



New York Roundtable: Human Rights, Prevention and Peace

Monday, 20 November 2023 10.00-12.30 (EST)

United Nations Headquarters, New York

Summary of the Discussion

prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

The New York roundtable was organized by the Office of the High Commissioner as part of a series of roundtables planned by the New York Office to mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The roundtable aimed to foster a creative exchange about the contribution of human rights to prevention, peace and security. In this context, the discussion explored the value of human rights in identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict, the future of human rights and peace operations, and how inequalities constitute a strategic risk to international peace and security. The discussion formed part of the preparations for the High-Level Event on human rights scheduled to take place in Geneva on 11 and 12 December, including a Round Table on the future of human rights in peace and security.

Objectives

- Highlight the contribution of human rights, actual and potential, to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peace-making and peacebuilding.
- Facilitate a multidisciplinary dialogue among experts and stakeholders to share experiences, insights, and best practices and consider ways in which human rights could strengthen the effectiveness of the UN's work on peace and security.
- Identify strategies and practical steps for advancing human rights as a central pillar in international efforts to maintain peace and security in accordance with the vision of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as a contribution to the intergovernmental dialogue taking place in the lead up of the Summit of the Future.

Guiding Questions

The following guiding questions were shared in advance of the round table:

1. What is the distinctive value of human rights in identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict? How can this be harnessed as part of national prevention strategies?
2. What lessons can be learned from successful peace and security initiatives that have effectively integrated human rights principles? How could the UN reimagine peace operations to more effectively address underlying root causes, support state institution-building, and build sustainable peace through human rights?

3. What would it mean for inequality to be recognized as a strategic risk to international peace and security? How can the peace and security pillar of the UN reinforce the 2030 Agenda practically, so that the Sustainable Development Goals are not undermined by conflict and violence? How can the universal values and norms of human rights be used to strengthen efforts for sustainable development and sustaining peace?

Opening statements

[High Commissioner Türk, USG LaCroix, ASG Spehar, moderated by ASG Brands-Kehris]

The opening remarks from the principals underscored the importance of commemorating Human Rights 75 and its achievements, but also acknowledged that these discussions take place at a difficult moment of growing division and mistrust as well as perceptions of selective application of human rights. As global tensions run high and serious human rights violations continue around the world in both conflict and non-conflict settings (including a backlash against women's rights), there was a need to heed the calls from the human rights ecosystem to find ways to address these crises earlier. The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) was referred to as a testament to the shared aspirations for a world where the inherent rights of every individual are recognized and protected. The universality and indivisibility of those rights also reflect the deep interconnectedness of human rights, peace, and security. The UDHR and UN Charter provide the blueprint and normative framework for addressing the challenges ahead.

The principals referred to the 2018 joint UN-World Bank study, '[Pathways to Peace](#)' and the [Secretary-General's Policy Brief on a New Agenda for Peace](#), which identified three main factors driving conflict: unaddressed grievances; inequalities; and exclusion. They affirmed that, corresponding to these drivers, the core human rights principles of accountability, including responsive and accountable government, non-discrimination and participation underpin the work of the United Nations. In turn, addressing the root causes and early indicators of conflict, including, but not limited to rising inequalities, discrimination, injustice, shrinking civic space, marginalization, and other violations of social, economic, and cultural rights - as well as of civil and political rights - constituted the first step toward building trust within and between communities. Societies that promote social cohesion by emphasizing the equal dignity and worth of all individuals regardless of their background or identity were more resilient to shocks.

The principals underscored the importance of a 'human rights lens' to analyse and understand risks and noted that the promotion and protection of human rights was a central and inseparable component of the work of the UN system, including in peace operations and in peacebuilding. In peace operations with specific human rights mandates, the promotion and protection of human rights enabled the building of trust and opening of political space. However, support from the Security Council and adequate resources for missions to fulfil their mandates was crucial. The practical impact of UN Country Teams convening country dialogues under the [Call to Action](#) were also cited as concrete and positive examples of system-wide engagement on human rights. Human rights were a practical problem-solving tool for peace-making capable of strengthening the UN's credibility and held the potential to help re-start stalled peace efforts through [mediation](#). A human rights lens was also crucial for ensuring the inclusion and participation of women and other marginalized groups in peacebuilding efforts.

The principals reaffirmed that sustainable peace without human rights was not possible. The discussions at the upcoming [Human Rights 75 high-level event](#) in Geneva in December 2023

(including Roundtable 1 on the future of human rights in peace and security), and at the [Summit of the Future](#) next year (with the proposed Pact including a chapter on peace and security with human rights as a cross-cutting theme) were opportunities for Member States to reinforce human rights as a basis for reimagining multilateralism, and to firmly place human rights at the heart of prevention efforts across the UN system.

Panel interventions

[Pablo de Greiff, Professor of Law, New York University; Graeme Simpson, Director of Interpeace USA; Leila Zerrougui, former SRSR and Head of MONUSCO, former SRSR for children and armed children; and Kayum Ahmed, Lecturer in Law, Columbia University]

The panellists highlighted the crucial role and normative value of human rights (and the UDHR) in the maintenance of peace and security as a preventive and problem-solving instrument. Panellists acknowledged efforts to uphold human rights from the perspective of seeking redress for violations, but also recalled the value of human rights in addressing grievances. The artificial boundaries between civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other, needed to be broken down to get a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes and drivers of conflict. Panellists called for a more consistent and non-selective implementation of human rights that reinforced its indivisibility and universality. Human rights needed to be seen as part of the solution that could address fundamental needs and reinforce a system of accountable governance.

The panellists underscored the centrality of trust in building peace and the role of human rights in providing early warnings for social unrest, violence, and conflict. Panellists recalled the importance of human rights-based research and evidence, noting that it was clear that civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights all had a direct impact on stability. It was important to recognize the gap that often exists between formal rights, and the reality of exclusion and marginalization experienced by communities on the ground. There was also a need to break down silos within the UN system as well as in donor discourse.

The panel also cautioned against a simplistic narrative of development serving as a remedy to addressing the underlying drivers of conflict. So long as development remained disconnected from the dialogue on social and economic justice (and recognition of how economic systems leave people behind), there was a danger of reproducing and exacerbating the same drivers of conflict in these societies. The panel further suggested revisiting the taxonomy of conflict and human rights violations as well as a reconsideration of human rights from various perspectives and how we invest in them – noting that protection and prevention were inseparable.

In the context of UN peace operations, the panel noted that human rights work enabled the missions to see what is not visible. The challenge is to convince governments that working on human rights, building trust with communities and strengthening human rights institutions is in their own interest. The purpose was not to name and shame, but to help governments to address human rights issues. The panel affirmed that there was no doubt that peace agreements integrating human rights considerations tended to be more durable. Panellists further noted that human rights, properly understood, were not a constraint on, or threat to State actors, but rather an enabler of individual rights that protected national sovereignty. Moreover, human rights were not just about issuing reports, but identifying possibilities and proposing solutions that strengthened the government position vis-a-vis accountability and institution-building.

On opportunities ahead, panellists emphasized the importance of the UN engaging women, youth and other marginalized groups and supporting their active participation across the peace continuum. On accountability, the panel highlighted the challenges of supporting the State while respecting its sovereignty. The panel drew attention to the importance of national ownership alongside the sustainability and durability of accountability mechanisms at the local level. At times, this meant pushing back on initiatives to create international tribunals and special courts.

One panellist proposed that a critical assessment of the dominant language of peace was required. He raised questions about the limits of human rights, and whether the current peace and security framework within the UN was appropriate or capable of addressing certain conflicts. The panellist noted that the liberal peace project ignored the conditions and knowledge of others, and further questioned the compatibility of capitalism with addressing meaningfully social inequalities. The panellist suggested that human rights discourse itself needed to be de-colonialized to remain a relevant framework.

Member State interventions

[Representatives of *Member States* took the floor in the following order: *Guatemala; Morocco; Romania; Denmark; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Australia; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Switzerland (on behalf of the Human Rights-Conflict Prevention Caucus); Ireland; Costa Rica; European Union; United States of America; Egypt; Malta; and Indonesia.*]

Member States broadly welcomed the roundtable discussion, noting that the UDHR retained its relevance as a guide to seeking solutions to new challenges such as Artificial Intelligence and climate change. They also welcomed the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace and the inclusion of the themes identified therein as part of the discussions for the Summit (and Pact) of the Future. Most Member States affirmed that human rights and peace and security were fundamentally linked. As a universally recognized framework, human rights were crucial in identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict. In this context, the Secretary-General's Call to Action was cited as an important problem-solving tool to ensure that human rights were built into the entire UN system.

Some Member States called for more organizational coherence across the UN system, and particularly in the prevention and peacebuilding mandates and advocated for breaking down silos and building better links between the peace and security and human rights pillars of the UN (Security Council, Human Rights Council, and the ECOSOC). Member States also underscored the importance of the UN meaningfully connecting and ensuring an inclusive approach that included the younger generation, women, SOGI and other minorities.

Member States noted that Human Rights 75 was a timely opportunity for the United Nations to reflect on whether the promise of the UDHR has been upheld. Certain Member States advocated for closer cooperation between the three pillars of the UN and noted that there was still a long way to go to embedding human rights across the pillars. Member States noted that the promise of the UDHR had not been fulfilled - in part due to the small percentage of the regular budget allocated to OHCHR. Human Rights 75 and the Summit of the Future offered opportunities to promote the universality of human rights and Member States needed to rise to the occasion to shore up OHCHR so that it had the adequate and appropriate resources to implement the promotion and protection

of human rights across the world. Certain Member States were candid in remarking that some members of the General Assembly Fifth Committee were seeking to cut funding for budget increases proposed by the Secretary-General and High Commissioner. Member States broad expectations from the Summit (and Pact) of the Future included a recommitment to SDGs and a visionary statement defending human rights and the human rights-based approach (HRBA) across all aspects of the work of the UN. Member States further emphasized that a HRBA was particularly important for the Security Council to protect civilians in conflict situations and advocated for the voices of women and youth to be heard. Human rights were essential to resilient peace processes, and Member States looked forward to a reinforced prevention agenda grounded in human rights.

Member States encouraged more evidence and research to be presented to document and reinforce the impact of human rights on reducing conflict and supporting development. Member States also noted the importance of addressing militarism, masculinities, and military spending and its adverse effects on human rights, peace, and security. The issue was not so much a lack of information on human rights violations, but rather a lack of coordinated early action by the UN in conflict and deteriorating situations.

One Member State remarked that while human rights was an important pillar of the work of the UN, mainstreaming it across the pillars was not the way to go. The Member State noted that fulfilment of the right to development supported by dialogue and technical assistance from the UN best served to prevent human rights violations. Some Member States also underscored the importance of national ownership of human rights beyond the signing and ratification of treaties and conventions. Questions were also raised as to how the UN is addressing accountability and impunity vis-à-vis its own personnel for violations committed in countries hosting peace operations. Several Member States further recalled that the UN and the international community had a responsibility to address double standards and selective application of human rights by drawing on the current situation in Gaza as an example of the limitations of the human rights mechanisms.

Civil society interventions

CSOs contributed to the discussions by affirming the linkages between economic, social, and cultural rights and a lack thereof, and conflict and violence. CSOs encouraged closer cooperation between peace and security experts and human rights experts. In the African context, the partnership between the AU, OHCHR and the World Bank was cited as a good practice in terms of early warning mechanisms that needed to be scaled up in other contexts. CSOs also drew attention to the protection needs of local peacebuilders, not all of whom were human rights defenders, but nonetheless worked on sensitive issues. CSOs also underscored the value of the presence of international human rights mechanisms on the ground (e.g., OHCHR representative and Fact-Finding Missions mandated to investigate serious human rights violations) as a means of bringing justice closer to victims but raised concerns over the UN's "constructive ambiguity" in relations with certain host countries and the risk of instrumentalization of UN fora by certain states to normalize ongoing crisis situations. CSOs noted that the status of implementation of recommendation from human rights mechanisms reflected a state's commitment to human rights and called for its use as a benchmark for the UN's cooperation.

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