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Learning About Planting Seeds... and Why 'The UN is Nothing'

On October 15th, we were privileged to have joined a session of the Human Rights Committee in Geneva, held at the historic Palais Wilson. We were greeted by Professor Yvonne Donders, a selected member of the committee, who introduced us to the human rights country review process and led a Q&A before the formal review began.

A particularly striking moment came when Professor Donders stated, "the UN is nothing." We wondered: Was this disillusionment? A critique? However, as she explained, we realized it was a statement on the UN's unique position: an organization that advises, recommends, and monitors compliance with the UN Charter but ultimately lacks the power to enforce measures or decisions. The UN's role, we learned, is one of influence rather than enforcement – a "power without power."

Following the 'power without power' discussion, Professor Donders shared some candid reflections on how to stay motivated despite limited enforcement power: "One may feel useless at times, but would the world really be better off without the UN?" Optimistically, she clarified: While there are often doubts about enforcement, the process of human rights monitoring remains essential. The work is about "planting seeds" – small, incremental steps that may one day yield real progress.

The subsequent country report session on human rights in Iceland provided an ideal follow-up, showcasing the impact of "planting seeds" over time. As a party to the ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights), Iceland exemplifies a nation steadily working toward high human rights standards, proving the impact of committed, consistent progress.

For us, this experience underscored the UN's crucial role: indirect yet deeply influential in human rights. We are grateful to Professor Donders for her insights and to Doctor Monika Plozza, our lecturer, for organizing this powerful learning opportunity.

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