World Trends in Social Welfare and Human Rights

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Human Right Conference,
Seoul, November 2001
I would like first to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to Seoul to speak to this important topic. The world in which we live is rapidly changing, with the advent of globalisation, cultural change, mass communications and new technologies. Wherever we live, we can no longer pretend that we can live in isolation; as citizens of a globalising world we are increasingly inter-connected, and inter-dependent. Issues of social welfare and human rights must now be constructed globally, and we must learn from each other’s experiences in order to understand what the newly emerging concepts of global citizenship mean, in differing cultural contexts.

The most important international trend for all peoples of the world, that affects both social welfare and human rights, is, of course, globalisation. The world is shrinking, and a new level of global inter-connectedness is made possible by new technologies. But so far, this new global experience has been dominated by the economy. Globalisation, as we have come to understand it, is almost exclusively an economic, market-driven phenomenon. It is about the rights of people and corporations to invest where they choose, to make profits wherever they can, and to move capital rapidly from one part of the world to another in the interests of profit maximisation. In doing so, globalisation has ignored most other aspects of human existence, and in emphasising only the economic it therefore represents a particularly one-dimensional form of the global experience (Bauman 1998, Beck 2000, Mittelman 2000). It is true that we are also seeing a globalisation of culture; increasingly the people of the world are encouraged to eat the same food, wear the same clothes, watch the same television, listen to the same music, play the same games, and so on, often to the detriment of cultural diversity and the preservation of indigenous and minority cultural traditions (Barber 1995). But it needs to be remembered that this cultural globalisation is really in the interests of the dominant economic globalisation; it is concerned with creating global markets, because it is much easier to market products globally if people can be persuaded to consume the same things, regardless of culture.

One of the most interesting aspects of globalisation has been the counter trend of localisation (Hines 2000). In many parts of the world, people at the local level are turning away from the global economy, perceiving that it does not meet their needs, and are setting up local community-based alternatives (Ife 2002, Ekins 1992). One example is with banks; the large traditional banks have become players in the global market, and have as a result often ignored the needs of local people; branches that played a vital role in local communities have been deemed to be not sufficiently profitable, and so have been closed, often with devastating results at the local level. The reaction has often been to establish community banks, local co-operatives, local trading schemes, and similar forms of local community-based economic activity; such initiatives are now well established in many different countries, and in diverse cultural contexts. This local activity is an important trend, and it has produced both positive and negative outcomes. As well as the positive programs of local initiative and the increasing emphasis on community development that we now see in many nations, there are also the worrying developments of citizen militia and vigilante groups, the politics of exclusion, scapegoating and racism. Localisation is, therefore, neither good nor bad, just as globalisation is neither good nor bad; both can have enormous potential for human development, and both also have the potential for increasing exploitation and oppression. But localisation is important, because it demonstrates that a purely economic form of globalisation is not inevitable, nor, in the views of many people, is it necessarily all that its advocates have promised. I believe that we
have to accept the inevitability of some kind of globalisation and also some kind of localisation, and that the task is now to seek to influence each to take account of the values of social justice and human rights.

One of the important consequences of the twin trends of globalisation and localisation has been the erosion of the power of the nation state. Commentators differ as to the extent to which the nation state is eroded, but there seems little doubt that with the power of global markets, national governments do not have the degree of autonomy that they once had, and that government policy is circumscribed by what ‘the markets’ will accept. The capacity of the state to address the social needs created by inequality is therefore limited, in part because it is increasingly difficult for nation states to tax the global economy effectively. We are seeing a steady erosion of public services in many countries of the world, both rich and poor, as health, education, housing and income maintenance are increasingly required to rely on the vagaries of the market rather than the generosity of the state (Mishra 1999).

The sociologist Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) has described the emergence of the ‘network society’. He sees the development of networks of power, where powerful forces in different parts of the world are linked by communications technology. These networks are temporary and changing, but they nonetheless increasingly represent the location of economic power. Our relative advantage or disadvantage is determined by how closely connected we are to these networks. The networks link powerful interests across borders, and for this reason national boundaries are becoming less important as the lines of division of power and wealth; in all countries there are power elites that are linked to the networks of power, and also in all countries there are those who are excluded from the networks, and who are therefore powerless and disadvantaged. Thus we are seeing, in many countries of the world, a widening gap between the rich and the poor. It is still the case, of course, that some nations are richer and more advantaged than others, but these rich nations also contain people, communities, and in some cases whole regions, that are in poverty and have little chance to benefit from the economic miracles promised by globalisation.

This combination of globalisation and the network society poses new challenges for social welfare. I would like briefly to touch on eight of these, and then later in the paper to consider the implications for the idea of human rights.

The first challenge is how to serve the marginal communities created by the network society, those people that are simply unnecessary for the operation of global markets. The German writers Martin and Schumann (1997) have suggested that this is as much as 80% of the world’s population. These are the communities that are by-passed by the global economy, and it has now become clear that while globalisation can have positive effects for many people, these benefits are not evenly distributed, and there are people who lose from globalisation: the urban poor, village communities, those living in areas where major industry has collapsed, those made redundant by the mobility of capital, those who are forced to take casual and unpredictable employment, migrant workers, refugees, and so on.

The second challenge is to link the global and the local. People’s lives are affected by global forces; those who are in need are often in that position precisely because of globalisation. Yet their lives and their perceived needs remain stubbornly local. It is
difficult to provide local resources for the meeting of human need when those resources are controlled and rationed not by local forces, but by global forces. Linking the local and the global, in creative ways, is the key to the future effectiveness of human services, and this has been a major focus of the thinking of those concerned with community development; community development will have little significant impact unless the communities involved are able to network effectively and to impact global issues as well as local needs (Ife 2002).

The third challenge is the reliance placed on market mechanisms for the solutions of problems. Markets are very good for achieving some things: economic growth, technological innovation and prosperity. But they are not so good at achieving social equity, as the history of large-scale markets clearly demonstrates (Rees & Wright 2000). Indeed, many social workers spend their time working with the people who are the victims of the market, those who have been unable to compete effectively in the market place and whose lives have been negatively affected by market forces. It is therefore something of a contradiction to seek to solve these problems through the very mechanisms that caused the problems in the first place, as is advocated by the supporters of market mechanisms to achieve social policy ends. The relationship of welfare services to the market is problematic; some argue that we should be providing a critique of market mechanisms and seeking to establish an alternative for the delivery of human services (Ife 1997), while others argue that the dominance of the market requires that welfare workers be entrepreneurial, and seek the support of the market for the meeting of human need. Probably both strategies are necessary; there is certainly a need for sustainable alternatives, but at the same time it is important to meet immediate needs by working as best one can with the existing system.

The fourth challenge for social welfare is the breakdown of traditional family and community structures, which have traditionally provided social support, but which at a time of increasing mobility, individualism and personal consumption can no longer be expected to do so. The crisis in aged care in some Asian nations is a good example; with the changes to traditional family structures and values, many people are now seeking institutional care for their elderly relatives, who would once have been cared for at home. This is just one example of changes to the family that represent a major issue for policy makers in the coming decades, when still further changes in family structure seem likely.

The fifth challenge, closely related to the fourth, is that of changing demographics. High birth rates in the middle period of the twentieth century, coupled with improved health services and medical care, have resulted in an ageing population in many of the world’s developed and developing nations. This has presented policy-makers with a serious problem of how the rapidly increasing older generation can be adequately supported financially, and in terms of services, by a smaller proportion of the population of working age. In Africa, however, where health services are still inadequate and where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has caused such devastation, the demographics are reversed, with large numbers of children requiring care. Such demographic changes shatter many of the assumptions on which social security and poverty-alleviation policies are based, and if indeed the world is heading towards increasing instability and possible ecological crisis, such shifts in demographic structure seem likely to continue.
The changing nature of work is the sixth challenge. In developed countries, as in developing countries, the casualisation of the work force has led to the end of the predictable, established career. Most people, in the course of their working lives, will face career changes and periods of unemployment, and the workplace has become a more unstable and uncertain place. The global economy is able to move capital investment in a matter of seconds, to make the most of market opportunities, and labour is not so mobile, so gets left behind. Large-scale unemployment, especially in those regions not connected to the global network society, is the inevitable result, and even those in work do not generally have the security that they once enjoyed.

Even though the movement of people can no longer keep pace with the movement of capital, there is nevertheless more personal mobility than ever before in history, and this represents the seventh policy challenge. People move within and between countries with increasing frequency, for a variety of reasons: economic, political and personal. This has resulted in large populations of migrant workers, increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, transient populations, and a professional workforce that has become increasingly internationalised. The traditional forms of social welfare are inadequate and inappropriate for such a population, as they are based on assumptions about national citizenship and stability of settlement that simply no longer hold. This is forcing a major re-evaluation of the idea of citizenship, and the emergence of new understandings of global citizenship, which I will discuss more a little later.

The final challenge that I wish to mention is that posed by cultural diversity, and in particular by the recognition of the needs and rights of Indigenous People. While on the one hand cultural globalisation is increasing, the rise in mobility has resulted in most of the nations of the world now being multicultural. The rights and needs of cultural, ethnic, racial and language minorities have come into sharper focus, and can no longer be ignored by assumptions of cultural uniformity. In particular this is true of Indigenous People; many of the world’s nations have indigenous populations, most of which have been dispossessed and oppressed in ways that shame our humanity. Conventional welfare policy regimes have proved to be quite inadequate in addressing the issues raised by the presence of such populations.

These, then, are some of the challenges facing social welfare policy in the contemporary world. Taken together, they create a climate of instability and uncertainty for policy makers in all countries. I do not have time today to discuss them in detail, let alone to suggest solutions, as each is highly problematic. However they form the backdrop to a discussion of human rights, which will occupy the remainder of the paper.

In an era of globalisation, human rights become critically important. One of the lessons we have learned from the policies of the past has been that economic development and citizenship rights must proceed hand in hand. Economic development that does not take account of citizenship rights leads to inequality, social division, and the few profiting at the expense of the many. And human rights in the absence of economic development are of only limited value; indeed, many have argued that to benefit from economic development is itself a human right which should not be denied to anyone (Ife 2001). It is only when economic development takes place in a context of the rights of the citizen being maintained that social equity
and progress can result. Thus the nations that have successfully achieved economic development and stability have done so while at the same time ensuring that the rights of citizens are respected. In retrospect, one of the mistakes of the communist regimes was their attempts to develop economic prosperity for the whole society without due concern for the rights of individuals, families and communities, and this unbalanced approach led, in the end, to failure.

We are now living an increasingly global economy, and this means that the idea of global citizenship rights must be taken seriously. With increasing mobility, most countries of the world now have large numbers of residents, legal or illegal, who are not citizens of that country. While we define rights in terms of national citizenship, as guaranteed in constitutions, bills of rights, etc, such people have no rights, as they are not citizens. This enables refugees and asylum seekers, for example, to be denied human rights that are given to the citizens of the country concerned, hence in a number of countries – and I am ashamed to say that this includes my own country, Australia – asylum seekers are subject to human rights abuse which would not be tolerated for ordinary citizens of that country (Mares 2001, McMaster 2001). In an era of the global economy, and of the breaking down of national borders, some acceptance of global citizenship rights becomes essential. And global citizenship rights are, simply, human rights: the rights we can all claim, not on the basis of our national identity, but on the basis of our common humanity. They are the rights we should be affirming and respecting for all the people of the world. At present, the term ‘global citizen’ or ‘citizen of the world’ is used by the advantaged, those who are able to move freely from country to country, who can invest and make profits wherever they wish, who are welcomed in any country they choose to visit, and who can change nationality almost at will for their personal benefit. Such rights are not given to the poor; when they seek to move, they are labelled ‘refugees’, ‘illegal immigrants’ or ‘migrant workers’, and are likely to be detained, abused and sent home. True global citizenship suggests that we need to establish the set of rights that all people can claim on the basis simply of their humanity, and those, of course, are human rights.

It is interesting to note that the protesters against globalisation frame many of their protests in terms of the impact of globalisation on human rights (Barlow & Clarke, 2001). They claim, and there is strong evidence to support them, that the present form of exclusively economic globalisation is violating people’s human rights, creating poverty and disadvantage, and resulting in mass exploitation. This argument is not really an argument against globalisation as such, or against the world becoming ever more interconnected; to make such as argument is to fly in the face of the inevitable. Indeed, as human rights are, by their very nature, a global discourse, the protesters are themselves using a global argument. What the protesters are saying is a simple message: that economic development cannot proceed without a parallel attention to human rights and social development. It is therefore hardly surprising that, in this period of globalisation, there is an increasing interest in human rights.

To engage with an idea of human rights that will adequately meet the needs of people in a diverse but globalising world, it is necessary to expand our understanding of human rights, beyond the rather narrow definitions that have been accepted by many media commentators. The popular perception of the meaning of the term ‘human rights’ has been largely confined to civil and political rights, sometimes referred to as the ‘first generation’ of human rights: the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of
expression, freedom of assembly, the right not to be imprisoned without fair trial, the
right of access to the law, the right to be protected from torture, the right to join a
trade union, the right to minimum labour standards, and so on. These rights are, of
course, important. But they are only one aspect of human rights, and the idea of
human rights, as understood both in the literature and in international treaties, is much
broader than this. The so-called ‘second generation’ of human rights incorporates
economic, social and cultural rights: the right to work, the right to adequate health
services, the right to housing, the right to education, the right to economic security,
the right to freedom of cultural expression, and so on. These are often not associated,
in media reports, with ‘human rights’; for example a country with inadequate health
services or a poor education system would not be described as a country with a ‘poor
human rights record’. Yet such human rights are just as important as the first
generation of civil and political rights, and indeed they go together (Beetham 1999);
there is not much point in allowing people the right of freedom of written expression
of they do not know how to read or write, freedom of association is of little use for
people who are too ill to participate because of inadequate health care, and freedom of
speech is greatly enhanced if the people who are exercising that right have a good
education and so can express informed rather than uninformed opinion. In addition,
there is increasing recognition now being given to so-called ‘third generation’ human
rights, or collective rights. These are the rights we can only achieve collectively rather
than individually, and they include such things as the right to economic development,
the right to political stability and the range of environmental rights, such as the right
to breathe clean air, to drink clean water, to eat toxic-free food, and so on. Such rights
are also critically important, and belong alongside the other two sets of human rights.
There is not much point in having good education or health services, and adequate
legal protection for the right of free speech, if people cannot drink clean water, are
breathing polluted air, and are unable to participate in the benefits of economic
development.

All three generations of human rights are, therefore, important. However there has
been a tendency for people who talk about human rights to concentrate only on the
first generation, or civil and political rights. These are sometimes referred to as
‘negative rights’, because they require the state, or some other body, to protect
them and to prevent human rights abuse. The other two, however, are sometimes referred to
as ‘positive’ human rights; the state must not only protect them through adequate
legal processes and constitutional safeguards, but it must also provide for those rights
to be realised, through adequate health, education, housing, social security and
environmental programs, and through appropriate intervention in, and management
of, the economy. This is one reason for the unpopularity of second and third
generation understandings of human rights; they are more expensive, because they
require active state intervention in the economy and state-funded or supported
provision of human services; at a time when conventional economic wisdom
prescribes reduced government spending and lack of intervention, they often cannot
be afforded by governments.

There are other possible reasons for the current concentration on civil and political
rights. One is that these are the rights that are readily safeguarded through legal
mechanisms, for example through the courts and through legislation. At a time when
we commonly seek legal mechanisms to resolve problems, and where lawyers have
reached a position of power and privilege, it is not surprising that those rights that
lend themselves most readily to legal interpretation are those that have become dominant. But a more significant reason for the domination of first generation civil and political rights lies with their association with Western liberalism. These rights were emphasised in the western Enlightenment tradition, and grew out of the individualist notions of that era. Indeed calling them ‘first generation’ only emphasises the dominance of western thought in recent human rights discourse; they are called ‘first’ simply because they were the first to emerge in modern western thought, and have thus been privileged in the last two hundred years when intellectual discourse has been dominated by the western liberal tradition (Bauer & Bell 1999, Pereira 1997, Schmale 1993). This however represents a very limited understanding of human rights. Human rights are not an exclusively western concept; there are human rights traditions in all major religions and cultures, though they are expressed in different ways. And ideas of human rights stretch back many centuries before the western ‘Enlightenment’ (Ishay 1997, Hayden 2001). Those who see human rights as purely western, and having their origins in eighteenth century liberalism, are making an essentially racist assumption and are denying the other important human rights traditions in human history. Embracing a broader approach that includes all three so-called ‘generations’ is an important way to move beyond such a sterile position. It values other human rights traditions, including the more collective understandings that have been so important in many of the cultures and traditions of the Asian region (Bauer & Bell 1999). This broader approach to human rights, now evident in some, though not all, of the human rights literature, thus enables some of the issues of cultural diversity in human rights to be addressed and debated. I will return to this topic later, but for the moment the important point is to see the incorporation of economic social and cultural rights, and collective rights, as a major development in reconceptualising human rights in a globalising world.

Another important development in recent thinking about human rights has been the increasing emphasis given to inter-generational rights. This suggests not only that we have an obligation to redress human rights violations that exist in the present, but also that we have an obligation to consider human rights violations in the past and the future. One important example of human rights abuse to previous generations which is of concern to the present is the issue of wrongs done to Indigenous Peoples. In countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA there are increasing demands that there be recognition and also compensation for past human rights abuses such as dispossession, cruelty, discrimination and the forced removal of children from their families. The claims that Nazi war gold stored in Swiss banks should be returned to Holocaust survivors and their descendents is another example. This idea that a generation has an obligation not only to redress human rights violations in the present, but also to redress the wrongs of previous generations, is relatively recent, and is an important extension of human rights thinking. Similarly, there is a perceived obligation to future generations, particularly in regard to environmental rights. The policies and practices of the present are causing pollution, environmental degradation and climate change on such a scale that we are betraying future generations who will inherit a poisoned, polluted and devastated world. This can be seen as a human rights violation, committed against those who are yet unborn, as our actions are violating their third generation collective rights. This is, for many people, a new way of thinking about human rights responsibilities and human rights abuse, and this development is very important. Human rights are a powerful discourse, and to represent current policies and practices of ecological devastation as human rights
violations can add a sense of urgency and moral imperative to one of the most fundamental problems facing the human race in this century.

Another important extension of the idea of human rights, beyond the narrow conventional civil and political framing, is the extension of human rights from the public sphere to the domestic sphere. Civil and political rights are essentially about the right to participate freely in public civil society: the right to vote, the right to speak freely, the right to free association, and so on. These rights protect the people who choose to be involved in such civil and political action. But for many people, human rights and human rights abuse are more personal and private. Women’s experience of human rights abuse, for example, is largely in the private domain: rape, domestic violence, and subjugation within the family (Peters & Wolper 1995). The same applies to the rights of children, the rights of older people, and the rights of people with disabilities. None of these groups will have their human rights protected if it is only human rights in the public sphere that are considered, and the women’s movement has criticised traditional formulations of human rights, exclusively in the public domain, as being concerned largely with the human rights of men, and ignoring the human rights of women. This is an important criticism, and it requires different responses from governments. The extension of the idea of human rights to the private sphere as well as the public sphere is therefore a major issue for policy makers, and for those concerned with working towards the protection and realisation of human rights. In the contemporary world, we need understandings of human rights that reach across the public/private divide, and that see both the public and the private as essential contexts for human rights work.

Human rights do not exist in an objective sense. They cannot be discovered or measured. Rather, human rights are defined and redefined, in different historical and cultural contexts. Human rights are what we understand to be necessary for us to achieve our full humanity, and this understanding is not fixed (Howard 1995). Human rights, therefore, will change over time, as human values change, and as people reach new understandings of what being fully human really means. They will also be understood differently in different cultural contexts, and just because human rights are universal does not mean that human rights will be defined or realised in the same way in all cultures. The universal right to housing, for example, does not mean that everybody has to live in the same sort of dwelling; indeed, housing that is appropriate in one culture and climate will be quite inappropriate in another. Similarly, the right to education does not mean that all children should go to the same sort of school, or learn the same things in the same way. Universality of human rights does not mean uniformity; in fact it is only in a world that affirms and values diversity that everyone’s human rights can truly be met. Often it is through statements of need that we place universal human rights in their cultural context; there may be a universal right to education, but this can translate to very different educational needs in different communities and different societies. Human rights, although by definition universal, are pluralist in their realisation.

If we understand human rights as being defined or constructed through on-going debate and dialogue about what it means to be human, we need to ask ourselves who is controlling and contributing to that debate. A major criticism in the past is that it was largely western voices who had controlled the debate, and had shaped the definition of human rights. This led some people to argue that human rights was a
western concept and thus to advocate that the very idea of human rights ought to be abandoned. This argument is based on faulty logic: just because the west has dominated the debate on human rights does not mean that we should abandon the concept. The west has dominated many things in the last century – human rights are only one among many – and if we were to give up everything that the west has come to dominate we would have very little left. The western domination of food production and consumption, for example, does not mean that we have to give up eating. The task rather is to liberate ideas of human rights from their western domination and instead to reconstruct them in a spirit of genuine cross-cultural dialogue, and this is now happening. The literature on human rights now contains substantial writing from authors from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Indigenous Communities, who are making major contributions to the reconstruction of human rights across cultural boundaries, and this is a welcome and important development in human rights thinking.

There is, however, another question that needs to be asked about the human rights debate. It is no longer the exclusive domain of western voices, but it is still very much the domain of the powerful and the privileged. Those who write and talk about human rights, and those who seek to define human rights, are typically lawyers, academics, politicians, diplomats, journalists, and a handful of privileged activists from human rights NGOs. These people no longer come from exclusively western backgrounds, but it is still a narrow and privileged section of the population. If human rights are about people in dialogue about what it means to be fully human, it is not enough to confine the debate to the privileged few, and we need to be looking to ways to ensure that the voices of the marginalised, the poor, the disadvantaged, and the many victims of human rights abuse, are also heard in the debate (Mahoney & Mahoney 1993). Indeed, it is itself a human rights abuse to deny such people a say in the debate about what constitutes human rights that belong to the entire human family. The various human rights conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were drafted and discussed only by a very few people, from the most privileged section of society. As such, they are hardly representative of the voice of humanity. Human rights are so fundamental, that this represents a major problem, and a major contradiction, in the current human rights debate. That debate, at present, is a discourse of the powerful about the powerless, and it therefore itself represents a violation of human rights. I believe that this is one of the greatest challenges facing those of us who are concerned with human rights. The problem of western domination of the human rights discourse is being addressed, but the problem of the exclusive and undemocratic nature of the human rights debate itself has barely been recognised. It is important that we find ways to involve a far greater number of people, from all strata of society, in the debate about human rights, what they are, and how they should be both protected and realised. This will involve public education, and the incorporation of ideas of human rights into processes of community development and deliberative democracy. In the meantime, a debate about human rights that remains the exclusive domain of the privileged few is a contradiction, and a betrayal of the people in whose interests we claim to be acting.

Rights imply duties or obligations, and one of the most difficult challenges for policy makers has been to strike the right balance between the two. To emphasise rights at the expense of obligations is to encourage irresponsibility and a selfish approach to rights that does not recognise that we live in communities and have obligations to our
fellow citizens. On the other hand, to emphasise obligations at the expense of rights is to invite oppression and coercion, and to deny the importance of individual and family autonomy and self-determination. Both rights and obligations are important, and I would like to identify briefly three important obligations implied by human rights.

The first is the obligation on the part of the state to ensure that human rights are met and protected. First generation rights require strong and independent legal systems, with full access to, and equality before, the law. These need to be backed with strong legislation guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens (Holmes and Sunstein 1999). Second generation rights require governments to ensure that there is adequate provision of health services, education, housing and income security for all the population, to ensure that there is enough paid work, and so on. And third generation rights require an active economic policy, community development, and strong policies of environmental protection. Human rights, in other words, require a strong state, or a strong non-government sector that is resourced to provide these public functions (Holmes & Sunstein 1999).

The second set of obligations attached to human rights is the obligation of the citizen to respect the human rights of other citizens. A society that respects human rights cannot be a society of only self-seeking individuals with no respect for other citizens. Rather, a society that respects human rights is a society where people acknowledge and celebrate their mutual inter-dependence, and where we understand our responsibilities to others as well as to our own self-advancement. This underlines the importance of community, and the necessity of strong communities if human rights are really to be recognised and respected.

The third set of obligations is the obligation on citizens to exercise their rights. There is no point in having a society where there is freedom of speech, for example, if very few people choose to exercise that right; if that were to happen, the right becomes eroded. Similarly the right to education only really makes sense if people are prepared to exercise that right and to educate themselves to the maximum level possible in order that they may better contribute to society. The rights which many of us take for granted – such as the right to vote, the right of free speech and the right to join a trade union – were not easily won. Many people struggled and suffered in order that we can have those rights, and hence we have an obligation to exercise those rights in an active and constructive way. A society that respects human rights is therefore an active, vibrant, participatory society, where people value their human rights and exercise them vigorously. For this reason, those who believe in the importance of human rights need to be working towards increasing the level of participation in society as a whole, and helping people to realise that their citizenship obligations extend beyond the role of tax payer and passive consumer.

We can see, therefore, that a commitment to human rights, if understood in the broadest sense, requires a great deal more than simply supporting bills of rights, international treaties and conventions, and ensuring that legal structures and processes are strong and independent. These are important, but they are only part of the whole human rights picture. A commitment to human rights requires that we also are concerned with community development, with promoting an active, participatory society, with developing strong public services, and with balancing independence with interdependence. For these reasons, human rights and social welfare are intimately connected. Social welfare is, at heart, a matter of human rights, and those
concerned with social welfare are, in a real sense, human rights workers (Ife 2001). Similarly, human rights is about social welfare; it is about making sure that the welfare of all human beings is adequately safeguarded and adequately realised.

There is one more thing to be said about human rights. Human rights are a powerful ideal. They are not just about academic analysis, research and the provision of legal and social services. They are also a vision of our common humanity. They are something to be passionate about, and they can be a real driving force towards creating a better world. The anti-globalisation demonstrators realise that; they know that showing how globalisation adversely affects human rights has an immediate appeal to the people of the world, who believe that human rights are important, and worth fighting for. The idea of human rights represents one of the most powerful human ideals of the present day; this creates many possibilities for creative action, and for that reason alone human rights are worth our attention. They have the potential to unite the human race and bring about a society based on peace, justice and mutual respect; this might sound like an impossible dream, in a world racked with war and conflict; but can we afford any less?
References


