

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: Hope and History

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Nineteen ninety-eight is an important year; it is a year when we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also an important year for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is a year when we reaffirm our commitment to work for change and to demonstrate that the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration are not too theoretical, nor too abstract. It is also a time to recognize the importance of the Universal Declaration for health issues globally. If we strive to give such principles practical effect, the success of our efforts can be measured by the improved health and well-being of individuals around the world.

The Universal Declaration was the first international agreement aimed at the improvement of human rights for all people. The year 1948 was, of course, "no ordinary time." The devastation of World War II and the revelations at Nuremberg made nations more willing to commit to a universal standard of human rights protections. Today, when we have become concerned about a lack of individual and collective will, it is worth remembering that not only after that war, but throughout, dedicated groups and individuals around the world worked tirelessly for the human rights of ordinary men and women. This can serve as a reminder that no matter how hard the going gets, we must not sacrifice human rights for other goals.

The Universal Declaration is a document that owes much to the vision of Eleanor Roosevelt, one of those war-time champions of human rights. She was the US representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights and later its

chairperson. Neither an academic nor an expert on law, she saw herself as an ambassador for the common man and woman and brought both compassion and humanitarian convictions to the shaping of a declaration that is both direct and straight forward — a declaration that has endured as a universally accepted standard of achievement for all people and all nations.

Since every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity and equal dignity without discrimination, all human rights are universal. But as Mrs. Roosevelt warned: "Without concerned citizen action to uphold [human rights] close to home, we shall look in vain at progress in the larger world." The Declaration's fiftieth anniversary is an ideal time to assess whether we are upholding human rights close to home as well as further afield. As part of the follow-up to the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights of 1993, the UN system and its Member-States are undergoing a yearlong assessment of its successes and shortcomings with respect to the protection of human rights. Human rights organizations and concerned individuals play an important role in the assessment by encouraging discussion and debate on the continuing relevance of international human rights standards and pointing to areas of imbalance in protection.

One such area is the protection at the international level of economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development. Extreme poverty, illiteracy, homelessness and the vulnerability of children to exploitation are all areas requiring a greater effort. Economic and social rights are surely interdependent with civil and political rights, and their violation or their promotion collectively impact on both individual and public health.

The ongoing human rights debate provides a forum for the informed and purposeful discussion necessary to achieving a greater understanding of how the rights enshrined in the Declaration can be implemented at both the local and international level. The worldwide human rights community is invited to engage in this debate. It is a community that includes everyone and respects all cultures, traditions and backgrounds. It encompasses both organizations and individuals, including all who define themselves as working in human rights and all who work in the field of health.

For too many in too many parts of the world, rights remain little more than words on paper. It is important that we focus on the future and reinvigorate the common will and the commitment of the international community to ensuring the enjoyment of human rights by all people everywhere. We are all the custodians of human rights and must all find our own way to do what is required. As we move into the next 50 years, developing and strengthening the linkages between health and human rights will be a vital component of meeting the goal expressed in the motto of the fiftieth anniversary: All human rights for all.