

# Issue Paper

## THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS MEASUREMENT: TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF RIGHTS

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Ever since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, there has been a profound expansion in the breadth and depth of the global human rights movement. However, despite great advancements, there is a continuing disparity between official declaration and actual realization of rights. To improve the actual implementation of rights, scholars and practitioners need to create an international survey of human rights measuring both self-reported incidence and attitudes toward rights.

### Four Ways of Measuring Human Rights

Quantitatively measuring "rights in practice" is fraught with difficulty. In general there are four main approaches, each with certain limits and benefits (see sidebar). First, many researchers and advocates take an *events-based* approach, in which specific instances of rights violations are recorded. While valuable for allowing detailed analyses of specific instances, events-based data are liable to either under-reporting of events that actually occurred or over-reporting events that did not. In addition, comparing rights across countries is nearly impossible, for events-based data are almost always gathered by specific organizations during particular periods of time, often during disruptive civil and political conflicts.

A second way of measuring human rights is *standards-based*. In this approach, scholars and advocates translate recorded violations into a standardized scale representing a country's general human rights practices. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Freedom House Index, which scores countries on a scale from one to seven. Although allowing for commensurability across countries and time, it is unclear what standards-based

scales actually mean. Accordingly, standards-based scales may not be very useful to human rights practitioners, who need more specific information to pressure governments effectively and pursue legal action against perpetrators.

Third, researchers and advocates have also used *proxy-based* measures of human rights. For proxy-based measures, researchers use available socioeconomic and administrative statistics in place of direct measures. The best-known example is the Human Development Index, which combines income, longevity, and literacy to capture economic, social, and cultural rights. While allowing for comparability, proxy data are not ideal because there is usually a huge gap between conceptualization from measurement. For instance, regarding the Human Development Index, a country's income may reflect geographic conditions rather than actual rights violations.

A final approach to measuring human rights is *survey-based*. With a survey-based approach, researchers draw a sample of a country's population and ask a series of standard questions. These questions may measure reported human rights violations as well as knowledge and attitudes toward rights. The two main limitations of survey-based measures are that individuals may not respond to such questions because of fear or intimidation, and there may be cultural differences in understanding what human rights mean. However, fear or intimidation is endemic not only to survey-based measures but events-based data, which often come from informants. Although there are bound to be cultural differences in perceptions of human rights, the claims about cultural particularity are often overstated. More to the point, by asking respondents about their attitudes to-

Typology of Approaches to Human Rights Measurement	
Approach	Description
Events-based	Actual recorded instances of human rights violations; usually based on legal documents, interviews with informants, and media coverage
Standards-based	Quantitative scale representing the frequency and degree of human rights violations; usually based on recorded instances of human rights violations
Proxy-based	Quantitative scale or count representing particular rights violations; usually based on existing socioeconomic or administrative data
Survey-based	Self-reported frequency of violations and perceptions toward rights; often based on standard questionnaire used on a sample of individuals

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ward certain rights, survey-based research can actually help researchers better understand how human rights are viewed cross-culturally.

While other approaches are useful for data collection, there are a number of particular benefits of obtaining survey-based data. By randomly sampling the population, estimates from survey-based measures will avoid bias due to underreporting, as in the events-based approach. As well, a survey-based approach can, by including enough carefully-worded questions, capture nearly the full range of human rights issues and concerns. Moreover, by using a standardized survey, estimates can be compared across countries and time. Researchers can also examine which groups are most vulnerable to rights infringement by over-sampling certain marginalized groups. Finally, by asking respondents about their attitudes toward rights, researchers can gauge the efficacy of consciousness-raising in promoting human rights.

### The Limits of Available Survey Data on Rights

Given the value of survey-based measures, there are surprisingly little comparative data using this approach. Even more problematic, existing international surveys have several major limitations. Available surveys provide limited data on specific human rights violations. This is unsurprising inasmuch *none* of the available international surveys were designed to measure human rights, and only a few have batteries of questions explicitly measuring rights. As well, even when there are sufficient data on a particular issue on human rights, available surveys rarely (if ever) supply data on both the reported frequency and perception of rights. Finally, even when available, data are almost never comparable across region or time. For example, the Afrobarometer series contains several questions on attitudes toward civil and political rights, but these questions are not included in any of the other surveys.

Besides international surveys, there are some survey data on human rights from truth commissions, human rights commissions, and some NGOs. Most notably, Physicians for Human Rights has collected much-needed survey data from refugees in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Iraq. While undoubtedly valuable, these data nonetheless have several limitations. Most importantly, such data tend to be confined to particular rights violations. For example, the research on refugees conducted by Physicians for Human Rights does not provide data on economic, social, and cultural

rights, let alone solidarity rights. Moreover, most commissions and NGOs collect data in conflict-stricken societies during certain discrete periods of time. As a result, it is difficult if not impossible to compare such data with those from other countries at other times. Finally, many organizations and NGOs often rely on "convenience" samples of individuals who have experienced or have second-hand information on violations. As a result, there is the danger that these findings cannot be generalized to larger groups of people.

### The Future of Human Rights Measurement

Given the lack of international survey-based data on rights, as well as the benefits of a survey-based approach, the future of human rights measurement will involve obtaining new, international survey-based data. The way forward will involve several steps. First, since no such compilation exists, researchers need to gather and analyze all available surveys of human rights, using these data to summarize both the benefits and limits of current survey-based efforts. Based on these surveys as well as other research, scholars and advocates should work together to create a pilot survey. After this step, there needs to be a test run of the pilot survey, most likely using respondent-driven sampling to ensure feasibility. Once the survey is completed, activists and social scientists must work together to secure the resources to create a full-scale version of the pilot survey, either by appending the survey as a series of questions on extant surveys, such as World Values Survey, or by creating a new standalone international rights survey. Although difficult, such a task will contribute greatly to the world's understanding of the actual practice of human rights.

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## REFERENCES

For a similar typology, see Landman, Todd. 2004. "Measuring Human Rights: Principle, Practice, and Policy." *Human Rights Quarterly* 26: 906-931.