

Introduction

From the very inception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, countries now in the Commonwealth have engaged in shaping and promoting human rights. Those who wrote the Declaration included Commonwealth citizens from several countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and India. In 1948 they turned their thoughts to human dignity and the elements needed to make this dignity real.

The drafters saw human dignity as the lynchpin for freedom, justice and peace in the world. They called for freedoms – of thought, religion, expression and movement. They set out rights – to work, social security, health, education and an adequate standard of living. They declared the principle of non-discrimination and called for an international order that would enable the fulfilment of rights set out in the Declaration. They were clear that dignity cannot co-exist with poverty, homelessness, lack of education or exclusion from the decision-making systems that impact on a person's life.

The values of the Commonwealth and the content of the Declaration complement each other well. In addressing poverty, we seek to improve the working conditions and opportunities of the 2 billion people of the Commonwealth; in addressing discrimination we address gender inequalities; and through the Respect and Understanding agenda we seek harmonious and respectful relations between ethnic and other social groups.

The Declaration is Universal; it applies to everyone and indicates the range of rights that have subsequently been further established in a series of treaties: economic, social, cultural, civil and political. The following pages draw on United Nations information to record, country by country, the extent of sign-up to the eight most important of these treaties by all Commonwealth states. The extent of reservations, explained overleaf, and the date of the latest engagement with the UN to discuss national progress is also noted, as is the existence or otherwise of national human rights institutions.

Laws are not the entirety of the human rights story. They are important in setting the framework but the major challenge lies in turning the promises set out in these laws into reality for the people. Positive accounts of recent initiatives to progress human rights are presented, not only to publicise good human rights work in the Commonwealth but also to inspire others to action. This publication shows how committed is this organisation to human rights and celebrates our recent successes.

The publication moves on to offer a brief quantitative analysis of the country data, by region. The leadership of the African region on both ratifications and the number of reservations is clear; the front-runner position of the Pacific region on abolition of the death penalty is striking. Africa is the region where we find the highest rate of ratifications and

where the largest number of treaties enjoy universal regional sign-up: the Conventions on Civil and Political Rights, Discrimination Against Women, Racial Discrimination and the Rights of the Child have been ratified by all African Commonwealth countries. The one Convention that all Commonwealth countries have ratified is the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

I hope this will be a useful and inspiring document for those interested in the reality and the future of human rights in the Commonwealth. The 60th Anniversary of the Declaration provides the opportunity to celebrate our successes and to re-commit to the fulfilment of human rights across the Commonwealth.

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