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THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL AT 20

Expanding Participation, Strengthening Implementation: from NHRIs to Indigenous Peoples to LRGs

Draft Concept Note

Date: Friday, 19 June 2026

Venue: Villa Rigot, Geneva

Duration: 3 hours

Convened by: Geneva Human Rights Hub, Global Cities Hub, GANHRI, the Swiss Human Rights Institution, ISHR, Geneva for Human Rights, with the Permanent Missions of and Colombia (TBC)

Background and rationale

The twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Human Rights Council offers an opportunity not only to reflect on the Council's achievements, but also to examine how its institutional practice has evolved over time. Since its establishment in 2006, the Council has become a central forum for international human rights dialogue, standard-setting, scrutiny, prevention and follow-up. Its effectiveness, however, has never depended on States alone. It has also relied on the independence and diversity of the actors able to bring evidence, lived experience, institutional knowledge and implementation perspectives into its work.

One important feature of the Council's first two decades has been the gradual widening of the space for meaningful engagement by stakeholders beyond national governments. This evolution has not been linear, nor has it affected all groups in the same way. Yet it reflects a broader recognition that international human rights protection is strengthened when the Council can hear from actors who are independent, representative, close to affected communities and able to contribute to implementation at the national and local levels.

This widening of participation can be understood as both a procedural and a substantive development. Procedurally, it concerns the ways in which actors beyond States gain access, recognition and voice within the Council's proceedings. Substantively, it concerns the contribution these actors make to the Council's effectiveness: by grounding deliberations in lived realities, strengthening follow-up, supporting prevention, and connecting international discussions in Geneva with implementation on the ground. In this sense, stakeholder engagement is not simply a matter of inclusion; it is also a question of institutional relevance, legitimacy and impact.

National Human Rights Institutions offer one of the clearest examples of this development. Grounded in the Paris Principles, NHRIs occupy a distinctive position between the State, civil society and the international human rights system. Their role was already recognized in the Council's founding framework: General Assembly resolution 60/251 (2006), which established the Human Rights Council, called on the Council to work in close cooperation with NHRIs, alongside governments, regional organizations and civil society. This was then operationalized through Human Rights Council resolution 5/1 (2007) on institution-building, which provided the procedural basis for NHRI participation in the Council's work. The role of "A status" NHRIs was further strengthened by

Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 (2011), which gave them specific opportunities to intervene, including immediately after the State concerned in certain dialogues and at the adoption of UPR outcomes. In the same year, the Council adopted its first dedicated resolution on NHRIs, resolution 17/9 (2011), expressly recognizing their important role in the Council, including in relation to the UPR, special procedures and treaty bodies. These developments have enabled “A status” NHRIs to engage through written submissions, documentation, oral interventions and video statements, bringing independent national-level analysis into international proceedings. Their experience illustrates how an actor beyond States can become structurally embedded in the Council’s practice while contributing to the quality and credibility of its work.

A second important area of evolution concerns Indigenous Peoples. The Council has contributed to the development of dedicated spaces and mechanisms, including the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, established in 2007. An important reference point in this trajectory was the September 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, which gave renewed political impetus to the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system and helped pave the way for the subsequent strengthening of the Expert Mechanism’s mandate as a central mechanism in this field. More recently, Human Rights Council resolution 60/13 (2025) marked a further step in this trajectory. It provides for the participation of Indigenous Peoples’ representatives and institutions duly established by themselves in specific Council settings, including the interactive dialogues with the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism, as well as the annual panel discussion on Indigenous Peoples’ rights. At the same time, it keeps open broader discussions on their participation in the work of the Council more generally. This points to a broader shift: from discussing Indigenous Peoples primarily as subjects of protection, toward recognizing the importance of their own institutions, voices and forms of representation in matters affecting them. This raises fundamental questions about meaningful participation, self-determined representation and the relationship between affected communities and international human rights decision-making.

Looking to the future, local and regional governments represent a further actor in this conversation. Cities, regions and other subnational authorities are often at the forefront of implementing human rights in practice, including through public services, housing, education, policing, health, social inclusion, climate action and

local participation. The Council has already recognized the role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights, including through work by the Advisory Committee and, more recently, Human Rights Council resolution 57/12 (2024), which calls for further exchange on good practices, coordination between national and local governments, capacity-building and better engagement of local governments in United Nations human rights mechanisms. This reflects a broader trend toward acknowledging that meaningful implementation also requires the participation of actors operating closest to communities and responsible for many of the services through which rights are realized in practice.

This roundtable will therefore approach NHRIs, Indigenous Peoples and local and regional governments not as three separate categories of stakeholders. Rather, it will use them as three entry points into a broader institutional question: *how has the Human Rights Council widened participation over its first twenty years, and how can this evolution strengthen its impact in the next twenty?*

The experience of NHRIs illustrates the development of formalized access and recognized independent participation. Ongoing discussions on Indigenous Peoples' participation highlight questions of representation, status and voice. The growing relevance of local and regional governments points to the importance of implementation and multi-level governance.

The objective is not to blur the intergovernmental nature of the Council, nor to multiply participation for its own sake. Rather, it is to consider how broader, principled and well-structured engagement can strengthen the Council's relevance, legitimacy and implementation impact. This means asking both how actors beyond States gain meaningful access to the Council and how their engagement can make the Council's work more inclusive and effective.

By bringing together representatives of States, NHRIs, Indigenous Peoples, local and regional governments, United Nations mechanisms and civil society, the event will explore how the Council can continue to adapt to the realities of multi-layered human rights protection today: realities in which implementation is increasingly multi-level, evidence is produced by a wider range of actors and affected communities seek more direct and meaningful ways to be heard.

Scope and objectives

The event forms part of the Annual Conference of the Geneva Human Rights Hub and the broader HRC@20 anniversary week, which includes reflections on standard-setting, interpretation and guidance, prevention, implementation and stakeholder engagement. The discussion will be structured around two complementary questions.

- First, how have actors beyond States gained access, recognition and voice within the Human Rights Council?
- Second, how can their engagement strengthen implementation, follow-up and prevention beyond Geneva?

Together, these questions will allow participants to reflect on the Council's institutional evolution over the past twenty years, while identifying principles and pathways for more meaningful stakeholder engagement in the years ahead.

The event will aim to:

1. reflect on the evolution of stakeholder engagement at the Human Rights Council over its first twenty years;
2. examine how different actors beyond States have found pathways into the Council's proceedings, including through formal recognition, dedicated mechanisms, informal practice and thematic engagement;
3. identify lessons from the experience of NHRIs and Indigenous Peoples that may inform future discussions on broader participation;
4. explore the potential role of local and regional governments in strengthening implementation, follow-up and prevention within the Council's ecosystem;
5. consider the principles that should guide any further widening of participation, including independence, representativeness, accountability, complementarity, proximity to rights-holders and respect for the Council's intergovernmental character.

Format

The event will be organized as a three-hour roundtable, combining short framing interventions with moderated discussion. It will be divided into two substantive segments.

The first segment will focus on *pathways into the Council*: how actors beyond States gain access, visibility, recognition and voice. The second segment will focus on *participation as impact*: how broader engagement can strengthen implementation, follow-up, prevention and the Council's connection to realities on the ground.

Both segments will include perspectives from NHRIs, Indigenous Peoples and local and regional governments, allowing the discussion to move beyond stakeholder categories and toward broader questions of institutional design, legitimacy and effectiveness.
