

6. ESCR for Social Justice

In CESR's experience, groups working in diverse fields such as development, environment and human rights share common concerns about justice and poverty without a common language to support action and collaboration. This lack of shared response goes a long way towards explaining why a single case of torture elicits more international attention and outrage than a thousand unnecessary deaths from lack of potable water. ESCR can offer the missing framework and strategy to force governments to redress social injustice.

This paper is intended to introduce the reader to the basic legal issues of ESCR. It is hoped that NGOs and activists can use this guide to inform their own practical work in the field. Even social justice advocates whose work is not normally considered within the human rights field may benefit from articulating their activities in the vocabulary of rights.

There are a number of reasons why ESCR can make a difference in these struggles for justice:

- *They confront the most pressing problems of the day.* Adequate food, health care, and housing are of fundamental importance to all human beings. Yet hundreds of millions around the world have neither access to these basic necessities nor influence over the policy decisions that affect their daily survival. Economic and social rights empower people to take an active role in challenging the root causes of their impoverishment.
- *They transform needs into rights.* Traditional models of development treat people in low-income communities as passive victims. Grounded in concepts of justice and human dignity, economic and social rights enable people to reconceive their basic needs as a matter of rights to claim rather than charity to receive. This change in consciousness is the first step towards taking action.
- *They provide legal accountability.* International and domestic laws impose clear duties on decision-makers to guarantee economic and social rights. This means that advocacy groups can use legal mechanisms to demand more transparent allocation of resources and concrete remedies for policies that violate these rights.
- *They help build coalitions across borders.* A wide variety of grassroots, social justice, human rights, development, environmental, and women's groups are working for social change. Economic and social rights provide an overarching framework and common focus to link these efforts at the local, national, and international levels.
- *They challenge global inequality.* Globalization has widened the gap between rich and poor and left decisions about people's basic welfare in the hands of unaccountable officials in transnational corporations and financial institutions like the World Bank. Economic and social rights provide a mechanism to hold these powerful international actors responsible for the impacts of their policies.
- *They are inseparable from other human rights.* The interdependence of all human rights is an inescapable reality in the world today. The rights to vote and to free speech have little value to those lacking the education and income to

make them meaningful. Only when all human rights are respected will all people have the opportunity to realize their full human potential.

Conclusion

Responding to the daunting challenges posed by poverty and inequality is not a short-term proposition. Reversing the growing gap between rich and poor at the local and global level will require concerted and coordinated efforts by a wide range of civil society groups and activists. In the process of "globalization from below," human rights can play an important role by unifying these efforts for social and economic justice and providing a framework for demanding accountability and change.