



UPR Info- Nicoletta Zappile, Deputy Director

Good afternoon, everyone.

This is my second time attending an event organized by Birmingham City University, and I'm truly delighted to be part of it once again.

I represent UPR Info, a Geneva-based NGO that promotes human rights through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR is an invaluable tool that assesses the human rights situation in all UN Member States, offering them an opportunity to review and enhance their human rights records.

At UPR Info, we are at the forefront of supporting both states and various segments of civil society—including civil society organizations (CSOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs), human rights defenders, and students, just to name a few—to engage meaningfully in the UPR process. The resolution that established the UPR, along with its procedural documents, underscores the critical role of civil society in this process. At UPR Info, we firmly believe that everyone, depending on their role in society, has both the **opportunity** and the **responsibility** to engage in the UPR. Our role is to facilitate access to this mechanism through capacity-building activities, fostering exchanges of good practices, sharing information, and creating tools.

Today, I would like to begin with a reflection on the Pact for the Future, then explore the potential of the UPR to drive concrete change at the national level and reflect on the challenges of the mechanism.

Let's start by acknowledging that the crises we are facing today are deeply interconnected. We are grappling with a planetary environmental crisis, the rise of conflicts, the increasing presence of authoritarianism, and the erosion of the rule of law in many parts of the world. The ability of individuals to freely participate in civil society is shrinking, and human rights defenders are under increasing threat.

These systemic challenges have led many to question the effectiveness of the entire UN system.

In response to these global shifts, world leaders have sought common denominators to strengthen the multilateral system—one capable of responding to the current crises. This is where the recently adopted 'Pact for the Future' comes in. Described as one of "the most



wide-ranging international agreements of recent years”¹, it covers both entirely new areas and unresolved issues that have long persisted.

However, while the Pact takes a step forward in addressing global challenges, it leaves some crucial gaps—particularly in its approach to human rights. For instance, there is no dedicated human rights chapter in the Pact, and human rights are only explicitly referenced in four of its 56 action points. This omission is concerning, especially considering the central role human rights must play in preventing and resolving the crises we face.

Despite the absence of a human rights chapter in the Pact, the UPR remains a critical mechanism to help deliver on its promises. The UPR is unique because it reviews the human rights situation in all UN Member States, regardless of their size, wealth, or geopolitical position. Through the UPR, States can formulate recommendations on a wide range of human rights topics, from the right to housing and the protection of journalists to access to healthcare and freedom of assembly. Interestingly, the UPR has also become a crucial platform for raising new and emerging human rights challenges. A prime example of this is the growing number of recommendations linking the environment, climate change, and human rights. Since 2016, these issues have been addressed in UPR sessions, but it was only in 2022 that the Human Rights Council formally recognized the right to a healthy and safe environment as a human right.

However, let’s be clear: the UPR is not just about issuing recommendations. It is about turning commitments into action—action that leads to real, on-the-ground improvements. The UPR provides States with an opportunity to take concrete steps toward meeting their international obligations and addressing global challenges like gender equality, environmental justice, and the protection of marginalized communities or those living in vulnerable situations. Although the Pact for the Future does not explicitly mention the UPR, its universal scope, emphasis on cooperation, and firm commitment to human rights law make the UPR an essential tool in ensuring that the Pact’s goals are met.

Since its inception, the UPR has played a crucial role in advancing human rights worldwide. UPR recommendations, alongside national advocacy efforts, have contributed to achievements such as:

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/unis-nairobi/press-releaseunited-nations-adopts-ground-breaking-pact-future-transform-global>



- The strengthening of legal frameworks, including the adoption of legislation to end child marriage in Zambia and Sierra Leone.
- The establishment of National Human Rights Institutions in countries such as Bangladesh and Switzerland.
- Enhanced law enforcement capacity on human rights standards, including the Mandela Rules in the Maldives, Vanuatu, and Kazakhstan.
- Improved rights protections for people with disabilities and ethnic minorities, as seen in New Zealand.
- Initiatives to increase women's political representation, such as in Côte d'Ivoire.

One feature I would like to highlight is the UPR's inclusive, participatory approach. The UPR is not just a process for states to engage with one another; it actively involves civil society organizations, NHRIs, human rights defenders, and other key stakeholders. This participatory approach ensures that human rights challenges are not only recognized but also addressed collectively through constructive dialogue and cooperation.

What does this participatory process look like in practice? Before each country undergoes its UPR, CSOs have the opportunity to submit reports highlighting human rights challenges and violations within their countries. These reports can also include recommendations on measures they wish their governments to take to improve human rights. Through these reports and advocacy efforts, civil society can raise awareness of the human rights concerns before their countries' review. In doing so, the voices of the most vulnerable are given space in the process. These voices can include groups such as children and youth. A powerful example of this is the work conducted by the Coalition for Children's SOGIESC Rights in Thailand. They actively engaged in the UPR process, advocating for the rights of children and youth with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (SOGIESC). Thanks to their persistent efforts, submission of reports, and advocacy work, Thailand's government accepted, for the first time, four recommendations aimed at better protecting these children and youth's rights.²

A key part of UPR Info's work in supporting the participatory process is facilitating access for civil society actors, especially those in vulnerable situations who often struggle to have their voices heard. We achieve this by organizing training sessions to equip human rights

² See the Case Study: [How to Advance the Rights of Children with Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics through the Universal Periodic Review: A Case Study from Thailand](#), in *How to Child Rights Series* by Save the Children and other international and national partner organizations.



defenders, who may be unfamiliar with human rights mechanisms, with the tools and skills needed to engage effectively. In these sessions, we unpack and demystify the UPR process, making it more accessible and understandable. A key highlight of our work is the organization of UPR Info Pre-sessions. These have become an essential platform for CSOs, human rights defenders, NHRIs, and other stakeholders to bring attention to human rights issues and provide direct input into the UPR process. At UPR Info, we remain committed to ensuring that all human rights defenders attending our activities have a safe space to engage in the UPR process.

However, we recognize that the participation of civil society in the UPR process is not without its challenges. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a troubling trend of shrinking civic space, with increasing restrictions, threats, and attacks on human rights defenders across many states. Targeting of human rights defenders is not limited to physical spaces such as UN premises—it is pervasive in the digital sphere, where activists frequently face online harassment and attacks. In addition, two concerning trends are emerging: on one hand, human rights defenders advancing their causes are increasingly resorting to self-censorship out of fear of reprisals; on the other, anti-rights groups are gaining ground, seeking to undermine human rights efforts.

In this context, ensuring a safe and inclusive space for civil society within the UPR process is more important than ever. A participatory approach to the UPR is essential—not only to amplify the voices of civil society but also to hold governments accountable for the international commitments they have made and the recommendations they have supported.

In countries like Nepal, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where UPR Info has conducted in-country activities, civil society and NHRIs have participated in multistakeholder discussions leading to real improvements.

For example, in the framework of the UPR, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) received a total of 45 recommendations concerning the protection of human rights defenders, including 15 specifically issued during the third cycle. These recommendations were reinforced by other UN mechanisms, notably by the Committee Against Torture in 2019. Among these recommendations was the adoption of a law recognizing and protecting the activities of human rights defenders, as well as ensuring thorough and independent investigations into any violations they might face. Thanks to relentless advocacy efforts by CSOs and the National Commission for Human Rights, the DRC became the fifth African country to adopt a law protecting human rights defenders in 2023. Law No. 23/027



represents a significant milestone in the protection of human rights defenders. However, gaps remain, such as the lack of a protection mechanism to strengthen the implementation of this law and the inclusion of a requirement for human rights defenders to register with the National Human Rights Commission.

Implementing UPR recommendations is the most challenging part of the process. Human rights progress is not linear, nor does it happen overnight. It requires time, engagement from various actors, and financial resources. On this point, let me conclude my statement by reiterating the points raised by Gianni Magazzeni regarding how UPR recommendations can truly serve as strategic entry points for cooperation among Member States and development actors. These recommendations can become an important tool for coordinating bilateral development cooperation within specific countries and open space for discussions with national partners on key development issues.

Some countries have explicitly built a stronger link between their development and human rights strategies. This is the case for France, which, through its *Human Rights and Development Strategy*³, will support projects that contribute to the implementation of relevant UPR recommendations accepted by beneficiary countries. Systematically adopting similar strategies could ensure increased funding for the implementation of UPR recommendations and, consequently, lead to more tangible improvements on the ground.

I hope these examples have shown that the UPR is far from a theoretical exercise. It is a powerful tool for driving real change.

³ *La stratégie Droits humains et développement*,
https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/droits_humains_fr_cle04c451.pdf