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Committee History

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, or SOCHUM, is one of the United Nations General Assembly's (UNGA) six main committees. It was founded in 1945, after the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR outlines the fundamental human rights that SOCHUM must seek to defend globally.[1] SOCHUM follows the UN Charter, which structures the United Nations by describing the responsibilities and procedures that the organs are bound to. It also sets out key principles, such as member state sovereignty, which refers to the autonomy that a member state has when it is part of a larger international organization.[2]

SOCHUM's mandate extends to discussing social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, as well as protecting human rights among the international community.[3] It takes on a broader scope than other committees, allowing comprehensive discussions on important global challenges. The right to life, cultural expression, accessibility, disabilities, the promotion of social development, and other various topics that reflect emerging global challenges are often discussed.[4] Additionally, SOCHUM is a deliberative body which means that it gathers annually to discuss how to create thoughtful resolutions towards multiple issues. This enhances the international community by influencing the countries future actions and promoting social justice and human rights.

All 193 member states of the UN participate and have an equal vote in SOCHUM. They work with the rest of the General Assembly to discuss issues on their agenda, write draft resolutions, and recommend actions for the GA to consider and approve.[5] However, the committee faces significant limitations. One limitation of SOCHUM is that it cannot enact policies on its own, which means that it is not authorized to force states to take action, only recommend solutions.

Historically, the committee has worked with other bodies in the UN, such as the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Together, they investigate global issues and aim to collaborate with non-governmental organizations as well.[6] SOCHUM references many key documents to carry out its goals, allowing for more consensus among such a diverse group of countries. The committee conducts its proceedings by discussing various agenda items, allowing for the presentation of positions and resolutions, and utilizing voting procedures to finalize decisions, which reflect the diverse perspectives and interests of its member states.

1 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, accessed September 19, 2024, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.
2 "United Nations Charter," United Nations, accessed September 19, 2024. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter.
3 "General Assembly Third Committee 'anchored' in human rights protection," United Nations, accessed September 22, 2024, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/12/1029321.
4 "UN General Assembly Social, Humanitarian & Cultural "Third" Committee," Department of Foreign Affairs, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/international-priorities/human-rights/our-international-engagement/un-general-assembly-third-committee/.
5 "Workings of the General Assembly," United Nations, accessed September 20, 2024, https://www.un.org/en/ga/.
6 "Social Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (Third Committee)" United Nations, accessed September 21, 2024, https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/.

TOPIC A

Human Rights Violations in Venezuela

SOCHUM | NHSMUN 2027

Photo Credit: New York Times

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Venezuela has experienced prolonged political, economic, and humanitarian crises. Reports from United Nations (UN) bodies, regional organizations, and independent experts have raised concerns about elections, judicial independence, freedom of expression, arbitrary detention, and access to basic services. The Venezuelan government argues that many of these reports ignore the effects of sanctions and external political pressure. These competing interpretations have shaped international discussions about the country. The international community has to decide how to respond if a government is accused of violating its population's rights and how to do so without allowing foreign states to determine Venezuela's political future.

Public services such as water, electricity, education, and healthcare remain severely lacking in many parts of Venezuela.[1] According to reports from the UN, millions of Venezuelans require humanitarian aid, with some health centers lacking doctors, nurses, and essential medicines. At the same time, government authorities and security forces have been accused of violating the rights of protesters, political opponents, and other government critics. These violations include civil and political rights, such as expression, assembly, due process, and political participation, as well as social and economic rights, including access to food, health, and education.[2]

Different rights violations can reinforce one another and allow unjust conditions to continue. For example, a person who depends on the government for food or medicine may be less able to criticize officials if doing so could threaten access to those benefits. Similarly, the fragile legal system makes it harder for people to challenge both political repression and failures in public services. In Venezuela, political participation, judicial independence, and access to basic necessities can reinforce or weaken one another.

Attempts to protest have also yielded severe humanitarian consequences. Children have lost access to education and faced detention after protests, women have been met with gender-based violence, and migrants have suffered from trafficking and abuse.[3] These findings raise serious concerns about fundamental rights and the rule of law in Venezuela.[4] Restrictions on independent courts, civil society organizations, protests, and political expression have reduced Venezuelans' ability to participate freely in public life.[5]

At the same time, Venezuelans' right to self-determination, or their right to choose their country's political future without coercion, remains central to the debate. Delegates in SOCHUM must therefore consider how the international community can protect human rights, support Venezuelan-led reforms, and deliver humanitarian assistance without undermining Venezuela's sovereignty or allowing outside states to determine its political future.

History and Description of the Issue

VENEZUELA'S STRUCTURAL EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND LEGAL WEAPONIZATION

Governments do not always become authoritarian overnight. A democracy can slowly weaken from within, as was the case

in Venezuela. The government, starting with Hugo Chávez, adopted authoritarian practices to assert control and concentrate power at the highest levels of government. In addition to using force, the government used courts, the legislative branch, and other institutions to weaken checks and balances, limit oversight, and gain more power.[6] Political scientists call this autocratic legalism, or using laws and legal systems to weaken democracy while still having the appearance of democratic systems. Over the last 28 years, Venezuela has become a prominent example of this.[7]

In 1992, Hugo Chávez led a military coup to take over the Venezuelan government, which failed. On December 6, 1998, Chávez won the Presidency with 56.20 percent of the vote. Soon after taking office, Chávez attempted to pass a new national constitution. On paper the new constitution was progressive and sought to expand rights. However, in doing so it also significantly expanded the powers of the government.[8] In December 1999, Venezuelans voted "yes" to this new constitution in a nationwide referendum.[9] Although the referendum passed, concerns about the fairness of the vote were raised.[10]

The 1999 Constitution eliminated the Senate, extended the presidential term, permitted immediate reelection, and expanded presidential authority.[11] Supporters viewed these reforms as a way to increase participation and address inequality, while critics warned that they weakened institutional checks on executive power. The new constitution further gave the president more control over the army and the country's budget. The government could also take control of private businesses and property in certain circumstances when it claimed they were needed for the public interest. Critics argued that this could weaken property rights and make businesses less secure, especially if the government could take control of them without strong limits or oversight. Moreover, the president could make important financial decisions without Congress voting first.[12]

Moreover, in 2004, the National Assembly passed a law that increased the number of justices on Venezuela's Supreme Court, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, from 20 judges to 32. Additionally, before 2004 a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly was required to vote to confirm a justice, incentivizing compromise. However, a law was passed that allowed a simple majority vote if the two-thirds majority was not met after three rounds of voting. Since Chávez's coalition controlled a majority of the National Assembly, they were able to select the 12 new justices and replace retiring ones, ideologically dominating the court.[13] The government used this ideologically aligned court and the 1999 Constitution to continue taking apart the country's democratic institutions. This process, also known as "democratic backsliding," saw the gradual dismantling of democratic rules from the inside out. Judicial independence affects whether citizens can exercise their fundamental rights. If courts cannot review cases of rights violations without bias, rights that exist in the Constitution may provide little protection in practice.

In 2011, the Venezuelan government launched the "Gran Mision Vivienda," a large-scale housing program. It sought to address Venezuela's housing deficit by constructing millions of homes for low-income populations. However, reports concerning such housing raised concerns about the quality and safety of the homes. Residents reported persistent water leaks, sewage problems, structural cracks, sinking buildings, and inadequate drainage. The government retained significant control over the housing, creating a form of conditional housing. This means that families received the right to occupy and use an apartment, but lacked legal ownership. Reports also indicated political pressure on residents that made them fear losing their homes. While Venezuelans were given homes, they also became dependent on the government for shelter, which could make them afraid to oppose government policies.[14]

Additionally, large amounts of government funds were placed into these programs without

sufficient oversight. The projects became vulnerable to corruption. For example, "Mision Barrio Adentro," a Venezuelan public health and social welfare program, received more than USD 34 million between 2003 and 2016. Despite the enormous investment, most of the program's facilities became inactive or closed. While the right to health care was promised, citizens ultimately continued to face limited access to functioning services.[15]

In 2013, Nicolás Maduro, a member of Chávez's political party, became president following the death of Hugo Chávez. In 2015, the opposition won a majority of seats in the National Assembly. After losing control of the legislature, the government-aligned Supreme Court ruled that the National Assembly was in "contempt of court." This fundamentally undermined the right of Venezuelan citizens to participate in voting.[16]

Venezuela's government officials have also been accused of warning or pressuring citizens by suggesting that those who do not support the ruling party could lose access to government benefits. One important example is the CLAP food program, which provides subsidized food boxes to families. Access to these boxes and other social programs can depend on political support or participation. This can make people feel pressured to vote for the government because they fear losing food or other essential assistance if they do not.[17]

Beyond this, opposition leaders can be removed from office without being charged with a crime or given the chance to defend themselves in court.[18] By prohibiting the opposition's most popular leaders from running for office, political challengers are stopped before a single vote is cast.[19] Critics also accuse the National Electoral Council of changing rules and imposing barriers that disproportionately affect opposition voters. Before the 2024 election, costly passport requirements and consulate closures also limited voting access for Venezuelans living abroad.[20] The Supreme Court has also replaced the leadership of several opposition parties, further weakening their ability to compete independently. These measures affect more than election results. Political participation depends on citizens being able to organize, access information, support candidates, and challenge unfair decisions without retaliation.[21]

Over the last 28 years, Venezuela's democratic institutions have weakened significantly, limiting electoral competition and citizens' ability to participate freely in government. Critics argue that corruption and political pressure have weakened social welfare programs and made some citizens dependent on government assistance. These developments demonstrate how weakened courts, electoral institutions, and oversight mechanisms can leave several fundamental rights without meaningful protection.

STATE-SPONSORED REPRESSION

Before the 2024 elections, the Venezuelan government and the opposition worked together to try to reform elections and increase fairness. Both sides went to Barbados to sign an agreement. Under the Barbados Agreement, Venezuela promised to hold fair elections with international observers. In return, the United States temporarily agreed to ease some oil sanctions.[22] The US had previously imposed strict sanctions that froze bank accounts, banned gold trading, and blocked oil sales to reduce the Venezuelan government's main source of income.[23]

However, Venezuelan authorities did not follow the deal for long. The Venezuelan Supreme Court banned María Corina Machado from holding a government job for 15 years. She had won the opposition's primary election with more than 90 percent of the vote.[24] Machado then chose Corina Yoris, a professor and former member of the opposition's primary commission, to run in her place. However, Yoris was also unable to register as a candidate after the opposition reported that it could not access the electoral authority's registration system. The opposition eventually

Banners erected during the 2014 protests

Credit: NoonIcarus

registered Edmundo González Urrutia, a former diplomat, as its candidate instead.[25]

The Venezuelan government uses several systems to control politics and society. These systems are meant to stop political disagreement and keep the government in power. Institutional repression means mistreating people in ways that are supported by laws, customs, and official practices. Venezuela has used this for more than twenty years, but these activities increased during the July 2024 presidential election. In response to the election results, officials tried to scare the public.[26] They flew drones near well-known opposition figures to show that they were being watched. They also painted "X" marks on the front doors of people they thought did not support the ruling party. This warned the neighborhood that those homes could be targeted in a raid.[27] The UN Fact-Finding Mission documented these intimidation practices as part of a broader campaign of repression. It concluded that certain violations committed in Venezuela may constitute crimes against humanity.[28] These actions are not only political tactics. They also raise serious human rights concerns by limiting freedom of expression, political participation, privacy, and the right to feel safe in one's own home.

In Venezuela, public debate, civic participation, and information sharing have been heavily impacted. The government has created a system that watches and controls public life. This system works in three main ways: through laws, through changes in the media, and through digital technology used by the government.[29]

The state has relied on formal legislation to regulate public organization and human rights monitoring. Under the Law on Supervision, Regularization, Action and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations, the government introduced a centralized registration system.[30] This law forces non-profit groups to share detailed information including their financial statements, and full lists of donors. The government says these rules help increase transparency, protect the country, and stop money crimes or foreign political meddling.[31] However, critics argue that the rules can be used to arbitrarily exclude nonprofits. This limits their ability to distribute aid and to support basic human rights and safety.[32]

Because of financial limitations and strict government regulations, many independent news outlets have shut down. The government's media agency, CONATEL, further checks broadcast licenses and has closed several local radio stations. State TV channels have portrayed independent news sources as foreign propaganda.[33] The government claims these actions are needed to fight "fake news" and to maintain stability in the country. Freedom of the press has ultimately been restricted, limiting the ability of Venezuelans to access independent information and evaluate competing political claims.

As political communication moved online, internet providers increasingly blocked or slowed access to messaging apps, foreign news websites, and social media platforms.[34] The government also introduced VenApp, a digital reporting software. People can use VenApp to report problems with public services, such as water or electricity, but it can also be used to report people for actions that are considered anti-government. This system is connected to the Carnet de la Patria, a QR-code identification card used to provide access to food and other government benefits.[35] Supporters describe the system as a modern and efficient way to distribute public resources during difficult economic times. However, connecting essential benefits to a system that collects personal information can make people feel pressured to support the government. The cards have also been used at voting centers, raising concerns about whether access to basic services can be linked to political participation.[36]

This illustrates how economic and political rights can become connected. Welfare systems can distribute essential resources efficiently, but they may also discourage political participation if citizens believe that criticizing the government could threaten their access to food or other benefits. Delegates must therefore consider how assistance can reach vulnerable people without being conditioned on political loyalty.

ARBITRARY DETENTIONS AND TORTURE

Arbitrary detention and the treatment of prisoners have become central concerns in international scrutiny of Venezuela. The UN, the Organization of American States, and other monitors report that security forces have detained protesters and government critics without warrants, timely access to lawyers, or contact with their families.[37] These practices raise concerns about due process, judicial independence, and the use of criminal law to discourage political participation.

Further, in 2012, Venezuela announced that it would withdraw from the American Convention on Human Rights, a major regional agreement that protects human rights. The withdrawal took effect in 2013. Before this decision, Venezuelans could bring human rights complaints through the Inter-American human rights system, which includes the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The Commission investigates and monitors human rights violations, while the Court can make legally binding decisions in certain cases. After Venezuela withdrew from the Convention, the Inter-American Court could no longer hear new human rights violations that occurred in Venezuela after September 10, 2013. The Inter-American Commission could still investigate and report on human rights issues, but Venezuelans lost the legal protections provided by the Court. This made it harder for victims of government abuse to seek justice outside Venezuela and reduced international oversight of the government.[38]

UN fact-finding reports further raise serious doubts about how prisoners are treated. Many people describe physical and mental abuse. They say detainees are kept alone for long periods, cut off from light and sound, and badly mistreated inside facilities run by national intelligence agencies. International observers say these methods are used again and again to force people to talk or to scare off social movements.[39] They also warn that the courts are

not truly independent. This means people who are detained may not get fair trials or real legal help in their own country.[40] Detention without legal representation or timely judicial review also affects due process, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly. When people fear imprisonment for criticizing the government, individual arrests can discourage entire communities from participating in public life.

The Venezuelan government denies that these detentions are politically motivated and says the arrests are legal.[41] It alleges that reports are politically motivated stories pushed by foreign enemies. Maduro's government characterized many detainees as criminals or participants in violent, foreign-backed plots and argued that charges such as terrorism, treason, and incitement were legitimate measures to protect public order.[42] The administration says every sovereign country has the right and duty to protect its national security, public infrastructure, and democratic institutions. It also maintained that alleged misconduct should be investigated through Venezuela's own courts, rather than external mechanisms.[43] This creates a central criminal-justice debate for SOCHUM. Governments must protect people from violence, but national security laws can violate people's rights if they are too broad or courts cannot review charges fairly. Delegates must consider what safeguards can distinguish legitimate prosecutions from the punishment of peaceful dissent.

Both sides also use statistics to tell very different stories. Independent human rights groups like Foro Penal say that security forces have carried out more than 18,900 politically motivated detentions since 2014. They also use the phrase "revolving door" to describe a pattern where the government releases some detainees but arrests new ones at the same time.[44] Human rights defenders say that many of these people have suffered serious abuse in detention. Groups like the Casla Institute and the UN have collected hundreds of detailed testimonies. They say that people were subjected to electric shocks, waterboarding, and sensory deprivation in high-security facilities. Monitors also say that at least 87 political prisoners have been held in maximum-security centers for more than two years without a formal trial. The conditions in Venezuelan prisons have also led to deaths in custody. Human rights organizations have reported that hundreds of people have died in Venezuelan prisons over the past several years due to violence, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and limited access to food and medical care. These deaths raise further concerns about the government's responsibility to protect the lives and basic rights of people in detention.[45] The reported detention of children and teenagers creates additional concerns. International juvenile-justice standards state that detention of minors should be used only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period. Allegations involving detained minors therefore raise separate questions about family contact, education, legal representation, and protection from abuse.

Human rights organizations have reported that hundreds of people have died in Venezuelan prisons over the past several years

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE AND SYSTEMIC IMPUNITY

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is running an ongoing investigation into the situation in Venezuela to see whether crimes against humanity have been committed.[46] International human rights advocates and opposition groups see the ICC's work as a needed step toward justice and protection for victims. They argue that Venezuela's own courts cannot fairly investigate powerful officials.[47]

Venezuela challenged the continuation of the investigation by arguing that its national authorities were already examining alleged abuses. ICC judges nevertheless authorized the investigation to continue after finding that Venezuela had not demonstrated sufficient domestic proceedings covering the same alleged conduct. The Venezuelan government says the ICC is being used as a political weapon and is violating its national sovereignty. [48]

Global human rights groups and legal experts say Venezuela has "systemic impunity." This means the justice system may fail to investigate or punish abuses committed by government officials and security forces. The World Justice Project ranks Venezuela last out of 143 countries in its overall Rule of Law Index. That considers factors such as limits on government power, fundamental rights, and the fairness of the justice system.[49] When officials believe they are unlikely to face consequences, abuses may continue. Victims may also be afraid to report mistreatment if they do not trust the courts to protect them. Therefore, weak courts can harm several rights at once, including the right to a fair trial, protection from abuse, and the freedom to speak out against the government.

Independent monitors argue that Venezuelan courts follow the orders of political leaders instead of acting as a fair and independent branch of government. For example, the local human rights group PROVEA collected data showing that over 98 percent of documented cases of torture and unlawful killings never reached trial.[50] Activists point out that when high-profile political prisoners die in custody, investigations are often delayed for years or closed without providing victims with clear explanations or meaningful accountability.[51]

The Venezuelan government rejects claims of systemic impunity and points to domestic investigations and convictions of security officials as evidence that its courts can address misconduct.[52] It argues that international investigations ignore these efforts, undermine national sovereignty, and weaken domestic institutions.[53] Critics respond that official statistics do not show whether investigations are independent or whether senior officials responsible for broader policies are held accountable.[54]

Universal jurisdiction allows national courts, where domestic law permits, to investigate certain serious international crimes, such as torture or crimes against humanity, even when the alleged crime occurred abroad. For example, courts in Argentina have opened investigations into alleged crimes against humanity committed in Venezuela since 2014, with support from groups including the Clooney Foundation for Justice.[55] Courts have issued arrest orders for top Venezuelan officials. Spain is now considering a request to extradite a former National Guard colonel to Argentina for questioning.[56] This colonel is accused of abusing people during the 2014 street protests. Venezuela's courts did not act on these claims, so Argentina used universal jurisdiction to ask for his arrest. Spain is now processing the request to send him to Argentina for trial. Supporters view such cases as a safeguard when domestic courts do not act, while Venezuela argues that they bypass its legal system and violate its sovereignty.[57]

Together, the ICC investigation, domestic prosecutions, and foreign universal-jurisdiction cases present delegates with several possible accountability models. The central question is whether these mechanisms should compete

with one another or operate together, with international institutions acting when Venezuelan courts cannot provide credible and independent justice.

Current Status

POST-ELECTION CRACKDOWN AND THE CAPTURE OF NICOLÁS MADURO

The disputed 2024 presidential election became a major turning point in Venezuela's political and human rights crisis. On July 28, 2024, the National Electoral Council said Nicolás Maduro had won the election with about 51 percent of the vote, while Edmundo González got about 44 percent.[58] Volunteers gathered copies of official tally sheets from approximately 80 percent of polling stations and those counts showed González winning with about 67 percent of the vote.[59] The opposition posted the tally sheets online, and independent observers concluded that they were credible.[60]

Independent international observers also had serious concerns. The Carter Center said the election did not meet international standards for fair voting and criticized electoral authorities for not publishing detailed results from individual polling stations. United Nations experts also raised concerns about the transparency and credibility of the announced results. The Venezuelan government rejected these findings as foreign interference.[61] Countries like China, Russia, Cuba, and Iran recognized Maduro's victory. However, the United States, the European Union, and several Latin American governments called on Venezuela to release the complete voting results before recognizing Maduro's victory.[62] Maduro's government said these requests for openness were foreign meddling.[63]

President Maduro asked the country's Supreme Court to step in and review the vote.[64] In August 2024, Venezuela's Supreme Court officially confirmed that Maduro had won the election without making the underlying voting records public. This deepened international disagreement over the result, particularly between states demanding greater electoral transparency and those emphasizing Venezuela's sovereignty and right to manage its own elections.[65]

Protests followed the announcement of the election results. The government described parts of the unrest as violent and accused protesters of vandalism, terrorism, and attempting to destabilize the state. In response, security forces carried out an intimidation campaign called Operation Knock-Knock.[66] They entered the homes of people suspected of opposing the government, often without a warrant or court order. Security forces arrested thousands of people, including teenagers and journalists, as well as lawyers, election volunteers, and people who had criticized the government online. Foro Penal verified more than 1,300 arrests, while Venezuelan authorities reported that the total number of detainees was over 2,200.[67] Many detainees were processed through virtual court hearings, denied access to private lawyers, and accused of charges like terrorism and incitement to hatred. Although authorities later released some detainees, human rights organizations reported that many remained imprisoned in poor conditions.[68] The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported at least 23 deaths, most from gunshot wounds, following the election. They condemned the disproportionate use of force and arbitrary detentions, warning that these actions had created a climate of fear.[69]

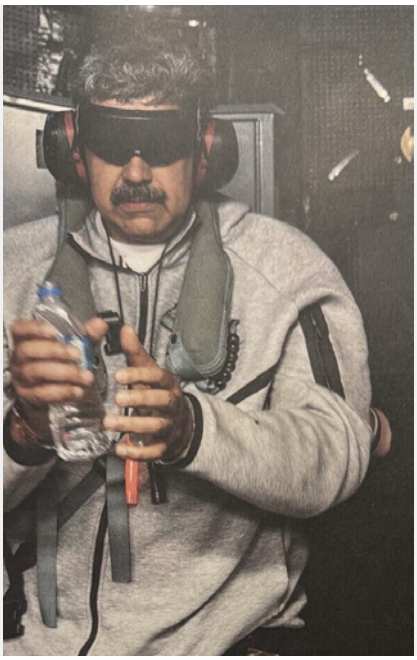
Over months following the 2024 election, both of the opposition's most prominent leaders were forced to leave public political life in Venezuela.[70] Edmundo González faced an arrest warrant and, rather than risk detention, fled to Spain in September 2024. He was granted political asylum there.[71] From exile, he continued to claim he was the rightful president-elect, a position recognized by the US and several other countries.[72] María Corina Machado, the opposition's leading organizer, had already been barred from running for office by a court ruling

that critics described as politically motivated.

By the end of 2024, the NGO Foro Penal counted nearly 1,900 political prisoners in Venezuelan jails.[73] International human rights bodies described many of the prosecutions as politically motivated, with vague charges like "inciting hatred."[74] Throughout 2025, international pressure on Venezuela intensified. In July 2025, human rights groups reported that at least 853 political prisoners remained arrested.[75] Inside Venezuela, tight limits on free speech and the risk of arrest for political dissent remained part of everyday life.[76] Together, these factors left the country deeply divided and without a widely accepted political solution.[77]

On January 10, 2025, Maduro was inaugurated for a third six-year term. The weeks surrounding the ceremony saw another round of arrests, with the government detaining over 125 people it labeled foreign "mercenaries" and coup plotters. The opposition and international observers saw these arrests as an attempt to silence dissent before a potentially turbulent moment.[78]

On January 3, 2026, US forces conducted strikes in Venezuela and captured Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores.[79] The entire operation, from the moment forces reached the compound to when the helicopters cleared Venezuelan airspace, took roughly two hours and 28 minutes.[80] The US government said the operation was intended to bring Maduro to the United States to face existing drug-trafficking and other criminal charges. These accusations against Maduro were not new. In March 2020, during Donald Trump's first term as president, the US Department of Justice charged Maduro and other senior Venezuelan officials with narco-terrorism, corruption, and drug-trafficking offenses. The United States had also opposed Maduro's claim to the Venezuelan presidency for years. After Venezuela's July 2024 presidential election, the Biden administration concluded that opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia had received the most votes and publicly recognized him as the winner, while Maduro claimed victory. The US increased pressure on Maduro after the 2024 election. In January 2025, the US raised the reward for information leading to Maduro's arrest and conviction from USD 15 million to USD 25 million. Against this background, the January 2026 operation represented a major escalation in US involvement in Venezuela. Maduro was captured and taken to the United States to face criminal charges. The operation raised major



President Nicolas Maduro aboard US military transport following his capture

Credit: US Military

questions about Venezuela's sovereignty, the use of military force, and the protection of human rights during political conflicts.[81]

The world reacted with deep division following the operation against Nicolás Maduro. Some governments and members of the Venezuelan diaspora welcomed Maduro's removal, while UN officials and numerous states condemned the unilateral use of force. At an emergency UN Security Council session, UN chief António Guterres warned of a dangerous precedent, Russia labeled it armed aggression, and major Latin American states rejected it as a violation of international law.[82] Leaders like the UK's Keir Starmer and Argentina's Javier Milei supported the change, whereas China demanded respect for sovereignty and even some US politicians criticized the lack of Congressional approval.[83] In response to the backlash, US UN Ambassador Mike Waltz defended the action, arguing that Maduro was a criminal fugitive rather than a legitimate leader.[84] Delegates must consider Venezuelans' right to participate freely in government and choose their political future without pressure from either their own government or foreign countries.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSEQUENCES OF THE TRANSITION

After the capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez stepped forward to assume control of the government.[85] Venezuela's Supreme Court, citing Article 234 of the Venezuelan constitution, ordered her to assume the presidency due to Maduro's "forced absence." She was formally sworn in by the National Assembly on January 5, 2026.[86] Despite the political changes in Venezuela after January 3, 2026, the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission reported that systems used to repress political opposition remain largely in place. Many of the institutions and practices that supported human rights violations for years have not been dismantled. Officials and military accused of serious human rights abuses continue to hold positions of power. Between January 3 and March, there were over 80 new politically motivated detentions. Under Rodríguez, the suppression of political opposition has continued.[87]

While some political prisoners were released and a new Amnesty Law came into effect, there are concerns about both processes. For instance, Venezuelan authorities have not provided information about who has been released or who remains imprisoned. The law does not provide enough mechanisms for victims to receive justice or compensation. The state says these reviews show that it is being fair and helping reduce crowded prisons.[88] The government reported that more than 3,200 people received some form of legal relief under the February 2026 Amnesty Law.[89] However, human rights organizations cautioned that this figure included people whose restrictions were lifted outside prison and did not represent 3,200 independently verified releases from detention. Many prisoners were released with conditions, some were re-arrested, and hundreds still remained behind bars. Moreover, the Amnesty Law was adopted without public consultations. As of April 2026, Amnesty

Many prisoners were released with conditions, some were re-arrested, and hundreds still remained behind bars

International reported that at least 485 people remained arbitrarily detained.[90] Meanwhile, the broader structure of political repression, media censorship, restrictions on opposition activity, and loyalist judges in the courts remained largely in place. The Amnesty Law does not by itself reform the laws, courts, or security institutions that allow arbitrary detention. Delegates should therefore distinguish among releasing current prisoners, preventing new political arrests, and holding officials accountable for past abuses.

Harassment of politicians, journalists, and other civilians has continued. Armed civilian groups known as colectivos also remain active.[91] Inside Venezuela, celebrations after Maduro's capture were quiet and private. Many people were afraid to express their feelings publicly. One Caracas resident told reporters: "People might be celebrating abroad, but not here - we are under repression. Before I left my house today, I deleted all my WhatsApp group chats because you never know if you'll be stopped at a checkpoint."[92] Reportedly, many Venezuelans reportedly remained fearful of surveillance or retaliation for political expression. A democratic transition would require institutional reforms, accountability for past abuses, and stronger human rights protections.

One of Rodríguez's most significant early moves was in Venezuela's oil industry. Venezuela holds the world's largest oil reserves, but decades of underinvestment had shrunk its output dramatically. By January 2026, Chevron was the only major US company still operating there.[93] Responding to US pressure, Rodríguez's government passed a new hydrocarbons law in late January 2026 that gave private foreign companies greater rights over oil production, reduced tax burdens, and allowed independent arbitration of disputes.[94] Supporters argued that renewed oil production could support economic recovery, while critics warned that foreign access to Venezuelan resources had become intertwined with US political influence over the transition. For SOCHUM, the important measure of economic recovery is whether changing policies improve access to food, health care, education, housing, wages, and social protection. Delegates must also consider whether sanctions relief should be unconditional or connected to verified human rights improvements.

By April 2026, Rodríguez was publicly calling for a "Venezuela free of sanctions." She announced salary increases and the creation of a labor dialogue commission, but workers still held protests demanding better wages and pensions.[95] Some projections suggested Venezuela's economy could grow as much as 12 percent in 2026, fueled by rising oil prices and easing sanctions.[96] However, this recovery would likely be uneven and depend on whether the country can keep attracting investment, increase oil production, and improve daily conditions for people. This creates an important human rights concern for SOCHUM. The right to an adequate standard of living includes access to necessities such as food, healthcare, housing, and other basic services. Economic recovery can help the government provide these rights, but only if its benefits reach ordinary families. If economic growth mainly increases government or business revenues while people continue to struggle with low wages, inflation, poor public services, or food insecurity, then economic growth does not necessarily mean that human rights conditions have improved. For Venezuela, the challenge is therefore not only rebuilding the economy, but ensuring that recovery improves the living conditions and protects the economic and social rights of its population.[97]

On June 24, 2026, Venezuela was struck by two major earthquakes measuring 7.2 and 7.5 in magnitude within seconds. The earthquakes affected Caracas and several states in Venezuela. The disasters caused widespread deaths, injuries, displacement, and damage to homes, hospitals, public infrastructure, and other essential facilities.[98] They created additional pressure on a country already experiencing shortages, weak public services, and widespread humanitarian needs. Although an earthquake is a natural disaster, the way a government responds

Aid workers review a building ravaged by the 2026 earthquakes

Credit: U.S. Marines 24MEU by Gunnery Sgt. Kevin Rivas

has a major impact on human rights. During an emergency, governments have the responsibility to protect people's lives and ensure that those affected can access necessities such as food, water, healthcare, and safe shelter.

The Venezuelan government response raised major concerns. Organizations like Amnesty International called for humanitarian organizations, human rights bodies, and more to be provided access to detention centers to verify the safety and well-being of detainees after the earthquake.[99] However, this did not happen. Moreover, the government's response to the earthquakes raised serious concerns about its ability to protect the right to life. Government forces such as the police and the national guard were largely absent from the most affected areas. Civilians began removing the rubble themselves – sometimes using their bare hands – because professional rescue equipment and personnel were not arriving quickly enough. Civilians led much of the rescue effort to recover survivors and victims. Delays in military orders and a lack of basic equipment slowed rescue efforts during the crucial first days after the earthquakes. This is particularly concerning because the earliest hours can be critical for finding people trapped beneath collapsed infrastructure. There were also reports that humanitarian aid was misused or stolen. Members of the Venezuelan military and police blocked aid deliveries, took donations intended for victims, and stole belongings from damaged buildings. Videos shared on social media showed security officials taking clothing, appliances, and money from the destruction.[100] These issues extend beyond the right to life to other fundamental human rights. A poorly coordinated response can affect people's rights to health, food, water, and shelter.[101]

DISPLACEMENT, RETURN, AND CONTINUING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

The complexity of the situation cannot be understood without considering the real economic and social problems faced by Venezuela. Sanctions, economic mismanagement, high inflation levels, and run-down infrastructure have made it increasingly difficult to import food, medicines, and other essentials. Numerous Venezuelans have departed the country searching for better living conditions,

putting migration pressures on neighboring states.[102] Nearly eight million Venezuelans have been displaced internationally, making it one of the largest displacement crises in the world.[103] Colombia hosts nearly three million Venezuelans, while significant populations live in Peru, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, the United States, and Spain.[104]

The change in Venezuela's government in January 2026 created hope that some migrants might finally be able to return home. However, political change does not automatically make return possible or safe. Many Venezuelans living abroad still face uncertainty about whether they can find work, access healthcare, obtain housing, or safely return to their communities. Others may fear the political and social conditions that caused them to leave have not fully disappeared. Years of economic hardship, limited access to health care and education, weak public services, and continued concerns about political repression mean that political change alone does not guarantee that conditions are safe enough for return. This raises an important human rights question: what conditions must exist for people to voluntarily and safely return to their home country?[105]

The possibility of large-scale return has become an increasingly important concern following the political changes in Venezuela. Some governments have discussed facilitating the return of Venezuelans, including through humanitarian corridors. However, the international community should not treat the return as the automatic solution to the displacement. From a human rights perspective, the principle of voluntary repatriation is critical.[106] The principle of voluntary repatriation holds that refugees must be free to decide whether to return to their country of origin, based on full and accurate information, and must never be forced to return to conditions where their safety or fundamental rights may be at risk.[107] Venezuelans should be able to decide whether and when to return based on accurate information about the conditions of their country, rather than pressure from governments or the loss of legal protections. Premature returns could also create a cycle of repeated displacement if migrants return to Venezuela before their safety, rights, and access to basic services can be protected.[108]

Therefore, the responsibility for protecting Venezuelans does not fall solely on Venezuela. Countries throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America continue to host large Venezuelan populations and play an important role in ensuring that displaced people can live with dignity while longer-term solutions develop. This includes access to legal documentation, education, health care, housing, employment, and protection from discrimination and exploitation.[109]

Moreover, Venezuelans without regular status may face difficulties obtaining formal employment, housing, education, healthcare, and access to other essential services. SOCHUM delegates may consider supporting the implementation of regularization and integration programs to allow displaced Venezuelans to fully integrate into society. This is particularly important for Venezuelans who have spent years outside their country. Many have established jobs, families, and communities in their host countries, while children may have grown up entirely outside of Venezuela. Treating migrants as people who can simply "return home" ignores these circumstances.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

Countries vary in their relationship and proximity to Venezuela. However, it is generally agreed upon that human rights violations should be prevented and addressed. However, there are a variety of considerations that shape countries' views and approaches to human rights abuses. The primary disagreements surround how the international community should respond to violations, how much pressure should be placed

on the government responsible, and how much authority international groups have within a sovereign state.

Some states believe that governments accused of human rights abuses will not reform on their own. Rather, they need an external motivator, such as political or financial pressure. On the other hand, states argue that excessive pressure can isolate governments, reduce their desire to cooperate, and negatively impact civilians. Another large division surrounds state consent and sovereignty. Some countries believe serious human rights concerns can justify international monitoring and pressure without the government's consent. Others maintain that international involvement should depend on the consent of the state concerned.

Ultimately, disagreements occur over what reforms and interventions should accomplish. Some states believe in direct aid to the impacted civilians, working to remedy the most immediate forms of humanitarian suffering. Others value accountability for violations, including investigations, trials, and prosecutions. Finally, some countries prioritize institutional reform and capacity-building to aid the growth and longevity of the country itself.

These differences can be grouped into blocs. The first bloc includes countries that value a pressure-based approach. This means they believe human rights concerns ought to be quickly addressed at the government level through political and economic pressures. The second bloc includes those that believe in a support-based approach. These countries value institutional support and positive incentives, rather than punishment. The final bloc includes countries that favor autonomy-based support. These are countries that believe that national sovereignty and domestically led reforms are the ultimate priority.

PRESSURE-BASED APPROACH

States in this bloc believe that severe human rights violations require external consequences when governments fail to address abuses internally. These countries are more willing to support independent investigations, public reporting, targeted measures against accused officials, and other forms of diplomatic or economic pressure. However, states within this bloc may disagree over broad economic sanctions or military action. Countries in this bloc are likely to argue that governments participating in human rights abuses are unlikely to take sufficient action independently. Supporting international pressure does not necessarily mean supporting military intervention or coups. Countries in this bloc may include Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Chile, the United States, Uruguay, and Argentina.[110]

One example can be seen in Canada, which has repeatedly used targeted sanctions, such as asset freezing and travel bans, against Venezuelan officials in response to attacks on democratic institutions or severe human rights violations. Canada has also supported international monitoring and accountability mechanisms for Venezuela.[111] While these actions were not explicit forms of military pressure or posturing, they conveyed a clear message with the intent of penalizing those accused of committing human rights abuses, and supported external monitoring to increase international attention on the situation. Similarly, Argentina has supported UN attention on Venezuela through the UN Human Rights Council. This has included international investigations.[112] This approach treats independent documentation and international scrutiny as necessary to provide credible information. A pressure-based approach does not necessitate sanctions or military action, but rather believes that international support should be accompanied by credible consequences when government action has failed.

Delegates in this bloc will have to balance the

urgent nature of human rights violations with actions that maintain the rights of Venezuela. Actions that attempt to pressure the Venezuelan government must consider the mandate of SOCHUM, as well as the potential impact of actions. Economic sanctions, a tool of many countries hoping to achieve change in Venezuela, may worsen economic hardship and restrict civilians' access to essential goods and services.

SUPPORT-BASED APPROACH

Countries in this bloc believe that violations of human rights are best combated through cooperation, incentives, and support. This differs from approaches that focus on punitive measures and those that avoid action altogether. Members of this bloc may support independent monitoring, but generally prefer that its findings guide dialogue, technical assistance, and negotiated reforms rather than immediate punishment. Solutions that focus on economic pressure or sanctions would also be avoided, with the belief that these policies can harm civilians in the long term. Instead, these states are likely to prioritize maintaining diplomatic relationships, reforms, and providing governments with resources necessary to improve institutions. Countries in this bloc may include Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Barbados, Spain, and Portugal.[113]

One example of this approach can be seen with Brazil's attitude towards Venezuela. Brazil has maintained diplomatic relations and emphasized dialogue with the Venezuelan government rather than relying on pressure tactics or isolation. However, cooperation does not require unregulated support. In October 2024, Brazil vetoed Venezuela's application to join BRICS, an inter-governmental economic partnership, following concerns about Maduro's leadership. Regardless, Brazil continued to communicate with Venezuela and offer diplomatic incentives. An important distinction is that withholding the benefits of greater cooperation is distinct from new punitive measures. Support-based states may condition diplomatic, economic, or political benefits on reform while maintaining communication and offering aid.[114]

Countries in this bloc must balance the importance of support and aid for Venezuelan citizens, while still holding the government accountable and pushing for reform. Diplomatic relations, while important, can also be interpreted as tacit approval of a government's conduct. However, isolation or punishment may further

Venezuelan President Delcy Rodriguez

Credit: US Department of State

harm Venezuelan civilians who have already experienced severe economic and humanitarian hardship.

AUTONOMY-BASED APPROACH

States in this bloc believe that human rights are best protected through domestic government-led reform. International assistance ought to respect state sovereignty and independence. These states are generally critical of punitive actions, external political pressure, and independent investigations conducted without government consent. These countries value self-determination. As such, they may argue that allowing foreign governments or other institutions to be involved in the political and legal affairs of another country is a violation of sovereignty. They may also argue that external involvement is not always neutral, but may be used by foreign states to advance their own interests. Members of this bloc may believe that international organizations should provide humanitarian aid and support, but only if requested and distributed by the government.[115] Countries in this bloc may include China, Russia, Cuba, Iran, Algeria, and Bolivia.

One example can be seen in China and Russia's response to international action regarding Venezuela. China and Russia jointly vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution in 2019 that called for action in Venezuela.[116] Chinese officials argued that Venezuela had the right to sovereignty and freedom from external influence. This was not a position that rejected international assistance, but prioritized Venezuelan consent in its future.[117] Meanwhile, Russia has broadly opposed sanctions and has argued that pressure-based tactics are violations of self-determination. Following the 2026 United States removal of Maduro, Russia issued a condemnation of the action as a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty.[118]

Even when human rights concerns are present, alleged violations do not give another state the authority to intervene in a country. Countries in this bloc must consider the interactions of sovereignty with consent-based solutions, and identify pathways for aid that maintain sovereignty. The argument is not that the international community should not help, but that assistance should be provided with Venezuela's consent and without imposed political conditions.

Committee Mission

SOCHUM, formally called the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, considers social, humanitarian, and human rights issues. It reviews reports from UN officials and human rights mechanisms and considers information provided by governments and civil society organizations.[119] For this topic, delegates should consider Venezuela's fundamental freedoms, treatment of detainees, criminal justice system, refugee crisis, and right to self-determination. As delegates, your goal is not simply to defend or condemn one side, but to find ideas that enough countries can agree on.

SOCHUM cannot punish Venezuela, send in soldiers, impose sanctions, or make any country follow what it says. Its resolutions are generally nonbinding, meaning that they recommend actions rather than legally require them. Delegates should therefore propose ideas that are realistic, specific, and consistent with the committee's authority.[120] SOCHUM can call upon Venezuela to work with UN human rights experts and recommend technical assistance for police, courts, prisons, and electoral institutions. Delegates can also suggest ways to improve access to food, medicine, and humanitarian aid while protecting journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, refugees, children, and other vulnerable groups.

The committee can also request regular reporting on human rights conditions, encourage access for independent monitors, support voluntary and safe refugee returns, and recommend international funding or technical

assistance.[121] Delegates must decide whether these measures should depend on Venezuela's consent, include measurable benchmarks, or be connected to incentives such as sanctions relief.

Possible proposals include independent bodies that investigate police misconduct, confidential systems for reporting abuses, protections for witnesses and human rights defenders, and international assistance to strengthen judicial independence.[122] Because institutional reform takes time, delegates should consider whether recommendations should include gradual stages, reporting deadlines, and clear ways to measure progress. For example, a proposal could begin by requesting access for independent human rights monitors and later connect continued cooperation to judicial reforms or long-term reporting requirements.

TOPIC B

Improving Global Literacy Rates

SOCHUM | NHSMUN 2027

Photo Credit: TAPAS KUMAR HALDER

Introduction

Literacy is the ability to understand and communicate information through reading and writing. Broader definitions may also include speaking, listening, numeracy, and digital skills.[123] Literacy is more than just being able to read and write; it also affects people's health, income, and overall quality of life.[124] People rely on literacy to understand medical instructions, apply for jobs, manage money, access government services, evaluate information, and learn other subjects.

Literacy can help people enter the job market, understand their rights, participate in public decisions, and communicate their needs. These benefits extend beyond individuals: communities with stronger literacy skills are better equipped to improve public health, expand economic opportunities, and support future generations.[125] Modern literacy also includes related skills such as digital and media literacy, but access to the resources needed to develop these skills remains unequal.

One of the main causes of low literacy is limited access to quality education. At least 739 million adults still lack basic literacy skills worldwide, and two thirds of them are women.[126] Limited literacy affects not only education but also employment, health, civic participation, and access to essential services. It also requires qualified teachers, accessible instruction, appropriate learning materials, and targeted support for vulnerable populations. For SOCHUM, improving literacy means examining both who can access education and whether that education produces meaningful learning. Delegates should consider how international cooperation can strengthen education systems and ensure that solutions match different economic, cultural, and political circumstances.

History and Description of the Issue

SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS AND THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL LITERACY RATES

Global literacy rates have significantly risen over the past two centuries. In 1820, only one in ten people in the world could read and write.[127] Industrialization, the spread of compulsory schooling, and global development agendas gradually pushed that figure upward across nearly every region.[128] By 2024, global adult literacy had reached 88 percent, continuing a steady climb from 86 percent in 2015.[129] Younger generations have benefited even more from this expansion, with global youth literacy reaching 93 percent by 2024.[130]

Despite this progress, literacy gains have not spread evenly across regions. In 2024, nearly 77 percent of the world's adults who lack basic literacy skills lived in just two regions: Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia.[131] This share has grown since 2015. More than half of the world's illiterate adults, roughly 441 million people, are concentrated in only ten countries, many of which have large populations.[132] These unequal patterns are especially visible in Sub-Saharan Africa. The region's total literacy rate rose from 65 to 69 percent between 2015 and 2024. However, the actual number of illiterate adults grew from 196 million to 225 million over the same period, since population growth outpaced educational gains.[133] Educational

attainment gaps compound these disparities. Only 29 percent of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa complete upper secondary education, compared to 62 percent globally.[134]

Accurately measuring literacy presents another challenge. Conventional statistics, such as national literacy rates, are often based on self-reported or household-reported information about whether a person can read or write, rather than direct testing. These figures also tend to capture only basic reading and writing ability, excluding the numeracy and digital skills increasingly required to participate in modern economies.[135] Even where literacy rates are high, more detailed measures of learning may reveal that many students lack foundational skills. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only about one in five students achieve minimum proficiency in both reading and mathematics by the end of primary school. Looking at reading alone, only 30 percent reach minimum proficiency, compared with 97 percent in Europe and North America.[136] These figures show that attending or completing primary school does not necessarily mean that a child has gained basic reading and mathematics skills.

Poverty can prevent children from attending school consistently even where tuition is free. Families may be unable to afford books, uniforms, transportation, or internet access, while some children must work or care for family members.[137] Children from the poorest households are nearly five times more likely to be out of school than children from wealthier households.[138] Schools in low-income communities may also lack qualified teachers and appropriate learning materials, making it more difficult for enrolled students to develop literacy.[139]

Poverty and illiteracy reinforce each other in a cycle that can persist across generations. Children born into low-income households often have far less access to resources that support literacy development. Over time, this produces a cycle in which poverty limits education, and limited education makes it harder to escape poverty.[140] Additional schooling raises future income, with each extra year of education associated with roughly a 10 percent increase in earnings.[141] A recent panel study of 34 European countries reinforced this link by finding that greater investment in education was associated with lower poverty.[142] This suggests that the benefits of education may emerge gradually.

This cycle also affects the economic and social development of entire societies. Illiteracy can create a structural barrier to people's full participation in economic and civic life.[143] It is not only a personal disadvantage. Modern development theory views education as an investment because it can improve productivity and help a country's economy grow.[144] Consequently, many economists argue that sustained development is difficult to achieve without broad access to literacy and education, as these skills support productivity, innovation, and civic participation.[145] Left unaddressed, widespread illiteracy can create compounding costs, including higher unemployment, wider inequality, and reduced social stability.

The foundations of literacy begin before formal schooling and are often shaped by conditions at home. Reading and writing skills develop through everyday exposure as much as through formal teaching.[146] A parent's own reading ability is widely considered one of the strongest predictors of a child's future academic success. Much of this early foundation comes from everyday literacy activities within families, such as reading, writing, and spoken-language exchanges. These include reading bedtime stories, writing shopping lists, or narrating daily tasks aloud. According to research published through the National Institutes of Health, maternal reading ability is an important predictor of a child's future academic achievement.[147] Therefore, children who grow up in low-income areas or in families with lower literacy levels are less likely to succeed academically. Breaking this cycle requires addressing more than access to a classroom seat.

Learning poverty means being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10.[148] The measure combines information about whether children are in school with assessments of whether they have reached minimum reading proficiency. According to the World Bank in 2021, 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple text by age 10. In certain countries, the level is as high as 80 percent.[149] These figures demonstrate that school enrollment alone has not ensured that children develop foundational literacy. Learning poverty can limit both individual opportunities and a community's long-term development.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN LITERACY

Gender inequality in literacy involves both who can access education and how enrolled students perform. Gender stereotypes may actually favor female literacy. In some cultural contexts, literacy and language-related skills are implicitly associated with femininity. Boys may instead be perceived as less naturally inclined toward reading.[150] Thus, girls have consistently outperformed boys on standardized reading comprehension tests in most countries.[151] This is despite the fact that boys and girls score similarly in most psychological domains, especially general cognitive abilities.[152] Therefore, this literacy achievement difference can be explained, to some extent, by preferences and behaviors developed through observational learning, social reinforcement, and perceived norms.

However, women and girls still face greater barriers to entering or completing school in certain countries. Standardized tests generally do not measure children who have already dropped out or never enrolled in school. Women and girls do not have equal opportunities in education globally. Where educational access is relatively equal, girls often outperform boys in reading. However, long-standing beliefs and traditions around the role of women in society in certain countries makes it harder for women to access these resources.[153]

Afghanistan demonstrates how government policies and social inequalities can widen literacy gaps. As of 2015, Afghanistan had one of the lowest literacy rates in the world at 38 percent.[154] However, the literacy rate was 52 percent among men and only 24 percent among women. After returning to power in 2021, the Taliban progressively barred girls from secondary education and women from

Aid workers teach women in one of Somalia's nomadic communities

Credit: USAID

universities, furthering this divide.[155] Afghanistan has reported very limited data on literacy since the 2021 takeover, but as a result of the ban, many girls have few opportunities to develop literacy skills. When educational exclusion affects multiple generations, families may have fewer resources to support their children's learning, and the country may struggle to train enough skilled workers and teachers.[156] This cycle can allow educational exclusion and low literacy to persist across generations.

Even when gender exclusion is not official policy, families might still prioritize male education. In some cultures, if a family is unable to afford fees, uniforms, books, transportation, or internet access for all children, then a boy might receive these resources despite age or merit. Historically in China, for example, traditions concerning inheritance, family lineage, marriage, and expected economic support have led many families to invest more heavily in their sons' education.[157] Although these cultural differences may persist within some communities, gender gaps in school enrollment have narrowed globally. However, substantial inequalities remain in particular countries and at the secondary level.

Girls may be expected to cook, clean, collect water, or care for siblings instead of attending school.[158] These activities are time-consuming and can prevent girls from attending school or completing schoolwork. Families may also keep girls home because of safety concerns. Amidst conflict, dangerous travel routes to school, harassment, kidnapping, or gender-based violence, girls may be kept at home. In Northeast Nigeria, attacks have been reported on 313 schools since 2009.[159] This has led to long-term educational disruption for girls in particular. Further, some girls are forced into child marriage or leave school because of pregnancy and childcare responsibilities, especially in settings where schools do not allow or support return after those life events.[160] Around 19 percent of young women are married, and 13 percent give birth before turning 18.[161] Most married and pregnant girls drop out of school. Sexual violence and policies that exclude pregnant students can further prevent girls from continuing their education.[162] These cases are often under-reported. Further, many schools lack safe and private sanitation facilities where girls can properly manage their menstruation.[163]

New types of inequality also emerge as access to digital learning becomes an increasingly critical aspect of literacy. Women remain underrepresented in information and communication technology (ICT) education and employment.[164] As of 2026, women are using mobile internet more than ever before, but they are 12 percent less likely than men to use it.[165] As a result, around 200 million fewer women use mobile internet. Even when they have access, social restrictions or safety concerns may limit how freely they can use technology.[166] Women may also face a disadvantage in digital literacy and ICT participation even when they perform well in traditional reading.

One approach to reducing the gender gap in education systems is community-based education (CBE). This approach can make education more accessible and culturally appropriate, especially in hard-to-reach areas. By working together with communities, CBE programs help provide better learning opportunities and support girls in gaining education and expanding educational access for girls. For example, even in restrictive places like Afghanistan, over 1,000 community-based facilitators in more than 2,600 villages across the country deliver literacy courses to 57,000 young people.[167] The vast majority of these learners are female. Despite this broad reach, UNESCO warns that alternative learning methods cannot fully replace formal classroom education and remain vulnerable to restrictions imposed by authorities.[168]

The Global Gender Gap Index was first introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006. It measures gender gaps across four main areas: economic opportunities, education, health, and political leadership.[169] Of these

areas, education has seen the most progress, from 90.8 percent in 2006 to 95.7 percent in 2025. This benchmark allows governments and researchers to compare progress and identify areas where gender inequalities remain. Even though economies differ around the world, having an index that tracks education and literacy helps countries measure progress and identify remaining disparities.[170] This issue falls within SOCHUM's mandate because the committee addresses the advancement of women, the protection of children, and equal enjoyment of human rights. Resolution 79/151 also calls for literacy programs for girls and women and greater attention to learners in vulnerable situations.[171]

LITERACY IN CONFLICT/DISPLACEMENT ZONES

Conflict is widespread and increasingly prevalent. The year 2025 marked the highest number of conflicts between states since World War II, and the highest number of fatalities recorded since the Rwandan genocide.[172] There were 65 active conflicts in 2025, including intra- and interstate conflicts. The cross-border conflicts included Russia and Ukraine, Iran and Israel, India and Pakistan, Thailand and Cambodia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US and U.K. against Yemen's Houthis, and Israel's conflicts in Syria and Yemen.[173] In 2026, crises disrupted the education of 258 million school-aged children and adolescents.[174]

Although Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes education as a right, conflict can prevent children from exercising that right for years.[175] As a direct result, nearly three in 10 young people aged 15-24 living in countries affected by conflict lack basic literacy skills, which is triple the global rate.[176] UNSC Resolution 2601 was unanimously adopted in 2021 to support education during armed conflict. However, conflicts continue to disrupt schooling and literacy development disproportionately.[177]

In conflicts, schools are often destroyed, shut down, or simply too far away for children to safely reach. Over 80 percent of schools have been damaged or destroyed since October 2023 in Gaza.[178] Therefore, children lack a stable space to concentrate and fully engage in educational activities. In Yemen, more than 4 million children are out of school.[179] Unpaid teachers and damaged infrastructure further weaken instruction. When education is repeatedly interrupted, children lose opportunities to practice reading, receive feedback, and progress to more advanced material.

Displacement makes consistent literacy instruction especially difficult. Over 47.8 million children alone have been displaced due to the direct impacts of armed conflict.[180] In places such as Syria and Ukraine, millions of children have been displaced, sometimes multiple times. This can make it extremely difficult to maintain consistent schooling. Even in safer host countries, language barriers, lack of documentation, and overcrowded schools can limit literacy achievement.[181] Economic hardship also pushes many children into work instead of school.

Girls living in areas with conflict are 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school

Conflict does not affect all learners equally. Girls living in areas with conflict are 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than girls in areas without conflict. The risk of child marriage and pregnancy in conflict zones also increases by 20 percent.[182] Boys also face the risk of recruitment or use by armed forces and groups. Children with disabilities may be unable to use emergency learning spaces or evacuation routes. As a result, more than half of children in conflict areas report not feeling safe at school and over 60 percent express having no hope for a better future.[183] Seeing violence, losing loved ones, and living in constant fear can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.[184] Without appropriate support, trauma can make it harder for students to concentrate, participate in lessons, and develop literacy skills.[185] These psychological effects can be long-lasting. Rebuilding education systems after a conflict can also take years. Without classrooms, textbooks or basic supplies, communities can struggle to restore any form of learning.

The African Union estimates that approximately 80 million African children are currently affected by conflict. This is equivalent to one in three children on the continent, throughout multiple countries. After more than four decades of intermittent conflict in South Sudan, only about 2.3 million of the country's 6.3 million school-aged children are enrolled in school.[186] Since 2009, more than 2,000 teachers have lost their lives in Northeast Nigeria, and over one million children have been forced out of school.[187] In the Sahel region, school closures have quadrupled over the last five years across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

Despite continuing instability, many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have still prioritized education and improving literacy, investing resources in local projects to expand and improve schools. Cameroon, for example, has worked extensively with the World Bank to hire over 9,000 primary school teachers, prioritizing zones that host refugees and internally displaced people.[188] The program provides training for almost 60,000 teachers in topics such as education in emergencies, gender-based violence and psychosocial support. The project also supports school grants as well as financial management training for school management councils in refugee-hosting areas.[189] These efforts ensure that even in difficult conditions, schools can continue to support students in improving their literacy skills. This also helps prevent long term reduction in literacy rates.[190] South Sudan also promotes alternative education programs for older students and young mothers.[191]

Since military spending far outweighs most peace-building investments, the difference highlights how governments often devote more resources to responding to conflict than to preventing it and rebuilding affected communities. Greater investment in education during and after conflicts could help restore schooling and improve literacy. In 2023, global military spending reached approximately USD 2.3 trillion, while peace-building investments remained at just USD 15.3 billion.[192] The difference demonstrates the limited funding available for long-term peacebuilding efforts.

In Colombia's armed conflict, widespread violence, displacement, kidnappings, extrajudicial killings, massacres, terrorist attacks, forced disappearances, sexual violence, torture, recruitment of children, and the use of anti-personnel mines have disrupted communities and education for decades.[193] In the early 2000s, the Colombian government's efforts prioritized immediate security measures. After the implementation of the 2016 peace agreements, these priorities shifted toward rural reform, transitional justice, and the reintegration of former combatants. These efforts addressed some of the root causes of the conflict.[194] However, critics argued that concentrating on long-term reforms could leave insufficient resources for the immediate needs of conflict-affected communities. This includes reopening schools, training teachers, and helping displaced children return to the classroom. Without these

educational investments, the effects of conflict on literacy can continue even after violence declines.

Improving literacy may also support long-term peace and recovery. Women are more likely to contribute to peacebuilding and economic recovery efforts in their communities when they are educated.[195] Literacy skills can help women become leaders and advocates for peace. More broadly, literacy can help people recognize harmful misinformation. It also enables communities to understand their rights and participate in political decisions.[196] In post-conflict societies, it can also help people find work and reintegrate into their communities. These benefits can reduce some of the hardships that allow violence and instability to continue.

SOCHUM can recommend that Member States protect education during humanitarian emergencies, support displaced learners, and include literacy in post-conflict recovery. Resolution 79/151 encourages safe education during emergencies as part of the transition from humanitarian relief to long-term development.[197]

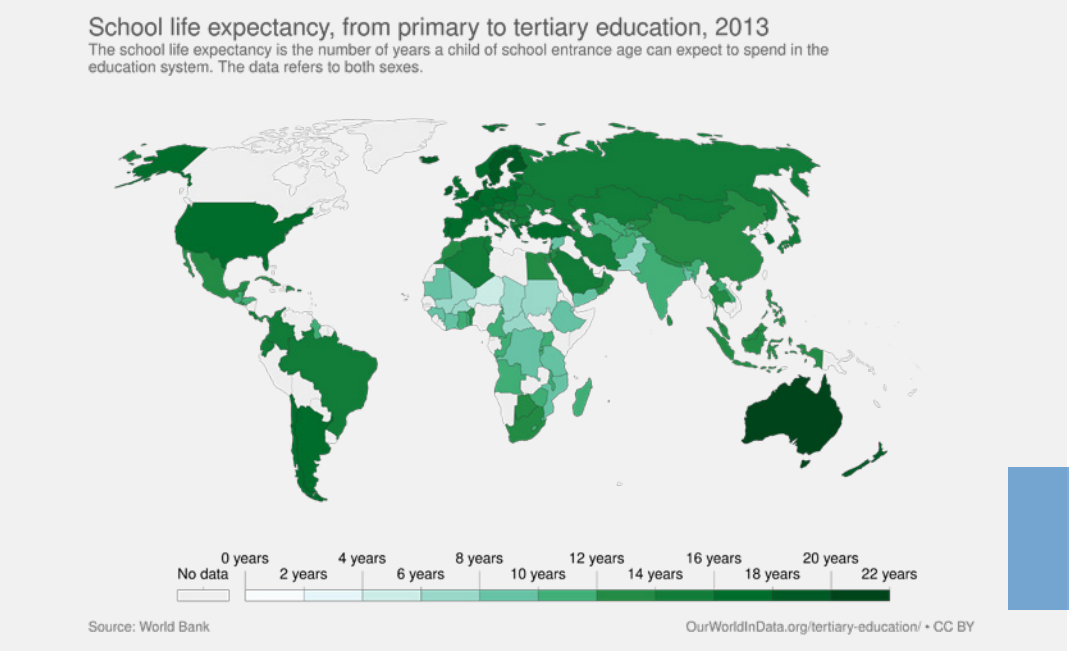
EDUCATION SYSTEMS

For decades, the dominant global strategy for improving literacy has centered on getting children into classrooms. This focus on enrollment alone has not translated into widespread literacy. One study of more than 500,000 students across 48 low- and middle-income countries found that, after three years of schooling, more than 90 percent still could not identify letters, sounds, or simple words.[198] Globally, only 58 percent of students achieve minimum proficiency in reading by the end of primary school, and just 44 percent reach minimum proficiency in mathematics.[199] This gap between attending school and actually learning to read is not confined to any single region. This disconnect reveals a central problem in global education strategy. Simply placing a child in a classroom does not guarantee that the child will leave it and be able to read.

Even well-funded schools cannot produce literate students without qualified educators. Globally, only about 8 in 10 teachers meet minimum qualification standards, leaving many classrooms led by teachers who do not meet minimum qualification standards.[200] This shortfall is compounded by a staffing shortage. UNESCO estimates that an additional 44 million primary and secondary teachers will be needed globally by 2030 simply to meet demand.[201] These shortages are not evenly distributed. Between 2015 and 2022, the share of students whose school principals reported teacher shortages rose from 29 percent to nearly 47 percent on average across mostly high-income OECD countries.[202] This suggests that even wealthier education systems are struggling to keep classrooms adequately staffed.

A 2025 study of secondary students in Bangladesh found that nearly 79 percent of participants identified the teacher's role as the single most critical factor in achieving quality education.[203] Students specifically pointed to teachers' subject mastery, consistent ethical conduct, and full use of instructional time as the behaviors most responsible for effective learning.[204] Yet the same study found that 58 percent of students said their education was not meeting their own standard of quality.[205] This points to a persistent gap between what students recognize as necessary and what their classrooms actually deliver.

Historical examples demonstrate the value of sustained investment in education quality. Japan's postwar recovery focused on integrating education directly into national development planning. It revised curricula, strengthened teacher involvement, and aligned educational outcomes with labor market needs.[206] Malaysia followed a similar trajectory after gaining independence in 1957, reducing its illiteracy rate from 74 percent in 1970 to just 6 percent by 2000, alongside near-universal school enrollment.[207] This was accomplished through



The school life expectancy is the number of years a child can expect to spend in education

.Credit: Our World In Data

sustained and deliberate investment in education quality rather than access alone. Sri Lanka offers a further example. Since 1945, the country has provided free education from kindergarten through university. This has helped it achieve the highest literacy rate in South Asia at 92 percent.[208] In each case, measurable gains in literacy followed sustained policy commitment to the quality of instruction students received.

Beyond staffing and training, the language in which a child is taught shapes whether instruction actually builds literacy. Roughly 40 percent of the global population lacks access to education in a language they personally speak or understand.[209] This is despite substantial research showing that first-language based instruction improves cognitive development, comprehension, and overall learning outcomes. When children are taught to read in an unfamiliar language before mastering it verbally, they are forced to learn two skills simultaneously. They must decode written text and acquire a new language. This added burden slows literacy acquisition and can discourage continued learning altogether, particularly in early grades.

Students with disabilities face additional barriers within education systems and are 42 percent less likely to have foundational reading and numeracy skills.[210] Those with physical disabilities may be excluded from school because buildings, transportation, or classrooms are inaccessible. Even when enrolled, other students with dyslexia, hearing or visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, and other learning needs may struggle to learn.[211] This is especially true if teachers lack specialized training, or if schools do not provide appropriate support. Quality education for those with disabilities is important for economic and social development. Persons with disabilities who develop literacy skills and complete higher levels of education generally have greater employment opportunities and independence.[212] Education and literacy can help people overcome barriers, increase their independence, and improve their overall quality of life.

Disability identification can also be affected by cultural and linguistic differences. In the United States, Indigenous students continue to be the racial and ethnic group with the highest percentage of students served in special

education at 18 percent.[213] However, higher identification rates do not necessarily mean that disability is more common in these communities. Language differences, culturally inappropriate assessments, poverty, and unequal access to early support may affect how students are identified and served. Culturally appropriate assessments, instruction in languages children understand, and teaching that recognizes students' individual strengths can improve literacy outcomes for marginalized learners.[214]

Whether students face language barriers, disabilities, or culturally inappropriate instruction, equal enrollment does not guarantee equal opportunities to develop literacy. Education systems must be designed around the different ways students communicate, learn, and demonstrate their abilities. For SOCHUM, this means looking beyond enrollment and encouraging investment in qualified teachers, inclusive instruction, accessible materials, and reliable learning data. Delegates may recommend these priorities, while organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF can provide technical support to governments implementing them.

Current Status

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language barriers can prevent people from developing or using literacy skills. A child taught in an unfamiliar language might struggle to learn how to read and write. Adults may be literate in their home language, but struggle to understand information provided in a different language. Language barriers can thus prevent people from applying existing literacy skills or from accessing opportunities to develop new ones.

As of 2025, 40 percent of students globally lack access to education in the language they speak and understand fluently. In some low-income countries, this number rises to 90 percent.[215] On International Mother Language Day in February 2025, UNESCO emphasized that learning that begins in one's home language enhances learning outcomes and preserves cultural heritage. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, children who learned in a familiar language were 30 percent more likely to read with understanding by the end of primary school, compared to those taught in an unfamiliar language.[216]

This challenge is especially visible in countries where an official language of instruction differs from the languages spoken in homes. Students in these systems may spend their early school years trying to understand the language of instruction before they can focus fully on reading comprehension or critical thinking.[217] As a result, children may appear to have limited literacy skills when they are actually struggling to demonstrate those skills in an unfamiliar language. Changing the language of instruction, providing multilingual materials, or gradually transitioning between languages may be more appropriate than treating these students as unable to learn. Instruction in an unfamiliar language may also weaken children's confidence and sense of belonging in school.[218]

Children who learned in a familiar language were 30 percent more likely to read with understanding by the end of primary school

The effects of language barriers continue beyond the classroom. Healthcare offers an especially serious example because misunderstandings can place a person's life at risk. Linguistic discordance occurs when patients and healthcare providers do not share a language in which they can communicate effectively.[219] Research has also shown a positive correlation between limited literacy skills or linguistic discordance, and chronic health conditions. Since language discordance can prevent people from using their existing literacy skills, it can prevent patients from understanding instructions and communicating effectively with providers. For example, a 2026 study found that language-discordant patients had shorter hospital stays after colorectal surgery in New York City.[220] They also had less interaction with the medical system after surgery, raising concerns about whether they received adequate follow-up care. Addressing language discordance therefore requires more than simply translating words. Interpreters and translated materials must communicate medical information accurately and in terms patients can understand.[221]

Language barriers are especially prominent as migration and displacement increase. Global displacement has nearly doubled from about 60 million people in 2014 to over 120 million by the end of 2024.[222] This is the highest number ever recorded. For immigrants dealing with language and literacy challenges, cultural barriers may create additional obstacles to accessing and understanding information.[223] The International Organization for Migration identifies language learning as central to migrants' social and economic inclusion in receiving communities.[224] Even migrants who are literate in their home language may struggle to use those skills in an unfamiliar language. However, with proper resources, displaced people can apply their existing literacy skills in a language of their new community.

When children begin learning in a language they already understand, they can focus on developing reading skills rather than learning a new language and learning to read at the same time. However, multilingual education does not necessarily require schools to use only a student's home language. Schools can begin instruction in familiar languages and gradually introduce national or international languages as students progress.

Research suggests that approximately 75 percent of learners who are not taught in their home language could be reached by introducing 220 additional languages of instruction.[225] Doing so would require governments to train multilingual teachers and produce textbooks, assessments, and digital materials in appropriate languages.[226] With this support, students may be more likely to understand lessons, remain in school, and develop literacy skills that allow them to participate in the economic and civic life of their communities. SOCHUM can encourage multilingual and culturally appropriate literacy programs, particularly for migrants, refugees, Indigenous communities, and linguistic minorities. However, decisions about national languages and curricula remain primarily within the authority of individual states.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

A digital divide is the gap between people who have access to digital technology and the internet, and those who do not. It also includes differences in connection quality, affordability, devices, and the skills needed to use technology effectively. Digital literacy is the ability to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate information through digital tools. A person may have internet access but remain digitally excluded if they do not have these skills. In 2025, approximately 74 percent of the global population, about six billion people, used the internet.[227] Limited digital literacy can also make it harder to distinguish reliable information from misinformation, especially on social media and AI-powered platforms. Without efforts to close this gap, the digital divide will continue to deepen existing inequalities, leaving disadvantaged

communities even further behind.[228]

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) may intensify existing inequalities. Using AI effectively requires internet access, appropriate devices, digital literacy, and an understanding of how to evaluate AI-generated information. The benefits of AI are concentrated among communities with the resources and skills needed to use it effectively, which may widen existing inequalities. People without adequate digital and traditional literacy may also have greater difficulty recognizing inaccurate, biased, or misleading AI-generated content. The most vulnerable communities, including low-income households, rural populations, women and girls, people with disabilities, and speakers of underrepresented languages, may face additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from AI.[229]

Access alone does not ensure that people can use technology to improve their lives. Digital literacy builds upon traditional reading and writing because users must be able to understand instructions, search results, application forms, and other written information online. Digital literacy can help people communicate across languages and cultures while expanding their economic and professional opportunities. Some people use technology for education, career advancement, financial management, and civic participation, or for entertainment purposes, like streaming videos or watching social media.[230] Other families have mobile-only internet plans, which limits what activities are practical. For example, filling out job applications or completing homework may be more difficult on a smaller screen, particularly when users also have limited digital literacy.[231] The digital divide therefore affects not only whether people can connect to the internet, but also whether they can use written digital information to pursue education, employment, and civic participation.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and widened the gap in technology access, as many people lacked the devices, internet connections, or digital skills needed to learn and work from home.[232] When life moved online, many communities were left without proper resources to continue learning and working. Students without internet connections or suitable devices lost opportunities to practice reading, access learning materials, and communicate with teachers. Adults with limited literacy or digital skills likewise faced difficulties using online health, employment, and government services.[233]

Internet cafe in Mogadishu, Somalia

Credit: AMISOM Public Information

Rural communities were especially affected because providing technological infrastructure across sparsely populated areas can be costly.

People without reliable internet access may also face barriers to employment, health care, and education. According to the International Telecommunication Union, 94 percent of people in high-income countries used the internet in 2025, compared with only 23 percent in low-income countries.[234] In higher-income countries, digital inequalities are often concentrated in low-income communities, rural areas, and older people who may lack devices, affordable connections, or digital skills. On the other hand, low-income countries are more likely to face widespread infrastructure and affordability barriers alongside limited opportunities for digital education.

The urban–rural gap was especially pronounced in Africa, where urban residents were 2.6 times as likely as rural residents to use the internet.[235] Globally, only 40 percent of primary, 50 percent of lower-secondary, and 65 percent of upper-secondary schools have internet access.[236] Even students with some internet access at home may therefore attend schools that cannot consistently provide digital learning materials or teach digital-literacy skills. For students in these communities, limited connectivity can mean fewer books, online courses, and opportunities to practice digital reading and writing. It can also restrict teachers' access to training and educational materials.

Addressing the digital divide requires a collaborative response from both governments and industry. Expanding digital literacy is one part of bridging the divide, but it must accompany affordable internet service, reliable infrastructure, accessible devices, and inclusive educational materials. Digital-literacy programs should teach people not only how to operate technology, but also how to read online information critically, protect personal data, recognize misinformation, and create digital content. This can include understanding how to find a job online, how to use generative AI responsibly and effectively when writing an essay, or how to manage a small business with digital tools.[237] Because traditional literacy provides the foundation for many of these activities, digital-literacy initiatives must also be accessible to people with limited reading and writing skills.

UNESCO has taken several steps to address this issue.[238] UNESCO promotes media and information literacy, which teaches people how to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate information responsibly. These skills are increasingly important for identifying misinformation and evaluating AI-generated content. UNESCO also used International Literacy Day 2025 to highlight how traditional literacy provides the foundation for safe and meaningful participation in digital environments.[239] These efforts demonstrate that closing the digital divide requires both technological access and the literacy skills needed to use technology safely, critically, and productively. Digital literacy is also directly connected to SOCHUM's recent work. Resolution 79/151 calls upon governments to expand digital-literacy programs and recognizes that digital divides affect rural communities, women, older people, and other marginalized groups differently.[240]

ROLE OF SOCHUM, UN BODIES, AND NGOS

SOCHUM has directly addressed global literacy through its work on social development and human rights. In November 2024, it approved "Literacy for Life: Shaping Future Agendas." The General Assembly later adopted it as Resolution 79/151.[241] The resolution recognizes that poverty, gender, disability, conflict, migration, language, education quality, and the digital divide are overlapping barriers to literacy. SOCHUM thus encouraged Member States to address literacy as part of broader strategies. It recommends greater investment in quality education, vocational training, digital skills, and lifelong education. It also calls for

Children at a book fair in India

Credit: Pratham Books

targeted support for marginalized populations and stronger cooperation.[242] SOCHUM does not operate schools or administer literacy programs itself. Instead, it develops recommendations, encourages policies, and asks UN bodies to coordinate assistance and report on progress.

Basic national literacy rates can hide important differences in people's ability to understand and use written information. Even countries with high overall literacy may have significant rates of functional illiteracy. This is estimated at 10.6 percent of adults in Finland, 16.4 percent in England, and 12.1–17.5 percent in Germany.[243] Governments hold primary responsibility for providing education, but Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can supplement their efforts by reaching communities that public programs may not adequately serve.[244]

NGOs are nonprofit organizations that operate independently of direct government control.[245] They may provide books, train teachers, operate community literacy programs, test new instructional methods, collect data, or advocate for policy changes. In countries affected by conflict or limited government capacity, NGOs may also provide temporary educational support where public services have been disrupted. By working with local governments, communities, and international organizations, NGOs can contribute to improving literacy rates.[246] Because NGOs often work directly with communities, they may be able to adapt programs to local languages, cultures, and learning needs. In the case of literacy, many NGOs focus not only on mastering skills, but also on fostering a joy for learning.[247] However, NGO programs may have limited funding, geographic reach, or long-term stability. Partnerships with governments are therefore important for expanding successful programs and incorporating them into public education systems.

Room to Read works with governments and schools to improve foundational literacy and gender equality in education.[248] In 2024, the organization reported that its literacy programming benefited 13.5 million children and trained more than 27,000 educators and 3,700 government officials.[249] Students participating in its programs read up to 2.5 times faster and answered 2.6 times as many comprehension questions as students in comparison schools.

Room to Read also helped governments develop learning materials in local languages, including revised national Grade 1 literacy materials in Tanzania and instructional books in Luganda and Runyankore-Rukiga for schools in Uganda.[250] This approach demonstrates how NGOs can expand their impact by strengthening public education systems rather than operating separate programs indefinitely.

The World Literacy Foundation has continued using solar-powered technology to reach schools without reliable electricity or internet access.[251] In September 2025, it expanded its Sun Books Literacy Initiative to two primary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. It provided more than 500 students with solar-powered tablets containing culturally relevant and curriculum-aligned literacy materials.[252] The organization reported that Sun Books had already reached more than 17,000 children and trained over 280 teachers across Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. Although the program addresses access, electricity, and learning materials simultaneously, its limited scale demonstrates why technology pilot programs cannot replace sustained investment in public education.

Pratham continues to address the gap between school enrollment and actual learning in India. Its "Teaching at the Right Level" approach groups children according to their current skills rather than their age or grade, allowing instructors to provide targeted reading support. In 2024–2025, Pratham ran 3,500 learning camps across 18 states, reaching more than 120,000 children in Grades 3–5.[253] By the end of these camps, over 70 percent could read a story or Grade 2-level text, representing a 44-percentage-point improvement from the beginning. Pratham also partnered with six state education departments to incorporate its methods into teacher training, classroom instruction, and learning assessments. These efforts demonstrate how NGOs can provide direct literacy support while also working with governments to expand successful approaches through public education systems.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

The World Bank publishes adult literacy data collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.[254] Adult literacy is measured as the percentage of people aged 15 and older who can read and write, with understanding, a short statement about everyday life. These data provide a useful starting point for comparing national literacy challenges, but they have limitations. Countries collect literacy data in different years and may rely on self-reporting, household reporting, educational attainment, or direct assessments.[255] For some countries, the most recent available figure may be decades old. These figures will likely not reflect present conditions. Delegates should treat each bloc placement as an approximate starting point, but consult newer evidence from their country. If updated literacy rates are unavailable, then rates of school completion, reading proficiency, learning-poverty estimates, and similar measures can lend insight into where a country might align. Even with recent numbers, these are not fixed political blocs and do not predict how every state will negotiate.

These categories describe the scale and type of literacy challenges states may face, but they do not determine national policy. States within the same group may disagree about whether programs should be internationally or domestically funded, whether assistance should be universal or targeted, how literacy should be measured, and how much authority international organizations should have over national education policy. Delegates should use these groupings as a starting point and research their assigned country's actual policies. During debate, the main disagreements will concern who should fund literacy programs, which populations should receive priority, how progress should be measured, and how much influence international organizations should have over national education policy. States may also disagree over

whether to prioritize traditional literacy, digital skills, teacher training, multilingual education, adult education, or emergency assistance.

COUNTRIES BELOW 60 PERCENT ON THE WORLD BANK ADULT LITERACY INDICATOR

Countries in this bloc have literacy rates below 60 percent nationally according to the World Bank index.[256] Most of the countries in this bloc are in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Low literacy rates in many of these countries stem from economic factors such as poverty, direct costs, and indirect costs of attending school. Direct costs include paying for books, materials, or transportation, and indirect costs can include travel time or income and household labor lost when a child attends school instead of working or caring for family members. Certain social factors can also pose challenges in accessing education, like gender inequality and distance to school.[257] Countries in this group often lack access to quality education, which widens educational inequalities between higher- and lower-income families. In many cases, people in high-income families have more opportunities to provide for their children, such as studying abroad, investing in private school, and individual support. Students from lower income families may not have this opportunity, which contributes to lower literacy rates.

Children in Sub-Saharan Africa suffer from the worst learning poverty, which is defined as a child being unable to read and understand a simple short story by age 10. According to UNESCO, Africa hosts 17 out of 20 countries with the lowest literacy levels. In 2019, the learning poverty rate in Africa was 86 percent.[258] Countries in this group have the lowest literacy rates because they face some of the most severe obstacles to education. Governments facing conflict or severe poverty may struggle to balance immediate humanitarian needs with long-term investment in literacy. They may therefore favor solutions that combine education with food assistance, child protection, healthcare, or emergency relief. Examples of countries in this group are South Sudan, Chad, and Afghanistan. This group might favor solutions like funding for schools and textbooks, mobile classrooms and literacy programs, as well as partnerships with NGOs and UN bodies to build educational infrastructure. Important divisions include how aid should be funded and whether short-term emergency programs or long-term public systems should take priority.

COUNTRIES BETWEEN 60-80 PERCENT ON THE WORLD BANK ADULT LITERACY INDICATOR

Countries in this bloc have national literacy rates that lie between 60 percent to 80 percent.[259] They may have established education systems but still face substantial gaps in access, quality, or adult literacy. Compared with countries below 60 percent, they may prioritize expanding and improving existing systems rather than creating entirely new ones. Examples of countries in this group are Morocco, Nepal, Algeria, Bhutan, and Jamaica. In 2024, UNESCO partnered with the Moroccan National Agency for the Fight Against

Africa hosts 17 out of 20 countries with the lowest literacy levels

Illiteracy to launch an initiative to promote quality literacy. The initiative sought to incorporate additional technology into literacy instruction.[260] The World Bank indicator places Morocco's adult literacy rate at 64 percent using data from 2014. Because this figure is old, delegates representing Morocco should consult newer national evidence before determining the country's present needs and priorities. Under this initiative, UNESCO was able to improve the digital skills of over 10,000 teachers in 2025.[261]

Countries in this group may expand adult, workplace, and digital-literacy programs alongside their existing school systems. Jamaica's adult-literacy institutions, for example, have evolved from mass-literacy campaigns into programs supporting lifelong learning, vocational preparation, and workplace education.[262] This group of countries may favor solutions such as expanding funding for public schools, low-cost learning platforms, improving instructional quality, expanding rural schools, and providing transportation support.

COUNTRIES BETWEEN 80-90 PERCENT ON THE WORLD BANK ADULT LITERACY INDICATOR

Countries in this bloc have national literacy rates that lie between 80 percent to 90 percent.[263] Although these countries are approaching universal basic literacy, national averages may hide gaps among particular regions, age groups, or marginalized populations. They may therefore prioritize targeted programs and improvements to existing education systems. Examples of countries in this group are Guatemala, Namibia, Belize, Iran, and El Salvador.

In Guatemala, the Spark Reading Program trains teachers in effective reading instruction and provides them with a library of books. Teachers get hands-on support in the form of training and donations of children's books for their classrooms.[264] With this support, students achieve more in school, continue their education longer, and overcome the obstacles presented by low literacy. The mission of this program is to start developing reading comprehension early on to build literacy skills from a young age.[265] By decreasing failure rates over 30 percent, the Spark Reading program has helped students rapidly build Spanish vocabulary, improve confidence, and make learning more meaningful.

In Iran, the Literacy Movement Organization launched the Literacy for Students' Illiterate Parents Program in 26 provinces. The program's mission is to "identify and offer literacy classes to the relatives of primary-school students, who have not themselves had the chance to go to school or who have low literacy skills levels."[266] Because many parents and older adults did not receive the same educational opportunities as younger generations, family-based programs can provide additional support for adult learners. School children whose parents are enrolled in the program are encouraged to support their parents in their journey towards literacy. Other initiatives include expanding the roles of school principals, using more supervision to improve education, and strengthening school-family partnerships.[267]

Similarly, this group of countries would favor solutions like targeted literacy programs for vulnerable groups, stronger secondary education policies, and better data collection on literacy gaps. Because national literacy rates may hide inequalities among particular populations, countries in this group may favor targeted programs rather than universal campaigns. They may prioritize literacy programs for marginalized communities, higher rates of secondary school completion, supporting migrant and minority-language education, improving adult literacy, and collecting better data.

COUNTRIES ABOVE 90 PERCENT ON THE WORLD BANK INDEX

Countries in this group have near-universal basic literacy. However, high national averages do not mean that every population has equal literacy skills or access to quality education. Many countries have already reached approximately

100 percent literacy in their population, but may retain gaps within some communities. Countries that have achieved close to 100 percent literacy rates include Uzbekistan, Norway, and Palau.

Examples of countries in this group include Thailand, China, Spain, Armenia, and Estonia. These states may support international literacy partnerships, but their national positions will differ considerably. Within their own populations, they may prioritize functional literacy, misinformation, AI and digital skills, disability inclusion, migrant education, minority-language instruction, or literacy among older people. High basic literacy rates therefore change the type of literacy challenge a country faces rather than eliminating the issue entirely.

The Bookworm Foundation (BWF) operates libraries and children's literacy centers in northern Thailand. Its resources are available to both children and adults. BWF also operates centers for ethnic-minority communities, where children who do not speak Thai as their first language receive literacy instruction. This approach demonstrates how community libraries can support rural and minority-language populations.[268]

The Estonian Reading Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to enhance language competence, teach research skills in reading, and foster interest in learning among children and adults in Estonia.[269] They currently have more than 200 mentors, ranging from teachers and speech therapists to librarians and psychologists.

This group of countries would favor solutions like teacher training, digital education support for low-income countries, and funding for girls' education and crisis-affected regions. Countries in this group may also support better data collection to identify populations whose literacy needs are hidden by high national averages.

Committee Mission

SOCHUM is one of the six main committees of the United Nations General Assembly. It addresses social, humanitarian, cultural, and human-rights issues. Its work includes the advancement of women, protection of children, rights of Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities, and treatment of refugees and displaced people.[270] Literacy falls within this mandate because it affects the right to education and people's ability to access employment, healthcare, public services, and political participation. Its role is to review information, develop policy recommendations, and encourage international cooperation on solutions that support human rights and long-term sustainable development. When SOCHUM looks at "Improving Global Literacy Rates," it should encourage measurable progress while recognizing that countries have different resources, languages, education systems, and national policy priorities.

SOCHUM has directly addressed global literacy through the resolution "Literacy for Life: Shaping Future Agendas."[271] The resolution called upon governments to expand traditional and digital-literacy programs, increase investment in inclusive education, support teachers, strengthen literacy data, and prioritize people in vulnerable situations. It also encouraged safe education during humanitarian emergencies and greater cooperation among governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector.

This committee does not have the power to punish countries or compel them to implement its recommendations. Its main tools are discussion, negotiation, and written recommendations known as resolutions. General Assembly resolutions are generally non-binding, meaning they recommend action rather than legally requiring states to follow it.[272] In its resolutions about global literacy, SOCHUM can call upon governments to make sure all people have access to inclusive, quality education and appropriate learning

resources. It can also invite Member States, UN bodies, NGOs, and other partners to work with low- and middle-income countries to develop sustainable solutions for improving literacy. SOCHUM may also request reports on global progress and encourage voluntary funding, technical assistance, teacher training, better data collection, and multilingual or accessible education. However, it cannot directly operate schools, administer UNESCO programs, or force governments to change national curricula.

SOCHUM also provides a forum for countries to share successful literacy policies and programs. This includes specific classroom resources, clearer curricula, or systems that make sure children have transportation to schools. However, national governments generally retain authority over curricula, languages of instruction, and education budgets. International recommendations must therefore balance cooperation and common goals with different economic, cultural, and political circumstances.

In its eightieth session, SOCHUM was assigned responsibility for social development, the advancement of women, refugee issues, children's rights, Indigenous Peoples' rights, and other human rights concerns.[273] These responsibilities intersect with global literacy because displacement, gender inequality, discrimination, and unequal access to education can prevent people from developing and using literacy skills. Delegates are encouraged to think about how international cooperation, research, and education policies can help improve literacy rates around the world. They should also consider how to balance school access with education quality, childhood education with adult literacy, and traditional reading and writing with digital and media literacy.

Research and Preparation Questions

Your dais has prepared the following research and preparation questions as a means of providing guidance for your research process. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

TOPIC A

1. When a government ties access to food, housing, or healthcare to political loyalty, how should the world respond without putting people at even more risk or leaving them without these services?
2. Nearly eight million Venezuelans have left their country. What needs to happen before it is safe for them to return? Who is responsible for making that happen, Venezuela, the countries hosting them, or international organizations?
3. Does a country's right to govern itself protect it from outside criticism of human rights abuses? Or can severe abuses cause a country to lose that protection? Who should get to decide?
4. Economic sanctions can pressure a government to change. They can also hurt the people living under that government. How should the world weigh these two effects against each other?
5. Releasing political prisoners is only one step toward justice. What else does a country need to do to truly hold people accountable for human rights abuses? Can forgiveness and justice happen at the same time?
6. Long-term political repression does not affect everyone the same way. How might it affect women, children, or Indigenous communities differently than it affects the general population?

TOPIC B

1. What specific policies or frameworks could help protect literacy growth during armed conflict and displacement?
2. What safeguards are necessary in creating digital strategies to literacy involving AI tools, devices, and learning platforms?
3. How can international literacy assessments accurately measure reading and writing proficiency across countries with different languages and curricula?
4. How should nations balance instruction in local languages with instruction in international languages, often prioritized for employment and educational opportunities?
5. How do literacy rates in each country vary across gender, age, geography, or income, and which disparity should each country prioritize addressing?
6. Poverty and illiteracy can reinforce each other across generations. Can literacy programs alone break this cycle, or do they need to be paired with other kinds of support, like healthcare or job training

Important Documents

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"World Bank Open Data." 2026, World Bank Open Data, 2026, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/se.adt.litr.zs?end=2024&most_recent_value_desc=false&start=2024&view=map.

About the Authors

TOPIC A: MICHELE NIETO MEZA

Michele Nieto Meza is an undergraduate at Universidad Metropolitana, where she studies International Studies with mentions of International Law and International Economics and a minor in Political Thought. She is from Venezuela, and has been involved with Model United Nations since 2023. This same year, she attended NHSMUN, won best delegation, and was chosen to speak at the United Nations General Assembly. Outside of Model UN, Michele is heavily involved in her university's student council, where she works alongside ambassadors, embassies, and transnational companies to give lectures to future international studies professionals. She looks forward to pursuing her graduate studies in human rights in the coming years.

TOPIC B: AVA TASHARROFI

Ava Tasharrofi is a student at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she studies Public Health with particular interests in health equity, community safety, and barriers to education in marginalized communities. A native of Los Angeles and a proud Persian-American, she has been involved in Model United Nations for five years, first joining as a sophomore in high school and later attending NHSMUN as a UNICEF delegate. Her experiences in Model UN have strengthened her interests in diplomacy, public speaking, and creative problem-solving. Outside of Model UN, Ava has worked as an intern alongside local Councilmembers and Assemblymembers, experiences that have shaped her perspective on the challenges facing underserved communities throughout Los Angeles. She also enjoys traveling, exploring her hometown, and learning new languages, with the goal of one day becoming a polyglot.

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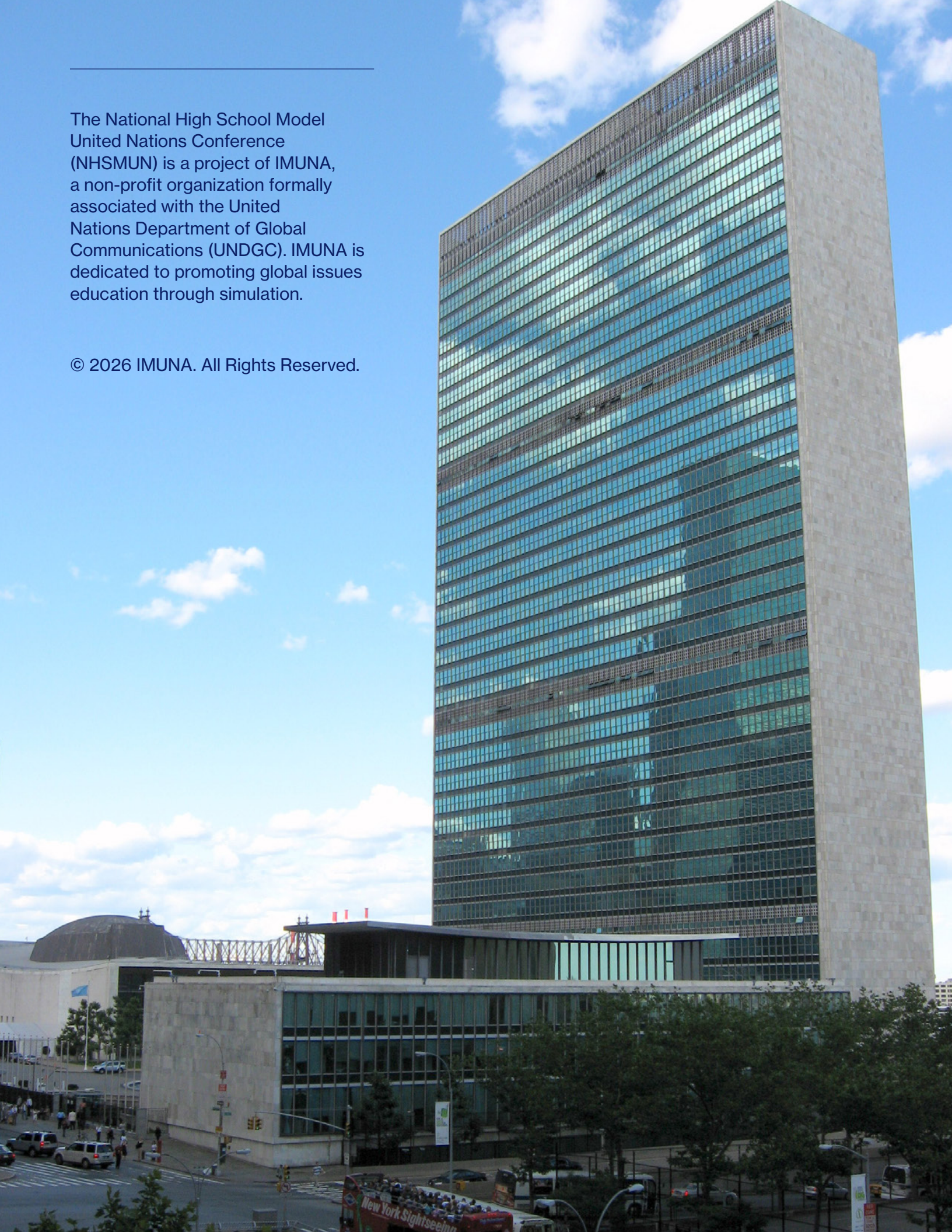
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