

THE AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

promoting human rights standards
for social justice

What is the Project?

The Australian Human Rights Project will research and report on a national approach to supporting human rights advocacy and education.

A national approach is a necessary response to Australia's declining commitment to human rights standards. Full recognition of human rights standards is essential to achieving social justice in Australia.

The Project is a joint initiative of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights and the Australian Human Rights Centre at the University of NSW. It is funded by the Myer Foundation and the Wynn Family Trust, and is supported by the UNSW Law Faculty.

Where are human rights in Australia?

Commitment to enforceable human rights in Australia has declined markedly. Contrary to the direction being taken by the international community, Australia is stepping away from recognition of human rights principles and practices. Examples include:

- Australia's inadequate funding and support for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the only national body established to ensure Australia complies with its international human rights obligations and its own human rights laws.
- Australia's disregard for the human rights of asylum seekers, which has been criticised widely in Australia, internationally, and by the UN.

- Australia's continuing inability to meet the material, health, social and governance needs of indigenous Australians, which has been criticised internationally, and has been the subject of adverse comment from the UN Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.
- Australia's announcement that it will adopt a "more economical and selective approach" to UN reporting obligations, and will agree to UN human rights visits only when "there is a compelling reason to do so".

Despite Australia's long democratic history, and its leadership in developing international human rights principles and institutions, there has been limited systemic commitment to developing a human rights ethos in Australia:

- Australia's legal system has no guarantee for the protection of fundamental human rights.
- There is a dire lack of understanding in the community, and among community leaders, of human rights and their relevance to Australians.
- Government develops its social policy without regard to Australia's human rights obligations.
- There is no legislative compulsion on Australian corporations to have regard to human rights standards in their activities.

A national voice?

The retreat from human rights in Australia calls for an urgent response: a continuing and effective means of ensuring that government complies with its international human rights responsibilities.

At the same time, social justice organisations need support in human rights advocacy. Those that use the language, law and process of human rights in special fields – such as refugees, youth, homeless, prisons – are limited in their ability to coordinate and collaborate, and to maximise their effectiveness.

The Australia Human Rights Project is researching effective and viable models for a national approach to human rights advocacy and education.

A national capability will:

- promote awareness, understanding and use of human rights standards among the community, policy-makers and corporations
- promote a culture that values human rights standards as a measure of a just society
- support and enhance the human rights work of non-government social justice organisations.

What can be done?

A possible model is a national non-governmental organisation. Throughout Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa, such organisations provide education and expertise to the community and government, support social justice organisations in their special fields, research and develop social policy, and advocate directly to government.

In investigating the feasibility and appropriateness of a national non-governmental organisation, the Project will analyse alternatives, such as closer

networking and co-ordination among existing non-government agencies.

How do we get there?

Through research and consultation, the Project will detail the necessary components for a national approach to be viable and effective.

In its first stage the Project will work with non-government social justice organisations to highlight the relevance of human rights to their work, and to learn about their capacity for human rights advocacy and education. This unprecedented research will allow organisations working with human rights to say what they do, how could do it better, and how their needs could be met.

In its second stage the Project will research and report on the appropriateness and feasibility of a national organisation, or other national approach, to meet these needs.

Project management

Indira Rosenthal is the Project Manager. Indira is an expert in international and Australian human rights law, with experience working in NGOs and in government.

Simon Rice is overseeing the Project for Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, of which he is President. Simon is a judicial member of the NSW Administrative Decisions Tribunal, and a lawyer, teacher and consultant in human rights issues.

John Squires is overseeing the Project for the Australian Human Rights Centre, of which he is Director. John is a psychologist of religion and a researcher in values, and a member of the UNSW Law Faculty.