



## 10 Essential Steps for First Time Advocacy at the Human Rights Council

1. **Define** your objectives realistically
2. **Sign-up** for OHCHR email list and extranets
3. **Communicate** and coordinate with other national groups
4. **Consider** how you will engage
5. **Check** for a Special Procedure on your issue and your country's next UPR
6. **Identify** a national, regional, or international partner with UN Consultative Status
7. **Review** available advocacy guides for civil society at the Council
8. **Research** the relevant countries to engage concerning your advocacy objectives
9. **Plan** well in advance to meet deadlines and arrange logistics
10. **Engage and Follow through** for long term advocacy with maximum results

### 1) **Define your objectives realistically**

*Why?* As with any form of advocacy, the first step for engaging with the Human Rights Council is to clearly define your objectives based on realistic expectations of what is achievable. Advocates should recognize that the Council seeks to promote respect for human rights primarily through political dialogue. The Council holds no mandate to decide on individual cases or issue legal decisions. Rather, the Council serves to monitor and report on recommendations for all countries' compliance and promotion of human rights through several distinct mechanisms. Therefore, advocacy at the Council should be understood as a tool for achieving objectives aligned with this mandate, which will be one further step towards ultimately achieving national protection and respect for your human rights.

*How?* Consider your *ultimate* human rights goal, such as ending a particular systematic abuse, securing individual accountability, changing national or local legislation. Then, identify the possible outcomes of your advocacy at the Council that would support progress towards that goal. Would your cause be aided if there were: increased awareness of the problem, international support for a specific policy change, recommendations by a UN body or expert, or increased pressure for government reform on a particular topic? Read the IJRC [Primer for Advocacy Opportunities with the Human Rights Council](#) to better understand the advocacy opportunities. In addition, looking through past Council [Session Reports](#) and [related commentary](#) by the International Service for Human Rights provides both a broad picture and concrete examples of actions by the Council on a range of human rights issues.

## **2) Sign-up for OHCHR email list and extranets**

*Why?* The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – Civil Society Section email list shares essential updates on advocacy opportunities at the Human Rights Council as soon as they are available. You can customize what types of information you receive, allowing you to keep you informed of key developments without needing to repeatedly search through the Council website. The OHCHR and Universal Periodic Review extranets are portals that provide a host of practical and technical information on the Council that may not posted the Council’s main website. For example, the latest working drafts of the Council programs are generally available on the OHCHR extranet well before the final program is confirmed and posted elsewhere.

*How?* Subscribe online to join the OHCHR [Civil Society Section email list](#). Use the free, online registration to obtain the login details for the [Council extranet](#) and the [Universal Periodic Review extranet](#).

## **3) Communicate and coordinate with other national groups**

*Why?* Whether as part of highly organized network or a loose coalition, working with other national groups on Human Rights Council advocacy provides several advantages. Among others, the benefits can include: greater accuracy in human rights reporting through shared information and analysis; increased credibility with external actors such as UN officials or government diplomats; and higher concentration of international attention through complementary rather than competing advocacy efforts.

*How?* Although the nature and structure of every network or coalition will likely be unique, any coordinated advocacy strategy will benefit from open discussions to determine a common purpose, shared objectives, and each partner’s available resources and organizational strengths, in order to reach agreement on how partners will work together. A wide range of civil society actors can make useful network partners, including grassroots organizations, national social justice organizations, universities, and research and policy institutions. In addition to communicating with organizations working on the same or similar issues, consider reaching out to groups who may make good partners because of their complementary goals, advocacy experience, communication networks, or access to unique resources.

## **4) Consider how you will engage**

*Why?* Advocacy at the Human Rights Council can take a wide variety of forms, including the submission of written information; in-person advocacy to government representatives and Special Procedures at the Council in Geneva; lobbying your national government agencies and representatives; and briefing other countries’ embassies in your nation’s capitol. Communicating your issues to the general public either directly or

through the media can also be key aspect of your advocacy. The approaches you choose will depend on your available resources, the national circumstances, and the issue you are addressing. For example, written submissions can be cost-effectively and regularly submitted online or via email; in-person advocacy in Geneva can be costly but can also generate strong media and public attention; lobbying your government at home can influence your government's actions at the Council in Geneva, and briefing other countries' embassies in your country's capital can raise your issues without the need to travel to Geneva.

*How?* The most effective advocacy strategies will combine multiple approaches where possible. The Council's [Practical Guide for NGO Participants](#) provides a better understand the opportunities and requirements. Council guidelines are available for written submissions to the [Special Procedures](#), [Universal Periodic Review](#), and [Complaint Procedure](#). The UN Offices at Geneva also maintains a directory of [Permanent Missions](#) to the United Nations Office at Geneva. The Council officially consists of 47 [member countries](#) and a simple internet search will generally obtain the details of their embassies in your country. For communicating your issues to the general public, you might consider circulating a short press release on your planned advocacy or even organizing a press conference prior to the Council session with either your national media at home or international news reporters in Geneva.

#### **5) Check for a Special Procedure on your issue and your county's next UPR**

*Why?* The Special Procedures established under the Human Rights Council are perhaps the most accessible and vibrant conduits for human rights testimonies and advocacy. They can take the form of Special Rapporteurs, Special Representatives, Independent Experts, and Working Groups. As of June 2012 there are 36 thematic mandate Special Procedures and 12 country mandate Special Procedures. The individuals appointed to hold a mandate receive no remuneration for their voluntary service and tend to be very open to, even reliant on, communication with grassroots advocates to fulfill their far-reaching monitoring and reporting responsibilities. The Universal Periodic Review process also enables nongovernmental groups to submit first hand information on human rights with all countries being reviewed under the UPR once every four and a half years.

*How?* The Council provides an [overview](#) of the current Special Procedure mandates, along with a [visual directory](#) of current mandate holders and a schedule of [forthcoming country visits](#). Regular [submission of written reports and information](#) relevant to a Special Procedure mandate are highly encouraged. There are also opportunities for in-person meetings at Council sessions as well as when Special Procedures undertake country or regional visits. The Council provides the full [UPR calendar](#) of country reviews over the next four and a half years, along with particular [deadlines and guidelines for written submissions](#) in advance of each country's UPR.

## 6) Identify a national, regional, or international partner with UN Consultative Status

*Why?* Although any individual or group can submit written information to [Special Procedures](#), the [Universal Periodic Review](#) and the Human Rights Council [Complaints Procedure](#), Council [guidelines](#) still require UN Consultative Status for direct written submission to the Council itself. Moreover, in-person advocacy at the Council sessions and other advocacy opportunities in Geneva, Switzerland effectively requires [obtaining accreditation](#) with an organization holding [UN Consultative Status](#). If your group does not currently hold UN Consultative Status, a partner organization with similar human rights interests and with this credential can provide both the required accreditation and a rewarding collaboration for in-person advocacy in Geneva.

*How?* Ask your current partners if they have UN Consultative Status. If no partners have UN Consultative Status, reach out to establish a new partnership with a national, regional, or international organization with Council advocacy experience. The [Civil Society Database](#) maintained by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs lists all non-governmental organizations with UN Consultative Status. Many active organizations are also members of the [Conference of NGOs](#) with Consultative relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO), which promotes civil society engagement with the UN.

Among others, a few prominent regional and international [organizations with consultative status](#) include:

- [Amnesty International](#) (Worldwide);
- [Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies](#) (Middle East and North Africa);
- [CIVICUS](#) (Worldwide);
- [Conectas](#) (Latin America);
- [East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project](#) (East Africa);
- [Forum Asia](#) (Asia and Pacific);
- [Human Rights House Network](#) (Central Asia); and
- [Human Rights Watch](#) (Worldwide).

Your organization could also [apply for Consultative Status](#) directly, but note that the UN application and review process will typically take over a year before you will receive a decision.

## 7) Review available advocacy guides for civil society at the Council

*Why?* In addition to basic information provided by the Human Rights Council itself, numerous guides have been produced by civil society organizations on nearly all aspects of Council advocacy. These guides can provide a wealth of information and practical advice, as well as technical details for engaging with the Council, the Universal Periodic Review, and Special Procedures.

*How?* The OHCHR produces several essential reference guides available in multiple languages that include: [Handbook for Civil Society](#); [Practical Guide for NGO Participants](#); and [UPR Practical Guide for Civil Society](#). Other excellent resources prepared by civil society organizations are the International Service for Human Rights journal [Human Rights Monitor Quarterly](#); the website [www.upr-info.org](http://www.upr-info.org); and the CIVICUS guide [Reporting Human Rights Violations to UN Special Procedures](#).

## **8) Research the relevant countries to engage concerning your advocacy objectives**

*Why?* The Human Rights Council is first and foremost an intergovernmental body and therefore while non-governmental organizations may participate through oral or written statements, government support and collaboration is essential for the introduction and adoption of any Council decisions. Researching the past statements and resolutions by countries at the Human Rights Council provides essential information for effectively targeting your planned advocacy. Countries will be more open to your advocacy if they have previously shown an interest about your specific issue or have previously supported recommendations on related human rights issues. By researching and understanding the Council record of each country, you will be able to focus your advocacy on those countries most likely to accept your information and support your human rights objectives at the Council, such as by making specific recommendations during the Interactive Dialogue of the UPR.

*How?* There are several databases containing the recommendations, documents, and resolutions produced by the Human Rights Council and related mechanisms. UPR-Info maintains an easily navigated [database of recommendations](#) made to and by countries as part of the Universal Periodic Review. The OHCHR manages a comprehensive database of all [UN charter bodies' documents](#); along with [Human Rights Council Resolutions](#) organized by session, and [UPR documents](#) organized by session and country. The [Universal Human Rights Index](#) provides country specific information from all UN human rights mechanisms and an OHCHR compilation of [human rights information worldwide](#) can also be browsed by region and country.

## **9) Plan well in advance to meet deadlines and arrange logistics**

*Why?* As a large intergovernmental body, the Human Rights Council plans and works on extended timelines, generally on the scale of months, not days or weeks. As one typical example, the program and agenda of the [Forum on Business and Human Rights](#), which takes place in December 2012, will be drafted and agreed upon by September 2012. Therefore advocacy to influence or contribute to the Forum's discussion would need to occur at least 3-6 months ahead of the Forum in order to be most effective. Similarly, a recent [survey of 31 countries](#) by UPR-Info found that human rights information pertaining to a country's Universal Periodic Review should be shared with peer countries an average of 1-4 months in advance of the UPR session. This advance

notice enables peer countries sufficient time to review and consider incorporating your information into their official comments and recommendations.

*How?* The OHCHR email list and extranets highlighted in Step 2 will keep you well informed of dates and deadlines for key upcoming opportunities, such as Council sessions, country visits of Special Procedures, or other occasions. In addition to any regular human rights reports that you publish periodically, you should also plan to prepare advocacy materials tailored for specific opportunities. Moreover, for any in-person engagements with the Council in Geneva, Switzerland you should complete all travel arrangements as early as possible. At a minimum, flights and accommodations should preferably be confirmed 4-6 months in advance. As both government and civil society delegations pour into Geneva, affordable flights and hotel rooms quickly sell out before each Council session. The Mandat International's [Delegate's Guide](#) is an excellent reference for key logistical information and their [Welcome Centre](#) also offers affordable lodging tailored of civil society advocates, but due to its popularity, you must reserve room months in advance.

### **10) Engage and Follow through for long term advocacy with maximum results**

*Why?* As highlighted under Step 1 – “Define your objectives realistically”, your advocacy at the Human Rights Council should be seen as a tool and only one step in your long term human rights strategy. This means you should also plan for how you will use the outcomes of your Council advocacy to feed back into and further strengthen your national human rights advocacy. How will you use resulting recommendations, statements, or resolutions to inform public opinion, advocate for legislative change, build momentum for individual accountability, or frame policy objectives?

*How?* While achieving your objectives at the Council is a success in itself, the greatest impact will come from leveraging and building upon this engagement through sustained efforts to implement the recommended or desired changes at the local level. Moreover, even when your international objectives are not be fully achieved, your advocacy at the Council can often still inform and contribute to your continued advocacy at home.