

Presentation by Mathias Huter,
Managing Director of the Global Civil Society Coalition for the UNCAC

8 June 2026

for the

OHCHR expert meeting on strengthening international cooperation for the repatriation
of funds of illicit origin and their use for the realization of human rights

In accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 58/7

Good morning, and many thanks to OHCHR for convening this meeting and for the invitation to contribute a global civil society perspective.

My name is Mathias Huter. I represent the Global Civil Society Coalition for the UNCAC – a Vienna-based network of over 400 non-governmental organizations from across every region, committed to the implementation and monitoring of the UN Convention against Corruption. The Coalition hosts dedicated Working Groups on Victims of Corruption, on Human Rights and Corruption and on Asset Recovery – and you are also hearing today from both Co-Chairs of this working group, Sara Brimbeuf of TI France and Jackson Oldfield of CiFAR.

This segment focuses on the right question. Much of the international debate still treats the freezing and confiscation of stolen assets as the finish line. For the people harmed by the original corruption, it is closer to the starting line. Whether a repatriated sum advances the right to health, to education, to an adequate standard of living – or whether it quietly disappears a second time – is decided in the phase this panel is examining: the return, the management, and the use of the funds. That is where human rights impact is realized, or lost.

And it is the phase where the international community is weakest. A number of countries, many from the global North, opposed Resolution 58/7, arguing that the issue belonged in Vienna under the UNCAC. Yet in Vienna, we have not seen the momentum needed to advance asset returns and to strengthen transparency and inclusion in the process. We believe the human rights fora in Geneva and the UNCAC fora in Vienna should be complementary and mutually reinforcing, and we encourage States to promote the same agenda in both, to ensure we make meaningful progress.

Returning proceeds of corruption to a treasury is not, by itself, a human rights outcome. The risk we see repeatedly is what our members call "re-looting": funds recovered at great cost are returned into the same governance weaknesses that allowed the theft, and a portion is lost again – to opaque procurement, to conflicts of interest, to contracts whose beneficial owners are never disclosed. Or they vanish into a budget line and cannot be traced. The victims of the original corruption never hear that assets were recovered, and never see those assets improve their livelihoods. When that happens, people are harmed twice, and public trust is corroded.

This is where organized civil society has a distinctive and irreplaceable role – and where international cooperation should build it in, not treat it as an afterthought. The participation of affected communities and victims is not only a good practice; it is an expression of the right to participate in public affairs, and a condition for ensuring recovered assets meet the needs of those who suffered because of corruption.

Let me offer two illustrations. In the return of parts of the Abacha funds from Switzerland to Nigeria, cash disbursements to poor households were systematically monitored by the NGO ANEEJ and local civil society – this monitoring not only flagged corruption risks, it also built public trust in the process and drove genuine public debate. And the return of stolen assets from Switzerland to Uzbekistan – the first channeled through a UN multi-partner trust fund – is one of very few cases where civil society holds a formal role, through a Civil Society Advisory Council. These remain exceptions. A 2023 StAR study, *Back for Payback*, found that of 56 jurisdictions surveyed, only three could point to any involvement of victims of corruption in return proceedings. That gap is the heart of the problem.

To make the effective use of repatriated funds, return mechanisms – including those run by international trustees – need transparency and accountability built in. Four elements are essential:

- protection for anyone who reports wrongdoing in the use of returned funds;
- disclosure and management of conflicts of interest, with rules excluding those connected to the original corruption;
- default transparency over who benefits – implementing organizations, contracts, and the beneficial owners of contractors – published proactively and traceable from confiscation to final use;
- and a strong access-to-information policy as a backstop.

These build on existing standards: GFAR Principle 4, which commits both countries to transparency over returned assets, and OHCHR's Recommended Principles on Human Rights and Asset Recovery, which underline that transparency is a precondition for human rights.

So, three points for the report to the Human Rights Council:

First, that meaningful inclusion of civil society and victims – at all stages of the return process, including the use stage, with a formal, resourced role – be a standard component of return arrangements.

Second, that returned funds should be additional resources for repairing harm, not a quiet substitute for budgets States already allocate; success should be measured not by the amount returned, but by whether funds reach affected communities and improve public services.

And third, that this work needs an enabling environment: those monitoring returned assets must operate freely and safely, without intimidation or retaliation. Where civic space is closed, accountability fails.

Finally, I invite Member States to engage their Vienna delegations to champion transparent, accountable, and victim-centered asset returns under the UNCAC – including by leading or supporting a dedicated resolution at the next Conference of the States Parties, in Uzbekistan in late 2027. We stand ready to help.

Corruption is not a victimless crime, and asset return is one of the few moments when that harm can be visibly repaired. With real transparency, and with civil society and victims genuinely at the table, repatriated funds can do what this segment asks of them. Without those safeguards, we risk recovering stolen money only to lose it again.

Thank you very much. ****