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Reflections on the Connection between the 2030 Agenda and Human Rights Mechanisms, and the Strengths and Limitations for Accountability

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There is an urgent need for stronger accountability to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda at multiple levels of governance. The obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights is not optional, and development must occur in a manner that is compliant with and advances human rights.

Historically, the United Nations has been a crucial space for developing and establishing both hard and soft law, which together constitute the international legal and policy framework on women's rights and gender equality. In parallel, several human rights bodies and mechanisms have been created to ensure progress towards this goal, notably the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and two United Nations Special Procedures, namely the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls.

These mechanisms focus on examining and exposing the structural causes of gender-based discrimination and inequality while providing guidance to Member States to concretely address them. They do this through regular engagement with governments, with the critical input of civil society, feminist movements and other key actors both within and beyond the United Nations system. This important role is built into their working methods, which create many opportunities for strengthening multi-level governance, monitoring and accountability.

The attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been recognized as a "cross-cutting thematic issue" for the protection of human rights by the United Nations special procedures system. Mandates focusing on a breadth of issues, from discrimination against women and girls to health, poverty, business and human rights, torture, unilateral coercive measures, and the independence of judges and the judiciary, among others, have frequently referenced the SDGs in their reports in connection with the binding human rights obligations of governments and called for speedier progress towards these goals. One compilation of this practice illustrates how over 30 mandates have over the years repeatedly referenced specific targets and included concrete recommendations to governments for achieving the goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda at the national level.[1]

There are numerous opportunities to systematically leverage the expertise and influence that lies within this system to strengthen multi-level governance, monitoring and accountability in the remaining years of the 2030 Agenda and in the development of a successor framework. The thematic and country reports issued by United Nations special procedures can be used to identify development gaps and state inaction contributing to a lack of progress and link them to the relevant systemic causes and binding obligations.

[1] See https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/special-procedures/SDG5.pdf.

From the point of view of accountability, United Nations special procedures are often able to take a more critical stance on human rights and development concerns and failures, as exemplified in the lack of progress. It is important to draw upon their expertise and leverage their regular access to Member States to exert pressure on governments to prioritize the implementation of agreed-upon development goals in alignment with human rights norms and standards.

United Nations special procedures can provide an independent voice and help facilitate difficult conversations around failure, gaps, non-compliance, regression and violations with Member States through constructive dialogue and even privately through diplomatic channels as well as publicly, when appropriate.

There is a technical soundness and legitimacy to the work of United Nations special procedures, as reflected in the many useful frameworks and tools that have been produced by them, aside from their regular thematic and country-specific reports, which can be used to conduct human rights feasibility and impact assessments and operationalized to accelerate progress through 2030 and shape a successor framework. These tools may be used to frame goals and targets and monitor the qualitative impact of development initiatives to ensure that the outcomes are human-rights compliant. These tools are often developed with the input of technical experts and civil society to reflect ground realities but remain underutilized.