

# THE POOREST – THE DRIVING FORCE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS<sup>1</sup>

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Human rights form a single entity composed of inseparable elements: if a single right is neglected, all the others are jeopardised.

That is the very reason why extreme poverty, destitution and famine are the most reprehensible of all violations.

Human rights are not only the concern of individual States, but also of the international community, the community of States and of individuals and populations.

## POLITICAL LIBERTIES, AN INTERIM PRIORITY

At the end of the Second World War, public opinion in the Western world was deeply convinced: never again. No more dictatorships, totalitarianism, political oppression or racially-driven holocausts! This led to a genuine leap forward by populations and governments in terms of human rights.

Human rights were already seen as a whole: as well as political rights, it was understood that inalienable economic, social and cultural rights should not be forgotten. But during the fifteen or twenty years following the 1948 Declaration – especially in the industrialised countries which largely set the tone at the UN – the minds of men and their political leaders were influenced by the horror of wars and fascist carnage. As a result, they launched themselves into what has since appeared as a double misunderstanding:

1. Priority should be given to civil and political liberties.
2. This was all the easier since, to guarantee these liberties, it was sufficient for governments to abstain from, rather than undertake, any action. It was sufficient to give citizens freedom of speech and thought, to allow them to organise political parties and participate in democratic elections. It cost States nothing, whereas implementing economic and social rights required determined initiatives, commitment instead of abstention. This commitment was costly, and developing countries could not yet afford it.

It was a double misunderstanding which has remained, even if doubts and a genuine unease are beginning to appear. We are not criticising the United Nations for wanting to make human rights an instrument for peace, which was why the UN was created in 1945. We are not criti-

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<sup>1</sup> „Les plus pauvres, moteurs des Droits de l'homme“, in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Ed. du Cerf / Ed. Quart Monde, Paris 2007, pp. 193-201. Translated from French, January 2012, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

cising it for taking short cuts in its concern to see the end of wars and genocide. Using civil and political liberties as an initial barrier against armed violence and concentration camps was a legitimate idea at a certain point in history. What is regrettable, is that by clinging to a priority which was intended to be temporary, the world somehow made it the only criterion for the implementation of the whole 1948 Declaration. It is as if political freedom, originally a small part of inalienable rights as a whole, has become the only path towards a just world. This has paralysed both thinking and the ability to make real progress.

By way of example, the Human Rights Commission, whose headquarters are at the UN Office at Geneva, has the task of "examining the human rights situation in various regions of the world, as well as prescriptive and incentive efforts with a view to creating respect for man's freedoms and fundamental rights on a global scale".<sup>2</sup> A Special Committee has been assigned the task of studying "human rights violations wherever they occur." However, when we look at the work of the Commission and its ancillary bodies, it becomes apparent that they concentrate essentially on studying certain national situations from the point of view of political freedom and equality granted to ethnic groups or "races" (the fight against racism, for obvious reasons, has a major place in this line of thinking). Apart from the reports on nations that were signatories to the Covenant on political rights (presented in closed hearings) the Commission has focussed on the state of liberties in countries like Afghanistan, Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatamala, Iran, Kampuchea, Namibia, South Africa and Western Sahara. Not to mention Poland and Cyprus...

These country analyses are completed by thematic studies, but which themes have been chosen? Racism and racial discrimination, religious intolerance, slavery, torture, wrongful imprisonment, flagrant violations of the right to peace, independence and impartiality of judicial power, to mention only the most important. The minutes of these debates show that it is always political freedom that prevails, even if, within this general approach, the right, for example, to education or work, appears here and there.

This narrowing of the approach to, and even of the thinking about, human rights, could not continue to satisfy the true defenders of a vision of man as a subject of absolute rights. Thus, in the Commission, as well as in the Centre for Human Rights at the UN Office at Geneva, some openings have appeared. Themes which break with the established tradition have gradually been introduced, such as "children, migrant workers, ethnic minorities or indigenous populations". They are not as yet a true focus on new horizons, but at the very least the "Rights of the Child" has opened the door to a less fragmentary approach. Bolder still has been the Commission's decision to take into account the new international economic order and the "right to development". It should be remembered that the members of the Commission are independent legal specialists. They receive no directives from their governments. But as we follow their efforts, we may feel that they remain, despite everything, dependent not only on their discipline (law, certainly, but above all political law, public law, international law, etc.), but also on history, the history which has put the entire emphasis on civil and political liberties, to the detriment of all the other, numerous, human rights.

Even in the Commission, which is the primary tool for thought and protection of human rights within the UN system, misuse of language is becoming more and more blatant, such as the constant use of the expression human rights to mean only political rights. Governments, and above all public opinion, often still do the same. This becomes a downright hindrance when it comes

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<sup>2</sup> It is in these terms that the concerns of the Commission and its specialised bodies were reaffirmed, during its annual meeting in 1985. (Translator's note: In the absence of the official English version of this text, this passage is a translation of Wresinski's text.)

to the UN's interest with regards to human rights in the area of "public access to information, the teaching of human rights in schools, training scholarships, consulting services...". We have studied the programmes, the written information, and the advisory service guidelines. Everything in them is coloured by the same misunderstanding: that what is essential is the freedom of thought, speech and assembly; it matters little if the holders of this political freedom are dying of hunger, have never learnt to read and are deprived of all means of communication.

## **POVERTY, THE MOST PROFOUND AND COMPLETE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

There is thus all the more reason to celebrate the appearance, in the midst of a somewhat digressive and muddled agenda for 1985, of this addition which came as a surprise to the general public: "question of the realization in all countries of the economic, social and cultural rights" contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Covenant "on economic, social and cultural rights, and study of special problems which the developing countries face in their efforts to achieve human rights, including:

- a) issues concerning the right to an adequate standard of living; right to development;
- b) effects that the existing imported international economic order currently has on the economies of developing countries, and that this constitutes an obstacle for the implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms." <sup>3</sup>

Couched in international jargon, here is a concern for human rights with regard to poverty. Perhaps we should not exaggerate the progress which this seems to show. The right to development and the new economic order had already appeared in discussions. We owe this to the developing countries and, in particular, to pressure from the 77 so-called non-aligned countries. Their first priority remains to put the new economic order back on the agenda, while the industrialised countries would like to postpone the debate. We have not yet reached the thorough renewal of our approaches to the human rights ideal and its implementation. Let us say that we are in a period of doubt: we are not so sure of our ideas, and our western democracies are a little less convinced that they have achieved success and that they know best. And having to think about the rights of developing *States* has certainly opened the way to what could become a new, and at long last comprehensive, way of thinking about the totality of the absolute rights of all men. Provided we have the courage to affirm, once and for all, that these rights are not a list from which we can choose our priorities to suit ourselves, but well and truly a programme to be taken as a whole. We are confident that the world will reach this point, but it will not get there fast enough if the defenders of human rights do not undertake concerted action.

It is true that, during the 1960s, the idea gained ground that peace would not be assured without considerable efforts for development. In the 1970s, this thinking was refined further. To consolidate peace, development had to be just, its profits had to be fairly shared out between peoples, and also between the different elements which compose each population. A more precise notion of the interdependence between peace, development and human rights began to emerge. It heralded a clearer notion of the essential interdependence of all human

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: In the absence of the official English version of this text, this passage is a translation of Wresinski's text.

rights. We began to have the courage to recognise that without education or work, without adequate means to fight famine, malnutrition and failing health, without genuine possibilities to become informed, to communicate or to get organised, the "fundamental freedoms" were unattainable for the poor. And this was the case in *every* country. But both the international political situation and the economic situation remain unfavourable to a public proclamation. For such a proclamation would be tantamount to saying that, all things considered, poverty is the most serious violation, because it is the deepest and most complete of the inalienable rights in the life of a person, a family or a population. Imagine the reappraisal of past international disputes that would be caused by the triple affirmation:

- human rights form a whole whose elements are inseparable: if a single right is neglected, all the others are compromised
- for this very reason, famine, poverty and extreme poverty represent the most reprehensible of all violations
- and finally, that therefore, human rights are not solely the concern of individual States, but of the international community; the community of States but also of individuals and entire populations. Dutch or French citizens would be considered as sharing responsibility for the implementation of human rights in Burkina Faso or Belize. And this shared responsibility would not result in a discourse in favour of political liberties, but in the effective sharing of their own material goods, education or health.

The citizens of the rich countries should also think about putting this into practice more comprehensively among themselves, since, in the industrialised countries, illiteracy among children in the poorest districts, the denial of the right to raise their children for those families most devastated by chronic unemployment, expulsions and the refusal of decent housing for families without guaranteed resources should, at long last, be seen as denials of human rights. Such denials are also visible in the lack of vocational training for the poorest workers and the shameful condition of dependence of the most completely destitute families caused by most of our systems of social aid or welfare. Just the fact that families can be left uninformed of the content of the files concerning them that circulate freely in public services is also a serious denial of rights.

## **THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY AND THE PROGRESS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ARE ONE AND THE SAME COMBAT**

The denial of the rights proclaimed in the UN Declaration is also the denial of those of the Council of Europe's Social Charter: only the European Community in Strasbourg has the courage to declare that it wants to move towards a new concept of all human rights. And to date, only the French President has had the courage to support this development publicly. Indeed, in 1981, François Mitterrand affirmed in Cabinet that "human rights must be implemented in the Fourth World, where poverty is transmitted from generation to generation". The Secretary-General of the Council of Europe has adopted this undeniably brave and pioneering affirmation. For all that, at the time, no other leaders nor the mass media saw fit to follow suit. When, in 1982, the International Movement ATD Fourth World launched its appeal to the defenders of human rights with its denunciation of poverty as the most serious of violations, it was once again in France that the majority of the 232,500 signatures were collected. Again, it was the French who were the most interested in furthering the analysis and

fulfilment of inalienable rights. However, the citizens of other European countries followed them in nonetheless convincing numbers. Europe seems ready for a new debate.

This is all the more important, since Europe lies at the root of the misunderstandings and inertia we mentioned earlier. Have not the governments and populations of other parts of the world, sub-Saharan Africa for example, always regretted their absence from the negotiating table of the 1948 Declaration? Were they not always tempted to propose a different balance, different concepts and articles, and other priorities in its implementation? What if we let them tell us what they really think? And what if we let the poorest in the industrialised countries speak out too? They were not represented in the preparatory phase of the Human Rights Declaration either.

During its forty years, the United Nations has shown considerable progress in the areas of peace, democratic involvement, development and human rights. But at this point in time it is as if we have reached a stalemate, we are at a standstill. But reaching a standstill never means simply coming to a halt. It leads to paralysis and backsliding. Surely it is time we stirred ourselves. We do not need to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the UN by listing its good deeds. The history of humanity tells us that good deeds can easily vanish into thin air, if we are not careful. It also tells us that UN values are not kept safe by maintaining the status quo, but by moving forward.

Now, at this precise point in our history, where can progress be made in human rights, if not by extending them to the poor? Doing so would oblige us to rethink human rights entirely with regard to poverty in the world. Similarly, how can we make progress in the fight against poverty other than in a more effective desire to see the poor really become favoured subjects of human rights? Only the poorest can show us the full meaning of inalienable rights and the efforts required to respect them. Only a full understanding of inalienable rights can make us realise how poverty is totally unacceptable with regard to the ideals proclaimed by the UN.

Perhaps it is high time France, and the rest of the world, got down to preparing for the next forty years of the UN and Human Rights.