

Research report summary

# Civil society organisations and international human rights

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# Introduction

A key part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) approach as an organisation is to provide clear, accessible information to help people understand and assert their rights. We do this by listening to, and learning from, their experiences. Working closely with civil society gives us a better understanding of how equality and human rights concerns affect people's lives, and helps us gain vital information to inform and improve the work that we deliver.

Ensuring a vibrant, strong and inclusive civil society, besides being of value in itself, can also strengthen our advocacy efforts. No single institution will solve the broad range of human rights problems currently facing the country. This requires a coalition of organisations with shared interests and values.

As such, we seek to build the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to improve their understanding of human rights, support them in asserting those rights, and encourage and defend their ability to advocate for lasting, meaningful change.

## The project

In December 2019, we commissioned the University of Nottingham to:

- determine the extent to which CSOs in England and Wales refer to the international human rights framework (IHRF) in their work
- assess the impact that referring to the IHRF has on CSO activities, and
- find out what changes would enable CSOs to engage more effectively with the IHRF in future.

Prior to undertaking this research, we had very little information about the extent to which CSOs engage with the IHRF in their litigation, legislative, advocacy, policy, influencing and campaigning work. The information that we had was largely anecdotal or gathered through experience. To fill this gap in our evidence base, the University of Nottingham surveyed selected CSOs between January and March 2020.

The aim of this summary of the main research findings is to help us determine how we can best help CSOs to engage with the IHRF and hold governments to account for their human rights obligations. It is also likely to be of interest to CSOs, other funders of human rights work and a wider human rights audience.

## Methodology

On 23 January 2020, the University of Nottingham sent survey questionnaires to 359 CSOs by email. We grouped organisations in the sample into three categories ('strong engagement'; 'some engagement'; 'no engagement') as defined by the EHRC. These categories related to their perceived level of engagement with either the UN human rights treaties and/or the UN human rights review mechanisms. The questionnaire covered CSOs' current and future use of the UN human rights treaties and/or their engagement with the UN human rights review mechanisms. It also examined the CSOs' use of EHRC funding and the activities they would carry out if greater resources and/or support were available.

After extensive follow-up, 119 CSOs responded to the survey by the deadline of 13 March 2020 (a 33% response rate). Of these, 36 were from the strong engagement group, 24 from the some engagement group and 59 from the no engagement group.

The largest group of respondents were senior managers, who made up nearly half of the total (45%), while the majority (81%) of respondents worked for organisations with 50 or less staff members. Moreover, more than half (52%) worked for organisations with 10 or fewer staff members. Respondent CSOs were most likely to represent or support older people, young people or children, disabled people, ethnic minorities and women, with 40-50% of organisations doing so.

Members of staff at the University of Nottingham undertook the research: Ms Laura Wills, the Research and Project Officer at the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC), and Dr Annemarie Walter, Assistant Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations. Professor Aoife Nolan, the HRLC Co-Director, led the project team.

## Key findings

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### Who we heard from

Respondent CSOs were most likely to carry out policy work (85%) and public campaigning (78%). Around half provide training and education for employers or service providers (50%), advocacy on behalf of individuals (49%), and information, advice and guidance for employers or service providers (46%). These figures exceed 100% as many CSOs carry out more than one activity in the course of their work. Just under one third (32%), however, stated that their organisation's policy and influencing work was the single most important activity that they carry out.

Two-fifths of CSOs (44%) referred to the UN human rights treaties (the treaties) and engaged with any of the UN human rights review mechanisms (review mechanisms), while one third (36%) referred to the treaties only in their work. One-fifth (20%) did not refer either to the treaties or to the review mechanisms.

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### Current engagement

CSOs that engaged with the review mechanisms were more likely to draw on the IHRF more frequently in their work. Of those that referred to the treaties only, one in ten (10%) did so at least once a week and a further half (49%) did so less frequently than this, but at least once a month. For those that referred to the treaties and engage with review mechanisms, two-fifths (43%) did so at least once a week and a further one third (33%) did so at least once a month.

#### Good practice

One respondent felt that their organisation's reference to the treaties and engagement with review mechanisms helped them build a reputation for well-presented, timely and evidence-based reports.

Policy and influencing work was the main reason why CSOs referred to the treaties and engaged with review mechanisms. Of all CSOs that referred to either or both, 85% did so for policy and influencing work. Although the base numbers are small, and so the results should be interpreted with caution, CSOs that referred to, or engaged with, both the treaties and the review mechanisms were more likely to refer to policy and/or influencing work (98%) than those that referred to the treaties only (68%).

### Good practice

One organisation drew attention to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability's (CRPD) requirements for adaptations in a 2016 report on mental health and fair trial and in their follow up work, which has subsequently influenced guidance from Government.

Overall, the second most important reason was public campaigning: of CSOs that referred to either the treaties or the review mechanisms, 64% did so for this reason. More detailed responses from CSOs indicated that engagement was highest with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), followed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

### Good practice

One organisation cited the role of CRC in their campaigning work for separated young refugees in the UK to be given the right to apply for Refugee Family Reunion. They also cited CEDAW in their work to ensure that women are fairly and equitably treated in the UK asylum system.

CSOs that referred to both the treaties and engaged with review mechanisms (76%) found their engagement either "very effective" or "quite effective" in achieving their organisation's strategic aims and objectives. This compared with 68% of those that referred to the treaties only, suggesting that increased engagement with the review mechanisms may lead to a more favourable view of the overall efficacy of this work. A quarter (27%) of CSOs, that either just referred to the treaties or additionally engaged with the review mechanisms, reported that their engagement was not very effective.

## Future engagement

The main obstacle preventing CSOs from making greater use of the treaties and/or review mechanisms was a lack of resources; this was reported by two-fifths of CSOs overall (44%) and was the main obstacle for CSOs from all three categories of engagement. In addition, about a quarter (29%) of CSOs reported that they lacked the specialist knowledge to use human rights treaties or review mechanisms.

The most important requirements to enable greater engagement were greater human and/or financial resources (stated by 70% of CSOs), and the treaty rights being legally enforceable at the domestic level (63%). Nearly half (47%) stated that better understanding of the applicability of UN human rights treaties in the domestic context would enable greater engagement. A quarter (24%) felt that if their organisation had more resources, they would use the treaty rights to strengthen their influencing, advocacy or litigation work. In addition, 12% of CSOs said that they would use the individual complaints mechanisms under CEDAW and CRPD.

Just over half of the CSOs (51%) that only referred to the treaties stated that better guidance on how to use UN human rights treaties would make them more likely to refer to them or engage with the review mechanisms. This compared with only one fifth (20%) of CSOs who already engaged with the review mechanisms.

Responses to a number of different questions demonstrated that many CSOs felt that the UK Government displayed a lack of engagement with, and care for, rights issues. In particular, 15 respondents whose organisations operate in Wales, noted either a greater interest in human rights by the Welsh Government than the UK Government or a better domestic rights structure in Wales.

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## EHRC support

When asked about the preferred uses of potential future funding from the EHRC, just over half (53%) of respondents said they would convene stakeholder discussions, while two-fifths (42%) would organise events to enable a submission to be made to a UN treaty body review. In addition, two-fifths (42%) would seek to use potential future EHRC funding to provide evidence, including from our [Is Britain Fairer? reports](#), for a submission. 40% said they would use it to provide support for legal cases.

## Contacts

This publication and related equality and human rights resources are available from [our website](#).

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