

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

In plain English

In 1976 the UK Government 'ratified' the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This means that they have agreed to recognise and fulfil the rights below for every person in the UK.

Article 1 – Self determination

Everyone has the right to self-determination – that is, to decide their own destiny.

Article 2 – Duties and non-discrimination

The government must do everything they can to implement this Covenant. It should progressively improve enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights over time. To do this, it must use all its available resources (including money).

The government must guarantee all economic, social and cultural rights to everyone without exception. It is the government's duty to protect everyone from any form of discrimination. This means that everyone has the same rights, no matter their:

- Sex
- Race or skin colour
- Language
- Religious belief (or lack of)
- Political opinion
- How much or little they own
- What social group they are born into
- What country they come from
- Or any other difference

Article 3 - Equality between men and women

Men and women are equal and have the right to enjoy economic, social and cultural rights equally.

Article 4 – Limiting rights

The government can sometimes limit rights but only in a small number of specific situations:

- Where the limits are set out in law
- Where the limits do not undermine Covenant rights
- Where the limits are needed to support a fair and just society
- Where the limits are needed to protect the rights of other members of society

Article 5 – Preserving rights and freedoms

Nothing in this Covenant can be used as an excuse for governments or people to do anything that harms the rights of other people.

Article 6 – Right to work

You have the right to work, to be free to choose your work, and to defend your rights at work. Governments must help people who do not find such work with education and training.

Article 7 – Right to just and favourable conditions at work

Everyone has the right to just and favourable conditions at work. This means everyone has the right to at least the following:

- A fair wage that does not discriminate between different workers
- The same pay as anyone else for work of equal value
- A wage that allows a person and their family to have a decent life
- Safe and healthy working conditions
- Equal opportunity to promotion based on only seniority and skill
- Rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours
- Paid annual holidays and public holidays

Article 8 – Trade union rights

- Everyone has the right to join and to form trade unions, who come together to fight for fair pay and good working conditions. Trade unions can organise nationally and internationally.
- The government must not interfere with trade unions unless the limitations are set out in law and are to protect the public and their rights and freedoms. The government can limit trade union rights for members of the armed forces, the police and the public service.
- Everyone has the right to stop work (strike) when they are not being treated fairly.

Article 9 – Right to social security

Everyone has the right to social security. This means that governments must make sure there is a social security system that provides money or other support to help people who need it.

Article 10 – Protecting the family – especially mothers and children

- Governments must give special protection and help to the family, especially mothers and children.
- Everyone has the right to choose whether to marry and who to marry.
- Governments must protect mothers during pregnancy as well as before and after giving birth, including by making sure working mothers have paid maternity leave. Children must be given special help regardless of who their parents are or what form their family takes.
- Governments must protect children and young persons from exploitation (being taken advantage of) and ban any work that is dangerous to them and punish employers who break these laws.
- Governments must set an age below which children must not work.

Article 11 – Right to an adequate standard of living

- Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their family - this includes good food, housing and clothing.
- Everyone has the right to a quality of living that gets better over time.
- Everyone has the right to be free from hunger. All governments have the duty to make sure that world food supplies reach everyone fairly so that no one goes hungry.
- Governments must work towards making these rights real for everyone, including by working with other governments.

Article 12 – Right the health (physical and mental)

Everyone has the right to the best standard of health possible for both their physical and mental health. Governments have to take steps to:

- Make sure fewer babies die, both before and after birth
- Make sure children can grow up healthily
- Improve the environments in which people live and work so that these do not hurt their health
- Do what is needed to prevent, control and treat diseases
- Promote a health system so that everyone can get medical help when sick

Article 13 – Right to education

Everyone has the right to education. The purpose of education is to:

- Help people fully develop their personalities and understand their value as people
- Understand our own rights, and to respect other people's rights and differences
- Help people to take part in the society that they live in and to live peacefully, and with respect for all

To fulfil the right to education, governments must make sure:

- Primary education is compulsory and free to all
- Secondary education (in a variety of forms) should be available to everyone and, as time passes, it should be made free
- Higher education should be available to everyone and, as time passes, it should be made free
- People who have not finished primary education are able to access other forms of education
- They develop the school system and continuously improve the conditions of teachers

Finally:

- Parents and guardians have the freedom to choose which schools their children attend so long as those schools meet the government's minimum education standards.
- Parents and guardians have the freedom to choose the religious and moral education of their children.
- Anyone can establish and lead schools so long as they respect the government's minimum education standards.

Article 14 – Implementing free primary education

Within two years of joining this Covenant, governments must have a plan of action to make sure that primary education is compulsory and free for everyone.

Article 15 – Cultural rights

Everyone has the right to participate in cultural activities, to benefit from the results of scientific progress, and to own any idea or design that they came up with.

Governments must:

- Conserve, develop and distribute science and culture
- Respect the freedom to engage in research and to create art

Articles 16-24 – Examining the enjoyment of rights

These articles explain how governments, different United Nations bodies and other organisations work to make sure that everything is being done to make sure that all people can enjoy all their rights.

Article 25 – Using natural wealth and resources

This Article explains that nothing in the Covenant can be used to limit the right of all peoples to enjoy and use their natural wealth and resources (such as water, land, minerals) freely.

Articles 26-31 – What signing up means

These articles explain how governments agree to follow the standards set out in the Covenant and how changes can be made to the Covenant. They also make clear that when a government has signed up to the Covenant, then it applies to all parts of that country and to all government decision-makers.

This guide was produced with reference to the following documents:

- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- [Easy-to-read version of the Human Rights Covenant](#)
- [Child-friendly version of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)