

Briefing for Member & Associate Organizations:

How you can engage with the UN's Universal Periodic Review (UPR)



What is the UPR?

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a UN human rights mechanism by which *every State* has their human rights record scrutinized. All States can review other States' records and make recommendations for improvement. States are reviewed every five years. The UPR is a unique mechanism as it is state-driven and based on the principle of peer review. So far there has been a 100% participation rate.

Universal: all member states get reviewed, and every member state can take part in every review.

Periodic: each member state gets reviewed every five years.

Review: the current rights situation is examined, and member states can recommend changes that are needed to uphold human rights.

How does the UPR work?

The Review: Each review takes 3.5 hours, in the form of an 'interactive dialogue' in a Working Group composed of all UN States. It is chaired by the President of the Human Rights Council (HRC). Each dialogue begins with the State under Review (SuR) reporting on its own situation. Other States then ask questions and make recommendations on the human rights situation.

The review is based on three reports: a National Report prepared by the SuR, a compilation by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) based on information from multiple UN bodies, and a summary from OHCHR of reports sent by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

A final report - the "Working Group Report" - which includes summaries of the SuR's statement and the dialogue, is released one week after the

Working Group's session. It includes a list of recommendations made during the dialogue.

The SuR will then, in the following 3-4 months produce a document which lists which recommendations it "supports" and which ones it "takes note of" (i.e. rejects), and present this at the UN Human Rights Council. At this stage the Council will then officially adopt the UPR report (i.e. the Working Group Report + the list of which recommendations which have been accepted / noted).

Implementation Period: This is the period of five years in between each review. During this time the State is expected to implement the recommendations it has accepted and pledges it has made during the review.

Reporting on Implementation: CSOs can monitor the progress of the state, and in five years' time, can report on the situation again, including the State's progress in implementing previous recommendations. In the meantime, they can leverage the UPR Report in conversation with other NGOs, the public, and State representatives.

Why should you engage?

The UPR is a tool that can be used to improve a state's human rights situation. Its main advantages are its scale, prestige, and universality. Its prestige comes from the report-drafters: a combination of the OHCHR and States. It is also the case that States are often more likely to listen to fellow States when being given recommendations.

These factors can also lead to media coverage, allowing the public to see how a state's human rights record has improved, how it needs to improve, and what improvements a State has committed to.

Whilst the review is state-led, it welcomes input from civil society via written submissions. Importantly for Humanist International Member and Associate Organizations (MOs), there is no requirement for CSOs who want to make written submissions to be UN-accredited. As such, any organization can make submissions from their home country with no need

for accreditation.

The UPR assesses the extent to which States respect their human rights obligations set out in:

1. UN Charter;
2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
3. Human rights instruments to which the State is party;
4. Voluntary pledges and commitments made by the State;
5. Applicable international humanitarian law.

How can you get involved?

Although the UPR is state-driven, CSOs have an important role to play. They allow for a deeper critique of the SuR, and give information to other States, which would otherwise lack insight beyond the SuR's assessment of itself. The more information available, the more submissions are filed, the more chance of achieving our common goal: human rights for everyone.

Humanist International's MOs can engage with the UPR process at several points:

Stage 1: Before the review

MOs can **submit a report on the human rights situation in the country to the OHCHR**. This submission will be processed and incorporated into the OHCHR's stakeholder summary. The form of these submissions is described in the "How to make a written submission?" section below. This is the most impactful and accessible part of the process that MOs can get involved in. Humanists International supports our MOs through this process including with an annual UPR training session, as well as editing and content advice. To date, 12 MOs have made written submissions. Some recent examples include submissions on [Barbados](#), [Canada](#), [Malta](#), [Nepal](#), and [the UK](#).

Often, the SuR will hold **national conferences** to consult with a multitude of stakeholders, including CSOs, trade unions, indigenous peoples, and human rights defenders. This is encouraged by the UN, and consultations usually take place a year, or more, before the review in different parts of the country.

The third way that MOs can get involved is by **bringing specific concerns to the attention of other States**. As other States will be reviewing the SuR, it is important that they know about CSOs' concerns. This mechanism is often more successful if you have already made a submission. This lobbying can take several forms:

Contacting local embassies: Embassies in your country are likely to be contacted by their UN Missions for information, and so you should try to put your concerns on their radar.

Engaging the media: With the UPR process being one that is quite open, letting local media know about your submission is an avenue to publicize your concerns and have other States pick them up.

Attending "Pre-Sessions": [UPR Info](#) is a Geneva-based NGO that works to maximize CSO involvement in the UPR process. They organize "pre-sessions" in Geneva where they invite a selected group of CSOs who have made written submissions. During the pre-session, CSOs get the opportunity to speak to Reviewing States and to, hopefully, inform the recommendations and questions those States will ask of the SuR. The pre-sessions are quite short (one hour per SuR), but CSOs can make the most of their time by identifying States that are allies on their issues, and organizing side meetings with their representatives to brief them. It can be a very effective way for getting the recommendations you want to be proposed by States. Whilst [UPR Info](#) offers travel grants to some participants, unfortunately in general the pre-sessions trips are not funded and so may not be feasible for all of our MOs who have made written submissions. However, if your MO is eligible for Humanists International's development grants, where they are available, you could consider how you might include engagement with the UPR as part of a development grant application.

Stage 2: During the review

While CSOs, such as Humanists International MOs, cannot take the floor during the review, they can organize side events, spread information on what has been discussed, deliver statements, issue press releases, organize press conferences and so on.

Stage 3: During the Human Rights Council Session

As mentioned above, 3-4 months after the review the SuR makes a presentation at the HRC. Usually it is either the Foreign Minister or UN Ambassador who is there to present on behalf of the SuR. Humanists International is accredited to speak during these UPR adoptions at the Council. To date, we have made a total of 29 joint statements with MOs on their country of concern during the UPR adoptions. Some recent examples: [Barbados](#), [Ghana](#), [Guatemala](#), and [Romania](#). Humanists International tries to amplify these statements through news stories on our website and encourages MOs to do the same.

Stage 4: During the implementation period

In the five years between Reviews, the State is expected to implement the recommendations it has accepted. MOs should monitor the progress of the State on the issues they care about. They can leverage the UPR Report and the commitments made in it, in conversation with other NGOs, the public, and State representatives,

When is your country up for Review?

As mentioned, every country is reviewed every five years. This timetable is published on Humanists International's [website here](#). Included on this timetable are: the deadline for CSO written submissions, the date of the Review itself and when the adoption of the UPR — when MOs can give statements before the HRC — will be.

How to make a written submission?

MO submissions should highlight human rights issues of concern, and rely on credible sources for their information. First-hand information is considered preferable, along with any of the MO's own findings.

Submissions are made via the following website: <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org>. MOs will need to set up a profile at least 48 hours in advance.

The UN has set out the formal guidelines for submissions which can be found [here](#). Some key requirements include that submissions:

- are in Word format;
- do not exceed 2,815 words (but additional documents can be annexed);
- include a cover page which clearly identifies the name of your organization (letterhead, name, logo, webpage, email and postal address);
- briefly describe the main activities and objectives of your organization (not included in the word count);
- include an introductory paragraph summarizing main points in the submission;
- only use endnotes to reference information;
- have numbered paragraphs and pages;
- be written in one of the UN official languages;
- be submitted by the deadline.

Humanists International's UPR training for members provides more detail on what a good submission looks like, so we encourage attendance. Our staff is also here to support you in the editing and content process of any submission you make. We will reach out to your organization when your country is coming up for review, but in the meantime feel free to email us with any questions you may have, at: advocacy@humanists.international.