5.1 Health and Human Rights Norms and Standards

5.1.1 Q.1 What Are Human Rights?

Human rights are legally guaranteed by human rights law, protecting individuals and groups against actions that interfere with fundamental freedoms and human dignity. They encompass what are known as civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Human rights are principally concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state. Governmental obligations with regard to human rights broadly fall under the principles of respect, protect and fulfil.

All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Vienna Declaration and Programme

5.1.2 Q.2 How Are Human Rights Enshrined in International Law?

In the aftermath of Second World War, the international community adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). However, by the time that States were prepared to turn the provisions of the Declaration into binding law, the Cold War had overshadowed and polarized human rights into two separate categories. The West argued that civil and political rights had priority and that economic and social rights were mere aspirations. The Eastern bloc argued to the contrary that rights to food, health and education were paramount and civil and political rights secondary. Hence two separate treaties were created in 1996—the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International
Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Since then, numerous treaties, declarations and other legal instruments have been adopted, and it is these instruments that encapsulate human rights.

5.1.3 Q.3 What Is the Link Between Health and Human Rights?

There are complex linkages between health and human rights:

– Violations or lack of attention to human rights can have serious health consequences;
– Health policies and programmes can promote or violate human rights in the ways they are designed or implemented;
– Vulnerability and the impact of ill health can be reduced by taking steps to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

The normative content of each right is fully articulated in human rights instruments. In relation to the right to health and freedom from discrimination, the normative content is outlined in Questions 4 and 5, respectively. Examples of the language used in human rights instruments to articulate the normative content of some of the other key human rights relevant to health follow:

– **Torture**: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation.”
– **Violence against children**: “All appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse...” shall be taken.
– **Harmful traditional practices**: “Effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children” shall be taken.
– **Participation**: The right to “... active, free and meaningful participation.”
– **Information**: “Freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.”
– **Privacy**: “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy...”
– **Scientific progress**: The right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.
– **Education**: The right to education, including access to education in support of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, the advantages of breast-feeding, hygiene and environmental sanitation and the prevention of accidents.
– **Food and nutrition**: “The right of everyone to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger...”
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- **Standard of living**: Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.
- **Right to social security**: The right of everyone to social security, including social insurance.

### 5.1.4 Q.4 What Is Meant by “The Right to Health”? 

The right to health does not mean the right to be healthy, nor does it mean that poor governments must put in place expensive health services for which they have no resources. But it does require governments and public authorities to put in place policies and action plans which will lead to available and accessible health care for all in the shortest possible time. To ensure that this happens is the challenge facing both the human rights community and public health professionals.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson

The right to the highest attainable standard of health (referred to as “the right to health”) was first reflected in the WHO Constitution (1946) and then reiterated in the 1978 Declaration of Alma-Ata and in the World Health Declaration adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1998. It has been firmly endorsed in a wide range of international and regional human rights instruments (Figure 5.1).

The right to the highest attainable standard of health in international human rights law is a claim to a set of social arrangements—norms, institutions, laws, an

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**Fig. 5.1** Examples of the links between Health and Human Rights
enabling environment—that can best secure the enjoyment of this right. The most authoritative interpretation of the right to health is outlined in Article 12 of the ICE-SCR, which has been ratified by 145 countries (as of May 2002). In May 2000, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which monitors the Covenant, adopted a General Comment on the right to health. General Comments serve to clarify the nature and content of individual rights and States Parties’ (those states that have ratified) obligations. The General Comment recognized that the right to health is closely related to and dependent upon the realization of other human rights, including the right to food, housing, work, education, participation, the enjoyment of the benefits of scientific progress and its applications, life, non-discrimination, equality, the prohibition against torture, privacy, access to information and the freedoms of association, assembly and movement.

Furthermore, the Committee interpreted the right to health as an inclusive right extending not only to timely and appropriate health care but also to the underlying determinants of health, such as access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, an adequate supply of safe food, nutrition and housing, healthy occupational and environmental conditions, and access to health-related education and information, including sexual and reproductive health.

The General Comment sets out four criteria by which to evaluate the right to health.

a  **Availability.** Functioning public health and health care facilities, goods and services, as well as programmes, have to be available in sufficient quantity.

b  **Accessibility.** Health facilities, goods and services have to be accessible to everyone without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Accessibility has four overlapping dimensions:

- Non-discrimination;
- Physical accessibility;
- Economic accessibility (affordability);
- Information accessibility.

c  **Acceptability.** All health facilities, goods and services must be respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate, sensitive to gender and life cycle requirements, as well as being designed to respect confidentiality and improve the health status of those concerned.

d  **Quality.** Health facilities, goods and services must be scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality.

### 5.1.5 Q.5 How Does the Principle of Freedom from Discrimination Relate to Health?

Vulnerable and marginalized groups in societies tend to bear an undue proportion of health problems. Overt or implicit discrimination violates a fundamental human
rights principle and often lies at the root of poor health status. In practice, discrimination can manifest itself in inadequately targeted health programmes and restricted access to health services.

Discrimination manifests itself in a complex variety of ways, which may, directly or indirectly, impact upon health. For example, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women recognizes the link between violence against women and the historically unequal power relations between men and women.

The prohibition of discrimination does not mean that differences should not be acknowledged, only that different treatment—and the failure to treat equal cases equally—must be based on objective and reasonable criteria intended to rectify imbalances within a society.

In relation to health and health care, the grounds for non-discrimination have evolved and can now be summarized as proscribing any discrimination in access to health care and the underlying determinants of health, as well as to means and entitlements for their procurement, on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, physical or mental disability, health status (including HIV/AIDS), sexual orientation, civil, political, social or other status, which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the equal enjoyment or exercise of the right to health.

5.1.6 Q.6 What International Human Rights Instruments Set Out Governmental Commitments?

Governments decide freely whether or not to become parties to a human rights treaty. Once this decision is made, however, there is a commitment to act in accordance with the provisions of the treaty concerned. The key international human rights treaties, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1996) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), further elaborate the content of the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), and contain legally binding obligations for the governments that become parties to them. Together, these documents are often called the “International Bill of Human Rights.”

Building upon these core documents, other international human rights treaties have focused on either specific groups or categories of populations, such as racial minorities, women and children, or on specific issues, such as torture. In considering a normative framework of human rights applicable to health, human rights provisions must be considered in their totality.

The Declarations and Programmes of Action from UN world conferences, such as the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, 2001), provide guidance on some of the policy implications of meeting governments’ human rights obligations.
5.1.7 Q.7 What International Monitoring Mechanisms Exist for Human Rights?

The implementation of the core human rights treaties is monitored by committees of independent experts known as treaty monitoring bodies, created under the auspices of and serviced by the United Nations. Each of the six major human rights treaties has its own monitoring body which meets regularly to review State Party reports and to engage in a “constructive dialogue” with governments on how to live up to their human rights obligations. Based on the principle of transparency, States are required to submit their progress reports to the treaty bodies, and to make them widely available to their own populations. Thus reports can play an important catalytic role, contributing to the promotion of national debate on human rights issues, encouraging the engagement and participation of civil society, and generally fostering a process of public scrutiny of governmental policies. At the end of the session, the treaty body makes concluding observations which include recommendations on how the government can improve its human rights record. Specialized agencies such as WHO can play an important role in providing relevant health information to facilitate the dialogue between the State Party and the treaty monitoring body.

Other mechanisms for monitoring human rights in the United Nations system include the Human Rights Council and the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. These bodies appoint special rapporteurs and other independent experts and working groups to monitor and report on thematic human rights issues (such as violence against women, sale of children, harmful traditional practices and torture) or on specific countries. In addition, the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights was created in 1994 to head the United Nations human rights system. The High Commissioner’s mandate extends to every aspect of the United Nations human rights activities: monitoring, promotion, protection and coordination.

Regional arrangements have been established within existing regional inter-governmental organizations. The African regional human rights instrument is the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, which is located within the African Union. The regional human rights mechanism for the Americas is located within the Organization of American States and is based upon the American Convention of Human Rights. In Europe, a human rights system forms a part of the Council of Europe. Key human rights instruments are the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Social Charter. The 27-member state organization—the European Union—has detailed rules concerning human rights issues and has integrated human rights into its common foreign policy. In addition, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a 55-member state organization, has separate mechanisms and agreements. In the Asia-Pacific region, extensive consultations among Governments are underway concerning the possible establishment of regional human rights arrangements.
5.1.8 Q.8 How Can Poor Countries with Resource Limitations Be Held to the Same Human Rights Standards as Rich Countries?

Steps towards the full realization of rights must be deliberate, concrete and targeted as clearly as possible towards meeting a government’s human rights obligations. All appropriate means, including the adoption of legislative measures and the provision of judicial remedies as well as administrative, financial, educational and social measures, must be used in this regard. This neither requires nor precludes any particular form of government or economic system being used as the vehicle for the steps in question.

The principle of progressive realization of human rights imposes an obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards that goal. It is therefore relevant to both poorer and wealthier countries, as it acknowledges the constraints due to the limits of available resources, but requires all countries to show constant progress in moving towards full realization of rights. Any deliberately retrogressive measures require the most careful consideration and need to be fully justified by reference to the totality of the rights provided for in the human rights treaty concerned and in the context of the full use of the maximum available resources. In this context, it is important to distinguish the inability from the unwillingness of a State Party to comply with its obligations. During the reporting process, the State Party and the Committee identify indicators and national benchmarks to provide realistic targets to be achieved during the next reporting period.

5.1.9 Q.9 Is There, Under Human Rights Law, an Obligation of International Cooperation?

Malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are examples of diseases which disproportionately affect the world’s poorest populations, placing a tremendous burden on the economies of developing countries. In this regard, it should be noted that although the human rights paradigm concerns obligations of States with respect to individuals and groups within their own jurisdictions, where the human rights instruments refer to the State’s resources, they include international assistance and cooperation.

In accordance with Articles 55 and 56 of the Charter of the United Nations, international cooperation for development and the realization of human rights is an obligation of all States. Similarly, the Declaration on the Right to Development emphasizes an active programme of international assistance and cooperation based on sovereign equality, interdependence and mutual interest.

In addition, the ICESCR requires each State that is party to the Covenant to “take steps, individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized [herein].”
In this spirit, “the framework of international cooperation” is referred to, which acknowledges, for instance, that the needs of developing countries should be taken into consideration in the area of health. The role of specialized agencies is recognized in human rights treaties in this context. For example, the ICESCR stresses that “international action for the achievement of the rights . . . includes such methods as . . . furnishing of technical assistance and the holding of regional meetings and technical meetings for the purpose of consultation and study organized in conjunction with the Governments concerned.”

5.1.10 Q.10 What Are a Government’s Human Rights Obligations in Relation to Other Actors in Society?

As government roles and responsibilities include increased reliance on non-state actors (health insurance companies, etc.), governmental health systems must ensure the existence of social safety nets and other mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable population groups have access to the services and structures they need.

The obligation of the State to protect human rights means that governments are responsible for ensuring that non-state actors act in conformity with human rights law within their jurisdiction. Governments are obliged to ensure that third parties conform with human rights standards by adopting legislation, policies and other measures to assure adequate access to health care, quality information and so on, and an accessible means of redress if individuals are denied access to these goods and services. An example of this is the obligation of governments to ensure the regulation of the tobacco industry in order to protect its population against infringements of the right to health, the right to information and other relevant human rights provisions.

In the corporate and NGO contexts, there is a proliferation of voluntary codes which reflect international human rights norms and standards. Increasing attention to the human rights implication of work in the private sector has resulted in human rights being placed higher on the business agenda, with several businesses beginning to incorporate concern for human rights into their daily operations.

5.2 Integrating Human Rights in Health

5.2.1 Q.11 What Is Meant by a Rights-Based Approach to Health?

A rights-based approach to health refers to the processes of:

– Using human rights as a framework for health development.
– Accessing and addressing the human rights implications of any health policy, programme or legislation.
– Making human rights an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of health-related policies and programmes in all spheres, including political, economic and social.

Substantive elements to apply, within these processes, could be as follows:

– Safeguarding human dignity.
– Paying attention to those population groups considered most vulnerable in society. In other words, recognizing and acting upon the characteristics of those affected by health policies, programmes and strategies—children (girls and boys), adolescents, women and men; indigenous and tribal populations; national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; internally displaced persons; refugees; immigrants and migrants; the elderly; persons with disabilities; prisoners; economically disadvantaged or otherwise marginalized and/or vulnerable groups.
– Ensuring health systems are made accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population, in law and in fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds.
– Using a gender perspective, recognizing that both biological and socio-cultural factors play a significant role in influencing the health of men and women, and that policies and programmes must consciously set out to address these differences.
– Ensuring equality and freedom from discrimination, advertent or inadvertent, in the way health programmes are designed or implemented.
– Disaggregating health data to detect underlying discrimination.
– Ensuring free, meaningful and effective participation of beneficiaries of health development policies or programmes in decision-making processes which affect them.
– Promoting and protecting the right to education and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas concerning health issues. However, the right to information should not impair the right to privacy, which means that personal health data should be treated confidentially.
– Only limiting the exercise or enjoyment of a right by a health policy or programme as a last resort, and only considering this legitimate if each of provisions reflected in the Siracusa principles is met (see Question 13).
– Juxtaposing the human rights implications of any health legislation, policy or programme with the desired public health objectives and ensuring the optimal balance between good public health outcomes and the promotion and protection of human rights.
– Making explicit linkages to international human rights norms and standards to highlight how human rights apply and relate to a health policy, programme or legislation.
– Making the attainment of the right to the highest attainable standard of health the explicit ultimate aim of activities, which have as their objective the enhancement of health.
– Articulating the concrete government obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.
– Identifying *benchmarks and indicators* to ensure monitoring of the progressive realization of rights in the field of health.
– Increasing *transparency* in and *accountability* for health as a key consideration at all stages of programme development.
– Incorporating *safeguards* to protect against majoritarian threats upon minorities, migrants and other domestically “unpopular” groups, in order to address power imbalances. For example, by incorporating redress mechanisms in case of impingements on health-related rights.

5.2.2 Q.12 What Is the Value-Added of Human Rights in Public Health?

Overall, human rights may benefit work in the area of public health by providing the following:

– Explicit recognition of the highest attainable standard of health as a “human right” (as opposed to a good or commodity with a charitable construct);
– A tool to enhance health outcomes by using a human right approach to designing, implementing and evaluating health policies and programmes;
– An “empowering” strategy for health which includes vulnerable and marginalized groups engaged as meaningful and active participants;
– A useful framework, vocabulary and form of guidance to identify, analyse and respond to the underlying determinants of health;
– A standard against which to assess the performance of governments in health;
– Enhanced governmental accountability for health;
– A powerful authoritative basis for advocacy and cooperation with governments, international organizations, international financial institutions and in the building of partnerships with relevant actors of civil society;
– Existing international mechanisms to monitor the realization of health as a human right;
– Accepted international norms and standards (e.g. definitions of concepts and population groups);
– Consistent guidance to States as human rights crosscut all UN activities;
– Increased scope of analysis and range of partners in countries.

5.2.3 Q.13 What Happens if the Protection of Public Health Necessitates the Restriction of Certain Human Rights?

There are a number of human rights that cannot be restricted in any circumstance, such as freedom from torture and slavery, and freedom of thought, conscience and
religion. Limitation and derogation clauses in the international human rights instruments recognize the need to limit human rights at certain times.

Public health is sometimes used by States as a ground for limiting the exercise of human rights. A key factor in determining if the necessary protections exist when rights are restricted is that each one of the five criteria of the Siracusa Principles must be met. Even in circumstances where limitations on grounds of protecting public health are basically permitted, they should be of limited duration and subject to review.

Interference with freedom of movement when instituting quarantine and isolation for a serious communicable disease—for example, Ebola fever, syphilis, typhoid or untreated tuberculosis—are examples of restrictions on rights that may, under certain circumstances, be necessary for the public good, and therefore could be considered legitimate under international human rights law. By contrast, a state which restricts the movements of, or incarcerates, persons with HIV/AIDS, refuses to allow doctors to treat persons believed to be opposed to a government or fails to provide immunization against the community’s major infectious diseases, on grounds such as national security or the preservation of public order, has the burden of justifying such serious measures.

5.2.4 Q.14 What Implications Could Human Rights Have for Evidence-Based Health Information?

The process that gives birth to an internationally recognized human right is generated from the pressing reality on the ground. For example, the development of a declaration on the rights of indigenous populations stems from the recognition that this is a vulnerable and marginalized population group lacking full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including rights to political participation, health and education. In other words, the establishment of human rights norms and standards is itself evidence of a serious problem and governmental recognition of the importance of addressing it. The existence of human rights norms and standards should therefore stimulate the collection of evidence, indicating the data needed to tackle complex health challenges. For example, disaggregating data beyond traditional markers could detect discrimination on the basis of ethnicity against indigenous and tribal peoples, which is considered an underlying determinant of their overall poor health status. However, the political sensitivities which underpin human rights in exposing how different population groups are treated, and why, hamper the extent to which human rights are welcomed as a driving force for data collection.

More widely accepted is the notion that human rights are relevant to the way in which health data should be collected. This includes the choice of the methods of data collection which must include considerations on how to ensure respect for human rights, such as privacy, participation and non-discrimination. Secondly, international instruments can be helpful in defining various population groups. For example, the ILO Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples provides
an authoritative basis for identifying and differentiating indigenous and tribal peoples from other population groups.

5.2.5 Q.15 How Can Human Rights Support Work to Strengthen Health Systems?

Human rights provide a standard against which to evaluate existing health policies and programmes, including highlighting the differential treatment of individual groups of people in, for example, manifestations, frequency and severity of disease and governmental responses to it. Human rights norms and standards also form a strong basis for health systems to prioritize the health needs of vulnerable and marginalized population groups. Human rights moves beyond averages and focuses attention on those population groups in society which are considered most vulnerable (e.g. indigenous and tribal populations; refugees and migrants, ethnic, religious, national and racial minorities), as well as putting forward specific human rights which may help guide health policy, programming and health system processes (e.g. the right of those potentially affected by health policies, strategies and standards to participate in the process in which decisions affecting their health are made).

5.2.6 Q.16 What Is the Relationship Between Health Legislation and Human Rights Law?

Health legislation can be an important vehicle towards ensuring the promotion and protection of the right to health. In the design and review of health legislation, human rights provide a useful tool to determine its effectiveness and appropriateness in line with both human rights and public health goals. In this context, HIV/AIDS has caused many countries to revisit their public health laws, including in relation to quarantine and isolation.

Restrictive laws and policies that deliberately focus on certain population groups without sufficient data, epidemiological and otherwise, to support their approach may raise a host of human rights concerns. Two examples in this regard are health policies concerning the involuntary sterilization of women from certain population groups that are justified as necessary for their health and well-being and sodomy statutes criminalizing same-sex sexual behaviour that are justified as necessary to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Government capacity to develop national health policy and legislation that conforms to human rights obligations needs to be strengthened. This includes developing the tools to review health-related laws and policies to determine whether, on their face or application, they violate human rights, and providing the means to rectify any violation which exists.
5.2.7 Q.17 How Do Human Rights Apply to Situational Analyses of Health in Countries?

Increased attention to human rights may, firstly, broaden the scope of situational health analyses in countries, and secondly, as a result, allow new partners to be identified. New areas of attention include consideration of the health components of national human rights action plans and, conversely, the inclusion of human rights in national health strategies and action plans. Given that human rights obligations relevant to health rest with the government as a whole, health and human rights goals need to figure in policies and plans which may be generated outside the health sector per se but which have a strong bearing on health, such as national food and nutrition policies and plans. The focus on vulnerable population groups draws attention to how national legislation and development policies impact upon the status of such groups, which institutions work to protect their best interests, and how civil society movements represent them. Finally, the reports to and comments from the United Nations human rights treaty monitoring bodies and the views of civil society organizations are another issue for consideration.

Practical implications may be to engage at the national level with a greater range of Ministries other than Health Ministries, for example, Justice Ministries and those with responsibility for human rights (including independent human rights institutions), women’s affairs, children’s affairs, education, social affairs, finance and so on. UN agencies and other intergovernmental organizations working on human rights, international and national human rights NGOs, national human rights institutions, ombudspersons, national human rights commissions, human rights think-tanks and research institutes also constitute fruitful partners for advancing the global health agenda.

5.3 Health and Human Rights in a Broader Context

5.3.1 Q.18 How Do Ethics Relate to Human Rights?

Ethics are norms of conduct for individuals and for societies. These norms derive from many sources, including religion, cultural tradition and reflection, which accounts in part for the complexity within each ethical outlook. Ethics as a system of norms employs many component concepts, including obligations and duties, virtues of character, standards of value and goodness in outcomes and consequences of action, standards of fairness and justice in allocation of resources and in reward and punishment.

Human rights refer to an internationally agreed upon set of principles and norms embodied in international legal instruments. These international human rights principles and norms are the result of deep and long-standing negotiations among Member States on a range of fundamental issues. In other words, human rights are generated by governments through a consensus-building process.
Work in ethics needs to take into account human rights norms and standards, not only in substance but also in relation to the processes of ethical discourse and reasoning. For example, where issues concern a specific population group, individuals representing this group should be participants in any determination of the ethical implications of the issues affecting them. Ethics is particularly useful in areas of practice where human rights do not provide a definite answer, for example, in new and emerging areas where human rights law has not been applied or codified, such as human cloning.

5.3.2 Q.19 How Do Human Rights Principles Relate to Equity?

Equity means that people’s needs, rather than their social privileges, guide the distribution of opportunities for well-being. This means eliminating disparities in health and in health’s major determinants that are systematically associated with underlying social disadvantage within a society. Within the human rights discourse, the principle of equity is increasingly serving as an important non-legal generic policy term aimed at ensuring fairness. It has been used to embrace policy-related issues, such as the accessibility, affordability and acceptability of available health care services. The focused attention on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society in international human rights instruments reinforces the principle of equity. Also, at the international level, human rights instruments address equity by encouraging international cooperation to realize rights as well as addressing intrastate relations, most notably in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development.

5.3.3 Q.20 How Do Health and Human Rights Principles Apply to Poverty Reduction?

The right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, including necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of sickness, disability, old age or other lack of livelihood are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has defined poverty as “a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural economic, political and social rights.”

Human rights empower individuals and communities by granting them entitlements that give rise to legal obligations on others. Human rights can help to equalize the distribution and exercise of power both within and between societies, mitigating the powerlessness of the poor. As economic and social rights, such as the right to health, are increasingly gaining weight through increased normative clarity and application, they will provide an important tool for poverty reduction.
A human rights approach also requires the active and informed participation of the poor in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies which may affect them.

Accountability, transparency, democracy and good governance are essential ingredients to addressing poverty and ill health. Legal rights and obligations, at the domestic and international level, demand accountability: effective legal remedies, administrative and political accountability mechanisms at the domestic level, as well as human rights monitoring at the international level. Overall, human rights provide a holistic framework to poverty reduction, demanding consideration of a spectrum of approaches, including legislation, policies and programmes.

5.3.4 Q.21 How Does Globalization Affect the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights?

Globalization is a term used to cover many different phenomena, most of which concern increasing flows of money, goods, services, people and ideas across national borders. This process has brought benefits to many peoples and countries, lifting many people from poverty and bringing greater awareness of people’s entitlement to basic human rights. In many cases, however, the globalization process has contributed to greater marginalization of people and countries that have been denied access to markets, information and essential goods such as new life-saving drugs.

Within the human rights community, certain trends associated with globalization have raised concern with respect to their effect on states’ capacity to ensure the protection of human rights, especially for the most vulnerable members of society. Located primarily in the economic–political realm of globalization, these trends include an increasing reliance upon the free market; a significant growth in the influence of international financial markets and institutions in determining national policies; cutbacks in public sector spending; the privation of functions previously considered to be the exclusive domain of the state; and the deregulation of a range of activities with a view to facilitating investment and rewarding entrepreneurial initiative. These trends serve to reduce the role of the state in economic affairs, and at the same time increase the role and responsibilities of private (non-state) actors, especially those in corporate business, and also those in civil society. Human rights analysts are concerned that such trends limit the ability of the state to protect the vulnerable from adverse effects of globalization, and enforce human rights.

In this context, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasized the strong and continuous responsibility of international organizations, as well as the governments that have created and manage them, to take whatever measures they can in the context of globalization to assist governments to act in ways which are compatible with their human rights obligations and to seek to devise policies and programmes which promote respect for those rights.
5.3.5 Q.22 How Does International Human Rights Law Influence International Trade Law?

Recently, the United Nations human rights system has begun addressing trade laws and practices in relation to human rights law, and, in turn, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other organizations dealing with trade have begun to consider the human rights implications of their work.

For example, the question of access to drugs has been increasingly addressed in the context of human rights. In an unprecedented move, the Commission on Human Rights in 2001 adopted a resolution on access to medication in the context of pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS which reaffirms that access to medication in this context is a fundamental element for the progressive realization of the right to health. States are called upon to pursue policies which would promote the availability, accessibility and affordability for all without discrimination of scientifically appropriate and good quality pharmaceuticals and medical technologies used to treat pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS. They are also asked to adopt legislation or other measures to safeguard access to such pharmaceuticals and medical technologies from any limitations by third parties.

Also in relation to the question of access to drugs, the relationship between the Agreement on the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and human rights was considered in a report to the Sub-Commission on Human Rights in 2001 by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. This report notes that of the 141 Members of the WTO, 111 have ratified the ICESCR. Members should therefore implement the minimum standards of the TRIPS Agreement bearing in mind both their human rights obligations as well as the flexibility inherent in the TRIPS Agreement, and recognizing that “human rights are the first responsibility of Governments.”

Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes “the right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.” This right places obligations on governments to take the steps necessary to conserve, develop and diffuse science and scientific research, as well as ensure freedom of scientific enquiry. The implications of this right for health issues have only recently begun to be explored, for example, with respect to access to drugs for developing countries.

5.3.6 Q.23 What Is Meant by a Rights-Based Approach to Development?

There is increasing recognition, within the UN system and beyond, that development itself is not only a human right as recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) but that the development process must, in itself, be consistent with human rights. In this regard, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) has advocated a rights-based approach to development as
a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights. This approach integrates the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into the plans, policies and processes of development.

The norms and standards are those contained in the wealth of international treaties and declarations. The principles include those of participation, accountability, non-discrimination and attention to vulnerability, empowerment and express linkage to international human rights instruments.

A rights-based approach to development describes situations not simply in terms of human needs, or of developmental requirements, but in terms of society’s obligations to respond to the inalienable rights of individuals, empowers people to demand justice as a right, not as charity, and gives communities a moral basis from which to claim international assistance when needed.

United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan

5.3.7 Q.24 How Do Human Rights Law, Refugee Law and Humanitarian Law Interact with the Provision of Health Assistance?

The large number and changing nature of emergencies and conflicts, including the explosion of religious and ethnic turmoil around the world, has prompted the need for new thinking and approaches within the UN system and beyond. Fresh attention is being drawn to the international legal framework for dealing with these emergencies, in particular the relationship between humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law and their applicability in a changing crisis environment.


Human rights, humanitarian law and refugee law are distinct yet closely related branches of the international legal system. Human rights and refugee law were developed within the UN framework and thus have similar underpinnings. Humanitarian law, however, has profoundly different origins and uses different mechanisms for its implementation. All branches of law have, however, a fundamental common objective: the respect for human dignity without any discrimination whatsoever as to race, colour, religion, sex, birth or wealth, or any similar criteria. In addition, they share a great number of detailed objectives and conceptual similarities.

Humanitarian law is the law of armed conflict or the law of wars: a body of rules which in wartime protect persons who are not or no longer participating in the hostilities and which limit methods and means of warfare. The central instruments of humanitarian law are the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols of 1977.

Efforts are underway to ensure that international human rights and humanitarian law principles provide the standard and reference for humanitarian action by the United Nations and its agencies as well as other actors. Health practices in preparing
for, assessing, implementing and evaluating the impact of health assistance in the context of an armed conflict need to be grounded within a framework of international law.

The sick and wounded, health workers, medical equipment, hospitals and various medical units (including medical transportation) are all protected under humanitarian law principles. Moreover, denying access to medical care in some circumstances could constitute a war crime.

Overall, humanitarian action in the field of health represents action towards the fulfilment of the right to health in situations where the threats to health are greatest. Moreover, in the provision of health care in emergency situations, consideration of the human rights dimensions can help ensure that strategies pay particular attention to vulnerable groups.

The particular vulnerability of refugees, internally displaced and migrants requires a special emphasis on human rights. Within these groups, women as single heads of households, unaccompanied minors, persons with disabilities and the elderly are in need of special attention. Specific human rights principles exist that provide guidance in ensuring protection in emergencies against exposure of vulnerable groups to risk factors of diseases and ill health.

5.3.8 Q.25 How Do Human Rights Relate to Health Development Work in Countries?

Human rights are upheld as a cross-cutting issue in the United Nations’ development work at country level. The Common Country Assessment (CCA) and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) provide the major principles upon which a human rights-based approach to development is founded. The CCA and UNDAF Guidelines refer to the implementation of United Nations Conventions and Declarations and underscore the importance of taking full account of human rights in both these processes. The CCA thus helps to facilitate efforts for coherent, integrated and coordinated UN support to government follow-up to the Conferences and the implementation of Conventions at the field level.

This parallels the principles enunciated in the World Bank’s Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), the joint WorldBank/IMF Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) initiative, the formal design of which reflects human rights concepts and standards.

A project of the OHCHR to produce guidelines for the integration of human rights in poverty reduction strategies, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (HRPRS Guidelines), has highlighted the close correspondence between “the realities of poor people,” as identified by Voices of the Poor and other poverty studies and the international human rights normative framework.

Thus, attention to human rights will help to ensure that the key concerns of poor people become, and remain, the key concerns of poverty reduction strategies. For example, the integration of human rights into anti-poverty strategies will help to ensure that vulnerable individuals and groups are not neglected; that the active
and informed participation of the poor is provided for; that key sectoral issues (e.g. education, housing, health and food) receive due attention; that immediate and intermediate (as well as long-term) targets are identified; that effective monitoring methods (e.g. indicators and benchmarks) are established; and that accessible mechanisms of accountability, in relation to all parties, are instituted. Furthermore, human rights provide poverty reduction strategies with norms, standards and values that have a high level of global legitimacy.