



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

24 June 2016

Excellency,

The High-level Thematic Debate on Human Rights that I will organise on 12-13 July 2016 is raising considerable interest within the General Assembly and beyond.

Following on from the preliminary outline and provisional programme annexed to my letter of 20 May 2016, I have the honour to bring to your attention today an updated concept note and programme.

I have asked my office to organize an informal briefing on the general preparations for this High-Level Thematic Debate. The informal briefing chaired by my Chef de Cabinet, Ambassador Tomas Anker Christensen, will take place on Wednesday, 29 June from 11:00am – 1:00pm in Conference room 4.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mogens Lykketoft'.

Mogens Lykketoft

To all Permanent Representatives
and Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

UN@70: Human Rights at the centre of the global agenda
High-Level Thematic Debate of the UN General Assembly

Concept Note

Background: At the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as a series of UN reviews and action plans in the area of peace and security lies a demand for a stronger focus on human rights across all aspects of society. These developments demonstrate the ever-increasing linkages between the three pillars of the UN alongside the need to ensure that each pillar is given equal prominence.

As part of his overall efforts to foster 'A new Commitment to Action', President Mogens Lykketoft will therefore focus his third High Level Thematic Debate (HLTD) on '**UN@70: Human Rights at the centre of the global agenda**'.

Taking place in the context of the 50th anniversary of the international human rights covenants, the 30th anniversary of the Declaration on the Right to Development and the process to select and appoint the next UN Secretary-General, this HLTD will seek to achieve the following objectives:

- reinforce the foundations needed for the enjoyment of human rights
- identify how action to realize human rights can contribute to progress on peace and security and sustainable development and vice-versa
- highlight ways to strengthen the United Nations' role and effectiveness in this area

Format: This event will comprise an opening segment, a plenary debate, interactive segments on three areas of focus and a moderated conversation with candidates for the position of UN Secretary-General. A series of side-events are expected to be organized around the event.

Whereas the plenary segment will focus on the overall role of the UN in the area of human rights; the interactive segments will provide an opportunity to delve deeper into three themes of immense relevance to the enjoyment of human rights in today's world and to consider what strategies can be used to address those issues.

Each segment will draw on expert contributors. Moderators will seek to engage member states in an open free-flowing discussion. Delegations who will have Ministers in attendance are asked to contact the Office of the PGA (opga70@un.org) to discuss possible lead discussant roles in one of the three interactive segments.

Further substantive and logistical information is provided below on the plenary debate, the interactive segments and the event with SG candidates.

Participation: The HLTD seeks to attract High-level representatives from States, the UN-system, regional organisations, human rights bodies and mechanisms, civil society, think tanks and the private sector.

Outcome: A summary by the President of the General Assembly will be circulated to all Member States and posted on his [website](#) after the event.

A. Plenary Segment

'The United Nations protects human rights because that is our proud mission – and because when people enjoy their rights, economies flourish and countries are at peace.'

UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon
Human Rights Day, 2014

The UN's role in the area of human rights has evolved considerably since the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 and the international human rights covenants some 50 years ago and continues to evolve today.

Throughout the years, the United Nations has continuously recognized human rights as one of its three pillars. To name a few examples, following the UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) was established to lead UN efforts in respect of the promotion and protection of human rights, and also support the mainstreaming of human rights work across the UN system. Following the World Summit of 2005, member states moved to establish the Human Rights Council. Most recently, the UN also adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an agenda grounded in human rights. The UN system has also embarked on human rights initiatives, such as the Secretary-General's Human Rights Up Front initiative, to ensure the UN system takes early and effective action to prevent or respond to large-scale violations of human rights of international humanitarian law.

As the UN marks its 70th anniversary and as member states gear up to appoint a new UN Secretary-General, the Plenary segment is an opportunity for member states to outline ways to further strengthen the UN's role in this area, to respond to global trends and to ensure even greater impact on the human rights situation in our world.

Key questions

- What strategies can the UN employ to further advance human rights in our world?
- What changes are needed to enable the overall UN system respond better to human rights concerns and support member states in meeting their obligations?
- What do major developments like the adoption of the 2030 Agenda or the recent reviews on peace and security, mean for the UN's approach to human rights?

Format: The plenary debate will consist of two parts. A ministerial plenary segment will be held from 9.30-11.30am on Tuesday 12 July. Member states who are not represented at ministerial level who wish to address the plenary debate will be provided an opportunity to do so on Wednesday 13 July. Speakers are asked to limit their statements to three minutes. The time-limit will be strictly enforced.

Speakers list: All delegations wishing to speak in the plenary debate are kindly requested to inscribe in the list of speakers, General Assembly Affairs Branch (Ms. Antonina Poliakova (e-mail poliakova@un.org ; tel. 1 (212) 963-5063)).

B. Interactive Segment 1: Combatting discrimination and inequalities

Equality and non-discrimination are the foundational principles of all of the international human rights covenants, and indispensable to realization of all human rights, including the right to development. Unless progress is made on these issues at the global and national levels, efforts to reduce poverty, achieve sustainable development and secure the social cohesion necessary to deliver peace and security will be significantly undermined.

Today, discrimination remains pervasive. Countless children, women and men continue to be discriminated against on a daily basis as a result of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability, and sexual orientation, migrant or other status. Millions face not only one form of discrimination, but multiple and intersecting forms that exacerbate their disadvantage and exclusion. Deep-seated discriminatory norms, harmful gender stereotypes, prejudices as well as gender-based violence against women and girls continue to prevent equality and the full realization of women's rights.¹ There are worrying signs of a rise in racism, xenophobia and related intolerance, particularly against ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities and migrants.

In addition, inequalities are rising. Inequalities are the result of discrimination in laws, policies and practices and the failure to protect the rights of the most marginalised. The rise in income inequalities across the majority of countries is also further exacerbating inequalities in opportunities and outcomes relating to education, health, food security, employment, housing, health services access to justice and political participation.² Deep inequalities between ethnic and religious groups can also threaten social cohesion, radicalize groups and heighten the risk of tensions escalating into political crisis and violent conflict. Inequities in the global governance system, including in the trade, finance and investment rules, reproduce inequalities both within and between countries, operating as obstacles to the realisation of the right to development.

The 2030 Agenda provides a new opportunity to put the human rights promise of equality and non-discrimination back at the heart of sustainable development. It calls for a world where no one is left behind, a world of "equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity" and includes two dedicated goals on eliminating discrimination and reducing inequalities (Goal 5 and Goal 10). Other SDGs and their means of implementation aim to achieve more inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory development at national and global levels while the call for disaggregated data is also crucial to ensuring that those furthest behind will be reached first.

Key questions for this segment:

- What are the major obstacles to eliminating discrimination and reducing inequalities?
- What can be done most effectively first? How can rapid improvements be made?
- How can we ensure that the 2030 Agenda and the commitment to 'leave no one behind' contributes to the realization of the principles of equality and non-discrimination?

- How can we mobilize greater political will at global and national levels, among governments and ordinary people, to engage everyone in realizing this vision?

C. Interactive Segment 2: Strengthening governance, the rule of law and access to justice

Good governance, the rule of law and access to justice are the essential tools through which human rights are realised and protected. At the same time, good governance and the rule of law are defined through the extent to which State institutions are constituted and act in compliance with international human rights standards and principles. Together they provide the foundation for peaceful and inclusive societies, and for economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development, ensuring that no one is marginalized or left behind.

In adopting the 2030 Agenda, member States have again recognized these interconnections and have committed to strengthen the rule of law, provide equal access to justice for all, fight against organised crime and corruption, and enhance access to information, as well as participatory and representative decision-making. Similarly, the link between sustaining peace and issues such as the rule of law, access to justice and good governance was also recognized in the recent UN Peace building architecture review.

At the international level, an order based on the rule of law and respect for the principles of international law is essential for peaceful coexistence and cooperation amongst States. It provides the conditions conducive to peaceful settlement of disputes, prevention of conflicts and peacebuilding, as well as for economic, environmental and scientific cooperation across borders, and for ensuring that crime or impunity is not tolerated. The first 70 years of the United Nations have seen the development of an international legal framework for the protection of human rights, as well as of institutions and mechanisms to support Member States in the implementation of their obligations, or to keep them to account when they fail to do so.

At the national level, member States have incorporated the international standards to their national legal frameworks to varying degrees, respecting the national context and legal traditions, and the particular challenges of each society. These legal frameworks are implemented through State institutions. When institutions are founded on central principles of the rule of law, such as the division of powers, equality before the law, and transparency and accountability, they provide a solid foundation for good governance and for protection of human rights.

This interactive discussion will examine the role of the legal system, both laws and the courts, at the national and international levels, as well as of institutions of good governance in the protection and promotion of human rights.

Key questions for this segment:

- What are some of the most effective strategies to achieve better protection of human rights and accountability through the national legal system? What about at the international level?
- How have legal frameworks in compliance with international standards facilitated socially and economically inclusive development and helped to build peaceful and inclusive societies?

- What practical measures can State institutions take to embed principles of transparency and accountability into their work in order to achieve the SDGs including Goal 16?
- What kind of support can non-state actors – civil society, national human rights and ombuds institutions, the private sector, the UN and other international organizations – provide to Governments to strengthen good governance and the rule of law?

D. Interactive Segment 3: Enabling active participation in society

International human rights law places an obligation on States to respect freedoms of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association and the right to participate in public affairs.ⁱⁱⁱ The exercise of these rights drives civic activity and helps individuals mobilize to realize social change.

Effective avenues for civic participation contribute to societal cohesion and give a voice to people, including minorities and those at the margins of society. Civil society plays a crucial role in educating and facilitating participation in public life and can allow people to contribute to policy development and decision-making. Allowing voices to be heard, even when they express criticism or unpopular views, is key to holding decision makers to account and to ensuring that policies are reviewed, lessons-learned and improvements made.

There is also a persuasive economic case for a strong civil society. Indeed, business and civil society have a shared interest in an environment that respects the rights to freedom of expression and association, is pluralistic and non-discriminatory, upholds the rule of law, and promotes transparency and access to information.

Governments and leaders that bristle at calls for change, are unprepared, short of better alternatives, or are overly sensitive about criticism, gamble that the benefits of dismantling public freedoms outweigh the costs. And civil society actors— those very individuals and groups advocating for change—are the most visible and easily identifiable targets for efforts to stop or prevent the words they say and the work they do.

Civil society also faces threats from non-State armed groups, and there are a growing number of allegations of intimidation and threats by the private sector against, for example, environmental and land rights activists. In many countries, women civil society actors face disproportionately adverse reactions, based on discriminatory stereotypes.

Countries where civil society space is nurtured reap significant dividends in terms of development and long-term stability. In a recent report, the High Commissioner for Human Rights identifies five essential ingredients in this regard: a robust legal framework compliant with international standards of public freedoms and effective access to justice; a political environment conducive to civil society work; access to information; avenues for participation by civil society in policy development and decision-making processes; and long-term support and resources for civil society.^{iv}

Key questions for this segment:

- How can Governments and international organizations work together to incentivize a pro-civil society culture in support of human rights and the SDGs?

- How can fears of those who seek to limit or dismantle public freedoms, be disarmed?
- What can civil society actors do to better leverage online space for effective advocacy?
- How can we build better appreciation and solidarity to safeguard the “super-rules” across all sectors within which civil society actors are engaged?
- Within the inter-governmental bodies of the United Nations, what can be done to meaningfully widen the space for civil society participation?

E. Conversation with candidates for the position of UN Secretary-General

A public event entitled: “Leading the UN: A Global Townhall with SG candidates” will take place in the General Assembly Hall on Tuesday, 12 July from 6:30pm – 9:00pm. This event seeks to enhance public interest in the work of the United Nations and its next Secretary-General and is distinct from the UN General Assembly mandated informal dialogues with candidates.

The event will be made available to broadcasters across the world and will be open to participation from member states, civil society and UN staff.

A professional moderator will engage attending candidates in an open discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing the next Secretary General including on how to ensure that Human Rights are at the centre of the global agenda. A process is now underway to source questions from the global public which the moderator will draw from to inspire discussion. The moderator will take additional questions from the floor, time permitting.

Further logistical information, including in relation to tickets, participation etc, will be provided on the website of the PGA closer to the date (<http://www.un.org/pga/70>).

ⁱ UN Women Progress of the World’s Women 2015-2016, : <http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/>

ⁱⁱ UNDP, *Humanity Divided: Confronting Inequality in Developing Countries* (2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ These rights are guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (articles, 19, 20, 21); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (articles 19, 21, 22, 25); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural (articles 8, 15); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (article 3); International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (article 5); Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 13, 15); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (articles 21, 29, 30); International Convention for the Protection of all Persons against Enforced Disappearance (article 24); and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (article 26). Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society, based on good practices and lessons learned, A/HRC/32/20.

^{iv} Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society, based on good practices and lessons learned, A/HRC/32/20.