

UNHRC

Committee Background Guide

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About this committee

The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them. It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year. It meets at the UN Office at Geneva.

The Council is made up of 47 United Nations Member States which are elected by the UN General Assembly. The Human Rights Council replaced the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The Council is made of 47 Member States, which are elected by the majority of members of the General Assembly of the United Nations through direct and secret ballot. The General Assembly takes into account the candidate States' contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.

The Council's Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution. Seats are distributed as follows:

1. African States: 13 seats
2. Asian States: 13 seats
3. Latin American and Caribbean States: 8 seats
4. Western European and other States: 7 seats
5. Eastern European States: 6 seats

Poverty and Human Rights

Everyone, everywhere has the right to live with dignity. That means that no-one should be denied their rights to adequate housing, food, water and sanitation, and to education and health care. Human rights violations drive and deepen poverty. People living in poverty have the least access to power to shape the policies of poverty and are frequently denied effective remedies for violations of their rights. Not only is extreme poverty characterised by multiple reinforcing violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, but persons living in poverty generally experience regular denials of their dignity and equality.

The UNHRC notes that "poverty is often a cause, as well as a result, of a complex system of human rights denials in which violations of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights interact and mutually reinforce each other with devastating effects."

The UNHRC defines poverty as "not only deprivation of economic or material resources but a violation of human dignity too...Poverty erodes or nullifies economic and social rights such as the right to health, adequate housing, food and safe water, and the right to education. The same is true of civil and political rights, such as the right to a fair trial, political participation and security of the person."

As such, a human rights definition and understanding of poverty is necessary to the infringement of human rights in pursuit of growth and development. Adequate concern and protection for human rights has not been implemented in international development work and this is the challenge of the UNHRC's work today

A human rights approach respects the dignity and autonomy of persons living in poverty and empowers them to meaningfully and effectively participate in public life, including in the design of public policy, and to hold duty bearers accountable. The norms set out in international human rights law require that States take their international human rights obligations into account when formulating and implementing policies affecting the lives of persons living in poverty.

Human rights, conflict and poverty

Violent conflict is development in reverse. It destroys societies and is a shortcut to extreme poverty. The destruction and chaos that violent conflict brings leads to lawlessness and human rights atrocities and the erosion, diversion or destruction of resources – natural, human, financial or infrastructure – limits people's access to basic needs, such as health, education and food.

Since the end of WWII, and even since the end of the Cold War, violent conflict has not significantly reduced. Rather, a decrease in state-on-state conflict has been replaced with an increase in conflict within states, and between sub-state groups¹. Furthermore, violent conflict is likely to be a cause or a symptom of poverty.

Violent conflict around the world is not only a source of human suffering, but is increasingly a threat to the peace and security of all nations

Violent conflict can quickly undermine state institutions in developing countries and gives space for illicit groups and activities to be harboured - this can have trans-national implications in the form of terrorism, organised crime, and the trafficking of drugs, arms, or people

- Economies in conflict grow [1-2% slower](#) than peacetime economies and divert money into war rather than poverty reduction and development.
- The World Bank estimates that civil conflicts last an average of seven years, cause a [2.2% reduction](#) in GDP per year and cost an estimated US\$54 million annually for a low income country.
- Nine of the bottom ten countries on the Human Development Index experienced conflict at some time since 1990, while 35 of the 46 fragile states are in conflict and account for [30%](#) of those living on \$1 per day.
- All of the countries the World Food Program identifies as “hunger hotspots” are in conflict or inundated by refugees as a result of crisis.
- In Africa for example, conflict has wiped [25 billion](#) from agriculture’s production between 1970 and 1997.
- Worldwide, an estimated 25 million people are displaced by conflict.
- The camps housing an estimated 1.8 million people in the region of Darfur have become a symbol of the displaced.
- In Colombia a protracted civil war has led to one of the largest displacements since those caused by the Second World War in Europe
- [Three-quarters](#) of a million people were displaced within Guatemala or had fled to Mexico by the mid-1980s, accounting for nearly a tenth of the population.
- Over 600,000 Chechens— half of the population—are internally displaced after nearly a decade of conflict

“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of fundamental human rights. Everyone everywhere has the right to live with dignity, free from fear and oppression, free from hunger and thirst, and free to express themselves and associate at will.” *Nelson Mandela*

Human Rights Principles when dealing with Poverty

The following principles are essential to an approach based on human rights and must provide the foundations for the design and implementation of all public policies related to poverty reduction or affecting persons living in poverty.

Dignity, universality, indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependence of all rights

Human dignity is at the very foundation of human rights. It is inextricably linked to the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Respect for the inherent dignity of those living in poverty must inform all public policies. State agents and private individuals must respect the dignity of all, avoid stigmatisation and prejudices, and recognise and support the efforts that those living in poverty are making to improve their lives.

Extreme poverty is a clear illustration of the indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependence of human rights, given that persons living in poverty face daily violations of their civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, which interact and mutually reinforce one another with devastating effects.

States must create an enabling environment to combat poverty and protect human rights. Public policies to overcome poverty must be based on respecting, protecting and fulfilling all the human rights of persons living in poverty in equal manner.

No policy, in any area, should exacerbate poverty or have a disproportionate negative impact on persons living in poverty.

Equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons living in extreme poverty

Discrimination is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Poverty frequently originates from discriminatory practices, both overt and covert. Those living in poverty are also subject to discriminatory attitudes and stigmatisation from public authorities and private actors precisely because of their poverty. Thus, those living in poverty tend to experience several intersecting forms of discrimination, including on account of their economic status.

States must ensure that persons living in poverty are equal before and under the law and are entitled, without discrimination, to the equal protection and benefit of the law. States must repeal or modify laws and regulations that are biased against the rights, interests and livelihoods of persons living in poverty. All forms of legislative or administrative discrimination, direct or indirect, on grounds of economic situation or other grounds associated with poverty must be identified and eliminated.

Equality and non-discrimination are immediate and cross-cutting obligations that must underlie all measures taken by all relevant stakeholders in relation to persons living in poverty. They require States to identify vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society and to ensure, as a matter of priority, such groups' enjoyment of human rights on an equal basis.

States have an obligation to take special and positive measures to reduce or eliminate conditions that cause or help to perpetuate discrimination.

Positive measures must be taken to ensure de facto equality of persons living in poverty. Such measures should include legislative, executive, administrative, budgetary and regulatory instruments and specific policies, programmes and affirmative action in poverty-sensitive areas such as employment, housing, food, social security, water and sanitation, health, education, culture and participation in public life.

Poverty is not gender-neutral, and any approach to social protection that is aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals while respecting human rights must take account of the fact that women and men experience poverty differently.

Equality between men and women

Women are disproportionately represented among the poor owing to the multifaceted and cumulative forms of discrimination that they endure. States are obliged to eliminate both de jure and de facto discrimination against women and put in place measures to achieve equality between men and women. International human rights law also requires States to take measures to eliminate harmful cultural and traditional practices and all other practices that are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either sex, or on stereotyped roles for women and men. States must take forceful action to combat gender-based violence. Women living in poverty who are victims of gender-based violence face particular difficulties in accessing justice and in leaving abusive relationships.

Women must have equal access to economic opportunities. States must accord priority to expanding employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for women, promote decent and productive work and improve access to finance. Public policies and employment regulations must take into account women's time constraints and enable both women and men to care for their households.

States must ensure women's full and equal legal capacity to own, control and administer economic resources such as land, credit and inheritance. Women must also enjoy equal access to decision-making power. States must develop mechanisms to enhance the involvement of women, including those living in poverty, in political life and decision-making bodies at all levels. Policies must promote gender equality in marriage and family relations, and ensure that women's decision-making, including regarding the number and spacing of children, is

Rights of the child

Given that most of those living in poverty are children and that poverty in childhood is a root cause of poverty in adulthood, children's rights must be accorded priority. Even short periods of deprivation and exclusion can dramatically and irreversibly harm a child's right to survival and development. To eradicate poverty, States must take immediate action to combat childhood poverty.

States must ensure that all children have equal access to basic services, including within the household. At a minimum, children are entitled to a package of basic social services that includes high-quality health care, adequate food, housing, safe drinking water and sanitation and primary education, so that they can grow to their full potential, free of disease, malnutrition, illiteracy and other deprivations.

Poverty renders children, in particular girls, vulnerable to exploitation, neglect and abuse. States must respect and promote the rights of children living in poverty, including by strengthening and allocating the necessary resources to child protection strategies and programmes, with a particular focus on marginalised children, such as street children, child soldiers, children with disabilities, victims of trafficking, child heads of households and children living in care institutions, all of whom are at a heightened risk of exploitation and abuse.

"All victims of human rights abuses should be able to look to the Human Rights Council as a forum and a springboard for action." *Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, March 2007*

Agency and autonomy of persons living in extreme poverty

Persons living in poverty must be recognised and treated as free and autonomous agents. All policies relevant to poverty must be aimed at empowering persons living in poverty. They must be based on the recognition of those persons' right to make their own decisions and respect their capacity to fulfil their own potential, their sense of dignity and their right to participate in decisions affecting their life.

Participation and empowerment

Effective and meaningful participation is an affirmation of the right of every individual and group to take part in the conduct of public affairs. It is also a means of promoting social inclusion and an essential component of efforts to combat poverty, not least by ensuring that public policies are sustainable and designed to meet the expressed needs of the poorest segments of society. Free and unconstrained and that food and other resources are equally distributed within the household. Women must be ensured equal access to public services, including health, education and social protection, and equality in the labour market, including equal wages, conditions of employment and social security benefits. In particular, sexual and reproductive health services and information, early childhood education and post-primary education must be made available to women and girls.

States must articulate gender equality as a goal in policies, strategies, budgets, programmes and projects. They must increase targeted national resources and official development assistance for gender equality, and pay attention to women's economic empowerment in the context of international trade.

Delegates... can we:

- Identify approaches for removing all obstacles, including institutional ones, to the full enjoyment of human rights for people living in extreme poverty and to identify efficient measures to promote their rights?
- Study the impact of discrimination and to pay particular attention to the situation of women, children and other vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities living in extreme poverty?
- Protect vulnerable persons in times of conflict, natural disaster or humanitarian crisis?
- Adopt an approach that addresses discrimination and the disenfranchisement of certain groups?

Questions for Research:

1. What action has your country taken to ensure access to human rights for those living in poverty?
2. Which human rights violations are of most concern in your country, region, the world?
3. How has your country implemented legislation that protects human rights and challenges discrimination?
4. What action has your country taken to ensure human rights are upheld on a national and international level?
5. What are your priorities? What new legislation or regional agreements are possible?
6. Who are your strongest allies in committee?

Research links

UNHRC Resolution on poverty July 2013 <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2013/08/14/UN-Human-Rights-Council-Resolution-International-Solidarity-and-Fair-Distribution-Goals>
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/poverty/expert/docs/Thomas_Pogge_Summary.pdf
<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43104&Cr=poverty&Cr1=#.Umcoq-p1wYqI>
http://www.who.int/hhr/news/HHR_PRS_19_12_05.pdf
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/HRCIndex.aspx>
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<http://www.amnesty.org/en/poverty>
<http://www.globalpovertyproject.com/infobank/conflict>