

UNIVERSAL VALUES OF HUMANITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS¹

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Abstract: This paper explores the universal values of humanity as articulated by prominent international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), World Health Organisation (WHO), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)... Although each organisation adopts an approach aligned with its respective mandate and operational domain, all collectively contribute to the diffusion and implementation of universal values through legal instruments, education, development policies, and international cooperation. The paper also highlights the significance of these values for nation-states and humanity at large, particularly in the context of globalisation and increasingly complex transnational challenges. Overall, the article offers a comprehensive and comparative perspective on the universal values of humanity as articulated by various international organisations, thereby elucidates both the convergences and divergences in their approaches, an aspect that has received little attention in previous studies conducted in Vietnam.

Keywords: Universal values; human dignity; peace; sustainable development; the United Nations

CÁC GIÁ TRỊ PHỔ QUÁT CỦA NHÂN LOẠI THEO QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA LIÊN HỢP QUỐC VÀ CỦA MỘT SỐ TỔ CHỨC QUỐC TẾ

Tóm tắt: Bài viết phân tích các giá trị phổ quát của nhân loại theo quan điểm của các tổ chức quốc tế như Liên hợp quốc; Tổ chức Giáo dục, Khoa học và Văn hóa của Liên hợp quốc (UNESCO); Tổ chức Y tế Thế giới (WHO); Tổ chức Lao động Quốc tế (ILO); Tổ chức Hợp tác và Phát triển Kinh tế (OECD)... Mặc dù mỗi tổ chức có cách tiếp cận phù hợp với lĩnh vực hoạt động riêng của mình nhưng tất cả đều thúc đẩy sự lan tỏa và thực thi các giá trị phổ quát thông qua luật pháp, giáo dục, chính sách phát triển và hợp tác quốc tế. Bài viết cũng chỉ ra ý nghĩa của các giá trị này đối với các quốc gia và toàn thể nhân loại trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa và những thách thức xuyên quốc gia ngày càng phức tạp. Xét tổng thể, bài viết cung cấp một góc nhìn tổng hợp và so sánh giữa nhiều tổ chức quốc tế về các giá trị phổ quát của nhân loại, qua đó làm rõ sự tương đồng và khác biệt trong cách tiếp cận, điều mà các nghiên cứu trước đây ở Việt Nam còn ít đề cập.

Từ khóa: Giá trị phổ quát; nhân phẩm; hòa bình; phát triển bền vững; Liên hợp quốc

Introduction

In the context of deepening globalisation and international integration, the identification and consolidation of universal values of humanity have become increasingly urgent, as these values constitute the foundational

basis for international cooperation, peacebuilding, and sustainable development at the national level. The UN, as the largest and most representative international organisation in the contemporary world, has played a central role in formulating and promoting core values regarded as the common denominator of humanity. These values are not only articulated through international legal instruments such as the Charter of the UN (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948).

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Still, they are also concretised in various global agendas. In addition, several international organisations, including UNESCO, WHO, ILO, and OECD, have proposed and promoted a range of universal values. While some of these values overlap with those advanced by the UN, others reflect the specific priorities and mandates of each organisation.

Although scholarly research on universal values of humanity has been extensive globally, such studies remain relatively limited in Vietnam. Moreover, most existing Vietnamese research has focused primarily on the role of individual international organisations in promoting universal values, without sufficient emphasis on comprehensive, comparative analyses that assess the differing approaches of various international organisations toward a shared system of universal values. This article seeks to address that scholarly gap by identifying the universal values affirmed and promoted by international organisations; providing an initial analysis of the approaches and instruments employed by each organisation; and offering a preliminary assessment of the significance of these values for states, nations, and humanity as a whole in the contemporary era.

About the theoretical approach, the article adopts an integrated framework drawing on political science, international law, and international relations. In particular, it employs a value-based approach to analyse principles and norms regarded as universal; an institutionalist approach to explain the role of international organisations in shaping and disseminating such values; and a comparative approach to contrast value systems across different organisations. The combination of these theoretical perspectives enables the article to clarify both the ideological foundations and the dynamic evolution of universal values in response to global transformations.

Regarding research methodology, the article primarily employs document analysis of international legal instruments, resolutions, strategic reports, and relevant academic literature. This is complemented by comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in how various organisations

conceptualise, scope, and operationalise universal values. In addition, qualitative synthesis is employed to integrate findings from prior studies, thereby providing a basis for general assessment and analytical interpretation.

By combining multidimensional theoretical approaches with mixed research methods, the article aims not only to describe and systematise universal values from the perspectives of the UN and selected international organisations, but also to explain the sources of divergence among these approaches and their policy implications for states - particularly developing countries. This contributes to strengthening the scholarly foundation for incorporating universal values into national policymaking, while ensuring a balance between international norms and each country's cultural and socio-political specificities.

1. Overview of universal values of humanity

In the social sciences, the concept of "value" is commonly defined as enduring beliefs that guide human behaviour, choices, and judgments regarding what is considered essential and desirable (Rokeach, 1973). Values function as moral and cultural compasses, shaping social norms and legal systems. They possess both an individual dimension - reflecting personal experiences and life contexts - and a collective dimension, expressing the identity of a community or a nation.

Within the diverse system of human values, "universal values" are understood as principles or norms widely accepted and serving as a foundational basis for human coexistence, regardless of differences in culture, religion, or political systems (Schwartz, 1994). These values commonly include human dignity, freedom, equality, justice, peace, and respect for human rights (UNESCO, 1995).

Theoretical approaches to universal values are multifaceted. In philosophy, Immanuel Kant emphasised the universality of moral imperatives through the categorical imperative, which applies to all individuals in all contexts (Kant, 1785/1993). From an anthropological perspective, Kluckhohn (1951) argued that universal values derive from shared biological and social needs of human beings. Cross-cultural comparative research

conducted by Schwartz (1994) identified 10 core value types that consistently appear across cultures, including benevolence, fairness, and environmental protection. In the field of human rights, UDHR serves as a legal affirmation of the universality of human rights values, notwithstanding ongoing debates between universalism and cultural relativism (Donnelly, 2007). Accordingly, universal values function simultaneously as shared aspirations and as enduring challenges for the international community, particularly in efforts to reconcile common normative standards with cultural diversity and social particularities.

2. Universal values of humanity promoted by the United Nations

2.1. Human dignity and human rights

From the Preamble of the UN Charter (1945), the concept of human dignity has been established as a foundational value for peace and justice in the international order. It affirms “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person” as a guiding principle for all the Organisation’s activities. This principle was further consolidated in the UDHR, which recognises human rights as deriving from the “inherent dignity” and the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (1948, Article 1).

According to the UN, human dignity is not merely a moral value but also a legal one, forming the normative foundation of the international human rights system. Core human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), consistently affirm that respect for human dignity is essential to the realisation of fundamental rights across all domains. From the UN’s perspective, the protection of human dignity and human rights constitutes a prerequisite for building a just, humane, and peaceful world (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020).

2.2. Equality and non-discrimination

Equality among all human beings, regardless of race, gender, religion, social origin, or sexual orientation, represents one of

the core principles upheld by the UN. Article 2 of the UDHR says that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms... without distinction of any kind.” This principle has been further elaborated and institutionalized in ICCPR and ICESCR, as well as in specialized conventions including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2007)...

According to the UN, promoting equality is not only a matter of individual rights but also a fundamental requirement for building a just, inclusive, and harmonious social order. Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the principle of “leaving no one behind” clearly embodies the value of equality in development. This reflects a shift from a purely rights-based understanding to a demand for proactive measures to eliminate inequalities in both opportunities and outcomes within societies.

2.3. Peace and security

Peace is one of the UN’s supreme objectives and foundational values. Article 1 of the UN Charter identifies the maintenance of international peace and security as the Organisation’s primary purpose. Since its establishment, the UN has not only engaged in peacekeeping operations but has also promoted conflict prevention, disarmament, and post-conflict peacebuilding.

However, in the UN’s viewpoint, peace extends beyond the mere absence of war. It encompasses the concept of “positive peace”, which includes justice, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and sustainable development. In Resolution 2282 (2016) on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, the UN Security Council emphasised the intrinsic link between peace and development, affirming that there can be no peace without development, and no development without peace. This demonstrates that peace has evolved into an interdisciplinary and foundational value within the universal value system of the international community.

2.4. Justice and the rule of law

The UN regards the rule of law as a prerequisite for a just, stable, and prosperous society. In a 2004 report, the UN Secretary-General defined the rule of law as a “principle of governance whereby all persons, institutions, and entities, including the state itself, are accountable under the law”. Under this conception, the rule of law is not merely a technical governance tool, but also a normative value that requires accountability, the limitation of power, and the protection of human rights.

Justice is closely intertwined with the rule of law, according to the UN. Based on this approach, the UN has adopted numerous instruments and implemented a wide range of programs to support judicial reform, enhance access to justice, and promote fair dispute resolution. Overall, the UN has played a central role in disseminating the value of justice as a foundation for reconciliation and social development. Furthermore, General Assembly Resolution 67/1 (2012) explicitly reaffirmed the central role of the rule of law in international development, thereby strengthening public confidence in institutions.

2.5. Sustainable development and global solidarity

One of the most significant milestones reflecting the UN’s value-based vision was the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This global commitment seeks to achieve a future that is “sustainable, equitable, and prosperous for all people and for the planet” (the UN, 2015). From the UN’s perspective, sustainable development is not merely a policy objective but a universal value of humanity, embodying the integration of economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection.

Besides, the UN also promotes the concept of global solidarity as a universal value, particularly in the context of global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and transnational inequalities. Consistent with this approach, the UN has undertaken numerous initiatives to encourage shared responsibility, development assistance, and enhanced participation by developing countries in global policymaking, reflecting

the principle of acting collectively for the common good.

In a nutshell, the universal values articulated and promoted by the UN reflect a comprehensive and inclusive vision for humanity’s future, while also providing the legal and moral foundations for contemporary international norms. In an increasingly fragmented and volatile world, respect for and implementation of these UN-endorsed values constitute an urgent requirement for maintaining peace, stability, and sustainable development. These values serve as a moral compass guiding states, organisations, and individuals in a globalised world that must reconcile universal standards with cultural diversity and national interests.

3. Universal values of humanity promoted by UNESCO

For more than 7 decades (since 1946), UNESCO has articulated and promoted a universal humanistic value system for humanity. Guided by its constitutional mandate to build peace in the minds of men and women, UNESCO affirms that sustainable development, peace, human rights, and respect for cultural diversity cannot be achieved without shared foundational values. These values include peace, human dignity, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, the right of access to knowledge, social justice, and sustainable development.

3.1. Peace

Peace, from UNESCO’s perspective, is a value that is simultaneously moral, political, and educational in nature - a long-term process requiring the participation of all segments of society. As early as 1945, UNESCO affirmed that “*since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*”. Peace is therefore understood not merely as the absence of armed conflict, but as the outcome of fostering mutual understanding, educational cooperation, scientific exchange, and respect for cultural diversity.

In furtherance of this value, UNESCO has implemented numerous global initiatives, such as the Education for Peace Programme, the Creative Cities Network for Peace, and the International Day of Peace, all of which aim to cultivate critical thinking, conflict-

resolution skills, and a spirit of tolerance among nations, peoples, and communities. UNESCO also plays a vital role in preserving historical memory and countering hatred and extremism through initiatives such as Holocaust Remembrance and Against Racism and Discrimination (UNESCO, 2023).

3.2. Human dignity and human rights

UNESCO is a pioneering UN agency in promoting human rights through education, culture, and science. In its UNESCO Strategy on Human Rights (2003), the organisation affirms that human dignity and the inalienable rights of human beings constitute the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace.

Unlike the UN Human Rights Council and other UN human rights bodies, UNESCO approaches human rights primarily by integrating universal values into educational programs such as Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). These programs convey values related to dignity, equality, participation, and mutual respect. In addition, UNESCO actively protects the right of access to knowledge and scientific freedom, regarding these as essential components of human dignity in the digital age (UNESCO, 2021a).

3.3. Cultural diversity and dialogue among civilisations

One of UNESCO's most significant contributions is affirming cultural diversity as the common heritage of humanity and a necessary condition for sustainable development and peace. In the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), UNESCO clearly stated that "respect for cultural diversity is respect for human rights". From UNESCO's perspective, cultural diversity extends beyond differences in language, religion, or customs; it constitutes a vital source of creativity, innovation, and development. On this basis, UNESCO has developed a range of conventions and programs, including the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the World Heritage Programme, the Creative Cities Network, and the Alliance of Civilisations. Intercultural dialogue is viewed as a key instrument for overcoming prejudice, combating racism

and terrorism, and building trust among communities (UNESCO, 2013).

3.4. Social justice and sustainable development

UNESCO regards social justice as a core principle for building inclusive societies and achieving sustainable development. Social justice, in UNESCO's view, extends beyond the equitable distribution of resources to encompass access to education, gender equality, the protection of vulnerable groups, and meaningful participation in cultural and social life. UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences Programme emphasises the role of ethics and social science research in promoting social justice, particularly in areas such as gender equality, migration, artificial intelligence, the rights of youth, and the rights of indigenous peoples (UNESCO, 2022). In parallel, UNESCO links the value of justice with sustainable development through strategies that support environmental education, local cultural development, and open science, thereby ensuring that no one is left behind in the development process (UNESCO, 2021b).

3.5. Knowledge, education, and open science

UNESCO places particular emphasis on knowledge as a global public good. In its Recommendation on Open Science, the organisation affirms that scientific knowledge should be shared equitably and not restricted by commercial or geographical barriers (UNESCO, 2021b). Knowledge must serve the common good and enable humanity to address global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and armed conflict.

Similarly, UNESCO recognises education as both a human right and a global public good. The promotion of inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all is regarded as a cornerstone of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Initiatives such as Futures of Education and Education for Sustainable Development reflect UNESCO's long-term commitment to positioning education as the foundation for societal transformation.

In summary, the universal values articulated by UNESCO, from peace and human dignity to cultural diversity, social justice, and knowledge, are not merely theoretical declarations but have been operationalised through global policies,

programs, and implementation mechanisms. In a world increasingly marked by division, conflict, and inequality, the value system constructed and promoted by UNESCO has become more essential than ever, serving as both a moral anchor and a strategic orientation for states and the international community.

4. Universal values of humanity promoted by other international organisations and forums

In addition to the UN and UNESCO, other international organisations and forums have articulated and promoted universal values of humanity in various forms and across different sectors as follows

4.1. World Health Organisation

The WHO emphasises universal values such as the right to health, health equity, human dignity, and global solidarity, with particular emphasis on the right to health. WHO regards health as a fundamental human right of every individual, irrespective of nationality, race or income level. Its Constitution affirms that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.” To operationalise this value, WHO has implemented initiatives such as Health for All and Universal Health Coverage (UHC). WHO’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and other global health crises in recent years further demonstrate its commitment to promoting health as a universal value grounded in human dignity and equity.

4.2. International Labour Organisation

The universal values promoted by the ILO include decent work, social justice, equality, and human dignity in the labour context. To advance these values, the ILO has established a comprehensive system of international labour standards, within which fundamental labour rights, such as freedom of association, the elimination of forced labour, non-discrimination in employment, and the abolition of child labour, are recognised as universal values (ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, 1998).

4.3. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Democracy, transparency, the rule of law, sustainable development, and respect

for human rights are the universal values emphasised by OECD. To give effect to these values, the OECD has developed common principles for good governance, accountability, integrity, and responsible business conduct, such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (2011) and the OECD Principles of Corporate Governance (2015).

4.4. Council of Europe

The universal values highlighted by the Council of Europe include human rights, democracy, the rule of law, equality, and human dignity. Although it is a regional organisation, the Council of Europe exerts global influence in promoting these values through its normative and institutional frameworks. In particular, the European Convention on Human Rights has served as a model for other regional human rights systems, while the European Court of Human Rights functions as a mechanism for the practical protection of universal values.

4.5. International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

The rights of migrants, human dignity, safety, fairness in migration, and non-discrimination are the universal values emphasised by IOM. IOM asserts that migration must be managed in a manner that respects human dignity and human rights, and that migration policies should be oriented toward the global common good.

4.6. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The universal values promoted by the ICRC include humanity, impartiality, neutrality, universality, and the protection of human beings in armed conflict. The ICRC advances these values primarily through International Humanitarian Law, which seeks to protect victims of armed conflict, including civilians, prisoners of war, and the wounded.

4.7. World Economic Forum (WEF)

The universal values emphasised by the World Economic Forum include social responsibility, intergenerational justice, and innovation for the common good. In this context, the WEF has promoted the concept of stakeholder capitalism, an economic model in which corporations are expected not only to maximise shareholder value but also

to assume responsibility toward workers, communities, the environment, and society at large (Schwab, 2020).

Conclusion

Universal values such as human dignity, peace, justice, equality, cultural diversity, sustainable development, and global solidarity are not merely moral principles but also the fundamental basis for the establishment of the modern international order. By analyzing the approaches adopted by international organizations such as the UN, UNESCO, WHO, ILO, OECD..., it can be seen that, although each organization operates within a specific sector (human rights, education, health, labour, and the economy, respectively), all of them are oriented toward affirming and safeguarding shared values, namely human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, peace, and development for the common good.

In general, the UN serves as the leading organisation in establishing universal values for humanity through the UN Charter (1945) and the UDHR (1948), thereby laying the foundation for the concept of the "human family." UNESCO further deepens these values by emphasising peace, the right to education, cultural diversity, and open knowledge. Meanwhile, the WHO protects the right to the highest attainable standard of health and equity in healthcare as expressions of human dignity; the ILO focuses on protecting and enhancing human dignity in the sphere of labour; and the OECD promotes principles of transparency, the rule of law, and good governance as foundational values of democracy and sustainable development. Differences among these organisations lie primarily in their sector-specific approaches; however, they share the recognition of universal values as the lowest common denominator for guiding the conduct of states, businesses, and individuals in a globalised and diverse world. Within the same organisations, they do not merely articulate principles but also concretise them through conventions, programmes, guidelines, and implementation mechanisms, thereby ensuring that universal values do not remain abstract ideals but can be translated into reality.

For states and nations, universal values of humanity serve as global moral and legal standards that help shape public policies, legal frameworks, and educational systems. For humanity as a whole, these values constitute the foundation for an international community grounded in mutual respect, equal cooperation, and inclusive development. In a world confronted with transnational challenges such as climate change, inequality, conflict, and crises of trust, the protection and implementation of the aforementioned universal values of humanity are not merely moral responsibilities, but also vital strategies for advancing a humane, just, and sustainable future for all./.

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