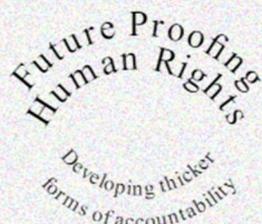


Thicker Notions of Human Rights Accountabilities



CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

DEADLINE: 20 APRIL 2025



BACKGROUND

Human rights are increasingly described as in crisis. One reason for this is the fact that current accountability mechanisms cannot adequately deal with intricate and multilayered human rights violations that occur in rapidly changing and vastly complex social contexts. Thus, if human rights are to continue to offer a widely accepted framework for thinking about (social) justice, we urgently need to reconstruct the very notion of accountability on which it is pinned, so that better protection is offered. In spite of a relatively robust legal framework there is a continued reality of human rights violations and rather low degrees of accountability. This closing conference, 'Thicker Notions of Human Rights Accountabilities', revisits the questions of what qualifies as a human rights violation, who holds human rights duties and how to actually deliver human rights accountability in the context of pressing and complex challenges. Our particular concern is the disconnect between the formal legal system and the lived experiences of those who suffer harms that could logically be – but are not yet – understood as a human rights violation.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

We welcome both theoretical contributions and empirical work from interdisciplinary perspectives. We invite proposals speaking to one of five themes of the closing conference:

Conference Themes

Change

Knowing

Duties

Harm

Remedy

Abstract Submission Deadline: 20 April 2025

Communication of Accepted Abstracts: 30 May 2025

Conference: 19-21 November 2025



Theme 1: Change

Is human rights accountability meant to cause change in society? Traditionally human rights accountability has intended to ensure **consistent minimum protections**, as well as incremental improvement over time. **Crises and new emergencies** can result in calls for urgent and immediate responses that may deviate from established human rights norms. Historically informed injustices and climate change raise both the necessity and desirability of **just transitions** from established (unjust or unsustainable) structures and institutions to new approaches. An approach to accountability that is oriented towards **uncertain, novel, and complex futures** centres the need for creative problem-solving. At the same time, changing human rights accountability in light of these demands risks **undermining the role of human rights in preserving legal and political restraints** and minimum conditions against new threats and societal changes. As human rights continue to be transposed, translated, and revised to confront new, multifaceted, political challenges, it is questionable what remains of the original human rights regime.

Is accountability meant to end disputes? Accountability processes can be a means to **establish the boundaries within which disputes are contained, regulated, and resolved**, often to prevent them from escalating, becoming more widespread, or leading to more disruptive or violent means of conflict. In some cases, human rights accountability processes can be set up, designed, and implemented with the objective of ensuring the continuation of violence. Accountability 'from below' can view disputes as part of **an ongoing and indefinite struggle** and rights mobilisation without any objective of final closure. Human rights accountability processes can themselves be contested through grounded realities and collective movements. While **accountability processes present themselves through monological narratives**, their practice is often affected or driven by **conflict between different actors**.

1. How can we better conceptualise the role of human rights accountability in societal change?
2. Should (and how should) human rights accountability be rethought in light of crises, just transitions, and uncertain futures?
3. How can we better conceptualise human rights disputes and mobilisation of rights 'from below' in the context of human rights accountability processes?

Theme 2: Knowing

Who is recognised as a knower? Human rights accountability often depends in theory upon the need for a shared imaginary or common knowledge base, which in practice is often informed and designed by dutybearers, with limited participation by rightsholders. **Significant knowledge asymmetries** between dutybearers and rightsholders on the content and functioning of rights frameworks and accountability processes **provide dutybearers with the power of knowing the rules** in disputes over accountability, which they are better able to navigate and game to their advantage. Evidentiary requirements often privilege particular means of knowing over others. The epistemic positioning within rights frameworks **privileges the testimonies of some actors** (e.g., experts' 'objective' opinions) and **deprivileges the testimonies of others** (e.g., victims' 'subjective' perceptions). Further, dutybearers often have privileged epistemic resources before accountability processes, which depend on **the concepts and factual accounts of dutybearers** and tend to **defer to dutybearers' authority and discretion** in translating and implementing rights frameworks.

Who knows human rights? While the allegation is regularly made that rightsholders 'do not know' their rights, it could be more apposite to state that dutybearers adopt rights frameworks which are (wilfully) **ignorant of rightsholders' lived experience**. When rightsholders are excluded or underprivileged in the crafting of these epistemic resources, **this common knowledge base will be structurally prejudiced against them**. Accountability processes often result in monological, 'authoritative', 'objective' accounts which can further **contribute to rightsholder exclusion and epistemic erasure**, particularly where certain justice narratives are used to exclude others. As actors acquire the epistemic resources needed to engage with accountability processes, and translate their claims into the language of accountability processes, they can revise how they understand their roles in relation to human rights.

1. How can we better conceptualise the epistemic dimensions of human rights accountability, including the role of language and terminology, knowledge sources, lived experience, expertise, evidentiary requirements, how truth is constructed, and narrative control?
2. (How) Should accountability processes and rights frameworks better account for the role of rightsholders as knowledgeable agents?
3. What are the potential epistemic harms of human rights accountability on rightsholders?

Theme 3: Duties

Is human rights accountability about duties? Human rights law claims to be rights(holder)-centric; human rights violations are often described as harm or deprivations of dignity for individuals, based on universal inalienable rights. **Human rights law, however, is often duty-centric** in both holding actors accountable and determining whether a human rights violation has occurred, with many legal principles **allowing harm in some contexts and disallowing harm in others**: conditional rights, necessity/proportionality tests, margin of appreciation, progressive realisation, non-retrogression, derogation/emergency measures etc. **This erases many human rights harms** (declaring them non-violations) in contexts where dutybearers meet their duties. **Wicked problems**, marked by complex, multifaceted, interconnected issues – climate change and biodiversity loss, poverty and inequality, global health crises, refugee crises, neocolonial and extractivist practices, and new technologies – can **fundamentally challenge duty-centric approaches**. This could require recognising new modes of implication, including **where actors are not direct agents of harm or domination but benefit from regimes of domination and harm**.

Are there alternatives to duty-centric human rights accountability? Clear, concise, and consistent duties are beneficial to ensuring the integrity of rules-based systems, including foreseeability of consequences on the part of dutybearers. At the same time, duty-centric conceptions of human rights accountability risk depoliticising deeply political issues and allow for immoral behaviour provided 'it meets the rules of the game.' Duty-based accountability often anticipates **command-and-control approaches, as opposed to alternative approaches** based on shared responsibility, co-regulation, new governance, participatory approaches, nudge policies, active account giving, market-based rationales, fostering cultural change and socialisation, or ceding political authority.

1. What is missing from duty-centric notions of human rights accountability and how can a thicker notion of accountability rectify this?
2. How can we conceptualise complementarities and tensions between various regimes, some of which are centred around duties and others which are not?
3. (How) Should human rights accountability recognise new dutybearers?

Theme 4: Harm

Is human rights accountability about harm? Human rights accountability anticipates both non-interference, protection and active fulfilment of human rights. Yet, **many forms of violence are invisible** from the lens of international human rights law, including forms of structural violence, slow violence, collective/relational violence, historical violence, and environmental/biodiversity harm. This is exacerbated by temporal orderings within human rights law which often focus on violations as fixed in particular points in time, including *ex post* (after the harm) or *ex ante* (before the harm). **Harm to dignity is embodied** in the sense that it is experienced, understood, and expressed through the body, both in physical and psychological forms. **Harm is often cumulative and intersectional** in practice, with many different originators. Recognising these forms of violence may require more **intersectional, redistributive, transformative, and/or relational approaches**.

Are rightsholders victims? Rightsholders are often stereotyped as passive victims of harm. This risks dehumanisation, **failing to recognise their agency** in struggles and recovery, and justifying their absence from accountability processes. **Human rights accountability may call for more participatory approaches**, including rightsholder participation in the projects of dutybearers and dutybearer participation in the projects of rightsholders. Human rights scholars increasingly call for **new forms of recognising rightsholders**, including relational approaches (e.g., *ubuntu* and relational approaches to data governance), collective approaches (e.g., indigenous rights, peasant rights, and peoples' rights), approaches rooted in recognising rightsholder agency (e.g., the capabilities or cession of authority to rightsholders) and post-human approaches (e.g., recognising Nature rights and future generations).

1. What is missing from harm-centric approaches ('human rights violations') of human rights accountability and how can a thicker conception of accountability rectify this?
2. How can human rights accountability better accommodate the realities of violence?
3. (How) Should human rights accountability incorporate new modes of recognition of rightsholders to better realise human rights?

Theme 5: Remedy

Is human rights accountability about remedies? Even where remedy avenues exist for human rights abuses, **remedies are rarely available**. The most prescient hurdles for rightsholders in claiming remedy lie in the lack of enforcement mechanisms. The **state-centric antecedents of human rights law continue to hamper remedy claims**. Rules of jurisdiction, immunities, procedural rules, selective prosecution, evidentiary burdens, inequality of arms between rightsholders and powerful actors, and the costs (material and psychological) of making human rights claims often prevent rightsholders from successfully bringing human rights claims. These accountability barriers are rarely justified, or justifiable, in human rights terms, but are often justified in reference to state prerogatives. **Often human rights claims are made before alternative systems**, whether in other fields of law or in extra-legal avenues that are often better able to provide remedy in practice.

What are the alternatives to remedy-centric human rights accountability? Often human rights bodies have a focus on improving accountability in decision-making. International human rights bodies often focus on the prevention of future violations, monitoring measures, increased transparency, better risk identification, influencing and shaping legal and other governance reforms, and precedent-setting. In Europe, recent developments – including new data protection and privacy regulations, the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, and the process-turn at the European Court of Human Rights – are focusing on **whether actors have followed a robust process of decision-making** rather than a substantive review of the decision. In the Americas and Africa, there has been a movement in the opposite direction to recognising **more ambitious, transformative remedies**.

1. What is missing from remedy-centric notions of human rights accountability?
2. How can human rights accountability better accommodate the needs of rightsholders?
3. What is gained and lost in viewing human rights accountability in terms of active accounting and robust decision-making?

Submission Guidelines

All selected presenters are expected to attend the conference in person in Brussels on 19-21 November 2025. Only submissions received by 20 April 2025 via <https://forms.office.com/e/mdrQZcgtCm> will be considered by the organisers. All submissions must include an abstract (max. 300 words) [in English], author bio(s), and the theme most relevant to the submission: Change, Knowing, Duties, Harm or Remedy (see above). We intend to invite selected authors to work on a collaborative publication (an edited compilation or special journal issue) based on presentations, through an iterative writing process with the conference organisers.

Practical Information

There are no conference fees. Catering during the conference is provided free of charge.

- If you have mobility or dietary restrictions, we will try to accommodate these throughout the event. Please inform us of any requirements in the comments box in the application form.
- We will make a limited number of scholarships available for individuals with financial constraints. If you wish to apply for one of these, please indicate this in the application form. Please note that only limited funding is available and that participants from underrepresented groups will be prioritised.
- Unless stated otherwise, we expect selected presenters to attend in-person on 19-21 November 2025. If you cannot travel on the dates of the conference, please inform us in the comment section of the application form, and we will explore options for hybrid participation, but this cannot be guaranteed.

For practical questions and further information, please email thickernotions@ugent.be

Sustainability Notice

For those attending the Brussels-based event in person, we strongly encourage you to use public transport for your travel whenever possible. We will provide local, sustainable, and vegan/vegetarian catering.

Background Information

This closing conference is part of the iBOF-funded project 'Future-proofing human rights: Developing thicker forms of accountability' [project](#). This project adopts a multi-disciplinary approach that allows us to rethink human rights accountability in the face of current challenges. We do not believe that legal structures can or should be bypassed in the quest for thicker accountability, yet by looking beyond human rights law and even beyond the legal domain, we aim to (also) identify approaches to accountability that (better) capture the experiences and lived realities of rights-holders who have been bypassed by the legal framework altogether. In doing so, we explore different avenues for achieving better human rights protection, which will provide the basis for a more robust conceptualisation of the notion of (human rights) accountability. The project is funded by the Universities of Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and Hasselt (IBOF Special Research Fund: iBOF/21/031; University of Antwerp Special Research Fund, grant no: 42367, Hasselt University grant code: BOF21IU04).