Internal Evaluation Report: The HLRN Urgent Action System (UAS)

Introduction

After years of Member demands, HLRN has fulfilled its longstanding promise to establish an Urgent Action system (UAS) for HIC and the wider public. Since January 2003, the UAS has been functioning as an integral feature of HLRN’s Global Program, managed from the HLRN coordination office (Cairo).

Building on the impressions and questions arising from the HIC evaluation of 2006–07, HLRN officers have considered the necessity to consolidate and simplify as possible the tools of the HLRN operation, in order to concentrate efforts at building the Coalition and promote its human rights culture. Therefore, this evaluation also seeks especially to determine the effectiveness and use of the UAS by Members as an intended solidarity and advocacy tool. During the HIC strategic meetings and General Assembly session at Barcelona, February 2008, HLRN’s coordination office pledged to analyse the performance of the Urgent Action system and report back to the membership.

Two instruments of intervention

The UAS in comprised of two forms of actions in support of those affected and potentially affected. The first addresses a specific incident, while the second addresses a broader, more general policy issue or series of incidents over a wider space and time span.

1. An Urgent Action Appeal consists of supporting those persons whose housing and/or land rights have been, or potentially will be violation such that participants send protest letters to the duty holders and all relevant authorities, putting pressure on them to repair the damage they caused, and ultimately change their policies and conduct.

The Urgent Action Appeals that HLRN issues always include a sample letter to facilitate participation. HLRN also has developed a methodology that instructs how one can write and initiate an Urgent Action appeal.

2. An Open Letter is a formal expression of concern and/or opposition that HC- HLRN’s coordination office sends to authorities about a series of harmful practices, a policy, or future projects that lead to housing and land rights violations. Where the subject is a whole policy, the Open Letter criticizes that policy and calls for structural correction.

HLRN encourages organizations and individuals to use the Open Letters also as a basis for their own letters. In some cases, an Open Letter is also a joint response, involving HLRN’s coordination office and other HIC-HLRN Members or other allied organizations or networks.
The Purpose of the UAS

The objectives of the UAS and five steps to meet them are detailed in the methodology document published and web mounted in four languages. Urgent Action! HLRN Guide to Practical Solidarity for Defending the Human Right to Adequate Housing is available online in Arabic, English, French and Spanish. In general terms, the UAS is designed with three immediate objectives in mind, including to help HIC Members (and other users) to:

1. Identify and assess housing rights violations;
2. Make the case of a violation before publics who are not on the field and for whom the violation, therefore, is not as obvious, and;
3. Prevent—or at least mitigate—housing and land rights violations.

Meeting strategic objectives

The UAS has ancillary, but similarly important strategic goals, especially (1) the improvement of Members’ presentation skills, in particular, in written argumentation, and (2) providing a context for practical solidarity and reciprocity among HIC Members and other allies that forms a common front against forced evictions and other violations of the human right to adequate housing (HRAH). For HLRN, developing this tool has sought to fulfill the strategic objectives to:

1. Remedy housing and land rights violations;
2. Capture and convey both the costs of a housing and land rights violation, including both physical and material losses of victims;
3. Systemize the pursuit of accountability; whereas, contributors delineate the duty holders’ responsibility arising from a violation;
4. Institutionalize the human rights framework through the emphasis on both local and international legal obligations;
5. Empower local organizations/person with the capabilities for positive activism by highlighting and claiming their guaranteed rights;
6. Create solidarity among HLRN/HIC members and allies working on the same theme;
7. Build HIC identity and Member reciprocity;
8. Create a context for broader alliances and networking.

Building capabilities

The UAS also embodies a pedagogical process: By participating in the Urgent Action scheme, contributors are trained to develop their own capacity to defend the HRAH and uphold human rights standards. In addition, solidarity is built within the world movement to uphold the human right to adequate housing (HRAH) and end forced evictions. Contributions to the Urgent Action scheme also help raise the human rights community’s professionalism at

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1 In the Committee’s General Comment No. 7 “The right to adequate housing (art. 11.1 of the Covenant): forced evictions,” the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has defined “forced eviction” to mean “the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection. The prohibition on forced evictions does not, however, apply to evictions carried out by force in accordance with the law and in conformity with the provisions of the International Covenants on Human Rights.”
monitoring the human right to adequate housing (and other economic, social and cultural rights) and arguing the realization of the human right to adequate housing by understanding, articulating and applying the legal obligations of States. HLRN’s goals for the UAS correspond to its general mandate: to promote and protect HRAH.

Practical solidarity

Urgent Actions constitute one category of the tools that HLRN has devised for HIC-HLRN Members as part of its overall housing rights monitoring and problem-solving methodology. Urgent actions offer one of the achievable goals in response to severe housing rights conditions and violations, while being a practical and economical means for demonstrating Member solidarity.

Synergies with HIC-HLRN monitoring and documentation

The basis for the HLRN’s development of tools and techniques for housing and land rights defenders is the *HLRN Housing and Land Rights “Toolkit.”* That seminal work presents the international legal standards (and popular claims) for the human right to adequate housing and land rights in such a way as to give the user a choice of selectively monitoring a case, or conducting a comprehensive country assessment within the applicable normative framework grounded in international standards. Whether the user chooses to use the Toolkit guidance to make a summary report, or conduct a more-thorough analysis, following the ten steps in the *HLRN Toolkit* ensures that a presentation of the case covers all of the essential elements, including:

1. The concept/normative content of the right claimed;
2. The legal—and, if lacking, the popular—sources of the claim;
3. The over-riding principles of implementation, as defined in the international human rights Covenants and required of any state;
4. The positive guarantees of the right within that state;
5. Any gaps in guarantees and safeguards;
6. The affected and vulnerable persons and groups;
7. Losses, damages and costs incurred as a result of a housing or land rights deficit;
8. The various duty holders, principal among them being the state;
9. Actions and proposed remedies; and
10. Monitoring of, and follow-up to the remedial actions.

This method insures that the initiator of a housing and/or land rights claim assume the authority of the law, characterizes sufficiently the human and other consequences, identifies the responsible parties and poses solutions, as distinct from simply enumerating violations and escaping the responsibility to present alternatives. In all steps, applicable international human rights norms serve as a practical guide.

The UAS is complementary to HLRN’s encyclopedic *“Housing and Land Rights Toolkit”* in that it summarizes and preserves the essential elements of presenting any housing and/or land rights violation case, but in the briefest possible format.

For those UAS cases constituting a violation, that data integrates also with the HLRN’s on-line Violation Database, which, in turn, forms a key resource for
practical data used in HIC’s annual mapping exercise for Habitat Day (Housing and Land Rights Day).

After two years of operating the UA system, HLRN developed the complementary on-line Violation Database (VDB), which is intended to be a HLRN Member-driven depository of all known housing and land rights violation cases globally. In order to simplify the process, VDB contains cases that correspond to only four of the most-common categories or violations: (1) forced evictions, (2) dispossession, (3) damage and destruction, and/or (4) violations arising from privatization. The VDB serves as a research tool that Members and the public can use. It also can serve Members as their own database of violations simply by entering cases in their field of operation.

When Urgent Action cases result in violations that correspond to these categories, then HLRN officers enter those cases into the VDB. Whereas the UAS does not purport to cover all such violations in the world, the UA cases form a minority of entries in the VDB. Because of limited HLRN coordination office and unproven Member capacities, the UAS was projected to issue an average of one appeal each month. The VDB has a much greater capacity and scope, allowing HIC Members and others to enter their violations cases directly, including past violations that are not within the UAS’ immediate scope.

As a logical outgrowth of the UAS, the VDB has accentuated both the necessity and objectives of the UAS as a public-mobilisation tool. While the complementary nature of the two tools is realized in the fact that some Urgent Action cases also constitute violations that are recorded in the VDB. However, the UAS also has an intended preventive purpose, channeling opposition and posing alternatives to violations before they happen. The VDB forms a permanent documentary record suitable for surveys, mapping and other research activities. Thus, the one does not duplicate or negate the other, but are organic cohorts serving both immediate and longer-term objectives.

Through the fundamental data-collection process in cases of violations to housing and land rights for the VDB, HLRN officers have been exposed to the potential opportunities for both the development of an Urgent Action and alliance building/networking options with other organizations (local, regional, international) working in a similar and/or complementary field. For example, in the process of developing an Urgent Action on mass evictions taking place in Nigeria, HLRN officers developed new relations with a local organization, the Development Initiatives Network (DIN), which subsequently became an esteemed Member of HIC-HLRN. While in this specific case, news of the violations came from other sources than the VDB, which had not been developed at that stage, the point remains that the knowledge-creation process on violations creates opportunities beyond just an Urgent Action. As the UAS is designed to respond to cases that HIC Members bring forward, the prospect of using the UAS is also an incentive for Membership in HIC, as it serves as one of the benefits of Membership.

Synergies with other organizations

In addition to its obvious relationship to HIC Membership, the UAS has provided a factor and practical basis for alliance building with other
organizations and networks. In 2004, HLRN entered into a formal and strategic alliance with Organisation Mondiale contre la Torture (OMCT), a Geneva-based network that assumed a new function in the promotion and defense of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). OMCT had developed an urgent action practice prior to its relationship with HLRN, but OMCT’s collaboration with HLRN meant also that both applied and shared a common methodology, borrowing also from the HLRN practice as developed. The ESCR unit within OMCT worked compatibly and productively with HLRN in the common UAS, and the relations developed in that process have been long lasting. Whereas HIC-HLRN lacks regular representation in Geneva, OMCT personnel there played an important role both in ensuring that the cases were submitted to the necessary UN organs and conducting selective-but-necessary follow-up.

However, the ESCR unit at OMCT was not so long lasting. A 2005 upheaval at OMCT led to the interruption of its function. For ethical reasons HLRN did not resume cooperation with OMCT.

The volume and pattern of HLRN’s UA appeal responses have declined somewhat since the 2005 loss of OMCT as a formal partner network in joint urgent actions. Since 2003, other organizations have engaged progressively in urgent actions of their own, but those have been occasional and part of general human rights programs to which housing and land rights count as only an addendum.

The Geneva-based Center of Housing Rights and Eviction (COHRE), on the other hand, is the most active and productive other organization issuing occasional appeals on cases of forced eviction, although such urgent actions are not regular or linked to a constituent network like HIC-HLRN. It has not gone unnoticed that COHRE’s calls for action, as of 2005, have assumed an organization and format closely resembling that which HLRN has developed (e.g., forced eviction cases in Cambodia and Angola).

Both before and since 2005, HLRN’s UAS has worked toward allying with other organizations on a case-by-case basis. Some informal cooperation has evolved in Urgent Actions cases with Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) and La Via Campesina. That cooperation specialized in cases of land deprivation, particularly where the right to food is at stake (FIAN). However, the collaborations have been minimal and inconsistent (see list of cases below). However, there is presently no replacement for the type of methodological cooperation that had previously existed between HIC-HLRN and OMCT.

Another important partnership in the field has emerged in the same period. The ESCR-Net, launched in 2003, unites civil human rights organizations globally specializing in a range of ESCRs. HIC-HLRN and ESCR-Net maintain some overlapping membership.

The HLRN Global program officer has negotiated with ESCR-Net, resulting in an agreement that ESCR-Net circulate the HLRN Urgent Action appeals to their constituencies and, if HLRN sends those appeals in Word (not pdf) format, ESCR-Net would both distribute the UAs and post the cases on their
website. The responses have been consistent, if not high volume. However, those numbers also have declined somewhat in the past year, which coincides with a change in personnel with the ESCR-Net secretariat.

**UAS innovations and new features**

With the recent restructuring and improvements to the HLRN website ([www.hlm.org](http://www.hlm.org)), the UAS appears among the options on the “Solutions and Tools” drop-down menu, which contains links also to the HLRN “Housing and Land Rights Toolkit,” “Social Production” section and the Violation Database.

In order to simplify participation in the UAS by supporting any current or still-unresolved (open) case, the user needs only (1) to click the “support” link on the UAS case menu corresponding to the UA appeal in question, then (2) enter her/his name, email and other basic indentifying information in the fields provided, and (3) click the “support” button on the screen. Those three simple actions then issue the sample letter (provided in the text of the case on the “support” page, as well as on line) in the name of the user.

The prepared sample letters are preaddressed to all of the responsible parties cited in the Urgent Action appeal. Thus, if there are several duty holders or other responsible parties addressed in the appeal, then those corresponding multiple letters transmit immediately their intended recipients’ email.

This extra preparation by HLRN officers makes it easy for busy people to participate in the system without having to take the extra time to cut, paste, sign and otherwise issue their own version of the sample letter.

In addition to generating HIC Member appeals, HLRN has developed the practice also of forwarding Urgent Action appeals from other networks known for the reliability of their information. Appeals from FIAN and ESCR-Net, as well as some calls from known organizations in Cambodia, over the past few years are examples. HLRN circulates these appeals as a courtesy, and in the interest of reciprocity and solidarity. However, they do not necessarily reflect the HLRN method and, therefore, generally contain less information and may lack, in particular, the human rights and legal dimension, or even circulate without a sample letter. HLRN does not alter the language or meaning of such appeals as received, unless the HLRN global program officer has to go back to the source to clarify a point of confusion. Therefore, they might not meet the same HLRN quality standard. Generally, however, HLRN does not circulate such received appeals unless they demand a specific action of the recipient (with addresses of identified duty bearers). Generally, the HLRN coordination office issues letters of support for such cases, which the HLRN coordinator typically signs. However, when such an appeal comes from a source other than a HIC Member, HLRN officers do not conduct the same thoroughness of fact-checking, assurance of completeness, or follow-up as it would for HIC Member-generated UA appeals. In other words, HLRN’s coordinating office exerts more effort and ensures higher quality of the appeals originating from HIC Members.

Nonetheless, while the UAS supports cases brought by HIC Members as a basis for trust in the veracity of known partners, the HLRN coordinating office
ultimately has to rely on the verification process of the originating organization for most UA appeals.

HLRN also receives Urgent Action requests from unknown parties. In such cases, HLRN refers them to the nearest HIC Members to propose that they form a partnership that HLRN can respond to on the basis of HIC Membership.

**Producing and managing UA appeals**

In establishing the UAS, HLRN had projected to have the capacity to mount the equivalent of one UA per month. Since 2003, over the 52 months of this evaluation period, the HLRN’s UAS has generated 56 UA appeals, plus 22 Open Letters (OLs), totaling 78 formal Urgent Action cases.

**Generating cases**

HLRN has tried to elicit participation from HIC Members, based on the assumption that Members’ demand for a HIC rapid-response operation has been for collective action in the Coalition spirit and function. However, the potential for generating or responding to appeal has not been realized sufficiently. Notably throughout the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina and its aftermath, HLRN’s coordination office contacted HIC Members in Zimbabwe, asking for advice and cooperation so that HIC-HLRN could support and coordinate with their in denouncing and posing alternatives to the horrendous ongoing evictions. Those offers were met with no single HIC Member reply.

In an alternative action, HIC-HLRN instead cooperated with Amnesty International (International and Zimbabwe), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights and COHRE to formulate a joint open letter to Zimbabwean authorities with 18 other Zimbabwean organizations. HLRN’s coordination office solicited participants in the action from its Member and general networks. Ultimately, the letter included 124 singing organizations, including eight HIC Members from the continent of Africa, plus 26 other HIC Members. The five HIC Members in Zimbabwe were absent.

This action evolved outside of the typical HIC-HLRN system for three reasons: (1) HIC Members were nonresponsive, (2) the situation was dire and the need for response was urgent and important, and (3) other international actors were willing and able to join in a broad-based rapid response.

Despite the HIC-HLRN operating principle to support—not supplant—Member actions, HLRN and HIC Secretariat motivated Members and Friends to protest the crimes in Zimbabwe, including through an HLRN Urgent Action appeal (see UA 33 below). HLRN also joined pan-African and international actions, despite the nonparticipation of its Members there.

Ultimately, the gravity of the violation set the Zimbabwe case apart, but the inertia of HIC Members was not unique. In Zambia and in China (2006–07), HIC Members also were unresponsive to serial HLRN email requests for
information and offers of solidarity through the UAS. Those requests were met with no single reply. Therefore, instead of an UA case, HIC-HLRN resorted to disseminating information of the situation to HIC Members, as well as publishing news on its HLRN (Global Program) website.

The past five years also have demonstrated some positive examples of UA activism. The SARP office (New Delhi) was by far the largest contributor of Urgent Action cases with seven initiated UA appeals between 2003 and 2007. Each of those appeals covered an actual and/or prospective housing and land rights violations in India. However, no follow-up or information on developments has come from SARP.

The only cases coming from Latin America were those Mexico cases (Oaxaca, La Parota, etc.) that HIC-AL has generated. One Open Letter case originated from a HIC Member in Argentina: Asociacion Civil MOI - Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (November 2005). Two other actions in Latin America include an open letter on the eviction of indigenous people in Colombia and HIC-HLRN to a FIAN-La Via Campesina generated appeal in connection to land deprivation in Honduras.

One example of a HIC Member that has developed a good capacity for issuing UA appeals is Collectif Ciahcameroun (Cameroon). Colleagues there produced three competent and well-argued appeals to address forced evictions in Laounde. This followed Joseph Fumtim’s 2005 visit to the HLRN office, in Cairo, where he worked with global program officer Angie Balata to develop the first of three HLRN Urgent Actions on Cameroon, addressing forced evictions in Yaounde, Douala et Limbe.

Following up
Across Asia, the most-diligent partners in generating UAs and managing their follow up with reports of developments and further actions have not been HIC Members at all. In fact, in a country where HIC had no formal Members—Cambodia—local organizations have remained in contact with HLRN consistently since the HLRN coordinator conducted a training course for NGOs there in January 2002 in cooperation with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Through this review period, HLRN cooperated with Cambodian parties to conduct three Urgent Actions. Those parties have been among the few to respond to request for follow-up information on their cases. (The Cambodian Housing Rights Task Force has since applied for HIC Membership in 2008.)

The other exceptions of UA case follow-up are HIC America Latina (“La Parota,” 2004–present), the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (case of “incarcerated human rights defenders,” 2007–08) and the GIYAV/Human Rights Association (“HLRN Members threatened,” 2003). All other UA initiators have been so far unresponsive to serial HLRN coordination office requests for information on developments and offers to carry out follow-up to HIC-HLRN supported appeals.

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2 In China, requests went to Society for Community Organization (Mr. Ho Hei Wah) and, in Zambia, to Human Settlements of Zambia, Zambia Women & Shelter Action Group, Zambia Collective Housing & Community Development Foundation and Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia.
Distribution

HLRN disseminates the UA appeals through a large contact list that it maintains in Cairo, organized according to the specialization and/or substantive interest of the contact persons and organizations. HLRN program officers send all Urgent Actions to four main contact groups, including: (1) HIC/HLRN Members and Friends, (2) media, (3) UN, and (4) a category called “Urgent Actions,” which contains entries of other individuals and organizations with a record of responding to UAs. In addition, the HLRN contacts with interests in land receive especially those UA appeals that involve some form of land deprivation. Additional categories are included on an irregular basis, depending on the content and presumed appeal of a case; i.e., involving women, social production, environment, Solidarity Network members / communities, refugees, etc.

Responses and results

Of the 78 UA and OL cases currently in the HLRN database (see list of cases in annex below), HLRN has received 136 notifications from respondents of their supportive solidarity action by issuing their own letter to denounce the HRAH violation and defend the victims. It is important to note that the data on record includes only the information coming back to the HLRN coordination office, in accordance with the standard UA procedure, as instructed, whereby respondents send a copy of their letters to both urgentaction@hlrn.org and to the originator of the case. In instances whereby UAS users support a case by the web-based function, the automated system generates those notices automatically. It may be possible that others have participated with their own responses without issuing the email copies to urgentaction@hlrn.org; however, those potential actions cannot be counted.

Of the 136 known UA responses, 47, or just 34%, came from HIC Members/Friends. Individuals and organizations unaffiliated to HIC sent in 89 notices of their response, amounting to fully 66% of the total.

In addition to these, the HLRN coordination office automatically has responded to each of the HLRN UA appeals. Including those responses, however, would bring the total HIC-generated actions to 214. However, for the purposes of this evaluation, that number is considered separate from the general participation of HIC Members, Friends and structures.

HIC Member participation

The most-consistent HIC Member and structure participants in the HLRN UAS are presented in the following table:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Signer</th>
<th>No. of responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIC Members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Coalition for Housing Rights / Eviction Watch</td>
<td>Quezon City, Philippines</td>
<td>Ted Anana</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter for the Poor</td>
<td>Dhaka, Bangladesh</td>
<td>Abu Rayhan al-Beeroonee, Davinder Lamba</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazingira Institute MieterInnenervein Witten / Habitat-Netz e.V.</td>
<td>Nairobi, Kenya</td>
<td>Davinder Lamba</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIC America Latina</td>
<td>Witten, Germany</td>
<td>Knut Unger</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIC America Latina</td>
<td>Mexico D.F.</td>
<td>Lorena Zarate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other HIC Structures</strong></td>
<td>Cairo, Egypt</td>
<td>Joseph Schechla</td>
<td>78⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIC President</td>
<td>Mexico D.F.</td>
<td>Enrique Ort z</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIC-SARP (HLRN)</td>
<td>New Delhi, India</td>
<td>Shivani Chaudry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIC-GS</td>
<td>Santiago, Chile</td>
<td>Ana Sugranyes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Few other HIC Members showed themselves to support the UAS, and no others did so consistently, or even more than once. In fact, the multiple contributors to the UAS shown above (apart from the HLRN coordination office) produced a total of 31, or 66% of the total HIC Member/Friend responses, or 23% of general responses to UA appeals.

HLRN’s coordination office (Cairo) supported all UAs with a letter to all duty holders in each case. However, the HLRN South Asia Regional Programme (SARP), whence the original commitment to operate the UAS originated, generated the most UA cases, but responded to only three cases generated by others.

The cases that elicited the most and most-consistent responses were those violations in Palestine. Especially, the 2004 case of house demolitions in Rafah (Gaza Strip) generated 22 known responses, with a broad sampling of respondents from regions and from HIC as well as non-HIC supporters. That case alone accounted for 16% of all known responses throughout the UAS.

Asian cases also raised a significant portion of UA respondents, amounting to 33 responses overall from all categories of respondents, or 24% of the total.

**Nonmember and UN responses**

Responses from international nonmember contacts, including as part of the follow-up process, have been important, but inconsistent. HLRN disseminates the UA appeals to the wider public through its contacts database, selecting the distribution options according to the specialization and/or subject interests of the contact as that may related to subject ofa case.

The UN agencies and personnel, a key target of certain Urgent Action appeals, have responded, however sporadically. These include special

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⁴ Including the Open Letters generated.
rapporteurs and human rights officers who have contacted HLRN directly to report their response to certain UAs.

Effective responses from the UN, particularly from Special Rapporteurs (SRs), have taken various forms that include issuing communications to government officials, occasional public statements and follow-up during country missions. Not only the SR on adequate housing, but also the SRs on minorities, indigenous peoples, the right to food and human rights defenders are known to have used HLRN’s UA appeals and, in some instances, taken up the UA case in their own advocacy work. The new SR on adequate housing Raquel Rolnick will continue the work on communications, including following up on some of the cases that her predecessor Miloon Kothari had taken up.

OHCHR officers have used UAs in their work on particular countries and ESCR themes. The best examples include HLRN’s UA cases that have been assumed under the 1503 procedure of the UN Human Rights Commission, now Human Rights Council. The frequency of that form of follow-up has declined also since 2005. (The most-recent case taken up as a 1503 procedure as a response to HLRN’s Urgent Action appeal was the case of Honduras, Repression of Peasants in Vallecito/Colon, in November 2006, as a case actually originating as an appeal for support from FIAN and La Via Campesina.) The reduced frequency in 1503 procedure responses probably is due to a combination of factors:

- the transition from the Commission to the Council and the consequent ambiguities of procedure,
- the interruption of the partnership with OMCT with its former ESC rights staff interactions with the UN Human Rights System,
- the lack of a regular HIC-HLRN representative in Geneva and the consequent incapacity of HLRN to carry out sufficient follow-up with UN bodies from Cairo or elsewhere.

Once a case enters the 1503 procedure, it remains confidential and internal to the workings of the Human Rights Council (formerly Commission on Human Rights) unless and until a solution is reached.

**Outcomes**

Of all the 78 UAS cases from 2003 to 2007, many involve unresolved issues, and some involve housing and/or land rights violations that already have taken place (and which find themselves also in the VDB). The lack of authorities' political will to apply housing rights, and the prevalence of impunity in such cases are the main factors affecting the UAS outcomes. Of all cases, most have become ongoing struggles with inconclusive outcomes to date. Some cases, such as Darfur, are so intractable that no amount of effort on HLRN’s collective part is likely to move the offending parties. However, four cases have come to satisfactory outcomes, and two have led to partial resolution. The satisfactory outcomes follow actual violations, which fact has
not been completely reversed. In no case has HLRN learned of the victims enjoying full restitution or reparations.\(^5\)

While it is difficult to measure the qualitative impact of Urgent Actions on the promotion and institutionalization of the human rights framework, quantitatively the accessing of UA information through the HLRN websites (as shown in the statistical reports of website use) indicates an increased awareness of, and reference to the UAS. This is presumed to be the case, as each UA cases is a source of both information on violations and corresponding legal standards.

In 2005, the number of visitors to the UA webpage was 433, with 671 views. The number of visitors to the developments page was 647, with 2,726 views. In the first half of 2008, the number of visitors to the UA webpage has tripled the total for 2005, with 1,292 visitors and 2,108 views. The number of visits to the developments page was 8,467, with 13,640 views. Also, the UAS has also had an impact in so far as UN bodies and mechanisms have taken up cases as critical instances for intervention. (In addition to the 2006 Honduras case under the 1503 procedure cited above, four earlier HLRN Urgent Action cases adopted under the 1503 procedure of the UN Commission on Human Rights. More recently, too, the HLRN urgent action on the Mosul Dam has also resulted in UN efforts to find out more about the case (example, responses).

Problems

In the previous HLRN analysis of the first year of UAS operations in 2003, the following emerged as obstacles to the effectiveness of the UAS:

1. Too many cases occur every day, as confirmed by the media and local organizations, for current human and financial capacity to cover as needed;
2. Less-integrated strategies with other organizations;
3. Lack of systematic follow-up of cases;
4. Insufficient communication with/from HIC Members and Friends,
5. Lack of institutionalized understanding and/or recognition within many Member organizations of the UAS as a useful tool to publicize violations at the global level.

Since 2003, the problems previously highlighted have, in some instances, been alleviated, and accentuated in others. The problem of an overabundance of violations still remains, without the institutional capacity or resources to cover the demand to address them. Communication with Members and other partners has increased to some extent, somewhat that both are willing to participate in the development of Urgent Actions, as in the case of Cambodia and, more recently, Iraq, or, at the very least, endorse the Urgent Action, as in the case of Palestine. The institutionalized understanding of the human rights framework seems to be increasing as a part of a global trend of awareness of rights, particularly, economic, social and cultural rights.

This is, in part, due to the increasing presence of civil society actors combined with
the accessibility provided by telecommunications and information
technologies and the increased intensity of analytical and interpretive work by
the UN human rights program, including treaty bodies, special procedures and
OHCHR. One part may also be the pedagogical and collaborative work that
HLRN has been conducting throughout the Membership—and elsewhere—to
the extent possible.

Despite this progress, there remain some very fundamental problems with the
UAS that have continued to be obstacles to realizing the full potential of the
system. These are:

1. Lack of resources has proved a continuing problem to the amount of
cases HLRN is able to pursue and the extent to which the advocacy
can be carried out. This has led to many lost advocacy opportunities.
For example, in 2006, a member in MENA relied on the assistance of
another organization based in Geneva to support their 1503 procedure
case. However, that organization was not a network serving members,
and the Geneva-based organization was unable (or unmotivated) to
carry out the necessary follow-up.

2. Member inaction at raising cases in their country: Members’
commitment to their Network should manifest by their providing
information to fellow Members when violations take place at the local
level. In some countries, information has been forthcoming and there
seems to be more communication generally. However, most members
have not maintained the lines of communication consistently. This is
particularly significant in countries and regions where violations of
housing and land rights are taking place, and some at notoriously high
volume.

3. In the instances when Members provide information, often it is poorly
organized and lacking crucial details. However, participation in the UAS
is intended also to be a training and capacity-building activity for those
using it. The Coordination office at HIC-HLRN, HIC-MENA and HIC-
SARP have made efforts to ensure their readiness and availability to
support Members in their local struggles through the networking tools
developed for them, including coordinating efforts to publicize local
violations and preparing urgent actions for public distribution.

4. Lack of Member support for cases: Of all the cases in which automatic
copies of responses have been received back at
urgentaction@hlm.org, only a very few responses have been recorded.
Of the 78 cases currently in the HLRN database, HLRN has received
47 responses from Members/Friends of HIC-HLRN and 89 responses
from nonaffiliated individuals and organizations. (See list of cases in
annex below.)

5. Difficulties in maintaining follow-up: The HLRN coordination office also
has initiated case follow-up and made repeated attempts to gather
updated information on the open cases. In certain instances where
violations are ongoing due to policies of discrimination intrinsic to the
state or government, as in the Palestine/Israel case, it is understood
that closure of any cases is unlikely. However, in many other cases, the Coordination Office has received no information on the status of the case, even after many HLRN requests from the initiating Member.

6. The turnover between the information received about a violation and the development of an Urgent Action to be sent out is often too slow. While this is, in part, due to the process of collecting sufficient information to the possible extent, the editing process between various HLRN officers takes longer than necessary. This results in Urgent Actions not being sent out immediately, as per their purported intention.

7. While the length of the urgent action has been significantly shortened over the years, urgent actions still remain longer than necessary. As such, a balance is not yet attained between collecting all the necessary information and sending out the urgent action in a timely manner. Moreover, this also impacts the potential for the Urgent Action to be read in its full versions.

8. There has been a concerted effort to ensure that urgent actions are sent out in English and, to some extent, French and Arabic; however, there has been less emphasis on other languages. This may have an impact on the broad impact of the Urgent Action for non-English-speaking audiences. The participation from Latin America, apart from the HIC America Latina resource center, has been extremely low, especially compared to the usual claim that regional HIC Membership there is the numerically largest and most active.

9. Intraorganizational cooperation and communication—either between the offices of HLRN and/or among other HIC thematic structures and HLRN—remain uneven despite several attempts commitments to increase communication and cooperation.

At various HIC Member meetings, Members have emphasized that the need for the UA System is urgent in the face of growing violations. However, for the UAS to be fully effective, greater participation on the part of members is both required and necessary. It may be that some Members do not see the UAS to be a vital tool for their offices/regions or that lack of resources/personnel makes it less of a priority. Another obvious theory is that the Members who called for the Urgent Action procedure really intended to delegate the work for someone else, and not actually to assume the effort for themselves. This speculation is discouraging, because the UAS experience suggests that HIC Members are not as active, competent or reciprocal as one would like to assume.

**Lessons and solutions**

Among the lessons in this evaluation is the finding that HIC Members and officers are not necessarily the most-reliable allies in the UAS experience. Quantitatively, as well as qualitatively, nonmembers have proved to be some of the most responsive partners among a mostly inert general HIC Membership. The initial UAS target of supporting and capacitating HIC Members, however desirable from a Coalition-building standpoint, may not
constitute the best investment of time and resources toward meeting the other objectives: preventing and/or remedying housing and land rights violations. On the positive side, however, this lesson also informs the HIC Member recruitment process and strategy in ways that promise to build the coalition with more-active constituents.

In order to overcome some of the paucity in information being received from the members, HLRN has increasingly interlinked the information collected for the Violation Database to opportunities for pursuing Urgent Actions. This has, on the one hand, helped in ensuring that the VDB reflects the growing global violations in housing and land rights. On the other hand, this has also helped to create new opportunities with nonMember organizations active in the same field. While remain still in the initial phases of developing the VDB, it is foreseen that both the UA system and the VDB will be evermore mutually reinforcing by making certain that the violations recorded can be advanced toward positive activism through the creation of Urgent Actions and/or Open Letters. Moreover, the VDB will be a more established record of violations as it will include any follow up and developments from the Urgent Actions.

Technically, HLRN has worked hard to revise its website, even in the face of many technical hazards (i.e., repairing the consequences of viruses, hacking of the server hosting HLRN sites, change of web platforms, poor hosting service, human-resource shortages, etc.). One of the main driving forces behind this decision was to make the site and the tools it contains more user friendly and more accessible. Part of this process entailed making sure that the Urgent Action System was offered as part of HLRN Solutions, and that the supporting of cases could be easily done in a simple two step process. HLRN also has arranged cases to reflect descending priorities: from the most urgent to the archived.

The VDB, though within its own section on the website, is tied visually to the Urgent Action System through the option to add documents and extra information to each violation record. This has allowed us to link many of the violations recorded directly to the urgent actions distributed, thus making the visual interlinking connection between the two through our website.

Little of the technological innovations can help the HIC Members that do not have regular email or internet access. That obstacle afflicts a significant proportion of HIC Members in across Africa and some in India. That fact may have affected the apparent nonresponses from concerned African Members in the certain cases.

In order to rectify the problems of missed opportunities as a consequence of limited resources it has become increasingly crucial that HLRN and HIC work to acquire funding for a full-time staff person, preferably to be located in Geneva so as to also be able to undertake international advocacy.

Members need to become more involved and active in the UAS. Members have demonstrated minimal action, initiative and capacity to mount appeals with sound arguments. This further demonstrates the need for the UAS as a didactic tool, but achieving that action rests with member participation. HLRN has tried to emphasize the need for participation on several occasions and
through various processes. For example, HLRN program officers have tried to contact Member and allied organizations on several occasions for follow-up on cases prepared jointly with very little to no response. Of particular emphasis has been the immediate feedback received consistently from HLRN allies in Cambodia and, to some extent, Palestine.

However, these are unique in a general trajectory of nonresponsiveness. As such, it may be time that HLRN staff discusses alternative options in order to make the UAS more useable tool. HIC Member feedback is important to take the most-appropriate decisions on future action.

Technically, this may be easily done by both shortening the requirements and length of the urgent action so as to ensure both that local organizations with limited resources are able to use the tool and that a quick turnover will increase the chances of impact. More qualitatively, the UAS may need to be advertised using more of a marketing approach, rather than promoting it only as a didactic-tool, particularly one that is linked to the more-complex HLRN Toolkit.

Specifically, while the UAS is a very simple mechanism, emphasizing its conceptual link to any more complicated tool, such as the TK, may overly complicating it by association. Moreover, applying the standards required, particularly legal standards, have proved to be daunting task for many local organizations. The simpler the tool, the better and the more likely it is to be accepted and used. However, this remains a theory yet to be proved with HIC Members.

Intracoalition communication, cooperation and training must precede any expectations of increased participation from the HIC membership. This requires a concerted effort on the part of the HIC leadership to ensure that the UAS is a priority for all. From here, it would allow for further opportunities to vet relationships with other allies who may be willing and capable to carry out joint actions.

Interorganisationally, the change in institutional programs, regimes and personnel has meant that HLRN has had to start afresh to build cooperative relationships on a regular basis. That remains part of the ongoing effort to form strategic alliances, just as it does with the HLRN training program. Meeting with new personnel at OHCHR, ESCR-Net, OMCT, FIAN, COHRE, La Via Campesina and other like-minded organizations will involve discussions and plans involving the HLRN Urgent Acti on System.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The purposes of the UAS have been partly served in so far as some HIC Member organizations have collaborated in producing UA appeals and supporting other Members’ cases. However the potential, as always, is far greater than the actual results. Taking the conservative number of 72 current and active HIC Members (as published in the HIC Annual Report 2007), the UAS participants count as a small portion of the membership, and a far smaller fraction of HIC’s wider alliances (some 1,258 organizations and individuals). These indicators may be typical of other such advocacy systems,
which all rely on the commitment and volunteerism of constituents. (However, a 2001 evaluation of Amnesty International Urgent Actions in selected countries in Middle East/North Africa indicated a nearly 60% member participation rate.) HIC Member commitment and volunteerism are qualities that HRLN officers cannot effectively control; however, certain practices could improve the UA outcomes in future.

On the HLRN officers’ part, more could be done to follow-up cases. The methodology could involve a follow-up system with a standard timeframe with which the HLRN global program officer would communicate with the source/author of the UA appeal to update facts and developments, and then determine further action, if any. At present, the requests for follow-up information have been repeated, but not systematic, and sometimes after a long interval. More discipline on all parts would enhance the UAS and its effectiveness.

The combination of forces with other networks has proved useful in the past, and more and more-formal alliances could lead to better outcomes and greater participation. That option remains for HIC-HLRN to collaborate with allies in the field such as COHRE, FIAN, La Via Campesina, FIDH, ESCR-Net and others.

HLRN reasserts its commitment to develop and promote tools, techniques and methods for collective action in defense of housing and land rights and to resist violations. In consultation with HIC’s General Secretariat, the Secretariat also has reaffirmed its commitment to assume and be part of the intra-organizational communication and cooperation challenge.” Despite all efforts to maintain and improve the UAS, more effort is needed to communicate the HIC message and motivate Members within the Coalition.

Training and experience with the UAS should improve the capacity to use the system. The Cameroon cases demonstrate that. However, training alone does not ensure participation in or initiating Urgent Actions. A series of training HLRN-conducted sessions in the UAS across Palestine did not lead to production of appeals, even though the need for articulation and solidarity is great.

Ultimately, the impression remains that, despite self-interest, participation and action are likely when the task is made as simple as possible, and presented just as simply. The UAS has attempted to do that without sacrificing the essential content in making the case.

The other reason for simplicity and greater attractiveness is due to the tremendous volume of work and reading that Member organizations have to do. It is understood that UA appeals are competing with many other solicitations that arrive through the constituency’s computers on any given day.

As done in the early development of the HIC-HLRN Urgent Action System, HLRN officers will review, once again, the urgent action formats and systems of actors in the human rights field to learn from innovations and comparable experiences of others. They will pay special attention to the models that are
simple in their design and presentation, as lengthy texts may be a deterrent to participation. HLRN officers also welcome HIC Members’ concrete suggestions for simplifying and otherwise making the UAS more attractive to prospective participants and, consequently, more effective at addressing housing and land rights violations.
### Appendix A: UA Cases (January 2003–June 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Developments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. UA: Iraq: Impending Disaster from Mosul Dam</strong></td>
<td>5/26/2008</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. UA: Morocco: Attack on Human Rights Defenders</strong></td>
<td>5/26/2008</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>Defendants released by royal decree Developments (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. OL: Germany: Protest against Arrest of Housing Rights Defenders</strong></td>
<td>8/28/2007</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Andrej Holm released Developments (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>13. OL: Pakistan: Emaar Properties Responsible for Impending Displacement of 500,000</strong></td>
<td>6/2/2007</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14. UA: Cameroon: 400 Persons Evicted and 10,000 More Expected</strong></td>
<td>11/26/2006</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15. UA: Israel: State to Destroy Entire Bedouin Village in the Naqab</strong></td>
<td>10/31/2006</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17. UA: India: Threat of Demolition of 4,500 homes and Forced Eviction Thousands More</strong></td>
<td>8/30/2006</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>Developments (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18. OL: Mexico: President Quesada Must Intervene to Stop Human Rights Violations</strong></td>
<td>8/21/2006</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20. OL (joint): Palestine: UN Agencies on Illegal Closures in Gaza</strong></td>
<td>7/27/2006</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>Developments (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21. UA (renewed): Cambodia: 1,000 families to be Evicted by Authorities</strong></td>
<td>7/26/2006</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>22. OL: UN Secretary General on Proposed Registry of Damages</strong></td>
<td>7/20/2006</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>23. UA: Cambodia: Authorities evict 1,000 Families for Private Development</strong></td>
<td>7/19/2006</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>Developments (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>25. UA: Nigeria: Authorities Evict over 800,000 in Abuja</strong></td>
<td>1/6/2006</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>26. OL: James W. Owens, CEO, Caterpillar Inc. on Use of</strong></td>
<td>5/27/2006</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Developments (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Country</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>UA: India: Authorities Set Fire to an Entire Slum</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>5/16/2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>UA: India: Increase in Dam Height Threatens Thousands of Families</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>4/4/2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>OL (joint): UNHCHR Louise Arbour on Egyptian Violence toward Refugees</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>9/1/2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>UA (joint): Kenya: Global Coalition of NGOs Call on Government to Stop Evictions</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>11/16/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>OL: Colombia: President Velez Must Stop Evictions of Afro-Colombian Populations</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>10/25/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>OL: Mexico: President Quesada on the Murder of Tomas Cruz Zamora</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>11/10/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>UA: India: Thousands of Slum Dwellers Evicted, Millions More at Threat</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>11/1/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>UA: India: 100 Homeless Women and Children Evicted from Shelter</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>11/4/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>OL: USA: To President Bush on Intended Cuts to Housing Subsidy</td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>4/10/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>OL: Mexico: To President Quesada on Effects of La Parota Dam</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>9/27/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>UA (joint): Egypt, Authorities Evict Families from Relief Tents</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>9/15/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>OL: Caterpillar Inc. Must Stop Participation in Israeli Evictions</td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>7/15/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>OL: Kuwait: Development Fund Must Stop Financing Lyari Project</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>6/21/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>UA: India: 100 Dalit Homes Burnt by Upper Caste</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>6/15/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>OL: Sudan: President al-Bashir Must Uphold Obligations toward Darfur</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>5/21/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>UA: Palestine: Mass House Demolitions Leaves over 2,000 Homeless in Rafah</td>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>5/19/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>UA: India: 300,000 People Evicted and 40,000 Houses Demolished</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>5/5/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>UA: India: 100 Homeless Women and Children Evicted from Shelter</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>11/4/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>OL: India: Prime Minister Vajpayee Must Halt Mass Evictions</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>2/3/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>OL: Mexico: President Vicente Fox Quesada Must Protect Indigenous Peoples</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>2/19/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Title</td>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>UA (support): Brazil: Increasing Criminalization of the Landless People Movement (MST)</td>
<td>7/14/2008</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>UA (support): Japan: Nike Park Threatens Local Community</td>
<td>7/7/2008</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>UA (support): Indonesia: Thousands to be Evicted and Left Homeless⁷</td>
<td>5/25/2008</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>UA (support): Colombia: Peasants Arrested and Threatened Due to Their Struggle for Land</td>
<td>10/25/2007</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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⁶ Did not require further development and, therefore, HLRN distributed and supported the UPA (HIC-Member) initiative.
⁷ Case did not require further development and, therefore, HLRN distributed and supported the ACHR (HIC-affiliated) initiative.
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case Summary</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>OL (support): Pakistan: Violent Demolition of Juma Goth Settlement⁸</td>
<td>8/10/2007</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>ACHR</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>UA (support): Israel: Forced Evictions and Displacement of the Jahalin Bedouin⁹</td>
<td>7/6/2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>BADIL</td>
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⁸ Case did not require further development and, therefore, HLRN distributed and supported the ACHR (HIC-affiliated) initiative.

⁹ Case did not require further development and, therefore, HLRN distributed and supported the BADIL (HIC-Member) initiative at the Member's request.

¹⁰ Case did not require further development and, therefore, HLRN distributed and supported the ACHR (HIC-affiliated) initiative.