

30 ARTICLES ON THE 30 ARTICLES

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AT 70: STILL WORKING TO ENSURE FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND DIGNITY FOR ALL

Article 25: Right to Adequate Standard of Living

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights covers a wide range of rights, including those to adequate food, water, sanitation, clothing, housing and medical care, as well as social protection covering situations beyond one's control, such as disability, widowhood, unemployment and old age. Mothers and children are singled out for special care.

This Article is an effort to secure freedom from want, based on U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's famous vision of four freedoms. In a speech in 1941, he looked forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms: the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship God in his own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear. After Roosevelt's death and the end of World War II, his widow Eleanor often referred to the four freedoms as head of the committee drafting the UDHR.

The phrase "freedom from fear and want" appears in the Preamble to the UDHR, and Article 25 tells us what that should look like. It is further fleshed out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, part of the trio of instruments that comprise the Bill of Rights, along with the UDHR.

"A hungry 14-year-old girl picked up a narrow line of grain fallen into the dust from a truck. She was penalized only 3 years with the extenuating circumstances of not having plundered the socialist property directly from field or corn loft."

–Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*

After two Articles that looked after the rights of working people, Article 25 emphasizes that "everyone" has social and economic rights. There is a level below which nobody should fall. In language that is now old-fashioned, yet expresses a progressive notion, this Article specifies that all children are guaranteed the same rights "whether born in or out of wedlock." Article 25 also forms the basis for current efforts to address the particular challenges facing millions of older women and men around the world.

The first requirement listed in Article 25 as being necessary for "a standard of living adequate for... health and wellbeing" is food. A former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, observed that "the right to food does not mean handing out free food to everyone." However, governments are obliged not to prevent access to adequate food by, for example, forced eviction from land, destruction of crops or criminalization of poverty. Governments also have to take adequate steps to ensure

that private sector activities do not impinge on people's right to food. And, similarly, private water services cannot compromise equal, affordable and physical access to sufficient, safe and acceptable water supplies.

Many experts say the world produces enough food to feed itself. But some 815 million people continue to suffer from chronic hunger because of unequal distribution of wealth and resources: they are too poor to buy food, do not have land to produce their own food or face a variety of other obstacles that could be resolved.

“Half the world's population is missing out on essential health services, and 100 million are pushed into poverty each year trying to pay for them. This is a violation of the human right to health.”

– **WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of violations of human rights, and places many other rights listed in the UDHR out of reach. The World Bank and World Health Organization reported in 2017 that at least half of the world's population (some 3.8 billion people) is too poor to get essential health care services, inconsistent with the right to health spelled out in Article 25. They

also said nearly a billion people spend 10 percent or more of their household income on health expenses for themselves, a sick child or another family member. For almost 100 million people, these expenses are high enough to push them into extreme poverty, an unacceptable and unnecessary situation, they said.

Extreme poverty is more than just a lack of sufficient income. For the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, extreme poverty involves a lack of income, a lack of access to basic services – health, schooling and living conditions – and social exclusion. By this measure, over 2.2 billion people – 30 per cent of the world's population – are either near or already living in poverty.

The current Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston – tasked with advancing the eradication of such poverty – has pointed out that extreme poverty is not confined to developing countries. Government policies can entrench high levels of poverty and inflict “unnecessary misery” in even the richest countries in the world.

“I have spoken with people who depend on food banks and charities for their next meal, who are sleeping on friends' couches because they are homeless and don't have a safe place for their children to sleep,” Alston said after a 2018 visit to the UK. He said he also met people “who have sold sex for money or shelter, children who are growing up in poverty unsure of their future.”

Where national governments step back from international obligations (such as the United States' announced withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change), cities increasingly are stepping in to fill gaps. The global South has led the movement to establish “human rights cities,” and York has followed this lead to become the first human rights city in the UK.

In a 2017 declaration, it embraced “a vision of a vibrant, diverse, fair and safe community built on the foundations of universal human rights.” It selected five human rights priorities: the rights to education, housing, health and social care, a decent standard of living, and equality and non-discrimination. York's first four

priorities are among the social rights found in article 25, while the fifth – equality and nondiscrimination – lies at the very heart of the UDHR and of all social rights.

This is one in a series of articles published by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to mark the 70th anniversary of adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948. All rights enshrined in the UDHR are connected to each other, and all are equally important.

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