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March 2026

Safeguarding Civil Society Space at the United Nations

A Crucial Element in Human Rights Promotion and Protection



About the author

Patrizia Scannella is a human rights expert with extensive experience engaging UN human rights mechanisms and supporting civil society participation at the international level, including as Human Rights Programme Director at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), where she worked from 2016 to 2025. Prior to that, she worked for Amnesty International's International Secretariat in various capacities in London and Geneva, including for twelve years as Deputy Representative to the UN in Geneva. Her advocacy covered a wide range of issues, including work related to the creation and review of the Human Rights Council.

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About this report

This report examines the place and role of civil society within the United Nations (UN) human rights system and the conditions that, over time, have enabled it to participate. It focuses on how these conditions are now being eroded and on the risks this poses to the effectiveness, legitimacy and inclusivity of the UN's human rights work. This analysis is situated within a broader global context in which multilateral institutions and human rights norms are increasingly contested, democratic space is contracting in many regions, and power-driven approaches to international relations are imposing sustained pressure on participation, accountability and oversight.

Civil society engagement has been integral to the development, functioning and accountability of the UN human rights system. Today, however, the political, financial and institutional environments that have sustained this engagement are under acute strain. Shrinking civic space across the globe, increasing reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN and growing barriers to participation within multilateral forums are converging at a moment when the UN system itself is coming under profound pressure.

These developments are unfolding amid severe funding shortfalls affecting both civil society organisations and the UN human rights pillar. The latter has long been the least funded of the UN's three pillars (the other two being peace and security, and development) and is particularly exposed to cuts and so-called 'cost-saving' measures. Shifts in donor priorities and the resulting financial constraints have reduced civil society actors' capacity to engage in UN processes, while at the same time limiting the accessibility, predictability and functioning of human rights mechanisms.

It is in this context of sustained financial and political pressure that the UN Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative in March 2025, accelerating efforts to restructure the organisation. While framed in terms of efficiency and financial necessity, these reforms have significant implications for participation and access within the UN human rights system.

Without adequate safeguards, these trends risk further narrowing civil society space at a moment at which when independent information, accountability and participation are especially needed. Restrictions on civil society participation should not be understood as merely technical or administrative adjustments. They are fundamentally political in nature, with direct consequences for whose voices are heard, how power is exercised and whose interests are protected within multilateral decision-making.

Civil society enables democratic participation by bringing independent information, marginalised perspectives and lived realities into multilateral decision-making, and by helping to strengthen transparency, the rule of law and accountability. Civil society also plays a crucial political role within the UN human rights system by linking international norms to realities on the ground and by acting as a counterweight to State-controlled narratives and vested interests. Limiting its participation shifts power away from rights holders and towards governments and other powerful actors, thereby undermining the effectiveness of human rights mechanisms. The contraction of civic space therefore narrows democratic decision-making and weakens oversight, with consequences that extend beyond the integrity of the UN human rights system itself. As their capacity and access diminish, a vicious circle develops: civil society organisations become less able to defend and strengthen the very system through which they help to deliver tangible progress for people on the ground.

Protecting civic space in the UN human rights system today requires the same courage, leadership and principled commitment that built the human rights system in the first place.

Closing civic space at the UN is like disconnecting the fire alarm because the noise bothers you. But silence doesn't mean safety. On the contrary, it means the beginning of the fire goes unnoticed.

Santiago Canton, Secretary-General of the International Commission of Jurists

Scope of this report

This report does not aim to provide an exhaustive history of civil society engagement with the UN human rights system. This is well documented in the existing literature, including the 2023 book *The Protection Roles of Human Rights NGOs*¹. Nor does it seek to catalogue the many instances in which civil society advocacy has contributed to concrete human rights advances at national level, such as changes in national laws, policies or practices, thereby linking global norms to local impact. Instead, the report presents some representative examples to illustrate key moments, practices and institutional arrangements that have shaped civil society participation across different parts of the UN human rights system; how practices of engagement developed across different historical and institutional settings, often despite significant obstacles; which factors enabled this progress; and why civil society participation has been so central to the construction and successes of the human rights system itself, making it more responsive to the lived realities of all of us. It further examines why these gains have become increasingly fragile in the current geopolitical context.

The report is intended for actors engaged in, or with influence over, the UN human rights system, including States, UN officials, funders and other relevant actors. Its purpose is to support informed discussion and action aimed at protecting and strengthening civic space and democratic participation within the UN.

For the purpose of this publication, the terms ‘civil society’, ‘civil society organisations’ (CSOs) and ‘civil society actors’ are used to encompass national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose mission includes promoting and protecting human rights and other principles of the United Nations; trade unions; social movements; community-based organisations; and organisations representing Indigenous Peoples. This definition encompasses individual human rights defenders, as well as victims and survivors of human rights violations and abuses engaging in different capacities with the UN human rights system. In some instances, the term ‘non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs) is used where this reflects the terminology employed in specific UN documents or that used by interviewees or quoted sources. Such use is intended solely to ensure terminological consistency and does not limit the broader understanding of civil society actors set out above.

Methodology

The analysis draws on interviews and written input from current and former civil society representatives, former UN officials and other experts, alongside civil society reports and academic literature. Although some examples mention particular civil society organisations, the developments they illustrate resulted from a combination of factors and the work of many organisations and actors, not just the ones named.

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As UN reforms are still ongoing at the time of concluding the research and writing, and as geopolitical developments occur at rapid pace, it is important to note that the present publication reflects the situation as of 31 December 2025.

¹ Bertrand Ramcharan, Rachel Brett, Ann Marie Clark & Penny Parker (eds), *The Protection Roles of Human Rights NGOs: Essays in Honour of Adrien-Claude Zoller* (Leiden: Brill | Nijhoff, 2023).

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Overview of UN mechanisms cited in this report¹

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is one of the UN's principal organs. It coordinates the UN's work on economic and social issues and provides a forum for discussions of global challenges, such as development, health, education and the environment. ECOSOC also oversees the work of various UN specialised agencies (such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), functional commissions (such as the Commission on the Status of Women) and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), where progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is discussed.

ECOSOC accreditation (consultative status) and the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs

ECOSOC manages the relationship of accredited non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with the UN. Accreditation (formally known as 'consultative status' with ECOSOC) provides a framework within which NGOs can contribute to the UN's work, although it is not required for all forms of engagement with the UN system. It confers on them practical benefits, such as UN ground passes, the ability to participate formally in meetings of bodies such as the Human Rights Council (HRC). ECOSOC grants such status on the recommendation of its Committee on NGOs, which is mandated to consider applications from NGOs seeking consultative status with the UN and make recommendations to ECOSOC on granting, maintaining or withdrawing it. The process for obtaining consultative status is highly politicised.

The (former) Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission

Before the establishment of the HRC in 2006, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) served as the UN's principal political body for human rights. Created in 1946 and reporting to ECOSOC, the CHR developed foundational human rights standards, established early mechanisms to work on thematic human rights issues or country situations and provided a key entry point for civil society engagement with the UN system.

Its subsidiary body, the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, functioned as a group of independent experts tasked with conducting studies on human rights issues and developing normative standards. It also played an important role in facilitating civil society participation and in pioneering early forms of independent scrutiny of human rights violations, which influenced later UN mechanisms. Many of the practices and mechanisms now associated with the HRC have their origins in the work of the Commission and its Sub-Commission.

¹ See also the *UN System Chart*, available at: <https://www.un.org/en/delegate/page/un-system-chart>.

The Human Rights Council and its mechanisms

The **Human Rights Council (HRC)** is the UN's principal intergovernmental body responsible for promoting and protecting human rights worldwide. It is a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly, meets in Geneva and comprises 47 UN Member States, elected by the General Assembly. Alongside these voting members, the Council's work involves a range of observers, such as UN Member States not currently among the 47 Council members, UN observer States such as the State of Palestine and the Holy See, and regional and international organisations (such as the African Union and the European Union), UN agencies (such as UNICEF, UN Women, the ILO), national human rights institutions (NHRIs) with A-status, and NGOs that hold consultative status with ECOSOC. Observers can participate in meetings, submit information and speak in debates, but they do not have the right to vote.

The General Assembly's resolution 60/251 (15 March 2006), which created the Human Rights Council, set out how it should work. Among other things, it instructs the Council to meet regularly (at least three sessions a year), to be able to hold special sessions in emergencies. The Council's detailed working methods are set out in its 'institution-building package' (adopted in June 2007) and a number of other documents. Resolution 60/251 explicitly acknowledges that NGOs play an important role in promoting and protecting human rights at the national, regional and international levels. It further guarantees their participation as observers.

One of the HRC's main mechanisms is the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)**, a peer-review mechanism through which UN Member States examine each other's human rights performances in a regular cycle. The UPR process

draws on State submissions, UN documentation and information provided by civil society and other stakeholders, and culminates in recommendations aimed at improving compliance with human rights obligations.

Another central component of the Council's work is the system of independent, unpaid experts known as the **UN Special Procedures**. This network of Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Working Groups addresses thematic issues (such as freedom of expression or right to housing) or groups (such as migrant workers, Indigenous Peoples) and country-specific situations (such as Afghanistan, Russia or Mali). These experts conduct research, undertake country visits, assess allegations of violations and report their findings and recommendations to the HRC and the General Assembly. Along with the investigative mechanisms and the treaty bodies mentioned below, they are among the most agile parts of the UN human rights system and the most accessible to civil society actors who actively collaborate with them.

In situations of serious or widespread human rights violations, the Human Rights Council may establish **investigative mechanisms**, such as commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions. Although their specific mandates differ, they are essential for documenting and analysing violations, collecting and making evidence available for international justice where domestic accountability is limited or absent and they contribute to the prosecution of perpetrators of atrocity crimes, such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, enforced disappearances and torture. Their public reports inform other international and national accountability efforts.

Treaty bodies

Treaty bodies are committees of independent experts mandated to monitor the implementation of the nine core human rights treaties.¹ Their functions include reviewing periodic State reports, considering information from CSOs and other stakeholders, issuing their findings in the form of concluding observations and recommendations and, for States that have accepted the relevant procedures, adjudicating individual complaints.

¹ See OHCHR, Core International Human Rights Instruments and their Monitoring Bodies, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/core-international-human-rights-instruments-and-their-monitoring-bodies>.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the UN's main human rights entity. It is headquartered in Geneva with field presences around the world and is a key counterpart for civil society. It is headed by the High Commissioner, a high-level official mandated to lead global efforts to promote, protect and monitor the realisation of all human rights for everyone, everywhere. Among other things, the OHCHR provides substantive support for the HRC, the Special Procedures, investigative mechanisms and treaty bodies, and implements activities requested in HRC's decisions and resolutions.

List of abbreviations used in this report

BINGOs: Business-organised non-governmental organisations

CHR: Commission on Human Rights (former UN body)

CSO / CSOs: Civil society organisation(s)

CSW: Commission on the Status of Women

ECOSOC: Economic and Social Council

FES: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

GONGOs: Government-organised non-governmental organisations

HRC: Human Rights Council

HRFN: Human Rights Funders Network

ITUC: International Trade Union Confederation

ICJ: International Commission of Jurists

ISHR: International Service for Human Rights

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex – ‘+’ refers to other diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and sex characteristics

NGO / NGOs: Non-governmental organisation(s)

ODA: Official Development Assistance

OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

OPCAT: Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

UN: United Nations

UN80: United Nations 80th Anniversary Reform Initiative

UNOG: United Nations Office at Geneva

UPR: Universal Periodic Review

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

I. Preserving civil society space at the United Nations – setting the scene

1. A multilateral system under strain

Founded in the aftermath of the devastation wrought by the Second World War, **the United Nations (UN)** was founded on the **principles of peace, justice, human rights and international cooperation**, grounded in a shared commitment to build a world in which human dignity is respected and protected, and nations work together to prevent conflict and advance the common good. Eighty years on, the multilateral order in which the UN operates is under increasing strain. Rising geopolitical polarisation, the resurgence of militarised approaches to international relations and growing challenges to the rule of law have weakened cooperation and reinforced transactional approaches to global governance. In many regions, democratic space is contracting and commitments to human rights and accountability are increasingly contested.

2. Civil society as a pillar of the UN human rights system

Since the founding of the United Nations in 1945, civil society has played a central and transformative role in the evolution of the UN human rights system. Building on forms of engagement with international institutions that predate the UN itself, **sustained civil society participation has been a driving force in the development of universal human rights protections and standards**, as well as the mechanisms needed to give them practical effect, monitor compliance and ensure accountability. By providing information, analysis and recommendations, and by ensuring that rights-holders, victims and survivors of violations and abuses can speak for themselves, **civil society organisations have helped to keep the system responsive, grounded in realities and reasonably fit for purpose**. Beyond their engagement at the international level, civil society organisations (CSOs) have played an equally crucial role in promoting the implementation of human rights obligations at the national level, including by using courts or engaging with legislative and administrative processes.

The UN's 2004 Cardoso Report affirmed the rise of

civil society as constituting a landmark development of the early twenty-first century and highlighted its role as 'the prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to deal with emerging global threats'.¹ It called for deeper, more systematic engagement with civil society as a core element of effective global governance. **Today, however, the conditions that once enabled vibrant civil society engagement are under severe strain.**

3. Shrinking civic space: global pressures on participation

Over the past decade, the environment for the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as for civil society participation more broadly, both in individual countries and within the UN, has become increasingly constrained because of several factors. They include the **global deterioration of civic space** and increasing reprisals against those who engage with UN processes and mechanisms. Across all regions, governments are **tightening restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly and public participation**. Freedom of expression, long regarded as a cornerstone of democratic societies, is increasingly coming under pressure. Journalists, environmental and women's rights activists, LGBTIQ+ rights defenders and trade unionists are among those facing serious, intersecting threats, including violence, arbitrary detention, strategic lawsuits against public participation ('SLAPPs'), digital surveillance and harassment, often with impunity. Environmental human rights defenders face growing threats because they challenge destructive economic and political interests; trade unions encounter increasing hostility for defending labour rights and economic justice;² and parliamentarians who challenge abuses or corruption or who dissent from government decisions, often face pressure or reprisals.³ New laws, often framed as measures related to national security, counter-terrorism or public order, restrict civil society activities, limit access to funding and criminalise dissent. The spread of so-called 'foreign agents' laws (which label CSOs receiving international funding as 'foreign-influenced' and subject them to

¹ Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations, 'We the Peoples: Civil Society, the United Nations and Global Governance', report of the Secretary-General, A/58/817 (11 June 2004), paras. 6–7. This report is commonly referred to as 'the Cardoso Report' after the Panel's chair.

² See, for example, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 2025 *Global Rights Index* (23 May 2025) which highlights how mounting attacks on trade unions form part of a broader global trend of shrinking civic space and weakening democratic oversight; available at: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/global-rights-index-2025>.

³ For example, in December 2024 the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that the number of cases before its Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians had more than tripled over the past decade, from 311 in 2014 to 956 in 2024; see press release available at: <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2024-12/ipu-sees-surge-in-human-rights-violations-against-mps>.

burdensome reporting obligations, sanctions or even closure) reflects a broader trend of invoking national security concerns to restrict civil society. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has highlighted how mounting attacks on trade unions form part of a broader global trend of shrinking civic space and weakening democratic oversight.⁴

4. Attacks on human rights norms and rising corporate influence

At the same time, a number of governments, particularly authoritarian ones, and influential reactionary organisations, both domestic and transnational, are **mobilising to dismantle gender equality protections**, restrict sexual and reproductive rights and challenge established human rights standards. These dynamics are compounded by the **expanding role and influence of corporate actors** in multi-lateral spaces, in which disproportionate corporate presence, privileged agenda-setting power and the normalisation of 'partnership' models have, in some cases, crowded out civil society voices, weakened accountability and fostered unsafe and unequal conditions for meaningful participation.⁵ Such corporate influence is not incidental, but the result of decades of transferred public power, weakened regulatory frameworks and the concentration of economic control.

Taken together, these trends have eroded accountability, shrunk civic space and hindered collective responses to existential global threats. They are not confined to authoritarian regimes. Even within 'established' democracies, we see growing constraints on peaceful protest, attacks on the freedom of media (including its capture by market forces and corporate interests), and the erosion of the rule of law and of democratic checks and balances.

5. Changing funding priorities and the erosion of civil society capacity

These dynamics are exacerbated by changes in donor priorities. Donor States have redirected spending towards record levels of military and security expenditure, while making severe cuts in foreign aid. Global military spending reached a record USD 2,718 billion in 2024, the steepest year-on-year increase since the end of the Cold War, according to SIPRI.⁶ The funding freeze imposed on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) by the Trump administration has further reduced resources available for human rights and humanitarian work. Taken

together, these developments have diverted resources away from climate action, human rights protection and sustainable development, with consequences that reinforce systems of violence and inequality. They have also resulted in **a severe funding crisis** that has left many civil society actors unable to sustain core work or participate effectively in UN processes. As noted later, this shift in priorities has also constrained the resources available to the UN system, including within the human rights system. This has forced adjustments that have resulted, intentionally or unwittingly, in a narrowing of the space for civil society engagement.

6. An existential funding crisis for civil society

In September 2025, the Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) warned of **a rapidly contracting global funding environment for human rights movements**.⁷ According to its estimates, Official Development Assistance (ODA) is expected to plummet by USD 62 billion (28 per cent) annually by 2026 compared with 2023. According to HRFN, these reductions could have devastating humanitarian consequences. HRFN also conservatively estimated that human rights-focused ODA will fall by up to USD 1.9 billion (31 per cent) over the same period. These drastic reductions are compounded by restrictive political environments that hinder cross-border grant-making and limit foundations' ability to support human rights work globally.

Many civil society organisations now face an existential threat. In March 2025, in its State of Civil Society Report 2025, the global civil society alliance CIVICUS, which represents thousands of organisations and activists worldwide, warned that

*[i]n recent years, major funding sources such as state donor agencies have been cut back and become more aligned with narrowly defined national interests, particularly defence, diplomatic and trade agendas. This has made it harder for civil society organisations to secure support for core work and raised the risk of being instrumentalised around agendas that aren't theirs. Many states have also passed laws to make it harder for organisations to receive international funding and vilify those that do so. Several European states have reduced their support for civil society and others in the rest of the world have failed to fill the gaps, leaving implementation of the universal Sustainable Development Goals badly off track. Now the reckless, ill-intentioned USAID funding freeze has brought the crisis to a head. Many civil society groups face an existential threat.*⁸

⁴ See, for example, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 2025 *Global Rights Index* (23 May 2025) which highlights how mounting attacks on trade unions form part of a broader global trend of shrinking civic space and weakening democratic oversight; available at: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/global-rights-index-2025>.

⁵ See Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Resisting Corporate Capture of UN Multilateral Spaces: The Role of Civil Society in Dismantling Systems of Exploitation and Greed (2024), available at: https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/APWLD_Briefing_Paper_Corporate_Capture.pdf; ESCR-Net, Corporate Capture of the United Nations (2021), available at: <https://www.escr-net.org/resources/corporate-capture-of-the-united-nations/>.

⁶ See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Unprecedented rise in global military expenditure as European and Middle East spending surges', press release, 28 April 2025, available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>.

⁷ Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), *Funding at a Crossroads: Foreign Aid Cuts and Implications for Global Human Rights*, September 2025, available at: <https://www.hrfn.org/foreign-aid-cuts/>.

⁸ CIVICUS, *State of Civil Society Report 2025*, available at: <https://publications.civicus.org/publications/2025-state-of-civil-society-report/>.

A March 2025 survey by the EU System for an Enabling Environment further underscores the gravity of the situation.⁹

In the abovementioned projections, the Human Rights Funders Network further noted that the full impact of funding cuts would be felt within six to twelve months, with **human rights movements for LGBTQI+ rights and gender equality hit especially hard**. It added that ‘strategies to shore up funding for these and other social movements are critical protection against democratic backsliding’.¹⁰

In July 2025, Women Enabled International (WEI) warned that movements working at the intersection of gender, disability and human rights have been among those most affected:

*Across the world, feminist disabled leaders and their organisations are challenging rising authoritarianism, pushing for gender and disability-inclusive sexual and reproductive health services, and speaking up against the high rates of gender-based violence and growing anti-gender movements. They are playing a vital role in addressing armed conflicts, climate change and other humanitarian emergencies affecting their fundamental rights. Substantially increasing investment in this transformative work has never been more urgent. (...) Any strategy to uphold democracy, address human rights abuses, and advance gender equality will fall short if it does not ensure the sustainability of the feminist disabled leaders who represent this vast and often overlooked community. However, the work of these leaders has been historically underfunded, more so in recent years.*¹¹

Sofía Minieri and Satya Nelms,
Women Enabled International (WEI)

These combined pressures are eroding CSOs’ capacity to undertake essential work domestically and severely limit-

ing their ability to engage in UN human rights processes. Reduced budgets are making it impossible for them to attend sessions or sustain ongoing advocacy. Organisations that support civil society engagement with UN human rights mechanisms have highlighted this trend. The Centre for Civil and Political Rights (CCPR Centre), which works closely with civil society actors engaging with the UN Human Rights Committee, notes that ‘recent funding cuts have severely limited civil society participation at both local and international levels’.¹² Similarly, Child Rights Connect, which supports engagement with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, reports that ‘as a network organization, we have witnessed many of our members being forced to downsize, while others have had to close altogether. NGO offices in Geneva and New York have shut down as engagement with the UN has been deprioritised at a time of severe resource scarcity’.¹³ In August 2025, Swissinfo reported that NGOs (like many UN entities) were also scaling back, many of them reducing their activities, cutting staff and subletting office space; some had even ceased certain Geneva-based operations altogether.¹⁴

7. Impact of funding cuts on the functioning and accessibility of the UN human rights system

The challenges facing civil society are compounded by the UN human rights system’s own funding crisis and the cost-cutting measures imposed on it. Human rights mechanisms are meeting less frequently and changes to working methods have reduced openness and accessibility. Financial unpredictability has led to late confirmation of sessions and last-minute cancellations, directly undermining civil society organisations’ ability to participate.¹⁵

The UN’s human rights pillar has been undermined by chronic underfunding and politically driven constraints on its already minimal budget. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) receives only a small share of its funding from the UN’s regular budget and relies on voluntary contributions for most of its operations. This leaves it structurally vulnerable to financial and political volatility.¹⁶ Political manoeuvring within the UN budget process is further deepening the financial strain. According to a report by the International Service for Hu-

⁹ EU System for an Enabling Environment discussed in *New survey: US funding freeze triggers a global crisis in human rights and democracy*, Hivos, available at: <https://hivos.org/us-funding-freeze-triggers-global-crisis-in-human-rights/>. It found, among other things, that human rights, democracy and gender equality programmes face the most severe disruptions, with a real risk of setting global progress back by decades, and that many organisations lack alternative funding sources and are at risk of permanent closure.

¹⁰ Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), *Funding at a Crossroads: Foreign Aid Cuts and Implications for Global Human Rights*, September 2025, available at: <https://www.hrfn.org/foreign-aid-cuts/>.

¹¹ See ‘Everyday, more rights are threatened: New research reveals impact of funding cuts on feminist disability activists’, available at: <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/everyday-more-rights-are-threatened-new-research-reveals-impact-of-funding-cuts-on-feminist-disability-activists/>.

¹² From input received for this report.

¹³ From input received for this report.

¹⁴ Swissinfo, ‘Ripple effect of aid freeze becomes real in Geneva’, 26 August 2025, available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/geneva-organisations/in-geneva-the-ripple-effect-of-aid-freeze-becomes-real/89871296>.

¹⁵ CCPR Centre, *The UN Budget Crisis and Its Deepening Impact on the Human Rights Committee and Civil Society Participation*, 28 July 2025 (describing how funding shortages have restricted civil society and victim participation in treaty-body processes); available at: <https://ccprcentre.org/ccprpages/the-un-budget-crisis-and-its-deepening-impact-on-the-human-rights-committee-and-civil-society-participation>.

¹⁶ For more information, see High Commissioner’s Foreword, OHCHR, *UN Human Rights Appeal 2025*, January 2025, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/annual-appeal/un-human-rights-appeal-2025>.

man Rights (ISHR), a small group of States has used UN budget negotiations to limit or reduce resources for the UN's human rights work. Among other things, ISHR highlights that China and Russia have introduced or supported measures aimed at constraining human rights funding, while noting that the USA's non-payment of assessed contributions has contributed to the wider financial pressures facing the UN.¹⁷

*Cuts to both civil society and the UN multilateral system disproportionately affect civil society whenever costs need to be reduced; we are among the first to suffer and are treated as a variable that can be adjusted.*¹⁸

Nicolas Agostini,
Representative to the UN for DefendDefenders

8. Growing obstacles to civil society participation in the UN system

Civil society is facing an increasingly restrictive operating environment within the UN system, including a growing number of new practical and administrative obstacles to participation. **Recent key UN reform processes**, such as the Pact for the Future, have been **quite opaque for civil society**. Even in the Human Rights Council (HRC), in which civil society participation is formally anchored in its founding resolution, consultations on some key processes have been limited or exclusionary. A recent example is the controversial non-paper released by the OHCHR on 27 November 2025,¹⁹ outlining potential areas for consideration in the upcoming General Assembly review of the HRC and its rationalisation process. The document's references to wide consultations have come as a surprise to many of those working closely on these issues.

As further illustrated in Part II of this publication, **new forms of gatekeeping have emerged, even within the traditionally more open UN human rights space in Geneva**. This is contributing to a sustained erosion of long-standing practices and increasingly undermining inclusive and equitable participation and reinforcing exclusion.

We are witnessing increasing attacks on civil society, coupled with a noticeably weaker response from actors who traditionally defended these spaces. And so, it's a (...) pincer movement, if you like, where increasingly civil socie-

ty is being squeezed out of those spaces that they had previously and the defence of them is far less now than what it was in the past. As a result, this is a very difficult moment for civil society organizations. It is harder for them to be heard, to be recognised, and to have their perspectives taken into account.

Chris Sidoti, International human rights expert

9. The UN80 initiative: efficiency-driven reform and risks

In March 2025, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative, accelerating efforts to restructure the organisation under acute financial and political strain. It is a system-wide reform effort marking the UN's 80th anniversary, and its purported aim is to make the organisation 'more efficient and cost-effective'. 'Efficiency' has become the dominant framing, a term that draws heavily on corporate and market logics. However, an overemphasis on efficiency risks hollowing out core UN functions, narrowing participation and further undermining essential human rights capacities, rather than addressing the political roots of the UN's crisis.

It's not UN reform, really, it's UN contraction. You know, if it was reform, you could see opportunities, but it's not true reform.

Chris Sidoti, International human rights expert

These risks are particularly acute for the UN's human rights work, as they may lead to disproportionate cuts to staff, mechanisms and mandates, further weakening the capacity of the UN human rights system, including the spaces in which civil society engages and holds State and business actors to account.

True efficiency, rightly understood, should reinforce the UN's human rights mandate. **In this context, efficiency should mean ensuring that limited resources are used strategically to protect those most at risk, to improve public policies for better human rights realisation, to prevent human rights violations before they escalate into crises, to strengthen accountability and to uphold the UN's founding principles of human rights, justice and peace.**

¹⁷ International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), *How States Try to Defund Human Rights at the UN*, report, available at: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/report-how-states-try-to-defund-human-rights-at-the-un/>.

¹⁸ From input received for this publication.

¹⁹ OHCHR non-paper on the UN Human Rights Council, shared as the High Commissioner's initial input to the General Assembly review of the Human Rights Council and the HRC's rationalisation process, circulated to civil society on 27 November 2025, available at: <https://files.constantcontact.com/22f9d04e001/ed8fe193-437c-4a5d-9984-ba4b7dee5799.pdf>.

10. Why this matters: human rights, democracy and accountability

The UN human rights system plays a vital role in protecting human rights around the world. Its mechanisms are essential tools for rights holders, survivors and communities to demand equality, accountability, reparation and effective participation in decision-making.

The stakes could not be higher. At a time when democratic space is shrinking in many parts of the world and inequality and exclusion are on the rise, human rights offer a shared normative and practical foundation for advancing social justice. They provide a universally agreed framework for how political and economic power should be exercised, anchored in dignity, equality and meaningful participation. **They are practical, hard-won guarantees that shape daily life: whether everyone has access to essential services; whether workers can organise; whether minorities are protected; whether people can have access to justice and can speak out against injustice; and whether governments or corporate actors are held to account.** Human rights help to ensure that all people, regardless of background, identity or circumstances, can participate in public life, influence political decisions and access opportunities on fair and equal terms. Protecting human rights is not only a legal duty but also a strategic imperative for sustaining peace, legitimacy and trust in public institutions. Investing in human rights is among the most effective ways to prevent conflict, build inclusive societies and reinforce democracy.

II. The place and role of civil society in the UN – a brief historical overview

1. Civil society, the UN Charter and early engagement with the emerging human rights system

Civil society's pivotal role in shaping and sustaining the UN human rights system is rooted in a longer history of civil society engagement in international governance, including the normative role of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the tripartite structure of the ILO, and advisory arrangements within the League of Nations. This influence was carried into the 1945 San Francisco Conference (the founding meeting of the UN), at which advocacy by religious groups, women's organisations, peace movements and early human-rights NGOs helped to embed human rights, gender equality and social justice into the UN Charter. Such advocacy proved instrumental in securing key provisions, including Article 1(3) on promoting respect for human rights, Article 56 committing all UN Member States to act to secure universal respect for and observance of human rights, and Article 71, which authorised the UN to formally consult with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Women's organisations, together with women delegates – most notably Bertha Lutz of Brazil and Minerva Bernardino of the Dominican Republic – played a key role in ensuring that gender equality became one of the UN's foundational commitments. Among other things, they successfully advocated for the inclusion of 'the equal rights of men and women' in the Charter's Preamble and for the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a UN body mandated to advance women's rights and gender equality.²⁰

From the outset, civil society organisations engaged actively, though often under contested and evolving conditions of access, with the UN's emerging human rights machinery, including the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). They made substantive contributions, for example, to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and to the development of subsequent international treaties and standards. CSOs were deeply engaged, often indirectly, in informing and influencing the

CHR's deliberations, contributing expertise, on-the-ground perspectives and advocacy that influenced emerging standards and, over time, mechanisms for accountability.²¹

Following adoption of the UN Charter, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established a consultative relationship with NGOs in 1946. This was later formalised and updated through a series of resolutions, notably 288 B (1950) and 1296 (1968). In the 1960s and 1970s, civil society engagement expanded across areas such as human rights, development, humanitarian action, women's rights, health, education, environmental protection, refugee protection and disarmament. ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 marked a major shift by further expanding opportunities for engagement and, among other things, opening the door more widely to national NGOs, not just international ones. This expansion has resulted in a marked increase in the number of NGOs holding ECOSOC consultative status, from just over 1,000 in the mid-1990s to more than 6,400 by 2024.²² However, this growth has not necessarily resulted in greater openness or pluralism, as access to many UN bodies and processes remains subject to the highly politicised accreditation procedures of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs, as discussed later in this report.

2. The 1980s–1990s: system expansion

The 1980s and 1990s marked a high point for the UN human rights system. The end of the Cold War reduced ideological deadlock, while civil society participation expanded rapidly, creating a more dynamic environment for human rights work and making it more responsive to violations on the ground. Driven in large part by sustained civil society advocacy, the CHR built on reforms implemented in the late 1960s and 1970s to consolidate its system of country-specific and thematic mechanisms (known as the Special Procedures), which became its main tools for monitoring State compliance with human rights obligations, providing policy guidance to improve such compliance and responding to violations worldwide. It also expanded other parts of the UN human rights architecture, notably the

²⁰ See, for example, George E. Edwards, *The United Nations and Human Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Seventy-Five Years of Consultations, Collaboration, and Contributions (1945–2000)*, available at: <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/pilr/vol33/iss2/7/>; Rebecca Adami, *The United Nations Charter of 1945 and Women's Rights*, available at: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/united-nations-charter-1945-and-womens-rights>; SOAS, *Recognising the Women Who Shaped the UN Charter*, available at: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/recognising-women-who-shaped-un-charter/>; and Torild Skard, *Getting Our History Right: How Were the Equal Rights of Women and Men Included in the Charter of the United Nations?*, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08039410.2008.9666394>.

²¹ See, for example, William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'A Curious Grapevine'* (1998), especially chapters 1–3; and Bertrand Ramcharan, Rachel Brett, Ann Marie Clark and Penny Parker (eds), *The Protection Roles of Human Rights NGOs: Essays in Honour of Adrien-Claude Zoller* (2023).

²² See UN Economic and Social Council, *NGOs with Consultative Status (ECOSOC NGO Branch)*, and historical data tables available at: <https://ecosoc.un.org/en/ngo/consultative-status> and <https://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo/table2007.html>.

treaty body system, as several new thematic treaties and optional protocols were created.

The CHR developed broader participation practices than any other UN body: NGOs could attend its sessions, submit written statements, deliver oral interventions, organise their own meetings ('side events', which at the time could run much longer than they do nowadays) alongside the main CHR meeting, participate (with some limitations) in informal consultations on draft resolutions (also known as 'informals', usually held in side rooms during CHR sessions) and engage easily with State delegations and independent experts. Organisations such as the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), established in 1984, helped to facilitate access for grassroots defenders by providing training, analysis and advocacy support.

During this period, CSOs expanded their influence through major world conferences, such as the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights (1993) and the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), in which participation reached unprecedented levels. By organising parallel 'NGO forums', coordinating cross-regional advocacy and maintaining sustained pressure on States, civil society participation was instrumental in advancing landmark outcomes, such as the creation of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,²³ or the Beijing Platform for Action, which created a global comprehensive framework to advance women's rights and gender equality. Civil society also contributed during this period, for example, to the establishment of tribunals to deal with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity that took place in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and played a major role in the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The 1998 diplomatic conference that established the Court was marked by exceptionally high levels of civil society engagement.

3. New constraints and continued civil society engagement (2000s–2010s)

In the early 2000s, however, new challenges arose in this favourable environment. Aggressive counter-terrorism measures and a new security-centred approach focused the priorities of many States and rising global tensions contributed to the shrinking of civic space. After the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001, the expansion of counter-terrorism measures led to significant new restrictions. In many contexts, governments invoked security justifications to impose tighter controls on CSOs, some going as far as labelling independent CSOs as security risks or threats. In addition, the brief rapprochement in global politics in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War began to recede, and new adversarial tensions were reflected within the confines of international institutions.

Even in this less favourable environment, civil society engagement in influencing global agendas and moni-

toring implementation **did not recede**. Civil society continued to engage actively in world conferences, including the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban. Later in the 2010s, they influenced the development of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as the negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement on climate change, both adopted by UN Member States in 2015. Throughout the negotiations, CSOs brought evidence from local communities, along with their priorities, advocated for the inclusion of human rights, gender equality, climate action, inequality, access to justice and transparency and contributed expertise across a range of sectors from health and education to the environment, governance, peace and disarmament. Their engagement helped to shape a more grounded and responsive global agenda, and CSOs remain central to tracking progress towards the SDGs.

From the late 1990s through the 2000s, NGOs further played an indispensable role in the establishment of robust new human rights treaties and accompanying remedial mechanisms in areas such as women's rights, the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities, torture, enforced disappearances, and economic, social and cultural rights.

When the Human Rights Council (HRC) replaced the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in 2006, civil society was actively engaged in the negotiations leading to its creation and played a critical role in ensuring institutional continuity and preserving core aspects of the CHR (as discussed in Part III of this publication). Specifically with regard to participation, civil society worked to ensure that the Council preserved the Commission's participatory acquis. General Assembly resolution 60/251, which established the HRC, explicitly anchored civil society participation in the Council's founding framework. It recognises that civil society plays an important role in promoting and protecting human rights at the national, regional and global levels, and in operative paragraph 11 further guarantees their participation as observers, affirming that

the participation of and consultation with observers, including States that are not members of the Council, the specialised agencies, other intergovernmental organizations and national human rights institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations, shall be based on arrangements, including Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996 and practices observed by the Commission on Human Rights, while ensuring the most effective contribution of these entities.

During the Council's institution-building phase, its first President, Luis Alfonso De Alba of Mexico, played a crucial leadership role in safeguarding and expanding civil society participation. He resisted sustained efforts by some States to renegotiate or restrict civil society engagement inherited

²³ See, for example, A. Clapham, 'Creating the High Commissioner for Human Rights: The Outside Story' (1993) 2 *European Journal of International Law* 556, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.ejil.a035895>.

from the Commission and worked actively to preserve, and in some cases enhance, those modalities, including opportunities for civil society participation in interactive dialogues with Special Procedures. With the support of like-minded delegations, De Alba helped ensure that the broad and active civil society participation characteristic of the former Commission was maintained during the transition to the new HRC. In the Council's early years, the NGO liaison service of the OHCHR played a key role in helping civil society navigate the Council's evolving working methods, a function that remains central today.

4. Participation innovations

A series of innovations, often at the instigation of civil society, further broadened participation in the HRC, including for States with limited or no presence in Geneva, especially Small Island Developing States. These developments, such as the webcasting of plenary sessions and new technological tools, such as the HRC Extranet (an online platform on which statements and other documents are shared) make it easier for States, civil society organisations, national human rights institutions, journalists, academics and other stakeholders to follow the Council's work.

Over time, specific measures to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities were also introduced, such as a dedicated accessibility task force, sign-language interpreting and captioning for key debates, and guidance on accessible information, enabling more direct participation by organisations of persons with disabilities and their advocates. While these are important steps, UN reviews and disability advocates have underlined that accessibility at the Council remains incomplete and have called for more systematic measures so that persons with disabilities can participate on an equal footing in all aspects of its work.

In recent years there has also been increased openness to involving children directly in UN human rights work. For example, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has pioneered formal working methods on child participation and the HRC has invited children to speak as panellists. Child rights organisations, however, note that these opportunities remain largely ad hoc and depend heavily on NGOs to facilitate safe and meaningful engagement.

Mechanisms for recognition and accreditation for Indigenous Peoples have also evolved significantly, moving from ad-hoc participation to more structured and recognised engagement, even though in UN practice Indigenous Peoples are often grouped administratively under 'civil society'. Historically, Indigenous Peoples' organisations could access UN human rights bodies by applying for ECOSOC consultative status, an approach that treated them as NGOs rather than as peoples with collective rights and representative institutions. The creation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982, and later the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) by ECOSOC resolution 2000/22, marked important steps towards recognising the distinct status of Indigenous Peoples. The adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 further strength-

ened their right to participation in decision-making on matters that may affect them.

From the mid-2000s onwards, several human rights mechanisms developed additional modalities through which Indigenous Peoples' institutions and communities could submit information or participate in discussions, irrespective of ECOSOC consultative status. Since 2024, Indigenous Peoples' organisations have been able to apply for accreditation to participate directly in specific HRC debates, specifically the interactive dialogues with the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Starting in 2026, the half-day panel on Indigenous Peoples is scheduled to be added to this. Previously, this type of participation was possible only by acting through an organisation with ECOSOC consultative status. While debates continue about the need for a dedicated status for Indigenous Peoples' representative institutions at the UN, including in the HRC, these developments collectively reflect a gradual shift from treating Indigenous organisations as ordinary NGOs within the UN's 'civil society' space, to acknowledging their unique representational character and their right to participate as peoples directly in UN processes.

5. Civil society participation and influence in the treaty bodies system

Civil society influence is especially evident in the UN treaty body system. It has played an essential part in its evolution from its earliest beginnings to its current role as a cornerstone of the international human rights architecture. This contribution has included advocacy for the creation of each of the individual treaties, including their optional protocols, and their monitoring and individual complaints mechanisms. CSOs have ensured accountability and treaties' tools of redress have become at least modestly effective and operational, while treaty bodies can fulfil their function in interpreting treaties and offering guidance on implementation. These roles are elaborated in Part III. The focus here is on how CSOs have engaged with these mechanisms in practice, particularly through their participatory and information-providing roles.

When the treaty bodies first began their work, CSOs quickly became important sources of information for committee experts, often providing material informally before formal participation modalities were put in place. The parallel reports CSOs frequently provide have given committee members a more detailed and alternative picture of the human rights situation in particular countries than State reports alone. Through written submissions and in-person briefings, CSOs have offered the context and evidence that experts needed to frame their questions, identify key concerns and develop their recommendations. This has helped to ensure that monitoring reflected actual conditions in countries and that the experiences of individuals and communities in marginalised and disadvantaged situations were included in the review of States' reports.

CSOs have also been pioneers in enhancing the transparency and accessibility of the treaty body sys-

tem. Before the UN committed to webcasting all committee sessions, CSOs organised their own webcasts, opening up proceedings that had previously been accessible only to those physically present in Geneva. This innovation helped to widen global engagement by enabling rights holders and national organisations to follow treaty body proceedings directly, amplifying voices from local civil society and reducing barriers associated with physical presence. It also helped to push the UN towards greater openness and accountability in its own practices. Importantly, it also strengthened domestic accountability by enabling civil society actors to monitor State representatives' statements during reviews in real time and to hold governments to account for positions taken at the international level.²⁴

Specialised CSOs have played an essential role in facilitating access to treaty bodies for national organisations and rights holders. Organisations such as IWRAW Asia Pacific, the Centre for Civil and Political Rights (CCPR Centre), Child Rights Connect, the International Disability Alliance (IDA), the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) have developed structured support programmes that enable local actors to engage more effectively with treaty body review processes. Such organisations offer training on treaty standards, provide guidance on the preparation of the alternative reports that CSOs can send to the treaty bodies in parallel with the information submitted by States, organise briefings with committee experts, and support national groups' engagement in meetings in Geneva. The ability to sustain this support depends on adequate resourcing, which is increasingly challenging in the context of the broader funding crisis affecting civil society, as discussed earlier.

Many of the hybrid participation opportunities that had become near standard, have been reduced or removed completely. Participation in NGO briefings with most treaty bodies is reserved for in-person participants only, with some exceptions for pre-recorded messages. It is only because of the extraordinary efforts of specialised NGOs, such as the TB-Net, and the treaty body experts, that some of these conversations are continuing in informal settings in connection with country reviews. If these actors, in turn, face funding difficulties, it will be detrimental to CSOs' participation in the treaty bodies.

Anna-Karin Holmlund,
Senior UN Advocate at Amnesty International

6. The COVID-19 pandemic: between challenges and opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) was characterised by both disruption and innovation. Human rights mechanisms adapted more quickly than many other UN bodies and this generated a set of unplanned but important innovations. Hybrid modalities allowed participants to intervene remotely, including in informal consultations on draft resolutions of the HRC. For many stakeholders, including States with limited or no presence in Geneva and national CSOs, these changes significantly reduced costs, removed visa and travel barriers, and created new opportunities to follow and influence UN debates. At the same time, they demonstrated that broader, more geographically diverse participation is both technically feasible and beneficial to the legitimacy of UN decision-making.

However, the e-deleGATE portal introduced in 2020, which is a key digital tool underpinning the HRC's work, remains inaccessible to CSOs, including those with ECOSOC consultative status. This excludes them from core procedural aspects of HRC sessions. The portal includes real-time negotiation materials such as revised draft versions of resolutions under negotiation and lists of co-sponsors that are not available on public UN websites or secondary platforms.

7. From openness to restriction: recent shifts in civil society access in Geneva

In the past few years, especially since 2023, there has been a retrogressive shift. Civil society access in Geneva and gains built up over several decades have come under renewed pressure, with a trend towards alignment with the more restrictive participation practices in New York. There has been a **tightening of security practices at UNOG**, partly driven by an unsupported narrative that paints CSOs as potential security risks. Many pandemic-era innovations in participation have been rolled back, purportedly on financial grounds, with **options for hybrid participation becoming the exception** rather than the rule since 2023. These dynamics are visible even when retrograde measures are couched as 'technical' decisions, such as room allocation during the renovation of the Palais des Nations, the UN headquarters in Geneva, where many UN meetings and conferences take place.

The Strategic Heritage Plan, the initiative to modernise the Palais des Nations, and its ongoing building work have a practical and direct effect on the physical space in which the UN operates. However, many interlocutors have noted that the manner in which the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG) has responded to these changes often serves to reinforce, rather than minimise, their exclusion. The response of UN Conference Services and other administrative services of UNOG when it comes to the pressures

²⁴ For additional information on civil society's role in the treaty bodies system, see Anna-Karin Holmlund, 'The Role of Human Rights NGOs in Strengthening the Protection Mandates of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies', in Bertrand Ramcharan, Rachel Brett, Ann Marie Clark and Penny Parker (eds), *The Protection Roles of Human Rights NGOs: Essays in Honour of Adrien-Claude Zoller* (Brill Nijhoff 2022).

they face appears to default to bureaucratic, non-solution-oriented approaches. They point in particular to what they describe as excessively bureaucratic handling of legitimate requests by States and other stakeholders involved in the HRC's work, together with a limited flexibility to accommodate initiatives emanating from the Council. Whether these actions stem primarily from bureaucratic reflex or whether broader institutional and political dynamics are also at play, interlocutors have characterised the overall approach as unsatisfactory and, in some instances, highly perplexing. It risks undermining the traditional – and important – openness of UN practices in Geneva, which historically have been more accessible than those prevailing in New York.

A civil society colleague used the expression 'death by 1,000 cuts'. And I think it's really what it is. It's a range of individual measures which, taken in isolation, are trivial or not that serious, but altogether result in significantly restricting our space and propagating a narrative that we are basically a security threat.

Nicolas Agostini,
Representative to the UN for DefendDefenders

Civil society's access to treaty bodies has also been severely impacted by reductions in the funding available to the UN human rights system, from whatever source. A reduced number of sessions, late scheduling and the end of hybrid participation, together with funding constraints on civil society itself, have made access increasingly difficult.

Civil society organizations are increasingly losing opportunities to contribute to treaty body reviews, and when sessions are finally confirmed, it is often too late to arrange travel, secure funding, or obtain visas.

Agnès Gràcia Corberó,
Head of Programmes, Child Rights Connect

Participation practices with the treaty bodies have regressed. The spaces for remote participation that opened up before, and peaked during, the COVID-19 pandemic, such as online briefings and the possibility to join formal meetings remotely, have largely been rolled back. Citing the UN's liquidity crisis and practical constraints related to

interpreting services and interpreters' working conditions, the system has closed many of these avenues so that, today, most meaningful remote engagement has slipped back into informal spaces rather than being embedded in the formal work of the treaty bodies.²⁵

Further compounding this situation are the **increasing visa obstacles** faced by human rights defenders travelling to Geneva, as highlighted, for example, in Amnesty International's 2025 report *Closing the Door? How Visa Policies in Europe's Schengen Area Fail Human Rights Defenders*.²⁶ The report documents the many obstacles faced by activists from 104 visa-restricted countries – mainly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East – when trying to obtain short-term visas to travel to the area for advocacy, networking or respite from the risks they face because of their work.

8. Reprisals against those cooperating with the UN

The deepening civil society engagement with UN processes, however, also exposed civil society actors and rights holders to growing risks. Reprisals and intimidation against individuals and organisations cooperating with the UN emerged as a persistent concern, reflecting efforts by some States to deter scrutiny and silence critical voices. Such reprisals take many forms, including threats, harassment and surveillance, arbitrary arrest or detention upon return to a country, restrictions on travel or funding; public smear campaigns; and, in the most severe cases, enforced disappearance or killing. Reports have also documented intimidation and monitoring of civil society representatives during meetings at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, undermining the safety and integrity of UN engagement spaces.

Civil society organisations have played a key role in documenting these reprisals, supporting affected individuals and bringing cases to the attention of UN human rights mechanisms. This has helped to identify reprisals as a systemic issue. In response, the CHR and later the HRC developed a normative framework affirming States' obligations to prevent and protect against reprisals. System-wide coordination on reprisals was strengthened in 2016 through the designation of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights as focal point. While welcome, these initiatives have had only limited effectiveness in addressing the problem. Civil society organisations, notably ISHR, as well as a large number of States from all regions, have called for the further strengthening of the UN's response.²⁷

²⁵ See, for example, CCPR Centre, *The UN Budget Crisis and Its Deepening Impact on the Human Rights Committee and Civil Society Participation*, 28 July 2025 (describing how funding shortages have restricted civil society and victim participation in treaty-body processes); available at: <https://ccprcentre.org/ccprpages/the-un-budget-crisis-and-its-deepening-impact-on-the-human-rights-committee-and-civil-society-participation>.

²⁶ Amnesty International, *Closing the Door? How Visa Policies in Europe's Schengen Area Fail Human Rights Defenders*, EUR 01/0411/2025 (2025), available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/0411/2025/en/>.

²⁷ See, for example, ISHR's campaign End Reprisals, <https://ishr.ch/campaigns/endreprisals2025/>; and UNGA80: Joint statement on reprisals, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/joint-statement-on-reprisals-delivered-at-the-third-committee-of-unga80/>.

9. Gatekeeping participation: how the ECOSOC NGO Committee impacts civil society access

Composed of State representatives, the ECOSOC NGO Committee has always had wide discretion, due in part to vague and opaque procedures. Today, it remains the central gatekeeper for NGO accreditation and can recommend suspension or withdrawal of status. Its decisions have far-reaching implications for civil society participation, underscoring the need for transparent, timely and predictable accreditation practices.

In practice, obtaining consultative status can take years. The Committee is often criticised as one of the UN system's most politicised mechanisms, with practices that allow individual members to block or indefinitely delay applications from organisations that otherwise meet the requirements for consultative status. Under Committee rules, any member may ask an applicant a question, and each question automatically defers consideration to the next session, with no limit on how often this can occur. This mechanism has enabled some States to stall applications indefinitely.

The Committee's work is largely opaque, with limited public access and minimal records of State positions. As a result, independent monitoring has become essential. ISHR has played a key role by supporting CSOs through the accreditation process, advocating for procedural reform and regularly publishing analyses of Committee sessions.²⁸

Civil society actors have long raised concerns that the ECOSOC accreditation framework has also enabled a growing number of government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) to obtain consultative status, allowing States to occupy and influence civil society space within UN human rights forums. Similarly, the growing presence of business-organised NGOs (so-called BINGOs) – industry-funded groups operating under NGO status – raises parallel concerns about corporate lobbying, potentially blurring the line of genuine civil society advocacy.

The NGO Committee is the single worst mechanism in the entire United Nations system. It's a complete disgrace. That committee is the main reason we see so many GONGOs today: the States that sponsor these groups ensure that they are consistently elected to the Committee, and they use their position to accredit their own organizations while blocking nationally based groups that are critical of them.

Chris Sidoti, International human rights expert

A 2025 ISHR report identifies China as 'the top obstructionist State at the NGO Committee since 2016', noting its pattern of deferring organisations that document human rights violations in countries aligned with Beijing. The report also analyses the Chinese government's use of its role on the Committee, expanded presence of GONGOs, intimidation and reprisals to restrict independent civil society access to UN human rights bodies, and makes recommendations to protect civil society space within UN processes.²⁹

While ECOSOC consultative status is not required for every form of engagement with the UN human rights system, it remains a central entry point for NGO participation in New York and Geneva and a prerequisite for many key spaces and procedures. **It is therefore crucial that access to consultative status be fair, transparent and based on objective criteria, and that the accreditation system not be used to sideline or punish critical voices.**

²⁸ See ISHR webpage on the NGO Committee, available at: <https://ishr.ch/about-human-rights/who-protects-human-rights/the-united-nations/ecosoc-and-the-ngo-committee/>.

²⁹ International Service for Human Rights, Report: *China's efforts to block civil society access to the United Nations* (28 Apr 2025), available at: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/un-access-china-report/>.

III. Illustrating civil society contributions to international law and UN institutional development

As already noted, civil society has played a central role in the development and functioning of the UN human rights system. This section will present some examples of this influence, sometimes citing specific organisations. It is **important to note** that the organisations mentioned in the examples are highlighted as primary drivers or visible leaders in relation to their respective treaties. However, the successful negotiation of these international norms has always relied on large, diverse coalitions of global and regional CSOs coordinating their strategies and leveraging their collective expertise within the UN system and beyond.

a. The role of CSOs in the development of human rights norms

Civil society continued to play an active role following the adoption of the UN Charter, from the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to the negotiation of later treaties, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the two International Covenants on Human Rights, and indeed, **in virtually every normative human rights instrument ever considered by the UN**. By contributing both legal expertise and evidence from affected individuals and communities, they have helped ensure that intergovernmental processes develop norms that better reflect the situations of those facing discrimination or abuse.

1. Examples of civil society influence across different issue areas

Citing only a few examples cannot capture the full breadth of civil society's contributions. Nevertheless, their influence is visible across decades of standard-setting. Their impact can be seen, for example, in the consolidation of women's rights into a single binding framework through the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (1979), later strengthened by an **Optional Protocol** enabling individual complaints and inquiry procedures; the development of the **Convention against Torture** (1984) and its **Optional Protocol** (2002), which established international and national preventive mechanisms; and the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989), drafted with sustained civil society engagement and subsequently expanded through **Optional Protocols**, including a protocol allowing children to seek remedies directly for violations of the Convention before the Commit-

tee on the Rights of the Child. Civil society advocacy was also central to the adoption of the UN **Declaration on Human Rights Defenders** (1998); the **Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation** (2005), which affirmed core elements of access to justice for victims and survivors of human rights violations; and the **UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (2007) and the **UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants** (2018), both of which reflect long-term mobilisation. Some additional examples are discussed later in this report. Civil society advocacy has also driven the increasing recognition of and articulation of rights such as **the human rights to water and sanitation**, and **the human right to adequate housing**.

Civil society advocacy on the abolition of the death penalty, including the 2007 UN General Assembly resolution '**Moratorium on the Use of the Death Penalty**' (A/RES/62/149) and subsequent related resolutions, is also often cited as a significant human rights achievement. The 2007 resolution marked the first time the General Assembly had adopted a clear, global position in favour of ending the death penalty and it helped reframe capital punishment as a human rights concern rather than solely a matter of domestic criminal justice.

Additional examples cited by experts interviewed for this research include the development of the Technical Guidance on a Human Rights-Based Approach to Reduce Preventable Maternal Mortality and Morbidity and the Guidance Note of the Secretary General on Child Rights Mainstreaming. In both cases, sustained civil society advocacy and technical input were critical in shaping the content, embedding gender equality, accountability and participation, and encouraging UN bodies to adopt stronger and more coherent human rights standards. These examples show how CSOs can also influence the normative and operational tools that guide how States and UN bodies put human rights into practice.

Civil society advocacy has also strengthened connections between the UN human rights system in Geneva and other parts of the UN. **By bringing human rights concerns into forums dealing with crime, drugs, security and the environment, they have helped to ensure that decisions taken in places such as Vienna, New York, Bonn or Nairobi reflect existing human rights standards.** This cross-system work has, for example, informed standards on the treatment of women in detention, the independence of judges and lawyers, drug policies and counter terrorism, and gender-responsive peace and security frameworks, including the Women, Peace and Security agenda, helping to

ensure that human rights are integrated across the wider UN system.

Civil society advocacy has also driven the development of **expert normative frameworks outside formal intergovernmental processes**, many of which were later taken up, endorsed or relied upon within the UN system, such as the **Yogyakarta Principles and Yogyakarta Principles plus 10** (on the application of international human rights law to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics); the **Global Principles on National Security and the Right to Information** (Tshwane Principles); and the **Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Public Health Emergencies**, an initiative of the ICJ and the Public Health Law Consortium in the wake of the COVID-19 public health crisis. **This shows that civil society has influenced not only what human rights standards contain, but also how they are interpreted, applied and followed up in practice.**

This long continuum of civil society influence extends to the **Arms Trade Treaty** (2013) and the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons** (2017). It also encompasses environmental milestones connecting human rights and environmental justice movements, as illustrated later in this report.

2. Civil society's role in advancing standards on business and human rights

For decades, human rights, environmental and Indigenous Peoples' organisations, social movements and trade unions have driven efforts to secure an international legal framework that addresses the responsibilities of both States and businesses to respect and protect human rights. As transnational corporations (TNCs) and other business enterprises grew in terms of reach and influence, CSOs and labour movements began to gather evidence of abuses, ranging from exploitative labour practices and environmental damage to complicity in serious human rights violations and abuses. While voluntary codes of conduct, corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes and the UN Global Compact³⁰ marked early steps towards addressing these concerns, civil society argued that such initiatives offered no enforceable obligations, accountability or effective oversight. They consistently called for binding international standards to ensure that businesses comply with human rights.

This push gained momentum in 2003 when the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights adopted the Draft Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with regard to Human Rights. Widely backed by

civil society, the Norms consolidated existing human rights obligations applicable to companies and represented the first attempt to create a unified framework for corporate accountability. However, strong pressure from business associations and resistance from several States led the CHR to shelve them.

In 2005, the Commission established the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on human rights and transnational corporations to clarify business human rights responsibilities and related standards. The work undertaken by John Ruggie under this mandate led to the Protect, Respect and Remedy framework (2008) and, subsequently, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011). The framework rested on three pillars: the State duty to protect human rights against abuses by businesses; the corporate responsibility to respect human rights; and access to remedy for victims of business-related abuses.

The Guiding Principles were endorsed unanimously by the HRC resolution in 2011 and welcomed by many governments and some businesses as a practical and broadly acceptable approach. Many CSOs, however, viewed them as an incomplete response to a deeply rooted problem. While recognising the clarity the framework offered, they criticised its heavy reliance on voluntary business due diligence and its lack of detail on States' obligations to provide effective remedy. For many, this left the existing power dynamics involving transnational corporations (TNCs) and States intact and failed to ensure enforceable remedies for people from affected communities.

In response to these gaps, civil society networks renewed their calls for a stronger, legally binding international framework. In parallel, CSOs engaged with treaty bodies, notably the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, supporting the development of general comments that proved influential in clarifying business-related human rights obligations and informing later treaty negotiations.³¹

Drawing on the experiences of communities affected by business abuses and the limitations of voluntary measures, a broad coalition known as the Treaty Alliance emerged in 2013, bringing together hundreds of organisations, such as human rights, labour, environmental and faith-based groups, behind a shared demand for a legally binding treaty governing TNCs and other business enterprises. This coalition was central in galvanising support for the initiative led by Ecuador and South Africa that resulted in HRC resolution 26/9 (2014), which established an Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group (OEIWG) to negotiate such a treaty.³²

³⁰ The UN Global Compact (launched in 2000) is a voluntary corporate sustainability initiative that invites companies to commit to ten principles in the areas of human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption. It is not a regulatory or a monitoring body; rather, it promotes responsible business practices through guidance, reporting expectations and peer-learning networks. CSOs have long argued that it functions mainly as a voluntary pledge rather than a mechanism that ensures accountability. Hence their call for binding international standards on business and human rights.

³¹ See, in particular, Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 16 (2013) on State obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children's rights, and Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 24 (2017) on State obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the context of business activities. Both General Comments have been widely cited as authoritative clarifications of States' duties to regulate business conduct, including transnational corporate activity, in order to prevent and address human rights abuses.

³² For additional information on developments up to the establishment of this OEIWG, see Jens Martens and Karolin Seitz, *The Struggle for a UN Treaty: Towards Global Regulation on Human Rights and Business* (Berlin/Bonn/New York: Global Policy Forum and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung–New York Office, August 2016), available at: <https://>

Civil society has continued to push this process forward. Members of the Treaty Alliance and allied networks, including the Global Campaign to Dismantle Corporate Power and Stop Corporate Impunity that has strong social-movement participation, have developed detailed proposals on the treaty's structure and obligations. These contributions brought into the OEIGWG's work call for clear business liability, mandatory due diligence across global supply chains, the obligation of States to regulate their businesses and make justice accessible for those from affected communities, including for activities and harm across borders, as well as protection for human rights defenders working on business abuses. CSOs have also insisted that the negotiations remain transparent and free from undue corporate influence and that the treaty's credibility depends on the participation of persons and communities directly affected by business harm. Trade unions complement other civil society positions by reminding negotiating parties of standards that already exist at the ILO and in other contexts and help in identifying gaps in labour protections and other areas of human rights beyond the rights to work and at work.

Feminist organisations, together with other feminist civil society experts have pushed for a gender-responsive treaty. Collaborating as part of the Feminists for a Binding Treaty coalition, they have emphasised the need to address both corporate power and the gendered systems that reinforce it. They have shown, for example, how practices in sectors such as mining and agribusiness can widen economic inequalities, displace women from land and livelihoods and increase the risks faced by women human rights defenders.

Other constituencies, such as youth groups (the 'Youth Friends of the Treaty') and child rights advocates have also contributed to the negotiations to ensure that the future treaty responds to the needs and expectations of children and young people.

After having made the political case for the treaty negotiations to be initiated and continued in the face of heavy resistance by a number of States and by business associations, trade unions and other civil society groups are now engaged in the negotiations, contributing technical and legal expertise drawn from their experience working on real situations in which business conduct harms the rights of individuals and communities. Although the treaty negotiations continue to face significant obstacles, sustained civil society pressure has shifted the debate away from reliance on voluntary measures and towards enforceable accountability. This effort represents a collective attempt to contribute to regulation of powerful business actors and to ensure that their negative impacts on human rights can be addressed and redressed.

3. Civil society's role in advancing human rights standards on the environment

Civil society, including environmental CSOs, representatives of Indigenous Peoples, social movements and youth movements, has been central in shaping how the UN deals with global environmental degradation, including catastrophic climate change. They bring real world experience, scientific knowledge and public pressure that governments alone often are unable or unwilling to provide. Over the years, they have helped the UN to recognise issues such as pollution, climate change and environmental justice as urgent global priorities. They have pushed for stronger rules, greater transparency and full public participation, so that environmental decisions better reflect the needs of people and communities. In many ways, the UN's modern approach to protecting the environment has grown directly out of civil society's persistence, expertise and advocacy.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro were early milestones that demonstrated how essential broad NGO participation is to global environmental decision-making. These conferences opened the door to sustained civil society involvement in influencing international environmental norms and policies and helped to establish the principle that environmental protection and public participation must go hand in hand. Such good practices were later formalised through instruments such as the **UNECE Aarhus Convention, which explicitly provides environmental procedural rights, such as access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice**, and recognises the public, including environmental NGOs, as having concrete rights to obtain information, take part in decisions and challenge them before courts.

More recently, CSOs have been key to ensuring that the UN addresses the human rights dimension of environmental issues. A global civil society mobilisation, including a global call with over 1,350 endorsements from 75 countries, was central to securing **recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment**, first through HRC resolution 48/13 (2021) and subsequently through General Assembly resolution 76/300 (2022). The UN itself acknowledged this achievement by awarding its 2023 Human Rights Prize to the Global Coalition of Civil Society, Indigenous Peoples, Social Movements and Local Communities for the Universal Recognition of the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment.³³ Sustained mobilisation by civil society actors contributed to the establishment of **three Special Procedures**, between 1995 and 2021, addressing the major global environmental concerns identified by UNEP: toxic substances and human rights; the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment; and climate change and human rights.

rosalux.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RLS-NYC_struggle_for_a_un_treaty_EN.pdf.

³³ Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), "Global Coalition Makes History: First to Receive UN's Top Human Rights Honor" 12 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.ciel.org/news/global-coalition-rthe-makes-history-un-human-rights-prize/>.

Furthermore, CSOs were **instrumental in ensuring that human rights were reflected in the Paris Agreement**. Throughout the negotiations, civil society coalitions, including environmental organisations, human rights NGOs, Indigenous Peoples' representatives, women's rights networks, youth movements and trade unions, worked together to highlight the human impacts of climate change and the need for people-centred climate action. Their advocacy helped to secure the landmark reference in the Agreement's preamble calling on States to respect, promote and consider human rights in all climate-related actions, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples, women, children, persons with disabilities and migrants. Trade unions, led primarily by the ITUC, campaigned for more than a decade to ensure that the concept of a just transition was reflected in international climate agreements. Their advocacy contributed to the inclusion in the Agreement's preamble of the reference to 'the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs'.

Youth movements have played a growing role in the UN's approach to climate and environmental justice. The initiative to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on States' legal obligations regarding climate change was first championed by Pacific Island students, who saw the need for clearer international guidance to protect communities already facing severe climate impacts. Working with youth-led networks around the world, they built the political momentum that led the UN General Assembly to request an advisory opinion in March 2023.³⁴ Their advocacy was key to ensuring that issues of intergenerational justice and human rights were central to the process, and these perspectives were reflected in the Court's landmark 2025 opinion,³⁵ which affirmed that States have a legal duty to prevent and respond to climate harm.

4. Civil society leadership in the making of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is one of the clearest examples of how civil society can transform international law. When the Convention was negotiated in the early 2000s, organisations of persons with disabilities and disability-rights CSOs were active participants in the drafting process. The modalities for participation in the working group that drafted the Convention were such that they allowed organisations of persons with disabilities and other CSOs, even without ECOSOC status, to engage directly with State delegates throughout the negotiations. This inclusive approach meant that civil society representatives could propose language, comment on draft provisions, and provide real time expertise drawn from lived experience. As a result, their perspectives became an integral part of the drafting process,

shaping both the substance and the structure of the Convention in ways that would not have been possible under more traditional, government-centred negotiations.

Because people with disabilities and their representative organisations were directly involved, the Convention was firmly rooted in a human rights approach and social model rather than a medical or charity model, marking a major shift in how disability is understood internationally. Their engagement influenced key elements of the Convention, including its definition of persons with disabilities, the recognition of women and girls with disabilities as rights holders facing distinct forms of discrimination, and the framing of disability rights within equality, dignity and full participation in society.

The CRPD is now widely seen as a landmark treaty because of this collaborative model. It demonstrated that when those most affected by discrimination help to design the rules, international agreements become more representative, more forward-looking and more capable of driving real change. The experience of drafting the CRPD has since become a reference point for other UN processes seeking meaningful and inclusive civil society participation.

Civil society engagement did not end with the adoption of the Convention. Long guided by the principle of 'nothing about us without us' that underpinned the CRPD's negotiation, organisations of persons with disabilities have remained central to implementation and accountability. They monitor State compliance through reporting to the CRPD Committee, engagement with the Universal Periodic Review, and ongoing interaction with the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities. They also promote disability inclusion across broader UN agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals. This sustained engagement has been essential to translating the CRPD's legal obligations into concrete legal, policy and institutional change.

5. Civil society's role in establishing international standards on internal displacement

For much of the twentieth century, internal displacement remained largely invisible at the international level. Although millions of people were uprooted within their own countries by conflict, persecution or human-rights abuses, traditional interpretations of State sovereignty discouraged any form of external involvement. International refugee law, focused on people who crossed borders, did not apply to those displaced within their own countries. As a result, internally displaced persons (IDPs) were left without protection or recognition, and the issue remained off the international agenda.

This began to change only when faith-based organisations and policy institutes drew sustained attention to the scale and urgency of internal displacement. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, CSOs documented pat-

³⁴ Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the obligations of States in respect of climate change, UN Doc. A/RES/77/276, available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/77/276>.

³⁵ International Court of Justice, *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change*, Advisory Opinion, 2025, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/187>.

terns of displacement, analysed protection gaps and pressed the UN to act. The CHR took up the issue as a direct result of advocacy from the Quaker UN Office (QUNO), the World Council of Churches and the Refugee Policy Group. Ahead of bringing this matter before the Commission, QUNO worked closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross in preparing the issue for consideration. Through these combined efforts internal displacement was formally institutionalised within the Commission's work, ultimately leading to the creation of a dedicated thematic Special Procedure mandate on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in 1992. The establishment of this mandate marked the first time the UN had formally acknowledged internal displacement as a global human rights concern.

I would say, it would not have got on the agenda if NGOs hadn't done it. No government was going to take up IDPs. This was the ultimate interference in internal affairs, which at that stage was still very much 'you cannot interfere in internal affairs'.

Rachel Brett, former Human Rights & Refugees Representative, Quaker UN Office, Geneva

From the outset, the new mandate was developed through deep collaboration with civil society. Working closely with NGOs, research centres and displaced communities, the first mandate holder, Francis Deng, undertook a systematic analysis of legal and operational gaps. This collaborative work culminated in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), which drew together existing human-rights and humanitarian norms to provide, for the first time, a coherent international framework defining who IDPs are and outlining States' responsibilities towards them. CSOs were central to the drafting process and to the rapid dissemination and uptake of the Guiding Principles. They translated the document, trained government officials, monitored implementation and integrated the Guiding Principles into regional advocacy strategies.

Civil society continued to shape the institutional architecture that followed. The Norwegian Refugee Council established the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) in 1998, creating the first global hub for data, analysis and policy engagement on internal displacement. Regional NGO networks helped to transform soft-law guidance into binding norms, most notably through the African Union's Kampala Convention (2009), the world's first legally binding treaty on internal displacement. The Convention not only embedded the Guiding Principles in regional law but also explicitly acknowledged civil society's central role in protection and assistance efforts.

Over the years, CSOs have remained indispensable

partners to successive UN Special Rapporteurs on the human rights of IDPs, providing field-level evidence, policy recommendations, community perspectives and monitoring support.

b. How CSOs have shaped the UN's human rights machinery

Few, if any, of the Special Procedures mandates would have been created without the significant role played by civil society in identifying issues, bringing them to public attention, analyzing their implications, and proposing ways and means to address them. The same applies to investigative and fact-finding bodies, which often originated from sustained advocacy and expertise provided by CSOs.

It is true that many proposals made by civil society did not ultimately succeed. Yet the extraordinary impact of civil society on the Council's work and achievements should never be underestimated. Without the input of genuine, independent NGOs, there simply would be no Human Rights Council as we know it today.

Eric Tistounet, Former Chief of the Human Rights Council Branch at OHCHR

1. Building accountability: pushing the UN to open up to human rights monitoring

The CHR, created in 1946, spent its first twenty years elaborating key instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two International Covenants. It avoided looking into concrete human rights situations of specific States, largely because many governments argued that such scrutiny would interfere in their internal affairs. In 1947, it adopted a resolution to the effect that it 'recognised that it had no competence to deal with any complaint about violations of human rights' (this is often referred to as the 'no power doctrine'),³⁶ a position endorsed that same year by ECOSOC.

CSOs played a major part in changing this. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, they sent reports, gathered testimonies and encouraged supportive governments to raise specific crises. Their pressure helped to shift perceptions inside the UN, making claims that the Commission had 'no power' to address violations increasingly difficult to sustain in practice and contributing to two important institutional breakthroughs.

³⁶ See, for example, Adrien-Claude Zoller, *Strategies of Authoritarian States regarding the UN Human Rights System, in particular in the UN Human Rights Council* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022), available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/6419516/12332519/Strategies+of+Authoritarian+States+regarding+the+UN+Human+Rights+System+in+particular+in+the+UN+Human+Rights+Council+Zoller+2022.pdf/>.

In 1967, ECOSOC resolution 1235 (XLII) authorised the Commission to publicly examine information related to situations that reveal consistent patterns of gross human rights violations. This development was strongly influenced by efforts to address apartheid in South Africa. Three years later, ECOSOC resolution 1503 (XLVIII) established a confidential procedure allowing the UN to receive and consider communications from individuals and CSOs concerning consistent patterns of gross and reliably attested human rights violations (the '1503 procedure'). **These steps opened the door for the UN to examine country situations systematically for the first time and laid the foundation for today's system of Special Rapporteurs and independent experts.** Prior to the late 1960s, situations such as apartheid in South Africa and the question of Palestine were discussed largely through thematic lenses, including racial discrimination, self-determination and refugees, rather than through systematic examination by the Commission itself. By the 1970s, CSOs had become essential actors in this human rights monitoring work. Their evidence helped the UN to respond to situations such as apartheid, the military dictatorship in Chile and widespread disappearances in Latin America. Their advocacy was crucial in, for example, establishing the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in 1980 (see section below), the first mechanism dedicated to a specific human rights question across countries.

CSOs also played an important role through the former Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, an expert body that often served as one of the UN system's most open entry points for civil society because of its flexible working methods, including the absence of an ECOSOC accreditation requirement. Through this engagement, CSOs helped to identify issues that States were not yet ready to address, contributed to early drafts of standards and drew attention to situations that later informed new thematic mandates.

Progress during this period was also made possible by close cooperation between CSOs and committed UN officials. Leaders within the UN human rights secretariat, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, worked with civil society to develop more practical monitoring methods and turn the new procedures into meaningful tools.

2. CSOs and UN response to enforced or involuntary disappearances

In the 1970s, as enforced disappearances escalated in countries such as Argentina and Chile, CSOs and families of the disappeared brought growing amounts of evidence to the UN. Although new UN procedures for examining serious violations were beginning to take shape, they remained limited in practice, and political divisions often prevented open discussion of specific countries. Argentina was a clear example. Despite mounting documentation from local organisations, the CHR was unable to address the situation

publicly. Even so, grassroots groups, including the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and national human rights organisations, continued to travel to Geneva to present cases, meet delegates and push for an international response. Their determined engagement helped to create the conditions for a new mechanism that could bypass political stalemate and address enforced disappearances directly.

Building on this momentum and motivated by the persistence of victims' families and CSOs, Theo van Boven, Director of the UN Division of Human Rights, sought a practical solution. In 1980, he proposed the establishment of an independent working group of experts that could receive cases of enforced disappearance from any country, transmit them to governments and follow up on the fate and whereabouts of missing persons. This proposal led to the creation of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the first thematic Special Procedure of the UN human rights system, and a major breakthrough in responding to a pattern of violations that had previously gone unaddressed.

I remember several individuals and organizations that helped the Grandmothers and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to participate in the Council's meetings, at a time when representatives of the dictatorial government did not even allow them to speak from Argentina's own seat. (...) Together with victims and families from Argentina and other Latin American countries, we succeeded in 1980, while we were still suffering under dictatorships, in having the then Commission on Human Rights establish the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. (...) We also returned, together with the mothers of Plaza de Mayo and relatives of the disappeared, to work on the drafting and adoption of the Convention on Enforced Disappearance, which was ultimately adopted in 2006. Today, we continue working to ensure that this Convention is ratified by as many countries as possible.³⁷

Estela Carlotto, President of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Association

The Working Group's creation laid the foundation for the development of new international law on enforced disappearances. Over the following decades, its documentation of cases, engagement with families and appeals to governments helped to shape the legal understanding of enforced

³⁷ See statement at the High-level commemorative event on the occasion of the 50th session of the Human Rights Council: achievements and lessons learned, available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1weuiu8il>.

disappearance as a distinct crime. CSOs and victims' associations continued to lead global advocacy for a binding instrument codifying the right not to be subjected to disappearance and the duty of States to prevent, investigate and punish it. Their efforts culminated in the adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance by the UN General Assembly in 2006, the first treaty to affirm the right of every person not to be subject to enforced disappearance and to guarantee victims and their families the right to truth and reparation. Though his initiative and related robust work cost him his post, as his mandate was not renewed amid political pressure from Member States uncomfortable with his outspoken emphasis on accountability for gross violations,³⁸ Theo van Boven's courage, combined with decades of Argentinian and international NGO advocacy, transformed the UN's ability to respond to enforced disappearances, a legacy that continues to this day.

3. Civil society's role in the transition from the Commission to the Human Rights Council

In the early 2000s, the Commission on Human Rights came under increasingly severe and sustained criticism. Although many of these concerns were not new, they gained greater visibility as questioning intensified, in the context of broader UN reform debates, concerning how best to strengthen the organisation's human rights machinery. With regard to the Commission, according to a major report by the UN Secretary General, 'a credibility deficit ha[d] developed, which cast a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole'.³⁹ Although views differed on its shortcomings, for many observers the core problem lay in its failure to address States' human rights performance and a membership increasingly focused on blocking scrutiny rather than on strengthening human rights protection. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's 2005 call for a stronger and more credible body, later backed by the 2005 World Summit,⁴⁰ paved the way for the General Assembly's decision in 2006 to replace the Commission with the HRC.

Even though CSOs did not always agree on how far and how fast reforms should go or on what should be preserved or changed from the CHR, **they were united in demanding a stronger and more effective UN human rights body.** They shared a common view that two essential features of the Commission should be retained, namely the system of independent experts known as 'Special Pro-

cedures' and the robust opportunities for NGO participation that distinguished the Commission from other UN bodies. During the negotiations that followed the Secretary-General's 2005 reform proposal, CSOs such as Amnesty International,⁴¹ the ISHR, Human Rights Watch, the ICJ,⁴² the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the Quaker UN Office actively engaged with governments and UN officials to influence the design of the new body and to ensure that the Commission's acquis should be preserved and strengthened.

After General Assembly resolution 60/251 established the HRC, negotiations were held over a year to review mandates and mechanisms inherited from the Commission, set out procedures for the functioning of the newly established Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and agree on the detailed rules and structures of the HRC. This work culminated with the adoption of HRC resolutions 5/1 and 5/2 (known collectively as the 'Institution-Building Package' or the 'IB package') in 2007, which set out its methods of work, mechanisms and working procedures. Civil society actively engaged with this process, including by defending the Special Procedures system against efforts to weaken it. Although many CSOs initially expressed reservations about the creation of the UPR and feared it might undermine existing standards, they nonetheless played a significant role in influencing its design, including the possibility for CSOs to submit information irrespective of ECOSOC consultative status. They similarly actively contributed to the periodic reviews of the IB package, including the 2011 review and the ongoing General Assembly's review of the status of the HRC. It has aimed consistently at consolidating the Council's achievements and addressing ongoing weaknesses in its procedures and responsiveness. Civil society has also remained central to the creation of new Special Procedures mandates, commissions of inquiry and other investigative mechanisms. **In practice, this continuing civil society engagement has functioned as a counterweight to political bargaining among States, helping thereby to keep the Council oriented in a more principled manner, however imperfectly, towards scrutiny, public accountability and the protection of victims and other rights holders rather than solely towards intergovernmental compromise.**

38 United Press International (UPI), *UN Human Rights Commission Director Theo van Boven* (10 February 1982), reporting on the non-renewal of Theo van Boven's mandate as Director of the UN Human Rights Division, available at: <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/02/10/UN-Human-Rights-Commission-Director-Theo-van-Boven-who/3594382165200/>.

39 See, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*, Report of the Secretary-General, UN Doc. A/59/2005, 21 March 2005, see paragraph 182, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/543857?ln=en&v=pdf>.

40 2005 World Summit, 14–16 September 2005, New York; UN, '2005 World Summit', UN conference page, available at: <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/newyork2005>.

41 See 'Meeting the Challenge: Transforming the Commission on Human Rights into a Human Rights Council' (April 2005), available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/zh-hans/documents/ior40/008/2005/en/>; and 'Ten-Point Programme for the Creation of an Authoritative and Effective Human Rights Council' (November 2005), available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior41/067/2005/en/>.

42 See International Commission of Jurists, 'Reforming the UN Human Rights System: a Chance for the United Nations to Fulfil its Promise', available at: <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/06/reform-UN-human-rights-system-thematic-report-2005-eng.pdf>.

4. Role of civil society in pushing for investigative mechanisms in the HRC

When the Human Rights Council replaced the Commission, CSOs drew on years of sustained pressure for deeper UN oversight and played a decisive role in the development of the Council's accountability mechanisms. **Especially in a context of frequent reluctance on the part of the UN Security Council to act, the mobilisation of the human rights mechanisms in Geneva are often the only UN avenues through which to address the human rights crises that are provoked by conflicts and to give victims and survivors some hope of seeing justice served in the future.**

CSOs have been central to the establishment and strengthening of investigative mechanisms within the HRC. They play a crucial agenda-setting role, often being the first to document emerging crises, gather evidence of serious violations and alert the international community when national systems fail. Through sustained advocacy, including public reporting, private briefings to diplomats, joint statements and coordinated campaigns, CSOs help to build the political momentum necessary for the Council to act. Because many States are reluctant to scrutinise peers or create new investigative mechanisms, it is frequently civil society pressure that brings issues onto the Council's agenda and keeps them there.

They provide the legal analysis and detailed information that underpin resolutions establishing Commissions of Inquiry, Fact-Finding Missions and other investigative mechanisms. They also help to shape the scope and contents of their mandates, ensuring they are sufficiently robust, victim-centred and gender responsive. **In the course of negotiations, CSOs work across regions to mobilise supportive States, counter misinformation or disinformation and reduce the space for political obstruction.** Once mechanisms are created, CSOs continue to support their effectiveness by supplying evidence, facilitating access to affected communities, monitoring follow-up and ensuring that findings feed into national and international accountability processes.

Civil society played a decisive role in pushing the HRC to establish dedicated **monitoring and accountability mechanisms for Afghanistan** following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. As national human rights institutions collapsed and space for local actors rapidly shrank, Afghan and international civil society organisations mobilised to ensure sustained international scrutiny. Their early documentation of reprisals, gender persecution, restrictions on journalists and attacks on minorities helped to secure the establishment of a Special Rapporteur mandate in 2021.

Civil society advocacy subsequently focused on the need for a complementary mechanism that could investi-

gate, collect and preserve evidence for criminal liability of perpetrators of crimes such as gender persecution or other crimes against humanity. Through coordinated submissions, joint statements,⁴³ briefings in Geneva and Brussels – and with a key role from Afghan women's rights groups and diaspora activists – civil society helped to build the necessary political support and influence the scope of the mandate.

In October 2025, the HRC established an independent investigative mechanism to 'collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of international crimes and the most serious violations of international law, including those that may also amount to violations and abuses of international human rights law, committed in Afghanistan'.

*Countries at the UN Human Rights Council have together sent a strong message of their resolve to ensure that those responsible for serious international crimes in Afghanistan now or in the past will one day face justice in court. It's crucial for the new mechanism to get up and running quickly so that it can begin to collect, prepare, and preserve evidence, and build files on those responsible for international crimes in Afghanistan.*⁴⁴

Fereshta Abbasi, Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch

5. Responding to the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

The creation of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in 2010 was the direct result of sustained civil society advocacy. Throughout the 2000s, trade unions, including the ITUC, and other CSOs documented a global surge in restrictive NGO laws, barriers to peaceful protest and reprisals against trade unionists and human rights defenders. Organisations such as the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the World Movement for Democracy and CIVICUS urged the HRC to respond to these concerns. Through detailed documentation, legal analysis and coordinated lobbying across regions, they demonstrated that restrictions on protest and association had become a systemic global problem requiring a dedicated response from the Council. This effort culminated in the Council's consensus adoption of Resolution 15/21 (2010), establishing the Special Rapporteur. Civil society's technical input and sustained engagement also informed the mandate's priorities, including its focus on ena-

⁴³ See, for example, Questions & Answers on the Establishment of an Independent International Accountability Mechanism for Afghanistan, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/26/questions-answers-establishment-independent-international-accountability-mechanism>; Open Letter To: Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the United Nations Human Rights Council, August 2025, available at: <https://hrd-plus.net/open-letter-to-permanent-representatives-of-member-and-observer-states-of-the-united-nations-human-rights-council-3/>; and Open Letter to Permanent Representatives of the UN Human Rights Council, 6 September 2024, available at: <https://hrd-plus.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HRC-Letter-6-Sep-2024.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, UN Rights Council Creates Afghanistan Accountability Body, October 2025, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/06/un-rights-council-creates-afghanistan-accountability-body>.

bling environments for association and assembly. In 2016, ITUC welcomed a Special Rapporteur's report (UN GA Report A/71/385) as a landmark contribution that helped to obliterate the artificial distinction between labour rights and human rights generally, noting that it brought 'the struggles of workers from around the world to the heart of the United Nations'.⁴⁵

6. Responding to human rights violations in counter-terrorism

In the wake of the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001, States engaged in a wide range of practices that had a monumental impact on human rights globally. Protective frameworks were dismantled, and widespread and systematic human rights abuses were perpetrated in many contexts. As the UN established elaborate new institutional structures to address terrorism, there was strong resistance, resulting from pressure from the US and allied States, to address the human rights dimensions of the question. Against this backdrop, the ICJ and other leading civil society organisations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, mobilised efforts over several years. Among other actions, they produced a joint declaration⁴⁶ and held a major conference in Geneva with addresses by high-level UN and State officials, independent experts and CSOs.⁴⁷ The then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson also played a pivotal role in the UN's initial response to human rights violations committed in the name of counter-terrorism, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Early attempts to establish a mandate at the Commission on Human Rights, including in March 2002, met with concerted opposition and were ultimately withdrawn. During this period, organisations such as QUNO played a critical role by leveraging trusted relationships with States, engaging in informal diplomacy and challenging flawed legal arguments underlying resistance to the mandate. Although these efforts did not succeed immediately, they contributed to gradual shifts in State positions.⁴⁸

Among the results of this collective mobilisation were, first, the establishment of an independent expert in 2004 to study the question and identify gaps and challeng-

es, and ultimately the creation of a fully-fledged Special Procedure mandate (the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism), through the leadership of Mexico.

This is a prime example of the decisive role played by civil society in a critical area where there were enormous political headwinds.

Ian Seiderman, Senior Legal and Policy Director, International Commission of Jurists

7. Ensuring a response to violations of LGBTQI+ rights

The HRC's engagement with violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity was driven primarily by sustained and often high-risk advocacy by civil society organisations and human rights defenders. Long before formal UN recognition, CSOs documented killings, violence, criminalisation and discrimination, ensuring that such abuses entered the work of UN treaty bodies and Special Procedures despite strong State resistance.

A small number of organisations with expertise in UN processes, including ARC International, ILGA, ISHR and the ICJ, played a key coordinating role, supporting defenders' engagement and framing these violations as falling within existing international human rights norms, particularly non-discrimination and protection from violence. Civil society advocacy was especially visible in 2003–2004, when CSOs mobilised cross-regional support around Brazil's first proposed resolution on sexual orientation at the CHR in 2003, which was thwarted by procedural filibustering by spoiler States. Concerted and sustained efforts by CSOs, however, prevented the issue from being sidelined, despite intense opposition. This sustained engagement laid the groundwork for subsequent institutional advances, including the adoption of the first HRC resolution in 2011 and the establishment in 2016 of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ ITUC, 'Landmark UN Report on Freedom of Assembly and Association', 20 October 2016, referring to the UN Special Rapporteur's report by Maina Kiai on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, available at: <https://ituc-csi.org/landmark-un-report-on-freedom-of-assembly-and-association>.

⁴⁶ Joint Declaration on the Need for an International Mechanism to Monitor Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism (2003), available at: https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/10/unchr_monitoring_terrorism_joint_declaration_2003.pdf.

⁴⁷ International Commission of Jurists, Papers delivered at the ICJ Conference on 'Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism: International Monitoring Systems' (23–24 October 2003), available at: <https://www.icj.org/papers-delivered-at-the-icj-conference-on-human-rights-and-counter-terrorism-international-monitoring-systems/>.

⁴⁸ See Rachel Brett, *Snakes and Ladders: A Personal Exploration of Quaker Work on Human Rights at the United Nations* (2012), Pendle Hill, p. 28.

⁴⁹ For an account of civil society advocacy that brought issues of sexual orientation and gender identity onto the UN agenda, see ISHR, *Putting LGBT Issues on the UN Agenda*, available at: <https://academy.ishr.ch/stories/putting-lgbt-issues-on-the-un-agenda>. See also ARC International, *How Far Has SOGI Been Mainstreamed in the UN Human Rights Machinery?* (September 2013), available at: <https://arc-international.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/How-far-has-SOGI-for-web.pdf>.

8. Civil society and the treaty body system

CSOs play a central role in the UN treaty body system, including by driving global and national ratification campaigns, building public support, engaging lawmakers and helping to translate treaty texts into national laws and policies in States around the world, as well as by providing independent information that supports monitoring, accountability and interpretation of treaty obligations. Their sustained engagement informs State reviews, dialogues and follow-up, enabling treaty bodies to assess compliance in practice. This section focuses on the participatory roles CSOs play within this system, examining how they contribute to information-gathering, accountability, norm interpretation and accessibility as part of the broader civil society engagement discussed in Part II.

As already noted, when the treaty bodies first began their work, CSOs quickly became important sources of information for committee experts, often providing material informally before formal participation modalities were put in place. Building on this role, CSOs have become integral to the regular monitoring work of the treaty body system. They regularly provide information on gaps and shortcomings in States' laws, policies and practices, informing the issues examined by committees during State reporting, dialogues and follow-up. Through this ongoing engagement, they help treaty bodies to identify patterns of concern and assess compliance in practice. CSOs also play a key role in promoting implementation of treaty body recommendations at the national level, including through litigation and legislative engagement.

When domestic justice systems fail victims, CSOs support individuals in bringing complaints to the treaty bodies' communications procedures. This support has enabled victims to seek international redress and has significantly contributed to the development of a rich body of treaty jurisprudence.

Furthermore, CSOs often act as catalysts for the treaty bodies' broader guidance work. Their research and advocacy, including by flagging emerging issues or gaps, frequently contribute to the development of 'general comments' and 'general recommendations' developed by committees, which provide authoritative interpretations of how treaty provisions apply in practice.

For example, during the process of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on General Comment 26, a group of civil society organizations felt one advanced draft was outdated regarding contemporary challenges on the issue – it read as something written for the problems faced 10 years before. They contacted us, and with this group of organizations we coordinated advocacy with Committee members to ensure the final version would respond to the main issues identified by grassroots communities, rural social movements and other experts on the issue.

Similarly, in the development of the CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 on rural women, FIAN facilitated the participation of women from rural constituencies such as fishers, pastoralists, peasants and others, to ensure that the final text contributed to the realization of rural women's human rights, based on their experiences and wisdom.

Ana María Suárez Franco, Secretary General of FIAN International

IV. Why civil society participation matters and recommendations to different actors

A vibrant civic space is essential to the credibility, effectiveness and accountability of the UN human rights system. Civil society participation is central to accountability, ensuring that human rights violations are documented, scrutinised and addressed in spaces in which national institutions may fail to respond, carrying the outcomes of UN human rights mechanisms beyond Geneva and New York, translating international findings and recommendations into national and local contexts and supporting their implementation and follow-up. For many individuals and groups, participation is directly linked to accountability and access to justice. **Full and meaningful participation is a driver of substantive human rights progress.**

Protecting civic space within the UN is essential to the universality of human rights. When participation is restricted, universality becomes more vulnerable, oversight weakens and a vicious circle develops: civil society's reduced capacity and access undermine its ability to defend and strengthen the system through which it supports tangible progress on the ground.

The restrictions on civil society engagement documented in this report are neither incidental nor inevitable. They are the result of deliberate political choices taken by States, both individually and collectively, through laws, policies and decisions that narrow participation, limit scrutiny and weaken independent oversight. These choices have consequences. They reduce transparency, constrain democratic participation and weaken the protection of human rights at the national and international levels. Over time, the cumulative effect is not only a diminished human rights system, but increased polarisation, reduced trust in institutions and a higher risk of violent conflict.

Current UN reform processes, including the UN80 initiative, illustrate the risks of efficiency-driven proposals that overlook participation. Some reflections shared for this report warned that inadequate inclusion in the UN80 process is already undermining transparency and may lead to reforms that inadvertently weaken participation.

The history of the UN human rights system shows that meaningful CSO engagement has never been a given. It has required sustained efforts from within and outside the system by principled and courageous staff, experts and State representatives who have found ways to secure and defend civil society input and participation despite significant pushback from States that contest the role of civil society in preserving the core democratic values and vision anchored in the UN Charter. Their legacy underscores the continuing responsibility of UN officials and State representatives to defend and expand civic space. Reflections

shared as part of the research for this report emphasise that action must be cross-regional and collaborative, with alliances that span borders and levels of influence. **Policy coherence between Geneva, New York and other UN spaces is equally essential; inconsistent positions undermine effective participation and weaken accountability. Strengthened coordination among CSOs at the national, regional and international levels can also help build more strategic advocacy and protect and expand civic space.**

Recommendations

As the UN system undergoes profound shifts, all actors, including states, UN institutions, donors and parliamentarians, share a responsibility to defend hard-won gains and renew their commitment to principled, human rights-centred cooperation. UN Member States and the UN Secretariat should ensure that civil society is meaningfully consulted in ongoing reform processes and that these reforms are used to embed and institutionalise civil society participation. Furthermore, specifically for the human rights system, this requires a set of concrete measures, including the following:

Recommendations to UN Member States

Ensure sustainable resourcing for human rights work and engagement

- Reverse the deepening underfunding of human rights work, both within the UN system and across civil society. Provide emergency and bridging funds to CSOs affected by major foreign-aid reductions. Sustainable and flexible financing is essential for participation and for the day-to-day monitoring, advocacy, protection and service provision that make human rights a lived reality.
- Pay assessed contributions to the UN in full and on time; support an increase and more equitable apportionment of the regular budget to the UN human rights pillar; and oppose attempts to defund or weaken human rights mandates through the Fifth Committee and other budget processes.
- Treat support for human rights and civic space as core investments for peace, security and sustainable development and democratic resilience strategies, not as a residual or expendable area.

- Recognise and actively communicate the public value and societal impact of human rights work and civil society participation, including their role in strengthening trust, preventing conflict, improving policy outcomes and sustaining multilateral cooperation.
- Earmark resources to support participation, in particular for organisations from low- and middle-income countries and those representing communities facing discrimination or marginalisation.

Reaffirm and protect civic space at home and at the UN

- Publicly reaffirm that full and meaningful civil society participation is a core component of the UN's human rights work, not an optional add-on. This requires:
 - repealing or amending national laws and practices that unduly restrict the rights to freedom of expression, of association, of peaceful assembly and of public participation, including abusive counterterrorism or 'foreign agent' legislation;
 - guaranteeing safe, unimpeded participation of civil society in UN processes, including by issuing visas, avoiding undue travel or security restrictions and refraining from intimidating or delegitimising NGO actors.

Prevent and respond to reprisals

- Publicly commit to preventing and prohibiting reprisals against individuals and organisations cooperating with the UN, including by adopting and enforcing laws, policies and practices to prevent, investigate and remedy such acts, ensuring accountability when reprisals occur, and responding robustly to reprisals against UN human rights experts for the exercise of their mandates.

Safeguard and expand participation modalities

- Support the reinstatement and institutionalisation of hybrid and remote participation across the HRC and treaty bodies, alongside in-person engagement.
- Ensure transparent access for CSOs to documentation and negotiations, including appropriate access to online platforms (such as e-deleGATE) and informal consultations, paying due attention to accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities.
- Support practical measures to ensure increased adequate seating and speaking opportunities for civil society in Geneva.

Improve ECOSOC NGO Committee and accreditation practices

- Ensure that accreditation is more transparent, fair, non-politicised, timely and predictable.
- Prevent misuse of the NGO Committee to block or delay accreditation of independent civil society organisations

or subject them to undue scrutiny.

Recommendations to the UN Secretariat, including OHCHR

- Treat full and meaningful civil society participation as a core benchmark for UN working-methods reform, including under the UN80 initiative, and ensure that such reforms are developed through transparent, inclusive consultations with civil society from all regions, particularly groups facing the highest barriers to participation.

Recommendations to the UN human rights mechanisms

- They should do their utmost to plan sessions and reviews with sufficient lead time to allow NGOs to prepare submissions and organise participation.
- Systematically monitor, document and report on reprisals against individuals, organisations and UN human rights experts, and coordinate closely with the UN focal point on reprisals to ensure that all affected persons are informed of available protection measures.

Recommendations to other funders

- Increase core, multi-year, flexible funding for human rights organisations, particularly those based in the Global Majority and those representing marginalised communities.
- Protect and expand funding for advocacy, accountability and participation, not only for service delivery.
- Support travel, interpreting, digital connectivity and security measures that enable grassroots organisations to engage safely and meaningfully with UN mechanisms.

V. Conclusion

Eighty years after the founding of the UN, the human rights system stands at a critical juncture. The progress achieved over decades, through new norms, stronger institutions and greater scrutiny of violations, was never automatic. It has depended on courage, determination, leadership and vision. It was built through the determination and expertise of a diverse range of civil society actors, including human rights organisations, women's movements, social movements, youth movements, trade unions, Indigenous Peoples, organisations of persons with disabilities and many others who have helped to ensure that the UN remains connected to the lived realities of people everywhere. Within the UN, dedicated officials have at key moments found ways to open doors, protect independent expertise and help to embed space for civil society participation in the system's rules and practices. Committed diplomats have also played a key role, negotiating mandates, safeguarding NGO participation, defending standards and building cross-regional coalitions that have allowed the system to grow. Parliamentarians in many countries have played an equally important role, translating international standards into domestic law, scrutinising government action and safeguarding democratic space at home. Together, these actors have played distinct yet complementary roles, expanding participation and making the UN more responsive to violations.

Today, this legacy is under strain. Shrinking civic space, deepening underfunding of human rights work, rising militarisation, attacks on hard-won normative gains on issues such as gender equality, political pushback within the UN and the erosion of inclusive participation risk weakening the connection between the international human rights system and those it exists to protect. Environmental human rights defenders face growing threats for challenging destructive economic and political interests; trade unions encounter increasing hostility for defending labour rights and economic justice; parliamentarians who challenge abuses or corruption, or who dissent from government decisions, often face pressure or reprisals; and many

grassroots organisations can no longer sustain essential work at home, sharply restricting, or altogether preventing, their participation in multilateral human rights processes. These pressures are not isolated; they reflect a broader global assault on accountability, participation and democratic oversight.

But this crisis is also a moment of clarity. The UN's history shows that when civil society can participate fully, meaningfully and safely, its work becomes more legitimate, responsive and capable of meeting global challenges, from climate change to inequality. Safeguarding this space is vital for the universality of human rights and the credibility of multilateralism itself.

As the UN system undergoes profound shifts, all actors, including States, UN institutions, donors and parliamentarians, share a responsibility to defend hard-won gains and renew their commitment to principled, human rights-centred cooperation. This requires, among other things, protecting and expanding meaningful civil access across UN processes, ensuring that the organisation remains true to its human rights mandate through leadership, resolve and inclusive, participatory decision-making. UN Member States and the UN Secretariat should ensure that civil society is fully and substantively consulted in ongoing reform processes and that these reforms are used to embed and institutionalise civil society space and participation across the UN system.

It also requires reversing the deepening underfunding of human rights work, both within the UN system and across civil society. Sustainable and flexible financing is essential for participation and for the day-to-day monitoring, advocacy, protection and service provision that make human rights a lived reality. There is an urgent need to strengthen and maintain the resilience of human rights financing, including through emergency and rapid-response funds, temporary bridging grants and other mechanisms designed to stabilise organisations that are otherwise at risk of shutting down.

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Safeguarding Civil Society Space at the United Nations: A Crucial Element in Human Rights Promotion and Protection

This publication examines the indispensable role of civil society in the United Nations (UN) human rights system and the growing pressures that threaten its participation. Since the UN's founding, civil society organisations (CSOs) have been central to advancing human rights standards, monitoring violations, supporting accountability and ensuring that the voices of affected communities are heard within international decision-making processes. Their engagement has strengthened the legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness of the UN's human rights work, linking global norms to national and local realities.

Today, this role is under strain. The report documents a convergence of restrictive trends, including increased reprisals against those cooperating with the UN, declining funding for civil society and human rights institutions, and administrative practices that limit access and participation. The analysis also shows how restrictions rarely occur through single decisions, but instead accumulate through incremental, political, technical or procedural changes. The report concludes that protecting and strengthening civil society participation is not optional. It calls for reversing restrictive trends and investing in the conditions that allow civil society to contribute fully to the protection of human rights worldwide.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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