The Future is Messy

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The future of Universal Human Rights Declaration lies at the intersection of economics and equity. In the 21st century, humanity will have to grapple with resolving fundamental, deep-held polar value issues: freedom of choice versus accountability of outcome; resolving historically entrenched institutional abuse without punitive policies that simply relocate and then perpetuate inequality; pursuing that which is universally applicable while preserving the unique beauty of individuality and cultural diversity. The 21st Century is when the ideologically messy work begins in earnest as we seek to meet the challenges of the future by returning to the lessons of the past.

Seventy-five years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) lit a beacon that shone a light on abusive conditions that so many were facing based on the conditions of their birth and the political situations they faced as a result. It gave voice to the universal truth of personal sovereignty, the right to be free of physical violence, to be allowed access to participate in civil life, including governance without fear. Important work that continues to this day.

But it is work that has moved into questions of implementation and enforcement. It is not difficult to reach consensus that violence by the powerful against the weak is immoral. It is not difficult to find supporters for the end of obvious brutality and oppression. The work is ongoing and important, and it will not be an easy road. Reporting, oversight, and enforcement of these rights must be addressed if the Declaration is to continue for another 75 years as a foundational document.

But the UDHR addressed more than political rights and rights against physical harms and violence, it also includes Article 25, which outlines economic and social rights. Based largely on Franklin Roosevelt’s “four essential human freedoms: the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship God in his own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear” (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). The UDHR was a product of the terrible lessons that had been dearly learned so recently as the world fell to the chaos and horror of World War II. It reflects the optimism of humanity that such outcomes could be avoided by building a new regime of cooperation and shared prosperity which would allow for the improvement of conditions for all. It reflects a view of the existence of abject poverty as a moral failure of leadership and society, rather than a moral failure of individuals. It was born in the understanding that without decent living conditions, man
cannot have peace. A man or woman that cannot feed themselves or their children is vulnerable to coercion and abuse from the powerful. As such, ensuring economic rights creates stability, and supports the achievement of the other rights.

But economic rights have been viewed less universally than political rights. Where the world seemed to achieve a desire to enter a new era of cooperation and unity post-World War II, over time, the sentiment waned as a new order appeared. The world found itself dividing along line of economic ideology. Was equity or freedom more important? What was the role of government in determining the allocation of resources? Is it better to increase the overall productivity through innovation even if the results will be an unequal distribution of gains? And as the world became more and more divided along these lines, forming distinctive coalitions that actively worked to promote their own ideological interests while thwarting those of the other, the concept of economic rights became more and more tied to deeper issues of national identity and values. Meaningful work towards improvements of the human condition were impeded by this impasse.

As the world changed again at the end of the Cold War, it seemed an ideological winner had emerged triumphant and that progress towards equality could be made. But even as an overall improvement has occurred in the base condition, questions about equitable distribution have only increased. As the world faces new challenges of our own making, the detrimental impacts of human activity, we find that not only are the distributions of wealth inequitable, the distribution of negative effects has also been inequitable – resulting in our most vulnerable populations paying the greatest share of the costs of industrialization and consumption while receiving the smallest share of its benefits.

But the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not an unchanging and standalone document, and it is not alone. It’s sister documents, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) join it to form the International Bill of Human Rights (Correaia, 2022, UNHCHR, n.d.). These additions outline even further the full extent of what humanity needs to progress further, to reach large-scale equity, and to address the challenges that come from an increasingly “small” and tangibly interconnected world. It is a world in which, as John F Kennedy said, "The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened." It is a world in which failures to address the basic needs of people in remote areas
will be felt by everyone. Without addressing economic equity, we fail to address the root cause and enabling conditions of oppression.

