The Universal Periodic Review: a skewed agenda?

New research highlights concerns about the quantity and quality of recommendations on economic, social and cultural rights. There are significantly fewer recommendations focused on economic, social and cultural rights — half the number on civil and political rights — while some economic, social and cultural rights issues receive much less attention than others.

Regions vary in the number of recommendations they make and accept. Less than 10% of recommendations made by countries from the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and Others focused on economic, social and cultural rights — the lack of attention to these rights by the later has an outsized impact, given that 35% of all recommendations come from WEOG. The acceptance rate among WEOG countries was 53%, compared to 80-90% in other regions.

Recommendations are vague on outcomes. The recommendations were also re-coded according to the type of outcome sought. Only one third of the recommendations focused on economic, social and cultural rights sought a specific outcome (e.g. increase the percentage of children registered at birth in remote and rural areas). Half sought a general outcome (e.g. ensure the protection of women and children) and the remainder sought no particular outcome. This makes it harder to measure progress in their achievement.

The UPR aims to promote the universality, interdependence, indivisibility and interrelatedness of all human rights (A/HRC/RES/5/1). Precise, policy-oriented recommendations are crucial in order to meaningfully measure the conduct of states and the outcomes of that conduct. Without them, the ability of the UPR to guide states towards policy choices — including on economic policy — that fulfill economic, social and cultural rights is significantly reduced.

This factsheet summarizes the findings of research undertaken by the Sciences Po Human Rights Clinic for the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR). Students at the clinic conducted an overall analysis of the entire dataset created by UPR Info and an in-depth analysis of a sample of 21 countries (chosen to reflect a mix of regions and income levels). Recommendations were classified as "focused" on economic, social and cultural rights using UPR Info's "issues" tag, for the full dataset, and after a review of the full recommendations, for the sample. The dataset used for this analysis is current up to the 21st session of the UPR Working Group (January 2016). For further information, contact Holly Stubbs, Research Fellow at CESR, at h stubbs@cesr.org.