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Governments can no longer shirk human rights responsibility

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Imagine not having enough to eat or watching your children go hungry. What would you do if your house was torn down and you had nowhere to live? Would you be confident about your children's future if they could not go to school or see a doctor if they were sick?

This is the reality faced by millions of people across the world every single day.

Every 90 seconds a woman or girl dies in pregnancy or childbirth. Every day thousands of people move into slums because they have nowhere else to go. On current trends, by 2020 an incredible 1.4 billion people will live in make-shift shelters on the fringes of the world's cities.

Vast numbers of people are denied the right to adequate housing, food, water, sanitation, health, work and education. This is not due to a lack of resources – it's because of a lack of political will.

For 65 years the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has helped secure a range of rights that all human beings are entitled to: the right to be free from torture, to speak out, the right to a fair and just trial, and the right to vote are just some of the fundamental principles and values outlined in perhaps the most remarkable global document of the 20th century.

The Universal Declaration is embedded in our collective consciousness. Crucially, it does not just focus on civil and political rights. It refers, too, to the economic, social and cultural rights which are vital to ensuring we lead decent and dignified lives.

The right to food and clean water, the right to an education and a home, social security benefits and the right to take part in cultural activities are all enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These essentials of human life are further protected in the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was adopted in 1966 and has been ratified by 160 states.

And yet, there are countless examples where governments routinely flout international law protecting these rights.

To take just two examples: In sub-Saharan Africa, there is for example the case of the Nigerian Rivers state Government demolishing a waterfront settlement in Port Harcourt in 2009 while the matter was still in court, leaving more than 13,000 people homeless. In Slovenia, Roma families living in informal settlements are denied access to water and sanitation. The list goes on and on.

There is hope though. An addition to the treaty – in UN-speak, an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant-- gives people the possibility of redress if they feel these basic rights have been trampled on. It is a side agreement to the Covenant that allows people to bring complaints directly against states when they believe their rights have been violated.

The title may sound obscure. But the Protocol establishes a vital tool for people, in particular for those living in poverty, to hold their government accountable if their rights are abused. Ten countries have now ratified this essential addition to the treaty, thus committing to protecting the economic, social and cultural rights of their citizens. This means that the Protocol comes into force on 5 May.

The small band of Argentina, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mongolia, Portugal, Slovakia Spain and Uruguay deserve praise for formally acknowledging the importance of rights that should be enjoyed by everyone. But what about the rest of the world?

Even in times of austerity, rich, western nations should be able to ensure that all citizens enjoy at least the minimum essentials of life such as primary education, health care and adequate housing. They need to step up and ratify the Protocol as soon as possible and give their people the protection they deserve.

As the gap between rich and poor gets ever wider, and social spending is cut in a bid to reduce deficits, everybody, whether they live in the developed world or the global south, needs the protection this Protocol gives.

So far, not a single African country has ratified the Protocol, and Mongolia the only country in Asia to do so. And yet, this type of legal mechanism could make a crucial difference to people's lives in these regions, not least in ensuring that the Millennium Development Goals which are due to end in 2015 deliver on their promises including effective accountability.

Governments like to claim they have their people's best interests at heart. In which case, they should ratify the Protocol and give people the rights they deserve.