

# HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

*“The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being ...”*

*Preamble to the WHO Constitution*

Health and human rights has been designated as a **cross-cutting activity** in WHO and **the Department of Health and Development** is the **focal point** within the Organization.

In the context of a multi-dimensional and changing international environment, human rights provide potential for supporting new and creative ways to tackle complex health challenges, including the relationship between poverty and ill-health.



WHO/Pierre Viot

*“All UN agencies are parts of a broad alliance for human rights. Based on our mandates we are pursuing different paths towards that goal. But one observation is common to all: poverty is the main obstacle ... Health and human rights are complementary approaches to the advancement of human well being.”*

(Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General, World Health Organization, at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Paris, 8 December 1998)

Overall, there are complex **linkages** between health and human rights:

- Violations or lack of attention to human rights can have serious health consequences (e.g. harmful traditional practices; slavery; torture and inhuman and degrading treatment; violence against women and children).
- Health policies and programmes can promote or violate human rights in their design or implementation (e.g. freedom from discrimination, individual autonomy, rights to participation, privacy and information).
- Vulnerability to ill-health can be reduced by taking steps to respect, protect and fulfil human rights (e.g. freedom from discrimination on account of race, sex and gender roles, rights to health, food and nutrition, education, housing).

*Every country in the world is now party to at least one human rights treaty that addresses health-related rights, including the right to health.*

II Human rights provide a useful framework, vocabulary and form of guidance for public health efforts, in particular those which identify, analyse and respond directly to the societal determinants of health.

II Human rights provide a standard of performance assessment whereby accountability of governments can be enhanced by applying international legal obligations as reflected in human rights instruments.

II Linking health and human rights means increasing the scope of analysis and action in countries and an expanded range of partners.

WHO will work to support Member States by enhancing their ability to combine sound public health practice with the fulfilment of their obligations towards human rights.