Expectations for Engagement and Collaboration with the Federal Government on Human Rights

A concept framework designed by the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights

"A dynamic, diverse and independent civil society, able to operate freely, knowledgeable and skilled with regard to human rights, is a key element in securing sustainable human rights protection in all regions of the world."

OHCHR[1]

[1] https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/civil-society#:~:text=Protecting%20Civic%20Space.all%20regions%20of%20the%20world

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Purpose

This framework outlines expectations for meaningful engagement and collaboration between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the federal government in the shared responsibility of upholding and advancing human rights. It establishes core principles designed to build trust, foster co-creation, and ensure accountability in human rights processes, while also providing a prototype engagement process.

This framework embodies a shared vision for a partnership rooted in respect, equity, and empowerment, ensuring that human rights are upheld through a collaborative and inclusive approach.

Expectations for Federal Government Engagement Processes

Tangible Progress:

- Ensure engagement leads to measurable and actionable outcomes, avoiding symbolic or non-committal consultations.
- Provide clear timelines, deliverables, and progress updates at every stage of the engagement process.
- Introduce collaborative monitoring systems enabling both the government and CSOs to track progress and ensure accountability.

Transparency and Accountability:

- Commit to full transparency regarding the intentions, limitations, and actions of engagements.
- Publish detailed and timely “What We Heard and Proposed Actions Forward” reports, ensuring participants have the opportunity to review notes and outcomes for accuracy.

- Develop public-facing dashboards and updates to track the status of recommendations.
- Establish clear mechanisms for follow-up on commitments made during engagement sessions.

Respect and Reciprocity:

- Recognize and value the time, expertise, and lived experiences of CSOs and community members. Create a grants program to support civil society in effectively mobilizing the participation of diverse voices.
- Build on existing community work, research, and recommendations, acknowledging historical contributions, and treating CSOs as equal partners.

Accessibility and Equity:

- Address barriers to participation by providing resources such as compensation, transportation, translation, interpretation, and childcare.
- Prioritize the inclusion of marginalized groups, including those with lived experiences, Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, newcomers, 2STQLGBIA+ individuals, and persons with disabilities.
- Create culturally appropriate and trauma-informed spaces for engagement.

Safety and Humility:

- Ensure participants feel safe sharing experiences, particularly regarding systemic or traumatic human rights issues. Civil society organizations, connected directly to those experiencing oppression, can create spaces for safety and courageous dialogue.
- Approach engagement with humility, recognizing participants' dignity, autonomy, and leadership.

Centering Lived Experience:

- Adhere to the principle of "nothing about us without us" by prioritizing the voices of those directly impacted by human rights issues.
- Empower leaders with lived experience to co-create solutions and actively participate in decision-making.

Anti-Oppressive, Anti-Racist, and Decolonial Approaches:

- Commit to addressing systemic power imbalances in engagement processes.
- Embed anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and decolonial principles at every stage of collaboration, from design to implementation.

Feedback and Follow-Up:

- Demonstrate that input is heard and acted upon.
- Clearly communicate follow-up processes, providing regular updates to stakeholders.

Wellness and Support:

- Recognize the emotional and mental labor involved in the engagement.

- Provide wellness resources and care strategies to support participants, especially those sharing lived experiences.

Fundamental Considerations for Federal Collaboration

Reimagine Engagement Beyond Consultation:

- Transition from symbolic consultation to co-creation, where CSOs actively shape agendas, processes, and policy outcomes.
- Replace the “hourglass” model, which funnels engagement through a single mechanism, with dynamic, iterative pathways fostering continuous dialogue and collaboration.

Shared Agenda Ownership:

- Develop a collaborative agenda-setting process, incorporating CSO input prior to meetings.
- Align agendas with treaty body obligations, UPR recommendations, and emerging issues identified by CSOs.

Clear Accountability and Ownership:

- Establish public-facing accountability mechanisms, such as dashboards or annual progress reports.
- Define clear roles for government departments and CSOs in implementing recommendations.

Structured Collaboration and Capacity Building:

- Develop advisory committees or working groups in partnership with CSOs to foster ongoing dialogue and expertise on human rights issues.
- Invest in capacity-building initiatives, including grants and contributions programs, to strengthen capacity and knowledge of both CSOs and government officials.

Dynamic and Responsive Processes:

- Adapt engagement processes to specific needs by hosting smaller, focused meetings on critical human rights issues.
- Leverage international best practices and technical assistance to design responsive systems for reporting and engagement.

Flexible and Inclusive Engagement Models:

- Create informal spaces for dialogue to build trust and dismantle biases in engagement processes.
- Foster open conversations where all participants feel invested in shared outcomes.

Monitoring and Evaluation Expectations

Transparent and Accessible Reporting:

- Develop public-facing dashboards to track the implementation of UPR recommendations and other human rights commitments.
- Ensure reports are timely, accessible, and easy to understand.

Inclusive Evaluation Frameworks:

- Co-design evaluation criteria with CSOs to measure the success of engagement efforts.
- Focus on inclusivity, responsiveness, and tangible outcomes in evaluations.

Iterative Learning and Adaptation:

- Treat engagement as a learning process, incorporating feedback to refine and improve future efforts.
- Share lessons learned publicly to promote continuous improvement and accountability.

Federal Government Commitments to Action

Co-Develop Mechanisms for Implementation:

- Actively involve CSOs in designing mechanisms to implement treaty body recommendations and UPR action plans.
- Ensure processes reflect community priorities and lead to tangible outcomes.

Leadership in Human Rights Advocacy:

- Strengthen Canada's international standing by advancing progressive human rights policies informed by CSO expertise.
- Use engagement processes to identify priorities and position Canada as a global leader in human rights.

Expand Collaborative Spaces:

- Foster informal and formal spaces for dialogue, inspired by models like the National Housing Strategy Act rights-claiming mechanisms.
- Use these spaces to promote mutual understanding, co-creation, and trust-building.

Invest in Capacity Building:

- Partner with CSOs to design training programs for government officials on human rights principles and engagement strategies.
- Develop grants and contributions programs to enable effective and meaningful CSO engagement and feedback.

Next Steps for Improving the Engagement Framework

Dedicated Session on Engagement Strategies:

- Host a meeting focused exclusively on reimagining engagement strategies and co-creating a robust framework. The prototype shared below can be a model for reflection and inspire dialogue.
- Create a calendar of engagement that gives civil society the capacity for planning, and consistency. This calendar of engagement should not only reflect the treaty mechanisms, but also the necessary domestic commitments, reporting and review.

Pilot Engagement Models:

- Test smaller-scale collaborative models before scaling up to broader engagement frameworks.

International Technical Assistance:

- Leverage expertise from the OHCHR and other countries' best practices to improve reporting and follow-up processes and keep Civil Society up to date on the process and outcomes.

Regular, Cyclical, Subject-Specific Meetings:

- Commit to ongoing engagement sessions with relevant subject-matter experts across the government. These should include co-created agendas and clear follow-up mechanisms that document the specific actions taken in response to CSO input.

Resource Sharing and Support:

- Establish federal mechanisms to provide resources that enable equitable participation of CSOs and communities with lived experience. This includes financial support, logistical assistance, and access to necessary tools to ensure meaningful engagement.
- Create an accessible online space where civil society and grassroots organizations have access to information on how to access information relevant to engagement, treaty reviews, how to be included in engagement invitations that are relevant to their work and in which there is transparency of what organizations are engaging and engaged.
- Create a public resource place and education campaign to inform CSOs that have not been engaged. Clearly provide a road map and resources that facilitate their engagement.
- National needs assessment co-created with CSOs that capture which CSOs want to engage, know how to engage and determine what support they need to participate in engagement processes.

New Accountability Mechanisms:

- Define clear lines of accountability within government and work with CSOs to develop mechanisms to monitor the implementation of UN recommendations and track progress on human rights outcomes metrics.
- As part of regular engagement in public information, monitoring and implementation, an online space with links to the last review(s), implementation tools and evaluation and process for the

new review. This will help both CSOs and federal departments engaged to maintain a historical memory of the process, monitoring and implementation.

Prototype Model: Civil Society Engagement Approach for International Human Rights Treaties and Obligations

1. Vision and Goals

This engagement approach aims to:

- Honour, amplify and facilitate the engagement of the voices of marginalized communities.
- Bridge the gap between grassroots groups and federal-level decision-making.
- Strengthen civil society organizations' (CSOs) capacity to engage in international human rights treaties and obligations.
- Establish a standardized, transferable, and inclusive process for gathering and synthesizing input from diverse groups.
- Directly impact Canada's compliance with international human rights obligations.

This engagement approach is not intended to address all the next steps proposed above and would constitute one of several necessary streams of collaborative work.

2. Core Components of the Engagement Approach

A. Advisory Committee:

- **Composition:** A group of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), representatives of the federal government department leading the treaty review and Heritage Engagement Unit.
- **Terms of Reference:** Standard terms of reference should be clearly defined to guarantee co-creation of the process, clear purpose, responsibilities and limits, a public and accessible process to select CSOs representatives, building of capacity and compensation for participation and diversity of representation.
- **Responsibilities:**
    - Serve as conduits for grassroots feedback.
    - Administer small grants to grassroots groups.
    - Synthesize input into a unified report for the federal government.
    - Support grassroots organizations in submitting shadow reports.

B. Grassroots Engagement via Small Grants:

- **Grants:** Two streams of grants
    - Flexible, small grants ($500–$2,000) are provided to grassroots groups representing marginalized communities.
    - Larger grants for larger CSOs to lead educational campaigns, to provide technical support and logistical support to smaller organizations, work with grassroots communities and reach rural and remote areas.
- **Purpose:** Enable grassroots groups to convene community dialogues (in-person or virtual) to gather input and feedback.
- **Process:** Efficient, transparent, and inclusive grant application and distribution mechanisms.

C. Standardized Dialogical Engagement Process:

- Development of a one-page guideline to support grassroots groups, including:
    - Key objectives and a process plan for engagement sessions.
    - Links to relevant treaty documents and obligations.
    - Instructions for documenting and submitting input and feedback.

3. Engagement Workflow

Step 1: Call for Engagement

- With at least 6 months of anticipation, the federal government issues a call for input on a specific treaty or obligation, announces funding allocated for engagement for that treaty process, directs the public to the Advisory Committee and the reference terms.
- Advisory Committee members are public, and there is a clear way to access it. CSOs receive resources to coordinate outreach and data collection.

Step 2: Grassroots Mobilization

- The Advisory Committee disseminates a call for grant applications to grassroots groups.
- Grassroots groups, with established relationships, convene engagement sessions, ensuring the inclusivity of underrepresented communities.
- CSOs that have received appropriate funding through the grants process can provide backbone support and facilitate the translation of feedback to the federal government.

Step 3: Community Dialogues

- Grassroots groups conduct dialogues using the standardized process.
- Data (key themes, quotes, and documented needs) is captured and submitted to core CSOs.
- Ethical guidelines ensure confidentiality and participant safety.

Step 4: Central Synthesis

- The Advisory Committee compiles grassroots data into a standardized framework report.
- The report highlights key findings, themes, and actionable recommendations.

Step 5: Submission and Shadow Reporting

- The framework report is submitted to the federal government and treaty bodies.
- The Advisory Committee supports grassroots groups in creating supplementary shadow reports.

Step 6: Trackable Processes, Monitoring, Evaluation and Continuous Engagement

- Reports placed before high-level committees should lead to published minutes of meetings, next steps, and details of the ministry or department in charge of actions on recommendations.
- The Advisory Committee will provide yearly or mid-term reviews on recommendations of treaty bodies

- Public Dashboard with treaty bodies reports and recommendations, responsibilities and state of recommendation should be tracked. Similar platforms exist already and can serve as a template:https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/mandate-tracker-results-canadians.html, https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/topics-start/poverty.
- Public access to lines of accountability within government and definition of mechanisms to monitor the implementation of UN recommendations with CSOs.
- Evaluation of engagement process to better the process after every engagement.
- HR progress and implementation go beyond committee recommendations to treaty bodies. Following not only the recommendations that emerged from the treaty bodies, but also the civil society ones that were part of the Treaty Body Review.

4. Resources Required

A. Federal Government Support:

- Funding for:
    - Core CSO administrative and engagement costs.
    - Small grants for grassroots groups.
    - Technical resources (e.g., online engagement tools).

B. Core CSOs:

- Resources for:
    - Outreach and grant administration.
    - Data synthesis and report preparation.
    - Capacity-building workshops with and for grassroots groups.

C. Grassroots Groups:

- Access to:
    - Funding for engagement sessions.
    - Training and technical support for documentation.

5. Deliverables

A. Engagement Session Outcomes:

- Documentation of marginalized community voices to shape recommendations and implementation of treaty obligations.
- Enhanced awareness of human rights treaties among grassroots groups.

B. Framework Report:

- A standardized report summarizing national input, ready for submission to federal government and treaty bodies.

C. Capacity-Building Outputs:

- Shadow reports by grassroots organizations.
- Strengthened networks and collaboration between grassroots groups and core CSOs.

6. Benefits

- Establishes direct connections between the federal government and grassroots communities.
- Amplifies marginalized voices in national and international human rights processes.
- Builds sustainable capacity for CSOs and grassroots groups.
- Enhances transparency and accountability in fulfilling human rights obligations.

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