



CANADA'S VOICE  
IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE:

# A CIVIL SOCIETY HANDBOOK

# UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS -UNCHR-

COORDINATED BY  
FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CANADA

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Friends of  
the Earth  
International

Les Ami(e)s  
de la Terre



Friends of  
the Earth



Walter & Duncan  
GORDON FOUNDATION

## Overview and Acknowledgments

Welcome to *Canada's Voice in Global Governance: A Civil Society Handbook*. The handbook is a resource for civil society organizations (CSOs) interested in understanding and influencing Canada's role in some of the world's most important global institutions. Each section of the handbook answers key questions and provides important contact information on a particular international institution, including: the Group of Eight (G8); World Bank Group; the World Trade Organization (WTO); the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); the Organization of American States (OAS); the International Labour Organization (ILO); the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). There is also a section that provides an overview of the key pillars of the Canadian Government's foreign policy-making process. See the [www.foecanada.org/intl/handbook.htm](http://www.foecanada.org/intl/handbook.htm) for a complete list of the documents that make up the handbook.

Please note that this version of the handbook is a "Working Draft". We hope that it can be of immediate use to CSOs across Canada and beyond, but we are also seeking comments and suggestions in order to improve it and ensure that it is useful to the widest possible range of organizations (please send comments to [gsaul@foecanada.org](mailto:gsaul@foecanada.org)).

Also note that the HTML version of this document includes hyperlinks to additional information. These links are indicated in the PDF version by underlined text, but they can only be opened through the html version. The handbook will be updated regularly, so to benefit from the hyperlinks and ensure that you have the most up-to-date version, please check the website: [www.foecanada.org/intl/handbook.htm](http://www.foecanada.org/intl/handbook.htm).

The many sections of the handbook represent the collective effort and input of a wide range of human rights, labour, environment and development organizations from across Canada and beyond. The process of bringing this information together was coordinated by Friends of the Earth Canada and advised by a steering committee that included representatives from the Halifax Initiative Coalition, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), and Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. We would like to thank the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for their generous support. While Friends of the Earth deeply appreciates the support of all of the organizations and individuals involved in the development of this project, we take sole responsibility for any inaccuracies or mischaracterizations that may have survived the editing process.

We are still in the process of compiling individual acknowledgements and will include them in the re-edited First Edition that will follow soon.

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## Canada's Voice in Global Governance: A Civil Society Handbook:

# The United Nations Commission on Human Rights<sup>1</sup> (UNCHR)

## Introduction

[The United Nations Commission on Human Rights](#) (the Commission; UNCHR) is the center ring of the United Nations human rights system and the most important human rights standard-setter in the world. It was responsible for the drafting of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the two human rights Covenants (the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#)), and it continues to play an authoritative role in defining human rights. It also keeps track of states' human rights records, and uses the power of international scrutiny to try to shame states into fulfilling their human rights obligations.

While traditionally the Commission has focused its energies on civil and political rights, in recent years it has devoted significant attention to economic, social and cultural rights. For example, it now has a Working Group on the right to development, and one on the methods and activities of transnational corporations. The Commission has also been at the forefront of efforts to give international expression to the rights of indigenous peoples.

In recent years the Commission has been the subject of much criticism. Its failure to condemn or even to discuss human rights abuses in certain countries has brought attention to the lack of political will among some

### Box 1: Background on The UN Commission on Human Rights

Philip Alston and Frederic Megret, *The United Nations and Human Rights: A Critical Appraisal*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2005.

Julie Mertus, *The United Nations and Human Rights: A Guide for a New Era*, Routledge, 2005.

Patrick James Flood, *The Effectiveness of UN Human Rights Institutions*, Praeger, 1998.

Tolley Howard Jr., *The U.N. Commission on Human Rights*, Westview Press, 1987.

William Korey, *NGO's and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights : "A Curious Grapevine,"* Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Antonio Jose Almeida, *Reform of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights: Proposals to Restore the Commission's Credibility, Coherence and Consistency.*  
[www.worldfederalistscanada.org/reformr2p.htm](http://www.worldfederalistscanada.org/reformr2p.htm)

Jan Bauer, *Report on United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Fifty-ninth Session – 2003*  
<http://www.hri.ca/uninfo/hrbodies/unchr.shtml>

members to pursue real protection of human rights. Furthermore, it has sometimes seemed that states have sought membership in the Commission in order to screen themselves from criticism of their own human rights record. In addition, the absence of a strong enforcement mechanism stands in stark contrast to the substantial economic power of other international institutions such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Still, the Commission's continued importance is attested to by the actions of states with poor human rights records: most still lobby the Commission extensively in an effort to avoid being publicly criticized.

At present, the Commission is still the focus of a great deal of NGO activity. For example, on August 2, 2005 an international coalition of 16 NGOs, including Rights and Democracy from Canada, [testified in Geneva](#) before the annual meeting of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, a body of independent experts belonging to the Commission. The coalition accused Zimbabwe's Mugabe Government of causing famine, practicing torture and destroying the homes of more than half a million people under a so-called 'urban clean-up' campaign, and demanded UN intervention.<sup>2</sup> This example underscores the continuing importance of the Commission today.

This handbook begins by describing what the UNCHR is, what it does, how it is structured, how it works and how it is financed. This is followed by an explanation of who speaks for Canada at the UNCHR and who the key governmental players are in determining what Canada says at the institution. Finally, the handbook ends with tips for civil society activists that are interested in better understanding and influencing the UNCHR. The information that follows will be periodically updated and we welcome your comments and suggestions.

## What is the UNCHR?

[The Commission on Human Rights](#) is the oldest human rights body in the UN system, created shortly after the birth of the UN in 1946. The UN has many bodies that deal with human rights issues, but the Commission is considered to be its principal authority on human rights matters and the human rights agenda-setter for the rest of the UN system. It is the only UN political body with a mandate that is both specific to and comprehensive within the field of human rights.

**Box 2: UN Bodies  
Dealing with Human Rights**

For an interactive organization chart of all the UN bodies dealing with human rights, see [www.ohchr.org/english/structure.htm](http://www.ohchr.org/english/structure.htm)

It is important to distinguish the Commission from the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (UNHCHR), a senior position in the UN Secretariat created in 1993. The Commission is the principal UN *political body* with responsibility for human rights, while the High Commissioner is the principal *UN official* with responsibility for human rights issues. There is, however, a close working relationship between the two: The High Commissioner, currently Louise Arbour of Canada, plays an activist role, seeking to guide the work of the Commission by bringing situations and issues to its attention, and her Office functions as the Secretariat for the Commission.

## What does the UNCHR Do?

The [mandate of the Commission](#) is to promote and protect human rights worldwide. Toward this end, it develops and promotes new human rights standards, investigates human rights abuses, and publicly condemns human rights violations.

The main outputs of the Commission are Resolutions, which it uses to clarify or elaborate human rights standards, to publicly condemn human rights abuses, and to bring political pressure to bear on violating states. Resolutions may address specific country situations, such as the situation in Burma (Myanmar), or specific themes, such as the rights of indigenous peoples. In addition to stating the Commission's opinion, a Resolution may suggest specific state action, appoint a Special Rapporteur to study the matter further, or make requests or recommendations to other UN bodies.<sup>3</sup>

The Commission can also express its views through Statements of the Chair, which permit it to comment on new developments in situations it is monitoring without passing a new Resolution. It also adopts Decisions, which are generally shorter, referring mostly to procedural matters.

Aside from official condemnation through Resolutions, the Commission also produces other documents that amount to a censure of human rights abusers. Among these are the many reports that result from studies of human rights abuses in problem countries, carried out through the [Special Procedures](#). This is considered one of the most important, if also one of the most controversial, roles of the Commission.<sup>4</sup> The Commission is also responsible for one of the UN's human rights "[complaint procedures](#)" which allows individuals to submit complaints about abuses.<sup>5</sup> The mechanism operated by the Commission is called the "[1503 Procedure](#)" after the Resolution that authorized it. The major advantage of this Procedure is that it allows individuals to

submit complaints in a confidential manner.<sup>6</sup> While the Commission's findings are also confidential, a list of countries examined under the Procedure (as well as a list of countries dropped from consideration) is announced each year. This amounts to an implicit form of criticism, since generally only cases with substantial evidence of abuse will make it as far as a formal "examination" by the Commission.

## **How is the UNCHR Structured?**

The Commission on Human Rights is one of nine "functional commissions" of the UN that deal with critical issues such as the status of women, sustainable development, and criminal justice.<sup>7</sup> These nine entities focus on defining and promoting international standards, norms and laws, and work under the authority of the UN's [Economic and Social Council](#) (ECOSOC). ECOSOC is one of the principal UN bodies, and is charged with promoting progress on international economic-, social-, cultural-, educational-, and health-related matters, as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. The Commission reports directly to ECOSOC, and many of its decisions and recommendations require ECOSOC's approval, though this approval is almost always granted.

The Commission is composed of representatives from [53 member states](#) elected by ECOSOC to three-year terms. Elections are conducted on a regional basis, using five groupings of countries.<sup>8</sup> All members of ECOSOC are eligible for membership in the Commission, including those with very poor human rights records.<sup>9</sup> Canada has been a member of the Commission in 1963-65, 1976-1984, 1989-2003 and 2005-2007.

The full Commission only meets for about six weeks of the year. These meetings take place in March and April in Geneva, and are attended by over 3,000 delegates from member states, non-member observer states, and NGOs. In exceptional circumstances, the Commission can hold additional "special sessions" to deal with urgent human rights situations, but this is rare.

While the Commission is the focal point of the UN's human rights activity, there are several other UN entities that support the work of the Commission. These include the Commission Bureau, the UN Secretariat, the Sub-Commission on the [Promotion and Protection of Human Rights](#), the "[Special Procedures](#)," and assorted working groups. There are also seven human rights treaty bodies within the UN system that monitor implementation of the [core international human rights treaties](#).

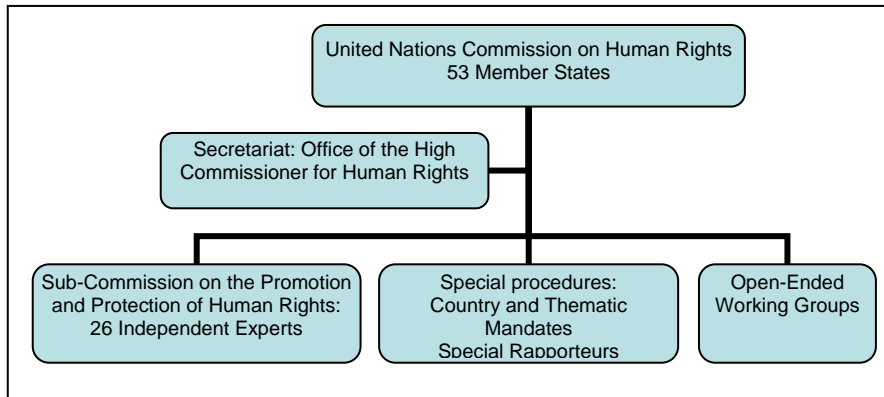
The meetings of the Commission are presided over by a [Bureau](#), elected a couple of months prior to the annual session, which also carries out certain responsibilities on the Commission’s behalf between meetings. The Bureau is comprised of a Chairperson, three Vice Chairpersons and a Rapporteur. These officers are joined by coordinators from each regional group in an “Expanded Bureau” of the Commission, which meets regularly between the annual sessions of the Commission. The Bureau chairmanship is rotated on a regional basis, and carries with it certain important powers, foremost of which are the appointment of independent experts and the issuing of statements on behalf of the Commission.

The Commission is also supported by a Secretariat, made up of the staff in the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), which provides research and expertise to the Commission and all of its subsidiary bodies as well as administrative and logistical support. The OHCHR employs approximately 570 staff worldwide, though only a handful work fulltime in support of the Commission’s work.

Between its sessions, the Commission relies on independent experts to carry out its work. They serve in their individual capacities, not as representatives of states. These experts work in three spheres: in the [Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights](#), in what is known as the “[Special Procedures](#)” of the Commission, or in open-ended [Working Groups](#). These functions all share in common the purpose of monitoring, studying, or deliberating on important issues that the Commission does not have time to fully consider during its short annual session.

The major subsidiary body of the Commission on Human Rights is the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (formerly the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities). The Sub-Commission is made up of 26 independent experts elected by the Commission to four-year terms on a regional basis, and meets every year for four weeks in August. The Sub-Commission’s role is to make recommendations to the Commission both

**Box 3: Basic Structure of the UN Commission on Human Rights**



on issues referred to it by the Commission and on issues of its own choosing. It reports annually to the

Commission and all of its major decisions are subject to the Commission's approval.

Another category of independent experts working on behalf of the Commission consists of those appointed to the "Special Procedures" system. Frequently called Special Rapporteurs or Special Representatives, their role is to undertake particular studies on the Commission's behalf (see Appendix A).<sup>10</sup> This system provides a mechanism to ensure that the Commission is constantly engaged in issues of concern throughout the year. Some of the experts within the Special Procedures system study situations in specific countries ("[country](#) mandates") while others study themes of human rights implementation ("[thematic](#) mandates"). The experts, who are usually appointed by the Chair of the Commission, report to the Commission annually, and their mandates are reviewed every one to three years.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the Special Procedures system, the Commission has several permanent, open-ended Working Groups, each of which meet annually for one to two weeks (see Appendix A). These are usually oriented toward the development of new human rights instruments, such as treaties or declarations.

## How Does the UNCHR Work?

Most of the deliberations of the Commission are oriented toward the adoption of Resolutions. In essence, a Resolution is what makes it clear that the Commission has taken a position. If a Resolution relates to a particular situation involving human rights violations, its purpose is

usually to bring the situation to the attention of the international community and to try to shame the state concerned into living up to its international obligation to respect and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Resolution must be initiated by member nations. NGOs are often instrumental in encouraging states to sponsor a Resolution on a particular matter.

### Box 4: Commission Resolutions:

All of the Resolutions of the Commission on Human Rights are stored in a searchable database called the "Charter-Based Bodies Database". This resource also contains summary records of all of the meetings of the CHR. You can search the database at:  
<http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/mainec.aspx>

While the process leading up to the adoption of Resolutions varies from case to case, there is a standard pattern, which consists of five phases: 1) a situation will be brought to the Commission's attention by a concerned state or group of states; 2) a Resolution will be passed which in most cases will call for further study by the Sub-Commission, a Special Procedure mechanism or a Working Group; 3) the body asked to

undertake this study will submit a report to the Commission the following year; 4) the Commission may pass a Resolution or issue a Statement of the Chair on the matter, or may simply take note of the report; and 5) the Commission will consider whether the body that has submitted the report (or in some cases another body) should continue to monitor the situation.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the work leading up to the adoption of a Resolution happens outside of the Commission's formal meetings. Almost all texts that appear before the Commission have been the subject of extensive informal consultations among the members, and most decisions are made by

**Box 5: Other Guides to the UN Commission on Human Rights**

**Web Monitoring & Documentation**

A human rights defenders initiative  
[www.unchr.info/](http://www.unchr.info/)

**International Service for Human Rights**

UN Human Rights System  
[www.ishr.ch](http://www.ishr.ch)

**Citizens for Global Solutions**

International Institutions/Commission on Human Rights  
[www.globalsolutions.org](http://www.globalsolutions.org)

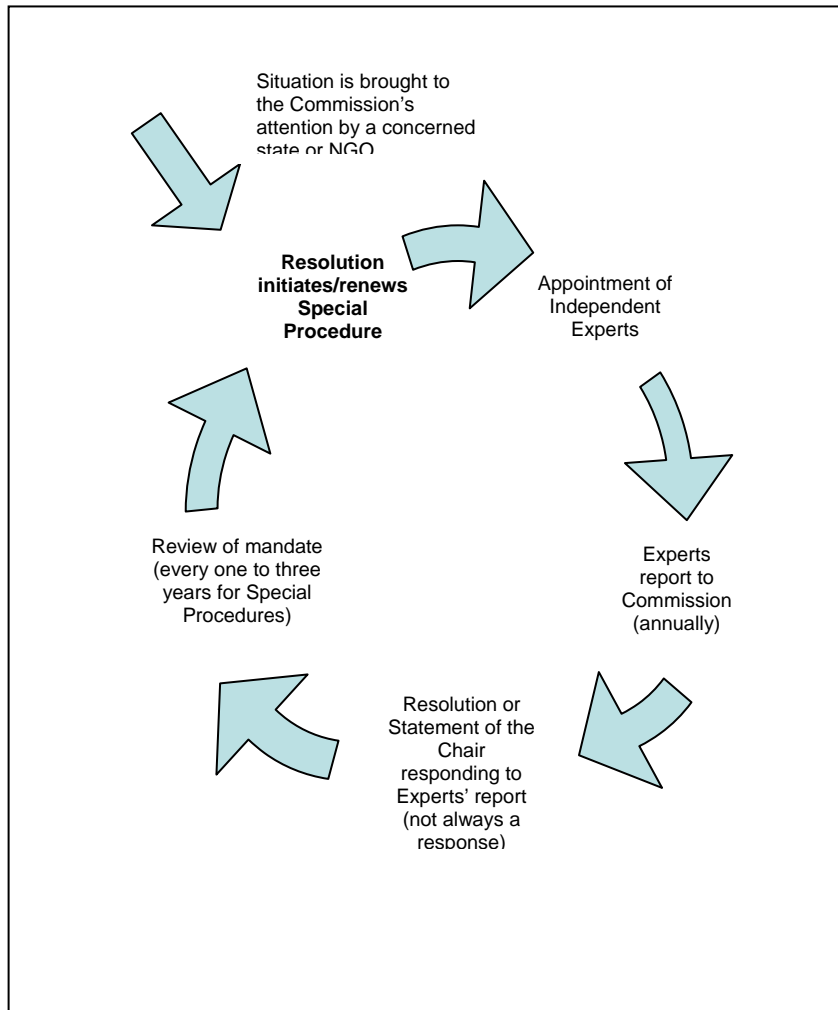
**UN Research Guide: Human Rights**

[www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/spechr.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/spechr.htm)

**Klaus Hübner, *How to File Complaints on Human Rights Violations?: A Manual for Individuals and NGOs***

[www.unesco.de/c\\_huefner/index.htm](http://www.unesco.de/c_huefner/index.htm)

**Box 6: Typical Cycle of Deliberation by the Commission**



caucusing and bargaining. The formal sessions consist of speeches, votes and increasingly, procedural wrangling to prevent certain Resolutions from being passed.

Many Resolutions are preceded by (or in some cases call for) investigative work by Independent Experts, either in the context of the Sub-Commission, a Special Procedures mechanism or a

Working Group. The Commission can choose to endorse or reject the reports of these subsidiary bodies, and in some cases it does not comment on them at all. In the latter case, reports submitted to the Commission are usually in the public domain, and so they can still have some impact.

In carrying out their mandates, the Independent Experts do not merely observe and report, but also attempt to engage the relevant governments through country visits (where possible) and “urgent appeals”. The Independent Experts are meant to act as “liaisons between the international community, individual governments, civil society and victims of human rights abuses.”<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the CHR, a human rights case initiated by a complainant is called a [1503 Procedure](#). Two working groups screen the complaints received under this Procedure to decide if they should be forwarded to the Commission for consideration.<sup>14</sup> Reports and findings related to the 1503 Procedure are confidential at every stage, but the Chairman does announce which countries have been examined under this procedure each year. The Commission also has the option to appoint a [Special Procedure](#) mechanism to investigate the situation further in a more public fashion.

## Where Does the UNCHR Get its Money?

The Commission on Human Rights does not have its own budget, but rather is funded under the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#). About a third of the OHCHR’s annual US\$90 million budget comes from the regular UN budget, of which it gets about a 2 percent share;<sup>15</sup> the rest has to be raised in the form of voluntary contributions.

Only a portion of the OHCHR budget goes to support the work of the Commission. In total, the OHCHR spends about US\$15 million per year (US\$8 million of which comes from voluntary contributions) to support the Commission and the UN human rights treaty-monitoring bodies. Compared to the World Bank’s administrative budget, which has now exceeded US\$2 billion (2005), or even the US\$135 million annual budget of the WTO, this is a tiny investment in human rights. The Special Procedures system costs over US\$6.5 million per year to operate, about US\$4 million of which comes from

Box 7: Canada’s Voluntary Financial Contributions to the OHCHR	
Year	Contribution (US\$)
2000	593,996
2001	326,417
2002	1,179,084
2003	733,048
2004	1,711,053
2005*	2,768,377
Average	1,218,663

\* Indicates amount pledged. All other amounts are actual contributions reported in OHCHR Annual Reports.

voluntary contributions. In some cases, NGOs have given money to support Special Procedures.

Canada contributes around US\$40 million to the total UN regular budget per year, about 2 percent of which (or US\$800,000) would go to the OHCHR. To put this amount in perspective, compare it to the annual payroll of the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team - anticipated to be around US\$80 million for the 2006 season. Canada's voluntary contributions to the OHCHR vary, ranging from around US\$325,000 in 2001, for example, to over US\$2.7 million in 2005. Canada is usually among the top ten contributors to the OHCHR in a given year, but compared to the US\$250 million it sends annually to the World Bank, this is still a small investment in human rights. Most voluntary contributions are earmarked for specific projects or programs. In the past five years, Canada has contributed funds for technical assistance or field offices in Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan and Sierra Leone, for work related to violence against women, for indigenous populations, for the 2001 conference against racism, and for a Youth Liaison Officer.

## Who Speaks for Canada at the UNCHR?

Canada sends a delegation to the Commission on Human Rights every year, whether as a member or an observer state. This delegation is led by a Delegation Head appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and is usually a senior official from Canada's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva.

### Box 8: Canada and the UNCHR

#### Foreign Affairs Canada, Human Rights Division

[www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/foreign\\_policy/human-rights/menu-en.asp](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/foreign_policy/human-rights/menu-en.asp)

#### Canada's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva

[www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/canada\\_un/geneva/menu-en.asp](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/canada_un/geneva/menu-en.asp)

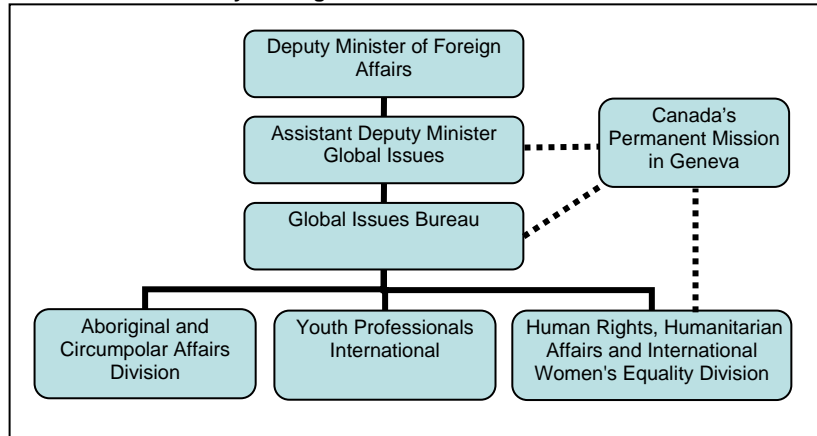
Several other officials from the Permanent Mission may also represent Canada during the course of the annual session, depending on the issue being discussed. There is also a "high level" segment during the first week of the session, typically attended by Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

## Who Decides what Canada Says at the UN Commission on Human Rights?

The Human Rights, Humanitarian Affairs, and International Women's Equality Division of the Global Issues Bureau of Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC) is responsible for policy coordination with respect to the Commission on Human Rights. The senior official engaged on a day-to-

day basis is a Deputy Director in this Division. Decisions on controversial issues or those of strategic importance to Canada go higher up the chain, to the Director General of the Global Issues Bureau or the Assistant Deputy Minister of Global Issues, or potentially all the way up to the Minister.

**Box 9: Canada's Policy-Making Structure for the UNCHR**



There is often significant communication between the Permanent Mission in Geneva and FAC in Ottawa on Canada's votes, particularly those that are controversial or that are seen as touching on key Canadian interests.<sup>16</sup> Other departments are consulted on issues that fall within their responsibility, as are the provinces on issues that touch on provincial jurisdiction.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (SCFAIT), and its [Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development](#) (SDEV), are responsible for human rights issues within Parliament. They sometimes deal with issues that overlap with the agenda of the UN Commission on Human Rights, but do not get directly involved in questions of how Canada is represented there.

**Box 10: Contacting the Government:**

To contact a person or office in the **Government of Canada**, check the Government Electronic Directory Services (GEDS), a searchable online database of government contact information. See: <http://direct.srv.gc.ca/cgi-bin/direct500/BE>

The **Parliament of Canada** website maintains contact information for Members of Parliament and records of parliamentary proceedings. See: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/>

### Tips for Civil Society

If your organization is concerned with human rights, it's likely that the activities of the Commission on Human Rights affects your work in some way. Many Canadian civil society organizations see the Commission as a key place to advocate for changes in international human rights law or to call attention to situations where human rights abuses are taking place around the world. If you are interested in getting involved in these efforts, you may want to start by contacting some of the groups who are already active in this field – organizations like Rights and Democracy,

Amnesty International Canada, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, the Assembly of First Nations, KAIROS: Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, the Canadian Friends Service Committee, the Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights and Human Rights Internet. You can also look at the lists of [Special Procedures](#) to see if there is already someone working on the issues that interest you.

Foreign Affairs Canada conducts Human Rights Consultations with civil society organizations every year during the first week of February, where the agenda for the upcoming session of the Commission is discussed in detail. If you're interested in attending, contact the Human Rights, Humanitarian Affairs and International Women's Equality Division at FAC to find out about the registration procedure. In past years, the Department has published background documents on its [website](#) to facilitate preparation for these consultations. These consultations are also a good opportunity to network with other [NGOs working on human rights issues](#). NGOs typically hold informal meetings on the sidelines of the consultations, starting on the evening (usually Sunday) before the formal meetings begin.

You can also arrange meetings over the course of the year with relevant government officials and decision-makers, starting much earlier than the consultations, in order to have a more engaged discussion about what Canada will do at the next meeting. These meetings will be most effective if you have a specific request: you want Canada to introduce a Resolution, support a Resolution, or change its vote on a particular issue, for example. The officials most directly involved are in the Human Rights, Humanitarian Affairs and International Women's Equality Division of Foreign Affairs Canada. You should start by talking to the Deputy Director responsible for Human Rights policy.

You may also want to talk to Members of Parliament who sit on the relevant committees – the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (SCFAIT) and its [Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development](#) (SDEV). The department of Foreign Affairs does not report directly to these committees on its activities at the Commission on Human Rights, but from time to time the committees do consider issues that are on the agenda of the Commission, and these deliberations can have an impact on Canadian policy.

In addition to your efforts in Canada, you may want to consider attending the annual sessions of the Commission and/or the Sub-Commission, or working with groups who will be there: even if you can get the Canadian Government to agree with your position prior to the session, you will need someone at the Commission meetings to remind them of any commitments they have made. You may have information that others do not have, including first-hand information observed in the field, and it is important to get this information both to the member governments of the Commission and to the media. Pressure from civil society can prompt states to take a serious look at human rights violations where they might otherwise simply “compliment each other on their human rights records.”<sup>17</sup> The NGO community also holds parallel sessions during the Commission meetings in Geneva to discuss human rights work and issues.

**Box 11: NGOs Working on UNCHR Issues**

Amnesty International

[www.web.amnesty.org/pages/unchr-intro-eng](http://www.web.amnesty.org/pages/unchr-intro-eng)

Human Rights Watch

[www.hrw.org/doc/?t=united\\_nations](http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=united_nations)

Rights and Democracy (Canada)

[www.ichrdd.ca/splash.html](http://www.ichrdd.ca/splash.html)

International Federation for Human Rights

[www.fidh.org](http://www.fidh.org)

Franciscans International

[www.franciscansinternational.org/](http://www.franciscansinternational.org/)

Dominicans for Justice and Peace

[www.un.op.org/](http://www.un.op.org/)

International Commission of Jurists

[www.icj.org/](http://www.icj.org/)

ECOSOC has a graded accreditation system, and over 2,700 NGOs have some level of consultative status. These organizations can participate in the meetings of the Commission on Human Rights through both written and oral statements, but cannot vote. The accreditation process, however, can take years, even if everything goes smoothly. You may simply want to work with an NGO that has consultative status, at least in the meantime. A [searchable list of NGOs accredited with ECOSOC](#) can be found on the ECOSOC website, and a list of [Canadian NGOs with ECOSOC consultative status](#) is available through the UN's NGO-IRENE (Informal Regional Network) system. More information on the accreditation process can be found on the [ECOSOC website](#).

Before you go to the Commission meetings, find out as much as you can about the treatment your particular human rights issues received at previous sessions of the Commission. The absence of a previous Resolution on an issue does not mean that it has been ignored. For example, a Resolution on human rights abuses in China has been repeatedly proposed for the past several years, but has yet to be passed.

The formal deliberations of the Commission are reasonably accessible. Most relevant documents, including summaries of all speeches made at the Commission, are available through the [Charter-Based Bodies Database](#). It is more difficult to know what has transpired in the informal caucuses and negotiations. For background information of this kind, you should contact other NGOs that have attended the sessions who often have a sense of the back-room dealings that have taken place.

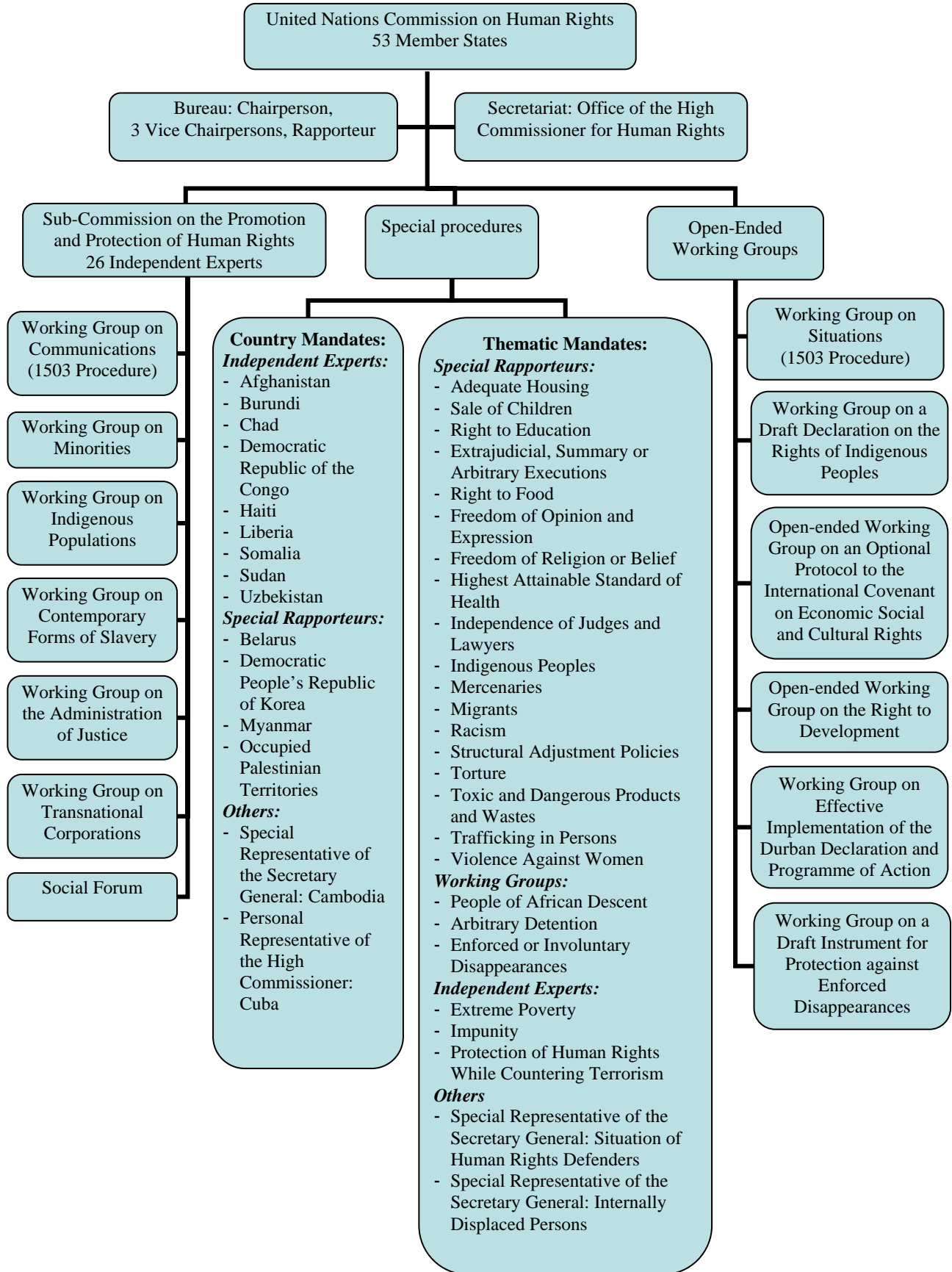
In some cases, NGOs have found the [Sub-Commission](#) a more fruitful ground for introducing new initiatives or ideas. Because it is made up of only 26 independent experts, the Sub-Commission can be less politicized than the Commission itself. However, keep in mind that the Commission altered the mandate of the Sub-Commission in 1999, reducing its ability to consider country-specific situations.

The Special Procedures are another crucial point of influence for NGOs. If you are concerned about a particular issue – human rights violations in Burma, indigenous rights or the right to health, for example – check to see if there is a [Special Rapporteur](#) working on your issues. If there is, then you should try to communicate with them to see what they are working on and what their priorities are. The Special Rapporteurs are generally very open to input from civil society, and NGOs frequently meet with them to share information or suggest priorities. Most Special Rapporteurs are under-funded and overworked, and they may welcome your formal or informal collaboration. In some cases, NGOs help to finance the work of Special Procedures on their issues of concern.<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Friends of the Earth Canada hopes that this handbook will serve as a useful point of reference for organizations interested in better understanding and influencing the UNCHR. This is a work-in-progress that will be periodically updated in order to better serve the needs of civil society organizations in Canada and abroad. We want to encourage readers to provide feedback and advice on how to improve this working draft. Please send any questions and comments to [gsaul@foecanada.org](mailto:gsaul@foecanada.org).

**Appendix A: Organization Chart of the UN Commission on Human Rights**



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unwatch.org/speeches/Pr020805.html>

<sup>3</sup> Citizens for Global Solutions, “A Brief Overview of the CHR”.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe LeBlanc, “The United Nations Human Rights System,” in Canadian Human Rights Foundation, *2004 International Human Rights Training Program, Participant Manual*, 6-35.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed comparison of the various complaint mechanisms, see Human Rights Fact Sheets, No. 7, *Complaint Procedures*.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/8/1503.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> These are distinct from the various UN “Specialized Agencies,” such as the International Labour Organization, and from UN “Programmes” and “Funds,” such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). See the organizational chart of the UN system at [www.un.org/aboutun/unchart.pdf](http://www.un.org/aboutun/unchart.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Fifteen members from African states, twelve members from Asian states, ten members from the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), five members from East European states, and eleven from the Group of Latin American and Caribbean countries (GRULAC).

<sup>9</sup> See Human Rights Watch, Briefing to the 59th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, February 27, 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/un/chr59/chrreform.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> See Human Rights Fact Sheets, No. 27, Seventeen Frequently Asked Questions about United Nations Special Rapporteurs, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/publications/sheets.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> For updates, see International Service for Human Rights, “Human Rights Monitor,” <http://www.ishr.ch/>.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of Special Procedures mechanisms, their mandates are reviewed every one to three years, and they report to the Commission every year as long as they continue to operate.

<sup>13</sup> OHCHR, *Annual Appeal 2005*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> The Sub-Commission’s Working Group on Communications and the Commission’s Working Group on Situations respectively.

<sup>15</sup> As the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change pointed out, there is a clear contradiction between this level of funding and the obligation of this Office under the UN Charter to make the promotion and protection of human rights one of the principal objectives of the UN. See the panel’s report, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Mike Blanchfield, “Our ‘painful’ vote against clean water,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, Sunday, September 21, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe LeBlanc, “The United Nations Human Rights System,” in Canadian Human Rights Foundation, *2004 International Human Rights Training Program, Participant Manual*, 6-34.

<sup>18</sup> CGS, “Civil Society Participation at the Commission on Human Rights”.