Mainstreaming Human Rights in the United Nations

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The origin and articulation of the concept

Mainstreaming human rights is a concept that has survived the nightmare of many short-lived ideas, the most spectacular moments of which have been their announcements. Even this fact alone might justify a look at this concept. But what is of primary importance in this case is, of course, its substantive impact on the protection of human rights. The text below attempts to give a snapshot of it.

Mainstreaming human rights means, in general terms, the integration of the international human rights standards and methodologies into the work of an organisation. Three interrelated observations have given birth to the concept of mainstreaming within the United Nations (UN). Firstly, human rights had been for a long time perceived as a domaine exclusif within the Organisation, located in a relatively isolated set of bodies (the system of the Commission on Human Rights and treaty monitoring bodies) and a department of the Secretariat. While the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council maintained human rights on their agenda, other bodies and UN agencies kept their distance from this area. The most spectacular and influential here was the attitude of the Security Council, which only recently decided to recognise mass violations of human rights as its matter of concern.1 Secondly, the human rights goals spelt out in the UN Charter cannot be achieved without a dedicated involvement of the entire Organisation in its promotion and protection. Such an involvement is a responsibility anchored in the Charter itself. Thirdly, the accomplishment of the goals and objectives of the UN can be greatly facilitated by – or, as increasingly stressed, is impossible without – integrating

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human rights standards and methodologies into the policy development, programming and implementation work of the entire Organisation.

Tracing the origin of the concept of human rights mainstreaming in the United Nations, one has to go back to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Although the notion of mainstreaming does not appear in this document, its several provisions refer to it. Particularly important are Articles 8 of the Declaration and 97 of the Programme of Action. The first reflects the consensus of the international community concerning the mutual links between human rights, democracy and development. The second recognises the important role of human rights components in peacekeeping operations and recommends that the reporting, experience and capabilities of the UN human rights programme be accordingly taken into account.

However, these recommendations of the World Conference were not widely followed within the Organisation. Eventually, the concept of mainstreaming human rights made a career after the first reform report by the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, entitled *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform* published on 14 July 1997. This report was prepared on the eve of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna+5 review. It would be risky to say that it is this Anniversary and follow-up process that guided the Secretary-General when he called for making human rights a theme permeating the entire work of the United Nations. This call was rather a result of his overall approach to human rights. But these events had undoubtedly created a good framework for taking the idea of mainstreaming forward and giving it a practical meaning. It is not by chance that the first signs announcing the new approach appeared in connection with the preparation for 1998. The programme documents by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank are to be mentioned in this context. Both of them declared the intention of the respective institutions to be guided by human rights in their work.

In his report, the Secretary-General stated first of all that “[h]uman rights are integral to the promotion of peace and security, economic prosperity and social equity. […] A major task for the United Nations, therefore, is to enhance its human rights programme and fully integrate it into the broad range of the Organization’s activities.” Consequently, the Secretary-General unfolded a plan addressing two dimensions of mainstreaming, namely:

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2 The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s report *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform* set off the integration of human rights into the Secretariat and the system of UN agencies and programmes (Report of the Secretary-General, A/51/950, 14 July 1997). See also UN General Assembly resolution A/52/12 addressing this issue.

3 The review process of the implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) by UN bodies and non-governmental organisations.


5 Report of the Secretary-General, *supra* note 2, paras. 78 and 79.