

Cash strapped! Can the multi-lateral human rights system survive the UN financial crisis?

Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights
2025, Vol. 43(4) 209–216
© The Author(s) 2025
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09240519251391605
journals.sagepub.com/home/nqh



Ann Skelton *

Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

Abstract

The United Nations is facing a financial emergency so acute that it threatens not only the day-to-day functioning of its institutions but also the very architecture of the multilateral human rights system. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the institutional anchor of global rights protection, recently announced a shortfall of around US \$60 million in its core budget, having received only US \$179 million of the US \$246 million allocated for 2025. Extra-budgetary funding, on which many of its programmes rely, has simultaneously been cut by another US \$60 million. These are not abstract numbers: they translate into treaty bodies forced to cancel sessions for the first time in their history, special rapporteurs restricted to a single country visit each year, and commissions of inquiry struggling to secure the staff and resources needed to investigate atrocities. The crisis raises an unsettling question – are we witnessing a temporary budgetary glitch, or the beginning of a deeper unraveling, in which states no longer have the political will to sustain the human rights project they created? This column takes up that question by tracing the roots of the UN's financial shortfall, examining its immediate and long-term consequences, situating it against pre-existing weaknesses in the system, and exploring whether its timing – coinciding with an increasingly hostile global environment for human rights – is mere coincidence or symptomatic of a more profound shift. It concludes with reflections on survival: not through unbounded expansion, but through consolidation, reform, and above all, solidarity.

Keywords

United Nations, funding crisis, multilateralism, treaty bodies, special procedures, Human Rights Council, solidarity.

* Professor of Law, Chair: Children's Rights in a Sustainable World, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands. UNESCO Chair: Education Law, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. Former Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Corresponding author:

Ann Skelton, Professor of Law, Chair: Children's Rights in a Sustainable World, Leiden University, Leiden, 2300 RA, Netherlands.

Email: a.m.skelton@law.leidenuniv.nl



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) is facing a financial emergency so acute that it threatens not only the day-to-day functioning of its institutions but also the very architecture of the multilateral human rights. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the institutional anchor of global rights protection, recently announced a shortfall of around US \$60 million in its core budget, having received only US \$179 million of the US \$246 million allocated for 2025. Extra-budgetary funding, on which many of its programmes rely, has simultaneously been cut by another US \$60 million.¹ The reduction of the regular budget has caused UN treaty bodies to cancel sessions for the first time in their history. Special rapporteurs are restricted to a single country visit each year instead of two, and commissions of inquiry are struggling to secure the staff and resources needed to investigate atrocities. The crisis raises an unsettling question – are we witnessing a temporary budgetary glitch, or the beginning of a deeper unraveling, in which states no longer have the political will to sustain the human rights project they created?

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the UN's human rights system has evolved into a complex web of treaty bodies, special rapporteurs, and investigative and accountability mechanisms. Collectively, these entities form the backbone of international accountability: reviewing state reports, handling individual complaints, and investigating allegations of serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. They provide the authoritative frameworks, evidence, and pressure that states and civil society rely on to keep rights violations in the spotlight. To hobble these institutions financially is therefore not a matter of administrative inconvenience; it risks silencing some of the global mechanisms that hold states to account for their human rights conduct.

Financial crises are not new to the United Nations. Delayed payments from member states have periodically pushed the organisation into liquidity shortfalls, forcing temporary austerity measures. What is different today, however, is both the scale and the political context. The largest contributor, the United States, has accumulated arrears in the billions. Other major economies, including China and the Russian Federation, are either delaying or politicising their contributions. At the same time, global conflicts and humanitarian needs – from Gaza to Sudan to Ukraine – have multiplied, straining the UN system at precisely the moment its budgetary foundations are weakest. For human rights mechanisms in particular, the timing could hardly be worse: demand for investigations, monitoring, and accountability is rising, just as the resources to sustain them are collapsing.

This convergence of financial austerity and political disengagement demands careful scrutiny. Is the current crisis just an unfortunate coincidence, the result of accounting shortfalls and donor fatigue? Or does it reflect a deeper retraction from multilateralism itself, in which member states – tired of being scrutinised, polarised by ideological divides, or resentful of the perceived overreach of the UN human rights system – are using financial leverage to weaken the very system designed to hold them accountable? The answer is likely somewhere in between, but either way, the implications are profound.

This column examines the UN's financial crisis and its consequences for the multilateral human rights system. It begins by explaining how UN funding works, and why arrears have tipped from manageable liquidity issues into a systemic threat. It then surveys the concrete impacts on treaty

1. 'UN rights chief warns of \$60 million funding shortfall' (*Reuters*, 11 June 2025) <www.reuters.com/business/finance/un-rights-chief-warns-60-million-funding-shortfall-2025-06-11/> accessed 1 September 2025.

bodies, special procedures, and investigative mandates. Next, it situates the crisis within the long-standing weaknesses of the human rights machinery, which has long been underfunded, overburdened, and slow to adapt. It also considers the political backdrop – an era of growing scepticism, even hostility, toward human rights among member states. Finally, it asks how the system might endure: through consolidation rather than expansion, through smarter and more efficient practices, and above all through renewed solidarity, both among states and within civil society. The challenge is formidable, and the stakes – the preservation of the only universal system of human rights oversight – are high.

2. WHY IS THE UN FINANCIAL CRISIS HAPPENING?

The financial difficulties now gripping the United Nations are not new. For decades, the organisation has relied on a system of assessed contributions from its 193 member states, supplemented by voluntary contributions earmarked for specific programmes. The assessments are based on GDP debt burden. Some of the wealthier states often fail to pay on time, sometimes for reasons of domestic politics, sometimes as a way to express dissatisfaction with the organisation itself. These delays have historically created liquidity shortages toward the end of financial years, but the Secretariat usually managed by shuffling resources and delaying non-essential expenditures. What distinguishes today's situation from past shortfalls is the sheer scale of the arrears and the geopolitical climate in which they occur.²

At the heart of the problem lies the United States (the US), the UN's single largest contributor. Under the current scale of assessments, the US is responsible for around one-fifth of the regular budget and nearly a quarter of peacekeeping costs. In 2025, the billions of arrears accumulated by the US reached a level that accounts for roughly half of the UN's funding gap.³ The practical effect is simple: if the US does not pay, the UN cannot pay all its staff, convene mandated meetings, or maintain its monitoring role and its investigative and humanitarian operations at current levels.⁴

Other major powers are also contributors to the crisis. China has expanded its global influence, including within UN structures,⁵ but it too has delayed financial contributions, citing technicalities or broader political disagreements. Russia's arrears have grown in parallel with its confrontation with the West, and several middle powers – including Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Venezuela – are also among the largest debtors. The result is a partial paralysis of the organisation. For smaller states, which generally do pay on time, the situation is frustrating. They shoulder little of the financial weight, but they also have little ability to compensate for the shortfall left by the big players.

2. 'The UN could run out of cash within months', *The Economist* (London, 3 May 2025), p. 48.

3. 'UN's lifesaving programmes under threat as budget crisis hits hard' (*UN Office at Geneva*, 30 May 2025) <www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/05/106898/uns-lifesaving-programmes-under-threat-budget-crisis-hits-hard?> accessed 3 September 2025.

4. 'UN faces deepening financial crisis, urges members to pay up' (*UN Office at Geneva*, 19 May 2025) <www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/05/106498/un-faces-deepening-financial-crisis-urges-members-pay?> accessed 3 September 2025.

5. Daniel F. Runde and Austin Hardman, 'Great Power Competition in the Multilateral System, Centre for Strategic and International Studies' (*Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 23 October 2024) <www.csis.org/analysis/great-power-competition-multilateral-system> accessed 30 September 2025.

Structural rigidities within the UN's financial rules make matters worse. Under current regulations, the organisation must return unspent funds at the end of each budget cycle, even if those funds arrive late in the year.⁶ This leaves the Secretariat unable to build reserves or buffers against arrears, forcing sudden austerity measures whenever contributions lag. In early 2025, the Secretary-General froze hiring across the organisation, reduced spending authorisations to 80 percent of approved budgets, and instructed departments to prepare contingency plans for even deeper cuts.⁷ These measures are meant to buy time, but they inevitably erode staff morale and undermine programme delivery.

All of this coincides with a surge in demand for UN services. The armed conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, worsening displacement crises in the Sahel, Myanmar, and Latin America, and the proliferation of climate-related emergencies have created unprecedented calls on the UN's human rights and humanitarian machinery. The paradox is stark: just as the world needs more international oversight, accountability, and humanitarian protection, the organisation finds itself unable to sustain even its existing commitments. The financial crisis is thus not a cyclical inconvenience but a structural and political turning point. It reveals how dependent the UN remains on the willingness of a few powerful states to keep the system afloat – and how vulnerable the multilateral human rights system is when that willingness falters.

3. IMPACT OF THE FUNDING CRISIS

The consequences of the UN's financial crisis are already being felt across the multilateral human rights system, and they are not theoretical. They manifest in cancelled sessions and meetings, delayed investigations, and curtailed country visits – concrete disruptions that weaken accountability and erode trust in the system.

The treaty body system, which forms the backbone of international human rights monitoring system, was one of the first casualties. These committees, composed of independent experts, are mandated to review state compliance with the core human rights treaties and to decide on individual complaints. Most treaty bodies typically meet three times a year, but the crisis has forced several to cancel their third session entirely.⁸ The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) which has a huge responsibility to review 196 states parties, and in 2024 reviewed both the Russian Federation and Israel among others, was compelled to drop its 100th regular session – the first time it has cancelled a session in its 30 year existence.⁹ For states awaiting review, this means prolonged delays. The week reserved for pre-session working groups when the Committee usually meets with NGOs and with children themselves, has also been cancelled, and the Committee will be carrying out some of the work online.¹⁰ The complaints procedure of the

6. 'The UN could run out of cash within months' (n 2).

7. UN General Assembly, 'Severe Cash Shortfall Exposing United Nations to Growing Reputational Risk, Speakers Warn, as Fifth Committee Discusses Organization's Worsening Financial Situation' (Meetings coverage, GA/AB/4499, 19 May 2025) <<https://press.un.org/en/2025/gaab4499.doc.htm>> accessed 30 September 2025.

8. 'Report of the Chairs of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies on their thirty-seventh Annual Meeting', (A/80/294, 31 July 2025) <www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/a80294-report-chairs-human-rights-treaty-bodies-their-thirty-seventh-annual> accessed 8 September 2025.

9. Child Rights Connect, 'The 100th CRC session scheduled from 01-19 September 2025 is cancelled due to the UN liquidity crisis' <<https://childrightsconnect.org/event/100th-session/>> accessed 7 September 2025.

10. Child Rights Connect, 'The 102nd pre-session scheduled from 22-26 September 2025 is partially cancelled due to the UN liquidity crisis' <<https://childrightsconnect.org/event/102th-pre-session/>> accessed 9 September 2025.

CRC Committee is also working under severe constraints which for individual children seeking redress, means justice deferred, and their childhoods are running out. I focus here on the CRC Committee due to my recent membership of it, but the same is true for all the treaty bodies that usually have 3 sessions per year.

Special procedures – the system of independent experts and rapporteurs who monitor thematic issues and country situations – have also been forced to shrink their activities. Country visits been reduced from two to only one visit per year. These visits often provide the only international oversight in otherwise closed or repressive environments. Their contraction leaves gaps that can be exploited by governments wishing to shield themselves from scrutiny.

Deeply worrying is the effect on commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions, which are the UN's most intensive and politically sensitive accountability mechanisms. In 2025, an inquiry into settler violence in the occupied Palestinian territories reported that it was unable to recruit staff or deploy properly because of the funding crisis, raising fears that it would fail to deliver its report on time.¹¹ Similar constraints affect other investigations, including those on Sudan and Ukraine,¹² where atrocities are ongoing and timely documentation is critical for eventual accountability. The failure to support such mechanisms does not simply frustrate the international staff working on these investigations in Geneva – it risks erasing evidence, emboldening perpetrators, and denying justice to victims.

The combined effect of these disruptions is profound. A system already struggling with backlogs and credibility deficits is being asked to 'do less with less'.¹³ In the past, UN staff have been urged to do more with less, but this shift in language is deliberate, and is a recognition that the current funding cuts will leave gaps that will not be possible to fill.¹⁴ The credibility of international oversight depends not only on the normative authority of treaties and resolutions but also on the practical ability to implement them. As that ability erodes, so too does the perception that the multilateral system can deliver. In this sense, the financial crisis is not just a budgetary issue – it is a crisis of legitimacy.

4. PRE-EXISTING WEAKNESSES IN THE MULTILATERAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

The financial crisis has thrown the UN's human rights machinery into turmoil, but it did not emerge onto a blank slate. The truth is that the multilateral human rights system was already fragile, chronically underfunded, and struggling with structural inefficiencies long before today's liquidity crunch. The crisis has merely exposed and accelerated problems that had been festering for years.

Perhaps the most fundamental weakness is the chronic underfunding of the UN's human rights machinery. Despite the centrality of human rights to the UN's identity – alongside peace and

11. Emma Farge, 'UN inquiry on Israeli violence hampered by funding shortfall, document shows' (*Al-Monitor*, 26 August 2025) <www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/08/un-inquiry-israeli-violence-hampered-funding-shortfall-document-shows> accessed 3 September 2025.

12. 'The UN could run out of cash within months' (n 2).

13. See 'Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Opens Ninety-First Session in Geneva' (*UN Office at Geneva*, 15 June 2025) <www.un Geneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2025/06/1e-comite-pour-lelimination-de-la-discrimination-legard-des?utm_source=chatgpt.com> accessed 4 September 2025.

14. Richard Gowan, 'Doing 'less with less' at the UN' (*International Crisis Group*, 16 May 2025) <www.crisisgroup.org/global-united-states/doing-less-with-less-un> accessed 30 September 2025.

development – the human rights pillar has historically received a fraction of the organisation's resources. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has long operated on just three to four percent of the UN's regular budget. To bridge the gap, it relies heavily on voluntary contributions from states, many of which are earmarked for specific projects.

Another weakness is what might be called mandate inflation. Over the past several decades, new treaties, protocols, and monitoring procedures have steadily increased the workload of treaty bodies, special mechanisms, and the Human Rights Council. Every new communication procedure, every new special rapporteur mandate, however well-intentioned, adds responsibilities without matching resources. The result has been ballooning backlogs of state reports awaiting review and of individual communications awaiting adjudication. As of 2024, hundreds of state reports were overdue, and complainants often waited several years for a decision on their cases. The treaty bodies themselves also cannot keep up with the demands – some states complain that although they report on time, there is a long scheduling delay before they can engage in constructive dialogues. As Jasper Krommendijk has previously pointed out in this journal, treaty bodies should be more selective in what they take on.¹⁵

The chairpersons of the treaty bodies have recognised these challenges and have, for more than a decade, discussed reforms under the banner of 'treaty body strengthening'. Proposals have included a predictable review cycle of eight years, harmonised working methods, and greater use of digital platforms to streamline reporting and reduce costs. Yet the General Assembly, in its resolution 79/165, in December 2024 did not endorse the Chairs' detailed proposals on the predictable eight-year calendar of reviews. States welcomed the idea of a more efficient and effective system, but they were not prepared to operationalise it.¹⁶

These pre-existing weaknesses mean that the human rights system entered the current financial crisis already on shaky ground. With too little baseline funding, too many mandates, and too few reforms fully realised, the system was ill-prepared to absorb further shocks.

5. COINCIDING WITH DISENGAGEMENT FROM HUMAN RIGHTS BY STATES

The coincidence of the UN's financial crisis with a broader political retreat from human rights is striking, and perhaps not accidental. Across the globe, governments are showing diminished enthusiasm for multilateral rights institutions, and in some cases outright hostility. This disengagement compounds the financial strain, because a system dependent on state support cannot thrive if those same states are losing faith in its value.

Even traditionally supportive states are now pushing back on aspects of the human rights agenda. In Europe, debates around migration and border control have fuelled scepticism of regional and international oversight.¹⁷ Gender-related rights have become another flashpoint: measures advancing sexual and reproductive rights or protections for LGBTI communities, once gradually gaining ground, are now subject to political backlash in both the Global North and South. The

15. Jasper Krommendijk, 'Less is more, proposals for how the treaty bodies can be more selective' (2020) 38 *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 5.

16. 'Report of the Chairs of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies on their thirty-seventh Annual Meeting' (n 8).

17. See, for example, the letter of nine states, initiated by Denmark and Italy, <www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Lettera_aperta_22052025.pdf> accessed 30 September 2025.

withdrawal of support is not confined to states hostile to rights in principle – it extends to democracies that once championed them.¹⁸

Polarisation within the multilateral system deepens these trends. The UN Human Rights Council has become a forum of sharp geopolitical divides, where issues are routinely politicised and decisions often split along regional or ideological lines.¹⁹ Instead of rallying around common principles, states increasingly treat human rights as a terrain of strategic contestation. In this context, the financial crisis is not a neutral accident but a convenient tool for weakening accountability.

Civil society is not entirely blameless. Over the years, rights groups and advocates have pushed the boundaries of their agendas. While such expansion has often been normatively justified, it has also provoked charges of overreach from governments who feel that the multilateral system is intruding into sensitive areas of national sovereignty. A politically sensitive but necessary reflection is that the human rights movement may have outpaced states' willingness to accept or adopt progressive interpretations of norms. The present crisis, then, is not simply about money, but about legitimacy: whether the multilateral system can command sufficient political support to sustain itself.

6. WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THE CRISIS AND ITS IMPACTS? A STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL

The UN80 initiative²⁰ launched by the UN Secretary General could be a moment to take the first steps towards a survival strategy, although critics are pointing out that efficiency measures it proposes impact the human rights pillar the hardest.²¹ If the UN human rights system is to endure, the financial crisis must be seen not only as a threat but also as an opportunity to rethink, reform, and rebuild. Austerity can be a moment of clarity: a chance to decide what is essential, what can be streamlined, and how solidarity can be renewed.

The first step is to confront structural flaws in financing. States must be pressed to pay their assessed contributions in full and on time, but beyond that, reforms are needed to give the UN more flexibility. Allowing the organisation to carry over unspent funds from year to year would provide a buffer against late payments. Greater transparency in the use of voluntary contributions could also build trust and encourage donors to support underfunded mandates. Some states have called for the exceptional use of special commitments (generally used to fund unexpected activities) during the first quarter of the year to sustain operations.²²

Second, consolidation rather than expansion may be necessary. The instinct to create new mandates in response to emerging crises or widespread rights violations is understandable, but in the current environment it risks overburdening an already stretched architecture. Instead, emphasis should be placed on

18. Wendy Swartz and Ann Skelton, 'A case for enhanced collaboration between experts and diplomats in the United Nations to enhance girls' rights' (2025) *The International Journal of Human Rights* 1.

19. AnneMarie Devereux, 'Amidst Simmering Tensions: Improving the Effectiveness and Coherence of the International Human Rights System's Response to Mass Human Rights Violations' (2020) 38 *Australian Yearbook of International Law* 199; Lucy McKernan and Hillary Power, 'Funding Crisis Threatens Work of Human Rights Council: Member States Should Urgently Mobilize to Plug the Gap' (*Human Rights Watch*, 8 July 2025) <www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/08/un-funding-crisis-threatens-work-of-human-rights-council/> accessed 4 September 2025.

20. United Nations, UN80 Initiative <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>

21. International Service for Human Rights, 'UN80 Initiative: proposed budget cuts disproportionately hit the human rights pillar' (16 September 2025) <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un80-initiative-proposed-budget-cuts-disproportionately-hit-the-human-rights-pillar/>.

22. See the proposals of Switzerland in UN General Assembly (n 7).

safeguarding core functions: the treaty body review processes, the independence of special procedures, and the capacity of investigative mechanisms to respond to rights violations and atrocities.

Third, solidarity must become the watchword of survival. As Special Rapporteur Cecilia Bailliet and others have argued, solidarity is not simply a moral aspiration but a practical necessity in international law.²³ In similar vein, the representative of Kazakhstan to the UN ‘has remarked: ‘Financial discipline is not just an accounting matter, but a matter of credibility, of solidarity and of our collective ability to implement mandates entrusted to the United Nations by Member States’.²⁴ Global solidarity among states is required to sustain the system financially, but solidarity within civil society is equally vital. Too often, NGOs and advocacy networks pursue niche agendas, and in doing so, compete for scarce resources. In a time of contraction, the priority must be defending and implementing existing rights rather than multiplying new frontiers.

Finally, member states should realise that dismantling the multilateral human rights system comes at a cost to their own legitimacy and to international stability. Rebuilding political will – through regional leadership, cross-regional coalitions, and visible commitments from influential states committed to upholding human rights – is as important as paying assessed contributions.

The strategy for survival, then, rests on three pillars: smarter financing, consolidated focus, and stronger solidarity. If the multilateral system can reorient itself around these, the crisis may yet become a moment of renewal rather than decline. But the window is narrow. Unless states and civil society act decisively, the financial shock risks will harden into long-term erosion of the universal human rights oversight system that has taken decades to build.

7. CONCLUSION

The UN’s financial crisis is more than a budgetary shortfall – it is a stress test for the multilateral human rights system itself. Just as global demand for accountability is soaring, the system is hobbled by cancelled sessions, curtailed investigations, and eroding legitimacy. It is necessary to promote consolidation rather than expansion, and cultivate solidarity among states and civil society alike. Preserving the architecture of international human rights oversight is a collective responsibility, demanding solidarity. If the crisis prompts renewal rather than retreat, it could prove to be a nudge toward resilience rather than decline.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Ann Skelton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4320-8904>

23. Lisa Ariemma, Cecilia Bailliet, and Nayelli Torres-Salas, ‘International Solidarity as a Human Right, Shared Goal, and Community Action’ (2025) 119 *American Journal of International Law* 30.

24. UN General Assembly (n 7).