UN80 Initiative and the Future of the UN Human Rights Pillar

Meeting Summary Report

December 2025

1. Context and Purpose of the Meeting

The UN80 reform process is unfolding against a backdrop of declining multilateralism, deepening geo-political divides, and a systemic weakening of human rights protections. Within this context, the UN's human rights pillar faces persistent underfunding, uneven political will, and shrinking spaces for civil society engagement.

As reform proposals begin to take concrete form—shaping how the UN's three pillars will interact, be resourced, and deliver—there is growing concern that human rights risk being sidelined amidst competing priorities and budgetary pressures. Civil society has been clear: UN80 must not reduce human rights to a residual function, but must instead reaffirm and strengthen the UN's capacity to promote, protect, and prevent violations of human rights worldwide.

With this in mind, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights and the Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN) co-organized a roundtable discussion to bring together Geneva-based civil society working on Human Rights on the occasion of a visit by the newly appointed Executive Director of C4UN, Adam Lupel.

The discussion sought to:

- Assess the implications of the UN80 Initiative and current UN reform efforts for the human rights system and the Human Rights Council (HRC);

- Reflect on the Human Rights Civil Society Letter on the UN80 Process and assessment on Work Stream 3 and building on lessons and findings from C4UN's July 2025 report on the Human Rights Pillar;

- Identify key risks and opportunities moving ahead notably leveraging C4UN's ongoing work in New York—aimed at ensuring that the voices of human rights civil society are better reflected in global reform debates;

- and discuss opportunities for better connecting debates in Geneva and New York with national and local level actors, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Participants were invited to exchange perspectives and formulate practical ideas on how civil society can collectively advocate for the following:

- Adequate and predictable funding for the UN human rights pillar;
- Independence and consistency in addressing violations and advancing accountability;
- Closer linkages among the human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security agendas; and
- Safe, inclusive, and sustained participation of civil society across UN processes.

By examining the impact of UN80 on the entire Human Rights Pillar, including the member-state led Human Rights Council, this dialogue aimed to ensure that human rights remain at the heart of global governance, and that reform efforts ultimately strengthen—not weaken—the UN's credibility, coherence, and capacity to deliver on its core promise to uphold human dignity.

2. Current State of UN80 and Key Concerns

Shift from the Pact for the Future to UN80

In New York, many member states and parts of the Secretariat are now primarily focused on UN80 with little attention being paid to the commitments made in the Pact for the Future. This contrasts with dedicated parts of the Secretariat and some local and national-level civil society that are just beginning to see the Pact as having some potential to assist with national advocacy, as reflected in C4UN's Civil Society Pact Monitoring report. This disconnect illustrates the risk that reform is currently headquarters driven and detached from lived realities of human rights defenders and local and national-level implementing partners. Participants warned that, without a broader political debate, the future of the human rights pillar may end up being shaped primarily by budget negotiators in the Fifth Committee, rather than by a principled assessment of human rights needs.

The UN80 Initiative

Participants described the Secretary General's UN80 initiative as insufficient to the scale of challenges facing the UN in general and the human rights pillar in particular. There is a risk that the proposed system-wide cuts become the default basis for negotiations, rather than starting from a discussion of what is needed for the UN to deliver effectively. This would leave the future of the human rights system to be shaped primarily by budgetary constraints rather than by human rights imperatives.

Civil society encouraged member states to avoid treating the Secretary-General's proposals for cuts as the starting point for negotiations, and to insist on a broader political discussion within the General Assembly.

Workstream Two

Workstream Two on mandate creation, delivery, and review is one of the most active components of the UN80 reform process for Member States. Member States are now formally engaged through the Informal Ad Hoc Working Group, established in August, which is progressing through a discovery phase before moving into a production phase that will run through July next year.

As part of this discovery phase, on 5 November the Coalition for the UN We Need, together with New Zealand and Jamaica, the Co Chairs of the Informal Ad Hoc Working Group, convened a civil society consultation. Ambassador Brian Wallace of Jamaica and Ambassador Carolyn Schwalger of New Zealand met with civil society organizations to discuss how mandate creation can be improved to reduce inefficiencies and duplication, how mandate delivery can be strengthened on the ground, and how challenges such as budget constraints affect the ability of the United Nations to respond to lived experiences and contemporary needs. Participants also shared good practices and highlighted concerns that should be addressed in the reform process.

Civil society organizations were invited to submit written recommendations directly to the Co Chairs. C4UN has been asked to collate these submissions and will prepare a consolidated summary of recommendations to inform the official reporting of the Informal Ad Hoc Working Group to the General Assembly.

The consultation emphasized the importance of civil society providing coherent and strategic input in the coming months in order to influence the next stages of the reform process.

3. Major Risks to the Human Rights System

The following risks to the Human Rights System were among the principal concerns discussed by participants.

Chronic Underfunding

The UN human rights pillar represents no more than 3% of the UN budget, and is chronically underfunded. Three structural causes were identified by participants: First, major arrears in assessed contributions. Second, chronic late payments which trigger rules requiring the UN to return unspent funds. Third, historically entrenched political resistance to funding human rights work from certain influential member states.

Participants stressed that cuts weaken early warning, prevention, investigative capacity and technical assistance, and therefore directly affect victims, human rights defenders and communities at risk.

Weakening of Accountability Mechanisms

Special procedures face political resistance and pressure to merge mandates. Investigative mechanisms risk losing operational capacity. Participants stressed that several bodies, including but not limited to the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have now reached a breaking point, with sharply reduced meeting time and rapidly expanding backlogs that undermine their ability to carry out timely reviews and protect rights holders. Participants also noted inconsistent information from different parts of the UN, reflecting an internal dynamic of individuals and departments fighting for their own institutional survival, but they agreed that the cumulative impact undermines the system's credibility as a whole.

Politicisation and Hierarchies of Rights

Some states increasingly argue that mandates lacking consensus should receive fewer resources. This would disproportionately affect mandates on gender and sexual orientation

and expression and would fundamentally alter the integrity of the system. Furthermore, attention was placed on the risk that powerful member states are systematically looking to block the resourcing of agreed mandates via negotiations in the Fifth Committee.

Threats to Gender Equality and SRHR

Proposals to merge UN Women and UNFPA, and to shift some sexual and reproductive health work to institutions that lack a rights based mandate, were viewed as highly concerning. These changes are perceived as driven by cost saving rather than programmatic logic and risk weakening gender equality and SRHR work across the system.

Shrinking Civil Society Space

Civil society access remains under pressure in both Geneva and New York. Restrictions appear to be political rather than only resource driven. Participants stressed the need to safeguard participation throughout the reform process.

4. Key Civil Society Perspectives and Expectations

Participants highlighted that the human rights, peace and development pillars are interdependent. Reducing the human rights pillar undermines conflict prevention, peacebuilding and sustainable development. Environmental and climate related human rights were also identified as vulnerable within current reform proposals.In addition to these substantive concerns,

Participants also raised concerns about data governance and digitalisation. Proposals for knowledge hubs risk shifting public data and analytical functions to private digital actors, which may weaken accountability. Several participants cautioned that this shift could also redefine what counts as public information, concentrating digital power in ways that undermine transparency and public oversight. Building on these concerns, participants further cautioned that without stronger safeguards, multistakeholder models risk enabling corporate actors to shape agendas, influence data governance, and steer funding priorities, which could undermine human rights outcomes.

Participants stressed the need for:

- mechanisms to prevent harmful corporate influence under multi-stakeholder models;

- coordinated advocacy to avoid duplication especially given limited organisational capacity;
- broader Global South participation to correct Western centric dynamics;
- stronger narrative framing that links funding cuts to real world human rights consequences;
- a common strategy for identifying new human rights champions in regions that have been less vocal, including within the G77 and among Small Island Developing States (SIDS);

5. Strategic Directions for Collective Action

Participants outlined several priorities for the coming period.

- Encourage member states to reject or significantly amend the current UN80 reform proposals and move the discussion toward the General Assembly.
- Identify new champions across regions and engage directly with national capitals, since decisions at the UN reflect domestic political positions.
- Strengthen civil society narratives by highlighting the impact of cuts on prevention, accountability, and protection.
- Advocate for structured cross-pillar engagement and ensure that human rights considerations influence reform discussions on development and peace and security.
- Prepare coordinated civil society input for the 2026 budget process.
- Support the creation of a permanent civil society platform for engagement with the UN.
- Ensure that reform discussions include youth and student-led movements, grassroots organisations and community based actors.

7. Conclusion

The roundtable highlighted that the UN80 initiative presents significant risks for the human rights system, but also opportunities to influence the long term direction of UN reform. The human rights pillar faces political pressure, chronic underfunding, shrinking space for civil society and proposals that may weaken gender equality and accountability. At the same time, the moment offers a chance to articulate a stronger vision for the UN that prioritises prevention, protection and participation.

In this context, Geneva based civil society organisations stressed the need for deeper coordination with New York and with national capitals. They noted a persistent disconnect between the two hubs, with Geneva driving much of the human rights substance while New York determines budgets and political mandates, making coordinated advocacy essential. More broadly, they emphasised that multilateralism does not deteriorate on its own but declines when states fail to defend it. At the same time, participants also underscored that civil society capacity is already stretched thin, and that the reform process must not impose additional parallel demands that overwhelm limited resources. Civil society actors agreed that advocacy must be sustained across immediate, medium term and long term time frames.
In line with its mandate, C4UN remains committed to supporting these efforts by mobilising and educating civil society, facilitating consultation and convening processes, amplifying perspectives on global governance reform, and helping to create the enabling environment needed for meaningful civil society inclusion. As the UN80 process advances, this is a critical moment for civil society, member states and UN actors to work together to ensure that the reform agenda strengthens, rather than weakens, the human rights pillar and places the protection of human dignity at the centre of the United Nations system.

About C4UN

The *Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN)* is a global platform of civil society organizations committed to creating a stronger, more effective, and more accountable United Nations system. Established in 2017, C4UN brings together more than 7,000 individuals and organizations from all regions and sectors to strengthen civil society engagement in UN reform and global governance renewal.

Recognized as a trusted convener and facilitator, C4UN has contributed to key milestones including the UN75 Declaration, the Our Common Agenda report, and the 2024 Summit of the Future. The Coalition co-hosted the UN Civil Society Conference in Nairobi, helping build the global constituency now pushing for a more inclusive, transparent, and results-oriented UN system.