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PARLIAMENTS AND THE UNITED NATIONS TREATY BODIES

How can parliamentarians turn
international human rights
commitments into reality?



WHAT ARE THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES?

NINE COMMITTEES

are entrusted with monitoring how a State implements the core UN human rights treaties it has ratified, on the basis of periodic State reports. **There are nine core treaty bodies**, each comprised of 10 to 25 independent experts who are elected by UN Member States for their expertise.

Following an interactive review with State representatives, the treaty body issues concluding observations — authoritative **recommendations** that pinpoint the gap between international commitments and reality, and the means to close it. Many treaty bodies also allow for an individual complaints procedure if the State in question consents to it.

The treaty bodies also provide detailed **guidance** on the application of the treaty to specific themes, such as the right to housing as a component of the right to a decent standard of living.

This review is separate from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which is a political process led by UN Member States within the UN Human Rights Council - but the two reinforce each other.



THE UN COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Oversees the implementation of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (ICESCR).

The ICESCR covers the right to **education, health, work, social security, non-discrimination, the environment** and other aspects that affect the daily lives of all people.

In 2025, the CESCR adopted its General comment No. 27 on the **environmental dimension of sustainable development**, with a particular focus on human rights obligations in the context of climate change, covering essential aspects such as the right to food and a healthy environment.

THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (ICCPR).

These rights **include the right to a fair trial, to freedom of expression and freedom of religion**. Most States have ratified the first Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, which foresees a complaints mechanism that created a vast jurisprudence identifying how obligations derived from the Covenant are to be implemented in practice. The Second Optional Protocol outlaws the death penalty.



THE UN CEDAW COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**. Parliaments' engagement on CEDAW has been ongoing for years on actions to eliminate discriminatory laws, address harmful stereotypes, and ensure equality at work, in education, in the family and in public life.

In 2024, the CEDAW Committee issued General recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making, developed in partnership with the IPU and UN Women.



THE UN CRC COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, the most widely ratified legally binding human rights treaty. The norms contained in the Convention are complemented by an Optional Protocol on the sale of children and an Optional Protocol on children in armed conflict.

THE UN CMW COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the International **Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families** (MWC). Although it does not create new rights for migrants, it clarifies existing human rights obligations of origin, transit and destination countries and provides practical guidance for full implementation.



THE UN CERD COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** (ICERD), the first legally binding human rights treaty which has been ratified by over 180 UN Member States. The CERD and CMW adopted recently a Joint General Comment with guidelines for eradicating xenophobia toward migrants and persons perceived as such.



THE UN CRPD COMMITTEE

Oversees the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which sets specific measures to be taken to remove barriers that exclude persons with disabilities.



Other UN treaty bodies include the UN CAT Committee, which oversees the implementation of the **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**.

One of the latest treaty bodies with a dedicated reporting mechanism is the **CED**, which oversees the implementation of the **International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICED)**.



WHAT CAN MPS DO?

All UN human rights treaties have a periodic reporting procedure under which States Parties are required to **report on the implementation** of the relevant treaty, including any challenges encountered.



Before the review, MPs can **contribute to their State's report** on the state of implementation in their country of the rights enshrined in the UN human rights treaties. They can facilitate or encourage their governments to host a broad consultation process and to consider and reflect in the national report the inputs received from all relevant stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs) and national human rights institutions (NHRIs).



During the review, MPs can **participate in the interactive discussion**, either as members of their government's delegation or as observers. Over the last 10 years, more than 100 parliamentarians have done so.



After the review, MPs can help **ensure that the recommendations are implemented** at the national level through budgetary allocations and the adoption of national legislation and policies. As most recommendations require action by parliament, the role of parliamentarians is key.



Moreover, as part of their **oversight** function, parliaments can request their governments to provide them with regular updates in writing and in person on their implementation of **treaty body recommendations and decisions**.

WHAT OTHER STEPS CAN PARLIAMENTARIANS TAKE TO PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS?



Take steps to ratify the Covenants and treaties, their optional protocols and **incorporate human rights in national legislation** and by-laws.



Ensure the State budget is in line with international obligations, which includes taking continuous steps towards the full realization of human rights, by using the maximum available funds and resources for the progressive realization of some rights (e.g. right to food) and for the training of key State actors (police, judges, educators, etc).



Meet regularly with key stakeholders such as line ministries, CSOs, NHRIs and experts, including UN country teams; cooperate with them in gathering data and inputs on the situation on the ground; and propose provisions to tackle issues through laws and policies.



Whenever evidence emerges that human rights have been violated in your country, **use your oversight powers to ensure accountability** for the alleged violations.



Hold **awareness-raising** activities with constituencies about UN treaty body recommendations, the status of key laws in parliament, and about the steps that parliament has taken.



Establish or integrate a **National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Followup** with a view to coordinating national efforts vis-à-vis human rights treaty obligations.



Take part in capacity-building seminars and briefings organized by the IPU and the Office of the United Nations High-Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

GOOD PRACTICES:

IN KENYA,

Parliament enacted several laws to ensure the progressive realization of the most relevant rights contained in the ICESCR in the local context, including the Land Laws (Amendment) Act, as well as constitutional norms enshrining several justiciable rights, including the right to clean and safe drinking water, social security and education.

IN MEXICO,

Parliament amended the National Human Rights Commission Act to establish gender parity as a principle that should govern all public affairs as recommended by the CEDAW Committee. The amendment was driven by gender equality bodies in both houses with inputs from NGOs.

IN GEORGIA,

the former Chair of the Human Rights Committee initiated the drafting process of the Code on the Rights of the Child as urged by the CRC. Shortly after its adoption in 2019, she was elected as a member of the CRC and later became its President.

IN FINLAND,

two members of Parliament took part in the country's delegation to the Human Rights Committee. Parliament established an independent human rights commission on non-discrimination and adopted a network to disseminate UN human rights recommendations and monitor implementation, as recommended by the UN Human Rights Committee.

IN MOROCCO,

the 2023 State report to the CERD was drafted in consultation with Parliament. Steps taken towards full realization of the ICERD included the creation of the Equality and Non-Discrimination Authority and the appeal by parliamentarians to amend the Nationality Code through a royal decree to allow foreign spouses of Moroccan women the right to acquire Moroccan nationality under the same conditions as spouses of Moroccan men as recommended by the CERD.

WHY SHOULD PARLIAMENTS BE INVOLVED?

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To ensure that every child grows up protected, respected, and able to reach their full potential demands determined political leadership. Parliaments can demonstrate such leadership by engaging with the CRC and other UN treaty bodies at each stage of the process – contributing to periodic reports, taking part in State delegations and most importantly, implementing the recommendations. Without strong parliamentary leadership, the full realization of human rights remains out of reach.”

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– Sophie Kiladze, Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Former Member of the Parliament of Georgia.



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USEFUL LINKS CAN BE FOUND BELOW:

[INTERACTIVE DASHBOARD MAPPING THE STATUS OF RATIFICATIONS OF
UN HUMAN RIGHTS TREATIES ACROSS COUNTRIES](#)

[FURTHER INFORMATION ON TREATY BODIES](#)

[IPU HANDBOOK FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS ON CEDAW](#)

[IPU HANDBOOK FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS ON HUMAN RIGHTS](#)

[IPU SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT ON PARLIAMENTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS](#)

[IPU PARLINE DATABASE ON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEES](#)



For more information on parliaments and human rights,
contact us at:

hrteam@ipu.org

THE FUTURE OF RIGHTS IS WRITTEN IN PARLIAMENTS

Find out more at
ipu.org/humanrights



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