

# FRACTURED ORDER

Recommendations to  
Advance Human Rights Multilateralism

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# COLLAPSE OF RIGHTS-BASED MULTILATERALISM

The integrity of the international human rights system is under threat as [geopolitical realignment](#) accelerates the dismantling of multilateral norms. The collapse of US leadership under the second Trump administration, coupled with consolidation of authoritarianism in Russia, China and their allies, has enabled the deliberate degradation of intergovernmental institutions designed to uphold universal rights.

This crisis is both structural and ideological: the very concept of rights-based governance is being replaced by “transactional” diplomacy, increased securitisation, and regressive nationalist agendas.

Human rights mechanisms — from the United Nations Human Rights Council to regional bodies such as the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or Council of Europe — are being increasingly undermined by states withdrawing from human rights bodies, reneging on their international commitments, cutting funding, rejecting accountability, and promoting regressive norms. Meanwhile, the rise of non-normative multilateral platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, has empowered repressive regimes in terms of action and rhetoric.

For over a decade, rights-based approaches have been framed as an existential threat to 'traditional values' and security by authoritarians and populists alike. After January 2025, the [artificial separation of humanitarian aid from human rights-based frameworks](#) adds to the weakening and playing down human rights.

The erosion of multilateralism disproportionately impacts marginalised groups, LGBTQ people and women and undermines the effectiveness of tools used to combat democratic

backsliding. UN Special Rapporteurs have [linked](#) this phenomenon to incremental, legalistic attacks on judicial independence, media and academic freedom, and civic space.

Without urgent action, the international community risks becoming entrenched in a dystopian “new normal” where militarisation and exclusion take precedence over the indivisibility and universality of human rights.

The path forward calls for reclaiming the original promise of multilateralism. This means embedding human rights and gender justice in financial, climate, and security institutions; ensuring regional human rights mechanisms evolve to reflect the challenges of the moment and remain independent; and prioritising multilateral human rights diplomacy.

It also requires states to uphold the integrity of the multilateral system by applying human rights principles without selectivity or double standards. Institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) have a profound impact on rights. Yet they often lack explicit human rights mandates. Examples as the [OECD grievance mechanism](#) and the [FATF revisions to protect civic space](#) show that human rights multilateralism is not destined to contract, but can expand — provided that human rights advocates, both state and non-state, find compelling ways to integrate rights into varied international fora in the rapidly changing political context.

Only a deliberate effort to restore human rights multilateralism can counter this fractured order.

# RESTORING HUMAN RIGHTS MULTILATERALISM

## » Use Non-Traditional Multilateral Arenas to Uphold Rights

### Recommendation:

States and intergovernmental organisations should incorporate human rights safeguards within non-traditional multilateral bodies, such as financial, trade, climate, and development institutions, and facilitate human rights-focused exchange between them.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Governments should promote the integration of rights-based indicators and reporting into the normative frameworks of FATF, OECD, the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation, OSCE, the COP and others. Building on positive examples within these platforms to protect civic space, states should advocate for governance models that reflect the indivisibility of rights, including in climate and financial cooperation frameworks. Australia's bid to host the COP31 in 2026 should present an opportunity to advance civic space and public participation in UN climate change negotiations.

## » Strengthen Regional Institutions as Guardians of Democratic Norms

### Recommendation:

Governments and parliaments should support regional intergovernmental or international organisations in defending democratic governance, rule of law, and civic space through funding, visibility and proactive political leadership.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

As authoritarian-leaning states erode regional bodies from within, committed states must act as norm entrepreneurs. This includes increasing core contributions (rather than earmarked funding), publicly defending regional courts and expert mechanisms, and resisting efforts to create diluted alternatives. Parliaments should scrutinise the government's compliance with regional judgments and recommendations, while regional organisations should modernise their communication strategies to better connect with the public. Regional organisations with democracy and human rights mandates should strive to elevate their role and their voice as standards-setting and make full use of their own existing mechanisms and powers (e.g. Council of Europe's Venice Commission opinions could be used and acted on cross-regionally).

## » Safeguard the Integrity and Independence of Human Rights Mechanisms

### Recommendation:

UN Member States and inter-governmental bodies must uphold the integrity and independence of international and regional human rights mechanisms, and ensure they have adequate resources.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

The UN special procedures, treaty bodies, international and regional courts are under political pressure and suffer from chronic underfunding. Governments should oppose efforts to undermine or politicise these mechanisms and ensure that they receive adequate, predictable, non-earmarked funding. Parliaments should reinforce their mandates through public resolutions and ensure the executive authorities cooperate fully. Member states should also support the monitoring of reprisals and protect mandate holders and their families from intimidation, in line with their obligations under the UN Charter.

At the March 2025 session of the UN Human Rights Council, Kyrgyzstan presented the “Friends of Multilateralism” [initiative](#) on behalf of over 70 states from all UN regional groups. The initiative expressed support for the international rules-based order and ensuring adequate funding for the UN human rights programmes. It also expressed a commitment to cooperate in good faith with human rights bodies, emphasised the importance of prevention and accountability for rights abuses and of enabling environment for civil society. This could serve a basis to continue to build support and identify concrete commitments to advance these goals.

## » Equip the UN System to Address Democratic Backsliding

### Recommendation:

UN Member States and the Secretary-General should establish a cross-cutting early warning and response mechanism within the UN system to detect and address systemic threats to democracy. Facilitating access and inputs by independent civil society organisations could contribute to such assessments.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

Democratic backsliding is [incremental](#), though may happen swiftly, and often evades the remit of traditional human rights tools. The line between democratic backsliding and authoritarianism may be thought of as a sliding scale. The UN system must move beyond siloed treaty-based assessments and adopt a more structural approach. Member states should grant the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights a mandate to coordinate with various treaty bodies, special procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review to identify trends in democratic erosion and support the development of a common early warning framework. This would allow the UN to respond more effectively to deteriorations in democratic governance.

## » Elevate Multilateral Human Rights Diplomacy as a Strategic Priority

### Recommendation:

Governments should revitalise human rights diplomacy by investing in multilateral alliances, promoting diversity in leadership, fostering cross-regional collaborations, applying human rights principles without selectivity and ensuring that foreign policy is [aligned](#) with international human rights commitments.

Governments should mainstream feminist foreign policy principles into their multilateral diplomacy to ensure that gender equality informs agendas related to peace, development, trade, and climate.

### Action-Oriented Explanation:

In times of systemic contestation, effective human rights diplomacy requires consistent engagement—not just when it is politically convenient. Governments should move beyond rhetorical support and diplomatically invest in cross-regional coalitions, including leadership from Global South states. Foreign ministries should appoint senior-level envoys to engage in multilateral human rights diplomacy and integrate it into other topical agendas. They should also instruct their missions to prioritise coordinated action in Geneva, New York, and at regional fora. Parliaments should scrutinise diplomatic coherence and press for alignment with treaty obligations and principled foreign policy.

States with feminist foreign policies (FFP) should champion equitable participation, gender-responsive budgeting and intersectional approaches within multilateral institutions (e.g. linking FFP with [care economy](#) and [human rights economy](#)). This includes embedding gender considerations into arms trade regulation, debt policy, climate finance, and AI governance. Parliaments must hold governments accountable for translating feminist rhetoric into institutional practice across multilateral engagements.

In daily diplomatic practice, this means ensuring that meetings with women, girls, human rights defenders and civil society organisations focusing on equality, the rights of LGBTQ people and the prevention of gender-based violence are a meaningful part of every country visit and every high-level visit.

Increased engagement across a broader range of rights issues, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, the right to development, structural discrimination and colonial legacies, climate change and accountability could help bridge geopolitical divides, strengthen cross-regional collaborations, and foster a more cohesive approach in addressing contemporary human rights challenges.

This Human Rights Compass Policy Brief is the result of a convening of over 30 leading international human rights organisations and their experts, which was held on 13 May 2025. Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, these recommendations reflect the discussions of the Human Rights Compass Convening of 13 May 2025 and additional research undertaken by Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH. The Policy Brief has been reviewed by an editorial committee composed of Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH and participants to the Convening.

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- » Convening key human rights stakeholders for coordinated policy advice and action.
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