

# [A meaningful Human Rights Council in 2030: Catalyse national rights protection](#)

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Rather than celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Human Rights Council, we should take a moment to reflect upon what must be improved. This applies not only to States but also to civil society. Social actors may not make decisions, but they do influence decision-making processes and have long-standing experience in working to promote and protect human rights on the ground.

In our case, we are three human rights organisations based in Latin America that combine strong national work with international advocacy and litigation both in regional and international human rights systems. Our work regarding the Council in the past 10 years has sought to contribute to reducing the distance between on-the-ground violations and the debates and decisions made in Geneva. In 2011, we established a joint representation in Geneva to have a collaborative platform of action before the Council and other relevant UN bodies and mechanisms.

We believe that a meaningful Council should bolster its capacity for catalysing national efforts; keep the human rights flame alight by strengthening its presence in relevant global debates; increase social participation; and call for more responsible and accountable Member States.

## **Addressing situations on the ground**

The Council's effectiveness in 2030 will be measured by the extent to which it addresses situations on the ground. Hence, we hope the Council will reinforce its role as a catalyst to national efforts that advance human rights.

For instance, in November 2015, the UN Special Rapporteurs on [toxic waste, environment](#) and [water and sanitation](#) took decisive and timely action on the disaster following the burst of an iron-ore waste dam owned by the companies Vale/BHP/Samarco in Brazil. This caused pollution along 800 kilometers of the Doce River, 19 deaths, and a long-term impact on the lives of one million other people. Local communities and civil society groups demanded that those responsible be held accountable and that victims receive proper attention and reparations. The Rapporteurs' involvement contributed to shifting the domestic dynamics and narratives in place, which had been marked by the authorities' inertia and by the notion that this was

an unfortunate accident—instead of a clear case of corporate irresponsibility and insufficient State oversight that caused significant social-environmental damage.

Much more is still needed, but this is a good example of how actions taken within the Council framework can serve to fuel local efforts to denounce abuses, and we believe in the importance of intensifying the Council's mechanisms in that direction.

#### **Putting human rights in the center of global discussions**

At the same time, a meaningful Council should strengthen its role as a key player in formulating international policies and discussing new perspectives. It should keep the human rights flame burning by stressing the importance of human rights law in issues of global interest, among other actions.

An important initiative of this type was the unprecedented discussion on drug policies and human rights, which prompted a comprehensive [Report by the High Commissioner](#) and a panel at the 30<sup>th</sup> Council session, broadening the focus of the discussions held by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs and other UN bodies in preparation for the UNGASS 2016.<sup>[1]</sup> For the UN to speak as one, any global debate disregarding the Council will remain incomplete, and thus out of touch. Moreover, the Council must keep the issue of drug policy on its agenda in the coming years since its human rights impacts are innumerable.

#### **Increasing broad social participation**

A strong Council should also take greater stock of the ever more plural and diversified nature of social actors. Thus, greater attention should be paid to those facing challenges of all sorts to be present in Geneva and to work with the Council from the ground. Remote participation and other innovative solutions are tasks for the present that will help build a more participatory Council in the future.

Often the distance between the Council and local societies is exacerbated by the fact that there is little dissemination of what States are discussing in Geneva. Even worse, social actors on the ground frequently struggle to find out what positions their own representatives are taking in forums like the Council. Lack of State accountability on foreign policy should also be targeted since Member and Observer States have a fundamental responsibility in designing an effective and responsive Council by 2030.

Our reflection on what needs to be improved stems from our desire to see more bridges built between the Council and local realities and to ensure that more diverse voices are heard in Geneva. That way, this body committed to ending abuses and advancing the promotion and protection of human rights may be truly effective.

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[1] United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem