

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

WHAT IS THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL?

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) was appointed by the UN General Assembly to replace the Commission on Human Rights in 2006, and is the part of the UN system that is responsible for the strengthening, promotion, and protection of human rights worldwide. The HRC monitors the fulfilment of human rights around the world, and can make recommendations on human rights themes in general (e.g. the reproductive rights of young people), or on the human rights situation in specific countries or regions (e.g. a humanitarian crisis).

The HRC meets for a total of ten weeks a year spread out over three regular sessions in March, June, and September, which serve as an international forum to discuss human rights issues, and result in the adoption of several resolutions. All 193 UN Member States, UN 'Permanent Observers', and civil society may attend these regular sessions, but only the 47 HRC members may 'table' (propose) resolutions and vote to adopt them. The Council may also meet for additional 'special sessions' if an urgent human rights situation arises. In addition to these annual sessions, the HRC also has several sub-organs which support its work:

- ✓ **The Advisory Committee**, which can be seen as a human rights 'think tank' made up of 18 independent experts in international human rights law who meet twice a year and advise the HRC on key human rights themes and issues. The Advisory Committee does research on behalf of the HRC, but does not adopt resolutions or decisions. For more information on this process, please see the [OHCHR website](#).
- ✓ **The Complaint Procedure**, which is a special procedure that allows individuals, groups, and NGOs who have already tried unsuccessfully to have a case resolved in their home country to bring complaints of human rights violations by a State to the HRC's attention. For more information on this process and for **examples** of what kinds of cases are considered, please see the [OHCHR website](#).
- ✓ **The Universal Periodic Review (UPR)**, which is a peer-review mechanism that assesses the entire human rights record of all 193 UN Member States in four and a half year cycles, and as such is a unique and important advocacy opportunity. For more detailed information on the UPR and how to engage with it please see the [OHCHR website](#), as well as our other resources on UN human-rights mechanisms in Geneva (forthcoming).
- ✓ **The Special Procedures**, which are made up of independent human rights experts and working groups who report to the HRC on key thematic human rights issues or the human rights situation in certain countries.

QUICK FACTS

WHAT?

Human Rights Council (HRC)

FOCUS?

Strengthening, promoting, and protecting human rights

WHO?

47 States are elected to be a member of the Council for a period of 3 years

REPORTS TO?

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

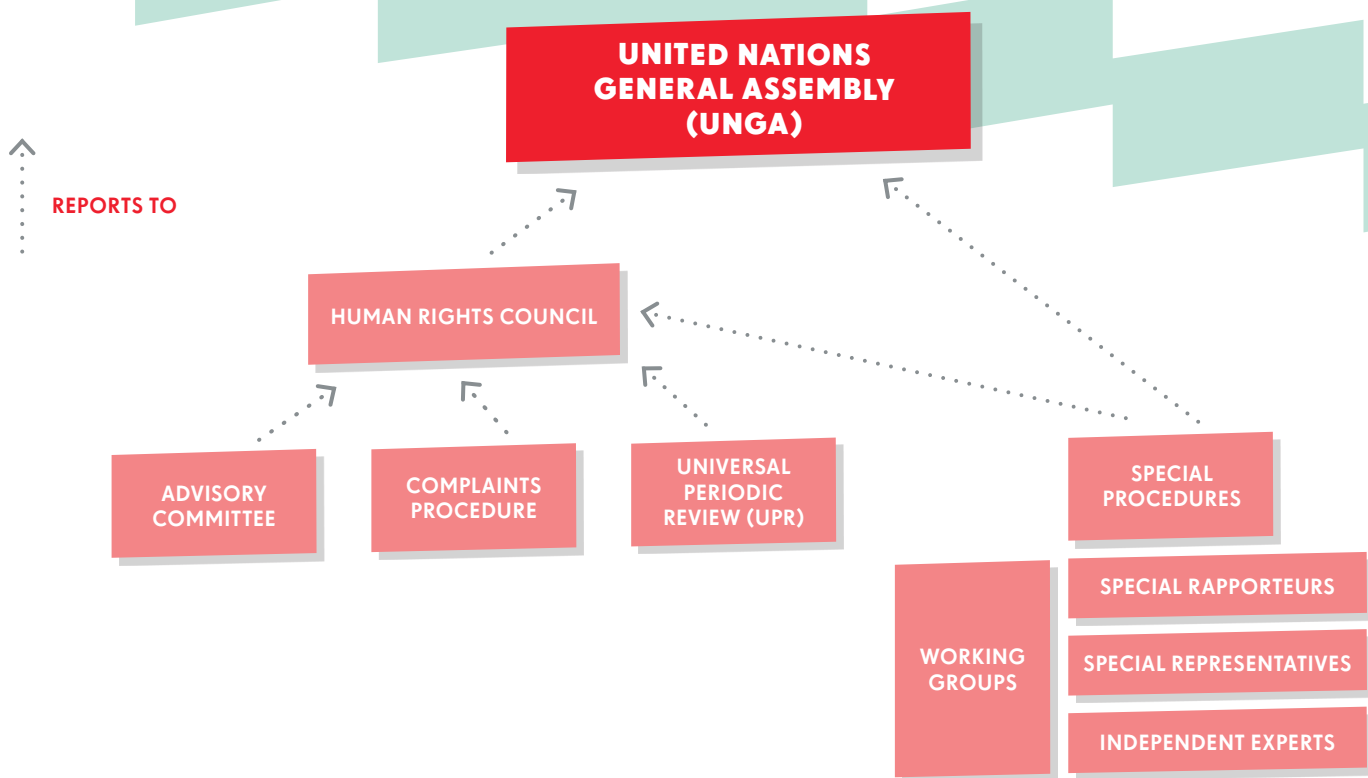
WHEN?

The HRC meets for a total of 10 weeks three times per year in March, June, and September, but may meet for additional 'special sessions' if urgent human rights issues arise

WHERE?

Geneva, Switzerland





SPECIAL PROCEDURES

Special Procedures can either be individuals (known as Special Rapporteurs, Special Representatives, or Independent Experts) or working groups, which are made up of five human rights experts (one from each official UN region). The Special Procedures monitor, advise, and report on key thematic human rights issues known as ‘thematic mandates’ (e.g. violence against women), or on the human rights situation in specific countries, known as ‘country-specific mandates’ (e.g. the human rights situation in the Central African Republic). To maintain their independence the Special Procedures experts are not paid, and are instead supported in their work by staff from the OHCHR. An up to date list of which Special Procedures mandates are currently active is available on the [OHCHR website](#).

To fulfil their mandate the Special Procedures may go on country visits (although please note that they may only visit countries they have formally been invited to), do fact-finding missions, conduct research or thematic studies, investigate claims of human rights violations and make recommendations on them, raise public awareness on human rights issues, enter into a dialogue with States and other key stakeholders, and contribute to the development of international human rights standards, amongst others. The Special Procedures will report back on their findings at least once a year to the HRC and the UN General Assembly.

Engaging with the Special Procedures

Civil society is encouraged to actively engage with the Special Procedures, and there are many ways you can involve them in your advocacy work. For example, if the human rights issue you are focusing on (e.g. the rights of young LGBT persons) isn’t being addressed by the Special Procedures currently, you can flag this gap and advocate for your issue to be included in a report or statement (e.g. advocating to include diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities and Expressions (SOGIE) in the Special Rapporteur on Education’s recommendations about Comprehensive Sexuality Education). Furthermore, the Special Procedures also have an important role in raising awareness

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) serves as the secretariat for the Human Rights Council, and supports the HRC’s work. For example, the OHCHR provides the Special Procedures with supporting staff, helps them to carry out field visits, conducts research on their behalf, organizes capacity strengthening activities, expert panels and dialogues, and provides technical assistance and advice to governments on how to uphold human rights, amongst others. The OHCHR also plays an important role in facilitating civil society’s engagement in human rights processes, for example, by organizing civil society briefings, developing toolkits and fact sheets on key thematic issues, organizing trainings and workshops, and supporting NGOs participation in the Council, amongst others.

PRO TIP: sign up for the OHCHR civil society section **email list** to receive updates on advocacy opportunities at the HRC – you can customize what type of information you receive to suit your advocacy goals.

about human rights, so you can consider inviting relevant experts to speak at a panel or side-event (either at the UN or in your own country or region) to draw more attention to your issues. Special Procedures may also communicate directly with UN Member States, so you can also advocate with them to enter into a dialogue with your government to address your human rights issue(s), or advocate with other Member States to push for a Special Procedure to visit your country to report on the human rights situation. Similarly, you could talk to your own government about inviting the Special Procedures to your country, or ask them to issue a 'standing invitation' (a common recommendation given at the UPR) which in principle allows all Special Procedures to visit the country, regardless of their focus. Note that when engaging with the Special Procedures it is best to go through the OHCHR, since they provide the support staff for the Special Procedures and are more accessible to civil society. They can, for example, organize a special briefing session for Special Rapporteurs, which can draw attention to the importance of addressing your human rights issue(s) in their work.

Finally, the work that comes out of the Special Procedures, such as briefings, (joint) statements, reports and recommendations, can serve as important advocacy tools. For example, in April 2016 the HRC received and reviewed the **report** of the 'Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health', which addressed adolescent's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and included references to diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and presented a strong case for investing in adolescent SRHR from a human rights perspective. You can of course use these expert reports to support your advocacy messaging with governments!

WHY IS THE HRC IMPORTANT?

The HRC is an important space for international dialogue about human rights issues and for UN Member States to come together to (re)confirm their commitment to human rights by setting new global standards and norms. The HRC's outcome documents (resolutions) that the 47 Council members vote to adopt during the annual sessions, are supposed to serve as a guidance for the international community on how to tackle human rights issues. Amongst others, the HRC's resolutions can contribute to greater international awareness of human rights problems, can increase international support for policy and legal change, can result in the creation of a new Special Procedures mandate (e.g. a new Special Rapporteur), and can increase the pressure on States to implement concrete policy or legal reforms. It is therefore important that advocates continue to try to influence the language and content of these resolutions to reflect a more inclusive and progressive agenda that recognizes the needs and realities of young people.

Furthermore, the HRC's outcome documents are important advocacy tools because they contain so-called agreed language - language that was negotiated and agreed upon, and that the HRC Member States have publicly committed to. Agreed language can therefore be used to hold governments accountable to the commitments that they have made. For example, the 2009 resolution on preventable Maternal Mortality and Morbidity eventually led to the development of a technical guidance on how to apply a human rights based approach to combating maternal mortality and morbidity, which was then piloted in several countries, including Malawi, Mexico, Tanzania, and Uganda. Do note, however, that as opposed to the agreed language that comes out of processes like the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) or the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), where all UN Member States have to reach a consensus before a resolution is adopted, the HRC's structure which only allows HRC members to table and vote to adopt resolutions, can unfortunately make the decisions that come out of the HRC seem less legitimate.

MEMBERSHIP

47 countries are elected to the HRC for a three year term which may be renewed once consecutively. Members are elected by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) by a majority vote through a secret ballot. To ensure regional diversity, every official UN region is allocated a certain number of seats (e.g. the 'African States' have 13 seats whereas the 'Eastern European States' have 6). Although only the 47 HRC members can vote on resolutions, all 193 UN Member States, UN Observers, and civil society are able to participate in the work of the Council. While HRC members are supposed to have exemplary human rights track records, there has been some controversy surrounding certain Member States that were accused of perpetrating grave human rights violations. This is especially worrisome since the HRC was created to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2006, following public outcry that the Commission was turning a blind eye to human rights violations to protect the geo-political relationships of its members.

For example, some States may argue that because they voted against a resolution which was adopted they cannot be expected to implement it. Similarly, non-HRC Member States may say that since they are not a member of the HRC they do not need be held accountable for the resolutions that come out of it.

➔ **For more information on UN language advocacy and how to influence it check out our UN language resource!**

Finally, one of the great benefits of the HRC that makes it different from other more specialised processes like the CPD or CSW, is that it has the broad mandate to address *all* issues related to human rights. This focus on human rights,

and more specifically on the obligations that States have to protect them which are often formalized in international human rights treaties, makes Geneva a unique and important space to hold governments accountable. In contrast, many of the New York based UN processes have a greater focus on international development and could be seen as being more aspirational in nature (e.g. the 2030 Agenda is a blueprint for the future we want, in contrast the universal declaration of human rights is about rights that we all have). The HRC, therefore, offers an important opportunity for young people to advocate for the issues that are most important to them, including on themes such as SOGIE which may be more difficult to discuss in other settings.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE HRC?

Three times a year, in March, June, and September, UN Member States, human rights experts, and civil society representatives meet for three to four weeks at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. The regular HRC sessions follow a similar structure, and can be divided into two parts, the 'formals', which consist of the official plenary sessions, and the 'informals', where the resolutions are negotiated. In addition to the formals and informals, Member States and civil society organizations can also host what are known as 'side-events' (e.g. panel discussions, presentations, dialogues, exhibitions etc.) that delve into a specific human rights theme or topic.

Formals

The HRC has several plenary sessions, known as the formals, which are open to all attendees, and which can be followed live on UN TV. The HRC sessions follow the same basic agenda, which can be found on the OHCHR website, with agenda items ranging in content from organizational or procedural matters to discussions about urgent human rights situations. The Council also receives and discusses reports from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Procedures, and the UN Secretary-General, and will host several high-level panel discussions, general debates, and interactive dialogues during the weeks it is in session. During the formal segment the Council can also appoint new Special Procedures or extend the mandate of current ones.

In terms of advocacy, civil society has the most opportunity to meaningfully participate in the following plenary sessions of the Council:

- ✔ **Agenda Item 3** (the "promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development") which takes up most of the Council's time, and is where resolutions are discussed and adopted. Civil society has the opportunity to make oral statements in response to the adoption of a resolution, and may advocate for their language suggestions to be included in resolutions during the informal negotiations.
- ✔ **Agenda Item 6** ("Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Outcomes"), where the UPR reports of the countries that have just been reviewed are discussed and adopted. Civil society has the opportunity to provide oral statements responding to the UPR reports (e.g. praising a State for agreeing to implement a recommendation on guaranteeing access to contraceptives to all persons, or condemning a State for failing to accept a recommendation to protect LGBT citizens from violence and stigma).

THE YWCA HRC YOUTH FORUM

In 2016 the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) organized the first ever Youth Forum ahead of the June Human Rights Council session. This event aims to promote the meaningful inclusion of young people in the Council's work, and provides young people with a safe space to discuss issues that are important to them, and to share their concerns with decision makers. Moving forward it is important that we ensure that young people's meaningful participation, including through the youth forum, is fully integrated into the HRC process. For more information, including on how to sign up for the event, please access their website at <http://www.worldywca.org>.



Informals

The resolutions that come out of the HRC make recommendations on how to better implement human rights on the ground, and call on States to take specific actions or to uphold certain human rights principles. Resolutions are negotiated during the 'informals' – discussions that technically fall under agenda item 3, but which take place outside of the formal plenary sessions. The HRC often produces resolutions on the same topics every year, for example, there is usually a resolution on the Rights of the Child in March, one on Early and Forced Marriage in June, and one on Maternal Mortality and Morbidity in September. Some resolutions may also be biennial (every two years), or triennial (every three years). However, do note that these recurring resolutions do not contain the same text year after year; instead a new thematic focus is taken every year which gives the HRC more space to delve deeper into what are often quite complex topics (e.g. the resolution on Violence Against Women focused on violence against indigenous women and girls in 2016, and on domestic violence in 2015). There is an organizational meeting 1 – 2 weeks ahead of the HRC where States can announce their intention to table a resolution and share upcoming statements and side events – to stay up to date on which resolutions will come up when, be sure to check out the **HRC extranet**. Do note, however, that new resolutions can still be tabled spontaneously up until the 'penultimate' Thursday (the last Thursday before the close of the HRC).

Every resolution is put forward by what is called a 'core group' of States – core groups are the States that work together to draft a resolution. For example, Burkina Faso, Colombia and New Zealand lead on the annual resolution on Maternal Mortality and Morbidity. The core group is key to the process of adopting a resolution, as they decide what language they can or cannot accept in the text. The core group also influences the level to which civil society can be engaged in the process of drafting the resolution – while some countries are very open to their involvement and will allow civil society representatives to actively take part in the discussions and make language suggestions, others are less receptive and will not let civil society make meaningful contributions. Once the core group is satisfied with the language contained within the resolution it will be put forward to the Council for adoption – the Council may adopt the resolution by consensus or by (majority) vote.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE INVOLVED?

First and foremost, young people have a fundamental right to co-decide on issues that concern us, as is guaranteed by several international agreements, including the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, the **International Conference on Population and Development's (ICPD) Programme of Action**, and **UN resolution 53/133** amongst others. International agreements, such as those made at the HRC, have important implications for the day-to-day realities of young people worldwide, in the sense that they (in theory at least) guide our government's priorities and policies. For these agreements to effectively address young people's key issues, and for governments to be held accountable to implementing them, it is essential that we are meaningfully involved in their design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation; after all, no one understands the challenges young people face better than young people themselves!

Furthermore, young people's exclusion from these key decision making spaces means that our leaders (often) prioritize their own beliefs and political gains above representing the needs and realities of young people back home. For this reason, it is more important than ever that a diverse and international group of young people are enabled to become meaningfully involved in UN processes like the HRC. On the next page you can find some ways for you to start advocating for your issues at the HRC – be sure to also check out our other advocacy resources at choiceforyouth.org!

CHOICE AND THE HRC

Since Geneva is heavily focused on human rights it is becoming an important place for CHOICE to advocate for young people's SRHR and our meaningful participation in these spaces and processes. There are several relevant resolutions, like the resolutions on women's and children's rights, which can serve as entry-points to bring in young people's SRHR using a rights based perspective. Similarly, the first ever mandate of the Independent Expert on SOGIE provides an exciting opportunity for CHOICE and our partners to advocate for the rights and needs of LGBTQI youth. For more information on CHOICE's advocacy work please see our [website](#).

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

Advocacy at the HRC can take several forms, including written submissions, advocating with State representatives in Geneva like the permanent missions and delegations, advocating with relevant UN agencies (e.g. OHCHR) and experts (e.g. Special Rapporteurs), engaging the media back home, organizing side events and panels, and more. We have included a list of the top five things you can do to help get you started.



Meaningfully engage young people in your country to identify their key issues, and collect data which can be used as evidence to support your advocacy and give legitimacy to your arguments. Use creative methods to distribute this data widely amongst the general population, relevant ministries, youth advocates, delegates etc. (e.g. by creating factsheets and reports or by starting a campaign) to generate widespread support for your advocacy messages. You can also use your findings to advocate with the Special Procedures to issue a joint statement – a good example of this is when a group of UN international human rights experts issued a joint statement for the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in 2015, in which they called for an end to discrimination and violence against young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons and children. For more information on this event see the **OHCHR website**. Importantly, if there are no relevant resolutions for the issues you have identified you can of course also advocate with HRC member States to put forward a new resolution which does!



Strengthen key stakeholders knowledge on young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR): often delegates just don't have the knowledge and expertise on SRHR to know what the difference between 'good' or 'bad' language is. You can support 'friendly' delegations, and other key stakeholders like the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights or relevant Special Procedures, by facilitating SRHR language trainings ahead of the HRC, providing them with language suggestions for resolutions, hosting briefings and info-sessions, organizing side events and panel discussions, amongst others.



Advocate with States, either on your own or within the NGO caucuses active in Geneva, to ensure that the focus and content of resolutions are informed by young people's realities on the ground. It is important that the focus of a resolution is strategic (e.g. there is a multi-annual strategy where each year builds upon the other), the content is progressive (e.g. the

SAFETY & SECURITY

Advocating for sensitive issues like SRHR or SOGIE in international, regional, and national spaces may come with certain safety and security risks, and it is important to be mindful of the potential threats to personal (and organizational) safety, especially when working with young people and adolescents. Unfortunately, human rights defenders often take great personal risks when they openly engage in these processes, and it is important that steps are taken to minimize these threats. There are many online resources and organizations which can help you learn more: <http://www.welcome-desk.org/en/human-rights-defenders-safety>.

resolution is inclusive of all groups), and the 'asks' are realistic (i.e. the agreements can actually be implemented). For example, a resolution on ending violence against women is strategic if it has a multi-annual plan that shifts the focus of the resolution to a different key element each year (e.g. engaging men and boys in year one, comprehensive sexuality education in year two, etc.), it is progressive if it takes a gender-sensitive and rights-based perspective and addresses the key dimensions of the issue (e.g. recognizes that certain gender constructs and stereotypes can perpetuate violence against women), and it is realistic if it contains agreements that states can begin to implement immediately and be held accountable to (e.g. containing law and policy recommendations, such as gender-sensitivity trainings for law enforcement).



Submit a written statement or sign up to give an oral statement during the HRC's plenary sessions (although note that you need a UN consultative or ECOSOC status to be able to do this – if you do not have this you can work together with organizations who do!). Oral and written statements provide an important opportunity for civil society to share their arguments with all those attending the session, and to have their viewpoints included in the official UN records of the HRC.



Once resolutions are adopted, it is important to document and share the commitments made at the HRC as widely as possible to increase national awareness and commitment, for example, through press-releases or by raising parliamentary questions. You can also engage with your government, for example, by organizing de-briefings with relevant ministries, UN agencies, and other key stakeholders, offering technical assistance and support in implementing the agreements, and by monitoring and evaluating their progress (e.g. by tracking policies and budget spending, but also by holding focus group discussions and interviews with young people to measure the impact).

NOT GOING TO THE HRC? YOU CAN STILL BE INVOLVED!

Even if you are unable to physically go to Geneva you can still play an important part in ensuring young people's voices are heard at the HRC. To begin with, you can play an active role in the preparations:

- ✓ link up with other civil society organizations who are focused on similar issues and who are active in Geneva (especially those who have the capacity to attend the sessions in person!);
- ✓ create factsheets and reports which can be shared widely amongst CSOs, youth advocates, delegates and your government;
- ✓ meet with your delegation and advocate for young people's issues and for their meaningful participation in the process (for example, through the meaningful consultation of young people ahead of the HRC, and by having a youth civil society representative on the delegation). Ensure that the relevant ministries – such as ministry of Health or Education – are actively involved in the content discussions related to the resolution and provide inputs to the delegation representing your country.

While the HRC session is taking place you can follow developments online (through listservs, email groups, WhatsApp, UN TV etc.), and support the advocates who are there on the ground:

- ✓ by providing them with text suggestions, argumentation, and data and evidence;
- ✓ by continuing to lobby with your government and other 'friendly' delegations to support your language suggestions (or, if they don't feel they can support that language to at least not block it from being accepted);
- ✓ if your government is unresponsive, you can also try to use the media (including social media) and the general public to apply greater pressure on your delegation to support your issues, for example, by issuing an 'urgent action alert' or a press release to call attention to what your government is doing at the HRC.

You can also play an important role in the follow-up and implementation of the commitments made at the HRC:

- ✓ by creating youth-friendly factsheets for the media, general public, and for relevant ministries explaining which resolutions have come out of the HRC and what this means for the national context;
- ✓ by engaging with your government and offering the relevant ministries technical assistance and support in implementing the resolutions, for example, by advocating for them to meaningfully consult the (young) people who would be impacted by them;
- ✓ by using the resolutions to inform your advocacy in other spaces (e.g. at the Commission on Population and Development);
- ✓ by monitoring and evaluating the implementation of these commitments; and of course you can also work on implementing these agreements yourself!

CHOICE RESOURCES

This fact sheet forms part of a series of resources aimed at demystifying international advocacy processes and making them more accessible to young people:

CHOICE FACTSHEET SERIES

A series of youth-friendly factsheets that explain key UN processes. This series includes a Factsheet on the CSW and CPD.

"SO YOU'RE GOING TO THE UN?" INFOGRAPHIC

A visual guide for youth advocates who are attending a UN process in New York.

UN LANGUAGE ADVOCACY TOOL

A tool that explains what UN Language is, why it is important, and how to get involved in UN Language Advocacy.

CHOICE SRHR GLOSSARY

A glossary that provides short and youth-friendly definitions of key SRHR terms.

For more youth-friendly resources, check out our website at choiceforyouth.org!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

HRC Extranet

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/HRCRegistration.aspx>

OHCHR HRC website

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/HRCIndex.aspx>

NGO Participation in the HRC

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NGOParticipation.aspx>

UN Human Rights Resolutions Portal

<http://www.universal-rights.org/human-rights/human-rights-resolutions-portal/>

HRC Resolutions and Reports

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Documents.aspx>

OHCHR Calendar of Events

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Meetings.aspx>

Human Rights Basics by OHCHR

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/HumanRightsBasics.aspx>

HRC Practical Guide for NGO Participants

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/PracticalGuideNGO_en.pdf

HRC Booklet by the UN OHCHR

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session34/Documents/HRC_booklet_En.pdf

HRC Briefing Note by the UN OHCHR

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/HRC_briefingnote_En.pdf

International Justice Resource Center '10 Essential Steps for First Time Advocacy at the HRC' <http://ihrlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/10-Essential-Steps-for-First-Time-Advocacy-at-the-Human-Rights-Council.pdf>

National Mechanisms for Reporting and Follow-up by OHCHR

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR_PUB_16_1_NMRF_PracticalGuide.pdf

Complaints Procedure of the HRC FAQ

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/ComplaintProcedure/FAQComplaintProcedure_en.pdf

Report of the Special Rapporteur on Health

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/067/53/PDF/G1606753.pdf?OpenElement>

WATCH THIS SPACE!

CHOICE is in the process of developing more resources on advocating in Geneva-based human rights processes

THINKING OF GETTING INVOLVED IN UN ADVOCACY?

CHOICE supports partners and youth advocates attending UN processes to ensure that young people from around the world are meaningfully participating and claiming their rights; thinking of getting involved? Contact us at info@choiceforyouth.org to see how we can potentially collaborate!

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

We appreciate your input! CHOICE places a high value on being inclusive and participatory; if you feel like anything in this factsheet is not accurate, or that we are missing something important, please do not hesitate to contact us at info@choiceforyouth.org.

Please share your feedback on this resource!



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For sexual and reproductive health and rights



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