

"Full-spectrum" human rights: Amnesty International rethinks
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The interdependence of the modern world is leading the human rights organisation Amnesty International towards a fresh conception of its work, explains its UK campaigns director, Stephen Bowen.

Amnesty International recently highlighted a case concerning water protestors in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. On 17 May a large group of men, women and children went to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation office in Bhopal to complain that clean water had been denied them, despite a Supreme Court of India ruling in 2004. Ground-water had been contaminated after the infamous 1984 explosion at the former Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Clean water, the protestors claimed, was their due.

The authorities' reaction was heavy-handed. Riot police allegedly beat the protestors with sticks, arresting, detaining and even charging some. Had the police overreacted, acting excessively? Worse, had they acted politically, whether directed to or not, suppressing legitimate free expression, not least of those with a serious grievance? Both scenarios bring with them classic human-rights concerns. Those familiar with the organisation's work would expect Amnesty International to step in. Indeed some would be disappointed if it did not.

However, what if the protestors had merely arrived, voiced their concerns and then gone home again, without police intervention? While less glaringly a case of human-rights abuse, informed commentators could still have said that this was a human-rights matter. After all, the 17 May protestors were seeking partial redress for wrongs done to them in 1984, when the Union Carbide pesticide factory exploded. The disaster left a deadly legacy; toxic gases caused the death of 7,000 people within days, at least another 15,000 in the following years, and some 100,000 people have since been struck down with chronic diseases.

In addition, 500,000 people were exposed to deadly chemicals and the environment was profoundly contaminated, remaining so twenty years on despite Union Carbide's claims to the contrary. The Bhopal water protestors were effectively already people living in the shadow of human-rights crimes.

But what if protestors had mounted a peaceful water protest anywhere

else?

Should Amnesty International and other human-rights groups support all those seeking their "right to water"? Or equally to other natural resources, to education, housing, a family life, the right to work, to speak a language of one's choice?

"Full-spectrum" human rights

Bundled together as economic, social and cultural rights (ESC), the classic division is between these "soft" rights and the "hard" rights of civil and political liberties -- the right to life, to be free from torture, arbitrary imprisonment and cruel punishments; combating political persecution versus the raising of living standards.

Like twins separated at birth, the human rights and development agendas have trod largely separate paths in the last fifty years. But now increasingly the paths are converging. Amnesty International is known for its work supporting civil and political liberties, but has been producing new work on ESC rights as well.

Amongst much else, this relatively recent work has focused on:

- the right to food in North Korea and Zimbabwe
- the right to mental health in Bulgaria and Romania
- housing rights in Angola, Israel / Palestine and Swaziland
- the right to health in Rwanda, Argentina and the Democratic Republic of Congo

Rather than somehow displacing the traditional emphasis on protecting people from torture and imprisonment, this wider ESC work typically seeks to engage with the world as it actually is, reflecting the reality of rights heavily intertwined.

The drastic curtailment of political rights in Zimbabwe and North Korea cannot easily be separated from the political manipulation of food supplies. The state-owned Grain Marketing Board's distribution of maize in Zimbabwe has led to "political hunger". Opponents of the ruling Zanu-PF party are vulnerable not just to arrest and torture but to withholding of food as well. Even more perilous starvation-levels of food scarcity in North Korea are inextricably linked to the country's dire human rights situation. Some 6.5 million people are vulnerable to malnutrition and some of those fleeing to China for political refuge are escaping a severe economic scarcity that is arguably created by Kim Jong-il's hardline politics.

In the case of Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory, multiple ESC rights

are subject to long-term denial. Israeli forces have destroyed over 4,000 homes and vast areas of agricultural land since the 2000 intifada began. Thousands of orange, lemon and olive trees have been uprooted and Amnesty International recently reported the poisoning of Palestinian fields by Israeli settlers in the West Bank despite the Israeli authorities having total control of the area.

In countless places on the planet, livelihood and place of abode form a near-inseparable whole. Deliberately damage these and you deny rights just as surely as if you imprison someone. In the case of Israel, a massive 'security' wall cutting many Palestinians off from their fields and workplaces is a vivid example of "persecution by other means".

New "full-spectrum" human-rights work also means human-rights organisations forging closer alliances with specialist NGOs and bodies like Oxfam and the World Food Programme. Amnesty International recently undertook research and lobbying projects alongside Food First International and Mental Disability Rights International. Increasingly Amnesty International is looking to widen its portfolio of expertise and has enlisted the input of town planners, agronomists and mental health experts.

At the height of the second world war the United States president, Franklin D Roosevelt, identified four key freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. With the onset of the cold war and an intense international focus on ideology and politics, there has arguably been an unwarranted neglect of Roosevelt's third freedom. In one way, the Bhopal water protestors are just reminding us that this is no less important than the others.

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