



The impact of respecting human rights and civil rights on the development of a democratic and inclusive society

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Abstract

A robust legal system and efficient institutions are essential for the enforcement and protection of these rights, preventing abuses and discrimination. Moreover, respecting fundamental rights contributes to reducing social and economic inequalities by ensuring fair access to education, healthcare services, and employment opportunities. Additionally, promoting civic education and democratic values strengthens a culture of mutual respect and helps prevent extremism and social conflicts. Historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that states prioritizing the respect of human rights benefit from a stable political climate and more equitable economic growth. On the other hand, violations of these rights lead to instability, social exclusion, and economic decline. Therefore, safeguarding human and civil rights is not only a moral and legal obligation but also a fundamental condition for the progress of a democratic and inclusive society.

Keywords: civil rights, democratic society, human rights, democratic institutions, justice and the rule of law

1. Introduction

1.1. General context

The respect for human rights and civil rights represents one of the cornerstones of modern societies. Since the proclamation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948, the international community has recognized the necessity of guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms for every individual, regardless of race, gender, religion, political beliefs, or social status. At the same time, civil rights—such as freedom of expression, the right to vote,

freedom of assembly, and equality before the law—have proven essential to the functioning of democratic regimes.

As democracies evolved, the focus shifted from the formal guarantee of rights to their effective implementation in daily life, with the aim of creating inclusive, participatory, and equitable societies. Therefore, respecting these rights becomes not only a legal obligation, but also a crucial condition for social cohesion and sustainable development.

1.2. Relevance of the topic

In a global context marked by polarization, discrimination, migration, social inequalities, and political crises, the issue of respecting fundamental rights becomes increasingly important. Democracy cannot function effectively without the protection of human and civil rights; likewise, a society cannot be considered inclusive if certain categories of people are excluded from full participation in public life.

Analyzing the impact of respecting these rights on the democratic and inclusive development of society is thus necessary for understanding the mechanisms by which equitable communities can be built—communities in which diversity is respected and social justice is a lived reality rather than a theoretical ideal.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Defining key concepts

Human rights are fundamental freedoms and guarantees inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, or social status. They include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, enshrined in international instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948), the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR, 1950), and the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000). Human rights reflect a global moral and political consensus regarding human dignity (Donnelly, 2013).

Civil rights are a subset of human rights and play a central role in protecting individual freedoms in relation to the state, as well as ensuring equal participation in public life. These include the right to freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, the right to a fair trial, the right to privacy, and, essentially, the right to equality before the law (Marshall, 1950). Such rights are essential for the proper functioning of a genuine democracy and for the prevention of abuse of power.

Democracy is a political system in which power belongs to the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives, within a framework that respects pluralism, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. According to Dahl (2000), modern democracies are defined by institutions that ensure political competition, free participation, transparency, and accountability. Democracy implies not only electoral mechanisms, but also a culture of rights and civic responsibilities.

Social inclusion refers to the process by which individuals or marginalized groups gain full access to a society's economic, social, cultural, and political resources. It is closely tied to the concept of social justice and involves fighting discrimination, reducing inequalities, and promoting the active participation of all citizens (Silver, 1994; Sen, 2000). Inclusion is not merely a political goal, but a necessary condition for long-term stability and social cohesion.

2.2. Theories of rights and democratic citizenship

Theoretical approaches to rights and citizenship in the context of democracy vary from liberal to deliberative and capability-based perspectives.

Habermas and deliberative citizenship

Jürgen Habermas promotes a deliberative conception of democracy in which rights are not merely legal instruments but also conditions for rational participation in the public sphere. According to Habermas, citizens must enjoy equal rights to participate in the process of forming collective will, under conditions of transparency and mutual justification (Habermas, 1996). From this perspective, rights are the foundation of legitimate public discourse, not merely legal guarantees.

Rawls and justice as fairness

John Rawls argues that fundamental rights and liberties must be distributed fairly within a democratic society. In his theory of "justice as fairness," he emphasizes that civil and political rights are essential to the development of a just society, in which "the least advantaged" benefit from equitable conditions (Rawls, 1971). Respect for rights is thus a condition for the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Nussbaum and the capabilities approach

Martha Nussbaum, in collaboration with Amartya Sen, develops a perspective centered on "capabilities"—what individuals are actually able to do and to be. Rights must be understood not only formally, but in terms of people's real opportunities to participate actively in social and political life (Nussbaum, 2011). Therefore, an inclusive democratic society is one that creates the conditions necessary for the full exercise of individual freedoms.

2.3. The relationship between rights and societal development

Respect for fundamental rights is a key indicator of social and democratic development. Historically, major democratic advances have been accompanied by the expansion of rights: from the restricted citizenship of the Greek polis to the post-war universalism of human rights (Tilly, 2004). Rights have served as both catalysts for change and tools for institutional consolidation.

From a political perspective, societies that guarantee civil and political rights tend to develop stable, transparent, and effective institutions (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Respect for rights fosters civic participation, trust in the state, and democratic accountability.

Philosophically, rights express the recognition of the intrinsic value of every person. They not only protect individuals but also empower them, laying the foundation for a fair social contract. As Donnelly (2013) states, rights are both "a response to abuse" and "a project for dignity."

3. Human and civil rights: evolution, international and national frameworks

3.1. Fundamental declarations and treaties

Contemporary understandings of human rights are the result of a long historical process, which reached a crucial turning point with the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. This document established a global standard for human dignity, liberty, equality, and protection against abuse of power (United Nations, 1948).

Another major instrument is the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR), adopted in 1950 by the Council of Europe, which provides concrete mechanisms for defending rights, including individual access to the *European Court of Human Rights* (ECHR, 1950). At the EU level, the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) reinforces these principles and integrates them into the EU's primary law.

In Romania, human rights are guaranteed by the **Constitution of Romania** (revised in 2003), which enshrines principles such as equality, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, and the right to a fair trial (Constitution of Romania, Articles 16–30). Furthermore, Romania is a signatory to most international human rights treaties, and according to Article 20 of the Constitution, international norms take precedence over domestic legislation.

3.2. Institutions promoting and protecting rights

At the international level, institutions such as the *United Nations* (through the Human Rights Council), the *International Criminal Court*, and *UNHCR* (the UN Refugee Agency) play a key role in monitoring the respect for rights.

At the European level, the *European Court of Human Rights* (ECHR) and the *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* (FRA) contribute to strengthening a coherent and effective protection framework.

In Romania, institutions such as the *People's Advocate* (Ombudsman), the *National Council for Combating Discrimination* (CNCD), and the *Romanian Institute for Human Rights* (IRDO) oversee the enforcement of human rights, receiving complaints and issuing recommendations, reports, or legal interventions.

3.3. Best practices and challenges in different regions

In Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden, Norway), human rights are systematically integrated into public policies, with emphasis on transparency, gender equality, minority protection, and access to justice (Smith, 2013). In contrast, in authoritarian or hybrid regimes (e.g., Russia, Iran, China), civil rights such as press freedom and the right to association are often restricted, directly undermining democratic participation and social cohesion (Freedom House, 2023). A recent positive example is represented by European initiatives for protecting LGBTQ+ rights, through the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships or marriages in several EU countries. At the same time, some regions (e.g., Hungary, Poland) have raised concerns over democratic backsliding and threats to judicial independence (European Commission, 2023).

4. The Impact of rights protection on democratic development

4.1. Civic participation, decision-making transparency, rule of law

The protection of fundamental rights directly affects citizens' participation in public life. The right to vote, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to information enable the formation of public opinion, civic engagement, and the accountability of decision-makers (Dahl, 2000). In societies where these rights are protected, a participatory political culture is more likely to thrive, in which citizens are active and informed.

Transparency in decision-making is another direct outcome of rights protection, particularly in relation to access to public information and freedom of the press. A free press and a strong civil society are essential for government oversight and the prevention of corruption (Diamond, 2008).

The rule of law—the principle that no one is above the law—is unattainable without effective protection of rights. Judicial independence, equal access to justice, and non-discrimination in the application of the law are vital conditions for a functioning democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

4.2. Strengthening Democratic Institutions through Rights Protection

Democratic institutions—such as parliaments, courts, public administration, and regulatory authorities—can only function effectively if they respect and protect fundamental rights. When institutions ensure equal access to justice, freedom of expression, minority rights, and privacy, citizens' trust increases, and democratic legitimacy is reinforced (Norris, 2011). Moreover, rights protection fosters political stability and sustainable development. Societies that systematically exclude or discriminate against certain groups face risks of social unrest, protests, or even democratic erosion (Sen, 1999). Conversely, governance centered on human rights builds an inclusive framework in which every citizen can feel valued and protected.

5. Research methodology

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining theoretical-documentary analysis with qualitative empirical research.

5.1. Objectives of the research

This paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide a conceptual and historical analysis of human rights and civil rights within the context of contemporary democratic society.
- To highlight the role of these rights in consolidating democratic regimes and fostering inclusive development.
- To investigate, through both theoretical and empirical approaches, the relationship between the protection of fundamental rights and levels of civic participation, institutional trust, and social inclusion.
- To identify good practices and current challenges in the implementation of human and civil rights, with emphasis on present-day socio-political realities.

5.2. Research Questions addressed in this study:

(QR1) How does respecting human rights influence the democratic development of a society?

Respect for human rights is a cornerstone of democratic development, as it ensures equal participation, freedom of expression, protection of minorities, and access to justice. A society where fundamental rights are upheld provides the necessary conditions for active civic engagement and governmental accountability. According to Donnelly (2013), consolidated democracies are grounded in institutions that safeguard individual liberties, whereas violations of these rights often lead to democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between democracy and human rights: democracy sustains rights, and rights consolidate democracy.

(QR2) In what ways do civil rights contribute to social cohesion and the reduction of inequalities?

Civil rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and equal protection under the law foster inclusion and reduce systemic disparities. By ensuring equal access to public services, legal protection, and political representation, civil rights create a foundation for social trust and

shared belonging. As Rawls (1971) argues, just institutions must distribute rights equitably to promote fairness and solidarity. Moreover, societies with strong civil rights frameworks tend to exhibit higher levels of social cohesion, as citizens are more likely to cooperate and engage when they feel equally valued and protected.

(QR3) What are the main mechanisms through which legal and political institutions protect fundamental rights?

Legal and political institutions protect fundamental rights through constitutional guarantees, independent judiciaries, legislative oversight, and international human rights frameworks. Mechanisms such as judicial review, human rights commissions, ombudspersons, and constitutional courts ensure that state actions comply with fundamental norms. According to Tate and Vallinder (1995), judicial activism in democratic regimes often serves as a check on executive and legislative excesses, reinforcing the rule of law and safeguarding individual liberties. Furthermore, international instruments like the European Convention on Human Rights provide additional avenues for redress and accountability.

(QR4) What economic impact does the respect or violation of human rights have on a nation?

Respecting human rights positively correlates with sustainable economic growth, investment attractiveness, and human capital development. Nations that uphold labor rights, property rights, and non-discrimination tend to have more stable institutions and better economic outcomes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In contrast, systematic violations of human rights—such as political repression or exclusionary policies—can lead to social unrest, reduced investor confidence, and long-term developmental stagnation. Economic inequality is often exacerbated by the denial of rights, creating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

(QR5) How can civic education support the development of a culture of respect for fundamental rights?

Civic education plays a pivotal role in fostering awareness, critical thinking, and democratic engagement. By teaching individuals about their rights, responsibilities, and the functioning of democratic institutions, civic education cultivates a sense of agency and accountability. According to Gutmann (1999), democratic education must empower citizens to question injustice, participate constructively in public life, and uphold the dignity of others. Integrating human rights principles into curricula contributes to a long-term cultural shift toward tolerance, equality, and social responsibility, especially among younger generations.

6. Conclusions and discussion

6.1. Summary of main ideas and findings

The findings of this paper reaffirm that the protection and promotion of human and civil rights are not peripheral considerations within a democratic society but rather its very foundation. The interdependence between rights, democracy, and inclusion, as demonstrated throughout the analysis, suggests that rights are not passive entitlements but active instruments that shape civic life, define institutional legitimacy, and influence socio-political dynamics.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research confirms that respect for fundamental rights is both a normative and functional precondition for democratic resilience. Drawing on the works of Rawls (1971) and Habermas (1996), democracy cannot merely be understood as a system of procedures (e.g., elections, representation), but must be rooted in a normative framework that ensures the protection of individual dignity, equality before the law, and access

to participation. The more a society operationalizes these principles in practice—not just in constitutional texts but in everyday governance—the more stable and legitimate its institutions become.

Furthermore, empirical data and comparative studies have consistently shown that societies with robust human rights protections tend to exhibit greater levels of social trust, civic engagement, and political accountability. These societies are less prone to authoritarian regressions, populist rhetoric, and institutional capture. In contrast, the erosion of rights—whether through legal restrictions, institutional neglect, or cultural normalization of discrimination—creates fertile ground for democratic backsliding and polarization. This aligns with Diamond's (2019) assertion that democratic decay often begins with subtle rights violations that go unchecked.

In addition, the relationship between civil rights and social cohesion emerged as particularly significant. Rights such as freedom of expression, the right to peaceful assembly, and access to education are not only enablers of participation but also mechanisms for recognition and visibility of marginalized voices. When rights are selectively enforced or structurally denied, inequalities deepen and the social fabric weakens. Civic fragmentation, identity-based conflicts, and distrust in institutions are among the observable consequences. This highlights the instrumental role of civil rights in fostering inclusion and repairing societal cleavages—functions that are especially crucial in pluralistic and multicultural democracies.

At the institutional level, the role of independent judiciaries, constitutional courts, and ombudsman bodies in mediating conflicts and enforcing rights is critical. However, legal protection alone is insufficient without a supportive political and civic culture. Civic education, as the fifth research question underlined, is a long-term investment in democratic sustainability. It instills in individuals the knowledge and disposition to recognize rights not only as personal claims but as shared responsibilities within a political community. As Biesta (2011) notes, democratic education is not about passive transmission of values, but about cultivating judgment, reflexivity, and the courage to act in defense of justice.

In conclusion, this paper underscores that rights, democracy, and inclusion function as an integrated ecosystem. Eroding one inevitably undermines the others. Therefore, democratic development should not be measured solely by electoral outcomes or institutional design, but by the extent to which rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled across all sectors of society.

6.2. Recommendations for public policy, civic education, and social engagement

Based on these findings, several lines of action are recommended to strengthen a democratic society rooted in the respect for fundamental rights:

a) Public Policy

Public policy represents a primary vector for translating human rights from abstract norms into tangible realities. Integrating human rights principles across all sectors—education, healthcare, justice, labor, and urban development—is essential to ensure that rights are not compartmentalized but applied consistently and universally. Such integration requires the mainstreaming of equality, non-discrimination, and participation in all legislative and administrative measures.

b) Civic Education

To achieve this, public institutions and educational stakeholders should promote civic culture through public awareness campaigns, participatory workshops, and the dissemination of accessible educational resources across all social categories. Particular attention must be paid to training educators in participatory, inclusive, and rights-based pedagogies. Teachers serve not only as transmitters of knowledge, but as role models of democratic behavior and social responsibility.

By embedding rights education early and consistently, societies can prevent discriminatory attitudes, encourage solidarity, and reinforce the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

c) Social Engagement

Citizen participation in public decision-making should be institutionalized through mechanisms such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, and deliberative forums. These tools empower individuals and communities to contribute directly to the policies that affect their lives, thereby enhancing democratic legitimacy and responsiveness. Finally, encouraging civic activism—especially among youth—is fundamental for sustaining democratic vitality. Programs that provide financial support for grassroots initiatives, build volunteer networks, and facilitate dialogue between citizens and authorities can create spaces for inclusive participation and innovation. Youth engagement, in particular, brings energy, creativity, and a forward-looking perspective essential for democratic renewal.

5.3. Research limitations and future directions

This paper has focused primarily on the conceptual, institutional, and comparative dimensions of rights protection, without conducting applied empirical research based on a representative population sample. As such, one key limitation is the absence of qualitative or quantitative data reflecting citizens' perceptions of rights and democracy.

A future direction for research could involve field studies analyzing the direct impact of rights protection or violation on quality of life, trust in institutions, and civic participation. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach (legal, sociological, educational) would allow for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the field of fundamental rights.

In conclusion, the respect for human and civil rights is not only a legal or moral imperative, but a *sine qua non* condition for building a democratic, equitable, and resilient society. Only through collective commitment to these values can we build communities grounded in dignity, solidarity, and social justice.

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