

**GENEVA
HUMAN
RIGHTS
HUB**



**Expanding Participation at the Human
Rights Council:**
Stock-Taking and Suggested Pathways
for the Future

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INTRODUCTION

Background and context: stakeholder participation to strengthen implementation, follow-up and prevention

The 20th anniversary of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) offers an opportunity to reflect on its achievements and examine how its institutional practice has evolved. A key feature of the first two decades of the Council has been the gradual widening of 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, in proximity to affected communities and able to contribute to implementation at both national and local levels. Stakeholders beyond national governments have brought unique evidence, lived experience, institutional knowledge and implementation perspectives into the Council's work.

How has the HRC widened participation over its first 20 years, and how can this evolution strengthen the Council's effectiveness on the ground? Which principles should guide further widening of participation, including independence, representativeness and proximity to rights-holders, among others?

Three points are worth noting. First, stakeholder participation exists in various forms, ranging from consultation, representation within the Council to institutional recognition and can be formal or informal. Second, stakeholders are not a monolithic group but rather distinct actors with differing interests, resources, institutional positions and sources of legitimacy which may affect their opportunities for engagement in the HRC's processes. These actors include, but are not limited to, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), Indigenous Peoples, community representatives, victims and survivors' groups, local and regional governments (LRGs) and young people. Third, participation is not an end in itself but rather a means to increased impact and effectiveness of the Human Rights Council on the ground. Indeed, stakeholder engagement is not simply a matter of inclusion but a question of institutional relevance, legitimacy and impact of the Council.

Why participation matters

The formalised role of National Human Rights Institutions, the evolving recognition of Indigenous Peoples and the growing engagement of local and regional governments have provided key opportunities for stakeholders to bring independent evidence and lived experiences emerging from their unique proximity to communities into the Council. These stakeholders, among others, provide an important bridging function between local and international levels, acting as connectors between Geneva-based deliberations and national and local implementation. However, the space for civil society organisations and other stakeholders within the UN system is shrinking, with CSOs and others facing

increasing accreditation challenges, security measures and resource constraints hindering their participation in HRC sessions and meetings. An equally worrying trend is the growth of anti-rights actors, competing for this little space with legit civil society actors. Shrinking participation threatens the credibility and accountability of the Council, with serious consequences for implementation, follow-up and prevention. Thus, independence, representativeness, accountability and clearer pathways for engagement are essential for translating wider participation into lasting impact while preserving the Council's intergovernmental character.

Objectives and scope

This briefing paper is one of three papers addressing key areas of discussion related to the Human Rights Council's achievements and future role, including on standard-setting, guidance in the digital transformation and the evolution of stakeholder participation in the human rights system. Each paper draws insights from and builds on discussions held between 15-19 June 2026 during the [Geneva Human Rights Hub's Annual Conference](#).

First, this paper will examine how stakeholder engagement at the Human Rights Council has evolved over the Council's first twenty years, including how actors beyond states have found avenues into the proceedings of the Council. Second, it aims to identify pathways towards meaningful stakeholder participation, access, recognition and voice within the Council, as well as how participation can strengthen implementation, follow-up and prevention. Third, the paper highlights key insights emerging from a roundtable on expanding participation and strengthening implementation, organised on 19 June 2026 as part of the Geneva Human Rights Hub's Annual Conference, and sets out recommendations for expanding stakeholder participation at the Council.

I. ASSESSING PATHWAYS INTO THE COUNCIL: ACCESS, RECOGNITION, VOICE

Since its creation under UN General Assembly resolution 60/251 of 2006, the Human Rights Council has invested significant efforts, time and resources in engaging a variety of stakeholders within its processes. Stakeholder engagement benefits both stakeholders and the Council: the Human Rights Council provides stakeholders with national perspectives and pathways for action to address human rights issues and challenges, while stakeholders provide necessary independent voices emerging from national and local levels to the international human rights system. Whether by participating in Human Rights Council sessions, organising and participating in side events held during these sessions, often in partnership with UN agencies or other partners, engaging with Special Procedures mandate holders on human rights issues or providing expertise and local perspectives to a country's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, stakeholders have explored various pathways into the Council's functioning and decision-making processes.

National Human Rights Institutions, grounded in the Paris Principles, offer one of the clearest examples of the widening of participation within the Human Rights Council. Particularly notable is the recognition of NHRIs' role in the Council's founding framework. General Assembly resolution 60/251 (2006) called on the Council to cooperate with NHRIs, governments, regional organizations and civil society in its work.¹ This was then operationalized through HRC resolution 5/1 (2007) on institution-building, which provided the procedural basis for NHRI participation in the Council's work.² The role of "A status" NHRIs was further strengthened by HRC resolution 16/21 (2011), which offered specific opportunities to intervene during dialogues and during the adoption of UPR outcomes.³ Two months later, the Council adopted its first dedicated resolution on NHRIs (resolution 17/9 of 2011), expressly recognizing their important role in the HRC.⁴ These developments have enabled "A status" NHRIs to engage in Council processes 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.

Other pathways have created further opportunities for participation, although these remain largely ad hoc and specific to certain groups. One important area of evolution concerns Indigenous Peoples. The Council has contributed to the development of dedicated spaces and mechanisms for this group, including the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, established in 2007 as a subsidiary body of the HRC. The 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples gave renewed political impetus to the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the UN system and helped pave the way for the strengthening of the Expert Mechanism's mandate. More recently, HRC resolution 60/13 (2025) provides for the participation of Indigenous Peoples' representatives and institutions in specific Council settings, including 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.⁵ This points to a broader shift from discussing Indigenous Peoples as subjects of protection towards recognizing the importance of their own institutions, voices and forms of representation in matters affecting them.

¹ See Human Rights Council resolution [A/RES/60/251](#) adopted on 15 March 2006, paragraph 5.

² See Human Rights Council resolution [A/HRC/RES/5/1](#) adopted on 18 June 2007.

³ See Human Rights Council resolution [A/HRC/RES/16/21](#) adopted on 12 April 2011 paragraphs 13 & 28.

⁴ See Human Rights Council resolution [A/HRC/RES/17/9](#) adopted on 16 June 2011.

⁵ See Human Rights Council resolution [A/HRC/RES/60/13](#) adopted on 6 October 2025, paragraph 28.

II. FROM PARTICIPATION TO IMPACT: IMPLEMENTATION, FOLLOW-UP AND PREVENTION

A key question is not simply how stakeholder participation takes place but how it contributes to the Human Rights Council's effectiveness and impact on the ground. Another is how to build stronger connections between Geneva-based deliberations and implementation on the ground.

Several key examples of how participation has effectively translated into impact relate to Indigenous Peoples' role within the HRC. Indigenous Peoples have taken notable initiatives within Council bodies to push for the recognition of their communities across the globe. Indigenous women in particular play a central role as knowledge-holders, leaders and members of community-led initiatives, essential for spotlighting Indigenous People's rights. Together, Indigenous Peoples play a vital prevention role due to their proximity to their territories and are often the first to detect early warning signs of shrinking civic space and other emerging patterns and trends of rights violations.

Indigenous Peoples' contributions to the Council have translated into tangible impact in several ways. In 1982, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, providing an institutional space for Indigenous issues within the UN human rights system.⁶ This was followed by the development of the draft UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including through an open-ended inter-sessional working group established in 1995 by the Commission on Human Rights. Indigenous organisations were specifically invited to participate in this process, reflecting an emerging recognition that those directly affected should have a role in developing standards concerning their rights. More recently, Indigenous organisations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have consistently documented Indigenous communities' exclusion from public services, generating political pressure which contributed to the landmark Law No. 22/030 on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples addressing this issue.⁷ Beyond Indigenous Peoples, another recent example includes the Charter of the Rights of Victims and Survivors of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, presented by UN Special Rapporteur on torture Alice Jill Edwards at the 61st Human Rights Council session in 2026 and largely drafted by torture survivors via the coordination of associations of torture survivors.

In other cases, impact may be more subtle, with contributions from stakeholders not always immediately visible. For example, non-governmental organisation UPR Info holds

⁶ See Economic and Social Council resolution [E/RES/1982/34](#) adopted on 7 May 1982.

⁷ It is worth noting that Law No. 22/030 is the very first national law in the DRC to legally recognize Indigenous communities and explicitly mandate their access to basic social services, healthcare, and education.

pre-sessions to a country's UPR process with civil society representatives to enable them to share human rights concerns and priorities with States engaged in the UPR process.⁸ Following this process, UPR Info acts as a facilitator for dialogues between civil society organisations, NHRIs and national actors, as well as for civil society consultations to identify advocacy strategies for popularising and implementing UPR recommendations.⁹ A key question here is how links and relationships between civil society, NHRIs and national actors can be sustainably maintained beyond and in between UPR cycles.

Further, initiatives aiming to increase stakeholder participation, implementation and follow up, with multiple initiated by the Council, are also worth noting. HRC Resolution 24/2 of 2013 first recognised the role of local governments in promoting and protecting human rights, "without any prejudice to the primary responsibility of the national government."¹⁰ Subsequent resolutions consistently reiterated the central role of local governments in the promotion and protection of human rights and encouraged their increased engagement in the work of regional and international human rights mechanisms, including for the implementation of recommendations emerging from these.¹¹ HRC Resolution 51/12 of 2022 also acknowledged the role of local government in "preventing and reducing inequalities and protecting the rights of persons in vulnerable and marginalized situations from discrimination by developing and implementing local laws, policies and programmes."¹² Most recently, Resolution 57/12 of 2024 encouraged States to promote their engagement "in the work of regional and international human rights mechanisms and in implementing relevant recommendations."¹³

Efforts to increase engagement of local and regional governments at the international level have also been initiated outside the Council, including at the subnational level. One recent example includes the New York State Assembly Bill 2025-A9068A, introduced in 2025, which would require New York State to participate in the UPR as a subnational

⁸ See "UPR Info Pre-Sessions," <https://upr-info.org/en/presessions> accessed on 15 September 2026.

⁹ See "Calendrier de l'engagement de l'EPU dans le cycle actuel," <https://upr-info.org/fr/review/benin> accessed on 15 September 2026. For example, following the Universal Periodic Review process in Benin in 2023, UPR Info organised consultations together with non-governmental organisation Changement Social Bénin and the National Human Rights Institution to discuss advocacy strategies for the implementation of UPR recommendations. Following this, Changement Social Bénin developed a toolkit to popularise recommendations, including on the issue of detention in police stations. See Changement Social Bénin, <https://changementsocialbenin.org/index.php/category/justice-penale-publication/> accessed on 15 September 2026.

¹⁰ See Human Rights Council resolution A/RES/24/2 adopted on 26 September 2013.

¹¹ See Human Rights Council resolutions A/RES/27/4 (2014), A/RES/33/8 (2016), A/RES/39/7 (2018), A/RES/45/7 (2020), A/RES/51/12 (2022).

¹² See Human Rights Council resolution A/RES/51/12 (2022) adopted on 6 October 2022.

¹³ See Human Rights Council resolution A/RES/57/12 adopted on 10 October 2024.

stakeholder.¹⁴ While the bill has not yet been adopted, it illustrates a potentially important model for enabling subnational authorities to contribute independently to international human rights review processes. Within the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), an ongoing project provides advice on including Indigenous Peoples in Treaty Body reviews, offering an Indigenous Peoples lens within resolutions emerging from the Council's mechanisms. As a result of OHCHR's work, human rights mechanisms have addressed the situation of indigenous Kanak people in French overseas territory New Caledonia.

Finally, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions' (GANHRI) established Indigenous Peoples' Rights Caucus in October 2024, bringing together 22 NHRIs worldwide, provides a platform for peer exchange, strategic advocacy and capacity building, while also facilitating collective engagement with UN mechanisms. Its work illustrates how networks can strengthen stakeholder participation by sharing expertise, coordinating advocacy and creating sustained links between national-level monitoring and international human rights processes.

III. KEY INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The insights and recommendations outlined below build on discussions during a roundtable on expanding participation and strengthening implementation, held in Geneva on 19 June 2026 as part of the Geneva Human Rights Hub's Annual Conference. These discussions offered relevant guidance and practical ways forward for expanding stakeholder participation in the Council.

Key Insights:

1. ECOSOC status is a precedent for effective participation.

Many external stakeholders to the Human Rights Council do not have automatic access to the Palais des Nations in Geneva. This limits stakeholders' opportunities to engage with Member States, UN staff as well as other civil society members in and around HRC sessions. Further, no clear options exist for observer status in the Council's sessions, which further limits stakeholders' ability to take note of key developments and updates within the Council. Securing ECOSOC status where possible, establishing clearer observer arrangements, communicating opportunities for affected communities to contribute to HRC session and ensuring participation modalities for local and regional governments would secure clearer pathways for stakeholder participation in the Human Rights Council's processes.

¹⁴ See The New York State Senate, "Assembly Bill A9068A," <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/A9068/amendment/A> accessed on 15 September 2026.

2. Stakeholders want active participation in Council decision-making, not simply consultation.

While the Human Rights Council has made significant efforts in widening the space for meaningful engagement by stakeholders beyond national governments, participation is still often resumed to consultation rather than active participation from said actors. Opportunities for active participation could include mechanisms for stakeholders to report back on implementation, maintain dialogue between review cycles, and feed local evidence into follow-up human rights processes.

3. Digital tools offer creative opportunities for increased stakeholder participation.

Digital tools can enhance remote participation to Council sessions, where possible, as a way of expanding the circle of participants involved in HRC processes. However, digital tools and platforms can offer more creative opportunities for expanding stakeholder participation. One interesting avenue is using digital tracking tools to link voluntary local reporting, including SDG reporting, with human rights implementation and follow-up.

Key Recommendations:

1. Move from consultation to active stakeholder participation in Council decision-making.

Participants noted that non-governmental organisations do not simply want to be consulted on Council issues, developments and decisions but want to actively participate in the Council's decision-making. A first key step is ensuring necessary accreditation for access to HRC sessions. Yet moving beyond a participation model that depends heavily on existing accreditation or State-mediated access is even more important. The Human Rights Council should provide differentiated pathways for stakeholders based on their legitimacy, expertise, independence and proximity to affected communities. This could include clearer modalities for affected communities and Indigenous Peoples to contribute directly to Council processes, strengthened opportunities for local and regional governments to engage, and more systematic avenues for stakeholders to provide evidence and report back on implementation. Participation should be understood not simply as being present in Geneva but having predictable opportunities to inform decisions, contribute evidence, follow up on recommendations and engage with actors responsible for their implementation.

2. Recognise and leverage stakeholders' preventive role for more effective prevention.

Stakeholders play a central role in identifying early warning signs of human rights violations, deteriorating humanitarian situations and/or increasing risks of violent conflict. For example, Indigenous Peoples are often the first within their communities to detect risks of shrinking civic space and other emerging patterns and trends of rights violations. This preventive function risks being lost if Indigenous Peoples and other stakeholders are not integrated throughout processes. The Human Rights Council, under its prevention function, should recognise and leverage stakeholders' preventive role and potential throughout human rights processes, including early monitoring, agenda-setting, country reviews, follow-up and implementation, with established channels for raising concerns and feeding evidence into the Council's preventive work.

3. Make space for local and regional governments (LRGs) participation.

Local and regional governments play an important role in implementing resolutions emerging from the Council's mechanisms, including the UPR, Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures. In fact, 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 and climate action.¹⁵ LRGs are equally well placed for bringing local constituencies' concerns, issues, challenges and requests to the international human rights system, advocating for ideas and providing key local and regional insights grounded in institutional practices.¹⁶ Catalonia provides a strong model example of bridging its active civil society to the HRC's mechanisms, including during Spain's UPR process. Expanding this model could provide important progress in increasing LRG participation in the Council by institutionalising links between local, national and international levels. Such participation should allow LRGs to contribute their own implementation experience and local perspectives while recognising that their institutional position and relationship with national authorities may differ across contexts.

¹⁵ OHCHR's Guidance Framework for creating a Human Rights City provides a comprehensive roadmap for local governments to set priorities, allocate resources and deliver services. See OHCHR, "Guidance framework for creating a Human Rights City," <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/guidance-framework-creating-human-rights-city> accessed on 23 September 2026.

¹⁶ Note: The Council has previously recognised the role of local governments in the promotion and protection of human rights, most recently in HRC resolution 57/12 (2024) which calls for further exchange and coordination between and among national and local governments, capacity-building and better engagement of local governments in human rights mechanisms. See Human Rights Council resolution [A/HRC/RES/57/12](#) adopted on 10 October 2024.

4. Invest in strategic thinking on how to make human rights palatable at the local level.

A key question for stakeholders is how to embed and operationalise human rights at the local level. International human rights language often feels abstract and/or disconnected from local priorities. Framing human rights as issues of (unequal) access to healthcare, education and services could help make the international human rights system more relevant locally. Here, national and sub-national actors, including NHRIs, LRGs and community-based organisations play a particularly important role in translating recommendations emerging from human rights mechanisms into national and local policies, tools and monitoring mechanisms.