**United Nations General Assembly**

**Making the human rights treaty body system stronger and more effective**

Plain English version of:

**Strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system**

**General Assembly resolution 68/268**

**Note:** This is not a United Nations official document.

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**Introduction**

**What words mean**

Some words are explained in the text.

Other words in **bold** are explained at the end of this document, in the word bank on page 24.

**About this document**

A resolution is a formal text that has been voted on by all countries that are members of the United Nations in the **General Assembly**.

This resolution seeks to make the human rights treaty body system stronger and more effective. It includes recommendations for how to solve the challenges the human rights treaty body system faces now.

**What is the human rights treaty body system?**

The human rights treaty body system is how the United Nations monitors the protection of **human rights** around the world. From now on in this document it’s called the human rights system.

Human rights agreements are rules for countries to follow to protect people’s human rights. When a country **ratifies** a human rights agreement, it agrees to follow the rules.

For each human rights agreement there is a committee made up of human rights experts. Each committee monitors how well countries that have ratified the human rights agreements are following them.

The committees are supported by the **High Commissioner for Human Rights** and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In this document, they’re called the High Commissioner and the Office of the High Commissioner from now on.

Countries report to the committees on how they’re meeting human rights agreements and where they need to improve.

The committees also hear from other organizations about the human rights agreements and country reports.

The committees review the reports and other information, then recommend changes countries can make to better protect human rights.

Most committees also consider complaints from people who believe there has been a **violation** of their human rights. Some also visit countries to find out about the human rights situation there.

**Challenges facing the human rights system**

The human rights system has several challenges that need to be addressed. For example:

* there’s a **backlog** of country reports and complaints that the committees still need to review
* countries don’t always submit their reports on time
* the way different committees work with countries is not very consistent.

1. **The background to this resolution**

* The General Assembly stresses that countries must protect human rights by following international law, especially the **Charter of the United Nations**, and human rights agreements.
* The General Assembly also stresses that:
  + the United Nations’ work to protect human rights and **basic freedoms** relies on countries following human rights agreements
  + the human rights system needs to work effectively for countries to be able to follow the human rights agreements.

The General Assembly recognizes that human rights committees are very important to promoting and protecting people’s human rights and basic freedoms.

This includes monitoring the progress of each country in following the human rights agreements, and recommending improvements.

* The General Assembly stresses how important it is for:
  + committees to act independently
  + committee members to be fair, independent and moral, and work for the committee in a **personal capacity**.
* The General Assembly recognizes that countries must write regular reports for each committee on how well they’re following their human rights agreement. The reports must describe what steps the country has taken and where it needs to improve.
* The General Assembly notes that countries need more help to prepare their reports.
* The General Assembly recognizes that protecting and promoting human rights should be based on:
  + working together and effective communication

* + increasing the ability of each country to follow the human rights agreements for the benefit of people everywhere.
* The General Assembly stresses how important it is that the United Nations works in different languages, including for human rights. There are 6 official languages in the United Nations. They are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. They’re all equally important in making sure the committees can work effectively.
* The General Assembly recognizes that:
* there are not enough resources available to the human rights system for it to carry on working effectively
* the human rights system needs more money from the United Nations budget
* it’s important to keep looking for new ways to make the human rights system more efficient
* it’s important to work with countries to give them **capacity**-**building** and technical support to follow human rights agreements
* it’s important that all countries in the United Nations can be fully involved in discussions with the committees.
* The General Assembly notes:
  + the **Secretary-General**’s reports on how to improve the human rights system
  + that the High Commissioner’s work on improving the human rights system involved discussions with countries, committees, national human rights organizations, **NGO**s and representatives from education and research
  + the High Commissioner’s report on how to make the human rights system stronger, including the recommendations
  + the report by the organizers of the process to make the human rights system stronger and more effective
  + that the participants in the process include the President of the General Assembly, and experts from countries, the committees, human rights organizations, NGOs and the Office of the High Commissioner.
* The General Assembly stresses that making the human rights system stronger and more effective is something all **stakeholders** want.
* The General Assembly recognizes the work the committees are doing to become more effective.

1. **The General Assembly’s recommendations for improving the human rights system**
2. The General Assembly encourages the committees to offer countries the simpler reporting process, and limit the number of questions they ask countries to answer.
3. The General Assembly encourages countries to consider using the simpler reporting process, if it’s available to them. It will make it easier for them to prepare reports and take part in discussions with the committees about how they’re following the human rights agreements.
4. The General Assembly encourages countries to consider preparing a document that has information relevant to all their human rights agreements, called a common core document.

The country should regularly update the common core document with its recent developments.

To help countries prepare a common core document, the committees should make their guidelines about it thorough, clear and consistent.

1. The General Assembly decides that the annual reports of the committees shouldn’t include documents mentioned in them that have been published separately.
2. The General Assembly encourages the committees to work together to create a consistent way to communicate and work with countries.

The committees should bear in mind the views of the countries, and the different **mandates** and areas of work of the committees. This will make discussions more effective and make best use of time when they have meetings with countries.

1. The General Assembly encourages the committees to write short and focused **concluding observations** for countries, including recommendations for how to improve. The documents should show what the committee has discussed with the country.

The committees should work together to create common guidelines on what to include in concluding observations. They should bear in mind the views of the countries, and the different mandates and areas of work of the committees.

1. The General Assembly recommends that when countries have meetings, they should use the time as efficiently and effectively as possible. For example, they should discuss how to apply the rules of each human rights agreement.
2. The General Assembly strongly disapproves of bullying or revenge against people and groups who work with or for the committees.

Countries should do whatever is appropriate to prevent and stop this kind of human rights violation. This should be in line with 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 all other relevant human rights agreements and documents.

1. The General Assembly encourages the committees to carry on looking for new ways to make their work more efficient, open and consistent, in line with their mandates. The committees should also carry on reviewing how they follow their own rules, so they can be more effective. They should do this in line with their human rights agreements and shouldn’t create new obligations for countries to follow.
2. The General Assembly encourages countries to propose experts for the committees with good morals, skills and experience in human rights, especially areas covered by the human rights agreements.

When it’s appropriate, countries should also consider creating national policies and processes for how to propose experts for committees.

1. The General Assembly recommends that the **Economic and Social Council** should consider a new way to elect experts to the **Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**. The council should consider having a meeting of countries that follow the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. But it should keep the committee’s existing structure and organization.
2. The General Assembly asks the Office of the High Commissioner to include information to explain how the committee is made up in the election documents for country meetings. It should include details of how balanced the committee is in terms of its members, including:

* where they’re from and their different legal systems
* their sex
* their professional background
* when each member joined the committee and when their mandate will end.

1. The General Assembly encourages countries, when choosing an expert for a committee, to make sure the committee always:

* has an even spread of members from different regions
* has a balance of sexes
* includes experts with disabilities
* reflects the different forms of **civilization** and main legal systems in the world.

1. The General Assembly encourages the committees to work together to create a consistent way to write **general comments**. It should involve countries and take stakeholders’ views into account.
2. The General Assembly decides that any documents written by the committees should have a word limit of 10,700. This limit is in line with other United Nations documents.
3. The General Assembly decides that documents written by countries and sent to the committees, including country reports, should have the following word limits:

* first reports: 31,800 words
* regular reports: 21,200 words
* common core documents: 42,400 words

The committees should limit the number of questions countries have to answer in reports, by focusing on the most important issues. This will help countries keep to word limits.

1. The General Assembly asks the Secretary-General, through the Office of the High Commissioner, to support countries to follow their human rights agreements. The Office of the High Commissioner should work with countries to give them advice, technical help and other capacity-building support, if they agree.

Support for countries can include:

* putting a capacity-building officer in every regional office that needs one
* working with regional human rights organizations to give technical help to countries on reporting, including training trainers
* creating a list of experts in reporting, which has a good balance of men and women from different places and legal systems, and with different professional backgrounds
* helping them report effectively and increasing their technical knowledge with training on reporting guidelines
* making it easier to share what has worked well in other countries.

1. The General Assembly stresses that countries need more support, for example from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights. All countries should pay into this fund if they can.

This support should be alongside technical help that focuses on how countries can build their capacity to follow the human rights agreements.

1. The General Assembly encourages the Office of the High Commissioner to work with **United Nations country teams**, agencies, funds and programmes to help countries follow their human rights agreements.

The Office of the High Commissioner should do this when countries ask for help, and in line with their mandates. It should:

* offer countries advice, technical help and capacity-building services
* work closely with countries to develop relevant programmes of support.

1. The General Assembly recognizes that some countries think the preparation of their national reports could be better. So, if a country asks for help on this, the Office of the High Commissioner should include guidance in its technical assistance, based on what works in other countries.
2. The General Assembly encourages countries to give money to help other countries work with the committees, especially those that aren’t represented at the United Nations in Geneva.
3. The General Assembly decides to make public committee meetings available to watch online as soon as possible, so the committees’ work is more accessible and visible.

The Department of Public Information of the United Nationsshould report on whether it’s practical to have **webcasts** of committee meetings in official languages used by the committees involved. The webcasts should be available after the committee meetings as well. They should be easy to search and stored securely to protect them from hackers.

1. The General Assembly asks the Office of the High Commissioner to give country representatives who can’t attend meetings about reports the chance to take part through video calls. This will allow more people to contribute to discussions if they want to.

The United Nations country teams already have video call equipment that can be used.

1. The General Assembly stresses that there should be **summary records** of meetings between the committees and countries. But to help clear the backlog of summary records, they will be made available in only 1 official language of the United Nations. Older summary records will not be translated any more. This is not going to be standard practice. The aim is to find other ways to have **verbatim records** of committee meetings in all United Nations official languages.
2. The General Assembly decides that, if a country asks for it, a summary record of its meeting with a committee will be translated into the United Nations official language the country uses.
3. The General Assembly decides that the meeting time committees get for reviewing reports will be worked out in the following way. So the Secretary-General will need to make sure there’s enough money and people for the work.
   1. A committee can review at least 2.5 country reports for agreements a week and, where relevant, 5 country reports for **Optional Protocols** a week. This is the review rate. Dividing the average number of reports a committee received from 2009 to 2012 by the review rate gives the number of weeks they need to review reports.
   2. Another 2 weeks of meeting time is allowed for activities relating to the simpler reporting process. More time is also allowed if a committee deals with individual complaints. This is based on each complaint taking 1.3 hours to review and the average number committees get a year.
   3. To prevent backlogs, at the beginning of each 2-year period, committees should set a target of a 5% increase in meeting reporting requirements to address the amount of work they expect to receive. And there should be an increase of 15% for the period 2015 to 2017.
   4. Committees that visit countries should have enough money, people and time to do that.
4. The General Assembly decides that the amount of meeting time each committee gets should be reviewed every 2 years. Any changes should be based on the number of reports received in the previous 4 years and the Secretary-General’s requests, in line with the budget rules.

If a committee was given a permanent number of weeks of meeting time before this resolution, that number won’t be decreased.

1. The General Assembly asks the Secretary-General to take into account the following points when setting the future budget for the human rights system:

* The meeting time committees will need when countries have more capacity to send reports
* More countries ratifying agreements
* The number of individual complaints committees receive
* Specific money for committees that need to visit countries

1. The General Assembly asks the Secretary-General to make sure **accessibility** standards are in place for committees, including in the new building being built and renovated.

Committee members with disabilities should also be given **reasonable accommodation** so they can always take part in the committee’s work effectively.

1. The General Assembly decides that committees can use up to 3 official languages for their work. A committee may be allowed to use a 4th official language if they need it to communicate with all their members.

This is not a permanent standard. Countries still have the right to communicate with the committees in any of the 6 official languages of the United Nations.

1. The General Assembly asks the Secretary-General to make the existing arrangements for committee members’ travel more efficient.
2. The General Assembly invites countries that are late sending their reports to include several reports in a single combined report. This is not the usual process, so the committees must agree to it. The report must cover any reports they still need to send by the time the committees adopt this resolution.
3. The General Assembly invites the committees to review reports they received before this resolution, but haven’t reviewed yet, to help countries meet their reporting requirements.

This is a one-off plan to help clear the backlog of reports. It doesn’t affect the existing processes of the committees. A committee can still ask for, and a country can still send, an extra document about the recent developments in that country.

1. The General Assembly invites the committees and the Office of the High Commissioner to carry on working to coordinate and plan the reporting process, and make it more efficient. They should work with countries to create a clear, standard schedule for country reports.
2. The General Assembly stresses how important it is that committee members are fair and independent, and that all stakeholders respect that. Stakeholders shouldn’t get in the way of committee members’ work.
3. The General Assembly encourages all the committees to use the guidelines for making sure committee members are fair and independent. The guidelines are called Guidelines on the independence and impartiality of members of the human rights treaty bodies. They were adopted by the **Chairs** of the committees in Addis Ababa in June 2012.
4. The General Assembly encourages the committees to carry on reviewing the guidelines in paragraph 36. For example, they can ask countries and other stakeholders what they think of the guidelines and how they could be improved. The Chairs should keep countries up to date on how they’re putting the guidelines into action.
5. The General Assembly encourages the committees to develop the role of their Chairs when it comes to making the human rights system more consistent. The Chair’s work should include:

* making decisions about ways of working
* sharing good practice with other committees
* making sure all committees use the same processes.

1. The General Assembly encourages the committees to make it easier for countries to get involved during the meetings of the Chairs in Geneva and New York.

Countries should be able to discuss and ask questions, including about committee members being fair and independent.

1. The General Assembly asks the Secretary-General to write a detailed report every 2 years about the work and progress of the committees. It should include:

* what progress the committees have made in making their work more effective
* the number of reports and individual communications the committees received and reviewed
* how many country visits took place
* how much meeting time the committees have
* how big the report backlog is
* what’s been done to help countries meet their reporting responsibilities, and what effect it’s had
* whether more countries have ratified the human rights agreements
* whether there’s been an increase in reporting
* what’s been done to get countries more involved in discussions with the committees about the human rights agreements.

1. The General Assembly decides it will review the human rights system again no later than 6 years from the date of this resolution.The General Assembly will review how effective the recommendations in this resolution have been to see if they should continue.

The General Assembly will also decide whether anything else can be done to make the human rights system even stronger and more effective.

**Word bank**

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| --- | --- |
| **General Assembly** | All the countries that are members of the United Nations. They meet once a year and make decisions about policies for things like peace and security in the world. |
| **Human rights** | Rights that everyone has, like the right to education or the right to be treated fairly |
| **Ratify** | When a country officially decides to follow an agreement |
| **High Commissioner for Human Rights** | The leader of the United Nations’ work on protecting human rights |
| **Violation** | When a rule is broken or somebody’s rights are disrespected |
| **Backlog** | A build-up of uncompleted work that needs to be dealt with |
| **Charter of the United Nations** | The first agreement of the United Nations about protecting human rights, including standards for how to do that |
| **Basic freedoms** | Freedoms that everyone has  For example, freedom of association, which includes the right to join or leave groups freely |
| **Personal capacity** | When someone acts as themselves and not on behalf of someone else – for example an organization or their employer |
| **Capacity** | The ability of a person or group to do something effectively, like do their job, obey rules or meet their commitments |
| **Secretary-General** | The head of the [United Nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Secretariat) who oversees its work and is responsible for its performance |
| **NGOs** | Non-governmental organizations  Non-profit organizations that work independently from governments |
| **Stakeholders** | People or organizations with an interest or concern in something |
| **Mandate** | Official orders to do something  For example, a committee’s mandate is to protect human rights and make sure countries follow their specific human rights agreement |
| **Concluding observations** | The document a committee writes after its review of a country. It has information on how well a country is following a human rights agreement, including what’s working and what they need to do better. |
| **Economic and Social Council** | A part of the United Nations that focuses on highlighting and improving social and economic conditions around the world |
| **Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** | The United Nations’ human rights committee that monitors how the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx) is followed |
| **Civilization** | The society, culture and way of life in an area or country |
| **General comments** | Guidance that committees write to help countries and other stakeholders understand the human rights agreements |
| **United Nations country teams** | Teams in more than 130 countries that run activities and programmes with different United Nations departments |
| **Webcasts** | Recordings broadcast over the internet, live or on demand |
| **Summary records** | A summary of a meeting, written in the third person  For example, using ‘she said’ not ‘I said’ |
| **Verbatim records** | A full, word-for-word account of a meeting, written in the first person  For example, using ‘I said’ not ‘she said’ |
| **Optional Protocol** | An extra agreement in a human rights agreement that countries can ratify |
| **Accessibility** | Making everything in society easy for people with disabilities to use and take part in. This includes buildings, transport, information, communication systems, public services and sports and leisure activities. |
| **Reasonable accommodation** | Changes that a person with disabilities needs to use a product, place or service. For example, changing a workplace so someone with a disability can work in the same way as everyone else |
| **Chairs** | The committee members who act as the heads of the committees and lead the meetings |