

# Human Rights

Human Rights for Human Dignity

By Cheryl Hotchkiss

- Migrant workers in China have little or no access to housing and health care.
- Indigenous and rural women in Peru experience high rates of maternal mortality because of a lack of access to health services and culturally appropriate care.
- Palestinian farmers have been cut off from their land and are unable to earn any income from their crops.
- In Zimbabwe, urban poor have had their homes demolished and land confiscated without compensation or support for relocation.
- The denial of the Aboriginal and treaty rights of the people of Grassy Narrows in northern Ontario has resulted in the erosion of traditional ways of life, widespread ill-health, and severe impoverishment.



Biona Ranja, India. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters, carers, and farmers - women are demanding their right to be recognized for the work that they do.

In each of these examples, the affected communities have been marginalized and discriminated against. As a result, they experience significant barriers to accessing the resources essential to their survival and well-being. These situations aren't just the result of poor public policy or unmet needs, they are the result of violations of fundamental human rights.

Limited resources are not the principal cause of widespread violations of economic, social and cultural rights and cannot be used as an excuse to deny these rights to specific individuals and groups. Even wealthy countries and powerful governments have failed to meet their obligations to end hunger and preventable disease, and to eliminate illiteracy and homelessness.

Governments, keen to encourage investment, have often failed to ensure that corporations respects human rights. They have exposed populations to pollution and to exploitation by denying workers the right to a fair wage and decent working conditions. Governments have also disregarded the rights of people when supporting large-scale development projects that have resulted in widespread homelessness, damage to land and water, and violations of Indigenous peoples' rights.

“We want our people to have a place where we can regain who we are. There are few of us that have jobs, and a lot more that don't have jobs, that barely meet the basic needs each month. That's not a good way to live. My hope is not just something for us, but that something good will be set up for our kids and for future generations so our people will no longer have to live in poverty like they live now.” – Roberta Kesick, grandmother and trapper, Grassy Narrows First Nation

Human rights are indivisible – all rights are of equal value and cannot be separated. Violations of economic, social and cultural rights – such as the failure to protect the land rights of Indigenous peoples, denying minorities' education rights, and inequitable provision of health care – are often linked with civil and political rights violations. No human right can be realized in isolation from other rights. Just as full enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression requires concerted efforts to realize the right to education, so the right to life requires steps to reduce infant mortality, epidemics and malnutrition.

Poverty is caused by human beings – it results largely from the quality of decisions made by governments, corporations, institutions and others who have the power to change people's lives for the better. Breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion means combating the human rights violations that drive and perpetuate them.

For too long, human rights organizations have failed to address adequately the human rights violations that create and support poverty. Amnesty International is preparing a global campaign to protect the human rights of people living in poverty. The campaign begins in the spring of 2009. While there are numerous compelling reasons for such a campaign, three in particular convinced Amnesty to make respect for and protection and fulfillment of the rights of people living in poverty a priority.

First, 60 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) the Declaration's promise that all should be able to live “free and equal in dignity and rights” has not been met for millions living in poverty.

A second reason is the recent emergence of civil society movements to demand a response to poverty – like the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, the Drop the Debt campaign, the Millennium Development Goals and, in Canada, the Make

Poverty History campaign. These movements recognize poverty as a denial of human rights. Their work has resulted in unprecedented activism to establish a global responsibility for the eradication of poverty. Amnesty International has supported these movements and plans to become more actively engaged with them.

A third reason for this focus comes from years of reflection and adjustments to research and campaigning strategies. During the mid-1990's, Amnesty's work documenting and addressing violations of the human rights of women fostered a new awareness. There was a recognition of not only the state's role as a direct perpetrator of human rights violations, but also that the state had to be held to account for creating and maintaining the systems and environments that enable violations by private individuals and groups. The evolution of the work on women's human rights was part of a broader shift toward trying to better understand and address the root causes of human rights violations. While Amnesty International has had considerable success in holding governments accountable for violations against specific individuals, new methods and approaches were needed to help create the environment in which basic rights could be enjoyed and violations prevented.

The 60th anniversary of the UDHR and the expanded lens through which Amnesty now approaches human rights protection, led to the decision to focus on the human right violations that result in poverty. Central to this campaign are two core ideas which will inform our research and activism.

1. Poverty is more than a lack of income. It is the denial of access to the resources, security and decision-making power that individuals and communities require to meet their needs. Lack of respect and the absence of protection for the human rights of people living in poverty deny them the opportunity to improve their lives. This often leads to further impoverishment.
2. Discriminatory attitudes, systems and structures often silence the voices of people living in poverty. The people living in poverty are denied the space and opportunity to actively realize their own visions and ideas for creating a path out of poverty. Amnesty International's work must be focused principally on amplifying their voices and supporting the realization of their solutions.

To stop violations of human rights:

1. People living poverty must have the opportunity and a safe space within which to demand the protection of their human rights.
2. States must reduce unequal access to the resources necessary for the enjoyment of human rights, such as access to basic health care and education.

3. States, corporations, and other organizations must be held accountable for actions that directly, or indirectly, violate the human rights of people living in poverty.
4. There must be greater, and more concrete, legal protection for the human rights of people living in poverty.

The upcoming campaign will provide new opportunities for Amnesty International members across Canada and around the world to join like-minded organizations and affected communities in focusing attention on the human rights of people living in poverty. The campaign will be a multi-year effort that will include projects on issues in specific countries, or regions, where a broad-based human rights campaign can make an immediate difference in the lives of people in poverty and set precedents for global change. Central themes emerging from discussions with partners include measures to support the right to health, particularly maternal health and treatment for HIV/AIDS, and measures for effective legal protection of land and housing rights.

While Amnesty International hopes the launch of the global campaign in spring 2009 will contribute to greater public awareness and demand for change, work is already underway on the key themes. For example, Amnesty International's current work includes calling for:

- An investigation into the disappearance of the Indigenous leader, Kimi Pernia, who was killed when he fought the damming of a river vital to the survival of his community in Colombia.
- Access to the same level of education Roma children in Slovakia as all other children in Slovakia.
- The government of Guerrero State in Mexico to be held accountable for its failure to fairly and transparently consult the community, particularly subsistence farmers, regarding the impact of the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam.
- Those who are being forcibly evicted in Angola to have the right to be told why they are being evicted, and to have their legal right to housing protected.

Amnesty International is aware of the tremendous work done by Canadian organizations to protect and promote the human rights of people living in poverty and wants to learn from organizations such as Make Poverty History, NAPO, and CCIC member organizations, who have played a leadership role in this work domestically and internationally.

In developing the campaign strategy in Canada, Amnesty International is deepening

the conversation with key organizations and individuals involved in efforts to protect the rights of people living in poverty. Amnesty is also building on a number of current projects in collaboration with partners in Canada, including:

- Continued calls for a comprehensive federal response to the patterns of marginalization and discrimination that enhance the high risk of violence against Indigenous women.
- Public education and awareness of the need for timely and fair resolution of outstanding Indigenous land disputes.
- Promotion of the recently adopted UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples.
- Demands for greater accountability for the actions of Canadian corporations at home and abroad.

Amnesty International welcomes and will seek out organizations and individuals willing to create a campaign that brings a strong human rights emphasis to existing and new initiatives and supports the valuable work already underway to end poverty.

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### **Find Out More**

[Human rights for human dignity](#): a primer on economic social and cultural rights - Amnesty Canada campaign (follow the links under “priority concerns”)