



Activity Report 1st January - 31st December 2021

I. Universal Rights Group's impact in 2021

In 2021, URG continued to implement and finalise the projects set out in its 2020-2021 two-year global strategic plan. At the same time, the organisation followed-up on important projects implemented as part of previous global strategic plans – to ensure they have a sustained impact.

As a think tank rather than an advocacy NGO, URG's focus at the international-level is to 'set the agenda' and engage in strategic thinking about the future of the international human rights system – with a particular focus on how that system can achieve greater relevancy and secure greater impact on the ground, thereby improving the lives of the 'Peoples of the United Nations.'

In that sense, in 2021, URG projects, always implemented with a diverse range of State partners, UN agencies and programmes, academics, civil society, businesses, and human rights defenders, continued to have a major impact on the international human rights 'landscape.'

For example, projects introduced in URG's current and previous global strategic plans have inspired and informed many of the priorities and policies of the Human Rights Council (Council), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the wider UN human rights pillar, and the UN 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 2021 in Geneva, New York and in capitals.

Examples of this international-level impact and influence in 2021 include:

- Following seven years of URG work and leadership on the subject, in October 2021 the Council adopted a resolution recognising a new universal human right: **the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment**. Recognition by the General Assembly is expected to follow in 2022.
- Linked with the above, URG has, over the past five years, worked to draw attention to the plight of **environmental human rights defenders** (EHRDs), and to build/develop a range of tools and support networks to protect them and support their important work. Today, thanks to this work as well as that undertaken by many other NGOs and States (e.g., Norway and its Council resolution on the subject), the protection and empowerment of EHRDs is at the very top of the political agenda at the Council (as well as at other parts of the UN such as UNEP/UNEA).
- For the past three years, URG has worked to convince States and civil society that the Council and its mechanisms, as well as the Treaty Bodies, should play a far more active

role in defending and promoting **democracy** around the world. Today, thanks mainly to President Biden's 'Summit for Democracy,' the relationship between democracy and human rights, and questions of how to leverage the international human rights system to lead the fightback for democracy and counter autocracy, is at the very top of the global political agenda.

- Linked with this work on democracy, URG has also, over the past two years, worked with States (e.g., Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands) and technology companies (e.g., Facebook/Meta, Twitter, and Microsoft) to understand the relationship between **digital technology, democracy, and human rights** (e.g., covering issues such as online hate speech and disinformation), and to encourage tech firms to adopt a rights-based approach to their products and services.
- URG has also played an important convening role – bringing together governments, technology firms and civil society to 'place technology at the service of human rights and democracy.' Digital technology and human rights were, for example, the subject of the most recent Glion Human Rights Dialogue (Glion VII), and of a series of meetings (the **Digital Democracy Dialogues**) organised by URG together with Norway, Switzerland, Facebook, Carter Center, and International IDEA.
- URG has led on efforts, in Geneva and New York, to make the UN's work on human rights more 'real' – i.e., less focused on abstract debates and general resolutions, and more focused on **implementation and impact on the ground**. This is important for rights-holders around the world, but also for the credibility and legitimacy of the Council and the wider multilateral system. In 2020 and 2021, for example, URG worked with UNICEF and UNFPA to conduct two ground-breaking studies into the national implementation of UN children's rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, recommendations. Both studies found strong levels of implementation and impact across over a dozen country case studies.
- Linked with the above point, URG has continued to take the lead in encouraging the UN human rights pillar to strengthen its ability to empirically **measure human rights change** at national level – using human rights indicators. As part of this effort, in 2021 URG launched its 'State of the World' human rights portal and report – showing human rights trends across over 100 countries.
- URG has continued its work with Norway and others to secure the full operationalisation of the **Council's prevention mandate** under paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251. Since September 2020, these efforts have been focused on securing the implementation of Council resolution 45/31 on prevention. This was done in part by continued engagement with relevant OHCHR staff, as well as the organisation of an Ambassador-level lunch with the High Commissioner on the topic.
- URG has continued its work to encourage States to rethink and revitalise the Council's work under agenda **item 10** (the delivery of technical assistance and capacity-building support). The overall aim is to create a 'safe space' at the Council where States will be encouraged to share information on their own human rights challenges and successes, exchange good practices and lessons learnt with their peers, and, where appropriate, request UN technical assistance or capacity-building support to help them better implement their human rights obligations and commitments. A new initiative taking forward this aim will be launched by URG and Luxembourg in early 2022.
- URG has continued its work to promote transparency and public accountability for the actions, decisions, and cooperation-levels of **members** of the Human Rights Council (e.g., via the yourHRC.org portal), and to strengthen the transparency of Council **elections** – to ensure that candidates are judged against the criteria for election/membership set out in GA resolution 60/251.

- At the same time, URG has continued to act as the secretariat for the **Council Contact Group on membership**, which focuses on encouraging more Small State democracies to consider running for a Council seat.
- URG has also continued to act as the informal secretariat of the Istanbul Process on **combatting religious intolerance and discrimination**, including online hate speech. This has included helping to organise the last five Istanbul Process meetings (the most recent one was hosted by Pakistan in early 2022).

Looking at the first of these examples of impact in more detail, since 2014 URG has worked to draw attention to the close inter-relationship between **human rights, the environment, and climate change**, and to raise awareness of the plight of EHRDs. In 2014, there was considerable scepticism about this agenda among States. Today, partly thanks to URG's work alongside the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, States such as Costa Rica, Switzerland, and Slovenia, OHCHR and UNEP, and other NGOs, the above-mentioned inter-relationship is at the very top of the political agenda.

For example, in December 2020, at the launch of a new UN report laying out a programme to address the three 'interwoven' crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres argued that the 'piecemeal' approaches of the past have not worked, because they have ignored the multiple links between environmental, development and human rights challenges. Instead, as the world recovers and rebuilds from the pandemic, science and policymakers should 'open a pathway' that seeks to promote and protect human rights, achieve the SDGs by 2030, and realise a carbon neutral world by 2050.

The close inter-relationship between human life, dignity, and rights, the environmental, biodiversity and climate crises, and sustainable development, and a determination to address all these things in an integrated manner, is also evident in the Secretary-General's 2020 'Call to Action' on human rights, and his 'We are all in this together' blueprint for responding to, and recovering from, the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the 'Call to Action' recognises that the climate and environmental crises 'threaten the rights and dignity not only of millions of people worldwide but also of people not yet born,' urges States to protect rights by promoting 'a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment,' and speaks to the importance of human rights in empowering environmental human rights defenders.

As noted above, in October 2021 these important shifts in political rhetoric and positions culminated in an important milestone for the UN, for human rights, for the environment, and for the climate: recognition, by the Council, of the **universal rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment**. Resolution 48/13 was adopted with 43 votes in favour and 4 abstentions – leading to a rare round of applause in the Council chamber. With resolution 48/13, which was cosponsored by 78 UN member States, the Council:

1. Recognize[d] the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right that is important for the enjoyment of human rights.

The resolution also 'invite[d] the General Assembly to consider the matter.' A draft resolution seeking GA recognition of the right to a healthy environment is expected to be presented in April 2022.

In a statement after adoption, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, warmly welcomed the Council's vote. 'Having long called for such a step,' she said, she was

'gratified that the Council had moved to 'clearly recognise environmental degradation and climate change as interconnected human rights crises.' Notwithstanding, she warned the Council against dwelling on this historic achievement: 'member States must now take bold action to give prompt and real effect to the right to a healthy environment.' Resolution 48/13 should 'serve as a springboard to push for transformative economic, social and environmental policies that will protect people and nature.'

These sentiments were also echoed by the Secretary-General in his report 'Our Common Agenda,' action point 2 which, *inter alia*, calls on UN member States to declare the right to a healthy environment.

Looking at a second of the above examples in more detail, in 2021 URG continued to play a leading role, at the UN and at national level, in powering the global human rights '**implementation agenda.**'

This has included working with States (e.g., members of the Group of Friends on national implementation/NMIRFs) to power the global development of 'national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up' (NMIRFs), and to involve other national stakeholders (e.g., parliaments) in the process of implementation. 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. These seminars were finally held in late 2021 (they were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). URG spoke at each of the seminars, and at each one presented the 'Pacific Principles of Practice' (PPP) on NMIRFs, adopted at a pilot regional seminar for Pacific Island States (organised by URG) in Fiji in 2019. The PPPs are the first ever intergovernmental standards for establishing or developing NMIRFs. In 2022, URG will work with Paraguay to secure the adoption of a further Council resolution calling on all UN regions to adopt similar principles.

URG also continued to undertake ground-breaking work in 2021 to track the implementation of UN human rights recommendations at national level, to measure impact, and to identify good practices in 'connecting the international and the national.' For example, in 2021, URG began a project with UNFPA (similar to a project completed in 2020 with UNICEF on the implementation of the children's rights recommendations) to track the implementation and measure the impact of UN recommendations related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). In 2022, URG will also use the same model for a project with UNEP on UN human rights recommendations related to the environment, climate change, biodiversity, and pollution.

Linked with this work to track levels of implementation at the national-level, URG has also led on international efforts to measure the impact of implementing laws and policies on human rights by the application of empirical human rights indicators. In 2021, URG and the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) launched the 'State of the World Human Rights Report' portal, with shows human rights trends (covering 12 rights) across more than 100 countries.

Moreover, in 2021 URG continued to received 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, and Maldives. For budgetary reasons, URG has so far only able to

¹ Developed by URG, Singapore and IMPACT Group.

provide assistance to Fiji, and the Marshall Islands. After a hiatus in this capacity-building work from mid-2020 to end 2021, URG restarted its support in early 2022, with capacity-building workshops for Fiji and Marshall Islands.

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.

"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 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

"Ensuring that human rights principles inform implementation of the 2030 Agenda [...] is the surest way to bring the benefits of the ambitious and far-reaching agenda to all, leaving no one behind [In that regard, we will] 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

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 2021:

“Over the past seven years, URG has been at the forefront of efforts to connect the previously separate concepts of human rights and environmental sustainability. With remarkable vision and skill, URG has brought States forward to better understand these deep connections. These efforts culminated in the Council’s historic move to recognise the universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment on 8 October 2021!”

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

“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 (2021),
Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Fiji

“UNEP is delighted to work with the Universal Rights Group on advancing the recognition and implementation of the right to a healthy environment, and on strengthening support and protection for environmental human rights defenders. This collaboration has made an important contribution in supporting States to adopt the landmark Human Rights Council resolution 48/13 recognising the right to a healthy environment for the first time at global level. The resolution was referenced in the political declaration of the special United Nations Environment Assembly session to commemorate UNEP@50.”

Patricia Kameri-Mbote, Director, Law Division, UNEP

“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

“I always greatly enjoyed working with URG. As an independent think tank, they consistently provide the Human Rights Council and all States with very relevant, timely and high-quality human rights policy analyses and realistic recommendations. URG’s work is often agenda setting for the Council. URG’s founder and Executive Director, Marc Limon, is widely respected

in Geneva. With only a small team, Limon has developed URG into an indispensable cutting edge human rights think tank."

Mr Rochus Pronk, former head of human rights section, Permanent Mission of the Netherlands

"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

"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 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, former 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

“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

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 and human rights**, and **digital technology and human rights**. Regarding the former, over the past six 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 2021, there were important signs that this message is getting through (for example, as noted above, 65 States came together to back a joint statement at the Council on democracy and human rights). 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'), 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 many 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, the Netherlands, and – most recently – Pakistan, to co-organise the past six 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 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 an 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; a window onto the work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms (designed to promote transparency, accountability, awareness and effectiveness); and – increasingly – by working to ‘connect’ human rights decisions and recommendations at international-level with the lived reality of rights-holders at national/local level.

Regarding the latter point, 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.

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.

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 – increasingly – to provide technical assistance and capacity-building support so that they can better engage/cooperate with the UN human rights system so that, through that engagement, States can bring real improvements to the national enjoyment of human rights.

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 engagement with 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 'link the international and the national.' 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 policymakers; 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

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.

URG's main office is located at the *Maison de la Paix, Building 5, Chemin Eugene-Rigot 2E* in Geneva. This location provides easy access to the UN, as well as other key partners the URG regularly engages with, i.e., States, OHCHR, and other civil society organisations.

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. Consequently, 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. As of January 2022, 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 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, member of the Council group of experts on prevention; Ms Yvette Stevens (Sierra Leone), former Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN in Geneva, chair-rapporteur of the Council group of experts on prevention; Dr (Ms) Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (Chile), former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; Ms Marta Mauras (Chile), former Permanent Representative of Chile to the UN in Geneva; and Mr Bertrand Ramcharan, former acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Guyana).

Sadly, in 2021 URG lost one of its most active and dedicated Board members when Professor Christof Heyns of South Africa passed away unexpectedly.

Former Board members are: Christof Heyns (South Africa); 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 2021, the Board convened its main annual meeting in April, during which it formally adopted the 2020 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 in November, to consider an update from the secretariat on work done in 2021.

Advisory Group

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

Dr (Ms) Başak Çali (Turkey), Associate Professor at Koç University, Turkey; Mr Malcolm Langford (Norway), Director of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Programme at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, Oslo, Norway; Professor (Ms) Elizabeth Griffin (UK), Professor and Executive Director at Global Jindal University, New Delhi, India; Mr Rolf Ring (Sweden), Deputy Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at Lund University, Sweden; Professor (Mr) Frans Viljoen (South

Africa), Director at the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, South Africa; Mr Scott Sheeran (New Zealand), former Senior Lecturer and Director of the LLM in International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law programme at the University of Essex, UK; Dr (Ms) Elvira Dominguez-Redondo (Spain), Senior Lecturer in Law at Middlesex University, UK; Mr Nick Cumming-Bruce (UK), Geneva-based journalist contributing to the IHT and the New York Times; Dr (Ms) Rosa Freedman, author of *The United Nations Human Rights Council: an early assessment* (March 2013); Mr Peter Splinter (Canada), former Amnesty International Representative to the United Nations in Geneva; Professor (Mr) George E. Edwards (USA), Director of the Programme in International Human Rights Law, Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law; Dr (Ms) Rose Nakayi (Uganda), Director, Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPPEC), School of Law, Makerere University, Uganda; Professor (Mr) Michael Ramsden (UK), Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Dr (Ms) Sejal Parmar (UK), Central European University, Budapest.

Secretariat

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

As of end December 2021, the composition of the URG secretariat was as follows:

- Mr Marc Limon (UK), Executive Director (Geneva)
- Ms Charlotte Marres (Belgium/Netherlands), Policy Analyst (Geneva)
- Ms Mariana Montoya Pineda (Colombia), Consultant (LAC Office)
- Mr Louis Mason (UK/France), Policy Researcher (Geneva)
- Ms Sarah Sáenz (Colombia), Fellow - environmental human rights defenders project (LAC Office).
- Mr Joseph Burke (United States), Fellow (LAC Office).
- Ms. Abigail Weiss (United States), Fellow (NY Office).

Over the course of 2020-2021, 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 part of 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, New York and Bogota, organised in cooperation with members of the Advisory Group and partner universities. So far, under the Geneva paid internship programme, over 50 people (35 women and 15 men) have been employed on internship contracts of between three and six months. This includes nine (unpaid) internships in 2021. 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, Germany, and Romania. URG New York has so far employed 10 interns (4 in 2021) - all from the US. In 2021, 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, six Fellows have been employed, one from Peru, one from Belgium, one from France, one from Canada/Serbia, one from Germany, and one from the UK. In 2018, this Fellowship programme was also rolled out in New York.

Presence in the global South

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

Furthermore, 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 have the possibility of undertaking internships.

Fundraising

As for many human rights civil society organisations, the period 2020-2021 was challenging for URG. The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences caused many donors to scale back funding. What is more, much of URG's work involves convening meetings/events, which was not possible during almost the entirety of 2020-2021.

In 2021, support was received from the following governments and organisations:

- Norway – core funding.
- Luxembourg – core funding
- Denmark – project funding (2 separate agreements)
- Switzerland – project funding
- Netherlands – project funding.
- Singapore – project funding.
- UNEP – Project funding
- USA – Project funding
- Commonwealth – consultancy.
- UNFPA – Consultancy
- META - Consultancy
- Drummcliffe Partners LLC - Consultancy
- World Resources Institute (WRI) – project funding (LAC office).
- CODECA – consultancy (LAC office).

- Freedom House and the Lifeline Fund for Embattled Civil Society Organisations – project funding (LAC 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 2021, URG continued to work with the design company My Dear Agency 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 2021, universal-rights.org received, on average, over 18,000 monthly visits. Around 88% of the users were new or first-time visitors, showing that the platform continues to reach new audiences. Over the same period, environment-rights.org received, on average, over 10,000 monthly visits. Around 75% of the users were new or first-time visitors.

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 in early 2020, 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 2021, yourHRC.org secured 3,517 new users (up from 2,424 in 2019). There were, on average, 9,163 individual page views per month, with particular peaks in September and December – when URG launched the yourhrc.org reports, namely, the 'Guide to the 2021 HRC Elections' and the 'Human Rights Council in 2021' reports. In 2021, the portal saw a new record, with almost 14,196 individual users visiting the page during September, when the URG published its 'Compare the Candidates' cards. 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 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. In 2021, three new videos were released: one on corruption and human rights, one asserting that #TheTimelsNow for UN recognition of the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and one on human rights and democracy.

Regarding social media, URG maintains accounts with Twitter (over 6,400 followers across the three offices, and over 26,000 tweets and retweets) and Facebook (3,587 followers, 3,365 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 2021, 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, SwissInfo, Geneva Solutions, and VOX. Some of the articles can be read here:

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

VI. Implementation of the Global Strategic Plan

Completing the 2018-2019 Global Strategic Plan

URG completed nearly all the projects in its 2018-2019 Global Strategic Plan by the end of 2019. The exception was the following 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 2019, 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 several current and former mandate holders, academic experts, and civil society representatives – to validate the research findings and draw conclusions.

In 2021, 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 2019).

Next steps

A new policy brief presenting the results of the above research is now completed and will be published in the first half of 2022. 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 13 projects across four broad programme areas.

Below is a summary of the activities undertaken in 2021, building on work done in 2020, in connection with the implementation of this fourth GSP.

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

Project 1

Human rights and democracy: how to build national resilience

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, URG Geneva

Partner(s)

New York University (NYU)

Context

At a time of democratic ‘backsliding’ in many parts of the world, including democracy’s ‘heartlands,’ and growing confidence amongst major autocracies (e.g., China), the need to mobilise the multilateral system to strengthen democratic ‘resilience’ has become increasingly urgent. The UN human rights system, including international human rights law (especially the ICCPR), must necessarily form a key part of that effort. Yet for decades, democracies in the Commission on Human Rights and – now – the Human Rights Council have been hesitant to mobilise that system.

Considering the importance of the multilateral system, which is itself based on ideals of democratic governance and human rights, that must change if renewed efforts to promote the ‘fightback’ of democracy (e.g., President Biden’s Summit for Democracy) are to succeed.

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, for example, 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. 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.

In 2021, URG continued to promote the idea that the Council and its mechanisms should play a more proactive role in strengthening democratic resilience around the world. In June, it worked with Norway and the US to draft and promote a joint statement at the Council on the relationship between human rights and democracy. This secured 65 cosponsors. In the run up to President Biden’s Summit for Democracy, URG participated actively in civil society consultations with the result that many of the ideas and themes from the joint statement were included on the agenda of the Summit.

At the same time, autocracies including China and Russia have also become more active in promoting their political systems, including through rival joint statements at the Council and side events during the Summit for Democracy. As a result, democracy vs. autocracy is now a key ideological struggle of our time, and further increases the importance of concerted action at the Council/UN. In that regard, in late 2021, URG commented for an Economist article entitled ‘China and America prepare for human rights showdown at the UN.’

Next steps and follow-up

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 and democracy. 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 strengthening of national democratic resilience (due in the first half of 2022). Building on that work, URG and New York University will (as part of URG’s 2022-2023 GSP) apply this empirical framework to six national case studies to show how human rights is central to both democratic advance and democratic backsliding.

Project 2

Democracy and digital technology - data, misinformation and ‘fake news’

Project leader(s)

Marc Limon, URG Geneva

Partner(s)

Center for Technology and Democracy (CDT), Carter Center, International IDEA, Facebook/META, Norway, Switzerland

Context

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 technology 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.

Outside of the world’s democracies, autocratic governments are increasingly leveraging digital technology as a means of exerting political and social control, and stifling dissent.

Impact

Throughout 2020 and 2021, URG worked with interested States, digital technology companies, including Facebook/META, Twitter and Microsoft, and civil society organisations including CDT, International IDEA, and the Carter Center, 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. For example, in early 2020, URG organised a first ambassadorial roundtable with ambassadors and senior representatives of Facebook. This focused on the societal and democratic impacts of online hate speech and ‘fake news.’

Prior to the 2020 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.

In 2020 and 2021, URG organised the first two 'Digital Democracy Dialogues' – gatherings of tech firms, States, NGOs and UN experts to consider issues such as 'fake news' and hate speech online (3D1) and the impacts (positive and negative) of technology for democracy (3D2). 3D2, organised with Switzerland, was held in a hybrid format in Montreux in late 2021, bringing together around 50 experts to look at the digital democracy 'landscape.' A report from the meeting was fed into President Biden's Summit for Democracy.

Finally, 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 and follow-up

In 2022, URG will organise, with META and other partners, a third 'Digital Democracy Dialogue' (3D3). This will likely focus on 'end to end encryption' – critical for human rights, especially for human rights defenders.

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.

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. Based on 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.

In early 2021, URG, working with the current and former Special Rapporteurs, published a new policy report entitled 'The Time is Now' setting out the case for universal recognition, explaining what benefits it would bring, and proposing the normative content of the right. In February 2021, URG, again with the core group, OHCHR, UNEP and UNICEF, organised a high-level event during the 46th session of the Council, to present the report and call for a final push for UN recognition in 2021, via twin resolutions at the Council and the General Assembly. Finally, in 2021 URG, working with other NGOs, launched a civil society social media campaign (bringing together 1,400 NGOs) backing UN recognition under the hashtag 'The Time Is Now.'

This campaign was remarkably successful. In October 2021, the Council adopted resolution 48/13 recognising the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. GA recognition is expected to follow in 2022.

Next steps and follow-up

In early 2022, URG will organise a strategy meeting with key stakeholders to map out next steps with the recognition, promotion, and protection of the right to a healthy environment.

Glion VIII in spring 2022 will also focus on this subject.

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.' This, he pointed out, had enormous negative implications for the enjoyment of human rights, especially social rights. 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 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has served to highlight and widen existing

social injustices, inequality has risen to the top of the political agenda. Against this background, URG's project aims 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.

Next steps and follow-up

In 2022, URG will organise, with Denmark, a 'Friday Exchange' ambassadorial lunch to consider, in a practical sense, a) the degree to which the UN human rights system is already mobilised to address inequality and discrimination, especially in the promotion and protection of economic and social rights, and b) how that system can be further mobilised to give meaning to the central promise of the 2030 Agenda to 'leave no one behind.'

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

Attacks, over recent years, 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 hatred and/or violence have two things in common. First, they did not happen overnight but were rather the 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 various 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 five 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.

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.

As noted above, in 2020-2021, URG organised two 'Digital Democracy Dialogues' that brought 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. Following the second 'Digital Democracy Dialogue,' URG and other partners published an important policy report setting out the current state of play with regard to digital technology, human rights and democracy.

Next steps and follow-up

URG will continue to work with tech firms and governments in 2022-2023, including in the context of the 'Istanbul Process' (URG will work with Pakistan in the organisation of the next Istanbul Process meeting in early 2022), to promote the Internet as a 'safe space' for peoples of all religions, and to address hate speech and all forms of religious or racial intolerance.

Project 6

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

Project leader(s)

Mariana Montoya, URG Latin America, and 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 2021, 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.

Next steps and follow-up

URG will publish its new policy report in early 2022.

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, Louis Mason

Context

A key pillar of URG's 2018-2019 GSP was to encourage and analyse the development of NMIRFs. Three 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 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 several countries in establishing/strengthening their NMIRFs (e.g., Gambia, Georgia, Fiji, Samoa, Marshall Islands).

Impact

During 2019, URG co-organised an important 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 of Practice.' 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 Council resolution 42/30 on 'Promoting international cooperation to support NMIRFs.' 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. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the meetings were delayed and were eventually held online at the end of 2021. URG was fully involved in the planning of the series of meetings, moderated the meeting for Asia-Pacific, and presented the Pacific Principles of Practice at all five.

In 2021, URG began a major international research project, alongside Bristol University and the Bingham Centre, to understand how States around the world currently seek to implement and report on UN human rights recommendations, and how many States have established, or are in the process of establishing, functioning NMIRFs. The results, showing for the first time the mechanisms and processes States have put in place to implement their international human rights obligations, and providing a first-ever snapshot of the emergence of NMIRFs, will be published in early 2022.

In 2020-2021, 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, 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 2020-2021 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 2021, the Group of Friends (of which URG is a member) organised regular meetings in Geneva to exchange good practice in the establishment of NMIRFs, delivered joint statements on implementation at the Council, delivered advanced questions and recommendations on NMIRFs to all reporting States under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and supported the adoption of resolution 42/30.

Next steps and follow-up

In 2022, URG will work with Paraguay to draft and help present a new resolution in follow-up to resolution 42/30. This will aim to kick-start a process of intergovernmental consultations to elaborate universal principles on NMIRFs.

URG will also publish the results of its global survey of national mechanisms and systems for implementation/reporting. Moreover, URG has agreed to work with the Commonwealth Secretariat to conduct a similar survey covering national implementation systems/NMIRFs across Commonwealth countries.

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)

Charlotte Marres

Project partner(s)

UNICEF, UNFPA

Context

In 2020, 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.

In 2021, URG began a similar project with UNFPA to look at the implementation and impact of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) 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 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 and follow-up

In the first quarter of 2022, URG will conclude its work with UNFPA and publish a further policy report outlining its findings. This will be launched at major events in Geneva and New York.

URG will also include a project, in its 2022-2023 global strategic plan (programme of work), aimed at using the findings and recommendations from its UNICEF and UNFPA studies to build the capacity of UN Country Teams to better leverage State engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms, including by supporting the implementation of recommendations, as a key tool to promote and protect human rights, achieve the SDGs, and build resilience (for prevention).

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. Consequently, very few States proactively gather human rights indicator data as a means of measuring progress. 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 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 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 a 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).

URG launched the 'State of the world human rights report' portal (in beta version) in March 2021, with HRMI and Denmark, to receive feedback from States and others.

Next steps and follow-up

URG will continue to work with HRMI to update and expand the portal, including by considering comments received on the beta version of the site.

Project 10

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 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.

In August-September 2021, URG, together with the US State Department, organised two virtual workshops on the different aspects of human rights accountability. The first looked at the effectiveness of, and prospects for, UN accountability mechanisms. The second looked at the emergence and future development of Magnitsky-style human rights sanctions regimes.

Next steps and follow-up

A report on the two workshops will be published in early 2022. In the final quarter of 2022, URG will launch a new policy report on accountability for human rights violations, distilling all the analyses, conclusions and lessons learnt gathered by URG since 2016. This will be part of URG's new global strategic plan for 2022-2023.

Project 11

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)

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.

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 well received; however, the global health pandemic made follow-up on the agreed 'matches' difficult. In late 2021, therefore, at a meeting involving the Permanent Missions of Argentina, Finland, Luxembourg, Maldives, Norway, and Thailand, as well as URG, it was decided to bring these ideas into the formal work agenda of the Council through an initiative on the revitalisation of agenda item 10.

Regarding **prevention**, at the 36th and 37th sessions, URG supported Norway, Switzerland, Sierra Leone, and Colombia to draft, negotiate and deliver two joint statements on the operationalisation of the Council's prevention mandate under paragraph 5f of GA resolution 60/251. 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. 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.

Finally, 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. Throughout 2021, URG continued to work with States and OHCHR on the implementation of resolution 45/31.

Linked with this work on prevention, in 2021 URG published 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**. The report was 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.

One of the key recommendations in the report, namely to 'bypass' or supplement the direct linear relationship between the two Councils by leveraging the General Assembly (and its security powers under the 'Uniting for Peace' doctrine) has been implemented in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. With the Security Council hamstrung due to Russia's veto, the General Assembly organised an urgent debate (as requested by members of the Security Council) under 'Uniting for Peace' framework, and passed a resolution condemning Russia's invasion and the human rights violations that it has caused.

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 in Stockholm, Sweden. In mid-2020, a third (digital) meeting of the group was organised by URG. A fourth meeting of the Oslo+ group, due to be hosted by Switzerland in 2021, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will now be held in spring 2022.

Finally, in 2020-2021, 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 2022, URG will continue to work with the core group on the take-up of the concepts and powers set out in resolution 45/31, particularly in the context of situations of emerging concern. This will include feeding into joint statements at the Council responding to the Secretary-General's expected (March 2022) report on 'upstream prevention' (how the UN delivers human rights technical assistance and capacity-building, and how it finances its human rights work), and continuing to work with OHCHR on building an effective early warning unit and to ensure that, where she identifies situations of emerging concern, the High Commissioner brings those situations to the urgent attention of the Council.

A fourth meeting of the Oslo+ Group will be held in Montreux, Switzerland, in spring 2022, hosted by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and URG. This fourth meeting of the group will look 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 12

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 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); 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 several 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 and 2021, however, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, these projects were postponed until early 2022.

Next steps and follow-up

URG hopes to support several developing countries (e.g., RMI and Fiji) in early 2022. Agreements have been reached with these countries.

Project 13

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

Project leaders

Mariana Montoya, URG Latin America

Context

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

In 2019-20, URG redesigned environment-rights.org to make it easier to access and more useful. The new portal was launched with events at the UN in New York and in Geneva. The new web portal was also used as the basis of two further events in New York in 2019 – one with the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) on 'Supporting environmental and land rights defenders: sharing initiatives and best practices,' and one with OHCHR and UNEP on 'Safe climate and the right to a healthy environment.' Both events were held during the 74th session of the GA in October.

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 2021, the URG produced a report addressed to donors, including private entities, States and international organisations, on how to better respond to, and support the needs of, EHRDs.

In addition to its work on the ground, URG has worked at the international level to bring the situation of EHRDs to the top of the political agenda.

For example, URG collaborated with Norway to draft and achieve the adoption of Human Rights Council (Council) resolution 40/11 on 'Recognizing the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development'. Moreover, the URG has worked closely with OHCHR to highlight the need of mobilizing the international human rights system to increase support and protection for Land, Indigenous, and Environmental Defenders and make it a priority for the current High Commissioner Ms. Michelle Bachelet. URG is also a world leader on issues relating to the relationship between human rights and environmental protection, and human rights and climate change. In fact, the URG worked closely with the coalition of civil society organizations and with the core group of States to bring about the universal recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (R2HE) by the UN Human Rights Council in October last year.

Moreover, URG has continued to work closely with UNEP and the OHCHR to enhance knowledge on R2HE. In 2022, the URG will publish a compilation including 193 good practices implemented across the world to support EHRDs across the world, a Handbook on human rights and the environment, and a report tracking the implementation of human rights and environment standards at local level.

During 2021, the URG developed a project with the support of Freedom House and the Lifeline Fund to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the emergency and non-emergency support needs of climate activists, how they parallel and/or diverge from those of EHRDs and give first steps towards effectively responding to these support needs.

Next steps and follow-up

In 2022, the URG will continue to work with the UN Environment Programme under which UNEP will provide content and tools to environment-rights.org, and co-organise capacity-building workshops for EHRDs in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

During 2022, URG will gather and share stories and testimonies from EHRDs to profile their important work, build a positive narrative about their contribution to sustainable development and the environment.

Finally, in 2022 URG will act as the International Coordinator of the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders, helping coordinate and catalyse action to support EHRDs worldwide, with a specific focus on Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

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 alone, and most recently (from 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 13-14 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.'

The 2021 Dialogue ('Glion VIII') was postponed due to COVID-19. The re-arranged Glion VIII will take place on 16-17 May 2022, and will focus on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

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. Three such preparatory meetings will also be held ahead of Glion VIII.

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 Glion partners, 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. The last two Presidents (Austria and Fiji) likewise wanted to organise Glion-style presidential retreats, in cooperation with URG. However, these were cancelled due to COVID-19.

Next steps

The 2022 Dialogue ('Glion VIII') will be held on 16-17 May 2022.

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.

The journalist capacity-building programme was suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, but relaunched in a digital format in September 2021. It will continue in a hybrid format with preparatory sessions organised online, while also bringing the journalists to Geneva for the final week of a Council session.

Impact

Although the project has just restarted, 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 three 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 Paolo, AP, AFP, and Voice of America.

In 2020-2021, no breakfasts were organised, due to the health pandemic.

Next steps

URG will re-engage with ACANU in 2022.

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 restart the Friday Exchange meetings in 2022 in Geneva and New York, starting with a discussion on inequality and human rights. A concept note has already been prepared and invites circulated (for March 2022).

Project

Summary reports on Human Rights Council sessions

Context

Until the URG, 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 2021, 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.

In 2021, URG was in discussions with Fiji regarding their planned retreat in Nadi. 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

It is not yet clear whether the Argentinian Presidency will organise a retreat.

Project

New Human Rights Council members' retreat

Context

With the Permanent Mission of the UK (and in 2020-2021, 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), the sixth in January 2021 (with the Netherlands), and a seventh in January 2022 (again, the UK).

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 2021'

report was launched in late 2021 during a digital event, co-hosted with Norway, and featured speeches by the outgoing President of the Council, the Executive Director of ISHR, and a journalist from the Economist. The yourHRC.org 'Guide to the Human Rights Council elections – 2021' was also launched at a reception in Geneva, with the participation of all candidate States.

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 2022, 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.