

ICT4Peace Foundation

# Human rights: 70 Years On



— YEARS —

**UNIVERSAL  
DECLARATION OF  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

**#STANDUP4HUMANRIGHTS**

# ICTs and Human Rights

Chaired by a woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, the Committee at the United Nations tasked with drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) finished its work in May 1948, but it wasn't until 10<sup>th</sup> December that same year that the UN General Assembly adopted it, as Resolution 217. 70 years on, used, abused, completely shunned or parochially adopted, the UDHR, which Eleanor Roosevelt went on to call an "international Magna Carta of all men everywhere" generates strong, emotive reactions. The inviolability of rights enshrined to all human beings, regardless of the circumstances of their birth or life, remain an enduring foundation for civilisation and widely acknowledged as a bulwark against authoritarianism and the rise of fascism. The ICT4Peace Foundation is anchored to Paragraph 36 of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), in which the role and relevance of technology in peacebuilding is framed. The core principles underlying the establishment of the Foundation, and the introduction of Paragraph 36 to the WSIS Declaration, flow from and echo the UDHR. Paragraph 36 was the first to give expression to how inextricably entwined technology is with peace and human rights.

A quick scan of headlines from any region underscores the importance of the UDHR as a moral instrument of power and authority, if not a legally binding document. So much of what is reported on as unjust, illegal, unethical, manipulative, hateful or harmful is from the lens of human rights. Very large companies in Silicon Valley, who for years thought that utopian ideals and technological determinism would render UDHR's values and importance redundant, have had to acknowledge in recent years the very real limitations of trying to skirt comprehensive human rights instruments and norms, including ethics. A renewed interest in the UDHR comes both as a result of rising populism and authoritarianism, and as a consequence of the volume and velocity of challenges to established Western democracies including rising inequality, neglected segments of society, extremist partisanship and manipulated information.

If the UDHR is at its core about human dignity and decency, it is evident that much remains to be done even as significant progress over the past seven decades is celebrated. The growing interplay between media, technology and institutions, the litany of issues that plague electoral processes and the crisis of public confidence in institutions as guardians of their safety have resulted in an unprecedented, full-frontal assault on UDHR. These attacks range from the open and explicit rejection to the more devious pushback while keeping up cosmetic subscriptions to UDHR's core tenets. These attacks also reinforce the urgent need to defend the UDHR, to not remain complacent or take our human rights for granted. As we have witnessed in 2018, the clock can be rolled back on progress and on collaborative responses to global challenges. In an age of divisiveness, protectionism, partisanship, disregard for human rights and the undermining of institutional and democratic integrity from leaders around the world, the UDHR offers an opportunity for common ground, an opportunity for individuals to champion their rights and those of their fellow citizens.

The Foundation, though not directly involved in securing or fighting for human rights is nevertheless deeply rights-oriented. Since its establishment, every single work-stream of the Foundation - from social media and training to artificial intelligence and input into the UN system - is informed by relevant human rights instruments, norms and standards. In calling for stronger, more accountable ethics in R&D around drones and artificial intelligence, the Foundation pioneered discussions that prefigured many of the concerns with larger Silicon Valley companies that dominate headlines today.

Since 2006, the Foundation has worked with communities in Tier 3 or Tier 4 countries (i.e. the Global South) in partnership, leveraging the experience and expertise of staff who live, work in and fight for the strengthening of rights in their region and countries of origin, often under duress and austere circumstances. We make this point to underscore the importance of locating human rights not only at the levels of senior management at the UN, political leadership, international governance or transnational leadership. UDHR is about all human beings, and the most democratic means of reaching everyone, anywhere, is the Internet.

This is why we focus on social media, misinformation, disinformation, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity. Technology for us is an enabler, and not an end in itself. Equitable access, conversational spaces that are non-violent, the gendered adaptation of technology, the fullest inclusion of voices from the Global South, the emphasis on open sharing of research, advocating for cybersecurity not just at the level of nation-states, but also at the level of activists and journalists, working in and going to regions of violent conflict to help teach those on the ground to keep safe and bear witness to inconvenient truths - these and so much more the Foundation does is ultimately linked to deepening and strengthening the UDHR's adoption. If not explicitly referred to in name, the UDHR infuses all of what the Foundation does.

The fullest realisation of human rights requires both commitment and sacrifice. It is relatively easy for transnational institutions and multinational corporations to make commitments and say they are in favour of the UDHR. It is much harder to support those on the ground, in fragile democracies, in the middle of complex political emergencies or post-war, to embrace these truths that so many hold self-evident. That is our challenge. The Foundation's belief is that as custodians of the UDHR, citizens need to be empowered to stand up for human rights, themselves. This is the enduring power and appeal of Paragraph 36, which proposes that undergirding democratic polity and society are information and communications technologies that help strengthen citizenry.

Today, the same technologies that offer emancipation of self, identity, voice and physical person are those that are being weaponised to promote falsehoods, contain dissent, control protest, monitor individuals, and censor critical commentary. This is not something the UDHR foresaw. However, as the UN and related institutions, instruments and individuals like Special Rapporteurs have repeatedly noted, the UDHR is the bedrock upon which today's complex human security challenges can be addressed. It flows from this that the UDHR is a central pillar in the establishment of a society that will hopefully one day be inoculated against the trappings of misinformation, disinformation and worse. Without the UDHR, what may be set up to combat oppression can over time, turn oppressive. What

may be set up to combat censorship could become the means to censor and control. And platforms designed to bring friends closer together can easily turn into the world's most powerful agents of manipulation and misinformation.

The ICT4Peace Foundation sits at the intersection of these challenges that are inherently local in genesis yet global in impact, international in scope yet domestic in response, transnational in nature, yet deeply anchored to communal, geographic, contextual, identity markers. We pioneer ideas that derive from innovation in the Global South, cognisant that often the deepest appreciation for the UDHR comes from contexts of systemic violence and hopelessness. Technology, for the Foundation, is a means through which the UDHR's core tenets can be actioned, made relevant, explained and strengthened. Reflecting Switzerland's commitments to rights, the Foundation's belief in and championing of the UDHR, to echo President Kennedy's oft quoted adage around space exploration, is not because it is easy, profitable or roundly welcomed, but because it is hard, challenging and fraught with difficulty. Technology holds many of the solutions, but is also increasingly the driver of division, violence and conflict. Technology needs to be reclaimed as a force for good.

70 years after the UDHR was adopted by the UN, let us resolve to address head on the significant, growing challenges to human rights - not just on one day in December, but every day of every year. And through that commitment, let us also reflect on and resolve to give voice to those who for years, without access to global platforms, have done more to secure, safeguard and strengthen the UDHR, than many larger institutions. It is through collective will, collaboration and acting in concert, that we shall overcome.

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