

Developing Rights

Background information for teachers

About poverty and basic rights

The world has sufficient resources to eradicate poverty. It is the unjust distribution of the world's resources at international and local level which determines who is poor and who is not.

In the year 2000, the richest 10% of the world's population owned 85% of the world's wealth.

The poorest half of the world's population owned barely 1% of global wealth.

The eradication of poverty is a principal aim of many international agencies and community groups around the world. Poverty is not easy to define. It is not just a lack of the material resources needed to sustain life. People's experience of poverty also has to do with the undermining of their self-esteem, their human worth, and their power to determine the course of their own lives. Lack of status, respect, and rights within society must also be taken into account when looking at poverty.

To end poverty it is necessary to tackle its root causes, rather than simply deal with its effects. Dealing with individuals' or communities' lack of power is a key factor in this. Powerlessness affects people's ability to tackle the injustice which they face. Over many years, the moral concept of natural rights has been one way in which the powerless have been encouraged to claim their rights.

The concept of natural rights – rights which belong to all people by virtue of their humanity – is a very old one. Despite wide differences in culture and in ideas about the individual, it has developed in some form throughout all human societies.

However, the recognition of natural or moral rights does not mean that these rights are automatic or secure for everyone. Throughout history, people have had to struggle to claim their rights. Action for justice has united people in some of the world's most memorable movements against tyranny and oppression. These include the fight for rights such as freedom from slavery; the right to vote and take political action; the right to follow one's own religion without persecution, and many more.

Movements have struggled to ensure that moral rights are safeguarded legally, through national or international law. There have been many codes and laws which attempt to define and protect rights. These have developed to suit the moral and political climate of the time, and have often excluded the weakest groups in society: slaves or landless labourers, women, and children.

In the twentieth century, international and regional codes of Human Rights which aim to secure certain basic rights for everyone have been developed and are endorsed by almost every government in existence. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). These laws act as guidelines for national governments, many of which include them, or similar codes, in their constitutions. Conventions can also be enforced through international agencies such as the European Court of Human Rights.

Yet despite the power of these codes in law, in practice there are still major violations of people's rights in many parts of the world. Today one in four of the world's people lives in a state of absolute want, unable to afford the most basic shelter, or the minimum food requirements for leading an active, productive life. Over half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day. Despite the fact that we are all born with rights, these are denied on a massive scale to tens of millions of people around the world.

Basic rights facts

- Every day 27,000 children die because they are poor. They lack the food they need to stay healthy and their parents cannot afford basic health care for them.
- More than 80 million children in the developing world go without an education. Over two thirds of whom are girls.
- In 2004 a survey found that one in four women and one in six men will be the victims of domestic violence in their lifetime.
- Around one in four primary school children and one in three secondary school children are bullied at some point in their school life.
- Every day 5,000 children die from illnesses that are carried in dirty water.
- Worldwide, women are paid on average 20 per cent less than men for the same jobs.
- Despite economic growth, 1 in 4 people – around 13 million people – currently live in poverty in the UK. 3.8 million of whom are children.

A summary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms listed in the Declaration, regardless of race, colour, sex or religion.
3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security.
4. No one shall be held in slavery.
5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
6. Everyone has the right to recognition before the law.
7. Everyone is equal before the law.
8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy for violation of their legal rights.

9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.
10. Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing.
11. Everyone is innocent until proved guilty
12. No one shall suffer arbitrary interference.
13. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement.
14. Everyone has the right to seek asylum.
15. Everyone has the right to nationality.
16. Everyone has the right to marry.
17. Everyone has the right to own property.
18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought.
19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
20. Everyone has the right to freedom of assembly and association.
21. Everyone has the right to take part in government.
22. Everyone has the right to full security in society.
23. Everyone has the right to work.
24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure.
25. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being.
26. Everyone has the right to education.
27. Everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community.
28. Everyone has the right to a social and international order in which these rights and freedoms can be fully realised.
29. Everyone has duties to the community and a duty to respect the rights and freedoms of others.
30. Nothing in the Declaration may be interpreted as giving a right to destroy any of the rights and freedoms set out in it.

A summary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

A convention is an agreement between countries to obey the same law. When a government ratifies a convention, it agrees to obey the law written down in that convention. The UK government ratified this convention in 1991. These rights apply to all people under 18.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child contains 54 statements called Articles. These are summarised below.

The main principles

There are three main rights which the Convention says must be considered whenever a decision is made about children or action is taken which affects them. These are:

- Non-discrimination. All rights apply to all children regardless of race, sex, religion, language, disability, or family background.
- Best interests. When decisions are made about children, they should always consider the best interests of the particular child.

- The child's opinion. Children have a right to say what they think about anything which affects them. They should be listened to carefully and have their views taken into account.

Other rights

These can be divided into three categories:

1. Self

These are Articles to do with children being respected as people. All children have the right to:

- A name and nationality.
- Express their thoughts, conscience and religion.
- Join organisations and to take part in meetings.
- Privacy.
- Access to information, including information about themselves.

2. Services

These are Articles to do with the child's right to care. Some of these should be provided by the parents or carers, but the State should help them too. All children have the right to:

- Physical and health care.
- Education.
- An adequate standard of living.
- A clean, safe, healthy environment.
- A range of leisure activities.
- Disabled children must be helped to live a full and active life, and to be as independent as possible.

3. Protection

These Articles are the responsibility of the State, which has a duty to protect children. All children have the right to:

- Protection from abuse or neglect.
- Protection from dangerous drugs.
- Protection from sexual exploitation or being sold, abducted or trafficked.
- Protection from work which could be dangerous, harmful or inappropriate to their age.
- Defend themselves if accused of committing a crime. They should be treated with respect and, if detained, should be treated appropriately for their age.
- Protection in times of war. Children should not be recruited into the armed forces if they are under 15.

Knowing your rights

Article 42 says that all adults and children should know about the UN Convention. The British government is committed to supporting the Convention and making it known to the public. It has to report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years on how it is putting the Convention into practice.