

How the General Assembly Strengthened the UN Human Rights Treaty Body System

The Treaty Bodies are a fundamental pillar of the international human rights protection system. They are independent expert committees that monitor the implementation by States of international human rights treaties, giving life to international norms and standards. States are obliged to report periodically to the Treaty Bodies on how they are doing. This reporting obligation has three benefits for the State under review, namely self-assessment, a national dialogue and international exposure to expert advice and good practices. The Treaty Bodies are substantively supported in their work by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Since the first Treaty Body was established in 1970, the system has expanded significantly. It has doubled in size since 2004 with the establishment of four new treaty bodies, five new procedures for individual complaints and significant increases in the number of members sitting on the committees.

But amid the growth, the functioning of the Treaty Body system was compromised by:

- ☞ Chronic under-resourcing
- ☞ The accumulation of significant backlogs in State party reviews and individual communications
- ☞ The increased complexity of the Treaty Body system due to the proliferation of different working methods for similar processes.

In addition, many States parties did not respect their reporting obligations or did not do so in a timely manner.

This situation led in 2009 to the Treaty Body strengthening process being initiated by the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay.

Ms. Pillay launched a process of reflection with States, Treaty Body experts, and other partners on how to strengthen the system. The inclusive and participatory consultations culminated in the publication of a landmark report (A/66/860) which was presented to the General Assembly in 2012. In this report, the High Commissioner proposed innovative measures to reinforce the Treaty Bodies.

In April 2014, after two years of negotiations among Member States, the General Assembly adopted resolution 68/268 on strengthening the Treaty Body system, building on many of the High Commissioner's proposals.



To enhance the capacity of Treaty Bodies to protect human rights, the General Assembly:

- ☞ Increased treaty body meeting time from 75 to 96 weeks per year, thereby allowing Treaty Bodies to review more countries and individual complaints per year, and decided to review the meeting time every two years on the basis of objective criteria
- ☞ Approved a capacity-building programme to assist countries that need technical assistance in implementing their treaty obligations
- ☞ Reaffirmed the independence and impartiality of Treaty Bodies and their members
- ☞ Strongly condemned reprisals against people and organizations cooperating with the Treaty Bodies
- ☞ Rationalized Treaty Body documentation, thereby also taking important steps towards more environmentally sustainable practices
- ☞ Modernized communication by providing videoconferencing equipment
- ☞ Encouraged the Treaty Bodies to align their working methods to make them more efficient and accessible
- ☞ Empowered Treaty Body chairpersons to harmonize procedures across the Treaty Bodies
- ☞ Requested the UN Secretary-General to ensure that the treaty bodies are progressively made accessible for people with disabilities
- ☞ Encouraged States to provide voluntary funds to facilitate the engagement of countries without representation in Geneva with the Treaty Bodies

The General Assembly requested the UN Secretary-General to submit a report every two years on progress in the implementation of resolution 68/268. In 2020, the General Assembly will review the effectiveness of all measures adopted in order to ensure their sustainability. If appropriate, the General Assembly may decide on further action to strengthen and enhance the effective functioning of the Treaty Body system.

All expenditures in the resolution were financed from efficiency measures within the Treaty Body system. The financial transparency that made such measures possible could serve as a model for other UN bodies.

