



**International covenant
on civil and
political rights**

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**A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PUBLIC RELATIONS,
INCLUDING RELATIONS WITH THE MEDIA**

Background

1. The Committee discussed the question of relations with the media at its 91st session in Geneva (October-November 2007). As a basis for discussion the Committee had before it a paper entitled "Notes on Possible Media Strategies" (CCPR/C/91/CRP.1).
2. The present paper draws on the discussion and presents, as was suggested at that meeting, a number of specific proposals representing a strategic approach to the question of making the Committee's work more widely known.
3. It is not proposed to identify the particular members who made suggestions. What follows is based on those suggestions that appeared to command support. Very possibly, new proposals may emerge from further consideration of the matter.

The need for a new approach

4. It was pointed out that the Committee's previous consideration of its relations with the media represented too narrow an approach. These relations should be viewed in the broader context of relations with the public, which would include making its work better known, and more effective an influence on national laws and practices by means other than the media.
5. Members appeared to agree that the work of the Committee in promoting respect for human rights is little known outside a small circle of academic and government lawyers who specialize in human rights law and the international human rights NGO community. The general public, and especially those in countries most affected by violations of human rights, remain largely in ignorance of the Covenant and of the work of the Committee. In a number of countries, this ignorance extends even to the judiciary.

6. The points that follow are expressed with intentional brevity. They are merely a basis for further discussion. Some might require elaboration and refinement. It is to be hoped that at the present session, or in the near future, an agreed plan of action will be adopted by the Committee.

Sources of information about the Committee

7. It seems right to start with the means by which members of the public can acquire basic information about the Committee. Educated people with access to the internet might start with the OHCHR website, or reach that source through the general United Nations website, www.un.org. There have been complaints about the ease of use of this website. There are also other websites that contain information about the Committee and its work, e.g. the University of Minnesota and Utrecht University human rights data bases. The recently established Universal Human Rights Index (www.universalhumanrightsindex.org) is a remarkable new development which will greatly assist in the promotion of knowledge of the work of the Committee and of other bodies in the field of human rights. Nevertheless, these specialized avenues are likely to be known only to the few, at least in the near future.

Recommendation 1

The Human Rights Section of the United Nations website, and especially the OHCHR web site to which it is linked, should be constantly reviewed, updated and improved for layout, content, topicality, and ease of use. The OHCHR website should also contain references and links to other relevant websites.

8. Many people with the most need to know about the Covenant and the Committee do not have easy access to the internet. There is an evident need to promote that knowledge at the grass-roots level. Direct dissemination among members of national parliaments and universities might also be employed. NGOs, and especially national NGOs, active in the field of human rights are the most obvious means by which, at a level and in a manner suited to the particular country, that knowledge may be disseminated among the general population.

Recommendation 2

At its annual meetings with NGOs the Committee should enlist their aid in establishing strategies for and secure their cooperation in the dissemination of information about the Covenant and the Committee. International NGOs may also be able to assist in identifying appropriate national NGOs that are able to work at the grass-roots level. The existence and identity of national NGOs sometimes become evident at the time of the consideration by the Committee of periodic national reports under article 40 of the Covenant. The Committee should encourage them to remain in contact, through registration with OHCHR after identification by United Nations field offices. Further programmes should be developed by OHCHR to assist national NGOs in conducting educational programmes in their countries, suited to local conditions. The OHCHR should disseminate the work of the Committee directly to national parliaments and universities.

Proceedings of the Committee

9. The open meetings of the Committee are unevenly attended by members of the public. The New York sessions are scarcely observed at all (this may be at least partly attributed to the rigorous security measures in force there.) The Geneva sessions are better attended, sometimes stretching the capacity of the Palais Wilson to its limit when reports of States parties of particular interest are being considered. Attendance at the Geneva sessions is almost entirely composed of NGO representatives. The press are not notably present at either location. Some members have drawn attention to the possibility of radio broadcasting, web casting, or otherwise recording for public access, open meetings in order to reach a wider public. It is already the case that on some occasions the Committee has permitted the filming of the arrival and seating of a State party's delegation for the hearing of its periodic report, for the international and national media.

Recommendation 3

The consideration of selected State party reports at the Geneva sessions should be held at the Palais des Nations in order to allow a greater number of the public to attend and for the convenience of the press present at the Palais des Nations, where the anticipated public interest in the report under consideration is likely to exceed the capacity of the Palais Wilson.

Recommendation 4

Webcasting, podcasting and streaming of proceedings of open meetings of the Committee should be permitted. A report should be requested from the OHCHR information officer on the feasibility and logistics of the implementation of this recommendation. Cassette tapes of the public proceedings of the Committee should be made available upon request to those who wish to receive them, at a reasonable cost. The Department of Public Information (DPI) should be requested to promote the video coverage of public proceedings.

Recommendation 5

The media should be encouraged to cover by radio or film the public proceedings of the Committee, subject to any guidelines that may be adopted, and provided that the Committee's work is not disrupted.

The role of individual members

10. The identity and functions of the individual members are not widely known. In particular, the identity of the members of the country report task forces in relation to individual States parties and of the rapporteurs in relation to particular communications under the Optional Protocol, has hitherto been kept confidential out of concern that those members

might come under improper pressure.¹ Some members believe that these dangers have been overstated. At all events, there seems to be no reason why the identity of country rapporteurs and the members of the country report task forces should remain confidential during and after the consideration of the respective report. They believe that members with a particular interest in a State party report or individual communication have a role to play in speaking publicly of the reasons that moved the Committee to adopt its concluding observations or Views. They believe further that those members should have a role to play in the Committee's press conferences and follow-up procedures. It was also suggested that members should be encouraged to publicize the work of the Committee in their own countries through newspaper articles, radio and television interviews, and commentaries in journals. One member mentioned the special importance of corporate journals, e.g. journals read by police, or bar associations, as a vehicle for publicizing the work of the Committee.

Recommendation 6

Except in relation to confidential matters, members of the Committee should be encouraged to make public comments on the work of the Committee in their individual capacity, albeit making clear that they do not speak on behalf of the Committee as a whole.

Recommendation 7

Individual members, in particular country rapporteurs and country report task forces members, should be encouraged to speak at press conferences during or at the conclusion of the Committee's sessions. They should also be able to participate in the follow-up activities of the Committee on cases of which they have particular knowledge.

Press conferences

11. At present a press conference is normally held at the conclusion of each session, which is attended by the Chairperson and the members of the Bureau of the Committee. The opinion was expressed by most members that press conferences had proven to be of uneven quality, much depending on the newsworthiness of the matters dealt with by the Committee at that session. It was suggested that there should be more flexibility in the organization of press conferences; that there could be more than one meeting with the press, such as ongoing press briefings; and that the final press conference could be held earlier in the session than on the very last day (normally a Friday). It was also suggested that press conferences and briefings should not be confined on the Committee side to the members of the Bureau but should include rapporteurs and other members with a special interest in particular agenda items.

¹ The practice of the other treaty bodies is not consistent. CERD and CEDAW maintain confidentiality in the same way as the Human Rights Committee. CESCR, CAT, CRC and the Committee on Migrant Workers do not have a policy of confidentiality.

Recommendation 8

The traditional final press conference should be retained, unless in the circumstances of a particular session it would seem unlikely to attract sufficient interest. It should be held no later than on the day preceding the final day of the session. Participation in the final press conference should not be restricted to members of the Bureau. The press and other media should have access to the Committee's concluding observations in relation to the countries examined at that session at least 24 hours prior to the final press conference or prior to any special press conference in relation to that particular country. An executive summary of the concluding observations adopted by the Committee at the session should be made available, prepared by the Secretariat, to help inform the media.

Recommendation 9

In consultation with the Media Unit and Public Affairs Office, arrangements for press briefings during the session should be made so that items of particular interest on the Committee's agenda for that session can be highlighted. An informal lunch or drinks party with members of the press should be arranged at the beginning of the session so that members of the press and members of the Committee can become individually acquainted. This should be accompanied by a formal pre-session media briefing.

Press releases

12. It was suggested that an important part of relations with the media is the issue of press releases when significant actions have been taken, or developments have occurred, in the Committee's work. They should not always be retained until the final press conference but should be published when the news is fresh. Also, since "names make news", the identity of the member of the Committee with particular responsibility for the matter in question could be made known. However, care should be taken that information is not released prematurely, e.g. the results of a communication under the Optional Protocol before the author and the State party have been informed, or judgments about the situation of human rights in a State party before the concluding observations have been finalized and communicated to the State party.

Recommendation 10

The opportunity should be taken to issue press releases during the course of a session of the Committee whenever it seems appropriate to do so. Press releases in all cases should be approved by the Chairperson who, in case of doubt, may consult the Bureau. The OHCHR website should contain a dedicated section devoted to press releases regarding the Committee's work.
