

Working with
the United Nations
Human Rights
Programme

A Handbook
for Civil Society

New York and Geneva, 2008



OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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HR/PUB/06/10/Rev.1

This Handbook has been produced with the financial assistance of Rights & Democracy

Foreword

Writing the foreword to this *Handbook* is one of my first acts as the new High Commissioner for Human Rights. I think that this is fitting. It offers me an early opportunity to emphasize in my new capacity what has been a firmly held conviction throughout my career, that is, my confidence in civil society's transformative capacity. Indeed, one cannot overestimate the contribution that civil society has made towards the development of international human rights standards, their advocacy and the functioning of the human rights mechanisms which are discussed in this *Handbook*. Today, civil society's views, practical knowledge and scholarship are as crucial to the human rights movement as ever in the pursuit of justice and equality for all.

Indeed, my Office's collaboration with civil society remains a strategic priority, as it bolsters our shared objectives, helps to address our mutual concerns, and supports my Office's mission and initiatives both at headquarters and in the field.

Civil society actors' contribution has also enriched the work of the independent experts that belong to other long-established human rights mechanisms, such as the human rights treaty bodies and special procedures. Crucially, their weight and knowledge have also been brought to bear in the operations of the Human Rights Council, the new intergovernmental body that, in June 2006, replaced the Commission on Human Rights.

Human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations and all other civil society stakeholders carry out their human rights work in a variety of ways: they share information; advocate and scrutinize implementation of human rights; report violations, assist victims of abuses; and campaign for the development of new human rights standards. They do so by taking the pulse of their communities and constituencies. They give voice to the powerless in venues that may, otherwise, be out of the victims' reach, including international human rights forums and mechanisms. Clearly, there is a need on the part of civil society actors to deeply understand and master the modus operandi of national, regional and international human rights institutions. This *Handbook* aims at facilitating such a demanding endeavour.

Finally, let me underscore that the release of this *Handbook* coincides with our commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The promises of justice, dignity and human rights for all that the Declaration contains have yet to be fully met.

We must persevere in our efforts to make the Universal Declaration's principles come to fruition for the different communities that we serve. It is my hope that this *Handbook* will

be used to facilitate civil society actors' understanding of and access to the United Nations human rights system. It is a modest but significant resource in our joint endeavour to make human rights, dignity and equality a universal reality.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Pillay', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Navanethem Pillay
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACT	“Assisting Communities Together” Project
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
LDC	Least developed countries
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHRI	National human rights institution
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UPR	Universal periodic review

Introduction

About the *Handbook*

Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: A Handbook for Civil Society is addressed to the civil society actors who, every day in every part of the world, contribute to the promotion, protection and advancement of human rights.

Developed following a survey among users of the first edition of the *Handbook—Working with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: A Handbook for NGOs* (2006)—this comprehensively updated and revised second edition puts United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms at its centre. Speaking to all civil society actors, including but not only non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the *Handbook* explains how civil society can engage with various United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms. It is the hope of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that this *Handbook* will enable more people to enjoy and make claim to their human rights through these bodies and mechanisms.

Who are civil society actors?

For the purposes of this *Handbook*, civil society actors are individuals who voluntarily engage in forms of public participation and action around shared interests, purposes or values that are compatible with the goals of the United Nations. This *Handbook* addresses civil society actors concerned with the promotion and protection of universal human rights, for instance:

- Human rights defenders;
- Human rights organizations (NGOs, associations, victim groups);
- Related issue-based organizations;
- Coalitions and networks (women’s rights, children’s rights, environmental rights);
- Persons with disabilities and their representative organizations;
- Community-based groups (indigenous peoples, minorities);
- Faith-based groups (churches, religious groups);
- Unions (trade unions as well as professional associations such as journalist associations, bar associations, magistrate associations, student unions);
- Social movements (peace movements, student movements, pro-democracy movements);
- Professionals contributing directly to the enjoyment of human rights (humanitarian workers, lawyers, doctors and medical workers);
- Relatives of victims; and

- Public institutions that carry out activities aimed at promoting human rights (schools, universities, research bodies).

A strong and autonomous civil society, able to operate freely, and knowledgeable and skilled with regard to human rights, is a key element in securing sustainable human rights protection at the national level. Civil society actors are therefore essential partners in the United Nations human rights system.

While important contributors to human rights promotion and protection, national human rights institutions (NHRIs) are not addressed in this *Handbook*. Information and resources on NHRIs are available from the OHCHR website. Readers are also invited to contact the OHCHR National Institutions Unit at niu@ohchr.org.

Contents of the *Handbook*

The *Handbook* opens with an introduction to OHCHR (chapter I), its fellowship and training programmes (chapter II), and its publications and resource materials (chapter III). It then addresses the United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms, and how they can be used. These are:

- The human rights treaty bodies (chapter IV);
- The Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, including the Advisory Committee, the Social Forum, the Forum on Minority Issues, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the open-ended Working Group on the Right to Development, and a number of mechanisms related to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (chapter V);
- The special procedures (chapter VI);
- The universal periodic review (chapter VII); and
- The submission of complaints on alleged human rights violations (chapter VIII).

The final chapter provides information on funds and grants (chapter IX), some of which are administered by OHCHR.

To make it easier for readers to access information, each chapter has been written in a way that allows it to stand independently from the rest of the *Handbook*. Individual chapters can be downloaded from the OHCHR website, along with the *Handbook* in its entirety.

It is important to note that this *Handbook* is not a stand-alone or static guide. Where possible, references to the OHCHR website and other resources have been provided to ensure that readers have access to current information. Readers are encouraged to use these supplementary resources.

Structure

The chapters are generally divided into three sections:

- What the body/mechanism is;
- How it works; and
- How civil society actors can access and work with it.

Each chapter also lists key contacts at OHCHR and includes links to other resources.

Your feedback

This *Handbook* is a dynamic tool. The OHCHR Civil Society Unit welcomes reader feedback. Please send your comments and suggestions to:

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