

UN Declaration on the Right to Development at 25

Development is a human right

Widening poverty gaps, food shortages, climate change, economic crises, armed conflicts, rising unemployment, popular unrest, and other pressing challenges confront our world today. To respond effectively, we need the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development that unequivocally establishes development as a right and puts people at the centre of the development process.

Declaring that everyone is "entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized," the groundbreaking document first proclaimed this inalienable right on 4 December 1986, when it was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

This year marks the Declaration's 25th anniversary. Yet many children, women and men – the very subjects of development – still live in dire need of the fulfilment of their entitlement to a life of dignity, freedom and equal opportunity. This directly affects the realization of a wide range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay has called on governments and all concerned to seize the opportunity of this anniversary to move beyond political debate and focus on practical steps to implement the Declaration.

"I am duty-bound to raise this anniversary call. We must end discrimination in the distribution of the benefits of development. We must stop the 500,000 preventable deaths of women in childbirth every year. We must free the millions of children from hunger in a world of plenty. And we must ensure that people can benefit from their country's natural resources and participate meaningfully in decision-making. These are the kind of issues addressed by the Declaration, which calls for equal opportunity and a just social order."

"It's not an act of nature that leaves more than one billion people around the world locked in the jaws of poverty. It's a result of the denial of their fundamental human right to development," says the UN human rights chief.

It belongs to everyone

The pursuit of economic growth is not an end in itself. The Declaration clearly states that development is a comprehensive process aiming to improve "the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution" of the resulting benefits.

Like all human rights, the right to development belongs to all individuals and peoples, everywhere, without discrimination and with their participation. The Declaration recognizes the right to self-determination and to full sovereignty over natural wealth and resources.

According to the latest UN Human Development Report, the number of malnourished people has increased from 850 million in 1980 to about 1 billion worldwide today. Despite over thirty years of technological progress and ever-increasing exploitation of natural resources, 150 million more people are now malnourished.

Rampant poverty and stark inequalities, both within and across countries, serve as a constant reminder that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the fundamental principles of international human rights law it subsequently inspired, and indeed the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development remain empty words for far too many people, especially those belonging to marginalized groups.

A right that addresses contemporary challenges

Born at the end of the colonial era, the Declaration on the Right to Development remains highly relevant today. The right to development embodies the human rights principles of equality, non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability as well as international cooperation. These along with the basic requirements of the Declaration (see box) can guide our responses to a series of contemporary issues and challenges, including climate change and the quest for sustainable development, the stalled Doha Development Round of trade negotiations, development cooperation, Aid for Trade, debt relief, technology transfer, foreign direct investment, the democratic deficit, weak governance, the Millennium Development Goals and the need to reform international financial institutions.

The right to development is not about charity, but enablement and empowerment. The Declaration identifies obstacles to development, empowers individuals and peoples, calls for an enabling environment and good governance at both national and international levels, and enhances accountability of duty bearers - governments, donors and recipients, international organizations, transnational corporations, and civil society.

Act together now

“States have the duty to cooperate with each other in ensuring development and eliminating obstacles to development,” says the Declaration. While there are hard-won development gains, the international community has yet to fully utilize the potential of the Declaration, partly due to politicization and polarization.

Basic requirements of the UN Declaration on the Right to Development:

- putting people at the center of development
- ensuring free, active and meaningful participation
- securing non-discrimination
- fairly distributing the benefits of development
- respecting self-determination, and sovereignty over natural resources
- all in a process that advances other civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights

The Right to Development in action:

The Right to Development was upheld by the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights. It found in 2010 that the way in which the Endorois, an indigenous community in Kenya, was dispossessed of its traditional lands and denied access to resources constituted a violation of their rights, including the right to development under Article 22 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

During this 25th anniversary in 2011, the United Nations Human Rights office (OHCHR) seeks to raise awareness, enhance understanding and promote dialogue on the right to development through a series of events and public information activities. More information including the text of the Declaration and programme of commemorative events is available on the OHCHR website:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Development/Pages/DevelopmentIndex.aspx>

“The Right to Development can be realized only when there is a solid national and international accountability framework for development that respects social justice and human rights. Let us return to the hopeful and principled message of the Declaration itself – in a spirit of reasoned compromise and with a sense of the vital mission at hand, and focus our efforts on making the right to development a reality for all,” says High Commissioner Pillay.

For further information, please contact R2D@ohchr.org

ABOUT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE

The United Nations Human Rights office, part of the UN Secretariat, has been given a unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in some 50 countries. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 to spearhead the UN human rights efforts, the Office takes action based on the unique mandate given by the international community to guard and advocate for international human rights law. For more information please visit www.ohchr.org