

Background Information: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Following this historic act, the Assembly called upon all Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories."



History of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, was a momentous occasion. Representatives of 48 countries came together at the United Nations in Paris to make a profound statement on the value and dignity of human life. After several drafts and much debate, the final version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emerged. It was a list of basic rights that the international community agreed upon as the inborn (*inherent*) legacy due to all human beings on earth.

The horrors experienced during the Second World War, particularly the genocides committed by the Nazi regime, shocked the world. War could no longer be used as an excuse to commit crimes against humanity; nor could the suffering and death of millions of innocent people be ignored. For the first time in history, the international community agreed that gross violations of human rights would not be tolerated. It was a monumental decision. Human rights were finally acknowledged as a global responsibility.

A strong and unified declaration against flagrant human rights violations was necessary in order to prevent such violations from recurring. The United Nations, established in 1945, began to formulate a policy that would make the respect of human rights an international priority. A key component of their mandate was the drafting of an International Bill of Human Rights. A commission was appointed to begin drafting the first in a series of documents, a list of universally recognized rights and freedoms, which was soon to be known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



The Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, set to work. The Commission needed to create a declaration that all countries around the world could adopt as their own. This was no easy task. The ideas needed to be 'universal.' This meant that

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they had to transcend different political and religious beliefs, and different cultures. They enlisted the help of several people, including a Canadian named John Peters Humphrey.

Dr. Humphrey was a young law professor from McGill University in Montreal and a renowned authority on international law. He wrote the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and worked to guide it through to its adoption on December 10, 1948. His tremendous contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the development of subsequent human rights law is a source of great pride for all Canadians.



Principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflects fundamental beliefs shared by countries around the world regarding human rights. The document is divided into two sections: the *preamble*, which describes the reasons why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created, and the 30 Articles that list our basic human rights.

There are two main themes contained in the preamble. The first is the belief that in order to support a better quality of life for all, laws that protect human rights must be enforced and respected universally. The second is the belief that, by upholding human rights, "freedom, justice, and peace in the world" can be achieved. In short, respecting human rights means a better world for everyone.

There are 30 articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, covering various categories of human rights, such as basic rights (e.g., life, security of the person, freedom); political rights (e.g., right to vote); civil rights and liberties (e.g., freedom of opinion and expression); equality rights (e.g., the right to be free from discrimination); economic rights (e.g., the right to fair wages and safe working conditions); social rights (e.g., access to education and adequate health care); and cultural rights (e.g., the right to speak your native language and practice your culture).

Although each of these rights may differ from one another, they are all considered to be part of an indivisible set of *human rights*.

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Importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a profoundly important document for people all over the world because it is founded on three key principles. Human rights are **inalienable**: no one can ever take them away from you. Human rights are also **indivisible**: you cannot be entitled to some of them and denied others.

Finally, human rights are **interdependent**: they are all part of a larger framework and work together so you can enjoy a safe, free, and productive life.



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself is not a document that is legally binding. Countries that have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot be held legally responsible if they break their promise to protect and preserve human rights and freedoms. The Declaration is a standard for countries to follow. It expresses the basic principles and ideals that the world holds for human rights.

Using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a guide, governments are responsible for creating national laws to protect universal human rights. Citizens can then use their own judicial and legal systems to prosecute individuals or groups that have violated human rights. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has incorporated the human rights standards of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into Canadian law.



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Available online at <www.unac.org/rights/>.