

Happy 60th anniversary - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Today (December 10) marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights <<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>. Human rights form the cornerstone of national and global economic, political and social policy. Every person, instead of being reduced to pleading for special favours, is recognized to have universal rights - and governments are obliged to also recognize those rights.

The Universal Declaration was forged in the aftermath of the second world war and the great depression of the 1930s, when the world had grown tired of bloodshed and inequality. The opening sentences recognize the importance of human rights and the perils of ignoring them: "disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people."

Canadians have played a key role in the recognition of human rights from the start. Canadian John Humphrey was the first head of the United Nation's Human Rights Division and helped to draft the original declaration. More recently, Louise Arbour (another Canadian) has just left a successful tenure as High Commission for Human Rights at the United Nations.

While every part of the Universal Declaration is important, here at the Wellesley Institute we are particularly interested in article 25, which reads:

"(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

The internationally-recognized right to an adequate standard of living is the basis for other rights, including the right to health and well-being (which many people today refer to as "health equity") and the right to housing.

It has been said of human rights: Ignore them and they will go away.

The work of the Wellesley Institute and our research partners shows that the work of fully realizing human rights in Canada still has a long path to travel. But we know from good practices in this country and overseas that there are practical and pragmatic measures that can be taken to turn rights into realities.

Happy 60th birthday, Universal Declaration!

* * *

Michael Shapcott, Director of Community Engagement
The Wellesley Institute, 45 Charles Street East - #101
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4Y 1S2