What are Economic and Social Rights?

Human rights are based on principles of dignity and freedom. Both are severely compromised when human beings cannot meet their basic needs. Economic and social rights guarantee that every person be afforded conditions under which they are able to meet their basic needs. In particular, economic and social rights include:

The Right to Education enabling all persons to participate effectively in a free society and is directed to the full development of the human personality. Learn more »

The Right to Food guaranteeing freedom from hunger and access to safe and nutritious food. Learn more »

The Right to Health ensuring the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health including access to care, nutrition, and clean water and air. Learn more »

The Right to Housing ensuring access to a safe, secure, habitable, and affordable home with freedom from forced eviction. Learn more »

The Right to Social Security guaranteeing that everyone regardless of age or ability to work has the means necessary to procure basic needs and services. Learn more »

The Right to Work guaranteeing the opportunity to have fulfilling and dignified work under safe and healthy conditions with fair wages affording a decent living for oneself and one’s family. It also provides for freedom from unemployment and the right to organize. Learn more »
Where are Economic and Social Rights Protected?

Economic and social rights are protected under a wide range of international and regional instruments including declarations and covenants. Human rights declarations represent a commitment by signatory countries to meet stated human rights standards. Covenants, also known as treaties or conventions, are international law agreements entered into by governments. Once covenants or treaties are ratified they become part of domestic law. Declarations and covenants that protect economic and social rights include:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- The American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man

What Obligations do Governments have under Economic and Social Rights Standards?

**Respect:** Governments must respect human rights, meaning that a government cannot interfere with a person exercising their human rights. For example, a government violates the obligation to respect human rights when school officials expel a student from a public school on arbitrary grounds, such as pregnancy or homelessness, or when a government policy prohibits access to needed medical services or drugs, such as birth control, or when a government engages in mass evictions of public housing residents in the interests of “development” without securing adequate alternative housing for those residents. In all these instances, government actions prevented individuals from exercising human rights (education, health, housing).

**Protect:** Governments must protect human rights. When private actors (that is, a person or business or institution that is not part of the government) impair the exercise of human rights, the government must step in to protect those rights. For example, if factories are imposing sweatshop conditions on employees that violate the right to work for adequate pay and under reasonable conditions, the government is obligated to step in and protect the right to work.

**Fulfill:** Governments must fulfill human rights. What this means is that the government must create the conditions that allow all people to exercise their human rights. For example, everyone has the right to receive medical care. Yet, many people in this country
cannot afford health insurance (and do not qualify for Medicaid). Over 50 million people are in this situation. The government is obligated to create conditions that make health care accessible regardless of payment, for example through providing a publicly financed and administered insurance program that guarantees universal, equal high quality care. By maintaining the link between payment and access to care, the U.S. government has failed to meet its obligation to fulfill the right to receive health care.