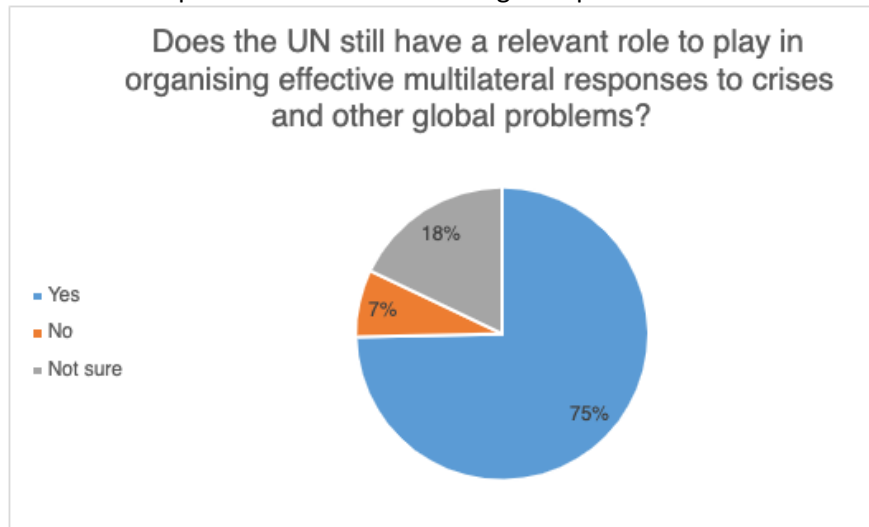


## Summary of the views of human rights defenders working at the international, regional and national level on the needed reforms at the UN

The International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) ran an online survey for human rights defenders and organisations working in national and regional contexts between 3 June and 16 July. We received 171 responses. Here is an analysis of those:

1. **Most of the respondents (75%) believe that the UN still has a relevant role to play** organising effective multilateral responses to crises and other global problems.



2. **They believe the UN is relevant because:**

- It's a forum to address issues that transcend national boundaries and cannot be resolved by any country acting alone
- It provides a platform (often the highest and last fora) for human rights defenders, victims and civil society to expose injustice, promote accountability, garner solidarity or assert its rights
- It upholds and further develops international law.
- It holds States accountable for their actions and human rights obligations

3. When asked more in detail about **what should the UN** mainly focus on to protect and promote human rights today and what should its **main role be**, additional elements highlighted by respondents included:

- **Promote multilateralism** and be a space of genuine dialogues for peace, consensus-building, cooperation and bring about the sense of global togetherness.
- Act as a **global guardian of human rights** ensuring their universality and indivisibility and making sure they are upheld and enforced.
- **Research, investigate, monitor and respond to human rights abuses worldwide.** Many respondents highlighted the importance of **addressing the systemic and intersectional inequalities** that disproportionately affect the most marginalised.

- Change the paradigm when human rights violations happen: move beyond reactive measures to **proactive prevention, enhanced protection, accountability, and meaningful redress**. Tackle the **root causes**, such as colonialism, unequal access to resources, extractive economic systems, and discriminatory policies. Go beyond reporting and recommendations and develop more robust mechanisms capable of issuing **binding decisions** (or even sanctions) and **holding States responsible of human rights violations accountable**.
- **Be a truly responsive and action-oriented arena and focus on implementation and enforcement**
- **Protect and provide support to victims**; civilians in situations of war, violence, and emergency settings; civil society. The system should listen, include, and empower people everywhere; it should amplify the voices of those most affected by systems of oppression and those excluded from global policymaking.
- **Prevent conflicts and crises**, organise **humanitarian aid**, and engage in **peacebuilding**.
- **Set standards, provide guidance on international law and technical assistance, capacity-building, and resources to help countries** improve their human rights practices.
- **Engage in broader and unbiased Human Rights education and awareness campaigns**.

*Note: there were two visions regarding the role the UN must play regarding socio-economic issues such as poverty and wealth inequities. The majority believed the UN should play a role in addressing those issues and offered a large range of solutions including making the SDGs binding, strengthening the UN normative role in relation to fiscal, economic and environmental justice, pushing for fair taxation, supporting debt relief for low income countries, promoting policies that equitably redistribute resources, enhancing the data collection and monitoring frameworks of economic, social and environmental rights to hold governments to account, tackling the root causes embedded in the current global trade, financial and production/consumption system, supporting people-centred and community-led development and holding companies to account among others.*

*A minority of the respondent considered that this was not the role of the UN either because it was unrealistic to expect any impact on these matters or because socio-economical changes should be left to governments, NGOs, and local actors.*

4. Respondents agreed that the UN is in crisis. **The top 3 challenges faced by the UN in upholding human rights** according to them are:
  - lack of enforcement mechanisms
  - political divisions among UN member states obstructing consensus-building and hindering the implementation of human rights resolutions and initiatives
  - lack of implementation by some States of recommendations made by UN human rights bodies

*(other popular options selected: lack of accountability for atrocity crimes and insufficient funding and resources for UN human rights activities)*

5. The 7% of respondents who said that the UN was not relevant anymore indicated as the main reason the inability of the system to respond to crises and global challenges due to the paralysis of the Security Council, double standards, the non-binding character of the recommendations or decisions emitted by the UN and the fact that States ignored them and were not held accountable for that and finally the lack of resources.
6. According to respondents, any reform process should be guided by the following **values or principles: accountability, inclusivity, principled decision making and participation**.

7. According to the respondents, the **top five changes most needed to make the UN human rights system more accountable and responsive** to grassroots realities are:
  - **Put people and communities affected by human rights violations at the centre of decisions** *(many respondents stressed this as essential and that the UN should work with bottom-up approaches and consider right-holders as co-creators of solutions. Several respondents shared the opinion that the UN should not be just a forum for States but an institution that defended and acted with humanity, firmly grounded in the lived realities of those it seeks to serve. There were also several responses pointing out to the importance of strengthening civil society – with trainings, funding, safe spaces, temporary relocation, technical support - and acknowledging/prioritising community systems/solutions, as well as reinforcing structures to support victims (e.g.: reparations, trauma support, reintegration programs, protection etc).*
  - **Ensure a safe and meaningful participation of civil society and human rights defenders** *(respondents also mentioned the need to make the system more accessible, participatory, and inclusive to people and communities who face exclusion and discrimination. The detailed solutions mentioned included: facilitation of remote participation, improved digital platforms, more transparency, facilitation of visas, more translation/interpretation, facilitation of accreditations, less bureaucracy, no intimidations, reprisals, and transnational repression. Several respondents also mentioned the idea to move UN offices or some key meetings to the Global South. Some respondents mentioned the necessity of having participatory mechanisms beyond State-centric structures, so civil society is included in the decision-making, not just consulted.*
  - **Reform the security council** *(solutions provided to make it more representative and diverse were, for example: rotating its membership, abolishing the veto system, and allocating seats based on regions)*
  - **Uphold universal human rights law and values**
  - **Ensure an adequate and sustainable funding for the UN's human rights work** *(Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures were mentioned by several respondents as essential mechanisms that should have adequate servicing and funding).*
8. **In addition to these five elements, when asked in more detail about their vision of a reformed UN, respondents mentioned that:**
  - **The UN must reaffirm the framework and principles it defends.** *(This included adopting two narratives: one that accepts and acknowledges that colonialism, racism and patriarchy are the root causes of many key problems, and another one that reasserts the UN authority, and make it more popular in order for States to renew their commitment and for the public to feel it closer)*
  - **The UN must focus on enforcement and implementation of the human rights treaties and the recommendations made by the system.**
  - **The system must address the power imbalances issues within it.** *(Apart from the reform of the Security Council, solutions offered included 1) acknowledging colonisation, engaging in*

*truth and reparations and ensuring equitable representation including those historically excluded from leadership, decision making and policy design spaces; 2) appointing a feminist woman UN SG; 3) allowing direct participation of citizens, social movements and civil society within the UN; 4) embracing principles of mutual learning, participatory solidarity, respect for local knowledge and bottom-up approaches.)*

- **The system must focus on accountability especially for human rights atrocities and non-cooperation by state parties.** *(Solutions here offered by several respondents: no double standards; necessity of establishing sanctions against States that commit human rights violations or fail on their human rights obligations; more support to ICC/ICJ or to new mechanisms with investigatory powers and authority to deliver and implement binding decisions; Fact-finding missions, investigative bodies, and treaty monitoring systems should be given full independence, adequate resources, and the authority to hold perpetrators accountable.)*

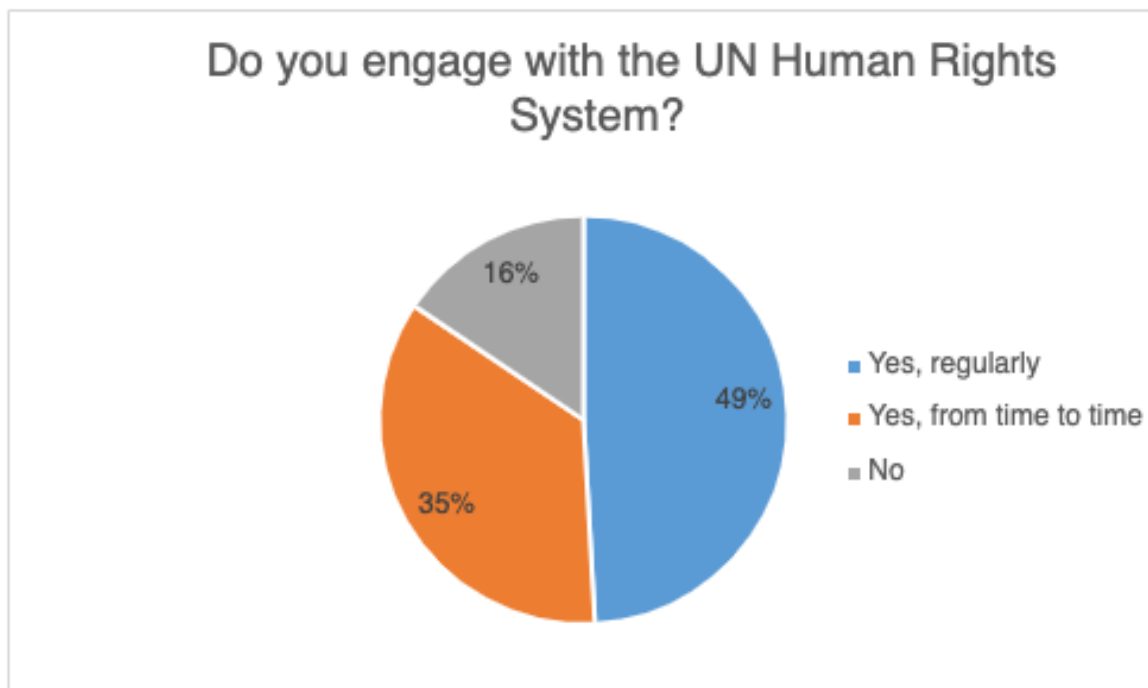
9. **On the reforms to structures and operations and cut-spendings:**

- **Ideas on how to make more with less:**
  - Coordination between countries (regional mechanisms) to share funds and specialised personnel.
  - Have less staff and in particular less officials on Geneva and New York. Decentralise key offices and have more agile and functional mechanisms on the ground linked to civil society. Develop and strengthen regional offices.
  - Decrease aid dependency, invest much more in tackling the root causes of the problems in countries instead of investing a lot in repair and humanitarian aid.
  - Reduce administration and bureaucracy. Leave the implementation of service delivery-oriented development programmes to local actors. Build stronger alliances with human rights organisations to reach the most vulnerable.
  - Invest in more efficient digital tools (so information is more accessible, but also certain activities can be done online – e.g.: some negotiations, monitoring/reporting, simplified reporting of human rights violations etc).
- **Work less in silos:**
  - mainstreaming human rights perspective across other UN spaces and aligning humanitarian, development, and human rights efforts
  - consolidation of UN human rights actors/activities that are currently spread across many agencies
- **On human resources:**
  - Develop staff education on colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and their capacity to engage more directly with right-holders and victims so they work more for the people and with humanity.
  - Leadership changes - put humans who are affected by systemic violations of HR (racism, colonialism, patriarchy) in positions where they can make a change.
  - Have more personnel from within developing countries, with locally appropriate pay and benefits applying, not expensive imported ""experts"" on international rates, it would be better able to relate to local people, groups, and officials.

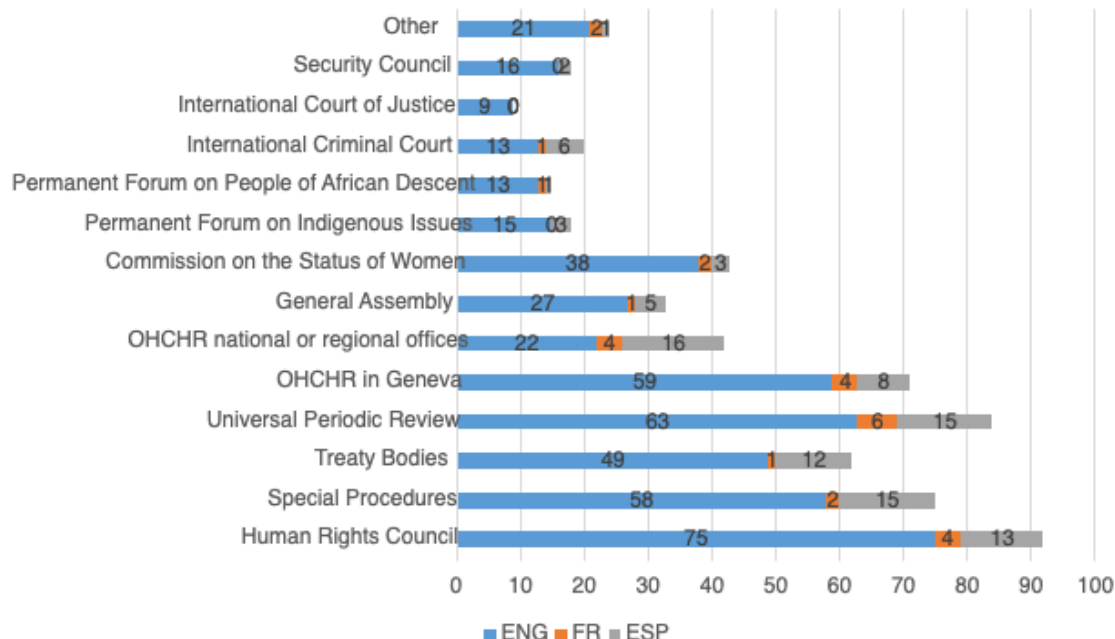
- Strengthen the internal complaint mechanisms, which are currently failing, make them more efficient and establishing dedicated units that will take care of this approach and reform.
- Eradicate corruption within the system.
- Introduce paid internships so that not only people coming from wealthy families can have the experience of working with the UN without working through the night to survive in Geneva/New York.

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**Additional data:** Profiles of the respondents and their engagement with the system



### What mechanisms have you engaged with?



### Has your participation and engagement been obstructed or hindered?

