



**NESRI** NATIONAL ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

Human Rights | Human Needs

## Why the United States Fails to Recognize Economic and Social Rights

### NESRI Statement on the U.S. Government's Human Rights Report to the United Nations

October 29, 2010

We welcome the U.S. government's engagement in the Universal Periodic Review, the United Nations' first ever assessment of the complete U.S. human rights record. The active participation by the U. S. government promises a much needed commitment to taking human rights seriously at home, rather than just demanding them overseas.

Unfortunately, the government's report to the UN does not adequately address the many human rights abuses people suffer in the United States. This task was left to hundreds of grassroots organizations across the country, which came together to document the state of human rights in the United States, determined to hold the government accountable. In more than one hundred reports submitted to the UN, these groups reported on human rights abuses ranging from racial profiling to deaths in detention, from homelessness and lack of health care to deprivation and impoverishment. That people in the United States are deprived of their basic economic and social rights, such as housing, health care, education and work is one of the most troubling, yet neglected facts that merit serious attention by the international community. It is profoundly disappointing and disturbing that the government, in its report to the UN, fails to recognize our economic and social rights. It does not acknowledge that as a society we have a basic obligation to come together and meet everyone's fundamental needs, rather than depriving people of the means to live dignified lives.

Throughout 2010, thousands of people have spoken out against these human rights denials in consultations across the country, in reports submitted to the UN, and in numerous self-produced video clips. Yet their experiences are not reflected in the government's report. There is no acknowledgement that in the richest country on earth, millions of people struggle to meet their fundamental needs, often against government policies that privilege the haves over the have-nots. Instead, the U.S. government does everything possible to avoid recognizing that people's needs give rise to human rights obligations.

What explains this disconnect between the government and its people? Why have successive U.S. administrations failed to recognize economic and social rights?

Firstly, the government appears unwilling to face the fact that we live in a profoundly inequitable society. It does not accept responsibility for addressing the most blatant income inequality in the Western world. Over the past thirty years, wages in the United States have stagnated, and 1 in 4 families have not earned enough to meet their fundamental needs, yet the top 1% of earners had

a net income gain of 176%. Despite the common sense perception that the government is trying to rectify this injustice, public dollars are in fact distributed upwards, to those who are better off. Subsidies, expenditures and tax breaks primarily benefit the wealthy: for example, the subsidy for home ownership, particularly for expensive homes, is three times as high than subsidies for affordable housing. More than half of this home owners' subsidy goes to people earning over \$100,000 per year; yet the government's report is silent on this inequity. In contrast, the human rights principle of **equity** requires the government to neither discriminate nor deprive. Resources need to be distributed equitably to meet people's needs.

Secondly, the government appears unwilling to face the fact that we suffer from out-of-control market forces, which have led to severe human rights abuses. The current recession reveals underlying policy failures that have been with us for decades. Despite the debacle of the housing market, despite the deadly health care crisis driven by the for-profit insurance industry, the government continues to rely on the market for solutions. Public housing is being sold off to private developers; and the new federal health reform law will give the profiteers in the health insurance industry over \$460 billion in public subsidies, while 23 million people remain uninsured and many more won't be able to use their coverage due to deductibles and co-pays. Moving public money into private hands has proven catastrophic in the past, yet the government continues to feed the market forces despite their threat to meeting people's needs. In contrast, recognizing economic and social rights requires providing essential services as **public goods**, shared by all and fully accountable to the people.

Thirdly, the government appears unwilling to face the fact that as a government of the people it has a responsibility to every person in the United States, not just to those people whom politicians consider worthy. The current system offers tax breaks, benefits, and programs for some but not for others, allocated in an arbitrary way. For example, despite running a number of public health care programs, the government is unwilling to create a common pool that includes everyone. Policies are selective, not universal, which leaves many people out. In contrast, the human rights principle of **universality** requires that the government assumes responsibility for meeting everyone's fundamental needs.

The reluctance of the United States to recognize economic and social rights is reflected in the record of successive administrations, which have been out of touch with the people on issues of basic human rights at home. Most people share an understanding of the government's human rights obligations toward us, manifested in the human rights principles of universality, equity, and accountability. NESRI calls on the current administration to take these rights seriously and to begin implementing them at home.

→ Together with seven collaborating organizations, NESRI submitted a report to the United Nations, documenting the United States' failure to respect, protect, and fulfill economic and social human rights. Read the report here: [http://www.nesri.org/UPR\\_Report\\_NESRI.pdf](http://www.nesri.org/UPR_Report_NESRI.pdf)

→ Read the U.S. government's report to the United Nations here:  
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/146379.pdf>