

Navigating the UN

Video transcript

The horrors of the Second World War compelled countries to come together and in one clear, confident voice say, 'Never Again'. And from these ashes the United Nations was born, beginning with governments drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Our human rights are enshrined in international human rights law and codified in regional and national legislation. The right to life, freedom and equality. The right to express your opinion, the right to protest, to justice. The right to education, to housing, the right to work...

Everyone is entitled to them and we should be proud that they exist.

But despite the progress we have made, there are still those who prevent others from enjoying their rights. And there will always be people who protect them too. Individuals, organisations, communities, lawyers, academics, advocates. Ordinary people. Human rights defenders just like you.

Human rights defenders are everywhere. Exposing human rights violations, drawing attention to serious issues, developing dialogue, fighting for change, improving lives of individuals and communities. They are the eyes and ears locally, nationally and regionally. So where a government says one thing but does another, or a regime thinks the world is not watching, it's human rights defenders who hold them to account.

But for all the great work defenders do, sometimes they can only go so far at the national level. That's where they can use the UN to increase scrutiny and apply more pressure. The UN has a number of mechanisms to promote and protect human rights, and each works in its own way.

First there's the Human Rights Council. The Council is made up of 47 states. Think of the Council as a forum. It's where the world comes together to talk about human rights issues, and decide upon action. It is the main intergovernmental space for human rights and can exert huge political pressure. It's also more accessible than you would think. By engaging with representatives and delegates you can encourage them to discuss and address the issues you think are important.

The Human Rights Council has the power to create other mechanisms.

One of these is the Universal Periodic Review or UPR. Every 5 years or so each member state is reviewed against their human rights commitments and obligations. It's essentially an audit, conducted by the other member states.

Human rights defenders can get involved, for example by raising concerns with the States conducting reviews, or submit reports about the local situation, particularly if you think official reports do not cover the full facts.

Another mechanism is Special Procedures, which are the UN's independent experts. Often known as rapporteurs, they either focus on a particular country, or a specific human rights issue. Special Procedures can act much quicker than other mechanisms.

Defenders are on the ground, all over the world, and are perfectly placed to monitor and report human rights issues to Special Procedures, enabling the experts to investigate, dialogue with States, speak out, and much more.

Defenders can also use the Treaty Bodies. There are 10 Treaty Bodies, covering the nine fundamental human rights conventions. The Treaty Bodies review the track record of countries that have ratified these conventions. Unlike the Universal Periodic Review where countries – influenced by their national interests – make recommendations, Treaty Body members are independent experts. So if you information, for example, about the treatment of migrant workers in your country, the Treaty Body covering that convention will hear you.

And let's not forget the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The OHCHR is a tool for defenders in its own right - monitoring, reporting, educating, assisting - and it also acts as a secretariat to the UN, making sure each of these mechanisms is able to do its valuable work. When defenders reach out to the UN, they often do so through the OHCHR.

Just like a tool in a toolkit, each of these mechanisms has a specific purpose. So for human rights defenders living, working, campaigning in countries all around the world, the most useful mechanism depends on situation and circumstance.

All these mechanisms are available to those who need them. Understanding the UN system and using its mechanisms is one of the most powerful things a human rights defender can do.

Helping create a world that is more peaceful, just and equal for us all.