

It's my right: human rights and RE

This resource focuses on human rights and the different interpretations of rights and responsibilities. It also looks at the work of development agencies in relation to aid and human rights. The student pages encourage analysis and discussion of the issues and make suggestions for taking action. The resource therefore enables teachers to cover parts of the citizenship curriculum and could be used in RE lessons.

What are the basic human rights?

Basic rights are the essentials that everyone is entitled to, including food, water, healthcare, education, shelter, security, a livelihood, information and participation. These rights are recognised by many United Nations declarations and agreements, including The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted in 1948. The word rights is used rather than needs because it recognises that people have an entitlement to these things. It is widely accepted that unless basic rights are recognised and achieved, poverty will not end.

Achieving rights and meeting needs

There are four main ways in which governments and organisations have tried in the past to ensure that people's basic needs are met and their rights protected:

1 Promoting economic growth

The theory is that economic growth in a country will 'trickle down' and so lead to increased income and quality of life for all people. However, there is considerable evidence showing that measures designed to boost the economy fail to impact on poor people, and may even make their situation worse. Yet international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) still subject poor countries to 'structural adjustment' measures designed to increase available capital.

2 Political liberation

Governments of other countries, or opposition groups within a country, may try to overturn an oppressive regime within a particular country. In doing this people may be better able to realise their rights and increase their incomes. However, decisions to invade another country may be based more on self-interest such as a desire to protect oil supplies, and many people may be killed, displaced or otherwise denied their rights in the process.

3 Relief

Governments and aid agencies may provide basic supplies to people who have been victims of war or natural disasters. This aid helps people to survive, but there is a danger of causing dependency if programmes do not take a long-term view of ensuring people's rights. The amount of aid given, and who to, are also decisions often made on political considerations rather than genuine need.

4 Community development

This is often referred to as the 'grassroots approach'. It focuses on the needs of a community as defined by that community, and uses local leadership and resources where possible. The emphasis is on long-term sustainability and enabling people to solve their own problems. This is the approach increasingly being used by development agencies.

Rights-based approach to development

ActionAid's vision is a world without poverty in which every person can exercise their right to a life of dignity. ActionAid's mission is to work with poor and marginalised people to eradicate poverty by overcoming the injustice and inequity that cause it. Today the focus of ActionAid work is fighting poverty together. This means taking sides with poor people, particularly those who are most systematically denied their rights. ActionAid believes that people should shape and take responsibility for their own development by discovering their rights to education, shelter, food, health and information and holding others accountable to provide them. It means engaging poor people as active citizens in their own societies.

It's my right: human rights and RE

This paper looks at basic human rights. This means the things people need to survive and live a dignified life. Lots of the activities are based around discussions and there are often no right answers. Listen carefully and respect the opinions of others; this doesn't mean that you have to agree with them.

Rights, needs, wants and freedoms: are they all the same?

People sometimes find it hard to define what rights are, and many people get confused between their rights, wants and freedoms. It might help you to think of real situations to illustrate each, for example you have the freedom to drive at the age of 17, and you might want to do so, but you do not have a right to do so. At the age of 18 you have the right to vote, and the freedom to do so if you want to. People elsewhere in the world may want to vote and have a legal right to do so, but their freedom to vote may be prevented by practical problems or illegal activities.

List – some of your rights, wants and freedoms in three separate lists. Show your list to a friend and see if they agree.

Discuss – how your rights, wants and freedoms will change as you grow up. What are you entitled to do at 16, 17 and 18 that you can't legally do at 15?

List – the rights that you think everyone in the world should be entitled to.

What are the basic human rights?

Basic rights are the essentials that everyone is entitled to in order to live a healthy, dignified life. These include food, water, healthcare, education, shelter, security, a livelihood, information and participation. ActionAid uses the word rights rather than needs because it recognises that people have an entitlement to these things. It is widely accepted that unless basic rights are recognised, claimed and used, poverty will not end.

Views on rights

The Jewish and Christian religions talk of people being made in the image of God and some people believe this is why they should be respected. ActionAid believes in the worth of each person and their right to a life of dignity that meets their basic needs. The

Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948. It claims, "all humans being are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms." It goes on to list 30 rights that everyone is entitled to.

Decide – which of the following do you think are human rights included in the declaration?

- Right to healthcare
- Right to be very rich
- Right to form relationships with others
- Right to stay out as late as you like
- Right to equal treatment under the law
- Right to education
- Right to express opinions

Read – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at www.un.org/overview/rights.html

Decide – if you think it is possible to sort these rights into order of importance.

If so, put the list into the order you think best and then compare your order with someone else. Try to agree a joint order. What problems did you have? If you don't think the rights can be put into an order, discuss why you think this.

Responsibility to help others

Do you think we have a responsibility to help people who are better off than ourselves? Does charity begin at home?

Read – Matthew 25:31-40 in the Bible. Which rights does it talk about and how do these compare to those listed earlier? What does it say about responsibilities?

Search – for references to rights in the Koran, for example 2:43 and 2:83 mention treating those in need with kindness and practicing charity on a regular basis.

Compare – what other religious texts say about our responsibility to help others?

Discuss – do we have a responsibility to help others? Which others? How do we decide who to give our limited resources to? How do we help? Is it better to send aid overseas or campaign in the UK for trade rules to be changed? How can we help people without seeing them as pitiful or being patronising?

Act – help someone else in the way you think best. Maybe you could fill in an online campaign action (see www.actionzone.cc for ideas) or do something practical to help people in your local community.

Look – at the websites of various development agencies such as www.oxfam.org, www.cafod.org, www.christianaid.org, www.savethechildren.org. How do the missions, values and activities of these organisations differ? What do they say about people's rights and our responsibility to help others?

ActionAid and rights

ActionAid believes that everyone has rights to life's essentials, such as food, water, healthcare, education and the right to participate in decision-making activities, but that poverty is preventing many people from claiming these rights. This is because resources like goods, services and information are not shared out equally. In fact, 80% of the world's wealth is concentrated in the hands of just 20% of the world's population. ActionAid works with many of the poor and vulnerable people who do not benefit from the world's wealth to help them meet their needs and claim their rights. While ActionAid recognises that national governments are responsible for providing for the needs of their people, it also campaigns for changes to economic and political policies in the UK and Europe. These changes will help governments of poorer countries meet the needs of the vulnerable people who are currently being denied their rights.

Real lives, real rights

ActionAid has been working with girls who live in the slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh. They aim to educate the girls and increase their confidence to improve their prospects.

When we came here we could not read or write anything, we sat in circles like stones and hardly made any response. It has been seven months and now we know how to read and write letters, we are aware of our rights and needs, we know many laws about violence against women and children, the curse of dowry, personal hygiene, risk of early pregnancy...
Anjum, 14



Poor people's right to food is being threatened by the global patents system. This basically means that a company or individual can claim that they own a plant, and then anyone else who grows it has to pay them to do so. ActionAid is helping Leopoldo Guilaran in the Philippines to lead other farmers in a battle against patents on crops. "Patents trample on the rights of farmers and stop us saving, exchanging and selling our seeds. Small farmers have everything to lose with the global patent rules, so we're determined to fight them." ActionAid has also run citizen's juries in India and Brazil to inform poor farmers of their rights.



ActionAid uses a type of adult education called Reflect. This teaches basic literacy skills but also helps people to understand what their rights are. This song was written by people who took part in Reflect in Nepal.

Nepali song

Stolen, stolen, what was stolen?
Our rights were stolen.
Turn back and see the village
Daughters are still being sold.
Stolen, stolen, what was stolen?
Our rights were stolen.
Don't go back let's walk ahead,
Let's take our rights.
Stolen, stolen, what was stolen?
Our rights were stolen.
The weak are suppressed by the strong,
This custom is still with us.
Stolen, stolen, what was stolen?
Our rights were stolen.
Our social culture is getting worse
Let's open our eyes in time.
Stolen, stolen, what was stolen?
Our rights were stolen.

