, to South-East Asia, and to Africa. This has included dedicated bilateral support for Gambia, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, and the Marshall Islands. In late 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 take forward the agenda of the 'Group of Friends on human rights implementation/NMIRFs.' In 2020, 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.

The positive impacts of URG's work on implementation, including via the Group of Friends, continued to be in evidence during 2020. For example, in September OHCHR issued a UPR Practical Guidance document that refers to the importance of UN system support for the establishment or strengthening of NMIRFs. The document included advice on how to make such national mechanisms effective and how to link human rights implementation with SDG implementation. Moreover, throughout the year, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in her letters addressed to the foreign ministers of States following their UPR reviews, systematically referred to the importance of setting up or strengthening NMIRFs.

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 8

Tracking implementation and measuring impact at national level: using the UN human rights system to drive real-world progress with women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, and children's rights

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon and Charlotte Marres, URG Geneva

Project partner(s)

UNICEF

Context

In 2019, URG began a project with UNICEF to track progress with the national implementation (in six UN member States) of important clusters of UN human rights recommendations (from Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies and UPR) relating to children's rights. In the first study of its kind, the URG-UNICEF project sought to follow the full 'implementation-reporting' cycle, from national level, to international level, and back again, to understand a) how UN Country Teams are feeding information into the work of the UN human rights mechanisms; b) whether that information helps to inform strong and practical recommendations back to the State; c) the degree to which UN Country Teams (including UNICEF) are following up with governments and other national-level stakeholders to support/press for the implementation of recommendations.

Impact

In late 2020, URG and UNICEF published a policy report presenting the conclusions of its one-year study. The document represents a first ever analysis (qualitative and empirical) of the degree to which UN human rights recommendations are actually being implemented at national level, the impacts of implementing measures on the enjoyment of human rights, and the degree to which information on implementation and impact are being fed back into the UN human rights mechanisms to inform future reviews and recommendations. The report was launched during a high-level event (online) featuring the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Executive Director of UNICEF, the Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and high-level government representatives from the six case study countries.

Next steps

With the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development in 2019, and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2020, an important opportunity exists to repeat this exercise for women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. URG hopes to work with UNFPA in 2021 to repeat the UNICEF project but for sexual and reproductive health rights.

Project 9

'State of the World' human rights report (human rights measurement)

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, Mariana Montoya

Project partners

Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)

Context

The human rights community has long been a laggard when it comes to the empirical measurement of progress and policy impact. Nearly 30 years after the UN's development pillar began elaborating a 'human development index,' the human rights pillar has made only one small foray into this space: a long-forgotten OHCHR report (2012) on human rights indicators. As a consequence, very few States proactively gather human rights indicator data as a means of measuring their progress in the area of human rights. This, in turn, has negative implications for the credibility, visibility and authority of the international human rights system, and serves to accentuate the politicisation of human rights (because of a lack of empirical evidence as a basis for policymaking). The absence of effective human rights measurement also undermines the UN's ability to ensure that 'no one is left behind' in the context of the SDGs, and its ability

to identify emerging crises at an early stage and prevent conflict (human rights regression is an important early warning sign of impending crisis). Finally, the scientifically robust and independent assessment of global human rights trends, especially in addition to 'human rights stories,' could quickly capture the imagination of the media and the general public.

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'?

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.

Based on feedback, in 2020 URG and HRMI, working with a web developer and visual designer, began to construct the new 'State of the world human rights report' portal – containing and presenting – through dynamic graphics – the human rights 'performance' of over 120 States (and across twelve human rights - civil and political rights, and economic and social rights).

Next steps

URG will launch the 'State of the world human rights report' portal in March 2021, with HRMI and Denmark, in pilot phase – to again receive feedback from States and civil society. Improvements and changes will then be implemented. At the end of 2021, URG will release its first 'State of the world human rights report' – summarising key global human rights trends over the course of the year, and focusing in on interesting national case studies.

Project 10

UN transitional justice systems and support

Project leader(s)

Danica Damplo

Partner(s)

Pablo de Greiff, Director of Transitional Justice Program at the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University of Law

Context

Transitional justice is the process by which rights are restored to rights-holders in societies in which the social contract had become damaged through repression or conflict. Experts in the field agree that truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence (and increasingly, genuine consultations with victims and stakeholders) are necessary as part of the rebuilding

process in such situations, though the mechanisms through which this may occur vary from State to State.

Notwithstanding this broad point, transitional justice is also a relatively new and highly complex area of work, and demands for UN support and expertise tends to far outstrip supply. This has led to a certain degree of confusion and apprehension among States and senior UN officials about what transitional justice requires, and - particularly given that it is a highly contextualised process - when and how transitional justice mechanisms should be put in place. There are also disagreements as to what lessons should be drawn from different models (such as South Africa's or Colombia's). Furthermore, while all three pillars of the UN have contributed to transitional justice processes around the globe, there is little consensus on the optimal nature of UN involvement, and how best to provide a wider programme of UN support covering development, rights, gender and security, in often fraught political contexts.

Impact

In 2019, URG organised an important event with the European Union Mission to the UN in New York, on 'Transitional justice: emerging challenges and opportunities,' with an audience of member States, civil society and UN officials. In late February 2020, URG released an analytical report on the UN Security Council's first ever thematic debate on transitional justice, during which States from all regions offered first-hand accounts and insights. The debate demonstrated that while there is broad agreement on the importance of transitional justice processes, the role of the UN and other international actors is far less clear. URG has since, through consultations with Pablo de Greiff, the UN's transitional justice focal point at OHCHR New York, and the International Center for Transitional Justice, worked to identify useful entry points for its work – i.e., areas where it can make a value-added contribution.

Next steps

In late 2021, URG will publish a policy report on the role of transitional justice in the UN's prevention agenda. To gather information, ideas and opinions for the report, URG will organise a policy dialogue in New York during the second half of the year.

Project 11

Towards a new accountability? From COIs to Magnitsky laws

Project leader(s)

Louis Mason

Context

One of the key mandates and powers of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms (e.g., country Special Rapporteurs and Commissions of Inquiry - COIs) is to secure accountability for serious human rights violations, including gross and systematic violations. But has it been able to fulfil this role since its establishment in 2006? In part, the answer to this question depends on our definition of 'accountability.' Do we mean accountability to the truth (i.e., fact finding) or accountability to the law (i.e., justice)? In 2017-2018, growing concern over whether COIs and Special Procedures are, on their own, capable of delivering accountability to the law, led Liechtenstein and others (at the GA) to develop a new type of mechanism: an international, impartial independent mechanism (IIIM) to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under international law in Syria. In 2018, the Council set up a similar mechanism for Myanmar.

Over the same period, an expanding group of countries, led by the US, Canada, and now the EU, have established and applied so-called 'Magnitsky laws,' to individually sanction the perpetrators of serious human rights violations and corruption. Both IIIMs and Magnitsky laws represent an important shift from mechanisms that emphasise accountability to the truth to mechanisms that emphasise accountability to the law, and a concurrent shift from State to individual accountability.

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 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 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.

In all of its work on accountability, especially regarding the operation and delivery of COIs, URG is careful to always adopt a victim's perspective – i.e., are COIs delivering for victims and their families?

Regarding 'Magnitsky laws', during 2020 URG spoke at and organised a number of events on this subject, and also regularly published opinion pieces (by its own analysts or by others, such as the UK Permanent Representative in Geneva) on the continued expansion of 'Magnitsky-style' laws around the world. For example, in 2020, both the UK and the EU established 'Magnitsky laws' – or, as they are otherwise known, human rights sanctions regimes. Both developments were extensively covered by URG. As a result, URG has become a key source of news and analysis on the emergence and development of such laws.

Finally, in mid-2020, URG organised a first meeting of those States that have either established Magnitsky-style individual sanction regimes, or are actively considering doing so. This led to a suggestion that a 'Magnitsky Group' be established in Geneva, to act as a space for States to share experiences on the establishment and applications of such regimes.

Next steps

In 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.

Also in 2021, URG will work with interested States to establish an informal 'Magnitsky Group' in Geneva, for the exchange of information on the establishment and utility of individual human rights sanctions laws.

Project 12

Human rights in a reformed UN: An 'all pillar' approach to securing human rights implementation, the prevention of crises and conflicts, and the achievement of the SDGs 'leaving no one behind'

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, Charlotte Marres, Danica Damplo

Context

This broad project aims to allow URG to continue its pioneering work to promote the domestic implementation of universal human rights norms, including via reform of the Council's operation under agenda item 10 and by reorientating ODA behind human rights implementation (i.e., the Oslo+ process); and to link this human rights 'implementation agenda' with the Secretary-General's ongoing reforms of the UN's security pillar and development system.

Regarding the security pillar, this means a continued URG focus on the operationalisation of the **Council's prevention mandate** (via the process begun with resolution 38/18), and the placing of that role within the Secretary-General's wider prevention agenda. Regarding the **development system** (continuing URG's work on 'human rights and the SDGs' begun with Denmark), it means scrutinising what reforms to the UN Resident Coordinator system mean for human rights, and working with relevant UN officials in Geneva and New York to promote the integration of UN human rights recommendations into UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs).

Finally, all of these points have implications for '**financing for human rights.**' If we accept that the human rights system must necessarily play a crucial role in international efforts to achieve the SDGs 'leaving no one behind,' and to prevent emerging crises and violent conflicts, then should the UN not 'invest' more in its human rights pillar?

Impact

Regarding **item 10 reform**, in January 2020, URG, together with Norway and Singapore, organised a first open platform for human rights capacity-building and technical assistance, at the Permanent Mission of Singapore in Geneva. The meeting, which brought together around 30 States (developed and developing) aimed to introduce a more results-based approach to the Council's work under item 10, by essentially 'matching' developing country requests for assistance, with available support on the part of developed countries (and other developing countries – South-South cooperation) and OHCHR/UN. The meeting was extremely well received and successful; however, the global health pandemic has made follow-up on the agreed 'matches' difficult.

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 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 in turn drove progress at the 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, 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 operationalisation of paragraph 5f. These statements laid out the sponsors’ thinking on the issue and their plans for action.

Then, 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 operationalisation 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. 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. At the end of those consultations, in March 2020, the three experts presented framework proposals for the operationalisation of the Council’s prevention mandate.

In 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 2020, it 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 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.

Finally, and most importantly, in at the Council’s 45th session in September 2020, the core group (Norway, Switzerland, Uruguay and Sierra Leone) tabled a second draft resolution to implement the key recommendations of the group of three experts. URG provided significant input into the draft. At the end of the session, resolution 45/31 was adopted by a vote (32 in favour, 3 against, 11 abstentions) – one of the most important texts ever produced by the Council. Resolution 45/31 gives the High Commissioner and the Council important new prevention powers.

Regarding the position of human rights in **UN development system reforms**, a key focus of URG’s work continues to be the ‘Oslo+ group.’

In April 2018, Norway and URG organised a first meeting of bilateral and multilateral development partners in Oslo, Norway. In May 2019, a second meeting was organised with the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) in Stockholm, Sweden. In mid-2020, a third (digital) meeting of the group was organised by URG. The aim of these meetings is to provide a space for development partners 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.

Finally, in late 2019 and early 2020, URG New York organised two informal consultations for senior UN officials and civil society, on human rights in the **Secretary-General's overall reform agenda**. These meetings covered the integration of human rights into both the Secretary-General's development system reforms, and his reforms of the peace and security pillar.

Next steps

In 2021, URG will continue to work with the core group on the take-up of the concepts and powers set out in resolution 45/31, in particular in the context of situations of emerging concern. URG will also publish a new policy report, as part of a project with Germany, providing ideas and recommendations on how to improve the coherence of the Human Rights Council-Security Council relationship, in particular from the perspective of prevention. This report is heavily based on a transatlantic online (half-day) seminar organised by URG and Germany in late 2020, with State delegations to the Security Council and the Human Rights Council.

A fourth meeting of the Oslo+ Group will be held in Montreux, Switzerland, in late 2021, hosted by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and URG. This fourth 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.

Programme 3 – URG Capacity

Project 13

Supporting the domestic implementation of international human rights obligations and commitments, including as a contribution to the 2030 Agenda, and to preventing crises and conflicts

Project leader(s)

Charlotte Marres

Context

A key pillar of URG's 2018-2019 GSP was to encourage, track and analyse the development of NMIRFs. Two years later and sophisticated, standing NMIRFs have been established in over 30 countries; a process of global meetings to promote their quantitative and qualitative development (including via the elaboration of universal principles) has been launched (in the Pacific, and then by a UN resolution at HRC42); and software has been developed (by URG,

OHCHR and others) to help NMIRFs address implementation and reporting challenges. As noted above, during this time URG has helped a number of developing countries establish or strengthen NMIRFs. However, during the same period URG received a number of other requests for capacity-building support (either directly from the State concerned, or via UN agencies and programmes such as UNDP) that it could not respond to (e.g., Zambia, Gambia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, RMI, Sudan).

Impact

As noted above (project 7), URG's work on implementation and NMIRFs continues to have a significant impact on the agenda and effectiveness of the Human Rights Council, as well as on the national-level implementation of UN human rights recommendations. That work has included significant technical assistance helping developing countries (e.g., Fiji, Georgia) establish NMIRFs. Further on-the-ground assistance projects were planned for 2020. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, these projects were postponed until 2021.

Next steps

URG hopes to support a number of developing countries (RMI, Sudan, Gambia) in 2021.

Project 14

Promoting and protecting the rights of EHRDs, and showcasing their role in sustainable development

Project leaders

Mariana Montoya and Camila Marquez Leiva, URG Latin America

Context

Over the past five years, URG has been at the forefront of efforts to highlight the important role of, and the risks faced by, environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) – individuals working at the interface of human rights and environmental protection. As part of that effort, in 2015 URG organised, with UNEP, a first ever consultation with EHRDs from Africa, South America and Europe. Then, in 2017 it conducted a regional consultation in Latin America and published a policy report by UN Special Rapporteur John Knox on the subject. On the basis of the consultations and Professor Knox's report, in late 2017 URG launched the environment-rights.org resource portal, in partnership with the Special Rapporteur, OHCHR, UNEP and other NGOs. Over the past two years, URG has worked with a coalition of partners, including the above organisations together with the Defending the Land and Environmental Defender Coalition, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), the World Resource Institute (WRI) and Wake Forest University, to use environment-rights.org as a central component of a global campaign to draw attention to the work and situation of EHRDs, and to better protect their lives and rights. This has included the organisation of URG capacity-building workshops in Latin America for EHRDs, including women EHRDs, government officials and businesses. Finally, in June 2018, URG supported Norway with the elaboration of a new UN resolution on EHRDs.

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, and is available in English, Spanish and Portuguese. 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](http://www.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 2019-20, URG redesigned [environment-rights.org](http://www.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.

In 2020, URG Latin America chaired the Support Committee of the Defending the Land and Environmental Defender Coalition, a coalition of 70 organisations working to support EHRDs. As chair of this Committee, URG has worked closely with teams of experts in countries where EHRDs are most at risk, namely, Brazil, Colombia, Kenya, Mexico and the Philippines. As a result of this work, URG has developed tools (including a mobile app) and projects to help EHRDs access support, including capacity-building, legal assistance and funding. During the second quarter of 2021, URG will publish a report outlining the results of this work. The report will include recommendations to States and international organisations on how to better respond to, and support the needs of, EHRDs.

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 2020, States of the Latin American region continued to ratify the Escazu Agreement - a new regional treaty on environmental rights, with a particular focus on EHRDs. There are now a sufficient number of parties to the treaty for its to enter into force.

Next steps

In 2020, 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 Latin America, Africa and Asia. Also during those workshops, URG and UNEP will gather stories and testimonies from EHRDs to profile their important work, build a positive narrative about their contribution to sustainable development and the environment, and identify good practices.

Finally, as noted above, in 2021 URG will continue to work with the Council's core group on human rights and environment, UNEP, UNICEF, OHCHR, 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 the protection and empowerment of EHRDs.

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 initially (from 2014-2017) with the Governments of Norway and Switzerland, then (from 2018-2019) with the Government of Switzerland, and most recently (2020) with the Governments of Liechtenstein and 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.'

The 2020 Dialogue ('Glion VII') was held from 3-4 December 2020, and considered 'Human rights in the digital age: making digital technology work for human rights.'

Ahead of Glion II, III, IV, V, VI and VII, 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, Iceland, Fiji, Seychelles, Maldives and Thailand.

In 2019 and 2020, ahead of Glion VI and Glion VII, URG organised, in cooperation with Iceland, pre-Glion policy dialogues in New York.

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

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 seven 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 six 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 2021 Dialogue ('Glion VIII') will be held later in 2021 (due to the coronavirus epidemic). The subject of the Dialogue is to be confirmed.

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 eight 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.

The journalist capacity-building programme was suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

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 2020, no breakfasts were organised, due to the health pandemic.

Next steps

Once the health crisis has abated, further press breakfasts will be organised in 2021, 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 2020, no Friday Exchange meetings were held due to the ongoing health pandemic.

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 other examples, a 2019 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 FX 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 aim to restart Friday Exchange meetings in 2021 in Geneva and New York, starting with a discussion on inequality and human rights. A concept note has already been prepared.

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 continued to receive extremely 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. 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.

Next steps

URG and Singapore will continue to publish Inside Trade before each Council session.

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 2020, 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.

In 2020, URG was in discussions with Austria regarding their planned retreat in Vienna. However, this had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. The 2019 retreat considered emerging human rights concerns and issues.

Next steps

The Fijian Presidency of the Council will host a retreat in Nadi towards the end of 2021.

Project

New Human Rights Council members' retreat

Context

With the Permanent Mission of the UK (and in 2020, with the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands), 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, the fifth in January 2020 (with the Netherlands), and the sixth in January 2021.

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 2020' report was launched in late 2020 during a digital event, co-hosted with Norway, and featured speeches by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the outgoing President of the Council, and a journalist from the Economist. The yourHRC.org 'Guide to the Human Rights Council elections – 2020' was also launched with an online event covering 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 continue to promote yourHRC.org in 2021, and will continue to use the two reports to promote transparency and public accountability at the Council, and to continue to improve the body's membership.