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## Are human rights Western rights?



WHEN STUDYING German a few years ago with students from Britain, France, Argentina, Malaysia and India, I recall how a discussion on human rights faltered almost immediately. This had nothing to do with our limited language skills, but everything to do with the fact that the Europeans were not on the same page as the others. Why was this?

It had become apparent that people's understanding of how human rights are implemented and encountered depended upon the perspective through which one viewed them – Western or Third World?

For example, access to clean water is a basic human right. However, the excessive consumption of the West impinges severely on the ability of others to achieve this. A Canadian consumes 35 times more water than an urban Indian, and an American even more. The USA consumes 23% of global energy with five per cent of the world population and contributes proportionately the greatest amount to global carbon emissions. If Canada and America continue to consume, as is their 'human right', the exercise of these 'rights' is a serious denial of material needs of two billion poor. In other words, human rights are contextual. And they may conflict.

« MATERIAL DEPRIVATION OF THE THIRD WORLD POOR IS A SERIOUS BREACH OF HUMAN RIGHTS. IT IS LINKED TO THE PREVALENT LIFE-STYLE OF THE WELL-OFF IN BOTH WORLDS. »

The point is not if human rights *per se* are contestable. The point is who is doing the talking. For the Third World, Christian proselytising came first, then the 'civilising mission' of colonialism and now the preaching of human rights. One civilisation has to be declared superior to another – then exploitation is morally justified.

Colonialism ensured that the West became materially better off than the colonies and stayed so. Yet Western 'values' are the yardstick by which all nations qualify as 'civilised'. This contradiction undermines the global applicability of human rights. Past and on-going wars, imposed by the West, as well as its post-September 11<sup>th</sup> curtailment of internal civil liberties, also appear as hypocrisy to the non-West.

Furthermore, an impression has been created as if human rights were an invention of the West made in 1948. Actually, 20<sup>th</sup> century freedom struggles – India, South Africa, Ghana... against colonial powers – were very much human rights assertions, though articulated differently.

Human rights as defined today are legalistic and formal, hence rather ineffectual. Often they become a political tool to criticise inconvenient or even insubordinate states and at times they actually play into the hands of repressive regimes. Mostly they help the victims cosmetically rather than substantively because they do not address the systemic problems.

Material deprivation of the Third World poor is a serious breach of human rights. It is linked to the prevalent life-style of the well-off in both worlds. When asked what he thought of Western civilisation, Gandhi commented that he thought it, "would be a good idea" – it still could be. Perhaps a good starting point for this would be to examine and redefine human rights from a Third-World perspective.

*The articles in this edition of Stride give some idea of how these complex issues can be addressed in the classroom.*

› Full text for this article can be found at: [www.art-non-deco.com/Writings.html](http://www.art-non-deco.com/Writings.html)

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Front cover picture: Matt Grayson / Crisis Action  
Protestors gather outside the Sudanese Embassy in London as part of a global day of actions to end the conflict in Darfur.

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## **comment**

This is a very interesting/enlightening piece. I always thought that having human rights is a good thing, and did not stop to think of how western world views them vs "third world". I always feel uncomfortable using the term third world by the way.

What surprised me in your editorial is that you say human rights can be used as a tool by repressive regimes. You say here they are ineffectual because they are legalistic and formal. I was wondering if you could give an example of how they have been used in this way?

You make a great point here when you explain "If Canada and America continue to consume, as is their 'human right', the exercise of these 'rights' is a serious denial of material needs of two billion poor. In other words, human rights are contextual." I see here how a regime would abuse the term human rights by saying they have a right to use up as much resources as they want. I would argue that is not their right and it is incorrect usage of the term.

Here is another good point "Colonialism ensured that the West became materially better off than the colonies and stayed so. Yet Western 'values' are the yardstick by which all nations qualify as 'civilised'. This contradiction undermines the global applicability of human rights" I see how this would undermine the applicability of human rights.

Overall your editorial is very thought provoking and informative! At the end you state that human rights need to be redefined from a "third world" perspective. I was wondering if you have a good idea about what that perspective would look like?

***Emily W, USA, Aug 17***