

# I. INTRODUCTION TO THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

## A. The United Nations human rights programme

The United Nations human rights programme works to promote and protect the human rights of everyone, everywhere. It is carried out through different United Nations human rights institutions and agencies, and includes the various human rights bodies and mechanisms addressed in this *Handbook*, all of which have the common aim of promoting and protecting internationally agreed human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social—rights that were proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights over 60 years ago.

As the global authority on human rights, the **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights** (OHCHR) is responsible for leading the United Nations human rights programme and for promoting and protecting all human rights established under the **Charter of the United Nations** and international human rights law.

Its vision is of a world in which the human rights of all are fully respected and enjoyed. OHCHR strives to achieve the protection of *all* human rights for *all* people, to empower people to realize their rights and to assist those responsible for upholding such rights in ensuring that they are implemented.

## B. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

OHCHR is part of the Secretariat of the United Nations and is led by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position created in 1993.<sup>1</sup> It collaborates with an ever wider range of actors, including Governments, national human rights institutions (NHRIs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors, to instil as broad a commitment to human rights as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> See General Assembly resolution 48/141 of 20 December 1993. The work of OHCHR is also guided by the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent human rights instruments, including the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (General Assembly resolution 60/1 of 16 September 2005).

As the United Nations principal human rights official, the High Commissioner acts as a moral authority and a voice for victims. The High Commissioner guides the Office's mission and values, identifies its priorities, and drives its activities. The High Commissioner makes public statements and appeals on human rights situations and crises; engages in dialogue with Governments to strengthen national human rights protection; and travels widely to ensure that human rights messages are heard in all parts of the world, to listen to those whose rights have been denied and to engage with duty bearers.

The High Commissioner works to mainstream human rights standards throughout all United Nations programmes to ensure that peace and security, development, and human rights—the three essential pillars of the United Nations system—are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, and that human rights form the bedrock of all United Nations activities.

As the High Commissioner speaks openly and publicly about the global situation of human rights and combats impunity by holding States accountable for their actions and inaction, it is to be expected that the High Commissioner and the Office will at times attract criticism from different quarters. It is all the more important then, when injecting human rights perspectives and approaches into debates which are frequently politicized, that objectivity, accuracy and the universality of human rights underpin the Office's work.

The current High Commissioner, **Ms. Navanethem Pillay**, assumed office in September 2008. Ms. Pillay was preceded by Ms. Louise Arbour (2004-2008), Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello (2002-2003),<sup>2</sup> Ms. Mary Robinson (1997-2002) and Mr. José Ayala Lasso (1994-1997). Mr. Bertrand G. Ramcharan was Acting High Commissioner from 2003 to 2004.

OHCHR is headquartered at Palais Wilson in Geneva, Switzerland, and has an office at United Nations headquarters in New York. Comprising more than 900 staff members, over half of whom work in the field, its presences include country teams and offices, regional offices, human rights advisers, and human rights components in United Nations peace missions.

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<sup>2</sup> On 19 August 2003, Sergio Vieira de Mello was killed along with 21 other United Nations staff in Baghdad, where he was serving the United Nations as the Secretary-General's Special Representative in Iraq.



## Mandate of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

The High Commissioner is mandated by General Assembly resolution 48/141 to:

- Promote and protect all human rights for all;
- Make recommendations to the competent bodies of the United Nations system for improving the promotion and protection of all human rights;
- Promote and protect the right to development;
- Provide technical assistance for human rights activities;
- Coordinate United Nations human rights education and public information programmes;
- Play an active role in removing obstacles to the realization of human rights;
- Play an active role in preventing the continuation of human rights violations;
- Engage in dialogue with Governments with the aim of securing respect for all human rights;
- Enhance international cooperation;
- Coordinate human rights promotion and protection activities throughout the United Nations system; and
- Rationalize, adapt, strengthen and streamline the United Nations human rights machinery.

## C. OHCHR work and activities

OHCHR seeks the implementation of human rights standards in the daily lives of all people everywhere. Working towards this goal, it collaborates with Governments, parliaments, judicial authorities, police and prison officials, NHRIs, NGOs and a broad range of other civil society actors, in addition to United Nations partners, to build awareness of and respect for human rights. OHCHR empowers individuals to claim their rights and assists States in upholding their human rights obligations.

Local, national and international human rights NGOs are a vital part of the international human rights movement and an essential partner for OHCHR. They alert the world to human rights violations. They defend victims, promote rights through education, and campaign for improvements and advancements. The relationship between OHCHR and civil society is a dynamic and collaborative one, which infuses all parts of OHCHR.

OHCHR areas of work span the full spectrum of human rights. Each activity is interrelated and complementary, and forms an integral part of its mission.

Its **thematic work** identifies and targets gaps in the existing human rights system, leading protection and research and addressing contemporary issues, such as climate change and gender-based violence, from within a human rights framework.

In its **standard-setting work**, OHCHR contributes to the development of new international norms to advance human rights protection and entitlement.

Its **monitoring work** aims to ensure that these standards are implemented in practice and thus contributes to making human rights a reality.

Through its work on **implementation** in the field, OHCHR looks for early warning signs of human rights crises and deteriorating situations, offering technical assistance to Governments and ready to deploy staff and resources when crises develop.

OHCHR also works to increase **human rights education** and awareness. It seeks to empower people to access their rights and, by using United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms effectively, to become agents of change—an aim which inspired the creation of this *Handbook*.

OHCHR activities are funded from the United Nations regular budget and from voluntary contributions from Member States, intergovernmental organizations, foundations and individuals.

### **Thematic areas of work**

*OHCHR explores new areas of human rights protection and standard-setting across a broad collection of themes and issues. It provides legal and policy advice, undertakes substantive research, facilitates discussion and consultations on emerging issues and trends, and seeks out issue-based partnerships with a range of human rights stakeholders, promoting best practices.*

*Its thematic areas of work include:*

- Anti-discrimination;
- Children;
- Climate change and the environment;
- Economic, social and cultural rights, including the rights to health, housing, food and water;
- HIV/AIDS;
- Human rights country assessment and planning;
- Human rights and business;
- Human rights and counter-terrorism;
- Human rights and disability;
- Human rights education and training
- Human rights mainstreaming;
- Human rights monitoring and investigations;
- Human rights in peace operations;
- Indigenous peoples and minorities;

- The Millennium Development Goals and the right to development, including poverty reduction;
- Racism;
- The rule of law and democracy, including the administration of justice, good governance, accountability, impunity and anti-corruption initiatives;
- Security policies;
- Trade and globalization;
- Trafficking;
- Transitional justice;
- Women's human rights and gender.

These programmes seek to inject expertise and fresh thinking into selected cross-cutting themes that are of particular importance to the United Nations human rights programme such as equality and non-discrimination. They address groups and issues deserving special attention, such as victims of racial discrimination, minorities and indigenous peoples, women's rights and gender, disability, trafficking and people affected by HIV/AIDS.



## Working together on impunity and the rule of law

The **Updated Set of principles to combat impunity** and the **Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation** were finalized in 2005.

When the initial drafts were ready, OHCHR convened consultations for dialogue and feedback. Several international NGOs participated in these consultations, including the **International Commission of Jurists**, **Amnesty International**, **Human Rights Watch** and the **International Center for Transitional Justice**. NGOs provided the perspectives of international and national partner agencies, allowing needs and experiences from the field to be incorporated into the drafts.

The General Assembly adopted the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation in 2005. Also in 2005, the former Commission on Human Rights took note of the Updated Set of principles to combat impunity.

OHCHR held a series of workshops to disseminate information on these two sets of principles as well as to discuss strategies for their national implementation. In addition to staff from OHCHR field offices and United Nations peace missions, a number of NGOs from post-conflict countries actively participated in these workshops. These local NGOs are instrumental in disseminating the principles and ensuring that they become operational on the ground. Working with

Governments to ensure the implementation and enforcement of these standards is an important role that NGOs continue to play to ensure that the rights set out in these documents are realized.

For further information, see:

- Updated Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity (E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1); and
- Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (General Assembly resolution 60/147).

## Standard-setting and monitoring

*OHCHR seeks to offer the highest quality research, expertise, advice and administrative services to the main United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms as they discharge their standard-setting and monitoring duties, contributing to the development of international human rights law and jurisprudence, and working to ensure the implementation of agreed human rights standards. These bodies and mechanisms include:*

- The **Human Rights Council** and its mechanisms, e.g., the special procedures, the universal periodic review mechanism, the complaint procedure, the Advisory Committee, the Social Forum, the Forum on Minority Issues, and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and
- The **human rights treaty bodies**.

OHCHR is committed to strengthening civil society's capacity to use the United Nations human rights programme effectively. The chapters that follow explore the various ways that civil society can engage with and contribute to United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms through OHCHR:

- **Chapter IV** addresses the human rights treaty bodies;
- **Chapter V** addresses the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, including the Advisory Committee, the Social Forum, the Forum on Minority Issues, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the open-ended Working Group on the Right to Development and a number of mechanisms related to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action;
- **Chapter VI** addresses the special procedures;
- **Chapter VII** addresses the universal periodic review; and
- **Chapter VIII** explains how to submit a complaint on an alleged human rights violation.



For current information on **OHCHR standard-setting and monitoring work**, please visit the **OHCHR website**.

## Human rights implementation

*Human rights standards have little value if they are not implemented. States recovering from conflict or lacking resources or expertise need assistance to meet their human rights obligations. OHCHR therefore devotes considerable resources to supporting national efforts to protect human rights. By engaging with countries, OHCHR strives to bridge a range of implementation gaps, including those related to knowledge, capacity, commitment and security.*

*Through its implementation work in the field, OHCHR aims to ensure that:*

- National authorities are informed about international human rights standards and how to translate these into laws, regulations and policies;
- Government officials and civil society have greater capacity to address human rights concerns;
- Government authorities are aware of their human rights obligations and implement effective remedies to overcome obstacles to the realization of human rights;
- Rights-holders are better protected from policies that threaten their personal security; and
- OHCHR is in a better position to respond to human rights needs on the ground.

OHCHR field offices and presences develop appropriate and effective responses to human rights challenges in close collaboration with Governments, the United Nations system and NGOs and other members of civil society. For instance, OHCHR assists efforts to incorporate international human rights standards into national laws, and advises on the establishment and functioning of independent NHRIs. It also works with and provides human rights training to judiciaries, military police and parliaments on international standards related to their work, provides advice on treaty body and universal periodic review reporting, and develops programmes for human rights education.

Civil society is a vital partner in all OHCHR activities in the field. Here are some examples of civil society engagement and collaboration with OHCHR in the field:

- Alerting OHCHR to deteriorating human rights situations and emerging trends;
- Providing information to OHCHR on human rights situations, developments and alleged abuses, locally and nationally;
- Working in partnership with OHCHR on human rights seminars and workshops, human rights training programmes, and on national and regional projects to raise awareness of human rights; and
- Working with OHCHR to promote the ratification of human rights treaties and their implementation.

OHCHR field presences include country offices, regional offices, human rights components of United Nations peace missions, human rights advisers in United Nations country teams and rapid response to emerging human rights crises.

### 1. Country offices

OHCHR has established an increasing number of country offices. Their activities cover human rights monitoring, public reporting, providing technical assistance, and assisting Governments to develop long-term and sustainable human rights policies and targets.



### **Working with the OHCHR country office in Uganda to better protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities**

The OHCHR country office in Uganda works with associations of persons with disabilities to promote an understanding of disability as a human rights issue, increase awareness of relevant human rights standards and promote full compliance with these standards in domestic legislation, policies and plans. The office in Uganda has engaged with NGOs in the following ways:

- It launched a consultation to provide technical advice on compliance of domestic legislation and policies on disabilities with human rights standards;
- It conducted monitoring activities and focus group discussions on the situation of persons with disabilities, actively promoting, in various districts, the participation of NGOs of persons with disabilities in human rights coordination mechanisms;
- It supported the National Union of Disabled Persons in collecting signatures for a petition urging the Government to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Over 1,000 signatures were collected on the occasion of International Human Rights Day 2007;
- It sponsored the construction of a ramp to the main administrative block in Soroti district to ensure the physical accessibility of public buildings. Continued advocacy by NGOs led to the construction of further ramps in town; and
- It provided training for persons with disabilities on international human rights standards and relevant domestic legislation and policies, making relevant materials available in Braille.

## 2. Regional offices

OHCHR seeks to identify human rights concerns that are important to countries within a region. It can then offer help, both to the region and to the countries, by promoting the sharing and dissemination of experiences and best practices. OHCHR regional offices are also a source of thematic expertise and work closely with regional and governmental bodies, United Nations country teams, international and regional organizations, NHRIs and civil society.

## 3. Human rights components of United Nations peace missions

OHCHR is involved in United Nations peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and plays an important part in the human rights components of complex field operations run by the United Nations Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs. OHCHR also contributes to the work of the United Nations Security Council, which is responsible for

international peace and security. These roles illustrate the central place that human rights occupy in all aspects of United Nations work.

OHCHR has identified four priorities that it seeks to integrate into peace missions:

- Ensuring justice and accountability in peace processes;
- Preventing and redressing human rights violations;
- Building capacities and strengthening national institutions; and
- Mainstreaming human rights throughout all United Nations programmes.



### **Working with the United Nations Mission in the Sudan on women's rights**

Since March 2008, the United Nations Mission in the Sudan's (UNMIS) Human Rights Office has produced a radio programme, in cooperation with the Women Advocacy

Group in Malakal and Radio Malakal, to raise awareness about women's rights, in particular their right to live a life free of gender-based violence. Members of the Upper Nile

State Legislative Assembly and civil society activists have been on the programme. The initiative has been coupled with workshops for local communities.

## **4. Human rights advisers in United Nations country teams**

Human rights advisers are experts deployed by OHCHR to support United Nations country teams at the request of Resident Coordinators. They advise on strategies to build or strengthen a country's capacities and institutions to promote and protect human rights. Human rights advisers also engage with national actors (Government and civil society) on how to promote and implement human rights standards effectively.

## **5. Rapid response to emerging human rights crises**

In addition to engaging with countries through field presences, the OHCHR Rapid Response Unit deploys trained personnel to assist in preventing or responding to deteriorating human rights situations across the globe. OHCHR may conduct or support fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry to investigate serious allegations of human rights violations.

The Unit also serves as the focal point for OHCHR engagement with the human rights components of peace missions, which OHCHR supports by providing assistance with recruitment, induction and training, as well as substantive policy and programme advice.

## OHCHR fellowship and training programmes

OHCHR has established fellowship and training programmes to help increase the role and participation of civil society in human rights mechanisms. These programmes are:

- The **Indigenous Fellowship Programme**;
- The **Minorities Fellowship Programme**;
- The **Human Rights LDC Fellowship Programme**; and
- The **Fellowship for National Human Rights Institutions Staff**.



For more information on **OHCHR fellowship and training programmes**, please refer to **chapter II** of this *Handbook*.

## OHCHR publications and resource materials

OHCHR produces an extensive range of publications related to human rights which provide information of interest to Governments, NHRIs, civil society, the general public and the media. Many publications and resources are available for downloading on the OHCHR website or may be requested from the OHCHR **Publications and Information Desk**.



For more information on **OHCHR publications and resource materials**, please refer to **chapter III** of this *Handbook*, and contact [publications@ohchr.org](mailto:publications@ohchr.org) or [library@ohchr.org](mailto:library@ohchr.org).

## Funds and grants

United Nations funds and grants, some of which are managed by OHCHR, directly benefit NGOs, grass-roots organizations, professional associations and other civil society actors.

The OHCHR-administered funds and grants are:

- The **United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture**;
- The **Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations**;
- The **United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery**; and
- The **“Assisting Communities Together” (ACT) Project**.



For more information on **funds and grants**, please refer to **chapter IX** of this *Handbook*.

## D. The structure of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

OHCHR is led by the High Commissioner and the Deputy High Commissioner. Both are supported in their work by the **Executive Office**, which is part of the OHCHR **Executive Direction and Management Branch**.

The Executive Direction and Management Branch also includes:

- The **New York Office**, which works to ensure that human rights are fully integrated into the United Nations agenda for development and security, and provides substantive support on human rights issues to the General Assembly, the **Economic and Social Council**, the **Security Council** and other intergovernmental bodies;
- The **Policy, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Section**, which works with OHCHR staff to ensure that the Office's strategic vision is translated into concrete priorities and operational plans, and that the impact is effectively monitored and evaluated;
- The **Communications Section**, which develops and implements strategies to improve general knowledge of human rights and inform the international community of human rights developments and OHCHR work;
- The **Donor and External Relations Section**, which works to ensure that Member States are kept fully informed of OHCHR plans, priorities and funding needs, and mobilizes resources to support the implementation of OHCHR programmes;
- The **Field Safety and Security Section**, which is responsible, in coordination with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, for ensuring the security of all OHCHR staff and premises.

The newly established **Civil Society Unit** is also part of the Executive Direction and Management Branch. It is the main entry point for civil society actors wishing to contact OHCHR. The Civil Society Unit provides information and advice on a broad range of issues, advises on policies and strategies to enhance cooperation, and develops tools to assist civil society in engaging with the United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms, of which this *Handbook* is the primary example.

OHCHR **Programme Support and Management Services** provide support in budgeting and financial management; recruitment and human resources; procurement, asset management and general logistical support for field activities; information technology; and staff development and training.

In addition to the Executive Direction and Management Branch and Programme Support and Management Services, OHCHR comprises four substantive divisions:

- The **Human Rights Council and Treaties Division**, which ensures the smooth functioning of the Human Rights Council and a number of its mechanisms, and the

human rights treaty bodies. It also supports activities carried out through the Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture and coordinates all official documentation prepared for use by intergovernmental bodies;

- The **Special Procedures Division**, which supports the work of the special procedures by providing thematic, fact-finding and legal expertise, research and analysis, and administrative and logistical assistance. The Division also facilitates collaboration and meetings between mandate-holders and stakeholders, including civil society;
- The **Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division**, which coordinates the development and implementation of OHCHR country engagement strategies, manages its technical cooperation programme and serves as an entry point for OHCHR field offices; and
- The **Research and Right to Development Division**, which carries out OHCHR thematic research on human rights, including by providing technical support to the field. The Division also manages the OHCHR documentation centre and publications programme, producing a range of methodological tools and learning packages for use in countries and at headquarters to build the capacity of national institutions, civil society and other partners.

## E. OHCHR resources

### OHCHR website

Civil society actors are encouraged to consult the OHCHR website for updates and information on OHCHR work and activities, including information on the various human rights mechanisms. The OHCHR **Annual Reports on Activities and Results** and the **High Commissioner's Strategic Management Plan** are also available from the OHCHR website.



Visit OHCHR website: <http://www.ohchr.org>

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The Handbook is available in digital format on the OHCHR website at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/civilsocietyhandbook/>

There you will find the Handbook's chapters available for download, as well as links to all the references contained in the publication.

## **F. How to contact OHCHR**

### **Visiting addresses**

#### **Palais Wilson:**

52 rue des Pâquis  
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

#### **Motta Building:**

48 avenue Giuseppe Motta  
CH-1202 Geneva, Switzerland

### **Postal address**

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Website: <http://www.ohchr.org>