

Other actors: intergovernmental organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

The last part of this lesson discusses intergovernmental organizations and NGOs and how their efforts contribute to the enforcement of international human rights law.

A. Intergovernmental organizations

A huge number of additional UN agencies, partners, and other intergovernmental groups also contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights. These agencies are known generally as **intergovernmental organizations**, and when they are affiliated with the UN they are sometimes known as **specialized agencies**. These organizations are established by governments either through the UN or via a separate treaty in order to monitor, commission studies on, report on, and administer agreements related to a specific issue.

The UN specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations form a critical part of the international structure of human rights governance, and their work complements that of the UN Charter-based and treaty-based bodies. These intergovernmental organizations include, among many others:

- Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
- Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division (IDD)
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)
- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- United Nations Human Settlement Programme (HABITAT)
- United Nations Mine Action (UNMAS)
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- World Health Organization (WHO).

Intergovernmental organizations like these are generally empowered to **act upon a limited set of issues**. With respect to the promotion of human rights, they may be able to perform a range of enforcement activities, from standard-setting to monitoring, reporting, providing technical assistance, or even receiving communications from individuals, businesses, or NGOs.

- For example, one of the specialized agencies with the most effective and well-developed mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights is **the International Labour Organization (ILO)**. The ILO was founded in 1919 for the purpose of improving labor conditions throughout the world. Because its mandate focuses on labour issues, the primary human rights targets of the ILO (as codified in the Declaration of Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work) are:
 - Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining;
 - Freedom from slavery and forced labour;
 - Freedom from child labour; and
 - Freedom from discrimination.

In pursuit of these aims, it examines country reports, receives input from NGOs, conducts technical and political reviews of national policies, and is even empowered to receive complaints about violations of labour rights. It provides technical assistance to Member States, and aids in the drafting and promotion of human rights standards at the national level.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has adopted a wide variety of international conventions and recommendations, many of which deal with human rights issues. It was one of the first international organizations to support special rights for women, adopting Convention No. 3 on Maternity Protection and Convention No. 4 on Night Work of Women in 1919. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has also continued to be active in concluding conventions for the protection of women's labour rights. These include: conventions on work by women in mines, equal pay, social security, discrimination, and family responsibilities. Moreover, the ILO has set up a Bureau for Gender Equality; an International Programme on More and Better Jobs for Women; and a Capacity-building Programme on Gender, Poverty and Employment.

The ILO has implemented strict rules on working conditions for children as part of the fight to eliminate child labor. It has been active in the area of disability and work, promoting the inclusion and employability of persons with disabilities. The

ILO and UNESCO have also contributed to protecting the right to work and the cultural artifacts (creations) of minority groups. The International Labour Organization (ILO) was one of the pioneers in protecting the rights of indigenous persons at the international level.

- Another specialized agency with a long-standing/old history of promoting and protecting human rights is **United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**. Founded in 1945, UNESCO has the obligation "to promote universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction of race, sex, language or religion by the Charter of the United Nations." UNESCO focuses on issues related to education, science, and culture, as well as information and communication.

In order to promote rights in these areas, UNESCO acts as a forum for discussion, provides technical assistance, assists in standard setting, performs research into trends and violations of rights, promotes awareness, and funds schools and educational programmes. Like the ILO, UNESCO has also established a complaints procedure and receives communications from individuals and NGOs. UNESCO has been active in highlighting the educational needs of disabled persons.

- **The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**, a UN specialized agency established in 1946 is the primary advocate of children's rights at the global level. It is the key global organizations concerned with children's rights. It is tasked with improving the lives of children across the world. Among its many projects, UNICEF does advocacy work, provides technical support and assistance to national governments, and it is one of the world's primary vaccine suppliers
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**: an independent UN specialized agency, it is one of the largest and most important humanitarian agencies in the UN system. UNHCR has become a primary player in protecting the rights and well-being of refugees. UNHCR monitors implementation of the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol and related aspects of international refugee law. It also provides basic services such as food, water, and shelter to persons in humanitarian emergencies. Moreover, it also provides protection and assistance to a wide variety of other persons of concern than refugees, including: returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons.

Most intergovernmental organizations **maintain up-to-date websites, and persons, particularly students are encouraged to visit some of them** in order to expand their knowledge of how intergovernmental organizations contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights.

B. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Human rights NGOs are civil society organizations formed by private individuals or groups (not governments) for the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights. They may focus either on human rights in general or on a specific human rights issue, such as landmines or the right to health. They may be local, national, regional, or international both in terms of their focus as well as in their structure and presence.

Human rights NGOs have become an important part of international and regional human rights enforcement systems. There are many ways in which NGOs and other civil society groups engage with and support other global, regional, and national human rights monitoring and enforcement systems. These include:

- Promoting the development, adoption, and ratification of treaties;
- Lobbying states to implement their treaty obligations;
- Monitoring states' compliance with their obligations;
- Submitting information and written reports to international and regional charter and treaty bodies;
- Attending and contributing to sessions of international and regional charter and treaty bodies, where possible;
- Submitting individual complaints to treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council, and regional human rights courts;
- Educating individuals about their human rights;
- Drawing attention to human rights violations and "shaming" states into action; and
- Mobilizing support for human rights enforcement.

NGOs operate under diverse mandates and focus on a huge range of different issues. They vary in size from a few people to major international operations and employ many different types of professionals. They may operate on an international, regional, national, or local level. Because they are decentralized and diverse, they can gather, organize, and distribute information quickly and reach areas where international and regional bodies are unwilling or unable to go. Particularly with respect to gathering and distributing information, NGOs are vital to human rights enforcement.

Over the past several decades, NGOs have gained in power and reputation, and are now an official part of many national and international human rights delegations. Large-scale international NGOs like Amnesty International, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, and Human Rights Watch have attended many intergovernmental meetings. They have been given key responsibilities in the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance, and partner with governments and international organizations on education and monitoring activities. They have scored major victories – **the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, for example, came out mainly as the result of NGO lobbying.

However, many people have criticized powerful NGOs for their lack of transparency and accountability, arguing that they are, in effect, unelected special interest groups that have been given important powers within the international system.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have examined the mechanisms established by the international community through the UN; the regional bodies set up in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, and the role played by intergovernmental organizations and NGOs. The mechanisms discussed in this lesson are extremely important parts of the international human rights enforcement system. Regional and other organizations work alongside the UN system in the promotion and protection of human rights. They fill gaps in global enforcement and create their own contextualized systems of human rights norms.

References and readings

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