

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

IDSN input to the Secretary General Minorities Report 2025: Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities

Overview of relevant IDSN activities

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) is at the forefront of advocating for the elimination of caste and descent-based discrimination globally. In recent years, IDSN has expanded its efforts, working through international forums, regional workshops and partnerships with UN bodies to raise awareness and advocate for systemic change.

IDSN has worked alongside OHCHR, mostly with the Indigenous Peoples and Minorities Section on several issues to address caste and descent-based discrimination for the past ten years. More recently, among these efforts, was an event held in Kathmandu, entitled “*Youth at the Forefront*”, organised by IPMS/OHCHR, the Global Forum on Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD) and IDSN, which focused on empowering Dalit youth in South Asia¹. The event convened over 50 youth activists, including Dalit women, LGBTQI+ individuals and persons with disabilities, all of whom are disproportionately affected by caste-based discrimination. The initiative provided training on international human rights standards, engaged with stakeholders from institutions, such as Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and positioned Dalit youth as key advocates in the struggle for justice and equality.

In 2024, we jointly launched the initiative on Access to Justice which culminated in a workshop entitled “*Mapping out Access to Justice for Persons from Descent-Based Communities*”². The workshop was held in Bangkok and organised by the OHCHR, IDSN and Asia Dalit Right Forum. Experts, legal practitioners and Dalit representatives from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka gathered to discuss the barriers that Dalit communities face in accessing justice. The workshop highlighted significant issues, such as the refusal by police to register complaints, insufficient representation of Dalits in legal and political institutions and the lack

¹ IDSN News, *Youth at the forefront: Kathmandu events boosts advocacy to end caste/descent-based discrimination*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2023. Accessible at: <https://idsn.org/youth-at-the-forefront-kathmandu-event-boosts-advocacy-to-end-caste-descent-based-discrimination/>

² IDSN News, *UN workshop sheds light on barriers to justice for Dalits in South Asia*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024. Accessible at: <https://idsn.org/un-workshop-sheds-light-on-barriers-to-justice-for-dalits-in-south-asia/#:~:text=The%20three%2Dday%20workshop%20held,barriers%20to%20justice%20and%20in.>

of effective enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. The workshop's [Outcome Document](#) mapped out key areas where reforms are necessary³.

The event in Kathmandu and workshop in Bangkok align with IDSN's strategic priorities for the period 2024–2030, which aim to promote access to justice and caste and gender justice, and address intersectional discrimination⁴.

The principal foci of IDSN's 2024 – 2030 strategic vision is to amplify the voices of Dalits in global advocacy, ensuring that their concerns are brought to international attention, and promoting effective measures for the elimination of caste-based discrimination⁵. The underlying tenet of this vision is advocacy for the adoption of the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent, which IDSN views as an essential step towards establishing a legally binding UN convention on caste-based discrimination.

Progress and implementation gaps on the UN Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination

In 2017, OHCHR released the [Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination](#), a comprehensive document designed to guide UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and Resident Coordinators (RCs) in addressing caste-based and analogous systems of discrimination⁶. The Tool laid out key challenges, strategic approaches and best practices for addressing the discrimination faced by communities based on inherited social status, including caste. The document is a critical instrument, equipping the UN system with the knowledge and frameworks needed to address the specific rights and needs of caste-affected communities. Its utilisation would facilitate inclusive development, non-discrimination and participation in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities.

However, implementation remains significantly lacking across UNCTs and RCs. At present, there is little evidence that the Tool has been systematically integrated into UNCT operational strategies. Many Common Country Analyses (CCA) and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) fail to explicitly address caste-based discrimination.

IDSN's [Roadmap to the UN OHCHR Guidance](#) in 2017 was to prevent this gap from emerging by providing civil society and UN staff with practical guidance on how to apply the Tool at the

³ *Bangkok Initiative Outcome Document, Promoting and protecting the rights of persons from descent-based communities: Access to justice, Mapping out access to justice for persons from descent-based communities in five pilot countries Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka*, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, International Dalit Solidarity Network and Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2024. Accessible at: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/minorities/issues-focus/access-justice/Bangkok-Initiative-OUTCOME-Documents.docx&ved=2ahUKEwif08Hi5c2MAxWHUUEAHdB1AZAQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw33MRmVJoK6YmJl3EitBkZR>.

⁴ *Strategy 2024–2030*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024. Accessible at: <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IDSN-2024-2030-Strategy.pdf>.

⁵ *Strategy 2024-2030*, IDSN, 2024.

⁶ *Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination: Key Challenges and Strategic Approaches to Combat Caste-Based and Analogous Forms of Discrimination*, United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, OHCHR, 2017. Accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/GuidanceToolDiscrimination.pdf>.

country level⁷. Regardless, the adoption of these resources by UNCTs is not commensurate with the scale of caste-based injustices. The lack of meaningful implementation is exemplified by the continued absence of Dalit issues from many UN country reports and the minimal participation of Dalit representatives in UNCT-led development processes and policy dialogues.

The implementation deficit undermines the purpose of the Guidance Tool, which was designed to ensure the UN system pays *specific attention* to populations placed in “particularly marginalized positions” due to caste discrimination⁸. The causes of this deficit include limited awareness and training among UN country personnel on caste dynamics and the absence of clear accountability mechanisms to track how UNCTs address descent-based discrimination. While OHCHR has sought to assist UN teams in integrating Dalit rights into annual Common Country Analyses, this support must be systemically scaled up. Moreover, a lack of caste-disaggregated data continues to impede efforts to monitor and evaluate caste-based inequalities, a critical gap identified by OHCHR’s guidance.

IDSN urges OHCHR and UN leadership to revitalise dissemination of the Guidance Tool, mandate orientation for UNCT members on its use and incorporate caste analysis indicators in UNCT monitoring and evaluation. Without proactive measures, the Guidance Tool’s promising framework will remain largely on paper; a missed opportunity to enact the UN’s commitment to protect minority rights in some of the world’s most entrenched hierarchies.

Progress of the Recommendations from the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues’ 2016

The [2016 report](#) of the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues specifically addressed caste-based discrimination, identifying it as a severe human rights violation affecting millions of people worldwide, particularly in South Asia⁹. The Special Rapporteur outlined the unique and intersecting challenges that caste-affected communities face, including discrimination in education, employment, justice systems and access to basic services. Significantly, the report emphasised the gendered nature of caste-based discrimination, with Dalit women facing compounded marginalisation due to both caste and gender biases. The Special Rapporteur made several critical recommendations to both Member States and UN bodies, calling for stronger legal frameworks, more robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and the active inclusion of Dalit communities in national decision-making processes.

Regarding the UN’s responsibilities, the Special Rapporteur welcomed the then-ongoing development of the OHCHR Guidance Tool and emphasised the need for UN agencies to systematically address caste-based exclusion. Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye also highlighted the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and

⁷ *IDSN Roadmap to the UN OHCHR Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination: Key challenges and strategic approaches to combat caste-based discrimination and analogous forms of discrimination*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2017. Accessible at: <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Digital-Final-IDSN-Guide-to-UN-GT.pdf>.

⁸ *Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination*, OHCHR, 2017.

⁹ *A/HRC/31/56, Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, minorities and discrimination based on caste and analogous systems of inherited status*, United Nations General Assembly, 2016.

Descent (2009) as a comprehensive framework awaiting formal endorsement¹⁰. In her recommendations, she explicitly urged that States promote these draft UN Principles and that the Human Rights Council formally endorse them. The Principles and Guidelines elaborate the duties of States, UN bodies and other actors to eradicate descent-based discrimination. To date, they have not been adopted by the Council, limiting their authority.

Since 2016, IDSN has witnessed continued advocacy by UN human rights mechanisms and the development of national action plans in countries like India and Nepal. However, the implementation of the Special Rapporteurs' recommendations remains insufficient. A lack of political will, inadequate enforcement of existing laws and weak accountability mechanisms continue to prevent Dalit communities from accessing justice and equality. For example, while India's Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and Nepal's Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability Act offer legal protections, implementation is often weak due to a lack of judicial will. In many cases, Dalit victims face systemic barriers to accessing justice, including police refusal to register complaints, court delays and intimidation from perpetrators¹¹.

The Special Rapporteur's call for legislative reforms and enforcement of special measures remains largely unmet in several countries, indicating a clear gap in commitment to addressing caste-based discrimination.

IDSN insights on access to justice and youth empowerment

Initiatives such as the Kathmandu event and the Bangkok workshop provide valuable insights into the ongoing barriers to justice and strategies needed to empower Dalit communities, particularly Dalit youth.

The Kathmandu event demonstrated the power of Dalit youth as agents of change, providing them with the tools and platforms to advocate for their rights at national and international levels. Through engagement with Dalit civil society and training on international human rights standards, young activists gained the knowledge to challenge discriminatory systems and demand accountability from governments and international bodies¹².

At the Bangkok workshop, participants identified key challenges in accessing justice, including police refusal to register complaints, delays in legal proceedings and the lack of legal aid for Dalit victims. The workshop emphasised the need for stronger community-based legal assistance and greater legal awareness for Dalit communities. Participants also stressed the need for Dalit representation in the justice system, calling for greater inclusion of Dalit individuals in law enforcement, legal professions and judicial bodies. A key takeaway from the workshop was the urgent need to address the systemic bias within legal institutions, which often leads to impunity for perpetrators of caste-based violence and discriminatory treatment of Dalit victims¹³.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *A/HRC/31/56.*

¹² *Youth at the forefront*, IDSN, 2023.

¹³ *Bangkok Initiative Outcome Document*, OHCHR, IDSN and ADRF, 2024.

A consensus on the need for regional cooperation emerged at both events. The Bangkok workshop proposed the creation of a South Asia regional mechanism to address caste-based discrimination, similar to efforts seen in other regions to address minority rights violations. This would help standardise regional best practices, encourage accountability and create a stronger coalition for Dalit rights across South Asia. The full recommendations can be read in the workshop's [Outcome Document](#)¹⁴.

Conclusions and recommendations

While significant challenges remain, the framework for change is already in place. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (1992) provides a robust foundation for promoting the rights of caste-affected communities. As the Special Rapporteur on Minorities previously argued, caste-affected groups share characteristics of minorities, including marginalization, non-dominance and stigma. Therefore, minority rights standards, including equality, non-discrimination and special measures for protection, should apply to caste-affected communities in the same way they apply to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.

To ensure the effective implementation of the Minorities Declaration for caste-affected communities, IDSN recommends the following actions:

1. Mainstreaming caste discrimination in UN country strategies: UNCTs must prioritise caste-based discrimination in their Common Country Analyses (CCAs) and UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs). Caste should be explicitly recognised as a barrier to social, economic and political equality for Dalit communities, and UNCT programming should be based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination.
2. OHCHR should expand its technical assistance to Member States to enforce anti-discrimination laws and develop national action plans to combat caste-based discrimination. Technical support should include training for law enforcement and judicial officers to recognise and address caste discrimination effectively.
3. UN support should focus on reinforcing NHRIs, and other institutions tasked with monitoring caste-based discrimination. NHRIs must be independent, adequately funded and inclusive of Dalit voices to ensure that caste-based discrimination complaints are handled appropriately.
4. Establish a regional mechanism in South Asia to coordinate efforts to combat caste-based discrimination to facilitate cross-border exchanges of best practices, strengthen regional accountability mechanisms and promote solidarity among Dalit communities across the region.
5. OHCHR and UNCTs should engage Dalit youth and civil society organizations in policy development and advocacy. Ensuring that Dalit voices are heard at international forums and in national dialogues is critical for ensuring that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the affected communities.

¹⁴ *Bangkok Initiative Outcome Document*, OHCHR, IDSN and ADRF, 2024.