

**The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75 and beyond:  
historical, contemporary, and future perspectives**



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# **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75 and beyond: historical, contemporary, and future perspectives**

Roxani Fragou, Peter A.J. van den Berg, Vincent Tassenaar

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This beautiful volume reflects the activities organised by the University of Groningen to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2023. The contributors look back at the origins of the Universal Declaration; they examine its role and relevance in our day and age; and they look ahead, at the challenges that await us. Together, they manage to capture the dynamic nature that has always characterised human rights – not a static body of law, but an ever-evolving set of principles and rules that are shaped by the experiences and ideals of those who seek to defend human dignity.

So, human rights are inherently dynamic. Still, the Universal Declaration enjoys enduring popularity. That may seem paradoxical, but the explanation is clear: the Declaration is short and accessible, its language is straightforward and its message is powerful. From the bold assertion of its very first article ('All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights') to the perceptive reminder in its closing lines ('Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized'), the Universal Declaration provides us with the blueprint of a just and fair society. It has inspired generations of citizens, human rights defenders, academics and policymakers. It laid the foundation of the international bill of rights. As the most widely translated text worldwide, it has a universal appeal.

And yet. One cannot ignore the clouds that have been gathering in the two years between the celebrations of 2023 and the publication of this volume. Deadly conflicts rage across the world; international organisations are under attack; international law itself is called into question. The international order that came into existence after the Second World War unravels. Human rights are not spared. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights suffers a great financial deficit. The European Convention on Human Rights – the first instrument to turn the Universal Declaration into binding treaty law and the backbone of European public order since 1950 – is under serious political pressure, too. We witness the ascent of authoritarian leaders. In their trail: a shrinking space for civil society, xenophobia, an emphasis on national identity and national interests, a recourse to armaments. The use of force is no longer a taboo. An observer would be forgiven for thinking that little is left of the determination, as expressed in the United Nations Charter (1945), 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind'.

How did we get here? The last part of the quote may offer us part of the answer. Those who drafted the UN Charter had lived through the First and Second World Wars: they had experienced the scourge of war 'twice in our lifetime'. In drafting the Charter, they became part of a long tradition. With every disaster, mankind drew lessons and built institutions to prevent repetitions. With each turn the rules and institutions became more sophisticated – domestically, constitutions were adopted, then refined; courts were created, then strengthened; slowly the concept of the rule of law developed. Internationally,

the peace of Westphalia, the Congress of Vienna, the League of Nations, the United Nations, the European Union... But all too often, the authority of these agreements and institutions diminished once the initial sense of urgency faded away. Shortcomings became apparent. Politicians were tempted to pursue national interests rather than the common good, and obtain short-term gains rather than sustainable development.

But it would be a mistake to believe that this trend is unstoppable. History is what we make of it. The sky may grow dark, but the Universal Declaration can and must continue to be our lodestar. This explains the importance of the current volume. Its contributions invite us to reflect again on the continued relevance of the Universal Declaration and to identify the potential it has to make this world a better place. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said that ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’. May the current volume inspire many readers to help bend the arc in the right direction.

*Rick Lawson*

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Few documents have shaped the understanding and development of human rights as profoundly as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Its enduring vision continues to resonate across generations, embodying both the moral foundation of human rights and their practical significance in everyday life. As Eleanor Roosevelt famously observed:

‘Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.’<sup>1</sup>

These words still echo with clarity and urgency today, more than seventy-five years after the adoption of the UDHR. They remind us that human rights are not abstract legal constructs; they are lived realities.

The ongoing relevance of the UDHR is exemplified in contemporary global initiatives that both celebrate its legacy and advance its principles. In 2023, the 75th anniversary of the UDHR provided a timely occasion for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to launch the *Human Rights 75 Initiative* – a worldwide campaign to evaluate progress in human rights over the past seven and a half decades and to reaffirm the commitment to realising these rights for all.<sup>2</sup> The initiative was structured around three key pillars: the first, *Promoting Universality and Indivisibility*, sought to renew consensus on the universality and indivisibility of human rights and to expand the constituency for human rights, with a particular focus on engaging young people; the second, *Looking to the Future*, encouraged reflection on breakthroughs for human rights over the next 25 years – anticipating UDHR 100 and deepening consideration of emerging human rights challenges; and the third pillar, *Sustaining the Human Rights Ecosystem*, aimed to strengthen the human rights architecture, including a vision for the future of UN human rights, build trust, and mobilise additional resources.

The University of Groningen, as a leading educational institution, actively participated in the *Human Rights 75 Initiative*, launching its activities in September 2023 and culminating on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. This book, which you now hold in your hands, forms part of the University’s contribution to the *Initiative*. Our efforts included hosting events,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Where do universal human rights begin?’, Statement on 27 March 1958 at the presentation of the book *In your hands: a guide for community action* to the UN Commission on Human Rights; sometimes called ‘The Great Question’ speech. Quote from: UN. 2012. OHCHR, Human Rights Indicators. A guide to measurement and implementation, 9.

<sup>2</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Human Rights 75 Initiative, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights-75>.

fostering partnerships and collaborations with other academic institutions and human rights organisations, and creating opportunities for students and faculty members to engage in meaningful discussions on human rights. This not only demonstrated the University's commitment to human rights promotion and education but also inspired others to join in this important work. In particular, the leading event of this campaign was a UDHR seminar series, featuring speakers and experts in the field of human rights and it was complemented by additional activities, such as integrating the principal messages of the campaign in the Faculty's curricula and social media awareness raising.

And indeed, we identified and invited a diverse and knowledgeable group of human rights experts to participate in the seminar series in order to discuss the UDHR's significance and its ongoing relevance. The seminars followed the three pillars of the *Human Rights 75 Initiative*, through eight sessions held from October to December 2023. Topics included, among others, *The Historical Foundations of Human Rights*, *Exploring the Intersection of Human Rights in the Digital Space*, and *The Right to Health: Then, Now, and in the Future*. After the end of the Seminars, many of these presentations, along with additional contributions from distinguished scholars across various scientific fields, such as law (particularly human rights law), legal history, political studies and sociology, were submitted as papers. These were edited and formatted into a cohesive volume, published as the present work, providing a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in human rights and the UDHR. Both the seminars and the volume drew on a range of perspectives, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration and learning.

At the conclusion of this initiative, it is safe to say that we succeeded in bringing human rights closer to us – where we live, work, and learn. We strived to discuss human rights using simple, clear language, seeking ways to tell their story and to demonstrate that 'human rights' is not just another cliché.

Building on the discussions and reflections sparked by the *Human Rights 75 Initiative*, this volume turns attention to the evolving nature of human rights in the contemporary world. At 75 and beyond, it asks: How can historical foundations of the UDHR inform our understanding of human rights in the face of modern social, legal, and technological challenges? What does universality mean when local injustices persist, digital technologies transform daily life, and new forms of inequality emerge? Can emerging rights claims – such as those related to AI, neurotechnology, and digital governance – coexist with the UDHR's foundational principles?

These questions are not merely theoretical. They speak directly to the continued relevance and resilience of human rights in the 21st century. Through contributions that critically examine historical achievements, contemporary reinterpretations, and forward-looking debates, this volume aims to stimulate reflection, encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue, and inspire informed action in both scholarship and practice.

Reflecting on these questions, the volume adopts a chronological-critical structure: it begins with the historical foundations of human rights, moves on to their reinterpretation within contemporary national and international legal systems, and concludes by examining emerging rights and governance challenges in the digital and technological age.

Part I lays the intellectual and legal groundwork for understanding the UDHR by exploring its philosophical roots, historical context, and (early) development. The three contributions in this section reflect on how the past shaped the UDHR and how the UDHR, in turn, has shaped global and national understandings of rights. Antoon De Baets argues that the UDHR embodies a coherent view of the past, rooted in Enlightenment ideals and framed as a moral and historical response to dictatorship and atrocity. He identifies seven key features of this historical view, noting its abstract yet contextually grounded nature and its strong anti-dictatorial and pro-democratic undertones. Peter van den Berg traces the transformation of slavery from a globally accepted institution to a universally condemned practice. He highlights how the Enlightenment, religious advocacy, and political mobilisation led to the first use of international law to enforce a human right – culminating in the prohibition of slavery in Article 4 of the UDHR. Vincent Tassenaar examines how freedom of religion evolved in the Netherlands from 1579 onwards, influenced both by the UDHR (especially Article 18) and by domestic social-political developments. He shows how Dutch legal reforms – such as recognising religious groups’ legal personality and strengthening collective religious expression – reflect the UDHR’s impact in a national context.

Part II explores how core human rights principles – anchored in the UDHR – are being reinterpreted in response to evolving social, legal, and technological challenges. The contributions reflect national and international efforts to adapt foundational rights to contemporary realities, highlighting tensions between old norms and new demands. Nicolle Zeegers examines the evolution of Dutch rape legislation, exploring the dilemmas posed by the public-private divide in parliamentary debates and analysing how the principle of legal certainty has been invoked by both proponents and opponents of expanding the definition of rape. Focusing on two key legislative periods, 1988-1991 and 2019-2024, she offers a longitudinal comparison spanning 35 years, highlighting shifts in legal reasoning and societal attitudes toward intimate conduct. Nikoletta Pikramenou and Bartosz Cyran shed light on the largely overlooked issue of sex-selective abortions of intersex fetuses in Europe. They argue that this practice raises profound social, ethical, and legal concerns and call for its open consideration within the broader human rights discourse on sex selection, bodily autonomy, and non-discrimination. Roxani Fragou focuses on the protection of journalists as Human Rights Defenders in increasingly restrictive civic spaces. She underscores how threats to media freedom – ranging from digital surveillance to physical violence – undermine democracy, and analyses how European legal frameworks, especially the European Media Freedom Act, aim