

## **One World, One Vision, One Set of Human Rights**

The modern human rights movement was established 50 years ago on the fundamental premise that human beings are born free and equal, and that no authority may rightfully deprive a person of this birthright. Inspired by the belief that human dignity requires freedom of expression and freedom from poverty, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 proclaimed the interdependence and indivisibility of all human rights.

Regrettably, the human rights regime soon became entangled in Cold War politics. The United States and its allies promoted civil and political rights while the Soviet Bloc and developing countries promoted, to a much lesser degree, economic, social, and cultural rights. The original commitment to human rights interdependence was maintained in rhetoric only, and in 1967 the international community divided the human right regime into separate legal covenants covering civil and political rights on the one hand and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other.

Since that time, the major human rights organizations, based and funded in the West, have focused exclusively on civil and political rights. These organizations have won important victories in the past few decades, and for their efforts the world is a better place. Yet even today, economic, social, and cultural rights are termed “second generation” rights in traditional human rights discourse despite their equal value under international law and their fundamental importance in people’s daily lives.

As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations, we must not forget that during this very period hundreds of millions of people in every corner of the world, particularly women, children, and minorities, have suffered and died for want of basic necessities – food, clean water, housing, health care. In this new age of increasing political freedom, we must not forget that the gap between rich and poor also continues to increase at an alarming rate, so that the richest 5% of the world’s population control and exploit 90% of its resources while almost one billion people struggle just to see the next day. Nor can we

forget that the human rights movement has responded to this staggering injustice with silence.

The historical neglect of economic, social, and cultural rights has real impacts. Despite an elaborate legal regime designed to protect people's access to the basic requirements of human dignity, governments and international institutions continue to pursue policies that actively impoverish entire communities. Human rights law explicitly holds that many aspects of poverty are neither natural nor inevitable, but rather result from deliberate policies that can and should be legally constrained. In failing to treat these policies as violations of internationally-recognized rights, social justice movements are needlessly deprived of an effective tool for challenging widespread deprivation.

This situation may be changing. In recent years a wide variety of groups, especially from the South, have returned to the original vision of human rights as a means of advancing social and economic justice. These groups and activists promote a "bottom-up" approach to human rights, prioritizing the interests and participation of marginalized communities on the conviction that those directly affected by injustice must take the lead in claiming their human rights rather than simply waiting for charity from benevolent policy-makers. This approach also recognizes the public education value of addressing issues such as a livable wage, primary education, access to clean water, and decent health standards as human rights rather than mere development goals.

Coinciding with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a newly-established network of NGOs has started a campaign to revitalize the original vision of human rights interdependence and indivisibility. The campaign will mobilize activists in human rights, development, social justice, and community organizing around a practical program for promoting the full range of human rights. The campaign will also seek to mobilize public pressure against governments, international institutions, and other powerful global actors whose policies continue to impoverish people in violation of their most basic rights.