

# ON HUMAN RIGHTS

"[W]hen order means the silence of the poor then it is good to be out of order."

- [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#) (Shackdwellers' Movement), South Africa

## ARE WE FRAMING OUR STRUGGLE AS LOCAL/DOMESTIC OR AS A GLOBAL ONE?

If it's a global one, then how do we use a frame that resonates globally? Combating imperialism, capitalism and other forms of oppression is a necessary *oppositional* frame, but how do we talk about what we want to *positively build*? What is the central guiding principle?

We say it in pieces – we need access to health, food, education, safety, self-determination, political participation/inclusion, housing, equality before the law – but the human rights frame helps tie it together because a human being should have all of those things in order to live fully and with dignity. It helps ground the fight in a push for our system to recognize our humanity, where respect for human dignity is THE measure of whether a system is just and equal - because if an institution is undermining/denying an individual or a peoples' dignity, then it is by definition unjust.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFINED

Human rights come from the inherent dignity of all human beings, not laws or treaties. As a human being, you have the rights to basic protections and assurances so that you can live a dignified life. There is a false distinction and hierarchy—a product of Western capitalism and imperialism—of these rights that places higher importance on civil and political rights (rights to life, non-discrimination, speech, vote, etc.) over economic, social and cultural rights (rights to decent housing, health, education, etc.). But human rights are all of these rights together, they are interlocking and interdependent because, for example, lack of access to education impedes an individual's ability to fully participate politically in society. A democratic, free society is one that strives to respect *all* of these human rights for all people.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT & RELEVANCE TO NOW

Back in the 40s and 50s, the leaders of the black struggle had framed the fight for equality as a human rights one—where justice and true equality were measured by whether society upheld the basic dignity of people.<sup>i</sup> Yet those in power at the time, at the start of the Cold War and anti-Communist fervor, did not want to have to put into place the social policies that it would take to achieve social equality in the US and pressured leaders to whittle down demands to a smaller subset of civil rights. We live in the legacy of that, where we continue to be caged in by civil rights discourse when actually what liberation *demands* are human rights, inclusive of economic and social rights that allow you to most fruitfully exercise your civil and political rights (i.e., if you want to fully exercise your right to vote, for example, you also need to be able to eat, get an education, and be healthy). Americans widely believe human rights issues are international ones, that they're only relevant to the UN and not to us, or that they are not concrete, too dreamy, or aspirational. But we are at precisely the moment to think about how to re-expand that vision from the narrow civil rights frame and human rights is a shortcut way to convey that vision.

## USING HUMAN RIGHTS LANGUAGE AS A FRAME

#BlackLivesMatter is a resounding condemnation of the government and law enforcement for their failure to uphold their obligation to treat every person as a human being. The demands that are coming up from the movement in the US closely mirror the demands of grassroots social movements elsewhere that have been sparked by disillusionment with government promises and injustice. While these movements might not necessarily frame their grievances by saying “human rights” explicitly, the rights language is implicit in their calls for justice, equality and the ability to live a decent life. Human rights need not be the label people use. But to the extent that the label fosters solidarity across communities (black/brown unity, gender equality, queer consciousness, etc.) and across nations, it can be a helpful frame.

In its grassroots interpretation, the human rights frame can be used in:

- laying a foundation for transformative change;
- boosting organizing across communities;
- shifting the debate and reframing the public narrative;
- increasing opportunities for transnational solidarity;
- disempowering the state by using the public’s right to information to demand transparency and accountability.

## USING HUMAN RIGHTS FORUMS AS A TOOL

Though of course international mechanisms like the UN human rights bodies have their limitations in terms of the kind of relief they can actually provide aggrieved communities, a framing of the demands in terms of human rights allows movements to leverage those forums as another source of political pressure to advance grassroots advocacy. But the UN is simply a platform to amplify organizing if it seems strategic, it is not an end in itself.

This iteration of human rights rejects legalistic justifications for unjust results that undermine the basic human dignity of the individuals involved and agitates for a transformative vision based on the fundamental notion that a just society can only come about when the laws and institutions are grounded in valuing the human dignity of every member of society.

In the legalistic realm, human rights mechanisms can be helpful as:

- a tool for empowering victims
- providing a platform from which impacted people can speak about their grievances
- rallying supporters
- increasing public attention and
- influencing policy.

*“As long as your problem is fought within the American context, all you can get as allies is fellow Americans. As long as you call it civil rights, it’s a domestic problem within the jurisdiction of the United States government... But when you call it “human rights” it becomes international. And then you can take your troubles to the World Court. You can take them before the world. And anybody anywhere on this earth can become your ally.” – Malcolm X, Feb. 16, 1965*

---

<sup>1</sup> Read more in Carol Anderson’s *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-55*