Human Rights Glossary

This glossary provides basic definitions of general terms used in the field of international human rights law. Many of the definitions come from a terminology listing made available by the International Budget Project. For the full terminology listing of the International Budget Project, see their website at http://www.internationalbudget.org/themes/ESC/HRGLOSSARY.pdf
HUMAN RIGHTS GLOSSARY

Accession
The act by which one nation becomes party to an agreement already in force between other nations (e.g., accession to a human rights treaty). Also referred to as adherence; adhesion.

Adoption
Formal acceptance of a human rights treaty or declaration.

Civil rights
Rights an individual has in his/her role as a citizen of his/her nation.

Collective rights
Rights associated with and exercised by communities or peoples. Many rights held by indigenous peoples are considered collective rights, as is the right to self-determination.

Convention
Formal, written agreement between states related to matters affecting them. Conventions usually involve binding commitments on states.

Covenant
Formal, written agreement between parties, usually requiring the performance of some action. In the human rights context, ‘covenant’ usually refers to either the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Cultural rights
Rights that protect a person’s enjoyment of his/her own culture.

Customary law
Law that is based on what governments and officials actually do over a period of time, law that is accepted by widespread consensus and consistent practice, and law that states generally believe they are bound to abide by. Customary rules of international law are sometimes referred to as ‘norms’.

Declaration
Legal statement of the general norms of international law or principles to which most countries would agree. Not generally, in itself, considered binding on the parties involved. Declarations do not create customary law, but they may indicate norms that have already developed. After consistent practice by a large number of counties, declarations can become customary law.

Discrimination
In the human rights context, the act or practice of discriminating against someone on the basis of his/her membership in a category (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender). Discrimination is normally a violation of human rights.

**Equality**
The quality or state of being equal. A fundamental right of all human beings.

**General Comments**
Produced by various treaty-monitoring bodies of the UN, such as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Human Rights Committee, to provide authoritative interpretations of the rights specified in each treaty and to provide detail on procedures related to the committee’s work.

**General Recommendations**
Produced by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Similar in purpose to General Comments.

**Human rights**
Human rights are those rights that are inherent to being human. The concept of human rights acknowledges that every single person is entitled to enjoy his or her human rights without distinction as to race, color, gender, language, religion, etc.

**Inalienable**
Incapable of being surrendered or transferred. Human rights are inalienable, which means that no one can take away a person’s human rights.

**Individual rights**
Rights of the individual as distinguished from the rights of the group or of the community. Traditionally, most human rights are considered individual rights.

**Interdependence/indivisibility**
Guiding principles of human rights work, meaning that civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights are interdependent; one set of rights does not take precedence over the other and one set of rights cannot be fully guaranteed without the guarantee of the other.

**International human rights**
Generally referring to the rights contained in international legal documents and treaties, jurisprudence, and customary international law. International human rights are rooted primarily in the UN and OAS systems.

**International law**
The law that governs relations between the nations of the world. International law includes human rights law, because countries bear the primary responsibility for protecting the fundamental rights of their citizens.
Monitoring/fact-finding/investigation
Terms often used interchangeably; generally intended to mean the tracking of and/or gathering of information on government practices and actions (related to human rights).

Natural rights
Term used to refer to the belief that rights are inherent in nature and in the natural condition of human beings.

Non-discrimination
Fundamental human rights principle, meaning that all rights are guaranteed to all without discrimination.

Political rights
Rights related to government or the conduct of government (e.g., the right to vote and to participate in governmental decisionmaking)

Ratification
The final establishment of consent by parties to a treaty to be bound by it, usually including the exchange or deposit of documents formally acknowledging the issuing state’s confirmation and acceptance of the treaty.

Social justice
Term used to refer to features of a humane and just society.

Social rights
Rights relating to the person in society, such as the right to education, social security, health.

State
A territorial unit with a stable population, under the authority of its own government, and recognized as being capable of entering into relations with other states. Also referred to as nation; country.

Treaty
An agreement formally signed, ratified, or adhered to between two or more nations or sovereigns. In the international context, it is an agreement entered into between two or more states in written form and governed by international law. International treaties have different designations, such as covenants, charters, protocols, conventions, etc.

Universal
Applying to all human beings (as in “human rights are universal”).

Universality
Essential quality of human rights, meaning that human rights apply to all human beings by the fact of their being human.
Violation of human rights
Failure of a nation-state with regard to one of its obligations under human rights norms.