

Universal, indivisible and inalienable

Universal

If human rights are rights human beings possess by virtue of being human, it follows that all humans possess them - there can be no distinction between human beings based on any criterion such as nationality, sex or sexual orientation, religion, culture etc.

Linked to universality is the notion of equality as emphasised in the Universal Declaration which in Article 1 states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Such ideas - universality, equality and a common humanity - lie at the heart of human rights. Concretely, this means that in the context of development the people of Zambia or Malaysia are entitled to the same enjoyment of human rights as people in Ireland or Malta.

Indivisible

The term human rights refers to a plurality of different rights - economic, civil, social, political and cultural. When we describe human rights as indivisible we mean that all of these various parts form one integral whole which may not be divided. Human rights can therefore be understood as a package which may not be divided into its various components for the purpose of picking and choosing some rights at the expense of others or for the purpose of giving importance to some rights while ignoring the rest. Historically, and especially during the Cold War, the West tended to emphasise civil and political rights at the expense of economic and social rights whilst Communist states tended to reverse the emphasis - with very considerable implications for development.

Indivisibility is linked to the concept of interdependence - meaning that each right forming part of human rights is only fully enjoyed when the other rights are also being enjoyed. That is why we say that human rights are indivisible and interdependent; every right forming part of human rights is equally important, deserves equal protection and promotion and can only be truly enjoyed if all other rights are concurrently implemented.

Inalienable

A legal term which simply means "that which may not be given away". To alienate means to sell or part with. If something is inalienable it means that it may not be sold or parted with in any other way. Hence when we describe human rights as inalienable we are saying that human rights may not be sold or renounced. This has practical implications for the protection of human rights - for example, if an individual is arrested by the police and is then forced to sign a document in which s/he accepts to be kept under arrest without trial indefinitely, that document would be invalid since no one may alienate or renounce her/his right not to be subject to arbitrary arrest.