

Human Rights are the core of the UN

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

Human rights are the rights and freedoms that we all have. Our rights include: the right to life, to be free from torture and abuse, to go to school and to work. We have the right to shelter and to food, the right to practise a religion, and the right to think and say what we want as long as we don't hurt anyone. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.

WHERE DO RIGHTS COME FROM?

Human rights are based on fairness, dignity, justice, equality and respect. These are values that everybody can understand, and that have existed for hundreds of years in different societies all over the world. Human rights were officially recognised as universal values by the world when the United Nations (UN) was set up in 1945 as the world emerged from the Second World War. Its founders were shocked by the destruction of the war and the horrors of the Holocaust. They wanted to create an international organisation that they hoped would be able to prevent such catastrophes from happening in the future. So promoting human rights, along with maintaining international peace and reducing poverty, became an aim of the UN.

“Human rights are inscribed in the hearts of people; they were there long before lawmakers drafted their first proclamation.” Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the most famous human rights agreement in the world. It has been translated into over 360 languages and is accepted nearly everywhere in the world by people from all political, economic and religious traditions. The key messages of the UDHR are that human rights are: Universal – every person should enjoy all human rights Equal – all rights are equally important Interdependent and indivisible – human rights are related and reinforce each other (e.g. the rights to education and food are connected because it is hard to study when one is hungry) Inalienable – nobody can take away your rights unless it is done through a fair legal process (e.g. if you commit a crime, your right to freedom of movement can be limited if you are sent to prison)

WHO WROTE THE UDHR?

In order to achieve its aim of promoting human rights, the UN created the Commission on Human Rights in 1946. The Commission's first task was to create a document that contained all human rights. Eleanor Roosevelt, the widow of American president Franklin D. Roosevelt, was the Chairperson of the Commission. She led a team of seven other people from Australia, Chile, China, France, Lebanon, the Soviet Union (now Russia) and the UK. It was very difficult for them to agree on what to put in the document, and even after they had agreed, all the UN member states voted on almost every word – over 1,400 times in total! Finally, on 10 December 1948, the UDHR was born. This day is now celebrated each year as Human Rights Day across the world.

HOW DOES THE UDHR PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS?

The UDHR is a statement of values that has been accepted by all UN member states. Many countries have made these values laws in their national legal systems. The UDHR has also inspired more than 80 international and regional treaties containing human rights laws, which together make a global system for the promotion and protection of human rights. Countries choose to sign up to a treaty and be bound by its laws. Once a country has signed up to a treaty, it pledges to make the rights contained in it a reality. The country's government is supposed to take steps to make sure that these rights are protected by national law, and that the people living in that country know their rights and what action they can take if their rights are abused. The government should also include the rights in its national policies, for example, its education plans. This means that public bodies such as schools and public services such as hospitals or social services must take those rights into account. The UK has signed all the main treaties except the one on migrant workers' rights.