

Mary Robinson  
“Public Sociologies and Human Rights: Finding Common Ground”  
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure to be here in San Francisco for the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. I would like to thank ASA President Michael Burawoy for inviting me to address you tonight. Although this gathering is still in its initial stages (I refer now to our being close to the start of this conference—not to your distinguished 99 years in existence!), I have been impressed by the quality of the discussion, the active engagement of those in attendance, and perhaps even more so by your collective willingness—indeed, your self-appointed charge—to examine where public sociology is going, and how it can best adapt itself to make the most valuable contribution to our rapidly changing world.

Given your discipline’s intrinsic ties to civil society, I am not surprised by this. As civil society begins to be shaped by emerging global social movements, increasingly unwilling to accept a status quo of gross inequality and widespread lack of respect for human rights, so sociology is engaged in exposing the discrepancy between what is and what could be, and encouraging the building of bridges that respect diversity and differing perspectives. I know there is debate on the issue, but I like Michael Burawoy’s description: “*Public sociology aims to enrich public debate about moral and political issues by infusing them with sociological theory and research.*”<sup>[1]</sup>

Let me encourage you further by noting a strong parallel with the current debates in the human rights community. There is active internal discussion on how to integrate a human rights approach into development programs; how to advance economic, social, and cultural rights more effectively, and how to link human rights and human security more closely to counteract the erosion of civil liberties in the aftermath of 9/11.

It seems to me that this rethinking and renewal of purpose among sociologists and human rights activists is occurring at a time in which a more values-led - a more ethical - globalization is possible.

Why? My optimism is based on two developments in recent years that I believe are significant.

First, debates about globalization have finally moved beyond the rather unhelpful and simplistic arguments “for” or “against”, to discussions about new strategies that can make these complex processes more transparent, participatory, and accountable at every level—local, national and international. A growing number of credible initiatives and projects are now underway – one example is the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, with its report “A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All”; another is the Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy. Their aim is to provide constructive agendas for reform of international policies and organizations, and to ensure greater involvement in decision-making by relevant stakeholders. The challenge for sociologists and for the human rights community is to contribute actively to and enrich such initiatives.

The second development, one I think will resonate with you more personally, is that wider civil society, to which your discipline is closely connected, has become steadily more effective in demanding that political leaders make principled decisions. Leaders are under pressure to organize national and international relations with a greater sense of shared responsibility for the fate of those who have been most excluded from the potential benefits of open markets and societies. We saw signs of this change in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, adopted in September 2000 by the largest gathering of heads of state ever assembled. The Declaration affirmed that “the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people”.<sup>[2]</sup> Crucially, they agreed to share responsibility for achieving a set of specific targets and commitments now known as the Millennium Development Goals, or the MDGs. The eight goals, you will recall, include halving those in extreme poverty and hunger by 2015; achieving universal primary education for boys and girls by 2015; specific targets for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

I am aware of a lively debate in the ASA on the merits of public sociologies, with some concerns expressed as to whether there is a danger they may be subjective and even arrogant, rather than professional in a rigorous and objective sense. The value of a shared global agenda, drawn up by

political leaders in the framework of the United Nations, and with a time-line of 2015 – such as the Millennium Development Goals – is that it provides a practical set of objectives both for public sociology and for the human rights community.

The terrible attacks of September 11, 2001 in this country shifted the collective attention of the international community off this people-centered commitment, and replaced it with a more traditional state-centered notion, in which national security has dominated the agenda, often at the expense of civil liberties. Securing borders and enforcing strong anti-terrorism measures have become a vital part of our modern world, but the time has come to reinforce the agenda set at the start of this century. It is time to hold governments accountable for the commitments they made to alleviating some of the factors that give rise to the most widespread conditions of insecurity in this world—not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is a crucial component of achieving sustainable national security.

Sociologists and the human rights community need to be more actively engaged, both from an academic and an advocacy perspective, in raising the issue of responsibility for addressing the widespread conditions of poverty. We need to question a world in which globally only \$50-60 billion is spent on development assistance while \$300 billion is spent on agricultural subsidies for farmers in developed countries, and over \$900 billion on global military expenditures.

I think we would all agree that individual countries continue to bear primary responsibility for their own development and for the building of national structures that ensure the protection of fundamental rights. Experience shows that societies where the domestic infrastructure reflects the state's commitment to democracy and the rule of law – such as a pluralistic and accountable parliament, an executive ultimately subject to the authority of elected representatives and an independent, impartial judiciary – are also best able to ensure respect for human rights and to achieve sustainable development.

Yet the World Bank's 2004 World Development Report entitled, "Making Services Work for the Poor", points out that even where governments do have the basic infrastructure in place to provide services such as clean water, preventive health care or primary education, the poorest are often unable to access them. So what is still missing in this process is widespread accountability: between people and service providers; between people and policy makers; and between policy makers and

service providers. <sup>[3]</sup> The Bank acknowledges that making these changes and strengthening levels of accountability involves fundamental shifts in power—something that cannot happen overnight. But it is precisely the issues of power--and responsibility--that need to be addressed.

This is where the particular strengths of your sociological discipline can be crucial to holding governments accountable for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. To date, large parts of civil society in this country have not been actively engaged in promoting the MDGs, nor in mobilizing pressure on Washington to take effective action on them. The situation is complicated by the fact that many in the international human rights community have been critical of the MDGs. Criticisms include the concern that the Millennium Goals sideline more pressing human rights issues and can distract attention from the broad human rights agenda. For instance, a number of women's groups argue that the MDGs ignore much of the women's rights platform of the 1990s, including violence against women and reproductive rights. Another criticism is that the MDG process is top-down. Civil society was not involved in formulating the MDGs, which are seen by some as an attempt at a one-size-fits-all approach.

For all of their imperfections, however, the MDGs represent a shared global agenda of action, with the overarching objective of advancing human development. The task ahead is to ensure their implementation in practice, which will require a massive social mobilization, especially of young people in both developed and developing countries. I was interested to learn recently that a concerted effort to mobilize young people around implementation of the MDGs is being spearheaded by the initiative ImagineNations. Given the demographic reality of majority populations under 25 and very high youth unemployment in many developing countries, this would seem an appropriate priority for public sociology.

Doing my homework in preparation for this talk, I was struck by the degree to which what some of you define as public sociology has similar objectives to the international human rights movement. In a real sense the ASA embodies the vision laid out over fifty years ago in the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that the rights and principles enshrined in the Declaration serve *“as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms . . . to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance . . .”*. <sup>[4]</sup> The Theme Statement for this conference describes how you endeavor to do this: “As a mirror and conscience of society, sociology defines, promotes and informs public debate about class and racial

inequalities, new gender regimes, environmental degradation, multiculturalism, technological revolutions, market fundamentalism, and state and non-state violence.”<sup>[5]</sup> With some minor changes, this statement could easily have come from the mission statement of my former office, that of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It implies the notion that ‘everyone has duties to the community’—which is enshrined in Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, human rights could almost substitute for the word sociology in the recent article published by Michael Burawoy, in Norway’s *Journal of Sociology*. He writes, “Sociology lives and dies with the existence of civil society. It teeters away with totalitarianism and gains strength when totalitarianism teeters. Moreover, sociology is not only a mirror of civil society, it can also actively promote such civil society. Here surely lies sociology’s distinctively public purpose: to represent humanity’s interest in containing the unbridled tyranny of the market and state.”<sup>[7]</sup>

In this passage, the connections between public sociology and fundamental human rights and freedoms are clear: human rights, like sociology, flourish and grow when civil society does—that is, when individuals have the right to express their ideas, to worship as they please, to labor in their chosen field, and to be paid for their work so that they may support themselves and their families. When totalitarian governments do not permit their citizens to live freely, civil and political, and economic, social and cultural rights are not realized. Similarly, rights, like sociology, also serve as a mirror for society. How minorities, those in prison, migrants, people with disabilities, are treated reveals a great deal about a society. And human rights represent, in essence, humanity’s interest in containing the tyranny of the state and the market. I would take it a step further: rights are also tools of accountability with which to *dismantle* the unbridled tyranny of the state and the market, and they are the means with which to protect and provide assistance to those who are most adversely affected by the state and the market in situations where significant changes have yet to be instituted on the macro level.

So here is a key difference between public sociology and human rights: human rights are *legal* obligations that states have signed onto and are required to uphold. That is not to say that sociology does not have a vital role to play in supporting and increasing knowledge of the values of diversity, of dignity, of human expression and human development. It is one of sociology’s strengths that it has the authority and the ability to share these values with others by teaching them to students in universities, or by engaging and writing about them in ways that expand public awareness, ownership and debate.

I would like to encourage those of you who share this perspective to recognize yourselves as part of the advocacy movement for human rights. You are, in my view, already doing this. Like human rights advocates, you defend the idea of public goods from privatization challenges, you address questionable activities of multinational firms and repressive national security regimes. You constantly remind the world that it can be different—that it must be different—and expose the vast gaps in income and opportunity that currently obstruct and stand in the way of this reality. You also search for the connections between disciplines, and endeavor to build bridges that – as your Theme Statement puts it “are open to all without tolls”. [\[8\]](#)

But I would invite you to take your involvement a step further—in effect, to really insert yourselves and your views into the vibrant debate now taking place in the human rights community. We could use the depth of research, intellectual integrity and knowledge of civil society that you would bring to the discussions currently playing themselves out on the best way to secure human rights for all. The implementation of the MDGs is just one area in which your expertise would add value. Another arena in which your contribution is needed is the debate around how non-governmental organizations can most effectively influence states to implement their economic, social and cultural (ESC) rights obligations.

To refresh you on the basics of the human rights legal mechanisms: implementation of human rights obligations by states depends to a large extent on civil society groups holding their governments to accountability by monitoring how they fulfill their obligations. This is more straightforward under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 2 of which specifies an immediate obligation to respect and ensure all enumerated rights. International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been successful in naming and shaming governments for their failure to fulfill their legal obligations, and local human rights NGOs are also increasingly skillful in using international standards to hold their governments accountable.

Effective monitoring and enforcement of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is more complex because of the different standard in its Article 2, which commits state parties---countries that have ratified the Covenant—to take steps individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, to fulfill these rights to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the Covenant. The requirement that progressive realization be evaluated according to “available resources” assumes that countries have differing states of

development and available resources, which necessitates differing performance standards. To be truly effective, much of the data on progress needs to be disaggregated in relevant categories—by race, gender, region, socioeconomic and linguistic groups, etc. This data, which is not generally available, also needs sophisticated evaluation, which is beyond the capacity of many NGOs, and many resource-poor governments as well.

Initially, for this reason, human rights NGOs focused their energies on the monitoring of violations, rather than on assessing the progressive realization of ESC rights. They based their work mainly on Article 2(2), which requires state parties to guarantee that the rights enumerated in the Covenant “will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”. And on Article 3, which makes it clear that state parties are required “to undertake to ensure the equal rights of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant”. Their strategy was to catalyze action around ESC rights by making it clear that nondiscrimination is an immediate right and obligation to fulfill, and not one that can be delayed by the standard of progressive realization.

With the additional help of the General Comments on specific ESC rights of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the body charged with monitoring the implementation of the Covenant by state parties, as well as the recommendations contained in that Committee’s country reports, NGOs could hold governments accountable for violations reflecting discriminatory actions and policies that perpetuate or aggravate, endorse or institutionalize forms of discrimination.

Two other treaties, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (ratified by 177 states), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by 192 states)<sup>[9]</sup> include specific provisions concerning ESC rights, and their respective monitoring committees have been carrying out similar work in relation to women’s rights and the rights of the child.

In recent years, a number of international human rights organizations have been exploring other innovative ways to advance economic, social and cultural rights. These include collaborating with local organizations in the developing world in lobbying for systems of services that meet needs in a manner consistent with human rights requirements; advocating for more resources for education, health, etc. to fulfill economic, social and cultural rights, and pointing out the impact of agricultural subsidies and tariffs in preventing countries from trading out of poverty; as well as monitoring compliance by states with the increasingly explicit obligations, including core obligations, to protect, respect and fulfill these rights, as elaborated by the relevant committees and special rapporteurs.

Links are now being made between this human rights work and the Millennium Development Goals. In the past few weeks my colleagues and I in Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, have been working with the Millennium Project in assisting the Task Forces on Hunger; on HIV/AIDS, on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers and on Poverty to integrate a rights-based approach and a strong gender dimension to their Interim Reports on how countries should plan to implement the MDGs, in preparation for the stock taking review next year, and the debate in the General Assembly in September 2005.

It is significant that UN agencies and programs have adopted a common understanding of what they mean by a "rights-based approach", and that international humanitarian and development NGOs are expanding their work to include research, policy planning and advocacy around ESC rights. I had been aware, as President of Oxfam International, of that organization's express commitment to integrating a human rights approach into their development work, but I was pleasantly surprised at a recent retreat with heads of humanitarian and development NGOs operating from the US, including CARE, Save the Children, Mercy Corps, Oxfam America, International Rescue Committee and World Vision, to learn that each of their organizations is committed to implement a rights-based approach.

As current chair of the Fund for Global Human Rights, I am aware of the expertise which some foundations have been developing through their support of innovative grassroots work in holding governments accountable for implementing economic, social and cultural rights, including useful work on budget analysis. A notable example is the Global Fund for Women, based here in San Francisco, which has supported thousands of women worldwide in combating violence and discrimination and developing projects of economic empowerment.

An area where further debate and research is needed is on the role of business in advancing ESC rights, or at least not being complicit in their violation. At the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January I participated in a stimulating panel discussion on holding governments accountable for ESC rights, and I believe the emerging social movements in different regions will rely increasingly on the tools of accountability offered under the Covenant and relevant Conventions, helped by the information sharing and examples of good practices offered by networks such as ESCR-NET. With your strong connection to civil society, I firmly believe that you, as sociologists, can assist this process of discerning new and imaginative ways that governments, corporations and international financial institutions can be held accountable to fulfill their ESC rights obligations. In doing so, you can play a critical part in the larger discussion about how these rights can and must become central to

addressing global challenges, such as extreme poverty and the catastrophic AIDS pandemic, which cry out for increased engagement and leadership.

Such collaboration has already produced valuable new evidence and increased observance of human rights. The sustained advocacy of the anti-dam network, an affiliation of conservationists, environmentalists, and other civil society groups, was directly responsible for the formation of the World Commission on Dams (WCD), which published a report assessing the social impacts of dams. It found in many instances that these dams had an overwhelmingly negative effect that was rarely “adequately addressed or accounted for” and were directly responsible for a range of human rights violations including: forced displacement without compensation of between 40-80 million people around the world, loss of livelihood, loss of cultural heritage, loss of development capacity, and so on.

[\[10\]](#) A new book, *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power*, by Sanjeev Khagram, tells the detailed story. [\[11\]](#)

Another example of this type of collaboration is the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). This campaign, which was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, brought about a major international treaty without superpower support, and was largely successful due to the grassroots campaigns in a number of countries that worked in tandem with the sustained efforts of government personnel and of international NGOs.

Currently, I see the potential of the “Publish What You Pay” campaign to be an effective means of tackling corruption and requiring accountability both on the part of extractive industries and states.

[\[12\]](#)

As sociologists, you can also strengthen the efforts of civil society by making the language and approach of human rights accessible to a wider audience, a longstanding challenge for the international human rights community. We lawyers have rarely been the best communicators in simple language!

I also believe you have a unique ability to mitigate some of the dilemmas and tensions of civil society activism. Your strong roots in research and academia lend a breadth and depth to campaigning work that can otherwise be accused at times of oversimplifying problems to gain widespread public support. The multidisciplinary nature of the social sciences enables you to present social problems to officials from a broader perspective, and in doing so, enables them, in turn, to devise remedies that address the range of causes of social breakdown. Your networks within academic institutions and internationally enable your counterparts in the South to speak for themselves, and lead the

debate in their areas.

In closing, I leave you with this challenge: as you engage in finding solutions for the most pressing issues of our time, I would urge you to add to your analyses a human rights lens, and to identify human rights violations when they are such. I am not talking here about war crimes, crimes against humanity, or other international-level infractions - as important as they are to confront - but rather the things close to home: the human rights violations occurring here in the United States, as elsewhere, and to which we are all exposed daily. I am speaking of the 1 in 4 American children living below the poverty line, and of poverty itself, which is the greatest human rights problem in the world today. These children and their families have few rights and little dignity, and live a precarious life without human security. Not only are they insecure monetarily and physically, but they often face discrimination based on race, gender, class, or a combination thereof.

These are central concerns to both sociologists and the rights community alike. A recent Ford Foundation Report "Close to Home: Case Studies of Human Rights Work in the United States" (2004) illustrates the grassroots work being done on issues as diverse as the death penalty, economic rights and domestic violence. In an article in 1996 entitled "Advancing Rights Protections in the United States: An International Advocacy Struggle" Dorothy Thomas put it this way:

*"One thing is certain: the struggle to guarantee America the full panoply of rights recognized under international law cannot rest solely with the Executive, Legislative or Judicial branches. It requires the active involvement of the American people themselves....the future demands a more dynamic and mutually reinforcing strategy that unites diverse people and institutions across sectors, and at all levels of policy and practice. Only in this way will sustainable social change be realized in the United States and throughout the world".* [\[13\]](#)

Her words are more true today than ever. The majority of citizens in our world face a bridge with a toll too steep to pay. The wide discrepancies they face can seem insurmountable, and many no longer believe in global equity or global social justice, backed by concrete and consistent actions by all. Fifty five years ago, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, Eleanor Roosevelt reminded us that if human rights are to matter at all, they must matter "in small places close to home". That is the challenge for sociologists and for the human rights community, and we have no excuse because we are better equipped than ever before to meet it.

Thank you.

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[\[1\]](#) Burawoy, Michael. "Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, Possibilities" *Social Force*. 82:4. June 2004. Pp. 1.

- [2] United Nations General Assembly. “United Nations Millennium Declaration”. A/res/55/2. September 2000. Chapter I(5).
- [3] World Bank. “Making Services Work for Poor People”. World Bank Development Report 2004. Pp.1, 4.
- [4] United Nations General Assembly. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. Res. 217 A (III). December 10, 1948. Preamble.
- [5] American Sociological Society 99<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference: “Public Sociologies”. Theme Statement. <http://www.asanet.org/convention/2004/theme1.html>
- [6] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 29.
- [7] Burawoy, Michael. “The World Needs Public Sociology” *Sociologisk tidsskrift* 3: 2004. Pp. 4.
- [8] ASA 99<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Theme Statement. <http://www.asanet.org/convention/2004/theme1.html>
- [9] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “Status of Ratifications of the Principal International Human Rights Treaties” (as of 9 June 2004). <http://www.unhchr.ch/pdf/report.pdf>
- [10] World Commission on Dams. “Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-making—An Overview”. November 16, 2000. [http://www.dams.org/report/wcd\\_overview.htm](http://www.dams.org/report/wcd_overview.htm)
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- [13] Thomas, Dorothy. “Advancing Rights Protections in the United States: An International Advocacy Struggle” *Harvard Human Rights Journal*. Vol. 9. 1996.