



**International Covenant on  
Civil and Political Rights  
Economic and Social Council**

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**Human Rights Committee**

**Committee on Economic, Social and  
Cultural Rights**

**The International Covenants on Human Rights: 50 years on**

**Joint statement by the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on  
Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

1. Fifty years ago, in December 1966, the General Assembly adopted the two human rights Covenants — the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights —, which built on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and completed the International Bill of Human Rights.
2. The adoption of the two Covenants was accompanied by great hopes. At a time when poverty was widespread and many countries, especially those that had recently gained independence, were still fragile, the Covenants were the expression of a consensus that, combined with the rule of law and democracy, the protection and full realization of human rights would result in better societies that would be safer, more prosperous, inclusive and respectful of diversity and that would allow each person to live a decent life.
3. During the years to follow, the ideal of human rights has continued to guide States, international and regional organizations, as well as social movements and people worldwide. And the achievements are not meagre. The Covenants are precise enough to establish human rights standards, yet sufficiently general to accommodate new developments and take into account national contexts. Their influence on national constitutions has led to the emergence of a common understanding of human rights across regions and allowed collective learning across jurisdictions, guided by the same ideals. The Covenants have decisively contributed to the emergence of a common universal language of human rights and offered a protection shield to millions of people worldwide.
4. The work of the two Committees has always been dedicated to the cause of the full realization of the rights contained in the Covenants by engaging in constructive cooperation with State parties. By offering practical assistance and advice to State parties, which has led to the revision of laws, policies and practices, the Committees have contributed to the promotion, protection and realization of human rights. They have also provided assistance and remedies to countless individuals whose rights had been breached.

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5. The last 50 years have witnessed a continuing advancement of human rights on the agenda of the United Nations. The 2005 World Summit proclaimed that human rights, together with international peace and security and sustainable development constituted the three interlinked and mutually reinforcing pillars of the United Nations. The Human Rights Council, established 10 years ago, is building on this vision by developing human rights instruments and fostering the observance and implementation thereof. Perpetrators of the most serious violations of human rights, including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, can now be held accountable and brought to justice at national and international levels, including, since 2002, before the International Criminal Court. Independent national human rights institutions, which complement the role played by judicial bodies in the protection, promotion and realization of human rights, have grown in number and have had an increased impact since the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights.

6. Progress has not been limited to institution-building; a range of new human rights treaties have been adopted and most of them have been widely ratified. The status of economic, social and cultural rights has been gradually aligned with that of civil and political rights, as was reaffirmed by the adoption on 10 December 2008 of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which established the communication procedure — missing until then. The right to development is better established today than it was in 1966 and a lively debate continues to explore the full range of its potential. Both the duties of States to protect human rights in the context of business activities and the human rights responsibilities of corporations themselves have been recognized. Furthermore, the extraterritorial implications of human rights treaties are being acknowledged: States increasingly understand that they cannot commit violations outside their borders that they would be prohibited from committing at home, and that they must refrain from taking measures that could adversely affect human rights outside their national territory. These are major advances.

7. However, progress has not always been smooth. Genocides have been committed over the last 50 years; terrorism has resulted in very serious human rights violations; and some of the measures taken to counter it have put civil liberties at risk. The global financial and economic crisis that began in 2008 led the Governments of many countries to cut down on resources available to meet basic human needs to the detriment of progress in the enjoyment of social, economic and cultural rights.

8. In September 2015, the global community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which identifies practical action in the form of Sustainable Development Goals to combat poverty, promote sustainable development and ensure peaceful societies. The Covenants are indispensable for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

9. The first joint meeting of the two Committees on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Covenants, which was held on 23 June 2016, was not only symbolic, but also served as an impetus for future interaction between the Committees. Holding the common view that all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated, the two Committees, meeting together, underlined the synergies between rights and their protection.

10. All rights require remedies, otherwise they are only words on paper. All rights must be guaranteed, without discrimination, either formal or de facto. All rights impose immediate obligations on States, although it may take time for some elements to be implemented fully. All rights are mutually supportive — civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights reinforce each other —, for example, the rights to food or to housing cannot be fully protected without the rights to freedom of expression and/or of association, or where there is no remedy to claim these rights.

11. In the fulfilment of their mandates, the members of the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights will continue to uphold the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago when the two Covenants were adopted. In their endeavours, the members of the two Committees count on the continuing support of the process to strengthen and enhance the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system put in place by the General Assembly. The members of both Committees are also determined to further develop their cooperation with a view to contributing to the full implementation of both Covenants.

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