



Wilton Park

Human rights and Agenda 2030: challenges and opportunities

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Discussion summary

Experts from around the world, government and civil society representatives, met at Wilton Park to explore how Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and existing international human rights norms can be further aligned, identifying potential risks and challenges. The off-the-record discussion sought to identify creative approaches to promote and strengthen human rights protection, and enlarge the space for civil society, in the context of realisation of the 2030 Agenda.

1. Many perceive backsliding in the current global human rights environment, with virtual abdication of responsibility for rights protection in a number of countries, primarily in the West, which were previously human rights champions. There is also seen to be a crisis of confidence at the United Nations (UN) itself. At the same time, there are better means now available for protecting human rights, and many more human rights activists working at local level than in the past.
2. Among the threats to human rights are: the many unresolved armed conflicts, for example in Myanmar, South Sudan, Yemen, and Syria; terrorism, as manifested through ISIL, and the Faustian bargains governments have made in counter-terrorism activity; the assertiveness of China, and Russia, undermining the fundamentals of human rights; shrinking space for civil society and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders globally; the risks of technology; the rise of hate and divisiveness, which while not new have been normalised through political discourse; states' non-cooperation with international human rights and legal bodies; discrimination, and the lack of equal protection, for example for the LGBTI community in parts of the world.
3. Reversing such trends will take much more effective messaging, and greater effort to win hearts and minds, bringing human rights closer to people's everyday life and garnering popular support. There is a need to be bold in addressing failures or erosion of fundamental rights, through the UN and robust responses from governments. Human rights defenders, who speak out for the marginalised and are often killed or targeted in the context of development projects, need to be protected in national law, and funds dedicated to their work.
4. It was generally agreed that while much effort has been made in recent decades to integrate human rights and development, a critical moment has been reached in human rights 'mainstreaming' with the adoption of Agenda 2030. The framework for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is anchored in human rights, and in some areas, for example education, the elaboration of the goal is in line with international human rights standards. SDGs are universal, applying to all countries. They are comprehensive, comprising economic, cultural and social rights as well as civil and political, through reference to rule of law and access to justice. SDGs promote equality and inclusion, based on the concept 'leave no-one behind'. SDGs therefore represent a major opportunity to promote a human rights-based approach to development. But what does a human rights-based approach comprise? In essence, human rights focus on the protection of the individual.

5. International human rights law and the SDG framework are parallel, but converging frameworks. The SDGs have political commitment, and can secure far larger financial resources than human rights. They provide an opportunity to address the most vulnerable groups, especially in Europe. Yet to capitalise on promoting human rights through the SDG framework, a number of key issues, or shortcomings, must be addressed. These overlapping challenges include:
- **Communications, narrative, engagement and outreach:** human rights messaging is often in jargon which is technical and largely unintelligible or unattractive to persons outside the human rights community. It needs to be simplified, to include messages relevant to young people as well as persons such as health, environment or sanitation workers, showing how linking the SDGs can have real impact to change people's everyday lives. Communication with the business community, with which there should be much more engagement, should be shaped to show the business case for economic growth through linking human rights and development. The UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provides the framework for business engagement and should be fully utilised in the realisation of SDGs.
 - **Dialogue and partnerships:** there should be a willingness to speak to persons outside the 'comfort zone' of the human rights community, and to break out of working in silos, in particular engaging more with development actors and those financing development projects, the World Bank, international financial institutions and regional economic bodies. Human rights advocates should speak to foreign and development ministries, as well as finance and economic officials. New partnerships could be established with, for example, communities of fishermen, miners, artisans, or agrarian workers, those closest to the coal face, who are rights holders and can themselves become human rights activists. Partnerships can also be created with local government, faith communities, social movements and sports organisations. Working to link human rights and development at local level can be highly effective, for example through the 'human rights cities' framework.
 - **Financing:** democratisation initiatives, and especially development projects, have considerably more money attached than human rights budgets provide. At the same time, there should be some caution as human rights activity does not necessarily fit easily the methodology for measuring, evaluation and outputs used by the development community. Becoming smarter in leveraging money for human rights could, for example, mean plugging into the anti-corruption agenda, which brings together a range of issues key to human rights including political energy, business involvement, the important role of human rights defenders, independent media and investigative journalism. With regards to SDG financing, greater clarity is needed on what business is expected to do, and whether it becomes the 'go to' sector for funding, which seems to be the expectation whether or not the corporate sector is ready for this. The UN needs to draw up criteria for public-private financing. The investment community is an area largely untapped for human rights support and should be explored, particularly since there are signs it is becoming more aware of a need to contribute to society and not only perform financially for investors.
 - **Technology and data:** there is a growing recognition of the risks of technology to human rights, and strong sense the human rights community needs to engage more fully in discussions on technology which, while part of the problem, can also provide solutions. There is a need to reconceptualise digital spaces and how the international human rights framework fits with digitisation. There are existing initiatives, for example in the area of artificial intelligence, on which to build to introduce systems of accountability, such as a code of conduct.
6. Much data relevant to SDGs already exists in the UN's human rights treaty monitoring and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) procedure and should be utilised. The universal human rights index should be made SDG readable. Shadow reporting on SDGs should be encouraged. Data should be transparent and clearly sourced, from both government and civil society, and localised initiatives to obtain data, likely to be closest to the issues, should be supported. SDG indicators are seen to be a weakness in Agenda 2030 and the human rights community should communicate with the statisticians in government who were responsible for drafting these indicators.
7. **The UN, regional bodies and human rights machinery:** while UN human rights machinery is often under threat, and needs itself to mobilise popular support and sufficient funding, treaty bodies and special

procedures can also play a key role in realising SDGs. UN regional and country offices should understand the human rights and development linkages, which the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has been unable consistently to do. The human rights community needs to engage with UN regional economic commissions, which have the mandate to lead on SDGs. The High Level Political Forum (HLPF) should learn from human rights forums, particularly the from the UPR and treaty monitoring bodies, to be open to civil society and develop a more robust procedure for reporting, review and follow up. Members of treaty monitoring bodies need to become more familiar with SDGs, and include SDGs in the list of questions sent to prompt focused state reporting. Ensuring human rights becomes integral with Agenda 2030 requires leadership from the UN at the highest level, and there is concern that such commitment to human rights has not been demonstrated in recent years despite adoption of the Human Rights up Front framework.