

**A Declaration of Human Rights for the People of Appalachia:
Reframing the Debate about the region's future
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“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home ... Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. Thus we believe that the destiny of human rights is in the hands of all our citizens in all our communities.”

Eleanor Roosevelt, speaking in 1958

Abstract

A human rights framework for economic development in Appalachia combined with concrete action steps are essential to creating a more just economy for the region which can become a model for global development. A human rights framework for economic development links the region to other areas of the US and around the globe and calls into question damaging ideas about Appalachian exceptionalism. Creative action steps grounded in human rights provide new opportunities for mobilizing and coordinating broad public support for positive social change, both inside and outside the coalfields.

What is a human rights framework?

The concept of human rights, including liberty, justice and opportunities for all citizens to pursue a better life, is forcefully stated in the foundational documents of American government, including the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In the twentieth century, following the unprecedented global destruction of World War II, the United States, represented by Eleanor Roosevelt, took part in an international Commission on Human Rights charged with setting forth new standards of national behavior to ensure global peace and prosperity. As First Lady to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor had traveled widely throughout the U.S during the Great Depression, demonstrating her concern for men and women of all backgrounds. The members of the Commission elected her as their Chairperson; and, under her leadership, they created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948.

The first three articles of the Declaration state that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; that these rights are equal without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status; and that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. The remaining 27 articles cover a wide range of fundamental freedoms and rights, such as protection against slavery and torture, the equal protection of all people under the law, and freedom of religion.

The Declaration includes specific economic rights for all people. It states that everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by other

means of social protection. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for his health and well-being and that of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services. Everyone has the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond their control. The Declaration also states that mothers and children are entitled to special care and assistance.

The Declaration further states that everyone has the right to education. While technical and vocational training are addressed, the Declaration states that the primary purpose of education is to develop the full range of the human personality and strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore the purpose of education is to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and further the maintenance of peace.

The Declaration addresses basic standards relating to the quality of life of all people. It states that everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay. Moreover, everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

In calling for these universal human rights, the Declaration also addresses the individual's responsibility to his or her community. It concludes with a strong statement of the inextricable relationship between individual and community development. The final article declares that everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his or her personality is possible.

Since 1948, international understanding and agreements concerning economic human rights have expanded to include, for example, the concept of sustainable development created by the United Nations Brundtland Commission of 1987. The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: *Our Common Future* issued at Brundtland states that sustainable development should be based on social equity, addressing the needs of the poor first and include a focus on economic and social justice to promote the common good. While there is still room for expansion and new areas of human rights, the Universal Declaration of 1948 lays out the basic components of justice and equity for all people in the United States and around the world.

Why does a human rights framework make sense for Appalachia?

Like the tradition of human rights, the history of the Appalachian region reaches back to the founding of this country. In 1775, a small band of white settlers camped in what became central Kentucky learned that American insurgents had defeated the British at the battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. They celebrated by naming their campsite "Lexington." Lexington, Kentucky, is now the home of the University of Kentucky with its Appalachian Studies programs and Appalachian Center.

As the early settlers of Appalachia joined the battle for American independence, Adam Smith, a Scot teaching at the University of Edinburgh, completed his influential *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nation*. A pioneer of political economy, Smith conceptualized an "invisible hand" guiding a free market economy as the key to creating a more productive society. Although Smith was a philosopher and his previous book examined *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the operation of the "invisible

hand” in such areas as supply and demand became a rationale to gauge economic development by standards of profits and loss rather than being regulated by justice, fairness and human rights. For example, after the American Revolution, the new national government institutionalized slavery as an economic system and removed the Cherokee Indians from their homelands in favor of white settlers.

Many soldiers who fought in the American Revolution received land grants in Appalachia in lieu of pay. Thus the new national government encouraged traditions of fierce patriotism, independence, resistance to government, military service, and contested land ownership in the new frontier of Appalachia. Over the next 60 years, the men, women and children living in the region worked to develop a mainly agrarian place-based economy, much like other rural areas of the nation, persisting until the U.S. Civil War.

The Civil War proved particularly divisive in the Central Appalachian region. Within the slave-holding states of Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee, for example, many in the mountainous areas supported the Union in opposition to their own state legislatures and power elites. Guerilla warfare characterized much of the fighting in the region, adding to the tendencies toward the use of arms and feuding. After the Civil War, United States political leaders and entrepreneurs turned to industrialization as the chief means of rebuilding the national economy. As historian Ron Eller of the University of Kentucky shows in *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: The Industrialization of the Appalachian South*, this new economic development most often focused on Appalachia as a source of low cost coal and cheap labor.

While Eleanor Roosevelt and the International Commission on Human Rights labored to create their Universal Declaration following World War II, Ron Eller demonstrates how the economy of Appalachia went from bad to worse. In his most recent study, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, Eller documents how ever growing national demand for cheap electric power generated increased economic inequality as the region became ever more dependent on coal extraction as its major economic driver. The coal industry brought wealth to some, but also brought health and environmental dangers to many, benefited absentee owners disproportionately, destroyed much of the agricultural economy and led to increased corruption in local government.

As Eller argues, intermittent attempts to address economic inequality in Appalachia has furthered complicated the problems. In the 1960s and 70s, the War on Poverty focused on educating and uplifting residents through job creation without addressing mechanization of underground mines, surface mining and corrupt local officials, many of whom used federal resources to further their own ends. Media images of poor people meant to galvanize national action had the unintended result of portraying Appalachian people as “other,” “exceptional” and perhaps even the cause of regional poverty.

In the 1970s, economic “growth theory” and “modernization” promoted urbanization in Appalachian areas deemed to possess the most growth potential but did not address how absentee landownership, among other factors, continued to contribute to systemic poverty. In the 1980s and 90s, Appalachia’s economy shifted to the service sector, and some Appalachians became part of the “consumer culture.” Yet many remained in poverty because of the absence of adequate community tax bases, continued corporate environmental abuses and low wages. Today, systemic poverty, lack of equal opportunity, inadequate education, loss of hope and erosion of traditional culture and

values has led to widespread prescription drug addiction afflicting many communities in Central Appalachia.

Clearly, even the best-intentioned policies have not been able to change the systemic economic inequality that continues to impoverish the people of Appalachia. A human rights framework offers new opportunities to integrate economic development with human development and create a new global model for just economic development. By articulating a human rights framework, a more interconnected vision of a just economy begins to emerge that recognizes the links binding economic, political and social justice to the health, well being, safety and dignity of all people. The human right to participate in arts and culture also speaks to the disparagement of poor people through vicious stereotypes, which affects not only the citizens of Appalachia, but also poor people on reservations, in the barrios and in urban centers.

What are some action steps to establish a human rights framework for Appalachia?

Step One: Progressive organizations can work together to develop a human rights framework for Appalachia.

Creating a human rights framework for economic development in Appalachia links the local and the global, questions the damaging ideas about Appalachian exceptionalism, and provides new opportunities for mobilizing support for social justice, both inside and outside the region. A strong and effective human rights framework would connect the dots between economic oppression and the health, education, and other social challenges facing the region. A clearly stated human rights framework can build trust among those who share the same core commitments but work in different places and programs, inside the region and out. Likewise a strong human rights framework is a key to creating transparency and accountability, especially in terms of such long standing practices as pernicious incentive programs which reward unjust economic behavior, such as maximizing coal industry profits while passing on the costs of doing business, like road repair and clean-up of mining sites, to taxpayers.

Finally, a human rights framework for economic development is essential for critiquing the kind of well intentioned but very harmful urban/rural differentials, such as those currently being supported by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Economy Initiative (<http://www.brookings.edu/metro.aspx>). Looking at economic growth as a goal, rather than striving to create models of development that create just and sustainable economies for all, can shift philanthropic and public dollars away from rural development to the dominant exurban and urban economies. This would compound the current inequalities and challenges facing Appalachia and other rural areas in the US, such as the western plains states and American Indian reservations. By developing a human-rights framework for economic development that does not leave rural areas behind, Central Appalachia can become a national leader in creating a more just economy for all citizens.

Eastern Kentucky, located in the heart of the Appalachian coalfields, is home to two strong and progressive community-based organizations that can provide valuable leadership in articulating and acting on a human rights framework for just economic development throughout the region. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development are organizations

grounded in the history, challenges and strengths of the people they serve. Both organizations highlight the strong human rights values that animate their work.

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), for example, identifies as one of its objectives to “challenge and change unjust institutions. Our members want to create a shared balance of power and equal enjoyment of benefits within our political, economic and social systems. We identify and tackle the root causes of social, political, and economic problems to create long-term, systemic change.” To achieve this change, KFTC recognizes the need to “communicate a message of what is possible and shift our worldview. All of us are influenced by the messages that surround us every day,” they explain. Therefore, “We work to develop and communicate new messages of what is possible on a large and small scale” (<http://www.kftc.org/>).

KFTC’s vision statement is also consistent with a human rights framework based on the Universal Declaration of 1948. The organization envisions a future: “When the lives of people and communities matter before profits. When our communities have good jobs that support our families without doing damage to the water, air, and land. When companies and the wealthy pay their share of taxes and can’t buy elections. When all people have health care, shelter, food, education, and other basic needs. When children are listened to and valued. When discrimination is wiped out of our laws, habits, and hearts. And when the voices of ordinary people are heard and respected in our democracy.”

KFTC’s mission is forthrightly focused on “working for a new balance of power and a just society,” using “direct action to challenge—and change—unfair political, economic and social systems.” Their membership is open to “all people who are committed to equality, democracy and non-violent change.” The organization believes “that all people are created equal, everyone deserves respect and equal opportunities,” and KFTC works to “overcome racism and other forms of discrimination.” Finally, the organization articulates a key value not often listed by activists: having fun. (<http://www.kftc.org/>).

Like KFTC, the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) has deep roots in the region, “built upon 30 years of listening, learning and experience working in the mountains of Kentucky and Central Appalachia.” MACED also recognizes that belief systems are a critical factor in successful economic change. They state that, “We believe our vision can become real only if people have the proper tools, resources and believe in a better way.”

In working to “create economic alternatives that make a difference to people and places in eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia,” MACED, like KFTC, strives to “strengthen democracy, support sustainable use of natural resources, create quality jobs for low income people and make government a more effective partner in regional sustainable development.” The organization defines “good public policy” as being “inclusive” and considering “everyone affected.” Like KFTC, MACED recognizes that more equal access to political and economic power is essential for positive change. “For Appalachian communities to have a brighter tomorrow, they need better tools to retain the natural resources and wealth they are losing today.” (<http://www.maced.org/>)

While these two Appalachian-based organizations offer models and inspirations for a human rights economic development framework, focusing on such a framework is an important key to linking Appalachian prosperity to social justice efforts elsewhere in the US and around the globe. The Opportunity Agenda, for example, a project of the Tides

Center, believes that expanding and promoting opportunities for all in the United States requires a national commitment to protecting and promoting human rights, ensuring dignity and fairness for everyone. Many governments around the world recognize human rights, such as equality before the law, a living wage, a safe environment, and basic health care, as universal and essential. As the leaders of the Opportunity Agenda recognize, because the human rights of many Americans continue to be unfulfilled or violated, it is essential to build understanding and support for those rights here at home. (<http://opportunityagenda.org/>).

Step Two: Tap into the power of media, arts and culture to advance human rights

Media, arts and culture provide innovative and creative way to engage all people, and especially youth, in understanding and advancing human rights. Media, arts, and culture are especially important in places such as Appalachia where long-held stereotypes diminish hope, self-confidence, individual self-expression and community pride. There are at least three homegrown organizations in Central Appalachia, in addition to KFTC and MACED, that combine a focus on economic justice and positive social change, and use culture as effective tools for organizing and communicating:

- Appalshop is a multi-disciplinary arts and education center in Letcher County, Kentucky, that produces original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, and books. Their programs support communities' efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way. Appalshop is dedicated to the proposition that the world is immeasurably enriched when local cultures garner the resources, including new technologies, to tell their own stories and to listen to the unique stories of others (<http://appalshop.org/>).
- The Highlander Research and Education Center in Newmarket, Tennessee, serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South, working with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability and supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny. Highlander develops leadership and helps create and support strong, democratic organizations that work for justice, equality and sustainability in their own communities and joins with others to build broad movements for social, economic and restorative environmental change (<http://www.highlandercenter.org/>).
- The Center for Rural Strategies, based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, seeks to improve economic and social conditions for communities in the countryside and around the world through the creative and innovative use of media and communications. By presenting accurate and compelling portraits of rural lives and cultures, the Center aims to deepen public debate and create a national environment in which positive change for rural communities can occur. The Center is based on the belief that rural America's fate is interrelated to those of metropolitan and urban America. Thus, building stronger rural communities helps the nation as a whole. (<http://www.ruralstrategies.org/>)

Step Three: Recognize and respect all human rights while designing specific programs to build on the strengths and meet the needs of specific populations.

The human rights framework applies equally to all population groups within the US, without regard to ethnicity, age, gender immigration status, sexual identity, economic class, and physical or mental abilities. By doing so, the framework provides new ways for groups to work together and to build national and international coalitions for positive social change, in and outside of the region. By recognizing that people of all regions and backgrounds deserve life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and dignity, the framework places the Appalachian region in unity with, rather than in competition for, scarce resources needed by people in other places. In this way, the framework recognizes that the region is not an exceptional problem but rather a product of unjust economic development, and advances the truth that what is just economic development in Central Appalachia is just for other parts of the US and the world.

Working within a human rights framework does not mean that progressive organizations cannot focus their efforts on a particular segment of the population, but instead places these specific efforts within larger, interconnected national and global contexts. For example, organizations like the Kentucky Foundation for Women that focus on gender equity in the arts can work to recognize, track and improve economic conditions for women and children at the state level as a specific way to support a global human rights framework. Eleanor Roosevelt spoke to the importance of focusing on women in 1953 when she called for equal political rights for all women and the full participation of women in local, state and national governments. As Eleanor Roosevelt understood, focusing on women within a human rights framework requires paying attention to similarities and differences among women based on ethnicity, age, immigration status, sexual identity, economic class, and physical or mental abilities.

Gender equality is a key component of human rights, so a specific focus on gender in Appalachian economic development is not only important but necessary since many times women and children suffer most in an unjust and exploitative economy. As in other societies around the world, rural and urban, the unpaid labor of women are key components of “nonmarket” production in terms of key economic activities such as child and elder care, food preparation and housekeeping. Tracking and acknowledging this important work is one way to ensure that it will not be overlooked.

Moreover, the health and well being of women, including their family relationships, access to childcare, and ability to provide nutritious food to dependents, directly affects family economies, as well as stability. Also, many barriers to women and children’s economic development are grounded in values that do not reflect gender equity (for example, expectations of early marriages and lack of knowledge and access to birth control), so it is crucial to articulate human rights values to provide women and children with more choices and self-determination.

A human rights framework including a focus on gender equity is also necessary to pinpoint crucial differences in policy proposals affecting women that employ similar values-based language but are not grounded in equality. For example, the influential book, "Creating an Opportunity Society" by Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill focuses on “improving the lives of the young and the disadvantaged.” But rather than confronting systemic inequalities, the authors “emphasize individual responsibility as an

indispensable basis for successful policies and programs.” One of the key proposals of this book is to “reduce the number of out-of-wedlock births while increasing the share of children reared by their married parents.” While a human rights framework shares the focus on improving lives of the young and disadvantaged and strengthening families, the gender equity focus questions whether the recommended policies would have a disproportionate impact on women. Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that children are deserving of consideration, regardless of whether they are born in or out of wedlock.

Step four: track specific demographic categories of analysis in the research, planning and evaluation of economic development.

Although specific demographic tracking is as rarely done in economic development as in medical research, it is a crucial first step in determining how policies affect people. For example, the website of the Appalachian Regional Commission's Area Development Program and Highway Program includes four goals identified in the Commission's strategic plan:

- 1 Increase job opportunities and per capita income in Appalachia to reach parity with the nation.
- 2 Strengthen the capacity of the people of Appalachia to compete in the global economy.
- 3 Develop and improve Appalachia's infrastructure to make the Region economically competitive.
- 4 Build the Appalachian Development Highway System to reduce Appalachia's isolation.

Including a gender and/or racial/ethnic analysis in each of these goal areas would mean specifically stating and measuring how to increase jobs and income and strengthen the capacities for both men and women of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. It would also mean stating how improving the infrastructure and highway system would impact the lives of women, children and persons of color, as well as the white men who overwhelmingly populate and control state departments of transportation in the region.

Step five: Create new partnerships with a wide variety of organizations, programs and projects working for economic justice

A human rights framework provides new opportunities for progressive organizations focusing on political and economic development in Appalachia to work more closely with organizations focusing on specific populations, places, issues or methodologies. Viewing gender equity as a crucial component of human rights, for example, means that progressive social and economic reform organizations and women's funds could work more closely together. The 106 members of the Women's Funding Network (<http://www.womensfundingnetwork.org/>) share a commitment to social justice and understand the links between women's well being and the health and vitality of their families and communities. The Women's Funding Network's Women's Economic

Security Campaign (WESC) uses the power and resources of women's funds across the U.S. to increase opportunity for low-income women and their families. The campaign strives to ensure that the problems faced by women living in poverty and their families are at the center of efforts to fix America's economy and create opportunity for all U.S. residents (<http://www.womensfundingnetwork.org/wesc>).

As part of WESC, for example, the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis commissioned a study of the impact of the federal program for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) on women and children in Tennessee. In 2009, the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis published a report asking *How Can the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program Better Serve Tennessee's Single Mothers?* The report not only includes an analysis of the existing program but also makes recommendations for policy revisions and additional research at the state level.

The Appalachian Women's Alliance is another potential partner. Based in Floyd, Virginia, the Alliance is a network of women and girls in Appalachian communities who are raising consciousness and self-esteem, sharing leadership and power, creating a common vision, and taking collective action. Together, they are working for economic justice, human rights and dignity, safety for women and children, and the preservation of Appalachian mountains, culture, and communities (<http://www.appalachianwomen.org/>).

Although not specifically focused on women, a community-based arts project directed by Robert Gipe, the head of the Appalachian Program at Southeast Community College located in Harlan County, Kentucky, drew significant participation and leadership from local women. Gipe asked members of his class in Appalachian Studies, mostly women returning to complete their education after raising families, to identify the major strengths and challenges facing their communities. Like the women who participated in the Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project, the group came up with ambitious but do-able ideas. The women in West Virginia wanted to create a bottle deposit program to encourage people not to discard bottles on highways and in streams. The women in Harlan County wanted to create a skate-board park for their children's recreation.

The group in Harlan County went on to identify addiction to prescription drugs as a major obstacle to the health and safety of their communities. They helped to create and stage *Higher Ground*, presented by a cast of more than 60 local participants. The play examined the history and current challenges their county has faced from river floods and the flood of drugs flowing into their communities and endangering their families. (<http://www.ket.org/muse/higherground/performers.htm>)

As these examples show, women can make and help implement strong and specific recommendations about how to improve their family lives and their community. A gender equity component of a human rights economic development framework would include allocating funds for coordination and shared communication about local initiatives as well as to encourage local women to participate in state, region-level policies and actions, by providing them with child-care and transportation.

Why do we need s Declaration of Human Rights for the people of Appalachia now?

The economy of the Central Appalachia region has been linked to global developments and shaped by economic values and international financial forces since the founding of this country. After two hundred plus years of inequitable economic

development, it is time to reframe and recontextualize the debate about the future of Appalachia's prosperity and the transition to creating a more just economy based on a human rights framework. The last forty years of fighting poverty has created a wealth of knowledge and experience produced by Appalachian experts and activist organizations. Yet while the debate must draw from the lessons of the past, if policy makers and the public can envision and enact a future based on broadly shared human rights, Appalachia can become a model for building a more just economy for all citizens.

As the United States works to correct the global consequences of unregulated financial investments and bloated profit-making, the time to act on a human rights framework for Appalachia is now. If sustainable "Economic Development must meet the needs of the Central Appalachian people today while preserving the capacity of future Appalachians to meet their needs," as the Central Appalachian Prosperity Project states on its website, then the time to act is now. Untold tons of coal and other natural resources and millions of people in search of economic security have left the Appalachian region never to be replaced. Many human and natural assets remain, but the exploitative policies and practices must be stopped, and the time to act is now to protect the future of the people and the region.