



Commonwealth Secretariat

Briefing Note – Human Rights

The challenge

Human rights constitute a philosophy that prioritises the pursuit of human dignity, mutual respect and understanding as well as peace, development and democracy. Poverty, hunger, war, torture, fear and injustice stand in contradiction to human dignity, as do inequality and discrimination.

The human rights framework proposes that in order to create societies in which human dignity can be realised for all it is important that certain actions and ways of being are protected.

We talk therefore of rights – the right to education, development, shelter, health and vote for example – and of freedoms – of expression, movement or choice in marriage/partnerships. These spell out what is needed to ensure dignity for all, no matter what status, wealth, sex, disability, race, age and so on.

These rights and freedoms have been codified by governments in international laws that set standards for all states to accept and implement.

There is a foundational document that set the overarching vision for the framework – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). There are also eight key additional documents that set out these standards.

The UDHR and the two international covenants (one on civil and political rights – ICCPR, the other on economic, social and cultural rights – ICESCR) together constitute the International Bill of Human Rights.

There are a number of states, including some in the Commonwealth, which consider human rights to be a Western agenda and dangerous for their countries. In fact, many traditions have values and principles that dovetail with those of the formal human rights frame. It is all states that have constructed the legal framework for the modern human rights field; they are from all parts of the world. It is rare that the poor or the hungry or the victims of crime in any country decry human rights as irrelevant to them.

Some states see human rights as marginal or optional to their agendas, with financial crises, climate change or other issues taking centre stage. In fact, all these other issues have human rights dimensions and that is why the Commonwealth has made a commitment to mainstreaming human rights across all work.

Seventeen Commonwealth countries are yet to ratify the two major international human rights covenants (the ICCPR and ICESCR). Our aim is to have Commonwealth-wide ratification of these universal protections.

Only the child rights convention has universal ratification in the Commonwealth.

Thirty-two of the 53 member countries that constitute the Commonwealth are classified as small states. These countries experience greater constraints on their ability to fulfil international obligations owing to resource paucity. The Human Rights Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat works with small states to enable them to promote and protect human rights.

The Commonwealth strategy

Commonwealth members have repeatedly committed to the promotion of human rights. The Secretariat's human rights team works with governments to promote and encourage wider adoption of human rights standards. We advise on and support the implementation of these standards. This is done primarily through capacity-building and awareness-raising on human rights.

We also contribute to the strengthening of institutions that are key to the promotion of human rights, and the seeking of redress by those whose rights have been violated. In particular, we work with national human rights institutions (NHRIs).

We keep abreast of global developments in human rights and feed these through to governments, providing support on new areas of work, as appropriate. For example, we have supported governments, NHRIs and NGOs in preparing for and following up on the new Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Key principles

- Human dignity is the core concept of the human rights vision.
- Human rights are inherent in one's humanity – they are not a gift given by governments or taken away by them.
- The task, indeed the obligation, of governments as per laws that they themselves have drawn up, is to respect and promote these rights. This is so, whether the actual or potential abusers of rights are state agents themselves or non-state (private) actors – such as family members or businesses.
- The right to life is the key to all others.
- Equality and non-discrimination are underlying principles that support this vision. If the marginalised and the weak are less able than others to achieve their potential and live their lives to the full, then their dignity is jeopardised – the poor, the disabled, women and all others who have traditionally enjoyed little or less freedom or safety than others, must be able to exercise their rights and freedoms to the full.

The practical response

- Our police training programme, which principally targets police trainers, has reached over 42 countries so far.
- We support a network of 32 national human rights bodies in the Commonwealth, and have assisted in the establishment of national human rights commissions in several countries.
- Some 400 police inspectors and 60 government officials in India have already completed a human rights training course, as have teachers, journalists and non-governmental organisation staff, based on our human rights curriculum model.

- We have advocated for a stronger link between climate change initiatives and human rights.
- We have also provided support to 22 countries which have undergone the UN Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights.
- We have changed our working methodology, from widespread small initiatives in many states to more intense engagement with a small number of states.
- Furthermore, we have placed priority to working with small states: for 2008–09, Mauritius, Maldives and Solomon Islands.

Commonwealth ministerial meetings

The human rights area of work is not organisationally connected to any ministerial meetings, although Commonwealth law ministers have invited the Human Rights Unit to participate. The area of work has a substantive connection to all ministerial meetings.

Other Commonwealth players and their work

Several professional associations have a close interest in human rights – these include the Commonwealth Lawyers Association and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association.

There are several civil society organisations (CSOs) with a human rights interest – these include the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and the Raajje Foundation.

Relations/co-operation with other bodies involved in the sector

The Commonwealth Secretariat works very closely with the United Nations; international umbrella organisations for NHRIs; and CSOs such as Rights and Democracy, and the Association for the Prevention of Torture.

We also work closely with experts and academics in the field of human rights, seeking their advice on and participation in our work.