

The United Nations and the Mainstreaming of Human Rights

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Abstract: *The United Nations (UN) has always been a proactive promoter of mainstreaming human rights, while the Charter of the United Nations is the cornerstone and starting point for this endeavor. The mainstreaming of human rights is a principle and direction of UN reform, as the UN has promoted it through human rights institutions reform and institutional building. Reviewing the UN's many years of practice in promoting the mainstreaming of human rights, it is evident that its various departments and agencies have formed a united front already, which is specifically manifested in the following ways: The UN Secretary-General puts forward reform plans to promote the mainstreaming of human rights and issues relevant initiatives and calls to action; the mechanism of mainstreaming of human rights provides institutional and financial support; the UN Development Group (later renamed the UN Sustainable Development Group) is the main platform for the UN to promote the mainstreaming of human rights; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council are the main implementing bodies for the UN to promote the mainstreaming of human rights; and other UN agencies actively respond to and implement the requirements of the mainstreaming of human rights in their respective areas of work.*

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The United Nations (UN) has always been a proactive promoter of mainstreaming human rights. In the late 20th century, the UN launched the initiative “Mainstreaming Human Rights” and gradually established a comprehensive implementation mechanism. Conceptually, mainstreaming human rights typically refers to the process of integrating human rights concepts into the activities of governments or intergovernmental organizations, and is sometimes also used to denote a rights-based approach and viewpoint. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (hereinafter referred to as “OHCHR”) considers mainstreaming human rights to have two layers of meaning: First, it refers to the process of human development that is normatively grounded in international human rights standards and practically aimed at promoting and protecting human rights; second, in other fields, this definition means that organizations base their programs, policies, and activities on international human rights law, thereby promoting these rules, standards, and principles. The second layer of meaning indicates that human rights are internalized and institutionalized in the policies and targets of organizations, and are

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operationalized and realized through their policies and programs.¹ Overall, mainstreaming human rights has two main aspects: first, recognizing, respecting, and protecting human rights, treating human rights as both the purpose and value of all activities, and giving them priority consideration; second, ensuring that human rights are operable within the framework of international human rights law and are realized and promoted through specific measures.² After the end of the Cold War, mainstreaming human rights gained recognition among international organizations, domestic governments, and nongovernmental organizations, becoming a fundamental goal actively pursued by the international community.³

I. The *Charter of the United Nations*: The Cornerstone and Starting Point for Mainstreaming Human Rights

The United Nations represents the international community. The process of mainstreaming human rights is closely related to the UN's promotion efforts. The *Charter of the United Nations* (hereinafter referred to as “the *Charter*”) serves as the cornerstone and starting point for mainstreaming human rights. The *Charter* explicitly states that the purposes of the United Nations are “to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”⁴

The *Charter* is recognized as the first international legal document to stipulate human rights principles. As a multilateral international convention, it forms the basis for a series of international human rights instruments subsequently formulated by the UN and is legally binding on its Member States. The *Charter* contains provisions on human rights principles in nine provisions. After establishing human rights principles in the *Charter*, the UN further solidified the principles of international human rights protection by adopting the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and a series of international human rights conventions, ultimately forming international human rights law.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (hereinafter referred to as “the *Declaration*”), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, is an international document specifically addressing human rights, following the *Charter*. The *Declaration* remedies the deficiencies of the *Charter* by specifying its provisions on human rights. The *Declaration* states: “Now, therefore the General Assembly proclaims this *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this *Declaration* constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching

¹ Gerd Oberleitner, “A Decade of Mainstreaming Human Rights in the UN: Achievements, Failures, Challenges,” *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2008).

² Zhang Wanhong, “On the Mainstreaming Human Rights,” *Law Review* 6 (2016): 44.

³ Liu Huawen, “On the Mainstreaming and Localization of Human Rights in China,” *Study Exploration* 4 (2011): 118.

⁴ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/chinese>.

and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”⁵ From this, it can be seen that the *Declaration* explains a gradually achievable goal rather than an immediate obligation for Member States. “It was precisely because neither the *Charter* nor the *Declaration* adequately addressed the issue of Member States’ legal obligations regarding human rights that the UN began preparing two international human rights conventions after the release of the *Declaration*.”⁶

The drafting and revision of international human rights conventions was a protracted process. It was not until 1966 that the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* were finally adopted after seven years of drafting (1947-1954) and 12 years of discussion and revision (1954-1966). Alongside the two covenants, the *Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* was also adopted and opened for signature. These two covenants were formulated based on the *Declaration*, thus encompassing virtually all the rights stipulated in the *Declaration*, except for the “right to private property,” which was excluded due to significant disagreements.⁷ Additionally, the covenants introduced some rights not covered by the *Declaration*, particularly collective rights such as the rights of minorities and children.

The significant contribution of the two covenants to the cause of international human rights lies in their legal formalization of the provisions outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Unlike the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, whose legal effect has been a subject of debate, the two international human rights covenants possess indisputable legal validity. According to international treaty law, state parties are obligated to strictly fulfill their obligations under the covenants from the date of ratification, and states that violate these obligations are subject to international responsibility. The adoption and implementation of the covenants marked the completion of a trilogy in international human rights principles: the *Charter* proposed human rights principles without explicitly defining the concepts of human rights and fundamental freedoms; the *Declaration* concretized the human rights principles and content in the *Charter*, yet its legal effect remained controversial; the two international human rights covenants further supplemented the *Declaration*’s provisions on human rights and endowed these provisions and states’ obligations to respect human rights with indisputable legal validity.

The *Declaration*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, and the *Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* are collectively

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bai Guimei, Gong Renren, Li Ming, et al., eds., *Human Rights in International Law* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1996), 63.

⁷ For disagreements and struggles on the issue of “private property rights,” see Ibid., 77-78.

known as the “International Bill of Human Rights”⁸ and occupy a central position in international human rights law. Other human rights conventions adopted after the war, such as the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* adopted in 1948, the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* adopted in 1965, the *International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid* adopted in 1973, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* adopted in 1979, the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* adopted in 1984, and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* adopted in 1989, are all important components of international human rights law. Furthermore, important resolutions and declarations adopted by the United Nations, such as the 1952 *Resolution on the Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination*, the 1960 *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, the 1977 *Resolution on New Concepts of Human Rights*, the 1984 *Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace*, the 1986 *Declaration on the Right to Development*, and the 1987 *Declaration on the Human Environment* have also played crucial roles in the development of human rights principles in international law.

Moreover, after the establishment of human rights principles, the content of human rights has also been enriched and developed. During the initial drafting of the *Declaration* after World War II, intense struggles took place between the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union and the capitalist bloc led by the United States. The eventual compromise resulted in the inclusion of both economic, social, and cultural rights, reflecting the views of socialist countries, and civil and political rights, consistently advocated by capitalist countries, in the *Declaration*. The *Declaration* comprises a preamble and 30 articles, with Articles 1-21 primarily addressing civil and political rights, and Articles 22-28 mainly concerning economic, social, and cultural rights. Economic, social, and cultural rights are also known as second-generation human rights or “positive rights.” The *Declaration*’s important position in international human rights is undeniable, as it was the first international document to propose human rights standards and clearly define the connotation of human rights for the international community. Over the following decades, a series of rights reflecting the aspirations and demands of these countries, including the right to self-determination, the right to development, the right to the environment, and the right to peace, have gradually been recognized by the international community through the continuous efforts of developing countries. These rights are primarily collective rights, also known as third-generation human rights or “solidarity rights.”

It was under the impetus of the United Nations that the content of human rights evolved from the initial civil and political rights (first-generation human rights) to encompass not only civil and political rights but also economic, social, and cultural

⁸ Louis Henkin, “The International Bill of Rights: The Universal Declaration and the Covenants,” in *International Enforcement of Human Rights*, R. Bemhardt and J. A. Jolowics, eds. (Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 1987). There is also a view that the three documents — the *Declaration*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* — are collectively referred to as the “International Bill of Human Rights.” See Pang Sen, *ABCs of Contemporary Human Rights* (Chengdu: Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 1991).

rights (second-generation human rights), as well as collective rights (third-generation human rights).

In summary, from the establishment of human rights principles in the *Charter* to that of human rights standards in the *Declaration*, that of the international human rights law system, and the continuous enrichment of human rights content, all these achievements have been made with the promotion of the United Nations, which itself represents the gradual process of mainstreaming human rights.

II. Mainstreaming Human Rights: A Principle and Direction for UN

Reform

Since UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed the UN reform plan in 1997, mainstreaming human rights has become a principle and direction for UN reform. After years of reform efforts, the trend of mainstreaming human rights has continued to strengthen within the UN.

In 1997, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan delivered a report entitled “*Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Action*” at the UN General Assembly. The report stated, “Human rights are integral to the promotion of peace and security, economic prosperity, and social equity. The United Nations has a long and consistent record of active engagement in the promotion and protection of human rights.” “A central task for the United Nations is to strengthen its human rights programme and integrate it into the broad range of the Organization’s activities.”⁹ This report explicitly proposed for the first time that human rights should be integrated into all aspects of the UN’s work, and thus marked the beginning of human rights issues being viewed as comprehensive issues in practice; human rights principles thereby became the foremost principle of UN reform.¹⁰

In 2002, Annan emphasized in his report “*Strengthening the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change*” that “the promotion and protection of human rights is a bedrock requirement for the realization of the *Charter*’s vision of a just and peaceful world.” He acknowledged that “good progress has been made so far in integrating human rights into the work of the various parts of the United Nations system,” and proposed that “the challenge now is how to build on that progress, in particular to help countries strengthen human rights protection at the national level,” and “further efforts are needed to modernize the system of human rights treaties. We must also ensure that human rights are integrated into analysis, planning and implementation at the country level.”¹¹

In 2003, the UN convened an Inter-Agency Workshop on Implementing a Human Rights Approach in the Context of UN Reform in the U.S. The meeting drafted and adopted “The Common Understanding on a Human Rights-Based

⁹Kofi Annan, “Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform,” accessed January 2, 2024, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/247842?ln=en#recordfiles-collapse-header>.

¹⁰ Zhang Wanhong, “On the Mainstreaming Human Rights,” *Law Review* 6 (2016): 44.

¹¹ Report of the Secretary-General: “Strengthening of the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change,” UN Document (A/57/387), paras. 45-58, accessed December 5, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/474330?ln=en>.

Approach to Development Cooperation,” which mainly comprises three aspects: First, all development cooperation, policy, and technical support programs should promote the realization of human rights in accordance with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other international human rights instruments; Second, the human rights standards and principles derived from the international human rights framework should guide all aspects of development cooperation and programs; Third, development cooperation should contribute to enhancing the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfill their obligations or enabling rights-holders to claim their rights.¹²

In 2005, Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s report “*In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*” to the General Assembly, as well as the World Summit, reiterated that “human rights must be integrated into all decision-making and discussions throughout the Organization. The concept of ‘mainstreaming’ human rights has gained greater attention in recent years but has yet to be fully reflected in key policy decisions,” and “support further efforts to place human rights at the centre of the broader United Nations system.”¹³

In June 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Summit) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The conference urged the international community to place human rights at the core of all discussions on “sustainable development” and advancing the “green economy,” establishing several principles centered around “a human rights-based approach to achieving sustainable development,” namely participation, accountability, equality and non-discrimination, empowerment, and the rule of law.

In September 2015, the 70th session of the UN General Assembly formally adopted “*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” (hereinafter referred to as the “*2030 Agenda*.”) All 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets essentially mainstream human rights. Human rights are considered the core of the SDGs, as sustainable development cannot be expected to advance without human dignity. Human rights are propelled by progress across all SDGs, while the SDGs are driven by advancements in human rights.¹⁴

The term “human rights” appears 15 times in the *2030 Agenda*. The preamble states, “The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda. They seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.” Regarding the vision, the agenda states, “We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural

¹² Andre Frankovites, “The Human Rights based Approach and the United Nations System,” page 24, accessed December 2, 2023, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001469/146999e.pdf>.

¹³ Statement by UN Secretary-General Annan to the UN General Assembly, “*In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*” (New York, March 21, 2005), accessed November 5, 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/270/77/PDF/N0527077.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹⁴ 2020 Observance, accessed December 25, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/human-rights-day/past-observance-2020>.

diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity.” In terms of shared principles and commitments, “the new Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the *Charter of the United Nations*, including full respect for international law. It is grounded in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, international human rights treaties, the *Millennium Declaration*, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome. It is informed by other instruments such as the *Declaration on the Right to Development*.”¹⁵ Since the goals of the *2030 Agenda* mainstream human rights, countries worldwide have been advancing toward the established goals since its release, objectively accelerating the global trend of mainstreaming human rights.

III. The UN Promotes Mainstreaming Human Rights Through Institutional Reforms

Over its nearly 80-year history, the UN has undertaken two major reforms of its specialized bodies overseeing human rights affairs. First, it replaced the UN Commission on Human Rights with the Human Rights Council, and second, it appointed the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The primary objective of these reforms was to elevate the status and importance of human rights, thereby advancing the process of mainstreaming human rights.

A. Replacing the UN Commission on Human Rights with the Human Rights Council

The earliest specialized body of the United Nations overseeing human rights affairs was the UN Commission on Human Rights, established in February 1946 as a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council. The Commission existed for 60 years until it was replaced by the Human Rights Council. During this period, it carried out extensive work to promote and protect human rights, but also revealed numerous issues. In addition to the Commission’s inherent problems, a key reason for its replacement by the Human Rights Council was that its setup was seriously inconsistent with the due status of human rights, which became an important impetus for reform.

On March 21, 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan delivered a report entitled “*In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*” to the General Assembly, formally proposing the establishment of the Human Rights Council. He stated, “What I am proposing is a comprehensive strategy, which gives equal weight and attention to the three great purposes of this Organization: development, security, and human rights, all underpinned by the rule of law.”¹⁶ He recommended that the United Nations adopt a system of three councils to address international peace and security issues, economic and social issues, and human rights issues, respectively. He urged member states to establish a new Human Rights

¹⁵ “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” accessed March 2, 2025, <https://docs.un.org/zh/A/RES/70/1>.

¹⁶ Statement by UN Secretary-General Annan to the UN General Assembly: “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All” (New York, March 21, 2005), accessed November 5, 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/270/77/PDF/N0527077.pdf?OpenElement>.

Council to achieve the primary goal of the United Nations in promoting human rights. Annan pointed out in the report that creating this council would elevate the status of human rights issues, aligning with their primary position in the *UN Charter*.¹⁷

The World Summit held in September 2005 adopted the proposal to establish the Human Rights Council and directly set the goal of mainstreaming human rights. The outcome document of the summit explicitly stated, “We resolve to strengthen the United Nations human rights machinery and decide to create a Human Rights Council, which shall be responsible for promoting universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind and in a fair and equal manner. The Council should address situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations, and make recommendations thereon. It should also promote effective coordination and the mainstreaming of human rights within the United Nations system.”¹⁸

On March 15, 2006, the UN General Assembly voted to adopt the resolution regarding the establishment of the Human Rights Council. The replacement of the UN Commission on Human Rights with the Human Rights Council, and this upgrade from a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council to a subsidiary body of the General Assembly signifies an elevation in the status and importance of human rights within the UN system.

Since its establishment, the Human Rights Council has conducted substantial normative work in international human rights protection, exerting profound normative influence. Its main mechanisms include the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Special Procedures, the Advisory Committee, and the complaint procedure. The UPR has reached its fourth cycle, playing a crucial role in advancing human rights mainstreaming at the national level and improving the human rights situation in countries worldwide. Investigations authorized by the Human Rights Council have also become a vital tool for addressing serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law. The investigative mechanisms authorized by the Human Rights Council have taken various forms, including fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry. Additionally, the intergovernmental working groups, expert mechanisms, and forums under the Human Rights Council have played important roles.¹⁹

B. Establishment of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the international community decided to establish a more robust mandate for human rights, bolstered by stronger institutional support. To this end, the member states of the United Nations adopted a General Assembly resolution in 1993 to establish the OHCHR and appoint the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (hereinafter referred to as the “High Commissioner for Human Rights”). The High Commissioner for Human Rights is the highest-ranking executive official responsible for human rights within the United

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 2005 *World Summit Outcome*, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/59/PDF/N0548759.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/hr-bodies/hre/other-sub-bodies>.

Nations system, at the Under-Secretary-General level, and is primarily tasked with coordinating UN activities in the field of human rights. The OHCHR, as the UN entity leading on human rights matters, symbolizes the global commitment to promoting and protecting all human rights and freedoms enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Its unique mandate is to promote and protect all human rights for all.

Established in 1993, the OHCHR serves as the primary UN department for promoting and protecting human rights, tasked with mainstreaming human rights. It collaborates with governments, civil society organizations, foundations, and international organizations and agencies to advance human rights, formulating, monitoring, and implementing human rights standards, and providing substantive expertise and institutional infrastructure support as the secretariat of the Human Rights Council. The OHCHR is committed to mainstreaming human rights across all areas of the Organization's work, including development, peace and security, and humanitarian affairs.

The mission of the OHCHR is to work for the protection of all human rights for all, to help empower people to realize their rights, and to assist rights defenders in ensuring that these rights are upheld. In fulfilling its mission, the OHCHR prioritizes addressing the most urgent and severe long-standing human rights violations, particularly those that pose an immediate threat to life; focuses on populations at risk and vulnerable in multiple ways; attaches equal importance to the realization of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights, including the right to development; and measures the impact of its work by the tangible benefits it brings to people worldwide.

According to the self-positioning of the OHCHR, the unique roles played by the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Office encompass the following four aspects, with the fourth specifically emphasizing the role of promoting human rights mainstreaming.

(1) Promoting and protecting all human rights: Providing candid and objective views on human rights violations and helping to develop standards for assessing global progress in human rights.

(2) Empowering people: Conducting research, education, and advocacy activities to help raise awareness and engagement on human rights issues in the international community and among the public. This means empowering thousands of people worldwide to assert their rights.

(3) Assisting governments: Helping to prevent human rights abuses through resident representatives (offices) and contributing to easing situations that could potentially lead to conflicts. Conducting monitoring and analysis to support sensitive decision-making and the formulation of development programs. It also provides capacity-building and legal advisory services to thousands of individuals worldwide, supporting the formulation and prudent adoption of laws and policies.

(4) Integrating a human rights perspective into all UN programs: Mainstreaming human rights into all UN programs, thereby ensuring that peace and security, development, and human rights — the three pillars of the United Nations — are

interconnected and mutually reinforcing.²⁰

Operationally, the OHCHR collaborates with governments, legislatures, courts, national institutions, civil society, regional and international organizations, and the UN system to develop and strengthen capacities (particularly at the national level) for protecting human rights in accordance with international norms. Institutionally, the OHCHR is committed to strengthening the UN human rights program and providing it with the highest quality support. The OHCHR is dedicated to working closely with its UN partners to ensure that human rights serve as the cornerstone of the Organization's work.²¹

The OHCHR also ensures the implementation of international human rights standards on the ground through its offices worldwide. It has 12 regional representative offices, including 10 regional offices, a Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa (Yaoundé), and a UN Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region (Doha), as well as offices in 19 countries. Regional offices are located in East Africa (Addis Ababa), Southern Africa (Pretoria), West Africa (Dakar), Southeast Asia (Bangkok), the Pacific (Suva), the Middle East and North Africa (Beirut), Central Asia (Bishkek), Europe (Brussels), Central America (Panama City), and South America (Santiago, Chile). As of the end of January 2025, the OHCHR maintains presences across 90 field locations and supports other UN entities by deploying rapid-response human rights officers in response to emerging situations.²²

IV. The United Nations Promotes Human Rights Mainstreaming through Institutional Development

To advance human rights mainstreaming, the United Nations has established dedicated mechanisms, including both operational and funding mechanisms. These institutional arrangements have played a pivotal role in the UN's efforts to promote human rights mainstreaming.

A. Establishment of the human rights mainstreaming mechanism

In 1997, the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) was established in line with the reform vision of the UN Secretary-General. It consisted of a consortium of 36 UN funds, programs, agencies, departments, and offices that play a role in development.²³ UNDG aims to create a mechanism that could better coordinate UN

²⁰ OHCHR, accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/about-us>.

²¹ OHCHR, accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/about-us/mission-statement>.

²² OHCHR, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/about-us/where-we-work>.

²³ Members of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) mainly include: International Fund for Agricultural Development; International Labour Organization; International Telecommunications Union; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries & Small Island Developing Countries; Office of the Special Adviser on Africa; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; United Nations Development Programme; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; United Nations Environment Programme; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia; United Nations Population Fund; United Nations Human Settlements Programme; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; United

development-related operations, foster policy coherence and coordination in mainstreaming human rights, and provide a broad platform for elevating this endeavor.

In November 2009, in response to the UN Secretary-General's 2008 call for strengthening the human rights system at a higher level, UNDG established the Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism (UNDG-HRM), co-chaired by the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and a senior representative of UNDG. This mechanism also serves as a crucial high-level policy forum to discuss key human rights policy issues. Through its leadership and the development of guidance tools, it seeks to integrate human rights into programs, policies, and activities to the fullest extent possible, thereby enhancing capacity for human rights protection at the national level.

B. Transition from human rights mainstreaming mechanism to human rights working group

To emphasize human rights as the cornerstone of the post-2015 development agenda and to reaffirm the UN system's renewed commitment to upholding human rights, UNDG renamed the Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism as the Human Rights Working Group (UNDG-HRWG), effective from January 2015.²⁴

The UNDG-HRWG aims to advance human rights mainstreaming within the UN development system. Chaired by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it seeks to strengthen the UN's coordination capacity in responding to requests from Member States for assistance in fulfilling their human rights commitments. A key priority of this inter-agency mechanism is to support the UN development system in achieving rights-based development outcomes at the country level.

In line with UNDG's overall strategic priorities, the Human Rights Working Group focuses on: ensuring policy coherence and programmatic convergence in human rights mainstreaming as a primary policy forum; supporting UNDG in providing normative and operational human rights expertise to national development actors; and supporting the UN development system in fulfilling its responsibilities and requirements for prioritizing human rights.

The UNDG-HRWG adopts a comprehensive approach to achieve these three priorities across various levels, including the UN system, regional, and national levels, with knowledge management serving as a key component in providing information at all levels.

In 2008, UNDG was incorporated as one of the three pillars of the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). In 2017, while deliberating on the topic of UN reform and the need for greater clarity on the roles of the different inter-agency coordination mechanisms, CEB decided to separate the system-wide programmatic and management policy roles (High-level Committee on Program and High-level Committee on Management) from the operation support provided by

Nations Children's Fund; United Nations Industrial Development Organization; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; United Nations Office for Program Services; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women; United Nations World Tourism Organization; World Food Programme; World Health Organization; World Meteorological Organization; etc.

²⁴OHCHR Mainstreaming Human Rights, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewYork/Pages/MainstreamingHR.aspx>.

UNDG, placing UNDG outside of the architecture of CEB. Following, the UNDG was re-positioned as the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), with its own dedicated Secretariat, the Development Coordination Office (DCO).²⁵

At the global level, the UNSDG²⁶ serves as a high-level forum for joint policy formation and decision-making. It guides, supports, tracks, and oversees the coordination of development operations in 162 countries and territories. One of its guiding principles, as outlined in the *United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework* (UNSDCF) developed by the UNSDG, is the affirmation of the Human Rights-Based Approach to Development (HRBA). This approach posits that HRBA is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. Under the HRBA, the plans, policies, and processes of development are anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law, including all civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights, and the right to development. HRBA requires human rights principles (equality and non-discrimination, participation, accountability) to guide United Nations development cooperation, and focus on developing the capacities of both “duty-bearers” to meet their obligations, and “rights-holders” to claim their rights.²⁷

C. Establishment of the funding mechanism for human rights mainstreaming

The Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund (hereinafter referred to as the HRM Fund) was established on January 12, 2010. It aims to support the implementation of the objectives and priorities of the Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism of the UNDG (UNDG-HRM), established on November 30, 2009. By further enhancing system-wide normative and operational coherence, the HRM Fund further integrates human rights mainstreaming into UN operational activities for development and institutionalizes this process, while strengthening collaboration with and support for UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in mainstreaming

²⁵ Ibid., note 23.

²⁶ Entities of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group include: Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, International Trade Centre, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Labour Organization, International Telecommunication Union, International Organization for Migration, United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, United Nations Volunteers, United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Meteorological Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations World Food Programme, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children’s Fund, UN Women, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Capital Development Fund, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, United Nations Office for Program Services. Source: United Nations Sustainable Development Group, <https://unsdg.un.org/zh/about/who-we-are>, accessed December 5, 2023.

²⁷ *United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework*, United Nations Sustainable Development Group website, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/UN%20Cooperation%20Framework%20Internal%20Guidance%20--%201%20June%202022.pdf>.

human rights. This approach ensures a more coherent UN response to national priorities, thereby fostering strong national ownership and capacity to fulfill human rights obligations. The HRM Fund will support strategic activities at the global,²⁸ regional, and national levels, ultimately facilitating transformation and/or impact at the country level.

The full name of the HRM Fund is the Human Rights Mainstreaming Multi-Donor Trust Fund. It supports the efforts of the United Nations Development System (UNDS) to respond to calls from Member States to assist countries in their efforts to respect and fulfill human rights obligations and commitments, including the pledge in the *2030 Agenda* to leave no one behind. Leveraging the opportunities presented by the repositioning of the UNDS, the HRM Fund enables empowered and independent UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) and a new generation of UN Country Teams (UNCTs) to advance the values of the *UN Charter* and ensure that human rights constitute the foundation.²⁹

The overall goal of the HRM Fund is for the UNDS to contribute to a society where all people enjoy their human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as the right to development and the right to a healthy environment without discrimination and are empowered to be active partners in development in accordance with the *2030 Agenda* and its promise to leave no one behind.³⁰

The mission of the HRM Fund is to support the UNDS, particularly at the country level, to fully integrate human rights in the implementation of the *2030 Agenda*, putting people at the centre of development and systematically applying a human rights-based approach. Its vision is that human rights are at the core of the UN development system work at all levels, Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams build the capacities of duty bearers and strive to empower rights holders as active agents in development, and will uphold their inherent dignity and rights to ensure no one is left behind.³¹

The support provided by the HRM Fund to Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) is crucial for achieving the vision of the *2030 Agenda* and the Secretary-General's call for a new human rights-based social contract in Our Common Agenda. In this regard, the HRM Fund has made significant contributions to supporting the UNDS in responding to the Secretary-General's call for action on human rights at the country level and in assisting UNCTs in fully integrating human rights into their COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

The major donor countries to the HRM Fund include Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Ireland, and Switzerland. Participating international organizations include the OHCHR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific

²⁸Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund Final Narrative Report (2011-2024) , accessed March 2, 2025, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-12/hrm_fund_final_report_2024-reduced_size.pdf.

²⁹ Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/hrm00>.

³⁰Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund: Investing in Human Rights for Sustainable Development, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/HRM00>.

³¹Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/hrm00>.

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).³² The fund is currently the only inter-agency joint fund that integrates human rights into the UNDS.³³

Since its inception, the HRM Fund has undertaken extensive work to promote human rights mainstreaming, providing direct support to Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in at least 83 countries, such as by deploying human rights advisors to UNCTs.³⁴ Human rights advisors funded and deployed by the HRM Fund and OHCHR in multiple countries have offered significant assistance to Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UN Country Teams (UNCTs). Figure 1 illustrates the deployment of human rights advisors by the HRM Fund from 2013 to 2024.³⁵

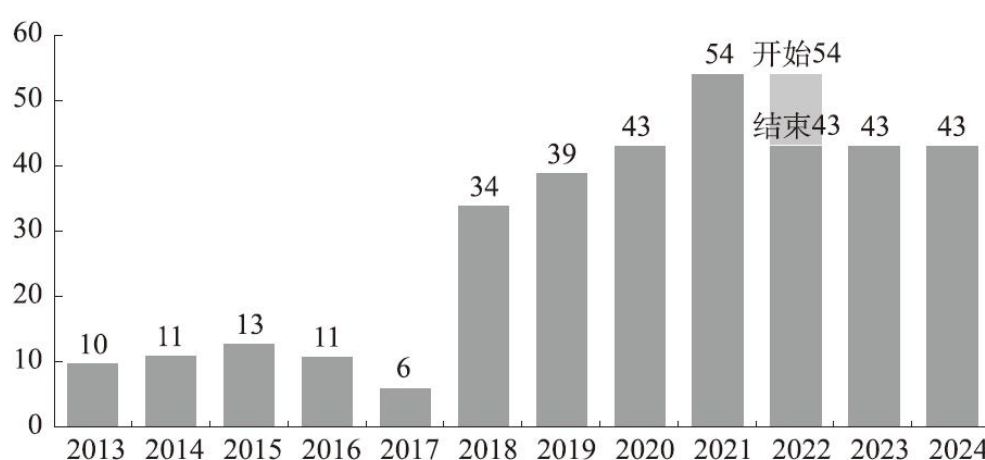


Figure 1 Deployment of Human Rights Advisors by the HRM Fund from 2013 to 2024

Source: Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund Consolidated Annual Report 2024, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/hrm00#>, accessed February 21, 2025.

V. The UN Secretary-General Promotes Human Rights Mainstreaming through the “Human Rights Up Front” Initiative and the “Call to Action for Human Rights”

The UN Secretary-General plays a pivotal role in advancing the process of human rights mainstreaming within the United Nations. Not only does the

³²*Building Rights-Based Foundations for Development Consolidated Annual Report of the Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund 2022*, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/hrm00>.

³³*Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund Final Narrative Report (2011-2024)*, accessed March 2, 2025, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-12/hrm_fund_final_report_2024-reduced_size.pdf.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund Consolidated Annual Report 2024, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/hrm00#>. HRAs stands for Human Rights Advisers.

Secretary-General set the objectives for human rights mainstreaming at the UN, but they also drive the process forward through the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative and the “Call to Action for Human Rights.”

A. The “Human Rights Up Front” Initiative

In 2012, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, reflecting on the UN’s actions following the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, pointed out a “system-wide failure” in the organization’s responsibility to prevent and respond to serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law, as well as to protect people at risk. Consequently, the Secretary-General called for action to learn from past lessons and ensure that the UN fully fulfilled its prevention responsibilities in all countries. This led to the proposal of the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative.

Initiated by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative was officially launched in December 2013. Authorized by the *UN Charter* and resolutions, the initiative aims to ensure that the UN system takes early and effective action to prevent or respond to large-scale violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. The Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General presented the initiative to the UN General Assembly, UN staff, and senior personnel in the UN system through speeches, letters, and policy documents in various forms.

The initiative calls for a significant cultural shift within the UN, placing the protection of human rights and civilians at the core of the organization’s strategic and operational activities. It seeks to achieve this through a cultural transformation within the UN system, so that human rights and the protection of civilians are regarded as core responsibilities across the entire organization.

Specifically, the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative seeks changes in three key areas:

First, it aims to bring about a cultural shift: requiring all UN staff to recognize that human rights and the protection of civilians are core responsibilities; demanding that UN personnel uphold principles and act with ethical leadership; ensuring that UN headquarters supports those who do so; and calling for greater accountability for UN actions.

Second, it seeks operational-level changes: requiring the UN system, both in the field and at headquarters, to maintain a sustained focus on human rights violations that may foreshadow worse situations; supporting better early warning, shared analysis, and strategies; and ensuring improved coordination and adaptability.

Third, it aims to change the UN’s political engagement: encouraging more proactive engagement with Member States to provide political support for early and preventive action.³⁶

One of the core tenets of the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative is to place greater emphasis on timely and effective prevention. It forms a crucial part of the UN’s efforts to prevent and respond to serious human rights violations, and thereby integrates a human rights perspective more consistently into the organization’s peace

³⁶Human Rights Up Front: An Overview, accessed December 25, 2023, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2016-10/overview_of_human_rights_up_front_july_2015.pdf.

and security, humanitarian, and other work at both headquarters and country levels. The initiative helps ensure early recognition of the risks of serious human rights violations, including those related to economic, social, and cultural rights, and ensures that the entire UN system understands these as potential threats to development or peace and security, and as shared responsibilities. ³⁷It aims to strengthen the UN's human rights pillar and recognizes the value of viewing human rights violations as early warning signs of impending crises.³⁸

The purpose of the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative is to break down the silos between the UN's three pillars — supporting development, maintaining peace and security, and upholding human rights — and encourage cooperation among different departments and agencies of the UN system. The initiative aims to unite the UN system in a mutually supportive manner that helps prevent and prioritizes human rights, emphasizing shared responsibility among UN entities to address such issues collaboratively.

The initiative seeks to ensure that a human rights-based approach to preventing atrocities and serious human rights violations becomes an integral part of the UN's work in any given country. It encompasses action at three levels: national, regional, and senior management.

At the national level, UN resident offices are required to conduct regular risk analyses of the likelihood of atrocities occurring in the country. This necessitates adjusting the UN's work in the country to mitigate such risks. If the risks are significant, it is necessary to develop a country-level strategy to manage such risks.

At the regional level, regional divisions at UN headquarters regularly scan for early warning signs of atrocities in all countries. Emerging serious situations can be promptly reported.

At the senior management level, heads of relevant agencies meet monthly to review emerging threats of atrocities and, if necessary, present them to the Executive Committee, where the Secretary-General and their top advisors meet weekly.³⁹

The “Human Rights Up Front” initiative includes training UN staff on the core purpose of international organizations in promoting respect for human rights, providing Member States with the information needed to respond to human rights violations, ensuring that UN staff worldwide are better equipped to adapt to situations with a high risk of serious human rights violations, and equipping them with the capacity to assume responsibility for such potential crises.⁴⁰

The initiative also emphasizes providing the support needed by Resident Coordinators (RCs) and UN Country Teams (UNCTs), recognizing the role of the UN

³⁷Yearbook of the United Nations, 2015, accessed December 13, 2023, https://odn.un.org/unyearbook/yun/pdf/2015/2015_26.pdf?_gl=1*jmzu46*_ga*MzAwOTY4NTEuMTY4MDY3NTlwMg.*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTEwMjAwOTQ2MS4xMS4xLjE3MDIwMDk3MTguMC4wLjA..

³⁸ Deputy Secretary-General's remarks at interactive dialogue with the General Assembly on Human Rights Up Front, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/dsg/statement/2016-01-27/deputy-secretary-generals-remarks-interactive-dialogue-general>.

³⁹UN Briefing: Human Rights Up Front, October 23, 2019, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://una.org.uk/news/un-briefings-human-rights-front>.

⁴⁰New UN “Rights Up Front” strategy seeks to prevent genocide, human rights abuses, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/12/458212>.

Resident Coordinator system in mainstreaming human rights and encouraging the international community to work together in a more united and coherent manner.⁴¹

B. “Call to Action for Human Rights”

On February 24, 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the “Call to Action for Human Rights” at the opening ceremony of the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The Call to Action is the Secretary-General’s transformative vision for human rights. Focusing on seven thematic areas for action, it recognizes human rights as central to our most pressing issues. These seven areas are: the urgent achievement of sustainable development; the protection of all people regardless of their circumstances; tackling gender inequality once and for all; ensuring robust civic space for everybody; creating a healthy environment for future generations; ensuring a safe digital world; and finally, all pitching in together to make this a reality.

First, rights are central to sustainable development. “When we adopt a human rights-based approach to development, the outcomes are more sustainable, robust, and effective. This is why the 17 SDGs are grounded in economic, social, cultural, political, and civil rights, as well as the right to development.”

Second, human rights in times of crisis. Guterres highlighted that international human rights law, refugee law, and humanitarian law can, to some extent, restore humanitarian initiatives during the darkest moments of conflict and disaster. He emphasized that even necessary counterterrorism efforts must not undermine human rights; otherwise, they will be counterproductive. The call to action asserts that respecting human rights is a fundamental mechanism for crisis prevention.

Third, gender equality and women’s rights. Guterres stated, “Women’s rights are human rights. But without women’s power, human rights will never be universal.” Universal human rights cannot be achieved amidst persistent misogyny, exclusion, violence, entrenched gender inequality, economic disempowerment, and multiple forms of discrimination. The UN has pledged to achieve gender equality across all levels of its organization by 2028.

Fourth, public participation and civic space. Societies become stronger and more resilient when everyone can play an active role in political, economic, and social life, including through access to information, engagement in dialogue, and expression of dissent. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion falls within this scope. Therefore, the UN is intensifying its efforts to incorporate the voices of civil society more systematically into its institutions, with special attention to organizations advocating for women’s rights and young people.

Fifth, the rights of future generations, particularly the right to climate justice. The triple planetary crisis threatens not only the rights and dignity of millions worldwide but also those of unborn generations. It jeopardizes the very existence of some Member States, especially small island developing countries.

Sixth, the centrality of human rights in collective action. Guterres stated that the call to action places human rights at the heart of collective efforts to address today’s

⁴¹ Valeria Guerra and Maria Jeannette Moya, “An excellent tool for mainstreaming human rights,” July 28, 2015, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/blog/excellent-tool-mainstreaming-human-rights>.

crises. Multilateralism must become more inclusive and networked, with human rights at its core. In this regard, the UPR is a crucial tool for engagement at the country level.

Seventh, new areas for human rights. While digital technologies offer new means to promote, defend, and exercise rights, they can also be used for censorship, surveillance, intimidation, and other violations of fundamental rights. To this end, the UN advocates for integrating human rights into the internet sphere, ensuring effective data protection, especially for personal and health data. It will also strive to enhance the functions of key global institutions like the Internet Governance Forum, ensuring that machines are never granted lethal capabilities beyond human judgment and control.⁴²

VI. Pathways and Progress of the UN in Promoting Human Rights

Mainstreaming at the Operational Level

Throughout the years of the UN's primary endeavors in promoting human rights mainstreaming, it is evident that a concerted effort has been forged among various UN departments and agencies. Specifically, the UN Secretary-General has proposed reform plans and issued relevant initiatives and calls to advance human rights mainstreaming; mechanisms for human rights mainstreaming have provided institutional guarantees and financial support; the United Nations Development Group (later renamed as the United Nations Sustainable Development Group) has served as the main platform for the UN to promote human rights mainstreaming; the OHCHR and the Human Rights Council have been the primary implementing bodies for this endeavor within the UN; and other UN agencies have actively responded to and implemented the requirements for human rights mainstreaming.

One of the roles of the OHCHR is to inject a human rights perspective into all UN programs. It defines one of its functions as follows: "We mainstream human rights into all UN programmes to ensure that peace and security, development, and human rights - the three pillars of the UN - are interlinked and mutually reinforced."⁴³ Since its inception, the UN Human Rights Council has consistently regarded promoting human rights mainstreaming as a key objective of its work. On March 22, 2013, the Human Rights Council issued a President's Statement entitled "Mainstreaming human rights throughout the United Nations system," which stated: "The Human Rights Council, recognizing that peace and security, development and human rights are the pillars of the United Nations system and the foundations for collective security and well-being; affirming that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing; reiterating that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interrelated, interdependent and mutually reinforcing

⁴²Call to Action for Human Rights launched by the UN Secretary-General, <https://www.un.org/zh/content/action-for-human-rights/>; Address to the Human Rights Council: "The highest aspiration": a call to action for human rights by António Guterres, accessed March 2, 2025, https://news.un.org/zh/story/2020/02/1051221?_gl=1*14ob0x7*_ga*MzAwOTY4NTcuMTY4MDY3NTIwMg.._ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTkwOTIzNTgzLjI4LjEuMTc0MDkyMzU4My4wLjAuMA..

⁴³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/zh/about-us>.

and must be treated in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis; welcoming the high-level panel discussion on mainstreaming human rights throughout the work of the United Nations system held at the twenty-second session of the Human Rights Council.”⁴⁴

A. An important communication platform for un human rights mainstreaming: the annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming

The Annual High-level Panel Discussion on Human Rights Mainstreaming originated from the five-year assessment of the work of the Human Rights Council by the UN General Assembly in 2011. In the resolution (A/HRC/RES/16/21) adopted by the General Assembly in April 2011 to review the work of the Human Rights Council, it was stipulated that: “The Council shall hold an annual half-day panel discussion with the heads of governing bodies and secretariats of the United Nations agencies and funds on specific human rights topics falling within their respective mandates, with the aim of promoting human rights mainstreaming throughout the United Nations system. This provision is without prejudice to the possibility for the Council to discuss human rights mainstreaming with United Nations agencies and funds on other occasions as well.”⁴⁵

Since then, the annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming held by the Human Rights Council has become an important communication platform for promoting human rights mainstreaming. According to Resolution A/HRC/RES/16/21 adopted by the General Assembly, countries or regional groups may propose topics for discussion at the annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming. Based on these proposals and after consultations held with all regional groups, the President of the Human Rights Council will propose a topic for the high-level panel discussion for the following year, subject to approval by the relevant organizational sessions of the Council. The OHCHR, as the secretariat of the Human Rights Council, shall coordinate the preparation of documents required for the high-level panel discussion. The topics of the annual high-level panel discussions on human rights mainstreaming each year reflect issues of widespread concern in the international community regarding human rights mainstreaming. Judging from the topics of the high-level panel discussions on human rights mainstreaming from 2012 to 2025 (see Table 1), the issues of concern were relatively broad in the early years and have become increasingly specific in recent years.

Table 1 Topics of the Annual High-level Panel Discussions on Human Rights Mainstreaming by the Human Rights Council (2012-2025)

⁴⁴“Human Rights Mainstreaming in the United Nations System,” accessed February 27, 2025, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g13/131/20/pdf/g1313120.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 of March 25, 2011, on the review of the work and functioning of the Human Rights Council, UN Document No.: A/HRC/RES/16/21, UN website, accessed February 27, 2025, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/16/21.

Session of the Human Rights Council	Date	Topics
19 th Session	February 28, 2012	Human Rights Mainstreaming and International Cooperation
22 nd Session	March 1, 2013	Human Rights and the Post-2015 Development Agenda
25 th Session	March 4, 2014	Mainstreaming Human Rights Throughout the Work of the United Nations System
28 th Session	March 3, 2015	Strengthening International Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights

Continued Table

Session of the Human Rights Council	Date	Topics
31 st Session	February 29, 2016	The <i>2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development</i> and Human Rights
34 th Session	February 27, 2017	The Contribution of Human Rights to Peacebuilding through the Enhancement of Dialogue and International Cooperation for the Promotion of Human Rights
37 th Session	February 26, 2018	The Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Light of the UPR Mechanism: Challenges and Opportunities
40 th Session	February 25, 2019	Human Rights in the Light of Multilateralism: Opportunities, Challenges and the Way Forward
43 rd Session	February 24, 2020	Thirty Years of Implementation of the <i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> : Challenges and Opportunities
46 th Session	February 22, 2021	The Status Quo in the Fight against Racism and Discrimination 20 Years after the Adoption of the <i>Durban Declaration and Plan of Action</i> , and the Exacerbating Effects of COVID-19 on These Efforts

Session of the Human Rights Council	Date	Topics
49 th Session	February 28, 2022	The Contribution of Universal Participation to Mainstreaming Human Rights Throughout the United Nations System on the Occasion of the 10 th Anniversary of the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing Countries in the Work of the Human Rights Council
52 nd Session	February 27, 2023	A Reflection on Five Years of the <i>United Nations Youth Strategy (Youth 2030)</i> : Mapping a Blueprint for the Next Steps
55 th Session	February 26, 2024	Coordinating Multilateral Action to Empower Persons with Disabilities: Advancing Their Full and Effective Participation and Inclusion in Society
58 th Session	February 24, 2025	The 30 th Anniversary of the <i>Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action</i>

Note: This table was compiled by the author based on information from the UN Human Rights Council website. See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions> (accessed February 27, 2025).

The most recent Annual High-Level Panel Discussion on Human Rights Mainstreaming was held on February 24, 2025, with the theme “The 30th Anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*.” The panel reviewed the significance of the commitments made in the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, assessed the progress made over the past 30 years in their respective areas of work, discussed the continued relevance of these two visionary documents in addressing existing and emerging challenges, and accelerated the progress toward the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all women and girls. The current High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, stated at the panel: “The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* represent a milestone in the history of women’s rights and gender equality. We must seize every day and every opportunity to promote and protect women’s rights and gender equality. This is my firm commitment to women and girls everywhere. But it must also become a national priority and a global commitment: for countries and societies to pledge to uphold women’s and girls’ rights, protect and develop the legacy of the *Beijing Declaration*,

and systematically deconstruct through legal and policy reforms.”⁴⁶ Chinese representatives have actively participated in all previous high-level panel discussions on human rights mainstreaming. At the 2025 panel discussion, Chinese female astronaut Liu Yang delivered a keynote speech via video as a high-level panelist. The theme of the 2024 Annual High-level Panel Discussion on Human Rights Mainstreaming, held on February 26, 2024, was “Coordinating Multilateral Action to Empower Persons with Disabilities: Advancing Their Full and Effective Participation and Inclusion in Society,” and Zhang Haidi, a representative from the China Disabled Persons’ Federation, delivered a keynote speech on-site as a high-level panelist.

B. Advancement and implementation of human rights mainstreaming in the UN system

On November 7, 2005, the General Assembly resolution entitled “Human rights mainstreaming in the United Nations System,” adopted by the 60th session of the General Assembly, emphasized the integration of human rights promotion and protection into national policies, supported further human rights mainstreaming throughout the UN system, and encouraged enhanced cooperation between the OHCHR and all relevant UN agencies. The Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights have further mainstreamed human rights across the UN, while specialized agencies, as well as UN funds and agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), have endeavored to incorporate human rights into their programming processes. Human rights issues have been integrated into the work of UN missions, particularly peacekeeping operations established by the Security Council, and the Security Council is encouraged to continue developing cooperative relations with the OHCHR. The Economic and Social Council is also encouraged to continue integrating human rights promotion and protection into all areas of its work.⁴⁷

After years of efforts, human rights mainstreaming has now been implemented across various UN agencies and in different areas of UN work. In terms of integrating human rights promotion and protection into national policies, the UPR of the Human Rights Council has played a pivotal role.

In the development sector, the UNDP has played a significant role in advancing human rights mainstreaming. The 2005 UNDP Practice Note “Human Rights in UNDP” identified mainstreaming human rights into development planning as one of the three strategic areas of UNDP’s human rights work.⁴⁸ In its 2010 publication, “Lessons Learned from UNDP Experience: Integrating Human Rights in

⁴⁶ HC Türk — We must rally to protect the legacy of the *Beijing Declaration*, February 24, 2025, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/02/hc-turk-we-must-rally-protect-legacy-beijing-declaration>.

⁴⁷ UN General Assembly resolution “Human Rights Mainstreaming in the United Nations System,” UN Document No.: A/C.3/60/L.44/Rev.1, accessed February 28, 2025, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/561140?ln=zh_CN&v=pdf.

⁴⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Mainstreaming Human Rights in Development Policies and Programming: UNDP Experiences*, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/English_Webdraft6b.pdf.

Development Policy and Programming,” the UNDP further clarified the connotation of “mainstreaming human rights in development,” defining it as “the process of integrating human rights into development planning and realizing them through that planning.” The document also explained the reasons for integrating human rights into development policies and planning: (1) “It is part of our mission,” as all UN Member States and agencies have committed to mainstreaming human rights into development policies and planning; (2) it contributes to achieving sustainable development outcomes.⁴⁹ The document also illustrated the effectiveness of human rights mainstreaming through practical cases in multiple countries.

In the security sector, human rights mainstreaming has also been implemented in UN peacekeeping operations. All personnel involved in peace operations have a responsibility to ensure the protection and promotion of human rights in their work. Protecting and promoting human rights is an essential component of the UN’s efforts to prevent conflicts, achieve and maintain peace, and assist in post-conflict reconstruction. Most multidimensional UN peace operations have human rights components, which are responsible for implementing the human rights mandates entrusted to the mission by the Security Council and assisting in mainstreaming human rights into all mission activities. The OHCHR provides expert advice, guidance, and support to these human rights components. The heads of human rights components serve not only as the most senior human rights advisors to the head of the mission but also as representatives of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the host country. The main objectives of human rights components are to promote the fulfillment of human rights obligations and uphold the rule of law by governments and other national institutions; to help build a human rights culture in the host country, thereby achieving sustainable and lasting peace and security; and to empower people to assert and claim their human rights.⁵⁰ Currently, UN peacekeeping operations with human rights components include the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Human rights components are also present in the following special political missions: the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).⁵¹

Other relevant UN agencies have also actively promoted human rights mainstreaming in their respective areas of work. For instance, UN Women has been

⁴⁹ United Nations Development Programme: “Lessons Learned from UNDP Experience: Integrating Human Rights in Development Policy and Programming,” accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Chinese_web_d8.pdf.

⁵⁰ United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/zh/promoting-human-rights>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

actively promoting gender mainstreaming, which is an extension and practice of human rights mainstreaming in the gender field. Its core is to integrate a gender equality perspective into the formulation and implementation of all policies, laws, and development plans, ensuring women's full participation and decision-making power in political, economic, social, and other fields, and achieving substantive equality by eliminating structural discrimination. UNESCO has taken the lead in formulating technical documents such as the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*, explicitly incorporating human rights principles (such as non-discrimination and inclusivity) as core standards for education policies and promoting them to member states through multilateral cooperation mechanisms. The World Health Organization (WHO) has clarified the inseparability of the right to health and human rights through documents such as the *Declaration of Alma-Ata* and the *WHO Guidelines on the Right to Health*, urging member states to integrate human rights principles into national health strategies. Overall, UN agencies have made active efforts and achieved positive results in implementing human rights mainstreaming.

VII. Conclusion

In summary, the United Nations has consistently been an active promoter of human rights mainstreaming. The *Charter of the United Nations* serves as the cornerstone and starting point for human rights mainstreaming, which constitutes both a normative principle and direction for UN reform. The UN has advanced human rights mainstreaming by reforming its human rights institutions and advancing institutional building. A review of the UN's long-standing efforts in promoting human rights mainstreaming reveals a collaborative synergy among its various departments and agencies. Specifically, the UN Secretary-General proposes reform plans and issues relevant initiatives and appeals to promote human rights mainstreaming; the human rights mainstreaming mechanisms provide institutional guarantees and financial support; the United Nations Development Group (later renamed as the United Nations Sustainable Development Group) serves as the primary platform for the UN to advance human rights mainstreaming; the OHCHR and the Human Rights Council serve as the main implementation bodies driving this initiative, and other UN agencies actively respond to and implement human rights mainstreaming requirements within their respective areas of work.

(Translated by *LI Chunyan*)