

28 February 2026

Upholding human rights and participation: Civil society input on the future of human rights treaty bodies

Joint civil society submission in response to the call for inputs to the Secretary-General's report on the status of the human rights treaty body system pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 68/268

The undersigned civil society organizations submit this contribution in response to the Call for Inputs issued on 8 January 2026 concerning the implementation of General Assembly resolution 68/268 on “Strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system,” to inform the preparation of the sixth biennial report of the Secretary-General on the status of the United Nations human rights treaty bodies.

We support a treaty body system that is accessible to and encourages active and comprehensive participation by civil society which will, in turn, enhance the effectiveness of the treaty body system in holding States parties accountable for their compliance with human rights treaties.

As civil society, we are deeply concerned about the current multilateral crisis, the ongoing backsliding on human rights in many parts of the world, and the liquidity crisis affecting the United Nations. In this context, we reaffirm our strong commitment to the United Nations and to the human rights treaty body system as a universal accountability mechanism mandated to safeguard human rights. Precisely in times of uncertainty and weakened protections, the treaty body system remains indispensable to uphold international human rights standards and ensure that States parties are held accountable to their obligations.

We reaffirm that the human rights treaty body system remains a cornerstone of the international human rights protection framework. We recognize and commend the crucial role treaty bodies play in advancing human rights at the national, regional and international levels through their reviews of States parties, views on individual communications and inquiry procedures. Since the establishment of the first treaty body in 1969, the system has grown significantly, strengthening the monitoring and implementation of human rights obligations worldwide. This progress has contributed to increased transparency and accountability of States parties, the development of international human rights law standards, the access to justice for victims, and greater implementation of human rights obligations.

To further support and enhance the functioning of the treaty body system, we respectfully submit the following observations and recommendations, focusing on several critical areas: *Enhancing civil society participation; Progressive realization and the principle of non-regression; Nomination and selection of treaty bodies members; and Independence and impartiality of members of the human rights treaty bodies.*

1. Enhancing civil society participation

Civil society participation is fundamental to the treaty body system and essential to the long-term sustainability of the system. Our ability to engage meaningfully, however, continues to be hampered by significant challenges.

a. Accessibility, communication, and language inclusion

Ensuring accessibility to the treaty bodies is imperative. This requires a comprehensive digital uplift, including the use of video conferencing technologies, live webcasting, simultaneous translation in all six official UN languages, and the provision of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities. Equal access to treaty body proceedings and documents across all official languages and formats is crucial for inclusive participation.

We also note that the inability of civil society to submit individual communications in all UN official languages imposes limitations on access to justice. Additionally, summary records are not available for some sessions, which undermines accountability and transparency. At the same time, we welcome that some States provide translations in non-official UN languages during constructive dialogues, and we acknowledge that prioritizing only the six official UN languages might restrict the full potential of the treaty bodies. We welcome initiatives aimed at including languages beyond the official ones, which enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and the overall effectiveness of the system.

Communication channels, including the treaty bodies' websites, should be improved and updated regularly to facilitate timely and efficient access to relevant information. Enhancing these digital infrastructures will make the system more transparent, user-friendly, and effective. We are also concerned about user safety, data protection and potential restrictions imposed by States, including internet blockages, censorship and surveillance at the national level, which may hinder safe and meaningful engagement with the treaty body system

b. Predictability and Logistical and Financial Barriers

Predictability is also essential. A clear and reliable schedule of State reviews would allow civil society organizations to organize and plan their advocacy and participation more efficiently. The current lack of advance notice and last-minute changes and cancellations of sessions undermines our ability to contribute meaningfully. The lack of predictability also directly affects visa

procedures and funding applications required to enable participation in sessions. Reasonable allocation of time for civil society interventions participating in country reviews is also essential.

Moreover, the liquidity crisis affecting the United Nations is having a direct impact on the treaty bodies' functioning and undermines access and predictability. Delays in sessions, cancellations, and reduced meeting time limit opportunities for engagement and weaken the system's effectiveness. This is further compounded by States failing to report on time and, in some cases, completely disengaging from the sessions. Such behavior raises questions among civil society regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of the treaty bodies and discourages meaningful participation.

In addition to these structural issues, logistical and financial barriers continue to prevent many civil society representatives, particularly those from the Global Majority/South, from attending sessions in Geneva, Switzerland. Many civil society representatives, especially those from Africa and Asia, need visas to enter Switzerland to attend State reviews, requiring them to invest significant time and resources to apply and travel to a Swiss embassy or consulate. In some cities there are no Swiss consulates, forcing human rights defenders to travel to capital cities or even neighbouring countries, which implies additional cost and time. Even with affidavits from UN offices, partner organizations in the Global Minority/North, and adequate evidence that they have the means to support their brief time in Switzerland, many civil society representatives are denied visas. In other cases, visa applications are submitted late due to the lack of confirmation of sessions, and visas are granted only after the session has already started - and sometimes after it has ended - effectively preventing participation.

Flying to and staying in Geneva can also be prohibitively costly for members of civil society, excluding them from participating in State reviews. These limitations contribute to a growing separation between Geneva and the rest of the world, creating the risk of an echo chamber of limited stakeholders while excluding civil society organizations working on the ground and documenting human rights violations first-hand. Providing a robust and consistent opportunity for civil society to participate in a hybrid modality would eliminate many of these barriers.

c. Inclusion of gender-diverse participants

Accessibility measures should also explicitly address the needs of civil society participants with diverse gender identities and expressions, particularly trans and gender-diverse persons. This includes ensuring safe participation options, confidentiality protections, and full recognition of self-identified names and gender identities throughout all engagement processes. Trans and gender-diverse persons, especially those from countries without legal gender recognition frameworks or where their identities are criminalized, frequently face compounded barriers when engaging with treaty bodies. These include difficulties in obtaining visas, discrimination while

traveling internationally, or during immigration procedures due to discrepancies between identity documents and lived gender.

Additional challenges exist within UN administrative systems. Barriers also arise from the lack of recognition of chosen names and gender markers in official documentation, including Indico registration systems, badge issuance, and speaking lists. During the civil society coordination and treaty body official sessions, trans human rights defenders often face heightened risks of misgendering when engaging in-person at UN spaces. For those coming from non-inclusive legal and social environments, concerns related to safety, confidentiality, and public visibility while engaging with other civil society during pre- or informal sessions can further deter meaningful participation. To address these challenges, treaty bodies should adopt explicit inclusive practices, including the consistent use of self-identified names and pronouns in both working and translated languages, gender-inclusive terminology in procedures and documentation, and support for the safe and meaningful participation of trans and gender diverse civil society actors.

d. Safety for human rights defenders

Protecting victims, human rights defenders, and civil society actors remains crucial for the effectiveness and credibility of the treaty bodies. These challenges are further exacerbated by safety concerns and the risk of intimidations and reprisals against human rights defenders who engage with the treaty bodies, both online and in person. The protection of civil society is essential, as enshrined by the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the San José Guidelines. Such international standards help treaty bodies and demand consistent action to address intimidations and reprisals allegations. This includes evaluating risks, implementing safeguards, and maintaining uniform practices to secure well-being of defenders and facilitate their work.

e. Accessibility for persons with disabilities

Civil society actors with disabilities continue to face structural barriers that limit meaningful participation in treaty body processes. Accessibility and reasonable accommodation are core obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),¹ essential for inclusion and for the effective functioning of treaty bodies, and reinforced in General Assembly resolutions and the 2019 Secretary-General Disability Inclusion Strategy.² Yet, despite

¹ CRPD, art. 34; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Rules of Procedure*, art. 7.

² General Assembly Resolution 68/268 (April 2014), para. 29; General Assembly Resolution 80/197 (December 2025), para. 42; Secretary-General Disability Inclusion Strategy (2019) (specifically stating the commitment to “ensuring full accessibility for all—to our buildings and facilities, workspaces, information and communications, conferences and events—with specific measures, equipment and services to achieve it”). G.A. Res. 68/268 (Apr. 2014), para. 29; G.A. Res. 80/197 (Dec. 2025), para. 42; United Nations Secretary-General, *Disability Inclusion Strategy* (2019) (specifically stating commitment to “ensuring full accessibility for all—to our buildings and facilities, workspaces, information and communications, conferences and events—with specific measures, equipment and services to achieve it.”).

these obligations, accessibility measures remain limited across the UN system, and systemic gaps persist.

In January 2026, the Department of Conference Management at the United Nations Office in Geneva suspended national sign language interpretation for interactive dialogues with States parties of the CRPD, immediately excluding Deaf communities from participating in those reviews.³ States providing online interpretation are required to pay fees, further limiting accessibility. Further, numerous requests by a Deaf CRPD Committee member, whose term began in 2025, for reasonable accommodation (namely at least two sign language interpreters) have not been addressed, forcing reliance on third-party support.⁴ The CRPD Committee has stated that these developments amount to discrimination against the Committee, placing it in a materially different and disadvantaged position compared to other treaty bodies.⁵

In January 2026, UNOG's Department of Conference Management indicated that, unless the UN's financial situation improves, mandated accessibility services, including International Sign Interpretation and captioning, cannot be provided to the CRPD Committee.⁶ In February 2026, they confirmed that these cash-conservation measures remain in place and that no additional funding from Member States has been received.⁷ This left the 34th session of the CRPD Committee, scheduled from 9 to 27 March in Geneva, at risk. The International Disability Alliance formally requested urgent intervention to ensure that minimum accessibility arrangements for the Committee session, as well as for related disability panels during the Human Rights Council, are confirmed in a timely manner.⁸ Without these measures, Deaf persons and persons with hearing impairments cannot meaningfully engage in reviews, consultations, or related Human Rights Council panels.

While the 34th session of the CRPD Committee was ultimately confirmed, it is essential to emphasize that accessibility services are not optional. They represent the minimum requirements for the proper functioning of human rights mechanisms. We hope that accessibility will remain a priority across all UN activities related to the rights of persons with disabilities.

This includes restoring previous levels of accessibility, such as national sign language interpretation during dialogues with States, the full provision of reasonable accommodation for

³ Statement of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – Discrimination against the CRPD Committee by the United Nations System and Denial of Reasonable Accommodation (31 January 2026).

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.; International Disability Alliance, *CRPD Now*, LinkedIn post, Feb. 3, 2026, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/international-disability-alliance_crpdnow-activity-7424488794671955968-AOA9/.

⁷ International Disability Alliance, *CRPD Now*, LinkedIn post, Feb. 3, 2026, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/international-disability-alliance_crpdnow-activity-7424488794671955968-AOA9/.

⁸ International Disability Alliance, *Status Update on Accessibility Services for the Upcoming Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Facebook post, Feb. 10, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/InternationalDisabilityAllianceIDA/photos/status-update-on-accessibility-services-for-the-upcoming-committee-on-the-rights/1328515815975869/>.

Deaf Committee members, and reasonable accommodation for all participants. It also entails strengthening the implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.

f. Expanded engagement

To address these challenges, we call for an expansion of opportunities for interaction with civil society during the Annual Meeting of the Chairpersons of Human Rights Treaty Bodies, as well as through regular formal and informal consultations. Establishing a structured forum for civil society dialogue would reinforce transparency and collaboration.

We welcome the meetings held with civil society, in particular, during the Annual Meeting of the Chairpersons of Human Rights Treaty Bodies. However, further engagement is necessary, especially through creating more opportunities for the participation of civil society organizations based outside of Geneva. We therefore call for an expansion of opportunities for interaction with civil society, including through regular formal and informal consultations. Establishing a structured and predictable forum for civil society dialogue would reinforce transparency, inclusivity and accountability.

2. Progressive realization and the principle of non-regression

The principles of progressive realization and non-regression are central to the functioning of the treaty body system. We commend the growing number of ratifications and accessions to core human rights treaties and their optional protocols, as well as improved compliance by States with reporting obligations. These developments have led to important advances at the local, regional, and international levels.

However, in the face of a generalized backlash against human rights, it is more important than ever to ensure that these gains are not reversed. The principle of non-regression, as enshrined in international human rights law, mandates that once progress is achieved, it should not be rolled back. Instead, States are obligated to build upon these advances and to adopt a forward-looking, proactive approach to the implementation of rights.

Upholding this principle reinforces the dynamic and evolving nature of human rights treaties. These instruments must be responsive to emerging global challenges and must serve as living tools that consolidate and expand human rights standards in all regions of the world. Assuring compliance with the principle of progressive realization has a direct impact on the credibility and efficiency of the treaty body system.

We further emphasize that these principles should guide all working methods of treaty bodies, particularly when drafting general recommendations or comments that interpret or expand the understanding of treaty obligations. We encourage treaty bodies to develop further general comments that proactively provide greater clarity on how treaties should be interpreted, while

simultaneously maintaining and safeguarding the principle of non-regression. Integrating progressive realization and non-regression into such instruments ensures that treaty bodies provide consistent, forward-looking guidance while protecting established human rights standards.

3. Nomination and selection of treaty bodies members

We recognize the unique responsibility of treaty bodies to maintain and advance the progress that has been achieved to date and to monitor the implementation and compliance of international human rights law treaties. The nomination and election process of treaty body experts is critical to the system's legitimacy and effectiveness, as mandated.

We recommend that the process be made more transparent and participatory by providing Member States and civil society with timely – well in advance of elections – and full access to the profiles, qualifications, and expertise of all candidates. An open, web-based platform for the evaluation of candidates would significantly improve this process, ensuring that independence, impartiality, gender parity and diversity are appropriately considered.

We encourage States parties to give due consideration to equitable geographical distribution; balanced gender representation in all committees; the inclusion of experts from different legal systems, professional and cultural backgrounds; abilities; and the highest standards of competence in the field of human rights. We further encourage potential committee members to commit themselves to a non-discriminatory and expansive application of international human rights law. These considerations should guide both the nomination and election of experts to the treaty bodies. As civil society, we stand ready to support this process and remain vigilant in our commitment to upholding the integrity of the treaty body system.

4. Independence and impartiality of members of the human rights treaty bodies

The independence and impartiality of treaty body members are foundational to the integrity of the system. We fully support the implementation of the Addis Ababa Guidelines,⁹ which aim to ensure objectivity, impartiality and accountability within the treaty bodies. The quality and effectiveness of the treaty body system depend on the expertise and independence of its members.

Although treaty bodies are “separate and free-standing,...[they] complement each other, with a number of principles binding them together.”¹⁰ Each treaty body “lays down, explicitly or implicitly, the basic principles of non-discrimination and equality, effective protection against violations, special protection for the particularly vulnerable, and an understanding of the human

⁹ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/67/222>.

¹⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet30Rev1.pdf> (page 18).

being as an active and informed participant.”¹¹ These principles should guide treaty bodies’ independence, their key role in expanding human rights achievements over the last decades, and in being vigilant of any attempts to undermine well-established standards in international human rights law that violate the doctrine of non-retrogression mentioned above.

It is essential that committee members uphold the universality of human rights and do not use their positions to restrict or selectively interpret international human rights law, commodify well-established human rights standards, or advance personal agendas. Conflicts of interest, whether arising from personal interests, links to State parties, or regional group affiliations, must be scrupulously avoided. In the event of conflicts of interest, committee members must disclose them promptly and ensure that appropriate measures are taken to manage and resolve them, maintaining the integrity and impartiality of the treaty body system.

We also call for the harmonization of good practices and methodologies among all treaty bodies, ensuring coherence and standardization of working methods across committees, while guaranteeing the timely and meaningful participation of civil society as a safeguard of independence, impartiality, and accountability.

Toward continued collaboration

As civil society organizations, we stand ready to contribute innovative and constructive ideas toward a stronger, more accessible, and more effective system.

We remain committed to supporting the vital role of the treaty bodies in protecting and promoting human rights and reiterate our support for their continued independence, integrity and efficiency. We thank you for your leadership and your attention to our recommendations and look forward to continued collaboration in advancing the work of the treaty bodies.

Signatories:

Center for Reproductive Rights

ILGA World

The Advocates for Human Rights

GATE - Global Action for Trans Equality

ODRI - Office against Discrimination, Racism and Intolerance

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet30Rev1.pdf> (page 18).