

From Rhetoric to Action: Assessing the Impact of the Human Rights Council in a Changing World

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Introduction

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was established on March 15, 2006, by General Assembly resolution 60/251 as a successor to the Commission on Human Rights². This decision marked a significant institutional reform within the UN's human rights framework as it was intended to address the shortcomings of its predecessor and enhance the UN's capacity to protect and promote human rights globally³.



Source. Jean-Marc Ferré UN Photo, Human Rights Council

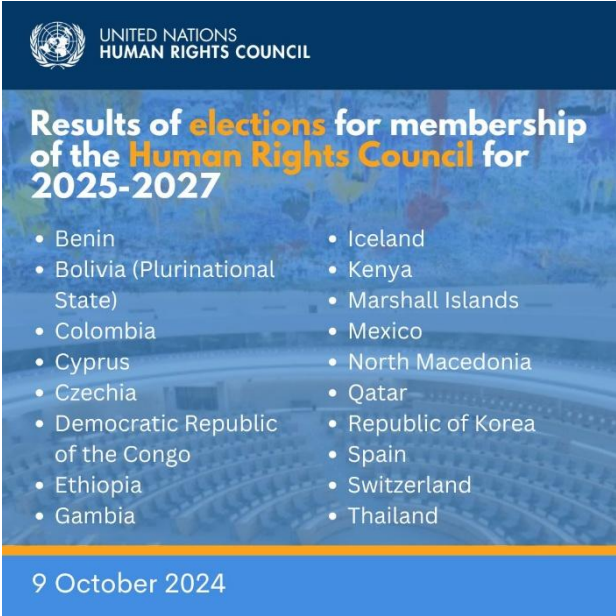
The Council comprises 47 member states elected by the General Assembly for a three-year term. As the principal intergovernmental body within the UN system responsible for human rights, the UNHRC meets for at least ten weeks annually in Geneva, addressing thematic issues and country-specific situations. Its mandate includes responding to human rights emergencies, making recommendations for better implementation of human rights on the ground, and

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² Paula Gerber, 'Human Rights Reform in the United Nations: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', *Alternative Law Journal* 31, no. 2 (June 2006): 88–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X0603100207>.

³ Paul Gordon Lauren, "'To Preserve and Build on Its Achievements and to Redress Its Shortcomings': The Journey from the Commission on Human Rights to the Human Rights Council", *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (May 2007): 307–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2007.0020>.

convening urgent meetings to address emerging crises. While the UNHRC has made significant strides in promoting human rights since its inception, its effectiveness is hampered by political challenges and membership issues⁴. These factors have led to concerns about the Council’s credibility and its ability to effectively deliver on its mandate.



This commentary aims to assess the impact of the UNHRC in promoting human rights in a rapidly changing world. By examining the Council’s mechanisms, achievements, and challenges, this publication aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of its effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. This evaluation is particularly relevant as the global human rights landscape continues to evolve, with crucial issues such as digital technology, AI and climate change becoming of increasing concern.

The Human Rights Council: Addressing Global Obligations and Emerging Issues

The UNHRC plays a pivotal role in addressing global human rights obligations and emerging issues across all 193 UN member states.

The Council’s mandate encompasses a wide range of thematic issues, including both civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights⁵. This comprehensive approach recognizes the interconnected nature of these rights and their impact on individuals’ ability to

⁴ István Lakatos, ‘A Critical Evaluation of the Work of the UN Human Rights Council, or Taking Stock of Fifteen Years without Illusions’, 19 June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1556/2052.2023.00432>.

⁵ Lucy Richardson, ‘Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (and Beyond) in the UN Human Rights Council’, *Human Rights Law Review* 15, no. 3 (1 September 2015): 409–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngv016>

fully participate in society. In addition to thematic issues, the UNHRC addresses country-specific human rights situations and challenges⁶. In recent years, the Council has taken action on serious human rights violations in various countries, demonstrating its commitment to addressing concerns across diverse geographical and political contexts.

Over the decades, the UNHRC has adapted to address new and emerging concerns that impact human rights globally. For example, digital technology has become a significant focus, with the Council recognizing the importance of digital literacy in promoting freedom of opinion and expression⁷. The Council has also expanded its focus on the rights of specific groups, including women, LGBTI individuals, and racial and ethnic minorities. Additionally, climate change has emerged as a critical issue⁸, the Council acknowledging that climate change impacts essential rights, including the rights to food, water, energy, housing, health, and sanitation, with vulnerable populations in developing countries being disproportionately affected⁹.

Mechanisms and Initiatives of the Human Rights Council

The UNHRC has developed a comprehensive set of mechanisms and initiatives to fulfill its mandate of promoting and protecting human rights worldwide.

The UNHRC works alongside ten **treaty bodies** that monitor the implementation of core international human rights treaties. These committees, composed of independent experts, cover various human rights areas such as civil and political rights, economic and social rights, and the rights of specific groups like women, children, and persons with disabilities. The treaty bodies perform essential functions including reviewing state reports, handling individual complaints, conducting inquiries, and interpreting treaty provisions.

⁶ Philip Alston, 'Reconceiving the Un Human Rights Regime: Challenges Confronting the New Un Human Rights Council', SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 1 June 2006), <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.907471>.

⁷ Kulesza, Joanna. "Human Rights and Social Media: Challenges and Opportunities for Human Rights Education." *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance* (2024): 139.

⁸ Ritu Modi and Neha Goyal, 'Analysing the Impact of Climate Change on Human Rights Through the Legislative Framework', *GLS Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (1 July 2023): 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.69974/gslawjournal.v5i2.104>.

⁹ Sri Wartini, Jawahir Thontowi, and Sefriani, 'The Impact of Climate Change on the Protection of Human Rights in Developing Countries', *KnE Social Sciences* 8, no. 9 (26 May 2023): 494–505, <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v8i9.13363>.

Special Rapporteurs serve as the Council’s independent experts, appointed to examine specific thematic or country-specific human rights issues¹⁰. These experts play a crucial role in monitoring and reporting on human rights situations, conducting fact-finding missions, investigating allegations, and sending urgent appeals to governments¹¹. As of 2023, there are 79 Special Rapporteurs covering 14 country-specific and 45 thematic mandates, addressing issues ranging from adequate housing and racism to slavery, cultural rights, and freedom of expression.

In addition to the ongoing work of Special Rapporteurs, the Human Rights Council has the capacity to convene **Special Sessions** to address urgent crises¹². This mechanism allows for a rapid response to emerging human rights threats or violations. Since 2006, 37 special sessions have been held, addressing critical situations in countries such as Ukraine, Palestine, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria, DRC and Afghanistan.

To investigate serious human rights violations in depth, the Council establishes **Commissions of Inquiry**¹³. These bodies are mandated to investigate allegations, promote accountability, and make recommendations based on their findings. Adhering to principles of independence, impartiality, transparency, and objectivity, these commissions gather information from various sources, including NGOs and on-the-ground investigations. The resulting reports describe facts, qualify acts, state violations, and provide recommendations for addressing human rights concerns.

The **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** represents a significant innovation in the Council’s approach to human rights monitoring. Introduced to address concerns about selectivity in human rights scrutiny, the UPR process ensures that all UN member states are subject to regular review of their human rights records¹⁴. The UPR has evolved to include mid-term reporting, allowing for tracking of progress between reviews.

¹⁰ Ted Piccone, ‘The Contribution of the UN’s Special Procedures to National Level Implementation of Human Rights Norms’, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 2 (1 February 2011): 206–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.537467>.

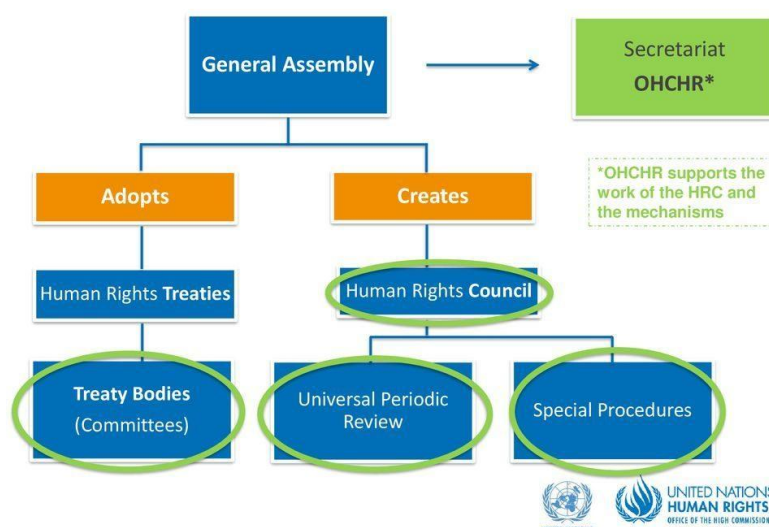
¹¹ Surya P. Subedi, ‘Protection of Human Rights through the Mechanism of UN Special Rapporteurs’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2011): 201–28.

¹² Rosa Freedman, ‘New Mechanisms of the UN Human Rights Council’, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 29, no. 3 (1 September 2011): 289–323, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169344111102900303>.

¹³ Philip Alston, ‘Introduction: Commissions of Inquiry as Human Rights Fact-Finding Tools’, *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* 105 (January 2011): 81–85, <https://doi.org/10.5305/procanmeetasil.105.0081>.

¹⁴ Hilary Charlesworth and Emma Larking, *Human Rights and the Universal Periodic Review: Rituals and Ritualism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The UN main Human Rights Mechanisms



These mechanisms and initiatives work in concert to provide the UNHRC with a robust toolkit for addressing human rights issues globally.

Case studies

The UNHRC has demonstrated both notable achievements and significant shortcomings in its efforts to address human rights issues globally. Among the Council’s achievements, the renewal of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi stands out as a significant step towards addressing ongoing human rights violations in the country¹⁵. This decision reflects the UNHRC’s commitment to maintaining scrutiny on situations of concern, even in the face of political resistance. Similarly, the Council’s resolution on Syria, which condemned violations of international human rights law, demonstrates its ability to take a strong stance against egregious human rights abuses¹⁶. The UNHRC has also played a crucial role in crisis mitigation, as evidenced by its work in Sierra Leone. Through collaboration with other UN agencies, the Council contributed to strengthening post-conflict justice mechanisms, supporting tribunals and truth commissions that were essential to the country’s reconciliation process.

However, the UNHRC has also faced criticism for its failures to act decisively in certain situations. The lack of action on human rights violations in China, particularly concerning the

¹⁵ Dawn Nagar, ‘The United Nations Role in the Great Lakes Region: Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo’, in *Challenging the United Nations Peace and Security Agenda in Africa*, ed. Dawn Nagar (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 19–74, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83523-1_2.

¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council (40th sess.: 2019: Geneva), ‘The human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic :: resolution /: adopted by the Human Rights Council on 22 March 2019’, 12 April 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3809638?ln=fr&v=pdf>.

treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, has been a significant point of contention¹⁷. Critics argue that political considerations have prevented the Council from adequately addressing these serious allegations, undermining its credibility as an impartial defender of human rights. Another instance of perceived failure is the weak resolution adopted on Sudan, which some observers felt did not go far enough in addressing the human rights situation in the country¹⁸. This case underscores the challenges the Council faces in balancing diplomatic considerations with its mandate to protect human rights. Perhaps one of the most glaring failures in recent years was the UNHRC's response to the situation in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021¹⁹. Despite widespread reports of atrocities and human rights violations, the Council adopted a resolution that lacked robust investigative mechanisms, effectively undermining protection for vulnerable groups in the country.

These case studies reveal a complex picture of the UNHRC's effectiveness. While the Council has achieved important successes in some areas, it has also faced significant challenges in others.

Challenges Facing the Human Rights Council

The UNHRC faces numerous challenges that hinder its effectiveness in promoting and protecting human rights globally. These challenges stem from complex political dynamics, institutional limitations, and resource constraints that collectively undermine the Council's ability to fulfill its mandate.

One of the most significant challenges facing the UNHRC is the politicization of debates within the Council²⁰. This politicization often manifests in discussions within the UNHRC, where political cleavages divert attention from substantive human rights concerns to geopolitical interests. The result is a Council that struggles to maintain focus on its core mission of protecting human rights, as member states prioritize their political agendas over collective action on human rights violations.

Closely related to the issue of politicization is the problem of selectivity in the Council's reviews and resolutions. Some countries accuse the UNHRC of disproportionately targeting

¹⁷ Hendrix, Cullen S., and Marcus Noland. "Chinese Arms Transfers, Xinjiang, and the UN Human Rights Council Vote." *Institute for National Security Strategy* (2024): 5.

¹⁸ Caroline Sweeney, "The United Nations Human Rights Council at 16: A Creature of Compromise or a Compromised Creature?", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 27, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 74–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2061952>.

¹⁹ Abigail B. Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban, *Human Rights and the United Nations: Paradox and Promise* (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

²⁰ Rosa Freedman and Ruth Houghton, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Politicisation of the Human Rights Council", *Human Rights Law Review* 17, no. 4 (1 December 2017): 753–69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngx027>.

certain states while ignoring violations committed by others²¹. This selectivity undermines the Council's credibility and effectiveness, as it creates the perception of bias and double standards in the application of human rights norms. This is exacerbated by the controversial membership of the Council, which often includes the presence of states accused of human rights violations, raising concerns about its ability to impartially address human rights issues.

The politicization and selectivity challenges often lead to deadlock on crucial resolutions within the Council. Disagreements between member states, driven by conflicting political interests, frequently prevent the UNHRC from reaching consensus on important human rights issues²². This deadlock is further complicated by the informal veto power wielded by some powerful states, which use their influence to block initiatives that do not serve their interests. The result is a Council that struggles to take decisive action on pressing human rights concerns, undermining its effectiveness and relevance in the global human rights landscape.

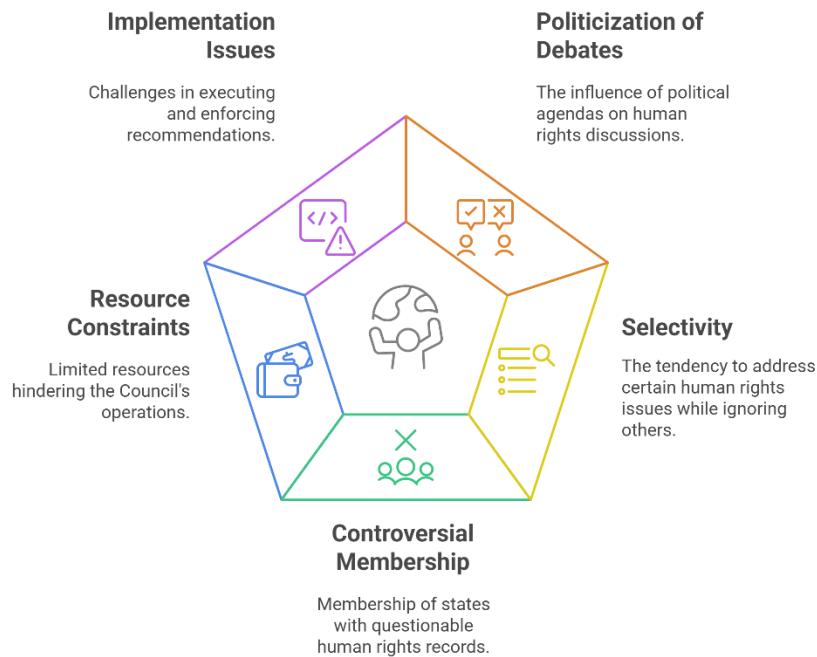
Finally, the UNHRC faces considerable resource constraints that hinder its ability to conduct thorough investigations and monitor compliance. It also results in a lack of implementation of its recommendations, raising questions about its effectiveness in fostering real change in human rights practices²³. Indeed, there is a significant gap in the translation of international standards into national laws, necessitating strong political commitment and resources.

²¹ Rosa Freedman, *The United Nations Human Rights Council: A Critique and Early Assessment* (London: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074732>.

²² David P. Forsythe, 'The UN Security Council and Human Rights: Promising Developments, Persistent Problems', *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 2 (3 April 2014): 121–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.886945>.

²³ Kaffah, Ahmad Usmarwi. "The United Nations Human Rights Council's Performance: Achievements and Challenges." *Aberdeen Student L. Rev.* 10 (2020): 116.

Challenges Facing the Human Rights Council



Source. Daversin, 2025

Recommendations

The UNHRC faces numerous challenges that require comprehensive reforms to enhance its effectiveness and credibility. A critical aspect of this reform involves revising the selection process for Council members, implementing stricter criteria based on human rights records. Additionally, depoliticizing debates within the Council emerges as another crucial step towards reform. By adopting a more technical approach to human rights issues and leveraging the expertise of NGOs and independent experts, the Council can focus more effectively on substantive concerns, mitigating the influence of political interests that often overshadow critical human rights issues. To further amplify its impact, the UNHRC must foster improved cooperation with other UN bodies and regional human rights mechanisms. Strengthening follow-up mechanisms is also essential to ensure member states implement HRC recommendations effectively. Advocating for increased resources would enable the Council to conduct thorough investigations and monitor the implementation of its recommendations more effectively, which are critical components of its work. Finally, facilitating greater involvement of civil society organizations and human rights defenders in the Council's work would bring valuable perspectives and expertise to its deliberations, ensuring that the voices of those most affected by human rights violations are heard and integrated into the decision-making processes.

These interconnected recommendations, if implemented, have the potential to significantly enhance the UNHRC's capacity to promote and protect human rights globally, addressing its current limitations and strengthening its role as the primary international body for human rights protection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the UNHRC has made notable strides in promoting human rights since its inception, yet significant gaps remain between rhetoric and actionable outcomes. While the Council has effectively addressed various human rights issues, including the rights of marginalized groups and responses to emerging challenges like climate change and digital technology, its credibility is often undermined by political biases and the selectivity of its actions. The lack of implementation of its recommendations further complicates the Council's ability to effect real change on the ground. To bridge the gap between rhetoric and action, it is imperative for the UNHRC to implement comprehensive reforms, including revising member selection processes, strengthening follow-up mechanisms, and enhancing cooperation with civil society. By addressing these challenges, the UNHRC can better fulfill its mandate and adapt to the evolving global human rights landscape.