



General Assembly

Distr.: General
9 May 2022

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Fiftieth session

13 June–8 July 2022

Agenda items 2 and 3

Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming: contribution of universal participation to the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in the Work of the Human Rights Council

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to paragraph 42 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21, contains a summary of the annual panel discussion on promoting the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system, held on 28 February 2022. The panel discussion was focused on the contribution of universal participation to the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system, with particular consideration given to the representation and engagement of the least developed countries and small island developing States. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for States and relevant stakeholders to consider the work and outcomes of the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in the Work of the Human Rights Council since its establishment. The present report contains a summary of the panel discussion held on 28 February 2022 at the forty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council.

I. Introduction

1. On 28 February 2022, at its forty-ninth session, the Human Rights Council held the annual high-level panel discussion on the mainstreaming of human rights, pursuant to Council resolution 16/21. The theme of the panel discussion was the contribution of universal participation to the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in the Work of the Human Rights Council, pursuant to the oral decision taken by the Council at its organizational session on 6 December 2021. In the same decision, the Council decided that the high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming would replace the high-level panel discussion on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Trust Fund mandated by the Council in its decision 46/115. The present report was prepared pursuant to paragraph 3 of decision 46/115, in which the Council requested the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a summary report on the panel discussion and to submit it to the Council for consideration at its fiftieth session.

2. The panel discussion was chaired by the President of the Human Rights Council. Opening statements were made by the President of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly (video message), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (video message) and the Secretary-General of la Francophonie, followed by the screening of a video celebrating the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Trust Fund and showcasing its activities.

3. The panellists comprised: the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Rebeca Grynspan; the Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Martin Chungong (video message); the acting High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, Heidi Schroderus-Fox (video message); and the Executive Director of the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, Emeline Siale Ilohahia (video message).

4. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for high-level representatives of United Nations agencies and funds, high-level representatives of States and other relevant stakeholders to discuss the importance of universal participation in, and multilingualism to, multilateralism and the need for the active promotion of those principles in order to ensure that all States could contribute meaningfully to shaping solutions to international problems. The discussion was focused, in particular, on the lack of representation of the least developed countries and small island developing States and on means of improving their participation and engagement.

5. The panel discussion, which was broadcast live on United Nations Web TV and archived as a webcast, was made accessible to persons with disabilities through the provision of international sign interpretation and real-time captioning.¹

II. Opening statements

6. Opening the discussion, the President of the General Assembly, in his statement by video message, recalled five areas of direction for the work of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly, which he had announced upon his assumption of office, namely, recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, rebuilding sustainably, responding to the needs of the planet, respecting the rights of all people and revitalizing the United Nations. He emphasized his hope for continued progress across those areas during the remainder of the seventy-sixth session.

¹ The full video of the panel discussion is available at <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1r/k1rtu3txec>. The concept note for the panel discussion is available at <https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/49session/Pages/Panel-discussions.aspx>.

7. In relation to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuilding sustainably, he echoed sentiments expressed during the recent high-level thematic debate held in New York on galvanizing momentum for universal vaccination, including the importance of ensuring a human rights perspective during the recovery phase and utilizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a road map to socioeconomic recovery. With regard to responding to the needs of the planet, he welcomed recent progress made by the Human Rights Council in that area, including recent resolutions relating to human rights and climate change and the recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. He took note of recent intergovernmental meetings and indicated that the upcoming high-level event to be held in July 2022 would be focused on highlighting synergies across areas such as climate change, biodiversity, desertification, energy, food systems and the ocean.

8. He stressed his commitment to empowering women and girls, including by ensuring that priorities and major initiatives were approached through a gender lens. He emphasized the importance of empowering young people and took note of the work undertaken to include their voices at upcoming meetings of the General Assembly and related events, as well as through the President of the General Assembly's Fellowship for Harnessing Opportunities for Promoting Empowerment of Youth programme. He highlighted the ongoing need to tackle racism and other forms of discrimination and took note of the engagement of States on that issue at the commemorative meeting to mark the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, in September 2021. In addition, he stressed the need to empower civil society and grass-roots organizations, which were uniquely situated to grasp challenges and occurrences at the community level.

9. The President of the General Assembly recalled the universality, indivisibility and mutual reinforcement of all human rights, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

10. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recalled the work of Maldives and Mauritius in drawing attention to the specific needs of the least developed countries and small island developing States, and the subsequent adoption of Human Rights Council resolution 19/26, establishing the Trust Fund. She highlighted a number of the achievements of the Trust Fund in its first 10 years of operation and observed that it was a timely opportunity to assess ways to advance its work in the future.

11. The High Commissioner noted that the Trust Fund had enabled over 170 government officials of least developed countries and small island developing States to attend regular sessions of the Human Rights Council, 95 per cent of whom had attended for the first time. A total of 71 of 72 eligible States had benefited from the Trust Fund's programmes, and 60 per cent of its beneficiaries to date had been women. She observed that the Trust Fund had significantly aided partnership-building and that beneficiaries had enriched the Council's debates.

12. The High Commissioner cited the example of Samoa. The Trust Fund's support for the participation of representatives of Samoa in the work of the Human Rights Council had facilitated the attendance of five women representatives at regular sessions of the Council over the preceding decade and the establishment of the Permanent Mission of Samoa to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva.

13. In addition, she emphasized her commitment to multilingualism and its importance in building greater inclusion in global institutions. In that regard, she commended the efforts of the International Organization of la Francophonie undertaken over the past 20 years to strengthen multilingualism. She took note of the ongoing work to enhance international cooperation, including through initiatives to increase the visibility and impact of the universal periodic review mechanism. The High Commissioner concluded by commending the Trust Fund's support for the participation of 19 delegates to sessions of the Human Rights Council in 2021. That constituted the largest cohort since its establishment, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. The High Commissioner expressed her thanks to the donors that supported the Trust Fund's work.

14. The Director-General of the World Health Organization, in his statement by video message, congratulated States for the historic recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and stated that that type of multilateral collaboration was critical to

advancing climate justice and environmental protection. He highlighted the disproportionate impact of extreme weather events and rising sea levels on landlocked developing countries and small island developing States. He described the recent work undertaken by the World Health Organization in relation to climate resilience and environmental health and development, such as the Special Initiative on Climate Change and Health in Small Island Developing States. He emphasized the World Health Organization's commitment to supporting landlocked and small island developing States in their efforts to build a safe, healthy and clean environment for all.

15. The Secretary-General of la Francophonie welcomed ongoing cooperation between the United Nations and the International Organization of la Francophonie, and noted their shared determination to promoting common values, in particular in the field of human rights. She highlighted the numerous challenges facing the least developed countries and small island developing States in the promotion and protection of human rights, including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rights of women and girls. She noted the ongoing barriers to the global realization of the right to education for girls, which was essential for their economic autonomy and constituted a major development issue for States. She described the work undertaken by the International Organization of la Francophonie in that area, including through the Ressources éducatives libres pour l'égalité femmes-hommes platform.

16. She reaffirmed the importance of solidarity and international cooperation in renewing and strengthening multilateralism and identified respect for multilingualism, capacity-building and the use of technological solutions as three areas of reflection in relation to the participation of the least developed countries and small island developing States. She emphasized the fundamental nature of respect for multilingualism in guaranteeing the inclusive functioning of multilateral mechanisms and underscored that it was essential for equality and equity between States. She affirmed the International Organization of la Francophonie's support for United Nations initiatives in that area, such as in the development of policies and other documents, as well as technological tools.

17. The Secretary-General of la Francophonie noted that capacity-building was a means to equip States to participate more fully in meetings and negotiations where decisions were made on important human rights matters and highlighted cooperation between the International Organization of la Francophonie and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in providing support to French-speaking delegations in relation to the work of the Human Rights Council. She noted that the increased use of digital tools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic had offered opportunities for the least developed countries and small island developing States to bridge the digital divide in an international context.

18. She welcomed the contributions of States to the Trust Fund, noting that 23 contributing States were part of the International Organization of la Francophonie.

19. Following the opening statements, there was a screening of a video celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Trust Fund and showcasing its activities. The video included commentary from eight former beneficiaries, i.e. delegates and fellows, who spoke about its achievements and impact. They welcomed the work of the Trust Fund and its support for the meaningful participation of representatives of the least developed countries and small island developing States in the work of the Human Rights Council. They outlined the outcomes of that support, such as subsequent participation in their State's universal periodic review process, strengthened engagement with their regional group and enhanced knowledge of the Council and its subsidiary mechanisms. Former delegates extended their thanks to the donors and encouraged ongoing support for, and the development of, the Trust Fund.

III. Panel discussion

20. The President of the Human Rights Council opened the panel discussion and invited the panellists to make their initial presentations.

A. Contributions of the panellists

21. The Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had demonstrated the unequal nature of the global pursuit for prosperity and that those countries that were the least developed, or whose development was more susceptible to external factors, were more fragile to shocks. She noted that the least developed countries had vaccinated approximately 5 per cent of their populations and that access to vaccines and financial resources had affected the ability of many countries to respond to the pandemic. She stated that small island developing States, which had faced financial difficulties as a result of the costs of climate change, now had limited funding to invest in the pandemic recovery. As emphasized in the Bridgetown Covenant, the outcome document of the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, certain underlying issues must be addressed in order to advance global economic recovery, in particular respect for human rights, which included the right to development, gender equality and the empowerment of women and young people.

22. She emphasized that, while there were many global challenges, it was important to ensure that the development needs of the most vulnerable countries were not marginalized. Particular challenges facing least developed countries and small island developing States, which must remain in focus, included rising poverty levels, growing inflation in commodities, disruption in global supply chains, which affected the import of essential goods, increasing interest rates, which affected debt service costs, unequal access to digital technologies and regressions in gender equality. She stated that the right to development would be meaningless if it was not underpinned by an ability to develop. In that respect, the Trust Fund had sought to address inequities in the ability to develop in terms of improving access to multilateral forums. She expressed that the United Nations was at its best when it ensured the greatest diversity of participation and that the work of the Trust Fund had helped to realize that principle in the Human Rights Council.

23. The Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in his statement by video message, emphasized that national parliaments were symbols of diversity and brought together representatives of all components of society. He affirmed the continued promotion of the universal participation of parliaments in the work of the Union, including through a solidarity fund to support the participation of parliaments with more limited financial means and the expansion of services offered in other languages. In order to address common challenges, such as human rights issues, climate change, insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic, he stated that an inclusive and multilateral approach was required. That involved ensuring gender parity in decision-making and the promotion of youth involvement in parliamentary processes.

24. The Inter-Parliamentary Union enshrined two key principles within its work to promote human rights. The first was the integration of a human rights perspective across all its activities, and the second was strengthening the contributions of parliaments to the promotion of, and respect for, human rights, in particular through the work of the Human Rights Council. He underscored the importance of partnerships between parliaments and the Council in enhancing respect for human rights at the national level. He welcomed the support of States in the adoption of resolutions advocating for stronger parliamentary involvement in the work of the Council.

25. The acting High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, in her statement by video message, stressed the importance of universal and meaningful participation in such multilateral institutions as the Human Rights Council. She welcomed the work undertaken by the Trust Fund since its establishment in ensuring more effective participation and promoting domestic implementation, as well as the related services and support provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

26. She noted that many global challenges disproportionately affected the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States. In particular, climate change significantly affected those States, despite their lower contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, and had broad human rights impacts, including loss of life and

livelihoods, increased poverty and inequality, increased likelihood of unrest and conflict, loss of territory and resulting displacement, and threats to the supply of essential goods and services. The COVID-19 pandemic had compounded and exacerbated existing pressures, with leaders and decision makers from those States facing further challenges with regard to attending in-person multilateral meetings and discussions, such as the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, from 31 October to 12 November 2021.

27. She observed that the full participation of the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States was not a luxury or an add-on to, but an essential component of, robust political processes, sound international governance and balanced and fair outcomes of international negotiations.

28. The Executive Director of the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, in her statement by video message, shared a number of reflections from civil society on the contribution of universal participation to the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system. She stated that universal participation should incorporate civil society alongside government officials, in order to enable a diversity of perspectives and to better promote the protection of human rights. She noted that a key challenge that civil society faced was a lack of access to the Trust Fund and emphasized that there was the need to improve understanding of how least developed countries and small island developing States could be supported to engage in the work of the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary mechanisms. In addition, she stressed that there was the need to encourage the active participation of civil society from those States, as well as to shift the focus of engagement closer to their geographical regions in order to better contextualize the cultural dimensions of key issues, such as climate change.

29. She made two recommendations for future action, in order to improve universal participation. The first was to enhance the institutional and human capacity of the least developed countries and small island developing States, including through their national human rights institutions and by supporting governments, civil society organizations and the private sector to engage in human rights processes. The second was to make the Trust Fund more accessible to civil society, including through capacity-building, training, evidence-based reporting and the allocation of resources for civil society to attend meetings of the Human Rights Council.

B. Interactive discussion

30. During the interactive discussion, interventions were made by the representatives of the following States: Angola (on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries); Bahamas (also on behalf of Barbados, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago); Benin; Burkina Faso; Côte d'Ivoire (on behalf of the Group of African States); Djibouti (video statement); Finland (also on behalf of Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden); Germany; India (video statement); Maldives (also on behalf of Bahamas, Barbados, Cabo Verde, Fiji, Haiti, Jamaica, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Nauru, Singapore and Vanuatu); Marshall Islands (video statement); Mauritius (video statement); Namibia; Nepal; Pakistan (on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation); Portugal; Singapore (video statement); South Africa; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (also on behalf of Maldives, Marshall Islands, Netherlands and Uruguay) (video statement); and Vanuatu (also on behalf of Australia, Bahamas, Barbados, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guyana, Luxembourg, Maldives, Mauritius, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Senegal, Singapore, Sudan, Switzerland, Togo and Turkey). An intervention was also made by a representative of the European Union (video statement).

31. Representatives of the following United Nations entities, specialized agencies and related organizations and non-governmental organizations also spoke: Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaïdjanais-Iran – « ARC » (video statement); iuventum, eV (video statement); United

Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); United Nations Development Programme; and UPR Info.

32. The following States and observer States were not able to make statements, owing to a lack of time: Armenia; Bangladesh; China; Egypt; Georgia; Indonesia; Kenya; Malaysia; Russian Federation; Senegal; Uganda; United States of America; Vanuatu; and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).²

33. For the same reason, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations was not able to make a statement.³

34. Speakers emphasized the importance of continuing to work towards universal and meaningful participation in the work of the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary mechanisms, in order to ensure that human rights were respected, protected and fulfilled around the world. They noted that effective multilateralism was crucial for addressing the most pressing global challenges to human rights, such as those relating to peace and security, climate change and new and emerging technologies. Those challenges could not be met, or human rights realized to the fullest extent, when States operated in silos. In addition, speakers highlighted how universal participation would lead to greater legitimacy of multilateral institutions and the advancement of human rights mainstreaming across the United Nations system.

35. A further key area of focus was multilingualism. Speakers emphasized that multilingualism was imperative for human rights mainstreaming at the local and global levels, and that that was enhanced through the participation of greater numbers of the least developed countries and small island developing States in multilateral institutions. One speaker highlighted that access to information in different languages was also valuable for enabling civil society to exercise and defend their rights.

36. Participants highlighted the important contributions made by the Trust Fund since its inception. In particular, it had facilitated improved diversity, representation and inclusivity and had brought greater focus to the issues that were most significantly affecting the least developed countries and small island developing States, which had ensured a more fulsome debate and had enabled progress to be made on key challenges which disproportionately affected those States, such as climate change and the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It had also enabled the least developed countries and small island developing States to voice innovative responses and solutions to those challenges.

37. In addition to more diverse membership, the presidency of the Human Rights Council had now been held by ambassadors of a least developed country and a small island developing State. States had participated in training and capacity-building on the international human rights system, and some had been supported in the establishment of permanent missions in Geneva. There had also been increased participation of those States in the universal periodic review process as recommending States. Speakers took note of the fact that, since the establishment of the Trust Fund, a total of 173 delegates and fellows, from 71 of the 72 least developed countries and small island developing States, had received support.

38. Speakers welcomed the ways in which the Trust Fund had promoted adaptability in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through the use of digital technology. For example, virtual workshops and training programmes had been offered to beneficiaries ahead of sessions of the Human Rights Council. In conjunction with the introduction of virtual and hybrid meetings of the Council and its subsidiary mechanisms, those offerings provided new opportunities for participation and engagement in the future.

39. In addition, some speakers took note of the ways in which the Trust Fund had demonstrated its ability to promote the rights of women and persons with disabilities. Women comprised approximately 60 per cent of beneficiaries of the Trust Fund, which was significant in the light of the unique challenges faced by women and girls and persons with disabilities in gaining access to their rights in the least developed countries and small island

² Statements received by the secretariat are available on the extranet of the Human Rights Council.

³ Ibid.

developing States. For example, the Pacific region had the lowest rate of women represented in parliaments, as well as one of the highest rates of gender-based violence, in the world.

40. Speakers acknowledged that those varied benefits and outcomes would not have been possible without the crucial support of donor countries to the Trust Fund. That support had demonstrated the cooperation of the international community in working towards universal participation.

41. Speakers emphasised the need to continue to build on the work of the Trust Fund due to the ongoing financial and other constraints faced by the least developed countries and small island developing States. Those States made up the majority of States that had not yet been members of the Human Rights Council. Some speakers noted that donors to the Trust Fund had decreased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other speakers noted that there must be greater emphasis placed on the ways in which beneficiary States were supported to incorporate and implement human rights standards at the national level, in order to mainstream the practice alongside participation. In addition, some speakers highlighted that a significant number of States continued to fall within the list of least developed countries and small island developing States, indicating that further commitment and action was required in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

42. Some speakers highlighted the importance of continuing to improve the ways in which civil society could participate in, and contribute to, the work of the Human Rights Council. They emphasized the value of civil society expertise and grass-roots knowledge, as well as the need to ensure diversity of civil society voices, including those of women and girls. In addition, some speakers stressed that indigenous peoples' voices must be present in the discussions on matters that affected them.

43. Speakers posed a number of questions to the panellists. They were asked what further steps could be taken to ensure meaningful universal participation in the work of the Human Rights Council, as well as how the Trust Fund might serve as a model for promoting universality of participation in other mechanisms. Panellists were also invited to consider how to better encourage the participation of non-governmental stakeholders and persons with disabilities in the work of the Council.

C. Responses and concluding remarks

44. After the interactive discussion, the President of the Human Rights Council gave panellists the opportunity to make concluding remarks.

45. The Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development welcomed the enriching debate that had taken place. She emphasized that only true inclusiveness would allow progress to be made towards universal participation and effective multilateralism. She stated that that would require cooperation in mainstreaming human rights and urged individuals to turn words into action. She congratulated the Trust Fund on its work to date and expressed the hope that it would continue to be supported and remain sustainable into the future.

46. The Executive Director of the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, in her video statement, noted that civil society in the Pacific region was familiar with the universal periodic review process, due to its structure, which allowed for civil society to engage from the national to the global level. She shared a number of recommendations that had been made by civil society actors in relation to that process. More attention should be given to institution-building and improving human capacity within the least developed countries and small island developing States. In that respect, she noted that there were few countries within the Pacific region that had established a national human rights institution. The operations of the Trust Fund should be made more accessible to civil society, such as through capacity-building, training, research and evidence-based reporting, and focus should be placed on the sharing of information on the international human rights system. It could also include the allocation of resources for civil society to attend meetings of the Human Rights Council alongside national representatives, as well as support for meaningful consultations at the national level.

47. She affirmed that one key lesson demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic was that human rights and dignity should be at the centre of any response and that the protection and safeguarding of human rights should be a global responsibility – of governments, the United Nations, civil society and all people around the world.

48. Following the concluding remarks, the President of the Human Rights Council closed the discussion.

IV. Recommendations

49. **Speakers made several recommendations during the panel discussion. They advocated for donors to strengthen support for the Trust Fund in order to enable universal and meaningful participation of the least developed countries and small island developing States in the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary mechanisms. Such participation would improve the diversity and representativeness of voices within the Council and further promote global respect for, and the protection and fulfilment of, human rights. Continued and enhanced support for the Trust Fund would also enable the Council to act as an example of inclusive multilateral decision-making across the United Nations system.**

50. **In terms of opportunities for growth, speakers recommended exploring ways to strengthen access to the Human Rights Council through the Trust Fund for various groups from the least developed countries and small island developing States, such as women and persons with disabilities.**

51. **Speakers also called for renewed focus on supporting the least developed countries and small island developing States to become members of the Human Rights Council, noting that the majority of States in those groups had not yet participated as members.**
