

Lesson 4

Why are human rights important?

Why do we need human rights legislation to protect vulnerable people?¹⁴

Learning objectives	<p>The students are able to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – issues which arise when people of different values and ways of life try to live together; – reasons why the international human rights instruments have been developed, especially where individuals and communities are vulnerable.
Student tasks	<p>The students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – engage in critical analysis and prioritising of situations; – role-play discussions between opposing parties; – develop key principles based on the role play and compare them with corresponding sections of the ECHR; – compare the scenario with real examples of human rights abuses in their own country; – develop presentations for other students about selected elements of the ECHR.
Resources	<p>Copies of the island scenario (student handout 3.4). Copies of the situation cards for each small group (student handout 3.5). Key elements of human rights (student handout 3.6). Large sheets of paper and art materials, as required, for final presentation.</p>
Methods	<p>Critical thinking. Discussion. Negotiation. Group presentation.</p>

Information box

The European Convention on Human Rights was introduced to protect the rights of people whose fundamental rights, for example the right to life, to religious freedom or to justice under the law, were being denied. All governments who are members of the Council of Europe have agreed to abide by the articles of the Convention in respect of their citizens. Each country has to report to the international community on the state of human rights in their country. Individual citizens can complain to the European Court of Human Rights if they believe that the country of which they are a citizen is denying them their human rights. One country can also lodge a complaint against another country about breaches of human rights, but this does not happen very often.

The European Convention on Human Rights was closely modelled on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was introduced after the genocides of the Second World War.

14. Based on a lesson developed by the Citizenship Foundation, London.

The lesson

The teacher refers to the “role cards” (student handout 3.4) when he/she introduces the scenario and the two groups involved in the role play. First, the teacher describes the island, possibly with the help of a map on the blackboard, and then describes the islanders, who have lived there for generations.

The teacher then tells the class that another group has arrived and wants to settle on the island. They are very different from the islanders. The teacher describes the settlers and their way of life and then divides the class into two halves. One half of the group will play the role of islanders and the other half will be settlers. There are two possible ways of discussing these issues (see methods 1 and 2 below). For classes used to role playing, use method 1. For classes used to working in more formal ways, use method 2.

Method 1: role play

The students work in pairs. One of them takes on the role of the islander and one that of the settler. They are to consider each of the situations described on the small cards from the point of view of their own people. They are going to enter into negotiations with the other people (assuming that language is no barrier). They should try to agree on:

- a) What are the most serious problems for their people?
- b) What do they want to get out of the negotiations?

Then the teacher asks pairs of islanders and pairs of settlers to sit together. They will role-play a meeting of the two peoples in an attempt to bring about agreement on both of these issues and on guidelines for the future.

Remind the two groups before they begin discussions that the islanders may not be completely happy until the settlers leave the island, because their whole way of life may be threatened. On the other hand, the settlers love this new place and may be prepared to use force to stay there.

Ask each group of four students to first agree on the most serious problems facing the groups and to deal with them in order of seriousness, working from the most to the least serious problems, as time permits.

Method 2: guided discussion

This exercise is best done using role play, but can work quite well for students unused to role playing. Half the class will look at the situations from the point of view of islanders and the other half from that of the settlers. Each situation is described from two points of view. Working in pairs, the students decide what are the most serious issues and try to think of the best way of resolving each issue from their own points of view. Remind them that there is an “ideal” or “fair” way of solving each problem, but reality (and history) suggests that one side might get its own way more than the other, due to an imbalance of power.

The teacher leads the discussion of each situation, taking one view of the problem and then asking the other group for opposing points of view. The teacher tries to broker an agreement between the two groups. Each discussion could be led by one pair from each side coming to the front of the class to talk about the problem as they see it. A variation on this method is for pairs to discuss each situation, with one representing the islanders and the other the settlers.

Debriefing for methods 1 and 2

Debrief the students about the situations they have discussed using the following questions:

- Were negotiations easy or hard? Why?
- Did each group get what they wanted out of the negotiations?
- Which group came out of the negotiations best? Why?

- Did one group have more moral rights in each situation than the other?
- What is the future likely to be for the two groups on the island?
- What might prevent the domination of one group over the other?
- Draw up a list of rules or principles that could help the two groups co-exist peacefully on the island. Compare this class list with key elements of human rights (see student handout 3.6). Which of these articles could help to prevent people like the islanders losing their land, their way of life and their basic human rights?

The teacher points out that this kind of situation has occurred many times in history, for example, when British settlers colonised Australia or Europeans colonised North and South America. At the time, there was no international human rights legislation in place and many acts took place which violated the human rights of the indigenous peoples. Similar situations are still taking place, for example, where South American tribes are being dispossessed of their land because international companies are mining or logging.

Celebrating the importance of human rights

As the final exercise in this unit, the teacher asks the students (in groups) to select one of the human rights found in the European Convention that has been discussed in the course of this unit. Then students make a banner displaying this right and prepare a presentation about its importance. Some students could draw scenes from the islanders' role play to illustrate the issues dramatically. These could be presented to the class, the year group or even to the whole school. In this way, the unit may lead to a follow-up project, if time allows and the students are interested. See lesson 4 in Unit 5 (media) on how to plan such a project in class.