



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Human Rights: A Path for Solutions

Vision Statement offered by the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Volker Türk — 2024



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Renewing our commitment

Human rights have the power to unify us at a time when we need to come together to contend with the existential challenges we face as humanity.

Renewing our commitment to human rights

75 years ago, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signalled a new era of progress towards human dignity and agency for all. In retrospect, we have come a long way on that journey, but we are at a precarious moment and cannot take things for granted. With us, devastating conflicts, the triple planetary crisis, skyrocketing inequalities, and new powerful technologies whose risks are yet to be grasped.

As we confront these challenges, we recall the Declaration's conviction that, no matter the context, it is through respect for human rights we craft a better future for "our human family". In this spirit, I offer this Vision Statement as a contribution to the [Summit of the Future](#) and as signposts for the years to come. Its outlook has been informed by an extensive engagement with diverse actors all across the world throughout the year-long [Human Rights 75 Initiative](#), which concluded in December 2023 at a High-Level Event hosted simultaneously in Geneva, Bangkok, Nairobi, Panama and globally online.

As an expression of shared values across cultures, the Declaration represents our common heritage, a testament to our universal human condition and our equal worth. Throughout Human Rights 75 we heard a resounding

message of renewed commitment to its principles and to the greater cause of human rights.

In December 2023 we recorded over 770 pledges to take transformative action, including from 150 States from across the world. The issues covered a wide range of areas, from ratification of human rights treaties, law reform, strengthening national human rights institutions to action on equality for women or on business and human rights – a vivid illustration of the universality, interdependence and indivisibility of the human rights framework. The range of actors pledging, with 255 pledges from business, inter-governmental organisations, national human rights institutions, parliaments, civil society organisations and others – a reminder of the importance of a whole-of-society approach alongside the duties of States under international law.

In a world increasingly characterized by fragmentation, Human Rights 75 allowed a rare opportunity for collective reflection on the trajectory for human rights, its successes and failures. And on the current crisis of implementation. It is precisely at these moments, where freedoms are so imperilled, that the Declaration and the global human rights framework it seeded are most needed. Division, unequal outcomes and unsolvable crises are not an inevitability.

We see a remarkable level of support for human rights worldwide, despite some attempts to discredit them. The global survey undertaken for the Open Society Barometer, for example, found a significant majority of respondents consider human rights to have been a “force for good”, equating them with personal values. Illustrating what we see every day in our work. Human rights have the power to unify us at a time when we need to come together to contend with the existential challenges we face as humanity.

We must use this moment for reclaiming our human rights. This is also a moment for critical self-reflection, including by my Office and the entire human rights system. It is in no one’s interest to instrumentalize human rights for political ends or to disregard them cynically. This will only threaten social cohesion, potentially unleash more destruction and chaos, and undermine international cooperation.

When the Declaration will reach its centenary, our world will be in so many ways unrecognizable. Reshaped by megatrends, more unknown unknowns and intensifying complexity. Two paths open up. One of enlightened cooperation and solidarity, stable and seeking balance with our natural world. The other, unmistakably dystopian.

Delivering on the Promise of Human Rights

Our choice is clear – embrace and trust the full power of human rights as the path to the world we want: more peaceful, equal and sustainable. To do this, we must affirm human rights as protection – a guardian against abuse, a guarantor of accountability and the ultimate tool of prevention. But we must also understand human rights as a propulsive force to meet today's and tomorrow's challenges. Unlocking fresh ideas and tools, generating the resilience needed for the shocks we face and those yet to come. This entails honest, constructive, albeit at times uncomfortable and difficult, conversations. This is how societies can evolve, heal and change – and our global community overcome tensions and forge solutions in the common interest.

For governments, human rights offer a comprehensive, long-term, problem-solving formula – a blueprint for effective governance. Transcending ideologies and divisions, they open up space for productive cooperation. **For individuals**, rights are a moral and legal anchor for their aspirations to a life in dignity and justice, a profound acknowledgment of their equality and a source of hope. **For youth**, in particular, they offer reassurance that the social contract can be reimagined for their futures.

We heard powerful testimony throughout Human Rights 75 of how human rights approaches, even in our contested environment, are driving social transformation. It is important to recognise that societies are in a constant state of evolution.

Points of divergence are a part of that, and continuous dialogue is therefore critical to address them. Human rights are at the centre of such dialogue and should be at the core of all policy areas at local, national and regional level. And at the global level too, human rights are the connective tissue.

We must use the momentum from Human Rights 75 to resolve to do things differently, conscious of the many lessons from the wins and failures in the decades since the Declaration's adoption.

This means embracing fully all human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural, as well as the right to development, the right to a healthy environment and the right to peace – moving resolutely away from the unhelpful artificial divides erected in the past. Human rights must be at the centre of rebalancing our economies so they start working for all people and for the planet. Human rights can also free us from the impasse on addressing the triple planetary crisis and equip us to manage successfully the technology revolution. We must, at long last, act on their blueprint for ending cycles of bloodshed.

As we move forward, eight messages from Human Rights 75 stand out. These have also informed my Office's strategic direction and priorities, embedded in our Organisational Management Plan 2024-2027, and will guide our longer-term thinking.

Global movement

In all peace work, human rights are by nature inclusive, necessitating the meaningful participation of women, young people and others routinely excluded.

1

We have a strong global movement for human rights: it must be supported and given the space to innovate

The vibrancy, dynamism and diversity of this movement underlines the continued legitimacy of human rights, their universal nature and their resilience for the future.

An ever-expanding network of actors engaged in human rights – civil society organisations, environmentalists, economists, tech experts, scientists, academics, artists, philosophers, religious leaders, city officials, policymakers, philanthropists and many more – is generating new entry points for understanding, collaboration and progress. The plurality of perspectives, experiences and expertise, a source of strength. Amongst this diversity lies the opportunity to construct alliances between civil society and States on key human rights goals.

At the core of this movement are individuals and communities whose lived experience and concerns must drive the human rights agenda locally and globally. Everyone must have a say in shaping priorities and action.

Stepping up availability of human rights education is critical, empowering individuals. The whole of society needs to be engaged in dialogue on human rights. We need to keep broadening engagement, reaching out to the silent majority who support human rights, as well as those who question its universality or relevance. We must keep working on framing new narratives with widespread resonance, making tools for effective action more accessible, and identifying novel platforms and messengers. The worlds of art, culture and sport hold enormous potential here; a reminder of the centrality of cultural rights, as crucial to social ties as they are to individual identity.

For the human rights movement to flourish we need to confront the unacceptable trend of declining civic space in every region. Governments must put an end to regressive and repressive behaviours that suppress freedom of expression, association and assembly. And they must ensure human rights defenders, including environmental activists, are protected from all forms of intimidation and attack. We need to explore strategies for encouraging positive engagement by States with human rights defenders.

Peace and Security

Inequalities, alongside unaddressed grievances and exclusion, must be recognised properly as a strategic risk to peace and security.

2

To end cycles of conflict, put human rights at the centre of prevention and peacebuilding

Human rights transcend politics and ideological mindsets, only ever taking the side of humanity. This is a fundamental truth we must keep coming back to.

The principles of international human rights and humanitarian law are our collective conscience, the guarantors of our very humanity. They must be respected without fail.

Human rights and peace are intimately connected. Human rights are at once a tool for prevention of violence, essential safeguards even amidst the conduct of hostilities, and a path to sustainable peace grounded in accountability and justice.

Widespread and systematic human rights violations often precede outbreaks of violence, making human rights analysis critical to early warning. Inequalities, alongside unaddressed grievances and exclusion, must be recognised properly as a strategic risk to peace and security. We must ensure that the

human rights ecosystem in its fullness – UN, regional, civil society – is empowered to feed systematically into early warning and prevention processes.

One route could be through regular briefings to the Peacebuilding Commission. Another, through closer links between the human rights ecosystem and the Security Council. Ultimately, though, such initiatives will be futile if early warning does not lead to early action. We see repeatedly the profound human cost of ignoring warnings and concrete recommendations on prevention – along with the damage to multilateralism. We must heed the lessons of the past.

This includes ensuring a central role for human rights in shaping the future of UN peace operations and special political missions, and more generally in peace agreements. In all peace work, human rights are by nature inclusive, necessitating the meaningful participation of women, young people and others routinely excluded. Accountability and transitional justice are integral to human rights, as are their capacity to nurture compassion, healing and trust when societies emerge from conflict.

It is important to recognise that the human cost in other situations of violence, such as those related to gang violence or organized crime, can be as devastating as armed conflicts. In the long-term, stability can only be achieved through tackling the root causes, including poverty, social and economic discrimination and corruption. It is essential that

law enforcement responses comply fully with human rights standards – preserving the rule of law and averting overreach along with over-securitization.

A Human Rights Economy

Human rights are integral to the 2030 Agenda, from the rights to food and water to the rights to health, including sexual and reproductive health, and education.

3

We must transform our economies with equality and sustainability at the core

Our economies are failing us. Mind-boggling inequalities, unbelievable wealth enjoyed by a privileged elite, alongside grinding poverty experienced by millions. This is a human rights crisis.

Through the Human Rights Economy concept, we can perform the reset so urgently needed. Looking beyond profit, the short term and the interests of the few, the [Human Rights Economy](#) can deliver for people and planet because it is grounded in everybody's human rights.

States have an obligation to realize progressively economic, social and cultural rights through the application of maximum available resources. Human rights are integral to the 2030 Agenda, from the rights to food and water to the rights to health, including sexual and reproductive health, and education. Resolute action is needed to reverse regression in recent years. Concrete ways for anchoring the economy in human rights include: the use of disaggregated

data to illuminate intersecting, structural and systemic forms of discrimination; the adoption of metrics beyond GDP to reveal a fuller picture of inequalities and well-being; participatory and inclusive budget-setting processes; prioritizing the rights of women and girls, given the impact of their disproportionate role in unpaid care work and the informal sector; and treating as an investment in society, care and support for children, people with disabilities and older people which preserves their agency.

Strengthening of fiscal self-reliance through optimizing progressive tax policies, preventing illegal financial flows and tackling corruption, as well as maximizing official development assistance, result in a public purse better resourced to support institutions and services that advance enjoyment of human rights. More effective international cooperation on both tax and illicit financial flows is also needed.

For many countries, though, the fiscal space to invest in education, health, social protection and other public services is thin due to crippling debt burdens. Prioritizing spending in these areas, including through ringfencing, in order to meet human rights commitments are economic decisions that should not be undercut by debt repayments.

By respecting the primacy of human rights, we can shape an improved multilateral framework for debt relief and restructuring which would prioritize social spending, sustainable development and climate action over debt servicing. Alongside this, we need more effective human rights perspectives and guardrails both in the workings and reform of the International Financial Institutions and their architecture.

Similarly, reframing the relationship between business and society is long overdue. Corporate power continues to grow, largely unchecked. There needs to be a considerable step-up in implementing the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#). We need to build on the trend of making corporate due diligence for human rights harms, including those related to environmental degradation, mandatory through legislation. Efforts by those businesses who do choose to invest in human rights are welcome.

Relationship with our Planet

Human rights must be at the centre of all climate action. These principles are key to ensuring the transition to a low carbon economy is a just one, through placing people at the core of all policy-making and programmes.

4

Environmental action, including on climate change, must be grounded in human rights

For too long, the health of our planet has been sacrificed for ill-considered and inequitable material gain. The impacts of our triple planetary crisis are equally unfair, with the severest effects landing on the most vulnerable and least responsible.

We must build on the remarkable progress on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: through furthering its recognition in national, regional and international legal frameworks; the ratification of existing human rights and environmental instruments along with consideration of new ones; and the introduction of effective mechanisms and policies to operationalize this right.

The growing trend of human rights-related strategic litigation on the climate crisis has much potential to drive significant shifts in policy and practice on the part of governments and business. It may also generate even greater momentum for other accountability initiatives, on ecocide,

for example – discussed in the following message. Children and young people are at the forefront of these remarkable litigation efforts. Their commitment is humbling. But none of this should have fallen on them. The responsibility lies squarely with those who hold power.

States must, without further delay, live up to their climate finance commitments, including for adaptation, loss and damage. Human rights require mobilization of adequate resources for global climate finance in an equitable manner. Countries that benefited least from the industrial revolution are left without the support necessary to protect their people and their environments. Communities feel abandoned, including those who face the loss of habitable land and possible displacement. Not only is this lack of international solidarity deeply unfair, it is a threat to our collective survival.

Human rights must be at the centre of all climate action. These principles are key to ensuring the transition to a low carbon economy is a just one, through placing people at the core of all policy-making and programmes. Difficult choices will have to be made, not least on jobs, and it is critical that these fully consider the needs and human rights of all affected. The Human Rights Economy approach is integral to all of this; for example, through addressing inequalities, tackling unsustainable consumption and production practices, repurposing budget-setting processes, as well as underlining the need for an early deadline for the phase-out of public subsidies that result in environmental harm.

Environmental policies must be informed by a diverse range of voices, including those of Indigenous Peoples who often play a critical role in protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, yet have suffered repeated violations of their human rights, including to their traditional knowledge, lands and resources. We need to have robust and consistent standards governing participation, inclusion, safety, as well as free, prior and informed consent for Indigenous Peoples, for all processes, including those at the UN.

Strengthening governance

Good governance is
dependent on holding
accountable those responsible
for human rights violations.

5

Governance must be responsive: through full participation and by ending impunity

For trust to be restored in public institutions, everyone must be able to exercise their right to participate meaningfully in public life.

Essential for agency in our lives, participation also fosters a sense of having a stake in society, nurturing social cohesion. We must urgently end all forms of discrimination, notably racial discrimination, discrimination against women and girls, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, older people, as well as against minorities. Such practices leave people behind, marginalize individuals and communities, and ultimately corrode our societies.

Meaningful participation also helps shape effective solutions. By encouraging input from across society, solutions can be targeted to actual need, benefit from varied perspectives and expertise, and attract widespread support. In an increasingly complex world, societies that fail to cultivate open debate and the free flow of ideas, including through free and independent media, will inevitably risk

atrophy and instability. A vibrant civic space is essential for all of us to thrive. This includes a digital town square that is not dominated by hate speech and disinformation.

Online and offline, we need to move away from polarizing rhetoric that can only divide; instead valuing respectful discussion which creates the space for exploration, innovation, mutual understanding and ‘more in common’ narratives even in the midst of free expression of sharply diverging views. Connection, community and solidarity are proven conduits for dialogue, collaboration and solutions. We must reject the dehumanization of ‘the other’. The vilification of migrants, refugees, political opponents, victims of conflict – a list that grows longer by the day – puts individuals and our societies at risk.

Elections are a litmus test of civic space and of effective governance. Polls are being conducted in an era where both deepfakes and disinformation can be generated more easily and effectively; in a context where the politics of distraction and division, as well as violence, are becoming familiar precursors to the ballot. States and societies cannot afford to fail this test. They must seize the opportunity to strengthen the social fabric and build a national agenda through an engaged process. Rights, such as freedom of expression and of assembly, must be fully respected, including through timely action by governments and companies to ensure an open, safe and inclusive digital space.

We must also urgently address widespread impunity. Good governance is dependent on holding accountable those responsible for human rights violations. Beyond an individual remedy, access to justice plays a broader, crucial role: preventing the simmering of unaddressed grievances capable of triggering instability and conflict. It is in every State's interest to invest properly in institutions that support the rule of law, from independent and well-resourced courts to transitional justice mechanisms and national human rights institutions.

Governments must also ensure effective routes for holding corporate actors to account for human rights harms. The accountability gap is apparent in relation to corporate responsibility, along with that of States and individuals, when it comes to environmental harms. This calls for innovative approaches. The potential of criminal law to deter harmful conduct and provide remediation deserves exploration, including efforts to establish the international crime of ecocide. We should also consider transitional justice approaches; for example, through an international commission of inquiry to investigate the causes of environmental damage, both as an act of memorialization and in order to issue practical recommendations to States. Environmental harms illustrate starkly the accountability deficit endured by Indigenous Peoples. Effective measures to address this include the integration of customary law into plural legal systems and facilitating greater visibility of human rights caselaw from national, regional and international bodies and mechanisms.

We also need to see enlightened leadership on reparatory justice for the legacies of slavery and colonialism, fully guided by the perspectives of people of African descent. This is as much about shaping our present and future as it is about addressing, at long last, the wrongs of the past.

Technology and science

We need to shift decisively to regulation and binding industry-wide standards rather than relying on tech companies to self-govern, with robust provisions on due diligence, transparency and accountability.

6

Human ingenuity must be in the service of humanity: technology and science that uplifts all

Unprecedented advances in digital technology, including generative Artificial Intelligence, offer us previously unimaginable opportunities to move forward on the enjoyment of human rights and contribute to rescuing the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, the negative societal impacts are already with us and proliferating, and human rights harms are almost inevitably going to grow given the largely unregulated nature of some of these technologies. The enormous digital divide means that millions are shut out from the benefits of the digital era with serious consequences for accessing healthcare, education, employment and other potential opportunities.

Placing human rights at the centre of how we develop, use and regulate technology is absolutely critical to our response to these risks. The human rights framework – as developed and applied over decades – constitutes an essential foundation for addressing the many questions raised in the digital sphere, including with regard to our privacy, our

dignity and our voice. These standards span continents and contexts, moving us beyond ethics to legal obligations. We need to shift decisively to regulation and binding industry-wide standards rather than relying on tech companies to self-govern, with robust provisions on due diligence, transparency and accountability. In areas where the risk to human rights is particularly high, such as law enforcement, the only option is to pause until sufficient safeguards are introduced.

A human rights approach requires inclusive and participatory processes which empower everyone affected by the roll-out of new tech – the online, the offline and the disconnected – to shape the digital environment; with a particular effort to reach out to those most often marginalized. States with limited resources must be properly at the table. But dynamics around technology reflect what is happening in society more broadly. Where civil society space is under pressure, the prospects for inclusive governance of technology are poor.

We have already developed a deep understanding of how human rights apply to digital technologies but face a disconnect with the capacity of key actors to translate this into practice. One way to bridge this is to establish, through the Global Digital Compact, a [Digital Human Rights Advisory Mechanism](#). Supported by my Office, this service could provide an invaluable resource for States, companies and others as they develop legislation, policy and practices.

It is crucial that States pay greater attention to the right to benefit from science. This includes protecting the space for scientific enquiry and for evidence-based debate and decision-making, including on environmental crises – governments and industry must take decisive steps to end disinformation, attacks on experts and conflicts of interest. We also need to see greater opportunities for public involvement in decisions on the direction and use of scientific innovations, as well as a step-up in international cooperation on technology transfer, knowledge-sharing and financing.

Youth, Children and Future Generations

Capacity-building and support, including human rights education, are essential to empowering children and realizing their vision of a fairer, safer and happier world for all with human rights at the centre.

7

It is time to go beyond voice: youth and children must be included meaningfully in decision-making and we must act on behalf of future generations

The need to hear from young people, both nationally and internationally, is well acknowledged. But as the [Human Rights 75 Youth Declaration](#) makes so clear, access must also come with the ability to influence outcomes, for all young people, in all their diversity.

By opening up meaningful participation for youth at every level of governance, States create the conditions for better decision-making and stronger outcomes. National youth consultative councils, if well-resourced and transparent on impact, are an important way forward. The deficit in youth representation in politics also needs to be addressed; for many countries, this points towards lowering age requirements for voting and holding office. The new UN Youth Office will open up another route for greater integration of youth perspectives.

The ability of youth to lead meaningful lives, including through active citizenship, is being undermined by the crisis in education. The Secretary General's [Vision Statement on Transforming Education](#) outlines practical steps for addressing this. Human rights standards, in particular on equality and on the use of public resources, are integral to achieving the goal of accessible, quality education for children and youth that is fit for purpose in our rapidly changing world. Attention should be paid to coverage of environment-related issues given the disproportionate impact of the triple planetary crisis on younger generations.

We must drive radical improvements in the enjoyment of human rights by children – in every aspect of their lives, from social protection through to the implications of the digital world. Children bear the brunt of every crisis, most painfully in conflicts. Meaningful and equitable engagement of children in all their diversity in decisions concerning them at the local, national and international levels is integral to the full realization of their human rights. Capacity-building and support, including human rights education, are essential to empowering children and realizing their vision of a fairer, safer and happier world for all with human rights at the centre.

Looking further ahead, we must all – especially governments and the corporate sector – become more vigilant in our responsibility as caretakers for future generations. Long-term approaches which make effective use of preparedness and strategic foresight should become the norm. [The Declaration on Future Generations](#) being negotiated as part of the Summit of the Future is a crucial opportunity to safeguard the rights and interests of future generations, including their enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment.

Our human rights system

Conversations around human rights are often sensitive. But they are indispensable. No country has a monopoly of wisdom on human rights nor a spotless record. We all learn from each other.

8

None of this can be achieved without strengthening our human rights system

Given the growth and complexity of issues before them, global and regional human rights institutions and mechanisms must continue to innovate for the purposes of effectiveness, accessibility, interconnectedness, transparency, responsiveness and inclusivity.

This will require deeper collaboration to reduce dissonance and duplication, encouraging instead greater coordination. One concrete option is to expand on existing approaches which bring global and regional mechanisms together in a more systematic manner. We should pursue the openings for moving towards establishment of human rights mechanisms in every region.

Technology also has a vital role to play; for example, in managing and, potentially, sharing securely the information received by human rights bodies and other mechanisms. We also need to take human rights recommendations to people. This could be through meetings hosted in country bringing

together the public, civil society and government to develop concrete plans for implementation. Building and enhancing partnerships, including creative alliances, will be integral in ensuring the effectiveness and resilience of the human rights system.

We must recognise that as the key institution for the UN's human rights pillar, my Office remains too small to fulfil properly its mandate, to meet demands from States and other actors, as well as respond to the range of challenges faced by the global community. An expansion of staffing, in particular in our country and regional presences, would upgrade our capacity to support peoples and governments more comprehensively. It has long been recognized that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing pillars of the United Nations. This recognition must now be matched by adequate resources for the human rights pillar. To enable my Office and the human rights system to work effectively, impartially and transparently, across all human rights – including the right to development, the right to a healthy environment and the right to peace – requires a significant strengthening progressively, in a predictable and sustainable manner, of our regular and voluntary budget resources. Alongside this, we will continue to innovate our ways of working, cultivate partnerships and develop networks. This includes bolstering our human rights coordination role in the UN system, including through the Agenda for Protection.

The long-term health of all human rights institutions and mechanisms depends ultimately on the extent of support from States. Our human rights architecture is their creation: an acknowledgement of the need for international bodies and mechanisms as both guardians of individual freedoms and as guides for all stakeholders on our journey to shaping stable, peaceful and prosperous societies through respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights. Conversations around human rights are often sensitive. But they are indispensable. No country has a monopoly of wisdom on human rights nor a spotless record. We all learn from each other. It is only through such dialogue that lasting change can become a reality, and further division, violence and chaos averted.

The remarkable evolution of the human rights system is something we should as a global community take pride in and seek to nurture further. This system is essential for the continued legitimacy of multilateralism. All duty bearers must engage with recommendations constructively. They must treat human rights crises wherever they occur with equal concern and consistency of approach, breathing more life into the principle of universality. We need an end to selectivity and double standards.



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Our Commitment to Each Other

In pursuing this vision for human rights, we stand in solidarity with all those denied their rights and pay tribute to the bravery of human rights defenders, past and present. We must draw determination from their courage to craft this new era for human rights, knowing that a long-term vision yields countless dividends today. And that a connecting thread runs between our actions and outcomes now and the world we will end up with in decades ahead.

The challenges are many and escalating, but progress is never linear. Through putting trust in our shared values and in each other, we can resolve to curb our most damaging reflexes. Choosing, instead, to keep moving, with even more conviction and ambition, towards the goal of individuals, societies and a global community thriving in alignment with our deepest values. We must seed that better future now.

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