

TOOLKIT

Strengthening Domestic Implementation of Multilateral Human Rights Commitments

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This toolkit seeks to provide practical strategies and good practices to inform national implementation of human rights commitments. In doing so, it addresses key normative stakeholders: ministries and government departments in capitals; permanent missions in New York and Geneva; and civil society organizations (CSOs).









The recommendations focus on greater information sharing, awareness raising, and communication; increased efficacy of existing tools, mechanisms, and resources; adequate funding; improved training and capacity building; and enhanced data and reporting. Each recommendation is derived from the analysis and findings of the 2022 Stimson report *Strengthening Human Rights: Translating Multilateral Commitments into Action*, which examines existing challenges and best practices for ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) and protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) in six country contexts.¹ The legend provided in this toolkit identifies how the recommendations link to different obstacles and opportunities outlined in the report.

The identified options for action speak to lessons learned and gaps in existing approaches to developing multilateral commitments and translating them to national contexts. When translating commitments to the domestic context, each member state should customize its approach to address the unique realities of its country and people. These options are not intended to be proscriptive, but to highlight ways UN actors, member states, and civil society can better support the domestic realization of normative commitments on human rights.

¹ See Lisa Sharland, Julie Gregory and Ilhan Dahir, *Strengthening Human Rights: Translating Multilateral Commitments into Action*, March 2022, Stimson Center.


LEGEND


Opportunities for and obstacles to domestic human rights implementation

 Domestic politics & framing of human rights	 Civil society engagement and communication
 Regional mechanisms	 Justice and accountability
 Funding, resourcing, and in-country capacity	 Communication within government
 Data and access to information	 Gender-responsive plans

For Ministries and Government Departments:

Conduct awareness raising around human rights and relevant terminology:

 How human rights are framed in domestic contexts has a significant impact on implementation of human rights commitments, particularly when human rights are perceived to be in opposition to traditional or cultural values. To ensure that key actors (e.g., politicians, government officials, desk officers, police, healthcare professionals, media, and constituencies at large) understand and appreciate the importance of human rights and how to translate them to domestic contexts, governments can take the lead in socializing the universal human rights framework and related terminology through concerted public information campaigns (e.g., similar to those undertaken for health or public safety issues). Governments can undertake these efforts, for instance, by translating the text of human rights conventions, treaties, and key thematic resolutions into national language(s) and circulating them; and by using social media to socialize human rights and their impact on daily life (including via influencers and celebrities), as well as combating myths or harmful stereotypes. With greater societal acceptance of human rights, governments can also leverage existing multilateral commitments to apply pressure on domestic opposition.

 **Support the role of national human rights institutions (NHRI) in-country:** NHRIs serve as essential independent monitors and protectors of human rights in national contexts. Many NHRIs remain underfunded and underresourced. Adequate funding is essential to the operations of NHRIs and should be prioritized, as outlined in the Paris Principles. Funding and resources, such as staff, dedicated offices, and modern technology, allow NHRIs to operate independently of the government and carry out their function. Thus, capitals should seek to reinforce the visibility and technical capacity of NHRIs to promote domestic respect of human rights and accountability for human rights abuses. This could include inviting NHRI Commissioners to brief at UN

meetings or events; supporting NHRIs' capacity to independently report to domestic and international audiences on the implementation of human rights; and soliciting NHRIs' input for UN action plans, guidelines, and studies through regular consultations.

Promote the role of CSOs in supporting human rights: With the global trend of shrinking civic space, CSOs and HRDs should be encouraged by governments to use their voices and networks to advocate and provide support services on human rights issues. This could be done by conducting public information campaigns on the role of civil society in democratic engagement; reducing bureaucratic hurdles for CSO registration, funding, and activities; and supporting independent civil society human rights networks (e.g., via provision of technical assistance or resources). Such support should also encourage greater representation and engagement with marginalized groups, nonurban and Indigenous communities, and those from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. CSOs play a pivotal role in promoting compliance with human rights commitments and can face threats, harassment, and violence for carrying out their work. In recognition of this, governments should implement safeguard initiatives and policies to help protect CSOs and HRDs from intimidation and reprisals from both state and nonstate actors. Funding support and resources should be considered when inviting CSOs to engage in consultations in support of human rights commitments.

Prioritize domestic promotion of human rights alongside international programs: Member states with more extensive development and foreign aid programs often focus on implementation of multilateral commitments in the international sphere. This can create the perception that member states are not addressing these issues domestically, or that there are no issues of domestic concern. For this reason, capitals should strive to ensure that any efforts to implement multilateral commitments on human rights consider the implications at home as well as abroad.

Meaningfully engage with regional organizations: Regional organizations have created differing but useful apparatuses to protect human rights. Some regional organizations have made more progress than others, with the African Union, Council of Europe, and Organization of American States having a major impact on their respective neighborhoods. It is not sufficient to join regional organizations, however; states should endeavor to adhere to conventions and recognize the jurisdiction of relevant regional courts. In this way, victims of human rights violations who cannot access justice domestically can seek remedy at the regional level. Furthermore, the standards developed by regional bodies can be relevant to national contexts and offer citizens greater protection regarding issues such as VAWG, racial and religious discrimination, and Indigenous marginalization.





Regularize data collection and analysis to inform public policy: Lack of sufficient data documenting abuses and trends on human rights issues presents a major challenge in making the case for further domestic reform. Governments should seek to ensure reliable collection of nationwide data through regular surveys that comply with ethical collection standards and are representative of the entire population, noting that data collection comes with significant risks around privacy, access and ownership that need to be managed. If used effectively, surveys and big data can assist governments in understanding the needs of different marginalized groups, including which services are working effectively and which need improvement. Data and any accompanying analysis should be made easily accessible to the public to support provision of services and promote government accountability.

Set feasible and budgeted policy commitments to implement in the short and long term: Some member states lag behind others in combating and preventing human rights abuses. When seeking to tackle pervasive violence against women and girls and against HRDs, a few member states studied made pledges, action plans, or policies that are not possible to implement in the short term because of domestic politics or a need for international assistance. While policies should always be forward-looking, they must be adequately funded, realistic, and achievable; otherwise, governments run the risk of ineffective action and loss of public trust.

Mainstream gender and develop gender-responsive policies on human rights: Some governments rely on an appointed ministry to further action on women and gender issues, which can result in superficial solutions that fail to address root causes of gender inequality if these efforts are not supported by gender-responsive policies and funds across government departments. Thus, gender mainstreaming in policies, action plans, and budgets must be a sustained whole-of-government activity.

Review implementation of human rights commitments domestically ahead of negotiations: Member states should systematically review progress on domestic implementation of resolutions ahead of new rounds of thematic negotiations, so that commitments remain achievable and informed by changing realities on the ground. Throughout these processes, governments should establish consultative processes with civil society that allow for timely, substantive feedback from a diverse range of civil society actors. Precautions should be taken to mitigate the possibility of reprisals against individuals by both state and nonstate actors. Following consultations, member states should consider civil society feedback for resolution negotiations; otherwise, consultation efforts may seem like a box-checking exercise. Governments should also consider commissioning independent reviews and evaluations of human rights implementation to inform such processes on a regular basis.

For Permanent Missions in New York and Geneva:

-  **Strengthen collaboration between New York and Geneva:** For missions that have a permanent presence in both New York and Geneva, ensuring thematic continuity in different UN bodies can be a challenge. Member states should institute regular opportunities for human rights experts in New York, Geneva, and capitals to collaborate and dialogue on key thematic issues, allowing for more synchronized strategies and language development. Staff from ministries in capitals should also be encouraged to take part in human rights resolution negotiations in New York and Geneva, where possible.
-  **Engage domestic CSOs in work at the UN:** Missions often rely on domestic ministries to consult with domestic CSOs on their behalf, most often for international human rights reporting. This is due to a variety of factors, including uncertainty about whether domestic CSOs understand UN processes and limited resourcing at posts in New York and Geneva. Missions should endeavor to include a wide array of national civil society stakeholders in their activities at the UN. Options for improved engagement with CSOs include the creation of a submission form on missions' websites for those who would like to engage in thematic consultations; routinely inviting diverse domestic CSOs to brief UN bodies and mission staff; promoting the work of domestic CSOs in international forums; supporting domestic CSOs in applying for Economic and Social Council consultation status; and providing resources that explain the variety of ways CSOs can engage with the UN.
-   **Communicate priorities and processes for upholding human rights:** Social media tools and online platforms have created an environment where delegates and permanent representatives can engage broad constituencies about the work they are doing in New York and Geneva. Diplomats should utilize these tools to clearly communicate and engage with a diverse range of CSOs and the wider public about their work as part of Third Committee, Human Rights Council, and Commission on the Status of Women negotiations. This will help bridge the gap in public understanding about what occurs at the UN and why such processes are important.

For Civil Society Organizations:

Monitor state implementation of nonbinding resolutions: Most member states do not have an institutionalized follow-up process for the review and implementation of nonbinding human rights resolutions. This can lead to a compounding issue wherein the list of normative commitments may grow while domestic action follows behind at a much slower pace, calling the utility of these norms into question. CSOs with greater resources should address this trend by holding governments to account by independently tracking and reporting on government implementation of nonbinding resolutions on human rights. Shadow reports and dialogues offer important vehicles to further these discussions.

Advocate for inclusive consultation processes: Since major cities house a majority of a given country's most prominent CSOs, CSO and government consultations can become closed circuits that preclude a large majority of a country's CSO landscape from effectively engaging. This can lead the government to have a limited understanding of key issues due to insufficient needs assessments. CSOs can combat this by using their platforms and constituency base to hold fellow CSOs, NHRIs, and governments to account for creating human rights consultation processes that include a variety of actors, including those not already involved in UN processes or consultations, those that may not identify with UN terminology (e.g., an HRD), those in remote areas or small cities, Indigenous leaders, those most impacted and marginalized, as well as those with lived experiences of the issues. Civil society should use available advocacy avenues to report and raise human rights violations with NHRIs, thereby reinforcing NHRIs' independence. In states where governments' civil society consultation does not exist or is not inclusive, NHRI and coalition efforts to report to UN human rights mechanisms can help prompt member states to involve civil society in government reporting and implementation efforts.