The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) has worked to promote and protect human rights in relation to sexual and reproductive health, relationships and sexuality since 1969. Our work is underpinned by the vision that women have a right to the highest standard of reproductive health. The IFPA has always interpreted this vision as requiring us not only to provide accessible, high quality services, but to advocate for rights-based women-centred policies, programmes and services in Ireland and globally and to challenge laws and policies that act as barriers to access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

One of the key human rights strategies we use is to provide submissions to the expert bodies that periodically monitor the implementation of the international human rights treaties, covenants and conventions to which Ireland is a signatory. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which have all examined Ireland’s human rights record in the last two years and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which will review Ireland in February 2017. These bodies have well-developed interpretations of the content of sexual and reproductive health and rights and their reviews of national level compliance with human rights norms involve close scrutiny of domestic implementation of international obligations to assess whether and to what extent states are genuinely translating rhetorical human rights obligations into effective implementation measures. They bring the normative power of international human rights law to bear on the domestic policies that determine individuals’ experience of sexual and reproductive health and their enjoyment of human rights.

In the context of review of national level implementation of Agenda 2030, these processes provide an already existing mechanism to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), targets and indicators relevant to sexual and reproductive health can be monitored according to the norms and in the spirit of the transformative human rights vision that underpins the global agenda. As spaces where engagement by civil society is integral to the work of the expert committees, they also afford opportunities to non-governmental organizations to work through collaborative, inter-sectoral approaches.

In their examination of reports provided by the state, the expert committees rely on submissions provided by national human rights institutions, human rights organizations, service providers and rights holders groups. Organizations like the IFPA, therefore, can use our role as a service provider to submit context-specific and detailed information on government policy. For example, in advance of Ireland’s upcoming review by the CEDAW Committee, the IFPA worked within the Women’s Human Rights Alliance, an umbrella group of non-governmental organizations, that includes organizations such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and the National Women’s Council of Ireland, to make a collective submission to the Committee in relation to its preparation of a list of issues (LOI) for consideration by the Government. The LOI asks the state to report on measures to expand access to abortion and to ensure “the accessibility, availability and affordability of modern contraceptive methods and family planning services, as well as to facilitate access by women and girls to health services and, in particular, reproductive health services.” We are now preparing a detailed submission on these questions from a health service provider perspective and we will provide more information on these issues. The interactive dialogue with the State in early 2017 will result in a set of observations and recommendations to the State, which we expect to build on the criticisms of lack of implementation of sexual and reproductive health and rights made in other human rights reviews.

In carrying out our work, the IFPA prioritizes cross-sectoral ways of working, such as participation in alliances and coalitions. We support other organizations to engage with human rights processes, for example by contributing to their submissions or by inviting organizations to endorse collective statements. We see this as the most effective way to strengthen the body of evidence on sexual and reproductive health and rights that is brought to the expert monitoring groups. These processes also create a critical space for challenge, dialogue and mutual learning between civil society organizations where we can address the taboo and stigma that has often surrounded sexual and reproductive health and rights. We have seen a significant shift from a time where many organizations considered reproductive health as somehow out of place in human rights advocacy, to the current situation where these issues are more normalized and are discussed with more respect and greater understanding of their centrality to women’s human rights and empowerment.

Human rights advocacy gives voice to the experiences of the women and girls who use our services. It ensures that the treaty monitoring bodies are well-informed to engage critically in dialogue with the State about sexual and reproductive health and rights. Since civil society engagement in Ireland has resulted in ever-increasing media coverage of and increased public and political interest in human rights processes, reviews by UN committees also serve to raise the public profile of the right to universal reproductive health, Ireland’s poor sexual and reproductive health and rights record and to public debate on these issues.

Human rights monitoring can also provide a bridge between overseas development agencies that have experience of monitoring global development goals and organizations focusing on national level policy that must now be involved in monitoring the SDGs. As an organization that has been actively involved in advo-
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cating for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of the Irish population we look forward to working collaboratively with such organizations to ensure that implementation and monitoring of the SDGs in Ireland proceeds in a manner that benefits us all.

References

Text Box 1. Sample of recommendations to Ireland on SRH&R by UN Treaty Monitoring Bodies.