

Background Information
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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Living Document

Many things can be said about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is the foundation of international human rights law, the first universal statement on the basic principles of inalienable human rights, and a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. As the UDHR approaches its 60th birthday, it is timely to emphasize the living document's enduring relevance, its universality, and that it has everything to do with all of us. Today, the UDHR is more relevant than ever.

Universality

It was the UDHR, almost 60 years ago, that first recognized what have become nowadays universal values: human rights are inherent to all and the concern of the whole of the international community. Drafted by representatives of all regions and legal traditions, the UDHR has stood the test of time and resisted attacks based on "relativism". The Declaration and its core values, including non-discrimination, equality, fairness and universality, apply to everyone, everywhere and always. The UDHR belongs to all of us.

More than ever, in a world threatened by racial, economic and religious divides, we must defend and proclaim the universal principles --first enshrined in the UDHR-- of justice, fairness and equality that people across all boundaries hold so deeply.

Enduring Relevance

Human rights are not only a common inheritance of universal values that transcend cultures and traditions, but are quintessentially local values and nationally-owned commitments grounded in international treaties and national constitutions and laws.

The Declaration represents a contract between governments and their peoples, who have a right to demand that this document be respected. Not all governments have become parties to all human rights treaties. All countries, however, have accepted the UDHR. The Declaration continues to affirm the inherent human dignity and worth of every person in the world, without distinction of any kind.

Ongoing struggle

The UDHR protects all of us, and it also enshrines the gamut of human rights. The drafters of the UDHR saw a future of freedom from fear, but also of freedom from want. They put all human rights on an equal footing and confirmed human rights are essential to a life of dignity.

The UDHR drafters' vision has inspired many human rights defenders who have struggled over the last six decades to make that vision a reality. The contemporary international human rights edifice that originates in the UDHR is to be celebrated. But it has yet to benefit all of humanity equally.

The struggle is far from over. As the Declaration's custodians and beneficiaries, all of us must reclaim the UDHR, make it our own. While we are entitled to our human rights, we should also respect the human rights of others and help make universal human rights a reality for all of us. In our efforts lies the power of the UDHR: it is a living document that will continue to inspire generations to come.