

29 October 2025

To: H. E. Guy Ryder, Under-Secretary-General for Policy
H. E. Volker Türk, High Commissioner for Human Rights

Subject: ISHR Proposals for Reform of the Human Rights Pillar under Workstream 3 of the UN80 Initiative, ahead of Chief Executive Board (CEB) Meeting on 30-31 October

Your Excellencies,

We welcome the objectives of the UN80 Initiative launched by the Secretary-General to modernise the UN's structures and operations in response to global crises, including escalating conflicts, authoritarianism, widespread human rights violations, climate change and inequality. The UN faces a credibility and financial crisis, with Member States failing to enforce decisions, uphold human rights, and pay contributions in full and on time. The UN's effectiveness is further hindered by a paralysed Security Council and growing double standards among Member States.

UN80 must be a turning point that strengthens the UN's capacity to ensure that human rights are centered and mainstreamed in global governance. Reforms must ensure unwavering commitment to the peoples the UN was created to serve.

Ahead of the meeting of the Chief Executive Board on 30-31 October to discuss the implementation of proposals under Workstream 3, including those from the Secretary-General's report *'Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver'*, we wish to bring your attention to two key principles and four priority areas for reform we respectfully encourage you to support.

Key principles:

1. Civil society consultation

We welcome your commitments to support the formalisation of a process for meaningful and transparent civil society consultations in the implementation of Workstream 3, in particular for reforms within the purview of the Secretariat. UN80 must be informed by and respond to the experience and expertise of human rights defenders and communities and groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

2. Principles and criteria for human rights-based reform

We reiterate the key principles that should underpin UN80's process and criteria for decision-making set out in Annex 1 (attached) of our [previous letter to the Secretary-General and the High](#)

[Commissioner for Human Rights](#) dated 12 July 2025. These principles include the need for reform to:

- safeguard and strengthen the independence of expert human rights bodies and mechanisms, including the post of High Commissioner, Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, and investigative mechanisms such as Commissions of Inquiry;
- promote a consistent, principled and non-selective application of human rights standards and principles; and
- advance prevention of and accountability for human rights violations and abuses, ending impunity for atrocity crimes.

Additionally, while OHCHR should explore opportunities to expand field offices and regional presences, and support the mainstreaming of human rights cross-country offices, **OHCHR should maintain its primary offices and functions in Geneva**. This will leverage economies of scale, contribute to coordination and collaboration with other agencies, assist to guard against fragmentation and duplication, and assist to ensure safe, coordinated, efficient and effective access for independent civil society. **Any location considered by OHCHR for any presence or mechanism should be subject to a civil society impact assessment**, identifying any challenges or barriers to safe and effective civil society access and participation.

Key proposals

3. Strengthening the proposal for a new Human Rights Group

We welcome the Secretary-General's proposal, in line with Action 46 of the Pact for the Future, to establish a Human Rights Group as a platform to upscale coordination, coherence, integration and mainstreaming of the UN's human rights work across the organisation, with a view to benefiting rights-holders and affected communities.

Building on this proposal, we recommend that:

- The Human Rights Group and OHCHR, consistent with the HRC's resolution on the prevention of human rights violations, should **ensure a UN system-wide response to early warning signals** from national and global civil society, national human rights institutions and UN country offices.
- The Human Rights Group should work to enhance cross-pillar coherence and coordination on human rights, **ensuring that the UN system adopts a strategic, principled and pragmatic approach on thematic or country situations**, while leveraging the distinctive but complementary mandates of different bodies and mechanisms. The Group must avoid the risk of consolidating all human rights and protection mandates under one single entity in such a way as to silo and insulate the human rights pillar from other UN pillars.
- The Human Rights Group and OHCHR, consistent with its mandate to support and strengthen the effectiveness of the UN human rights machinery, should **promote and protect the independence, diversity and responsiveness of the Special Procedures, as well as the independence of the investigative mechanisms established by the Human Rights Council**, free from political considerations and interference that may impede their efficiency and effectiveness. While efficiencies can be identified and resources can be pooled at the

operational level, these mandates should maintain their independence and autonomy, complementing the work of OHCHR.

- The Human Rights Group should include senior representatives from independent civil society, or **establish a civil society Advisory Committee**, ensuring that the Group has access to additional experience and expertise. Due consideration should also be given to including the Chair of the Special Procedures Coordination Committee and the Chair of Treaty Body Chairs as members of the Human Rights Group or Advisory Committee.

4. Improving early-warning and system-wide prevention

While the Human Rights Group should play a leading role in informing and coordinating system-wide responses to prevent and address human rights crises, the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner must continue to play a role in this regard:

- In order to contribute to effective and efficient prevention, the **High Commissioner should provide regular intersessional briefings to the Human Rights Council** on situations that merit the HRC's attention, and also regularly provide human rights analysis and information to the Security Council and the General Assembly on current and potential human rights and humanitarian crises.
- In order to contribute to greater prevention, enhanced coordination and efficiency across pillars, **the Secretary-General should use their mandate under article 99 of the UN Charter to refer to the Security Council any widespread and systematic human rights violations**, or early warning signs thereof, that may impact international peace and security.

5. Building on and operationalising past OHCHR and Secretary-General initiatives

The Human Rights Group should be given the necessary authority to take concrete steps to implement key and outstanding recommendations from the Call to Action for Human Rights, the UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, and the 2024 Agenda for Protection. This should include concrete steps by all Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams to operationalise these initiatives.

6. Proposing and supporting human rights initiatives with Member States

The Secretary-General, High Commissioner and Human Rights Group have important roles to play in proposing and supporting human rights initiatives and reforms that are within the prerogative of Member States. Without limitation, we respectfully propose two priorities in that regard:

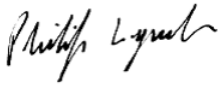
- The **Human Rights Council should mandate an independent, cross-regional working group of experts** empowered to refer urgent situations to the HRC, including by applying the objective criteria set out in the 'Irish Principles'. This would ensure that the HRC could be seized of matters on their merits and focus its limited resources on critical situations. It would also help to address issues of selectivity and double standards which significantly erode the integrity, effectiveness and efficiency of international human rights law and mechanisms.
- **The General Assembly's review of the status of the HRC should aim to strengthen the HRC's mandate, effectiveness and efficiency, as well as elevate the status of human rights**

across the UN system. Among other steps, pursuant to article 96(2) of the UN Charter, the **General Assembly should authorise the HRC to request advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice on legal questions arising with respect to human rights.** This would assist to ensure the principled and consistent development, interpretation and application of international human rights law. It would also contribute to efficiency by increasing the comity of law and providing authoritative guidance on legal matters which may otherwise be subject to different approaches by different mandates and mechanisms.

For meaningful reform, the UN must prioritise life-saving human rights work and avoid across-the-board cuts. Rather, in keeping with the commitments set out in the Pact of the Future, the Secretary-General, together with the proposed Human Rights Group, must ensure adequate, predictable, increased and sustainable financing of the United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the OHCHR. Strengthening civil society engagement is essential, as it provides crucial information and support to UN operations. The UN80 Initiative must ensure transparency and inclusivity, allowing civil society to contribute to the decision-making process, and must reaffirm the UN's commitment to human rights in global governance.

We are committed to supporting you in strengthening the UN human rights pillar, including ensuring that it is adequately resourced, and look forward to continuing to engage with you throughout the UN80 process.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Phil Lynch', with a stylized, cursive script.

Phil Lynch
Executive Director | International Service for Human Rights
E: p.lynch@ishr.ch

Principles underpinning process

- **Inclusive and participatory engagement:** Ensure safe and meaningful participation of affected populations, independent civil society and human rights defenders in all reform discussions, especially from historically marginalised communities and groups.
- **Transparency:** All processes should be open, with clear communication about agendas, timelines and decisions, as well as proposals on the table for deliberation.
- **Human rights-centered approach:** Reforms must prioritise the promotion, respect, protection, and fulfillment of human rights across all pillars of the UN.
- **Equity:** The process should proactively address power imbalances and ensure that historically marginalised groups are not excluded or further disadvantaged.
- **Sustainability:** Reforms should promote financial and environmental sustainability, and not be cosmetic or short-term fixes.

Criteria to guide decision-making

- **Do the reforms enhance the capacity to protect and promote human rights globally?** Decisions should improve the effectiveness, relevance, responsiveness and impact of UN human rights mechanisms, while addressing efficiency and cost-cutting.
- **Are the voices and needs of rights-holders reflected in the outcome?** Both processes and outcomes should enable, value and reflect the expertise and lived experiences of affected populations.
- **Do reforms strengthen the independence and integrity of human rights institutions?** Reforms must protect key human rights bodies and mechanisms from political interference.
- **Do decisions align with international human rights law and standards?** Reforms must be consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, core human rights treaties, customary international law and progressively evolving human rights standards, including commitments on gender equality.
- **Do the reforms or measures promote a consistent, principled and non-selective application of human rights standards and principles to all situations?** Reforms must ensure that all situations and issues are addressed on the basis of evidence and by applying human rights norms in a principled and consistent manner and without discrimination, avoiding politicisation, double standards or selective scrutiny.
- **Do the reforms promote cooperation of States with the human rights system, and levy consequences for non-cooperation?** Reforms should incentivise meaningful state engagement with UN mechanisms while establishing clear consequences—diplomatic, reputational, or procedural—for obstruction or refusal to cooperate.
- **Do the reforms address impunity at the highest level, and are accountability mechanisms reinforced or created to ensure compliance and remedy for violations?** Reforms must strengthen mechanisms to hold political, military, and corporate actors accountable for serious human rights violations and abuses, regardless of status or power, including through support for international investigative and judicial processes. There must be pathways to justice for victims and consequences for violators.