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**CALL FOR RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS
GOVERNMENTAL FOCAL POINT (MINISTRIES, INTER-
MINISTERIAL COORDINATION STRUCTURES, NATIONAL
MECHANISMS FOR REPORTING AND FOLLOW-UP)****BACKGROUND**

For the last five years, the Research Department of the Danish Institute for Human Rights has led a research agenda seeking to generate additional academic knowledge on national human rights systems and, in particular, on understanding the role of state actors in human rights protection (National Human Rights Institutions, Ministries, Parliaments, etc.). The latest output of this research agenda is a Special issue of the Nordic Journal of Human Rights on “The Domestic Institutionalisation of Human Rights”, published in December 2019. The co-editors’ introduction is available in open access: [“The Domestic Institutionalisation of Human Rights: An Introduction”](#).

Our Research Department would now like to combine efforts with researchers around the world to generate further understanding on one specific type of actors: governmental focal points on human rights (as defined below), as these actors have largely remained unexplored in critical analytical research, regardless of the disciplines.

OBJECTIVE OF THIS CALL

The aim of this call is to reach out to other researchers in order to pool efforts to explore and understand human rights governmental focal points. The overall ambition is to strengthen research cooperation on national human rights systems, to reach out specifically to researchers interested in human rights governmental focal points and to generate more research on state actors working with domestic human rights implementation

The first step of such cooperation is the production of 5 to 10 academic articles (max. 10.000 words, in English), that we would feed in: a joint panel proposed for the annual Conference of the Association of National Human Rights Institutes, hosted on 5-6 September 2020 by the University of Pretoria’s Human Rights Centre, and a special issue proposed to a peer-reviewed human rights journal (e.g. the *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *Netherlands Quarterly on Human Rights*, etc.).

FIELD OF ENQUIRY: “HUMAN RIGHTS GOVERNMENTAL FOCAL POINTS”

The practice of nominating governmental human rights focal points has emerged in the 1980s in thematic fields, in particular with regards to women’s rights and the rights of persons with disabilities. Whether called “machineries”, “coordination mechanisms” and taking the form of a unit, a ministry or an inter-ministerial committee, etc., these share some features, and primarily their embeddedness within the governmental administration. Human rights bodies and treaties have initially shied away from prescribing international blue-prints for such actors, although they saw it as a key area for enhancing state action in the field of human rights. Throughout the 1990s, more detailed prescriptions on intra-governmental coordination have emerged¹. International human rights law itself followed suit by starting to prescribe the structures and processes that states should set up domestically in order to implement treaties. The 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 33) initiated this approach.

Going beyond thematic fields, ‘governmental human rights focal points’ are found in various forms: Human Rights Ministries,² ministerial human rights portfolio added onto another ministry, typically to Ministries of Justice³ or inter-ministerial structures.⁴ Some countries have also established an ensemble of interlocked governmental structures as part of a system, as did Colombia in 2011 with the setting-up of a *Sistema Nacional de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario*.⁵

¹ See for instance: Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6 and para. 9)*, 2003 UN Doc. CRC/GC/2003/5, para. 37-38.

² Today, 11 countries in the world have a standing Ministry dedicated to human rights: Six are only devoted to human rights (Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Morocco, Pakistan, Togo and Yemen) and five adding a closely aligned portfolio, such as “minority rights” (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Montenegro, Tunisia).

³ In 20 countries.

⁴ For example: the Interagency Human Rights Council of Georgia (see: <http://myrights.gov.ge/en/>) or the National Commission for the Coordination, preparation and Submission of Reports and Follow-Up to Recommendations on Human Rights in Tunisia (see: *Study of state actors of the Tunisian human rights system*, Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2018).

⁵ See: <http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/areas/Paginas/Sistema-Nacional-de-Derechos-Humanos-y-DIH.aspx>.

International guidance has emerged pertaining to such general structures. Since 2016, OHCHR has insisted on the establishment of “National Mechanisms for Reporting and Follow-Up” (NMRFs). For the UN Secretary-General, these mechanisms constitute a “new type of governmental structure” that are “key elements at the national level.”⁶ This set of guidance addresses a series of considerations – notably a long-awaited recognition of the role of public servants within state structures. Yet, it is also a return to addressing state actors as international agents and intermediaries rather than national actors. Careful of respecting states’ sovereignty over national arrangements, OHCHR legitimates its interventionism by strictly relating to its mandate of supporting international machineries and helping states overcome the associated reporting “burden” by reinforcing national capacities.⁷

TYPE OF RESEARCH ENVISIONED

The DIHR’s Research Department is interdisciplinary, and we believe that various disciplinary approaches will bring valuable insights to the understanding of human rights governmental focal points. The rare pieces on the matter⁸ show the important contributions that can be made by scholars e.g. in the field of anthropology,⁹ political sciences¹⁰ and law.¹¹

New research can explore various dimensions of human rights governmental focal points: the emerging international standards and their reception at state level, the processes animated by these actors (planning, participation processes, data management, inter-ministerial collaboration, etc.), the reality of human rights compliance theories

⁶ UN Secretary General, *Strengthening United Nations action in the field of human rights through the promotion of international cooperation and the importance of non-selectivity, impartiality and objectivity*. Report of the Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly, 2017, UN Doc. A/72/351, para. 15.

⁷ For more on these typologies and definitions, the relevant chapter of Sébastien’s PhD thesis may be shared on request: Sébastien Lorion, *The institutional turn of international human rights law and its reception by state administration in developing countries*. PhD dissertation; University of Copenhagen (forthcoming in 2020).

⁸ More exists on human rights sub-fields, in particular on women rights’ mechanisms and on state structures pertaining to the rights of persons with disabilities.

⁹ Babül, Elif M. 2017. *Bureaucratic Intimacies: Translating Human Rights in Turkey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹⁰ Herrera Kit, Patricia, and Stéphanie Taylor. 2012. “El Sistema Nacional de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario: ¿una nueva etapa en la actuación en materia de derechos humanos en Colombia?” *Revista Opera* 12: 65-86; Meydani, Assaf. 2014. *The Anatomy of Human Rights in Israel: Constitutional Rhetoric and State Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ See Lagoutte and Lorion, op. cit. and forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Human Rights Practice* edited by Rachel Murray.

such as socialisation through capacity-building activities, the everyday work of public servants specialised on human rights, etc.

While we believe that case-studies with a degree of embedded research may generate important and well-needed insights on such structures, this call is opened to various research design and methods.

TIMELINE

- 31 January 2020: Expression of interest to participate in this project are sent by interested researchers by email to DIHR (contacts below)
- 31 March: Preparation abstracts of papers (authors), formal submission of a panel proposal to AHRI Conference and Special Issue proposal (DIHR)
- 30 April: Draft framing article on the human rights governmental focal points (definition, typology, developments) shared with all contributors (DIHR)
- 31 July: All draft papers finalised and circulated (authors)
- 5-6 September: Panel at AHRI Conference in Pretoria (all; subject to panel acceptance)
- 30 November 2020: Revision of pieces and submission for peer review (all)
- Spring 2021: Publication of the Special Issue (subject to discussions with the journal)

MISCELLANEOUS

The costs of participating in these activities is to be borne by your institutions. Nonetheless, we can discuss how to minimise costs: e.g. participation in the panel is not compulsory to be part of the special issue or can be arranged through skype. Please note that the DIHR may also host visiting researchers in Copenhagen (offering an office and the possibility to present one's research to colleagues) and may publish advanced research in its DIHR Working Paper series (non-peer reviewed).

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