

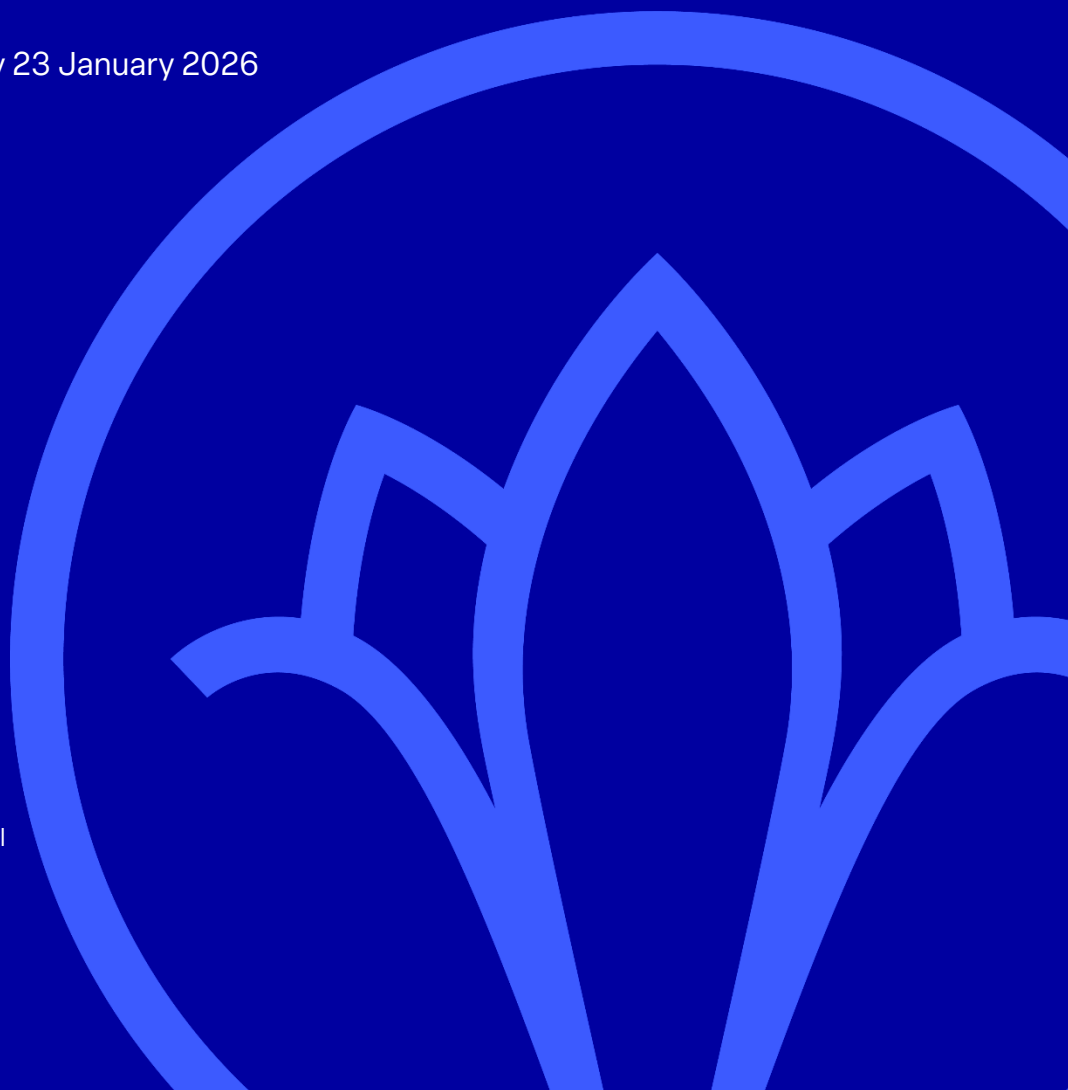


**Wilton  
Park**

**Report:  
Human rights in a shifting world:  
broadening support, securing  
futures**

Wednesday 21 – Friday 23 January 2026

**In association with**  
the Ministry for Foreign Affairs  
of Finland and the Swiss Federal  
Department of Foreign Affairs



In association with



**Ministry for Foreign  
Affairs of Finland**



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
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**Federal Department of  
Foreign Affairs FDFA**

# **Report: Human rights in a shifting world: broadening support, securing futures**

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## Background

In January 2026, over 50 key stakeholders from different sectors including the UN system, governments, civil society, academia, youth movements and the private sector met for the 20th annual human rights dialogue, held in partnership with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland.

This event provided an opportunity for human rights practitioners to take stock of the impact that recent geopolitical developments have had on the international human rights system and consider possible scenarios of how the situation might evolve.

Over two days of highly interactive discussions, participants exchanged inter-regional and inter-generational knowledge and best practice on building popular support for human rights and building human rights considerations into security and other policies. The event coincided with the World Economic Forum at Davos, where key speeches triggered and influenced inspiring reflections and recommendations for action.

## Summary

Profound disruptions to the universality of human rights are occurring across the world, negatively affecting the entire human rights ecosystem. This is set against a global backdrop of increasing numbers of armed conflicts, rising disparities within and across regions, and growing inequality that fuels social fragmentation and the polarisation of public discourse.

Multilateralism is strained, autocracies are increasing, and anti-rights movements are rising with unprecedented coordination. Backlash thrives where narratives go unchallenged, and peace and security collapses when human rights are sidelined.

Fundamental concerns include the erosion of international human rights law, the pushback against the rights of women and girls and gender equality, and the re-emergence of cultural relativism suggesting that human rights are optional, conditional, or negotiable. At the same time, the human rights ecosystem is facing a severe funding crisis.

What can be done to future-proof human rights and embed intergenerational responsibility into decision making? Some key recommendations included to fight hard

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and make the case for human rights, protect civil society, harness young energy in the world, and work with allies across multiple and intersectional social movements.

How can societal and public support for human rights be strengthened? Some key suggestions for action included to raise public consciousness of human rights as a means to ensure safe and secure societies, support social mobilisation, stop working in silos and embrace intersectionality, support and protect independent journalism and media, build new alliances across borders, movements, and sectors, always be led by victims and survivors, and build inclusive narratives and language to communicate about human rights focused on dignity, fairness, and agency.

Recommendations to improve accountability mechanisms and the treaty body system included to increase resources to the system, analyse and contribute to the UN80 reform process and make quality contributions to the resolution on treaty bodies in 2026, and to learn lessons from previous reforms and other experiences.

Operationalising new coalitions is a vital response for strengthening human rights and key strategic action included mapping existing coalitions and partnerships, leveraging new partners such as the private sector and foundations, framing new coalitions through the lens of intersectionality, bringing strong representation from those with lived experiences of human rights abuses, thinking beyond conventional spaces for engaging with young people and communities, and collectively devising a powerful communication strategy drawing in different actors.

The international human rights architecture is facing unprecedented financial challenges and legitimacy pressures and key recommendations included that states should allow the application of universal jurisdiction, civil society should advocate preserving and prioritising special procedure country visits, and national courts should increase the use of regional and international jurisprudence.

Full sets of recommendations can be found throughout the rest of this report.

## 1. Taking stock

Through dialogue and small group work, participants sought to create a shared understanding of how key threats to human rights are shaped by geopolitical developments.

Participants discussed the potential of negative scenarios in four areas: 1) The UN80 ambitious and system-wide reform effort is unsuccessful; 2) non-human rights bodies are significantly weakened; 3) anti-rights movements win; and 4) public support for human rights declines further due to economic insecurity. This led to fuller discussions about the extent of the threats and challenges being faced, and what some responses could look like.

Key points are highlighted below:

Attacks on human rights are increasing because human rights are powerful. They reject exceptionalism, they set limits on arbitrary power, and they affirm equality. Accountability through human rights monitoring, documentation, and reporting are not bureaucratic exercises; they ensure accountability and future justice.

As people around the world continue to demand dignity, equality, and justice the systems designed to protect those demands are under strain and subject to severe uncertainty. Human rights are being questioned in public discourses, are significantly underfunded, and in some contexts deliberately undermined.

Anti-rights and politically conservative actors are vocal and powerful in their reach, and their mobilisation is paradoxically framed in rights violations. Authoritarianism is rising and for the first time in decades autocracies are outnumbering democracies.

The erosion of international human rights law is a fundamental concern. The normative framework that has guided international relations for decades is weakening, and legal norms are being sidelined in contexts of conflict and violence such as in Gaza, Myanmar, Ukraine and Haiti.

The pushback against the rights of women and girls and gender equality is another troubling trend. Gains achieved over decades are being eroded through strategic and well-coordinated actions such as shrinking civic space, rising disinformation, and increasing attacks on defenders of the rights of women and girls. Yet evidence from the past 25 years shows that inclusion of women is a precondition for sustainable peace.

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The re-emergence of relativist arguments suggesting human rights are optional, conditional, or negotiable is also a major threat. This is reinforced by the weakening of respect for international law, including human rights laws and institutions.

Furthermore, securitisation narratives increasingly treat human rights as optional.

Traditional values and the security rhetoric are used to justify exclusion and discrimination, and this disproportionately targets women and girls, minorities, migrants, LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities, youth, and those who defend these groups.

Simultaneously, the human rights ecosystem and overseas aid is facing a severe funding crisis at precisely the moment when needs of the most vulnerable are escalating. The practical consequences are the loss of hundreds of UN staff positions, closure of country presences, postponement of treaty body reviews, and reduced investigations and special procedure visits.

Examples from the Asia Pacific region highlighted that militarisation and backsliding of women's rights results in displacement, violence, and insecurity. An intersectional perspective on human rights has a strong value, especially as women's and gender equality organisations are increasingly experiencing a reduction in funding.

The challenges faced are not isolated and independent, but rather present a system-wide stress with mutually reinforcing pressure points that are likely to define human rights trajectories over the coming year. The universality of human rights is the foundation of credible multilateralism and must be protected. The system needs to be able to defend the most vulnerable and marginalised people, not only as an expression of values but as indispensable to its legitimacy, coherence and long-term survival.

Participants shared initial reflections on where to take action, which were further developed throughout the rest of meeting, and included the following general points:

- Reject business as usual.
- Encourage new discussions and test longstanding assumptions.
- Forge new global alliances and coalitions across borders and sectors, including across middle powers.
- Work together better among social and youth movements, civil society, and government representatives.
- Develop strategic communication, narratives, and language about human rights and enter current discourses purposefully.

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## 2. Future-proofing rights: intergenerational dialogue

With 2045 as a horizon, participants discussed how current human rights challenges affect future generations, and what can be done to embed intergenerational responsibility into decision making.

Key points from the discussions included:

The younger generation have grown up with the reality of genocide, violence, and diminishing human rights. Through generations of trauma, trust in international law has been eroded, and therefore what happens next among youth is critical as to whether human rights have a future or not.

Intergenerational responsibility cannot just exist in social movements, it needs to be embedded properly in political and electoral cycles such as including youth in commissions, and parliaments.

Intergenerational justice is about relationships and relationships establish how well power is exercised. No generation can solve this alone, and shared decision-making spaces are essential.

Humans need to future-proof themselves and not fall prey to the fallacy that everything humans are taught to pursue is fixed and final. As youth are struggling to transition from a world they expect to a world of AI, human rights become an important part of the landscape of understanding, self-inquiry, and lived realities.

Young people are very good at communicating human rights and at creating and sustaining movements, for example, Fridays for Future, and Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA). Young people are coordinated and powerful, as lawyers, professionals, and government officials, and understand the system's sensitive points on which to put pressure.

In discussions, participants noted risks around general perceptions of human rights as being for minority communities, rather than for everyone, and perceptions of rights as being restrictive rather than freeing. If current trends continue there is a risk of human rights becoming a specialist and elitist ideology centred on cultural and moral issues, rather than a shared civic framework and a unified vision for human dignity.

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Future proofing human rights also means reviewing and reforming institutions, treaties, and processes. Some participants questioned the accessibility of the treaty bodies to civil society (as they are complex and can be difficult to understand), and others highlighted their value and strength. International treaties are used the world over by non-governmental organisations and lawyers to protect rights and hold abusers accountable, and the treaties' documents are useful and are implemented.

With the increasing use of technology and AI, it is important to recognise the role that AI can play in streamlining the work of human rights monitoring but equally ensure it does not replace diplomacy and opportunities for young people to learn. Future-proofing human rights does not mean automating the processes that people need to learn to make decisions in the future. AI is growing in capacity and influence, yet fewer than half of the companies adopting AI worldwide have an AI strategy.

Civil society organisations and social movements play critical roles in engaging with people on the ground, but they differ. Opportunities exist to put greater focus on supporting cross-movement building among movements of women, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples with the need to make investment in emerging and cross-sectional voices.

The concept of intersectionality in human rights is important for continuity and to connect movements and people across a range of issues including climate justice, trade, gender, Indigenous Peoples, peace, and development. There is power in fostering relationships across the entire ecosystem and include people and movements previously overlooked.

As we move into a changing era, it is no longer safe to make assumptions about the continuation of the human rights system. If honouring human dignity is at the core of the human project, then human rights must be brought into the new era.

Some key considerations and suggestions were to:

- Fight hard for human rights and the principle of universality and stand up for the institutions that are already established, imperfect as they are.
- Protect civil society as there is no future for human rights without it.
- Engage and harness young energy in the world and work with allies across multiple and intersectional social movements, while framing human rights as central.

- Make a powerful case for human rights, especially around business and security, arguing for a more prosperous and secure society, with peaceful and trustful communities as a result.
- Broaden engagement with private sector organisations on their responsibilities and positive influence on rights.
- Engage with states bilaterally and multilaterally on human rights principles and values and insist leaders speak up.
- Recognise the persistence of the patriarchy and of the legacy of colonialism and how both shape the world.

### 3. Building societal support for human rights futures

Although the world is witnessing unprecedented pushback on gender equality, positive structural shifts are taking place because of evidence-driven and coordinated action, with the UN working in alliance with civil society and movements.

For example, through close partnership with the CEDAW Committee, UN Women feeds country-level realities directly into global norms and bring these norms back to push legal reforms on the ground. Between 2022–2024, UN Women supported 325 laws across 83 countries to be adopted, reformed, or repealed, improving the lives of 2.9 billion women and girls.

Experience over decades shows that building resilient societies means building a culture of rights, and this starts with public consciousness and mobilisation. Shifting harmful social norms counters disinformation and puts the voices of those most affected by human rights abuses and violations at the centre including women with disabilities, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, LGBTIQ+ people, young women, and rural women.

Humans live intersectional lives and applying an intersectional lens to understanding how different people relate to human rights is critically important. There is not a single human rights violation that does not display intersectionality. It is strategically important to build intersectionality into all strategies and approaches from the start and find effective ways and language to reach different audiences.

Independent journalism is on life support because of competing platforms, unmanageable news cycles, social media influence, and AI making jobs redundant. Over the past 20 years the media's business model has completely shifted. The media

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industry is losing its capacity to produce content, and any content is increasingly difficult for consumers to find. Far right and anti-rights media is far more dominant, with most of the media's content on rights focused on framing rights as restrictive or oppositional rather than as protections intended to support individuals or communities.

In combination, the law is being increasingly weaponised to silence media freedom. In 2025, more than 60% of the journalists imprisoned were jailed through legal tactics. Freedom of expression declined in 44 countries. As journalists are being targeted, and legal representation is obstructed, the effects on journalism are chilling. Support and funding to the information ecosystem which plays a role in protecting human rights is critical.

Participants discussed underutilised entry points for building stronger societal support for human rights which included engaging private donors, better coordination between pro-human rights governments and embassies, and elevating the voices and testimonies of victims and survivors.

Strategic communication to a range of audiences to both counter disinformation and misinformation, and to support the positive value of human rights requires initial research on people's views and amplifying positive attitudes towards human rights.

The technical communication of human rights can often land badly with audiences. It is more effective to evoke concepts of human dignity, justice, fairness, equality, and agency to resonate with audiences who seek stability, order, and security.

As well as engaging with different sectors who do not identify as relating to human rights, such as the arts, faith, sports, and business sectors, it is also critically important to reach out in homes, families, and workplaces to oppose domination in all these everyday settings.

Awareness of gender is critical in engagement processes as the military and security landscape, the technology sector, and the investment sector are all male dominated.

Opportunities exist to strategically engage with companies, especially those with existing or emerging commitments to human rights and to get involved in conversations around regulatory frameworks, particularly for AI and digital services. Companies are concerned about their reputations, and their investors' opinions, and it is possible to apply pressure to sensitive points especially when companies appear to be competing over good practices.

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In considering how the anti-torture movement has worked, a major lesson is to understand that survivors are active defenders of human rights and their power to influence decisions, policy, and actions should never be underestimated or underutilised.

Another significantly underutilised entry point is that of local authorities, who are rarely at the table discussing human rights. The local level is a practical expression of human rights, for example in the form of health, education, water and sanitation, and democracy.

Some key areas and suggestions for action included:

- Raise public consciousness of human rights and supporting social mobilisation.
- Stop working in silos and embrace intersectionality.
- Support and adequately resource the information ecosystem and protect independent journalism as essential conditions for transparency, accountability and respect for human rights.
- Always be led by victims and survivors of human rights abuses.
- Invest in time and engagement with communities and sectors who do not identify as working on human rights.
- Be aware of gender considerations in dealing with predominantly male sectors.
- Build inclusive narratives and language to communicate about human rights focused on dignity, fairness, equality and agency.

## 4. Recommendations for action

In small groups, participants explored recommendations for actions in four key areas. The main challenges and recommendations from each group are summarised below.

### **New ideas for accountability mechanisms and the treaty body system**

The human rights treaty bodies are committees of independent experts that monitor implementation of the core international human rights treaties. As more countries ratify treaties, and with an overall decline in funding which limits capacity, the treaty bodies are under growing pressure to respond to a backlog of reports. Country capacity to produce the reports is also strained. Some questioned the non-harmonisation among the treaty bodies and suggested a lack of transparency on how the treaty bodies work and how funds are used and disbursed. Recommendations for action included the following:

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- Increase resources to the treaty bodies and strengthen predictability of reporting.
- During UN80 reforms, consider who will benefit from the reforms: the country administrations who are reporting, or those who are implementing human rights on the ground?
- Change the reporting system so that countries need only present one report for all the treaties in a five-year cycle, although there was debate about whether this would risk certain human rights abuses being overlooked.
- Remember that the solutions must also help communities, not just ease the reporting responsibility of states.
- Work with national mechanisms for monitoring and reporting and incorporate this into the reporting process for the treaty bodies
- Organise regional bodies and meetings for treaty bodies which are smaller, requiring less travel.
- Track data of how recommendations from treaty bodies and special procedures are used in other spaces, as it is useful in legal processes.
- States can lead the process to make high quality recommendations to the binding resolution on treaty bodies in 2026 to support the strengthening of the system. Civil society organisations may need training to advocate for implementable recommendations.
- Learn lessons from previous rounds of treaty body reforms, and from the Council of Europe, and draw on the leadership of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Acknowledge the voluntary nature of the treaty body members' service and the value their expertise generates.

### **Building public support for human rights**

The public conversation on human rights has been captured by the anti-rights movement, which is highly creative and powerful in appealing to audiences globally. Recommendations for action to counter this included the following:

- Conduct research to better understand anti-rights movements and how they work.
- Map out existing and potential partnerships, governments, and networks that do and could support human rights, and engage them in strategic communication planning and implementation.

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- Build a positive narrative on human rights rather than debunking or correcting anti-rights narratives. This includes reframing messaging around security and economic prosperity and demonstrating that human rights are a framework for security and stability. Tell the story of the success of the European Union's peace, security, and prosperity more effectively to demonstrate the value of human rights.
- Focus on persuadable audiences, build trust, simplify language, and be emotional.
- Build empowerment through civic education curricula, and a voting license.
- Build new alliances and connections across borders, movements, and sectors.
- Leverage and enhance the power of youth movements and schools.
- Train journalists and independent media to report on human rights.
- Engage with local authorities and mayors who can play a significant role in protecting people whose human rights are abused (such as migrants and refugees) and support local level solidarity and awareness.

### **Operationalising new coalitions**

As human rights are increasingly threatened, operationalising new coalitions is a vital response. Recommendations for action included the following:

- Map existing coalitions and partnerships to identify areas of work and overlapping agendas, and what configuration is needed for a more strategic approach to promoting and securing human rights.
- Identify how intersectionality can frame the coalitions that are strengthened or built.
- Identify actors to target including civil society organisations, youth, movements, states and the private sector.
- Explore the role of states and how to collaborate with them as duty-bearers and implementers.
- Create guiding principles for coalitions to work together, leading to strategic objectives and short-, medium-, and long-term planning for implementation.
- Collectively devise a powerful strategic communication strategy and work with representatives from groups to co-create and champion messages targeting different audiences. Include messaging about the connections between human rights and safe and secure societies.

- Bring the life experiences, voices, and representation of youth, women, people with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples to local and regional meetings and elevate to the global level.
- Think beyond the conventional spaces for engagement of air-conditioned offices and modern urban spaces and consider libraries, cafes, and community meet-ups as places to visit and engage meaningfully.

### **Strengthening the international human rights architecture**

As funding and capacity decreases, and the universality of human rights is challenged across the globe, how can the international human rights architecture be strengthened?

Recommendations for action included the following:

- Identify challenges and understand why universal jurisdiction is not being used. For example, a network across Spain, France, and Germany shares experiences.
- States to allow the application of universal jurisdiction (which is possible in some places and not others) and to train judges and prosecutors on implementation.
- Civil society to advocate preserving and prioritising special procedure country visits, both official and academic, and explore combining mandates.
- National courts to increase the use of regional and international jurisprudence, including a legal education priority to encourage judicial clerks.
- Policy experts to spend more time and coordinate with those with lived experience and encourage policy experts from within communities.
- Ensure safe spaces at international meetings and events for advocates and community representatives (including translation) and advise activists to make state representatives aware of risks to advocates.
- Intermediaries who bring activists to international human rights mechanisms should also bring independent and alternative journalists who can report back to their country.
- Civil society and states to advocate for more inclusive recruitment to appoint more candidates to treaty bodies from the global majority.
- Civil society, states, and the UN to recognise non-state, community-led accountability mechanisms such as peoples' tribunals.
- The UN should systematise, and civil society should advocate for, meaningful and inclusive consultation and impact assessments in the UN reform process.

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- The UN should quantify the pro bono value of the treaty bodies and fact-finding missions to account for value that is lost when costs are cut.
- Build the case for increased resources to the human rights pillar of the UN.

## 5. Conclusion

In the concluding discussion, participants shared the actions they will take following the meeting. This included: updating organisational communication guidelines on human rights; providing training workshops for colleagues on intersectionality and human rights; using examples of good practice in demonstrating impact to others; influencing discussions on treaty body reform; reaching out more to the business sector; participating in broad-based, cross-sector coalitions; and communicating more strategically to make the case for human rights that promote security, stability, and peace. Finally, in recognising the significance of every day and ordinary settings, many participants said they would talk about this meeting to their families and children to pass on the meaningful values of human rights and their future.

Alison Dunn

Wilton Park | March 2026

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