

HUMAN RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA

Their relevance to the vulnerable
and marginalised

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Fostering the better protection of human rights

It is a difficult predicament, in the current legal and political climate, to work in a legal practice where the clients are economically and socially disadvantaged and powerless. Sometimes, being an academic who is supposed to grapple with the theoretical and philosophical concepts in academic journals comes into conflict with the realities and practicalities of working as a clinical supervising solicitor in this academic role in a disadvantaged suburb of Melbourne. Yet from this vantage point, being an academic and a practitioner, a constructive inter-play occurs where theory can inform practice and vice versa. It is this inter-play which can make a valuable contribution to policy debates. From such a vantage point, I consider it incumbent on universities and policy-makers to tap into the experience of the day-to-day dilemmas facing members of the community for whom survival, emotional and physical well-being are precarious. With exposure to this in an academic/practitioner role, the theory and real life strategies can intersect to ensure strategies are realistic and can make a difference.

This article challenges the prevailing 'legalistic' approach to human rights, where court litigation tends to be considered as the means by which human rights can be enforced. The new human rights legislation in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) — with Western Australia and Tasmania examining the possibilities for legislation — offer broader opportunities for improving the human condition of people on Australian shores. Furthermore, since the Rudd government was elected there may be brighter prospects for human rights protection at a federal level. The new human rights mechanisms in Victoria and the ACT present opportunities beyond litigation which can be utilised to ensure a culture of human rights develops in legislatures and bureaucrats and how they administer their policies on the ground. Audits, parliamentary scrutiny processes and direct mediation with regional public authorities are all fertile ground to enforce the human rights of community members.

From my position as a community lawyer in a disadvantaged community, the limitations of a legalistic approach to human rights, without its grounding in the day-to-day realities of community, is highly problematic.¹ From this perspective, a human rights framework that consists of only civil and political rights, or which requires clients to use the courts

to complain of ill-treatment, fails to recognise the integral connection between the economic and social position of human beings and their capacity to exercise civil and political rights.² Such a legalistic approach to human rights can overlook other opportunities for cultural change, negotiation and dialogue, which a less adversarial environment than the legal system can allow. These opportunities will be discussed in this article. The legal system certainly has a place within the human rights framework; however, debates should also be constructed around the need to adhere to human rights and how to best foster such adherence before matters are the subject of complaint. In other words, how can a respect for human rights become entrenched in day-to-day dealings with each other? Evans has argued that the human rights debate needs to be widened to have a 'focus beyond the legislative process'.³

From my perspective, the offerings of a legalistic approach to human rights are restrictive in that some clients lack the money, power, capacity, confidence and knowledge to even realise their human rights. This article will discuss modest research undertaken by Mary Anne Noone and myself, which demonstrates this point.⁴ A purely legalistic approach to human rights, with the limitations imposed by rules and procedures, not only constrains the opportunities for human rights mechanisms and frameworks to be applied more broadly but means that those who will be able to take advantage of their rights are people who have the resources to navigate these rules and procedures.⁵ Such a concentration on legalistic approaches can also provide ammunition for those opposed to human rights protection.⁶

Lessons to be learned from the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom (UK), some powerful media interests and opponents see human rights as the domain of the legal: judges, politicians and lawyers. The *Human Rights Act 1998* (UK) is seen as being used by those considered unpopular, mainly because these groups are already within the legal system. Such groups include asylum seekers, defendants and prisoners. Whilst these people's rights are just as important as those in the rest of the community, it nevertheless enables opponents to label human rights as an 'industry for lawyers'.

The UK experience of their *Human Rights Act* reveals that, although the Act has improved many facets of life, it has also been used as a public 'whipping boy' and is blamed for decisions that do not actually pertain to the Act.⁷ This is unfortunate and reflects the more

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1. Conor Gearty, *The Hamlyn Lectures 2005: Can Human Rights Survive?* (2006).
2. Mike Salvaris, 'Economic and Social Rights: The Victorian Charter's Unfinished Business' (2007) 43 *Just Policy: A Journal of Australian Social Policy* 30.
3. Simon Evans, 'Improving Human Rights Analysis in the Legislative and Policy Process' (2005) 29 *Melbourne University Law Review* 665.
4. Mary Anne Noone and Liz Curran, 'Access to Justice and Human Rights: An Exploration of the Experiences of Social Security Recipients in Postcode 3081' (Paper presented at the W G Hart Legal Workshop, London, June 2007); Alexy Buck, Nigel Balmer and Pascoe Pleasence, 'Social Exclusion and Civil Law: Experience of Civil Justice Problems among Vulnerable Groups' (2005) 39(3) *Journal of Social Policy and Administration* 302, 318–20; Rebecca Sandefur, 'The Importance of Doing Nothing: Everyday Problems and Responses of Inaction' in Pascoe Pleasence, Alexy Buck and Nigel Balmer (eds), *Transforming Lives: Law and Social Process* (2007) 112, 117.
5. An illustration is contained in a letter to the author (9 August 2006) from Civil Law Policy, Department of Justice (Victoria) in response to a query in a letter (17 July 2006) about the legal costs for seeking a Declaration of Inconsistent Interpretation with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006* (Vic) from the Supreme Court. The Department of Justice indicated the procedure would be the same as in any other action under the *Supreme Court Act 1986* and the *Supreme Court (General Civil Procedure) Rules 2005*, as the Charter 'is silent on the question of costs'.
6. James Allan argues that recent human rights legislation in Australia has given power to an unelected judiciary, and lawyers and judges will play a much greater role in social policy-making largely through the power to decide the scope and ambit of the enumerated rights. See Allan, 'The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities: Exegesis and Criticism' (2006) 30 *Melbourne University Law Review* 28. This ignores that under the Charter, Parliament is left with the ultimate decision as to what action to take after a court's Declaration of Inconsistent Interpretation. I would argue the conversation on human rights between the Executive, courts and Parliament is more democratic and transparent than current process where such issues are rarely contemplated.

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sensational coverage which some media are prone to, rather than reportage of the actual facts behind many of the cases. It also highlights the dangers of narrowly constraining the definition of human rights to the civil and political rights sphere. As a lawyer and civil libertarian, on many occasions I have witnessed arguments that devalue economic, cultural and social rights in order to give precedence to civil and political rights. The latter are often seen in legal arenas as 'higher order rights'. Perhaps such attitudes are more reflective of the socially and economically privileged position of many in the legal profession rather than an accurate reflection of the positioning of human rights in international law.⁸ These views conflict with the fundamental notions of human rights being inviolable, indivisible and inalienable.

Recently, at a Public Interest Advocacy Centre⁹ conference in Sydney, a former parliamentarian argued that the most prudent course of action for advocates for bills or charters of human rights is to settle for civil and political rights and not agitate for the inclusion of economic, social, cultural and other rights, as this could be fatal to any such bill.¹⁰ Such arguments not only fail to understand the importance of economic and social rights to the general population,¹¹ but also risk thwarting the longevity of statutory human rights measures as the more narrow and legalistic rights come to be seen as 'exclusive', 'selective' and utilised only by a few 'sectional' interests. By contrast, human rights protections can and should offer opportunities for all human beings to maximise their potential and be treated with respect and dignity.¹² As Gearty has argued, if the manner of articulating the importance of human rights is not sophisticated and representative, then human rights arguments will be greeted without warmth and with blank indifference or mute incomprehension.¹³ Worse still, they will be manipulated and commandeered to the point where they can be used to justify the undermining of human rights. Gearty, Charlesworth and Williams have highlighted how human rights language can be twisted so as to actually allow for incursions of human rights.¹⁴

The distortion of human rights by 'cherry picking' civil and political rights and making human rights overly legalistic makes it easier for opponents to thwart future human rights frameworks in Australia. In the end, the people affected — for whom social and economic as well as cultural rights are important — go unrealised and are forgotten. As a consequence, their civil and political rights are also never realised. Gearty warns:

It follows that, at its core, human rights is a subject that is concerned with the outsider, with the marginalised, and with the powerless — these are the various individuals who in any given culture or time are most likely to be invisible to those around them, who are most liable to find themselves pushed beyond the periphery of a community's field of vision, all who are viewed as a non- or sub-human if they are seen it is these people who need human rights protection the most.¹⁵

The human rights of the vulnerable and disadvantaged

Many vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are reliant on government agencies for support and subsistence. Accordingly, they are susceptible to infringements of their rights by agents of government.¹⁶ The Audit Committee in the UK¹⁷ has indicated there is still a lot of work to be done to change entrenched culture and equip government agencies to conceive of their role in enabling the human rights of citizens in how they administer government policies. There is a lesson in this recommendation in Australian jurisdictions as each state and territory rolls out its human rights framework. If training civil servants and their agencies on human rights is to be effective it must be regular and resourced, especially in view of high staff turnover. It must be more than just a formulaic or 'tick a box' approach to human rights compliance.

So how can human rights be utilised by those without money, resources, or power?

For many of my clients, the issues foremost in their minds are: maintaining adequate affordable housing; ill-health; remaining in school or work; having adequate income support to pay for food, health care, pharmaceuticals, and other basic necessities; mental health issues; drug and alcohol addictions, often induced by trauma; lack of social support, particularly for the elderly and those with an intellectual disability; and coping with discrimination. These issues are mainly economic, social and cultural rights, although many may have a civil and political rights dimension that can come into play. All of these need to be dealt with in a holistic way rather than taking a 'cherry picking' approach to human rights.

What my clients want above all are solutions to their problems, a decent standard of living and to be treated with decency and respect. All of these elements are consistent with human rights which governments are required to adhere to and/or progressively work towards.¹⁸ These items go beyond what can be

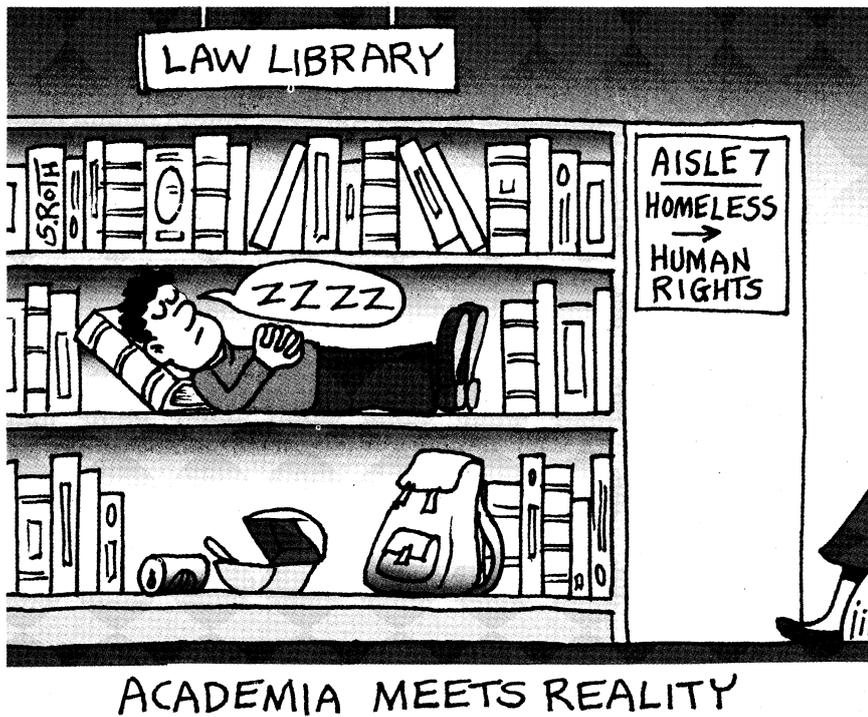
7. An example is the prison escapee given Kentucky Fried Chicken on a rooftop. Media portrayed the case as the *Human Rights Act* giving luxury items to a convicted felon. In reality police were trying to capture the man, keep him calm and protect themselves. In many other cases where the British press criticised the Act, court rulings have arisen more to correct administrative ineptitude than because of the Act. Rather than criticise poor administration leading to the prisoner's release, media preferred to target the Act. A further example is the release of paedophiles due to officers failing to consider all material reports pertaining to offenders being an ongoing risk to the community. This was also blamed on the *Human Rights Act*. For a further discussion of tabloid treatment and absence of facts, see Sir Stephen Sedley, 'The Rocks or the Open Sea: Where is the Human Rights Act Heading?' (2005) 32 *Journal of Law and Society*, 3.

8. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by UN General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

9. Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) is an independent, non-profit law and policy organisation that identifies public interest issues and works co-operatively with other organisations to advocate for individuals and groups affected.

10. The Hon Ron Dyer, 'Reflecting on what has worked in past campaigns' (Paper presented at the PIAC 25th Anniversary Conference, Sydney, 18 October 2007). See also George Williams, 'The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities: Origins and Scope' (2006) 30 *Melbourne University Law Review* 880.

11. In 1999, a survey of 3000 respondents in three Victorian municipalities asked what human rights should be guaranteed in a Constitution. The results ranked 'quality public health and education' above civil and political rights. These are economic and social rights. See Salvaris, above n 2.



12. The difficulty is that ministers and civil servants often appear confronted by the notion including economic, social and cultural rights as this allows scrutiny of areas of Executive activity problematic for governments such as health and education. Many argue that expenditure matters are for the Executive rather than courts. If courts held government to account on expenditure, this would intrude on the separation of powers. Such arguments fail to recognise human rights as indivisible and belonging to people rather than the governments and courts and contradict notions of elected government accountability integral in democracy. Initially in Victoria, the Attorney-General was very conscious in statements of a human rights framework that recognised the economically disadvantaged. As the Charter moved through Cabinet and government departments, its focus was contained to civil and political rights. This is now reflected in the legislation, although the inclusion of economic, social and cultural rights will be the subject for ongoing review. See *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). Similarly, the *Human Rights Act 2004* (ACT) was confined to civil and political rights. For a discussion of the ACT process, see Carolyn Evans, 'Responsibility for Rights: the ACT Human Rights Act' (2004) 13 *Federal Law Review* 291. For further discussion of the political machinations in Victoria see Salvaris, above n 2.

13. Gearty, above n 1, 21.

14. Gearty illustrates how a redefinition of human rights, in the context of terrorist attacks, has been used to excuse repression as necessary to prevent the destruction of human rights values, thus justifying the suspension of those very human rights through suspending processes of law: *Ibid* 108. For a discussion of the derogation of human rights in Australia, see Hilary Charlesworth, 'The Australian Reluctance About Rights' (1993) 31 *Osgoode Hall Law*

provided by litigation; they extend to how people are treated in their day-to-day lives by the community, the government and its agencies. They also relate to the provision of resources and services that are necessary for an adequate standard of living.

Politicians and bureaucrats can easily claim that human rights are being adhered to, but these claims may not accurately accord with the experience of people on the ground.¹⁹ Accordingly, for compliance to occur it is not merely a matter of self-auditing by Parliament and the public service but also measuring the experience of people affected. In a modest trial of research methodology, Mary Anne Noone and I (Curran and Noone) have endeavoured to develop a process for measuring people's experience of human rights which could be utilised to fill this void. This will be discussed later in this article.

Beyond formal legal structural approaches: the potential for human rights protection

Evans, noting the reticence of national government in Australia to implement a bill of rights, has explored ways in which human rights compliance might be integrated into the policy-making and legislative process and he sets out a constructive proposal.²⁰ He has examined the use of Regulatory Impact Statements on legislation and policy initiatives and their independent monitoring by the Office of Regulation Review and argues that similarly, a model for Human Rights Impact Statements²¹ could be adopted with Statements to be reviewed by a statutory entity such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. He notes the limitations of parliamentary scrutiny committees, which still have a place, but argues that early on in the process, there are opportunities for human rights considerations to inform policy analysis and

deliberations as part of the existing repertoire. Kelly has observed that the institutionalisation of human rights at a policy-making and legislative level will be 'invisible to practitioners and the public, in many respects it is where the biggest impact of the Act²² will be felt'.²³

This author argues that similarly, as a complement to human rights mechanisms involving the Executive, Parliament, the civil service and the courts, other methods are needed to benchmark and measure people's actual experience of human rights compliance on the ground. This then complements policy-making initiatives to ensure that the bold statements about human rights compliance by both politicians and bureaucrats can be tested and verified. Such a measure brings the notion of human rights and democracy together as those who are likely to be affected by government legislation, policy and its administration are able to share their experience as befits participatory democracy.

Unfortunately, this proposal will be met with initial resistance as those in power rarely wish to hear the negative elements of their policy's impacts. However, if parliamentarians want to stay in touch, develop good policies and avoid criticism, gathering information on a regular basis on how people's human rights are affected by policies on the ground can lead to better and more informed policymaking. It averts pitfalls before they occur. Both the positive and negative aspects of policies may also be identified and give improved opportunities for fixing unintended consequences of legislation, policies and administration.

To this end, Curran and Noone in a recent modest trial explored a new methodology that seeks to measure people's experience of human rights. This demonstrates that the task is not impossible. It is the funding for the conduct of such research that will be critical if the rhetoric around human rights implementation is to be tested in the community. In view of modest funding, the trial of the methodology examined only one human right: the right to social security.²⁴ The approach used internationally-recognised rights ratified by Australia; developed indicators as to what would be needed were the right to be implemented; measured the experience of people by benchmarking them against the indicators required for the human rights to be adhered to; and drew conclusions. The details of the methodology and the outcomes of this research are articulated in a conference paper and in a recent report.²⁵ The methodology could be utilised more extensively in the future to test people's experience of a range of other human rights through the use of focus groups and, only where appropriate, surveys as occurred in the research project. In addition to the need to measure people's actual experience of human rights, there are further measures that need to be adopted if vulnerable and marginalised groups are to reap any benefits from human rights mechanisms.

The problems for vulnerable and marginalised groups: a need for greater knowledge, capacity, support and capability

The research of Curran and Noone — which was very modest due to limited funding; the small sample

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of people who participated in the suburb of West Heidelberg; and the fact it was only a trial of new methodology — revealed that both service providers and service users had very little knowledge or understanding of social security as a human right or their rights at law. The overwhelming majority of participants had little information, knowledge or understanding of the methods by which such treatment could be addressed, including that there were legal aspects to the problem and that legal advice could be sought. Few people were aware of their rights or remedies when their right to social security was infringed or when Centrelink officers treated them inappropriately.

Participants expressed a high level of fear about reprisals for complaining about their treatment, as many service users believed that, if they challenged a decision or their treatment, they might jeopardise future payments.

When a right is threatened or curtailed, knowledge and the capacity and confidence to exercise that right are necessary pre-conditions to receiving an effective remedy. Without information and knowledge about the right to social security and the norms of appropriate treatment, and in the absence of the capacity or confidence to pursue the right, it is unlikely that the right will be realised. Hence, the international benchmarks for the right are not met.

The research by Curran and Noone revealed participants had little knowledge, capacity or confidence and were unable to exercise their rights even in the context of likely infringement of their rights. Supportive of these research findings are findings of Rebecca Sandefur, who conducted research into money and housing problems in the United States. She states that:

[t]he implication of this body of research is that people whose social position is near the bottom of an unequal structure will be the less likely to take actions that might protect and further their own interests.²⁶

In addition, research findings (again consistent with Curran and Noone, and with Sandefur²⁷) by the UK's Legal Services Research Centre (LSRC) notes that the results from their 2004 Civil Social Justice Survey across England and Wales found that often people thought seeking advice would make little difference; they were uncertain about what to do and where to get help or they felt that nothing could be done. Self-esteem affected their ability, as did entrenched avoidance behaviour that was often linked to previous experience,

life circumstances and the availability of support networks. All of these factors were found to affect why people did not take action and it was noted that these factors were often accompanied by anxiety.²⁸

This body of research reveals that people's state of knowledge about their rights and whether they have the capability, wherewithal and confidence to access their rights can influence their ability to have their rights enforced. The Curran and Noone research also highlights the impediments for people in West Heidelberg in accessing their legal rights where they lack the relevant knowledge and where the administrative system itself seems to compound these impediments.

In the context of the realities for vulnerable and marginalised members of our community, such research can inform the delivery of legal and other services. It points not only to the need for legal and other services to be more proactive, holistic, multi-disciplinary and outreach-based, but also suggests that community education is needed with improved strategies to deliver relevant information to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in an accessible, timely and digestible form.

The LSRC has stated that:

Not doing anything about the problem points to the lack of knowledge about the seriousness of the problem and what action to take, and being able to handle a problem alone requires expertise, confidence and also monetary resources. It is certainly the case that sometimes people are more than able to deal with problems alone, and sometimes it might be reasonable to make no attempt to resolve the problem. No one strategy to deal with problems can be universally prescribed. However, particularly for those people who face problems of social exclusion, and may be the least able to solve problems themselves, clear information and assistance may be vital to enable them to escape from civil justice problems that might well act to entrench or even worsen their predicament.²⁹

The experience in the United Kingdom

The experience in the UK can provide some lessons on the important role of training and education, not just of agencies working with people but also of members within the community itself, which can make a serious impact upon human rights compliance.³⁰ It requires government and funders to recognise the role of non-government organisations in fearless advocacy on behalf of the community. It also requires significant commitment and resourcing to enable capacity building, empowerment and infrastructure for

Journal 195, 218; Ben Golder and George Williams, 'Balancing National Security and Human Rights: Assessing the Legal Response of Common Law Nations to the Threat of Terrorism' (2006) 8 *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 43.

15. Gearty, above n 1, 5.

16. Salvaris, above n 2.

17. Joint Committee on Human Rights, UK Parliament, *Sixth Report* (2003) [13].

18. Article 2(1) of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* states that State parties to the Covenant must undertake steps to the maximum of their available resources to achieve progressively a full realisation of the rights in the Covenant.

19. Gould argues that forms of bureaucracy and administrative politics are often faceless and participation of democracy involves networks of engagement with other concrete individuals. See Carol Gould, *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights* (2004) 101.

20. See Evans, above n 3.

21. Others jurisdictions have adopted similar models which have been in operation for some time. In Norway, see 'Handbook in Human Rights Assessment: State Obligations, Awareness and Empowerment' (2001) published by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). In New Zealand, see 'The Guidelines on the Bill of Rights Act 1990: A Guide to Freedoms in the Bill of Rights Act for the Public Sector' (2004), Ministry of Justice, provided to all public servants. Guidelines are being developed in Victoria.

22. *Human Rights Act 2004* (ACT).

23. Elizabeth Kelly, 'Government in the ACT: A Human Rights Dialogue' (Speech delivered at the Assessing the First Year of the ACT Human Rights Act Conference, Canberra, 29 June 2005) cited in Evans, above n 3.

24. The right to social security is in Article 22 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and amplified in Article 9 of the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) (operative 10 March 1976 for Australia) that provides 'the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance'. The ICESCR norms must be recognised in appropriate ways within the domestic legal order and the appropriate means of redress, or remedies, must be available to any aggrieved individual or group.

25. Noone and Curran, above n 4; Liz Curran, *Ensuring Justice and Enhancing Human Rights: A Report on Improving Legal Aid Service Delivery to Reach Vulnerable and Disadvantaged People*, La Trobe University and Victoria Law Foundation (2007).

26. Sandefur, above n 4.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Pascoe Pleasence et al, 'Mounting Problems: Further Evidence of the Social, Economic and Health Consequences of Civil Justice Problems,' in Pascoe Pleasence, Alexy Buck and Nigel Balmer (eds), *Transforming Lives: Law and Social Process* (2007) and Alexy Buck, Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel Balmer, *Education Implications from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey*, Annex to the PLEAS Task Force Report (2007) 32–34.

29. See Buck, Balmer and Pleasence, above n 4, 320.

30. Sonya Sceats, *The Human Rights Act – Changing Lives*, The British Institute of Human Rights (2006) 7–14.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Kelly, above n 23.

33. Curran, above n 25.

34. Gearty, above n 1.

35. Amartya Sen, 'Elements of a Theory of Human Rights' (2004) 32, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 315.

36. *Ibid.* 323 and Gearty, above n 1.

37. Gearty, above n 1.

38. Gould argues that democracy must be interpreted as more than merely majority rule; in its fullest sense it involves widespread opportunities for participation. She argues democracy should involve recognition of the importance of difference and the individuality of members of the political community, and notes majority rule does not necessarily protect minorities. Gould argues democracy needs to be understood as multi or pluricultural in a specific sense and connected to citizenship and democratic communities. See Gould, above n 19, 93, 104, 114, 116.

39. Gearty, above n 1, 42–5.

40. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996*, Chapter 2. By including economic, cultural and social rights along with civil and political, the South African Bill of Rights has enlarged the legislative provisions and expectations on the State surrounding welfare, education and health within the human rights framework.

41. For example, class actions can be taken on the appropriateness of the social assistance scheme of the government. See Nick de Villiers, *Social Policy in a Development Context: how research can be translated into policy and action* (2006) The Legal Resources Centre <www.lrc.org.za/Publications/AcademicPapers.asp> at 29 May 2008.

42. Salvaris, above n 2.

43. Gearty, above n 1, 7.

44. Gould, above n 19, 73.

45. Nick O'Neill, Simon Rice and Roger Douglas, *Retreat from Injustice: Human Rights Law in Australia* (2nd ed, 2004) 26.

communities of marginalised groups and those within locations of disadvantage.

In the UK, subsequent to training of workers in agencies and local community members, there was a demonstrable increase in the use of the *Human Rights Act 1998 (UK)* by these people to raise issues of human rights non-compliance and unlawful activity.³¹ For these groups litigation was not an option for reasons of cost; a lack of access to legal advice or representation; the trauma of legal action; and the nature of the adversarial system. In a manner largely 'invisible to practitioners and the public',³² these workers and community members were able to raise agencies' non-compliance and breaches of human rights directly with those agencies and were able to secure better treatment and compliance with human rights standards. As stated earlier, this highlights that by taking only a legalistic approach to human rights, opportunities for clients can be lost. Human rights mechanisms offer potential and great opportunities for many vulnerable and marginalised in our community who often cannot access the legal system with its formal thresholds, procedures and significant costs.

Work done at this day-to-day level with agencies by advocates and citizens needs to be acknowledged and facilitated as it is a significant area in which the human rights of all people can be enhanced. The groups in the UK that benefited from changes in practice due to the activities of these trained workers (which include lawyers, advocates and community services) have empowered citizens from a wide section of the population including parents of school children; the elderly; people with mental illness; and people with a disability. The opportunities for negotiating with authorities for improved treatment based on these human rights frameworks need to be acknowledged and celebrated just as much as the formalised legal opportunities for greater compliance with human rights.

Properly arming advocacy groups, locating them in areas and communities of disadvantage (as is occurring in South Africa) and equipping and training communities in how they can respond to human rights infringements are ways in which the potential of human rights frameworks can be maximised.³³ This also requires advocacy groups themselves to be willing to be trained in human rights standards and for their organisations to endorse and support them. If this can occur then they will be better equipped to use the new human rights frameworks to the advantage of their clients/patients/community members.

Conclusion

If human rights are to be effectively protected and adhered to, then they need to be owned by all and based on what civilises — concepts of decency; compassion;³⁴ social cohesion; humanity; ethics;³⁵ deliberation;³⁶ good will; and collaboration.³⁷ Those most likely to experience human rights intrusions also need to be protected and the general population must be given clear explanations as to why they are being protected so it understands, owns and claims the rights

for all.³⁸ In addition, it is imperative that those on the margins, who so often lack a space to be heard due to the absence of power, money, political clout and reluctance of the media to convey the matters that concern them, are given a voice.

A selective approach to human rights protection that limits definitions of human rights only to the sphere of political and civil rights, as is the case with human rights legislation in Victoria, the ACT and the UK, is unfortunate and reduces opportunities for fundamental reform to benefit those most excluded and likely to have their human rights infringed. The language of human rights, as Gearty argues, should give voice and represent the language of hospitality, kindness and compassion as well as providing an ethical frame.³⁹ South Africa's human rights framework took an expansive view of human rights which includes economic and social rights and accordingly enables much to be predicated on this foundation.⁴⁰ In areas of health and social housing, the human rights framework under chapter two of their Bill of Rights has been successfully used to force the government to protect people in townships.⁴¹

For a long time, there has been discourse which tries to devalue the economic, cultural and social rights in favour of civil and political rights. They should be seen as interdependent, interrelated and indivisible with other rights, rather than as rights in competition with each other.⁴² They are 'indispensable for dignity and free development of his [or her] personality'.⁴³ It is access to conditions of subsistence, health, education which, in an extended sense, allow for liberty, freedom and participation. Without basic conditions for life to flourish and be enabled, it is unlikely that these civil and political rights will be owned by all. Human rights protection must include equal access to the conditions outlined in human rights instruments, including equal access to resources. It must build on the conception of human rights by allowing for the emergence and self-development of people's goals and capacities over time⁴⁴ — otherwise human rights protections risk gaining the reputation for being the purview of the exclusive and unpopular rather than being owned by everyone by virtue of merely being human.⁴⁵

Thanks are extended to the LSRC staff and Justice UK where the author was based during her time in the UK, with the assistance of partial funding by the Victoria Law Foundation.

Liz Curran further thanks the staff of the Aids Law Project and Legal Resource Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, as well as Mary Anne Noone at La Trobe University who was her partner in the Australian research discussed in this article.

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