I am happy to speak on behalf of Human Rights First, a US based organization that aims to create political space and policy recommendations to uphold the rule of law and respect human rights across the globe.

Human Rights First welcomes the fact that the study by the Advisory Committee has been adequately revised. We recognize that there is a diverse array of opinions on traditional values, as evidenced by the discussion today. Indeed the text affirms that there is “no agreed definition of the term traditional values” (paragraph 7), which makes this collective exercise challenging.

On the contrary, “human rights” is a well-defined concept and we welcome the fact that the universality and indivisibility of human rights is reaffirmed in this study. That is crucial.

1. We applaud the explicit statement (in para 25) that “the state is responsible for promoting and protecting all human rights for all persons”.

One this point, governmental authorities must not resort to invoking “traditional values” as an argument to avoid their inherent obligation to protect individual freedoms. As is also stressed in the same paragraph of the study “the prime responsibility to... protect human rights and fundamental freedoms lie with the State”. This clearly marks the responsibility of the State. It is important that this principle is non-negotiable.

2. Secondly, we applaud that the study mentions that “traditional values must never be presented as a substitute for international standards...given the subjective...framing of values when compared to human rights” (para. 74).

Indeed, the edifice of international law serves to protect individuals. The use of culture to defend concepts can lead to abuses- by states or by individuals- and traditional values should not be elevated above universal human rights standards.

3. Finally, Human Rights First recognizes that the role of values can play a positive and constructive role in upholding and advancing human rights and in fighting discrimination, hostility, and even violence. It is important that universal human rights can be implemented within all cultural contexts and traditions. We fully agree with paragraph 38 that “explaining international human rights principles in ways that resonate in diverse cultures may assist in promoting respect for human rights”. In that respect, we applaud the distinguished member of the Advisory Committee who spoke about the use of tradition to promote and advance human rights.

In fact, this is among the strategies that HRF has used to build cultural bridges to combat discrimination and intolerance. HRF has used values – often religious values – as a positive vector to advance the universality of human rights. For example, we have joined forces with Muslim groups who reaffirmed from a Koranic perspective that the concept of “defamation of religions” runs counter to Islamic values, in addition to violating international law.
Another example: we have worked with faith leaders who, through the prism of their Christian values, have spoken out against other human rights abuses – such as the criminalization of homosexuality and violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) individuals. A few weeks ago, on 24 July, 46 American Christian leaders issued a public statement expressing solidarity with LGBT Ugandans in the face of “increased bigotry and hatred.”

So to conclude, I would like to reiterate that Human Rights First applauds the revision of the current draft, and we look forward to closely following this discussion in the future.

Thank you.