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Handouts on human Rights

Human rights are the fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every single one of us, just because we are born as human beings – whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. They are based on the conviction that human rights are those entitlements without which we cannot live in dignity as human beings. They are minimum standards empowering us to shape our lives accordingly, guaranteeing, in particular, the equality of all people, integrity of the person, privacy, personal freedoms and fulfilment of basic existential and social needs.

Human rights define how we can live together peacefully, while safeguarding the rights and freedoms of each individual. They are



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considered as prerequisites for sustainable peace, development and security.

Human rights are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated – this means that if ONE human right is not guaranteed, a series of other human rights won't be, either.

Despite this comprehensive concept of human rights it does not mean that our rights are equally guaranteed worldwide. This is where the protection of human rights comes into play, through international instruments and mechanisms, obligations of states to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, and the countless contributions of civil society to fight for a better world.

Information on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

While the roots of human rights are very old, it



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was only after World War II that the protection of human rights emerged prominently as a challenge that states committed to address at the international level. The first key document in this regard is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." In its thirty articles, the Declaration includes civil and political rights – such as the rights to life and liberty, the right to freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial or the prohibition of slavery and torture – as well as economic, social and cultural rights – such as the right to work, the right to health or the right to an adequate standard of living (housing, water, food, clothing).

As indicated in its title, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is only a DECLARATION – and



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as such a non-legally binding instrument, a political commitment by states to abide by these rights. Over the decades, however, it has become so widely accepted that most of the rights enshrined therein are now considered to create binding obligations on states (the technical term for this is “customary international law”).

Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states have adopted a number of international treaties and other agreements protecting human rights over the course of the last decades – globally in the framework of the United Nations, regionally in Africa (Organization of African Unity/African Union), the Americas (Organization of American States), Asia (e.g. Association of South-East Asian Nations) and Europe (Council of Europe, European Union). Many of these documents create binding



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standards for all states who have signed and ratified them – standards which are monitored by international protection mechanisms and which represent an important point of reference for holding states accountable when it comes to their human rights records.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is of particular interest when discussing human rights with children. It is the most comprehensive and widely ratified international human rights treaty, containing the full range of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. It applies to all children up to the age of 18, draws heavily on the UDHR, and is legally binding on all countries in the world except one (the USA is the only country not to have ratified the Convention). Individuals and groups who benefit from human rights treaties



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obligation to respect, promote and realize human rights are called 'duty bearers'.

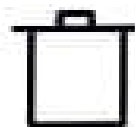
Our human rights thus also create duties, primarily on the state whose territory we are living in – the state has to:

- respect our rights – that means to refrain from undue interference (e.g. police violence, torture, arbitrary executions or arrests,...)
- protect our rights – that means to take measures to prevent abuse of our rights by others (e.g. against domestic violence, against environmental pollution by big companies, ...)
- fulfil our rights – that means to create the legal and institutional framework so our rights can be guaranteed (e.g. build schools and hospitals, adopt laws



(e.g. build schools and hospitals, adopt laws prohibiting crimes against life and property, ...).

These duties we can hold our states accountable to – using the human rights protection mechanisms at national, regional and



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