

## Human rights policy paper of Felm

***Our stance on human rights is based on Christian values that emphasise human dignity, and on internationally accepted human rights concepts and agreements.***

***We aim to promote the human rights of women and girls, persons with disabilities, minorities, abused and exploited people, marginalised people, and people living in conflict zones. We support such groups to enable them to defend their own rights. We also strive to influence decision-makers to encourage them to remove barriers that hinder the realisation of human rights, and to resolve the root causes of human rights infringements.***

***Our human rights based approach guides all of our work. Human rights principles including universality, parity, equality, non-discrimination and responsibility are duly taken into consideration in the planning, realisation, monitoring and evaluation of all our work.***

***We promote human rights together with our partners, and we help our partners to build up their capacity and commitment in relation to human rights. In addition to working within ecumenical networks, we also collaborate with other faith-based and non-religious human rights organisations in our target countries, in Finland, and internationally. We strive to utilise our religious literacy and awareness and the strengths of our church partners to promote human rights.***

### 1. Introduction

Defending human dignity has been a key element of our work throughout our more than 150-year history. In the early 2000s we particularly highlighted human rights issues as an area for holistic development and a strategic goal in our action plan “Human Rights in Mission Work”. Defending human rights also plays a key role in our strategy for the years 2017-2022.

During the strategy period 2017-2022 four key goals will feature prominently, as specified in our thematic Roadmap of Hope: 1) We will bear witness to God’s universal love; 2) We will defend the human dignity and rights of marginalised people; 3) We will strive for a more just world; and 4) We will build peace and reconciliation.

Our Theological Charter defines the theological foundations for our work. We have defined three policy papers to expand on our Roadmap of Hope and our strategic priorities. These policy papers relate to human rights, economic justice, and peace and reconciliation. They should be applied in unison, since human rights infringements, economic injustice and conflicts often go hand in hand. They also reflect the key values defined in our strategy: love for our neighbours, justice, partnership and responsibility.

This human rights policy paper particularly aims to expand on the second goal in our Roadmap of Hope: “We will defend the human dignity and rights of marginalised people.”

The policy paper also presents Felm’s position on human rights, the values and basis behind our work, and the principles we apply to promote human rights as part of our holistic mission work. The related analysis of current problems and our operating environment describes where we at Felm and

our partners are working now and will work in future, while also assessing future human rights challenges.

Our policy papers steer all of our activities, while also informing our various stakeholders about our approach and our position on the focus points of our work. They are designed for application between our wider strategy and our specific programmes. Procedures covering issues related to the environment and climate change have also been defined in relation to the policy papers. Our earlier policy papers related to HIV/AIDS and food security remain in effect, and will continue to support our strategic Roadmap of Hope.

## **2. Our operating environment**

### **Challenges and opportunities**

Over recent decades conditions for people around the world have generally improved: with the population getting healthier, earning better livelihoods, becoming more educated, and living longer. Child mortality, malnutrition and extreme poverty have all declined overall. More children are completing school, and life expectancy is rising. These trends show that the well-being of humanity is improving. The growth of the global population has also slowed.

But easily marginalised groups do not always benefit from these positive trends. Their rights are increasingly threatened in the countries where we are working. Such groups include various kinds of minorities, women and girls, and persons with disabilities. States and dominant groups widely discriminate against people from ethnic and religious minorities. The oppressed status of women still restricts social development in many regions, and violence against women remains a serious problem. The visibility and participation of disabled people in society is still limited. Indigenous peoples are also widely marginalised, with issues including their land rights still unresolved.

Human rights infringements seem to be increasing in many of the countries where we operate. Promoting and defending human rights is becoming more difficult and dangerous. People are not treated fairly and equitably, and human rights infringements often go unpunished. Torture, unjust legal processes and violence against civilians during armed conflict are widespread in some countries. The numbers of displaced people are also rising, especially within countries enduring conflicts. The countries currently tightening up their procedures for dealing with asylum seekers do not offer refugees sufficient protection.

In many places the development of democracy has slowed, and freedom of speech is restricted. The scope for civil society to function favourably is becoming more limited, with state controls on the increase. In countries where civil society organisations (CSOs) are closely monitored, they may be able to help provide basic services, but their human rights work is limited. However, many countries' governments support civil society and efforts to strengthen it. Technological developments provide new opportunities for promote democracy and awareness of human rights.

Challenges resulting from environmental problems and climate change, including conflicts, refugee crises, and disasters caused by extreme weather conditions, are all on the increase. Everyone's right to a decent environment is closely connected to societal factors including the energy supply, employment, food security and health. People in weaker positions in society particularly suffer when such problems arise. As climate change accelerates, the conditions they have to endure worsen, and it becomes harder to ensure they can lead safe and dignified lives.

### **Key actors and processes**

The most important actors in human rights work are the people whose rights are at stake. Our partners help the people targeted by their work to be aware of their human rights and recognise their opportunities and means to realise them. We focus on supporting groups who lack influence and are

vulnerable, since their capability to defend their own rights is limited. Everyone has the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, and to shape decisions and choices that are important to them and their communities.

In promoting human rights we work closely together with our partners and with actors from the Lutheran and ecumenical movement, as well as other Christian communities. **Our partner churches and organisations** are significant and active players within their respective civil societies, with the capacity to help realise human rights. In many cases our partners do not merely aid marginalised groups, but are themselves marginalised. We also encourage our partners representing marginalised groups to additionally recognise and promote the human rights of other disadvantaged groups.

We work actively through the global ecumenical network to promote human rights. **The World Council of Churches** encourages its member churches to jointly promote human dignity, defend social, economic and ecological justice, and build peace. The human rights work of **the Lutheran World Federation** focuses on freedom of religion, climate change and environmental protection, gender justice, refugee crises, marginalised groups and minorities, economic justice, and HIV/AIDS. The **ACT Alliance** particularly promotes human dignity, sustainable communities and sustainable development. These organisations have a special position in the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and they are able to highlight human rights issues within the UN. The dwindling resources available to ecumenical networks represent a challenge for the future.

We also collaborate open-mindedly with the representatives of other faiths to promote human rights. We want to understand other faiths' perceptions of human rights and find ways to work together with their representatives to promote human rights.

We also collaborate closely with non-religious human rights actors such as national and local authorities both in Finland and in our partner countries, as well as international and intergovernmental institutions, CSOs, universities and research institutes. Activities related to recognising, respecting and promoting human rights are gradually becoming less prominent in the work of political, intergovernmental and international institutions. In the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development human rights feature more prominently than in the earlier Millennium Development Goals, however. The human rights agreements and declarations drafted within the UN have set the standards that guide global efforts to promote human rights. Though the UN system is widely criticised, and its resources have shrunk, **UN organisations** – including the General Assembly, the human rights treaty, the Human Rights Council and the High Commissioner for Human Rights – will continue to play a significant role in promoting human rights and shaping related thinking around the world.

**Finland's** international human rights policies focus on the rights of women and girls, and on promoting economic, social and cultural justice. They continue to prioritise support for disabled people, sexual and gender minorities, indigenous peoples, and other particularly vulnerable groups and individuals, as well as everyone working to defend human rights. The human rights debate in Finland has also spotlighted issues related to the rights of migrants, human rights in cyberspace, the need to safeguard freedom of religion and opinion, and human rights in relation to the activities of businesses.

**The EU's** development policies aim to reduce poverty and promote human rights, democracy and good governance. Another objective specifies that human rights must be duly considered in all of the EU's spheres of activity. Due attention is also paid to the human rights situation within the EU itself, to ensure that the EU's human rights activities are just and credible.

### 3. Felm and human rights

#### The theological basis and values behind our work

*“According to our Christian faith, God has created each person in His image and likeness to share his work. This gives rise to the sacrosanct **human dignity** of all individuals, which is not in itself a human right, but forms the basis for human rights. God is just in his works, before him all people are equal, and he requires justice to be realised in their mutual lives.”*

Extract from Felm’s Theological Charter 2015

The recognition of and respect for human dignity emphasised in the Bible form a foundation for our perception of human rights. All people are equal in terms of their dignity and their rights. They must not be differentiated on the basis of factors such as their race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, language, faith, political or other opinions, national or social origins, or ancestry.

Christians and the representatives of other faiths have significantly shaped international human rights principles and standards and their implementation. The Christian principle of neighbourly love further obliges us to respect and promote human dignity irrespective of human rights agreements and the level of their implementation. The Bible encourages us to combat injustice and eliminate discrimination. Responsibility for realising human rights lies with every single person – and not just with states.

The Christian principle of neighbourly love also forms the basis for Christian human rights thinking. Christians are responsible for their neighbours, meaning all other people. In addition to highlighting this responsibility, our concept of human rights also encompasses responsibility for creation and the environment. Cherishing the environment is also essential for human rights to be realised. Without a safe and healthy environment it would be impossible to realise everyone’s right to work, food, health and a safe and stable place to live.

The concept of Christian mercy emphasises forgiveness, reparation and reconciliation. Holistic justice also applies to those responsible for human rights infringements.

#### A human rights based approach

*“Felm strives to realise universal human rights for everyone... Our principle of equality obliges the church to include everyone. Justice, solidarity and inclusion are key aspects of our mission that arise from needs on the margins of society... At Felm we are also committed to observe the principle of equal participation in our own activities and in collaboration with our partners.”*

Extracts from Felm’s Theological Charter 2015

Human rights form the foundations that guide all of our work. We see the factors that are essential to a dignified life as rights that we must promote. We duly consider human rights when setting goals for our work in accordance with our strategy. We strive to ensure that we do not infringe on the human rights of the people affected by our work. To do this we evaluate our own work and our operating environment from a human rights perspective.

This human rights based approach is reflected in all our work, also in terms of observing **human rights principles** in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all our activities. Universality, meaning that human rights apply to everyone, is one of the foremost principles behind our work. We promote equality between people of different genders and social groups. We emphasise that everyone should be able to participate in decisions that affect them. In our work nobody may be discriminated against on any grounds. This prohibition of discrimination does not, however, prevent positive discrimination that favours people in weaker positions in order to promote equity. The principles of rule of law and good governance are essential in our work and the work of our partners, and we also call on people in positions of responsibility within society to apply them. We promote responsibility among decision-makers through our advocacy work. We also ensure that

human rights principles – particularly equality – are fully realised in our own support functions, our administration and our personnel policies.

In line with our human rights based approach, we do not see the impoverished and marginalised people whose needs we address in our work as passive aid recipients, but as people with active **ownership of their rights**. We support their capacity to demand their rights and call upon those responsible for realising them to fulfil their responsibility. In addition to states, **those responsible for realising rights** include people with decision-making power at every level from grassroots upwards. By increasing awareness of rights issues we strive to help decision-makers to recognise and eliminate the social structures that cause human rights infringements. The roles of our partners, churches including the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Felm itself must also be strengthened with regard to bearing such responsibility. Owners of rights must additionally respect the rights of others and take responsibility for the common good of society as a whole.

## **Our operating principles**

We courageously defend everyone's human rights regardless of whether other people are defending them. In challenging conditions, however, we must work without endangering our partners and other people affected by our work. Calling for responsibilities to be realised does not entail entering into conflict with the state; in countries where the authorities have a critical attitude towards human rights we work through constructive rights-based dialogues. Such constructive dialogues should be based on human rights recommendations approved by the country in question, which we can identify through the operating environment assessments we conduct to examine the human rights situation in specific countries and regions.

We acknowledge the significance of religions in development, the right to freedom of religion for people of all faiths and convictions, and the need for dialogue between different faiths as an important way to promote human rights.

Our interpretation of human rights is based on our Christian value base, on the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and on other internationally accepted human rights principles and standards. Taken together, these factors provide a universal moral conceptual foundation upon which basis we can examine harmful practices and act to eliminate them also in countries and with partners who do not take the universality of human rights for granted. Our collaboration with our partners is based on the shared understanding that Felm works with a human rights based approach. We require our partners to observe our ethical guidelines, which are based on internationally accepted human rights principles.

Building a trusting relationship with our long-term partners enables us to engage in dialogues that will deepen their commitment to human rights, regardless of any differences there may be in our perceptions of human rights. We help our partners to recognise the possible negative human rights impacts of their work, and find ways to eliminate them. We strengthen our partners' capacity and commitment to promote human rights. We observe the recommendations of our ecumenical networks whenever we assess conditions for continuing cooperation with our longer-term partner churches from a human rights perspective. When entering into new partnerships we particularly examine our potential partners' commitment to respect human rights.

We take human rights into consideration in all of our activities in Finland, internationally and in all the countries where we work. Activities that promote environmental sustainability and help people to mitigate and adapt to climate change also play a key role in human rights work.

## **Strategic focus areas**

We understand **human rights** as rights recognised in international agreements as belonging equally and undeniably to all members of humanity. We recognise the universality, indivisibility, inalienability and interdependence of human rights.

Together with our partners we particularly strive to realise the human rights of **women and girls, persons with disabilities, minorities, oppressed and exploited groups, marginalised people, and people living in conflict zones**. We help to enable partners working in very different contexts to recognise the rights of such groups and find ways to acknowledge, protect and safeguard them. Awareness of the situations faced by these groups in relation to their rights, a positive attitude, measures to eradicate discrimination and prejudice, and advocacy work targeting decision-makers are all important ways to improve the statuses of such groups.

We focus on promoting the human rights mentioned in our strategic goals. These particularly include civil and political rights relating to equality, non-discrimination, participation, citizenship, ownership, the right to be recognised as an equal individual before the law, and freedom of religion and belief. Key economic, social and cultural rights in terms of our work include the right to a decent standard of living (e.g. food, housing, clean water and sanitation), and the right to a livelihood, education and work. We strive to ensure that everyone affected by our work can live as an equally recognised citizen, suffering from no discrimination, and with sufficient standards of living, education and work. Our work also particularly emphasises the collective rights of target groups to their own language and culture. In the spirit of international human rights thinking our own interpretation of human rights particularly focuses on the rights of individuals as members of society.

During this strategic period we will intensify the adoption of our Human Rights Based Approach by ensuring that promoting human rights is defined as a specific goal more extensively throughout our work. Our **human rights work** of this kind includes related communications and advocacy work on human rights, as well as actions designed to improve our partners' and our own employees' expertise on human rights. Possible means also include monitoring and reporting on human rights situations, providing support for human rights defenders, and backing the implementation of human rights agreements' monitoring and reporting systems. We will additionally pay more attention to human rights issues in our project work.

### **Bringing added value to human rights work**

Our organisation's Christian world view gives us extensive scope to respect other people's religious convictions and understand the role of religion and human rights thinking in cultures and societies where religion plays a central and public role. We also strive to share this understanding with non-religious actors working with human rights. Our faith-based values give us a good basis for promoting human rights through dialogues with representatives of other faiths. We are also able to interpret international human rights thinking for our religious partners in the countries where we work.

One of our significant strengths with regard to promoting human rights is our extensive network of partners, including many who represent civil society in their respective countries. Strengthening civil society is a vital means to promote democracy and the rule of law. It also improves the prospects for realising human rights. We work with our partners in to examine the local human rights situation, identify human rights challenges, and interpret human rights thinking.

Many of our partners are church organisations whose additional strengths in relation to promoting human rights include their leadership on values, their credibility, and the esteem in which they are held within their own communities and in the eyes of decision-makers. Churches can reach and mobilise great numbers of people to promote human rights, even in remote regions. They are also well placed to observe human rights situations at grassroots level and share information widely through their national and international networks.