What might the activities of anti-apartheid activists in West Yorkshire tell us about the entangled histories of human rights and decolonization? Rights talk in places such as Huddersfield, far from the abuses of the apartheid system, was not the echo of a message transmitted from above, nor some revolutionary mantra taken up from below. Tracing the ways that these entangled histories were enacted by any number of grass-roots activists (in Britain, or, indeed, elsewhere), necessitates examination of how a flexible discourse of human rights took shape during a period of instability. Individual actors below the level of state spoke in concert with liberation movements fighting states, but in service of diverse aims. Rights talk in the era of national liberation was often contingent on sovereignty, and often became conflated with it as the message was taken up by broader – and transnational – activist networks. Looking at the evolution of these discussions allows us to understand how the turbulent context of the late 1950s and early 1960s shaped discussions of human rights well into the 1970s. In this reading, responsive and flexible definitions of human rights mapped onto a broader category of solidarity, which eclipsed an initial focus on individual political rights. This was a definition more contingent on the context of African decolonization than on the reality of newly sovereign African states.

To chart this mutable concept, this chapter first looks at the rights abuses in South Africa that triggered transnational protest movements and international grass-roots activism. This oppositional movement would help to define the language of human rights in apartheid South Africa against the language of decolonization as it took shape in the
wider world. In part, this was a result of the networks it used to advance its cause. Petitioning the United Nations ensured that protests about South African rights abuses took on a colonial reference point. This was clear in the conflicting attitudes to violent struggle that separated movements with common cause; in the UN, postcolonial nations endorsed violent struggles to attain fundamental rights, while Western sympathizers often winced at the moral implications. Despite these differences of method, however, the discourse of rights was increasingly fixed to the discussion of nations and development. As postcolonial African nations began to speak of structural inequalities as ongoing forms of oppression, Western activists also took up an increasingly materialist language of rights. Yet, by the 1970s, this focus on structural reform and development was expressed in a way that distilled the legacy of the campaigns against racial violence and individual rights abuses that had taken place throughout the 1960s. By looking at transnational anti-apartheid activism and the interpretation of its legacy by distinct groups a decade later, we get a sense of how these debates had developed and been shaped by decolonization. The discourse on human rights, and its strong association with sovereignty and development, had been contingent both on the networks that made these calls and the forums in which they were heard.

Histories of decolonization tend to be, at the same time, histories of the triumph of the nation state. Even when recent scholarship has drawn attention to alternative possibilities, such as the federalist experiment in French West African territories in the aftermath of the Second World War, the narrative concludes with the ultimate succession of national sovereignty. Histories of human rights, meanwhile, have followed a similar orbit around the institutions of state and nation, tracing the emergence of a discourse of legal and moral entitlements that has become imbued with a disciplinary power over the actions of nation states. In some accounts, human rights are presented as a reflection of a cultural shift towards empathy and humanitarian universalism with its origins in late eighteenth-century Europe. More recently, human rights have been recast as a utopian vision emerging only in the 1970s, an entirely modern (or, indeed, postmodern) phenomenon. In this history, the 1960s has earned a poor reputation as a period in which, despite decolonization and an upsurge in radical idealism, the protection of individual rights and freedoms was locked in quiet retreat. Cold War calculations trumped universalist visions, and Soviet and US actions in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia overrode the high ideals of the late 1940s. Whatever student protestors, anti-Vietnam-War campaigners and anti-apartheid
activists discovered in the 1960s, it was not a utopian vision of human rights. Until their ‘breakthrough’ in political discourse in the late 1970s, as Samuel Moyn has argued, human rights were weakly observed and little understood. This general observation – that, in international relations, human rights were largely defined in terms of, if not synonymous with, the narrower right of self-determination – might equally be applied to those groups and individuals in Britain expressing support for and solidarity with anti-colonial movements in the Third World. As Moyn’s account implies, decolonization was a necessary precursor to the emergence of a human rights movement, as a new utopian vision that served as a response to the crisis of the postcolonial state.

During the 1960s liberation movements saw the language of human rights as an appropriate medium for the articulation of struggles against regimes whose actions were in denial of emerging international norms of anti-racism, democracy and sovereign rights. The South African authorities provided a prime example of the deviation from these norms in their efforts to control political opposition by equipping themselves with an array of legal devices – banning orders, house arrests, extended powers to imprison suspects – that could be defined as threats to the fundamental rights of individuals. Although the articulation of rights language remained vague, functional and often subordinate to the primary aim of achieving ‘liberation’ and self-determination where it was denied, a coherent and coordinated articulation of human rights did, nonetheless, begin to take shape, partly in response to the ways in which the apartheid state demonstrated its readiness to abrogate individual rights. Anti-apartheid activists deployed the language of human rights sporadically and instrumentally, but not purely as a synonym for sovereign rights. As postcolonial Third World states took up the language of human rights in the service of their own political agendas and to cultivate collective strength in global institutions, the meaning and form of ‘rights’ began to change. Western campaigners nonetheless sought to place individual rights at the centre of their conceptions of global political and social justice. This chapter explores these ways in which human rights, as a transnational discourse, reflected the entanglements of international institutions, state officials and social movements during the process of decolonization.

Histories of human rights and decolonization have tended, moreover, to limit their scope to discussions of rights talk within official circles. In the case of Britain, human rights have been seen as instrumental, deployed as protection against communism and totalitarianism, and intimately linked to the European Convention on Human Rights and its
influence on key officials in the Colonial Office.\textsuperscript{7} The Bills of Rights introduced into the constitutions of former colonial territories were thus an attempt to tie postcolonial states into a transnational system of human rights.\textsuperscript{8} Roland Burke, in contrast, suggests that newly independent Third World states had indeed ‘begun to transform the human rights project’ themselves by the end of the 1960s; while the anti-colonial dimension of human rights history was by no means the ultimate expression of a utopian vision of rights, it nevertheless represented a reshaping of the agenda of human rights.\textsuperscript{9} Burke also demonstrates how the relationship between rights and self-determination was multi-stranded, suggesting, perhaps, that human rights might be presented as an assembly of contradictory and by no means consistent components – conceptual positions, expressed at critical moments within a particular set of institutions that came together in a formulation of ‘rights’. Furthermore, he argues that Third World actors – even prior to formal decolonization – were often a driving force of human rights discourse not merely as a useful vehicle in the service of an anti-colonial agenda.

The idea that the struggles for independence in Asia and Africa were struggles for ‘rights’ was widely expressed, but invariably in ill-defined ways that tended to accord more closely with notions of natural rights defined by practice rather than pronouncement. Support for anti-colonial nationalism in the 1950s had tended to judge actions in the decolonizing world through the lens of the past. Rights could, in fact, be set within a civilizational discourse, albeit one that promoted the ‘equal opportunity for all human beings to become civilized’.\textsuperscript{10} Protests against the South African policy of apartheid, for example, had employed the notion of ‘human rights’ from the late 1940s and early 1950s, but these tended to be declarative, serving more as an expression of the general moral impropriety of apartheid than a programme for the establishment of a universal rights regime.\textsuperscript{11} That notions of ‘rights’ were deployed in such a diffuse manner reinforces recent interpretations of the development of human rights in the post-war period that cast them as a loosely held utopian concept subservient to the more powerful idea of national sovereignty.

Instead, I would argue that post-war human rights discourses cannot easily be disentangled from the process of decolonization. Human rights in their narrower sense, conflated with the notion of self-determination, continued to maintain a moral efficacy for anti-apartheid campaigners, but, with decolonization, the construction of an institutional structure around human rights – most particularly at the United Nations – provided a scaffolding that was both supportive
of the struggle against apartheid and at the same time reflected its major concerns around justice, imprisonment and the rights of those engaged in armed struggle. The work of key UN bodies, including the Commission on Human Rights and the Special Committee on Apartheid, meant that human rights became firmly established as a central instrument against the apartheid state. Rather than seeing transnational activism and human rights as peripheral to the politics of the apartheid debate, this chapter suggests that human rights played a constitutive role in the dynamics of transnational anti-apartheid networks in the 1960s.

**International opposition to South African rights abuses**

South African race policies were a primary focus for debates around human rights in the late 1940s. They centred predominantly on complaints regarding the treatment of the Indian population, lodged by the government of India in 1946, as an international dimension of the endgame of empire in South Asia. Subsequently, human rights became a minor theme in the examination of the South African administration of the territory of South-West Africa (Namibia) by the UN Trusteeship Committee. In general, early international opposition to apartheid tended towards a diffuse moral condemnation of South Africa, until (at least) the mass arrests of South African anti-apartheid leaders in December 1956. The arrests and the subsequent Treason Trial, which eventually collapsed in 1961, accelerated the growth of international campaigns against apartheid, notably the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), which went on to become one of the primary channels of financial assistance for South African liberation movements. The trial was also instrumental to the development of human rights movements in the United Kingdom, inspiring the formation of the campaign group Justice by a small group of British lawyers, whose members included the founder of Amnesty International, Peter Benenson. Another of its members, Gerald Gardiner QC, had been sponsored by Defence and Aid to observe the preliminary hearings of the Treason Trial in Johannesburg. In 1957 Justice was reconstituted as the British section of the International Commission of Jurists, and as such it drew back from active involvement in international campaigns but continued to
work to position human rights on British domestic and colonial political agendas. \(^{14}\)

The British anti-apartheid movement began to crystallize in the late 1950s, subject to the contingencies of decolonization and the Cold War. Anti-apartheid was defined not only as a negative campaign – against, and reactive to, apartheid – but also by a global politics marked by the ideological contest and very real existential threat associated with superpower tensions, as well as the nuanced differences between experiences of the end of empire across the world. Discussion of human rights tended to percolate into public debate only at moments of crisis, as in the wake of the Hola camp massacre in Kenya in 1959, or following the shooting of Pan-Africanist Congress supporters by the South African police at Sharpeville in March 1960. \(^{15}\) At these critical moments, the authoritarian impulse within the ‘late colonial state’ was revealed, pushing aside talk of ‘development’ and ‘partnership’ and underlining the moral case against colonialism. Human rights thus emerged as a point of reference in the politics of decolonization and the reframing of empire as Commonwealth.

Thus, in the wake of the shootings at Sharpeville, a cross-party group of British MPs drafted a petition calling for a Commonwealth convention on human rights. \(^{16}\) While, as Brian Simpson and Charles Parkinson have demonstrated, the Colonial Office had already begun to look more positively on constitutional bills of rights, the idea of a Commonwealth-wide convention seemed a wholly unwelcome proposition for government officials. Even within the Colonial Office it appears that there had been no conversion to the principle of legal protections for human rights; rather, it was recognition of their value in ‘expediting Britain’s withdrawal from her empire’ that drove the shift in policy. \(^{17}\) For officials, then, the idea of human rights was instrumental for decolonization. In the eyes of the proponents of a Commonwealth convention, the suppression of political opposition in South Africa following Sharpeville was an ill omen for rights and liberties in a postcolonial world. But, in an unequivocal response, the British home secretary, R. A. Butler, argued simply that the viability of the Commonwealth was ‘in great part due to the absence of this type of formal, institutional machinery’. He surmised that Commonwealth members would not welcome the imposition of ‘rules of a central court or dictates of any convention’. \(^{18}\)

The Sharpeville crisis precipitated a determined reassertion of authority by the South African prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, through both the suppression of the main black opposition movements and a consolidation of white support, embodied in the formation of a
republic in early 1961. South Africa’s exit from the Commonwealth later that year was a moment of triumph for Verwoerd, but one of despair for the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, coming as a blow to his vision of a new Commonwealth. Ultimately, the South African policy of apartheid would provide a crucial point of reference in the development of a new, multi-racial conception of Commonwealth, not, however, one shaped by a formal conception of human rights. Butler’s refusal to countenance a pan-Commonwealth convention defined the limits of official enthusiasm for transnational human rights frameworks in the early 1960s. While the practical benefits of human rights had begun to be recognized by senior civil servants, elected officials remained highly sceptical of any legally imposed definitions of rights.

The early 1960s did, however, witness the early growth of what would later be defined as ‘grassroots human rights advocacy’. In particular, the launch of Amnesty International in 1961 saw the language of human rights deployed as a foundation for the depoliticized patronage of individual cases of injustice. The founders of the new movement were concerned with the sanctity of the activist as much as the salvation of the victim; Amnesty was a re-articulation of earlier forms of muscular Christianity as much as it was a new form of activism. Moreover, the Quaker and pacifist traditions that informed founders Peter Benenson and Eric Baker set Amnesty – in its early years – within liberal-humanitarian networks that had supported nascent anti-colonial and anti-apartheid campaigns in Britain. In 1963 Amnesty hosted a conference on the question of asylum in southern Africa, giving particular prominence to the ‘increasingly threatened position’ of the protectorates of Swaziland, Bechuanaland and Basutoland. Amnesty’s intervention in discussions on colonialism in southern Africa is suggestive of the degree to which a discourse of human rights was shaped in the intersection between political and legal questions, between the regulation of movement across international borders and the political sensitivities that shaped the enforcement – or not – of these regulations. Shaped in the multiplicity of forces at play in decolonization and subject to the complex interactions associated with transnational activism, human rights became distilled into the narrower questions of legal rights, de-centring the issue of colonialism and sovereign rights. Moreover, the strong sense of moral propriety that shaped Amnesty’s definition of ‘prisoners of conscience’ excluded the leaders of those African liberation movements that had embarked on armed struggle in the early 1960s. Thus Nelson Mandela, one of the principal architects of the turn by the African National Congress (ANC) to armed resistance, though unanimously accorded the status of prisoner of
conscience following his arrest and imprisonment in 1962, was removed from the list as a consequence of his public assertions of the legitimacy of armed resistance against the apartheid state. Despite the ambivalence of Amnesty, the issue of South African political prisoners provided anti-apartheid activists a conduit to connect a campaign for sovereign rights to international debates around the protection of human rights.

In late 1963 Mandela, alongside other leading members of the ANC/Communist Party armed group Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), were tried for the capital crimes of sabotage and armed insurrection. On the eve of the trial, ANC leader-in-exile Oliver Tambo used an address to the Special Political Committee of the UN General Assembly to describe the actions of the South African government as ‘genocide masquerading under the guise of a civilised dispensation of justice’. Two days later the General Assembly requested that South Africa ‘grant unconditional release to all political prisoners’. While Western states made little more than ‘timid’ approaches to South Africa, by the time the Rivonia defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment, in July 1964, their trial had served to energize transnational campaigns against apartheid. A key contribution to this came from the World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners (WCRSAPP), launched under the auspices of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in November 1963. It was a coordinated international campaign, overseen by a small committee of MPs, anti-apartheid campaigners and South African exiles in London, and drawing on the support of groups from around the world. Eventually the WCRSAPP would submit a petition of nearly 200,000 signatures to the United Nations, while in Britain public attention was maintained through a series of vigils held outside South Africa House in London. It was in this matrix of state officials, non-governmental activists and exiled South African campaigners that human rights developed as an element of the discursive strategy of anti-apartheid. These networks intersected at different levels of national and international politics, with varying degrees of success.

The WCRSAPP had some influence through engagement with non-governmental activists and organizations in Britain, and, as we shall see, was a point of entry for interaction with international institutions. Its impact on politics in South Africa itself was minimal, however. Although the worldwide campaign might be claimed to have had some influence on the decision not to impose the death penalty for the Rivonia defendants, the trial had dealt a severe blow to the effectiveness of the ANC as a liberation movement. Furthermore, less high-profile cases, such as that of Washington Bongco, who was executed in December 1964,
despite providing momentum for the campaign, failed to attract international interest ‘on the same scale’ as the Rivonia Trial. Nevertheless, infringements upon the rights of political activists within South Africa continued to provide a critical point of reference for anti-apartheid campaigns. Even before the Rivonia Trial, international condemnation of the South African government’s recourse to authoritarian measures had been heard. When the South African parliament approved detention of up to 90 days for individuals suspected of ‘political’ offences in April 1963, the International Commission of Jurists denounced the move as synonymous with Stalinism.

Within South Africa, the most unswerving critics of the apartheid state’s willingness to abrogate civil liberties and constitutional rights had been found within liberal opponents of the state, including the small Civil Rights League (formed in 1948), the National Union of South African Students and the Black Sash. During the 1960s experts examined the legal, psychological and moral consequences of the infringement of ‘basic’ and ‘individual’ rights enabled by legislation such as the 1963 General Law Amendment Act. These assessments tended, again, to define rights in their narrowest sense. Similarly, while it produced copious testimonies of the techniques of political suppression employed by the apartheid regime, including the use of torture on detainees, the WCRSAPP made little reference to the language of human rights in its publicity or private discussions before 1967.

Viewed in the context of the apartheid state, a coherent and consistent language of human rights had not emerged from a process of decolonization. Beyond South Africa, however, where colonial institutions had undergone transformation, new spaces opened up that had the potential to foster the elaboration of a discourse of universal rights. It was in the intersections between networks of anti-apartheid and rights activists, state institutions and international organizations, from the Commonwealth to the United Nations, that a language of human rights would be formed.

**International forums and colonial reference points**

During the 1960s the issue of apartheid became a unifying cause for Third World states whose leaders sought to hitch a language of human rights to their respective postcolonial priorities. Thus, the WCRSAPP highlights the ways in which the Anti-Apartheid Movement helped develop the institutional structures that incubated a discourse of rights
in the service of Third World political identities. In February 1967 the WCRSAPP merged with a similar committee that had been established by the International Defence and Aid Fund in the previous year, and its frame of reference was widened to cover political prisoners across southern Africa. Under the sponsorship of IDAF, with the South African apartheid activist Dennis Brutus as the new director, human rights began to feature more prominently in its campaign rhetoric. This was, arguably, a function of its integration within networks associated with UN bodies, including the Commission on Human Rights. The UN Special Committee on Apartheid, which had first met in 1963, has been identified as a key site for the development of the instruments of human rights within the United Nations during the process of decolonization. As Roland Burke has shown in his detailed account, the efforts of representatives of Third World states in bodies such as the Special Committee revived the right of petition that allowed the United Nations to monitor human rights within individual states. The movements that had emerged in response to South African rights abuses were broadening their reach to campaign against rights abuses elsewhere. That these human rights discussions took place during the process of decolonization, as the late colonial state seemed to bow in the wind of change, inflected them with the language of sovereignty. The tenor of the discourse was contingent on its international context and its colonial reference points.

The international forums in which groups such as the WCRSAPP could operate saw their contributions shaped by the context of decolonization. The UN human rights seminar on apartheid, held in Brasília in 1966, provided one opportunity to exert international pressure on South Africa, and, together with the Special Committee, allowed groups such as the WCRSAPP to petition the world body. Although it allowed campaigners to mobilize a language of rights, however, the Brasília seminar demonstrated that groups continued to define rights in terms of sovereignty. The ANC, in its submission to the meeting, spoke of rights with reference to the UN Charter and its provisions against colonialism, and called for support for those ‘fighting for transfer of power to the majority of the people’. While these accorded opposition groups the capacity to express their claims in an international forum, they would rarely elicit more than utterances of solidarity. The most concrete proposal to emerge from the Brasília seminar was for an International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, to be held on 21 March 1967, the anniversary of the Sharpeville shootings.

Similarly, rights talk played a muted and contingent role in discussions at the UN seminar on apartheid held at Kitwe, Zambia, in 1967.
Nevertheless, the delegates at Kitwe did focus attention on issues that overlapped anti-apartheid and human rights concerns, notably the treatment of prisoners. By 1968 the UN Commission on Human Rights had established a working party to investigate the conditions of political prisoners. As such, the conduct of the apartheid regime was explicitly measured against key international human rights conventions, including the 1948 Universal Declaration, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.\(^{38}\) The WCRSAPP became intimately connected to the networks and institutions that were tasked with carrying out this process, for example by supplying witnesses for the working party meeting in London in 1968.\(^{39}\) In the years following the Rivonia Trial, the fate of political prisoners became a core feature of the discourse of solidarity that characterized transnational anti-apartheid activism. Moreover, efforts to sustain public interest in the plight of the imprisoned leadership of South African liberation movements drew anti-apartheid campaigners into networks and institutions that – notwithstanding the limits of their sovereign power – provided a forum for the expression of a postcolonial language of human rights. Whether those institutions provided a viable basis for any progress towards national liberation in South Africa was another question entirely, however. In the aftermath of decolonization, apartheid became a fundamental concern of international organizations transformed by the participation of postcolonial nations, and, in the process, new visions of human rights would be advanced.

What price human rights? Debates over violent struggle

The twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1968, marked something of a low point in the hopes of those who had participated in the debates of the 1940s. The UN International Conference on Human Rights, marked by a series of attacks on Israel in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, was widely regarded as the nadir.\(^{40}\) The efforts to mark the anniversary bear further scrutiny, however, insofar as they demonstrate the entangled debates around human rights and struggles against white minority regimes in southern Africa. Following the General Assembly’s decision to designate 1968 as International Year for Human Rights, the United Nations had called upon members to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration with intensified action on fundamental rights. States were urged to ratify
key human rights agreements, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as well as the International Labour Organization conventions against discrimination in employment and equal pay for women. In Britain, plans for the Year for Human Rights were coordinated by a committee chaired initially by the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Joost de Blank, which instituted a subgroup tasked with exploring ways to assist the ‘people of Britain’s dependent territories to realise their human rights’.41

On one level, these discussions remained closely bound up with the language of sovereign rights and the anti-colonial struggle. At the same time, though, some began to move the debate onto new ground, seeking to bring human rights principles to bear on the matter of incipient armed insurgencies in southern Africa. During 1967 South African fighters had infiltrated Rhodesia alongside fighters from the Zimbabwe African People’s Union, in search of a return route to South Africa. Operating independently in difficult terrain, the fighters were ultimately defeated after a series of clashes with the Rhodesian security forces. Although the mission ultimately failed, it demonstrated the capacity of MK fighters to engage in serious combat and marked a further escalation of insurrectionary violence across the settler colonies of southern African in the mid-1960s.42 While some contemporary observers regretted the apparent victory for the ‘apostles of violence’ within nationalist movements, serious discussion of the legitimacy of armed resistance to colonial rule began to suffuse public debate in the United Kingdom during Human Rights Year.43

It was here that the impact of the UN International Conference on Human Rights, held in Tehran in April and May 1968, was most strongly felt. The conference has been presented in recent accounts as a kind of farce, an opportunity exploited by its hosts to wrap their authoritarianism in the blanket of moral principles. Rather than promote the development of the human rights ideals first envisaged in 1948, the Tehran conference appeared to demonstrate that decolonization had resulted in the dominance of Afro-Asian blocs determined to promote visions of anti-colonial liberation over individual rights and freedoms.44 In advance of the meeting, Manouchehr Ganji, Special Rapporteur on apartheid to the Commission on Human Rights, had called for the United Nations to ‘tirelessly reiterate its condemnation’ of apartheid.45 The Tehran conference certainly fulfilled this aim. African states were particularly vigorous in their collective pursuit of a strong line on apartheid, eschewing compromise in favour of robust condemnation.46 South African race policy, the final statement declared, was a ‘crime against humanity’ because it
represented an intense form of racial discrimination. The failure of South Africa, along with Portugal and the Rhodesian government, to respect the principles of self-determination was cast as a threat to international peace – a statement that would have seemed impossible to sustain only four years earlier. Here, the context of the campaign emboldened and inflected its language, ensuring that rights and sovereignty would mingle in the evolving discourse initially ranged at the abused rights of South African political prisoners.

If Tehran revealed – or, perhaps, underlined – the political expediencies that obstructed attempts to pursue human rights campaigns through the United Nations, the organization did provide an institutional framework within which NGOs could at least undertake transnational lobbying activities. Dennis Brutus, who attended Tehran as a representative of IDAF, reported that the conference had allowed him to establish contact with the governments that supported Defence and Aid (and provided a significant proportion of its income), but also to meet with NGOs to discuss the treatment of prisoners. It is, in fact, striking that the conference report paid close attention to the rights of those fighting against ‘racist regimes’ in southern Africa, recommending that all states ‘take all possible steps to ensure that persons are not detained in prison for prolonged periods without charge’, and noted that ‘minority racist or colonial regimes’ that ‘frequently resort to executions and inhuman treatment of those who struggle against such regimes’ should instead treat these individuals as political prisoners or prisoners of war. The IDAF (and WCRSAPP) were operating in networks that mingled rights talk with self-determination, against a backdrop of anti-colonial internationalism. In the late 1960s, though, this was conditioned by the context of violent confrontations between liberation movements and the lingering vestiges of settler colonialism.

It is significant that the language of human rights could be employed as a rationale for armed struggle, rather than being set in contrast to it. In September 1968 the Anti-Apartheid Movement held a conference on ‘Human rights and the struggle against apartheid’, chaired by the Liberal Party MP and AAM president David Steel, and also by John Ennals, chair of the AAM. The conference, whose speakers included ANC representatives Joe Matthews and Robert Resha, Guardian reporter Patrick Keatley and the anti-apartheid activist Ruth First, sought to demonstrate the extent of human rights abuses within South Africa, and thus show how African forces had been compelled to turn to violence in their efforts to obtain rights and freedom. These efforts do not appear to have achieved a great deal of success, and in the final months of Human Rights Year the AAM honorary secretary, Abdul Minty (who had also advocated on
behalf of the WCRSAPP), used the Human Rights Year Committee bulletin to excoriate British failure to support freedom struggles in southern Africa. Individuals who had turned to armed struggle in their attempts to ‘achieve their basic rights and dignity’ were not, Minty argued, ‘freaks, wedded to a philosophy of violence’. For a member of a committee devoted to a year of educational programmes on human rights, Minty struck a pessimistic note, accepting that it was a ‘major task’ to inform people in the United Kingdom why African movements had resorted to armed resistance against white rule in southern Africa. For Third World leaders, notions of human rights seemed compatible with armed struggles undertaken in the just cause of liberation from colonialism; they seemed less so when viewed from the moral perspective of Western sympathizers. In the second half of the 1960s redefinitions of human rights were fostered by the advocacy of Third World states, and in particular by the impact of the ongoing crisis of colonialism in southern Africa.

**Individuals and (postcolonial) nations: development as human rights**

In his recent account of the international politics of anti-apartheid, Ryan Irwin has argued that human rights replaced nationalism as the ‘thematic forefront’ of debate in the late 1960s. As Burke has suggested, however, Tehran marked a shift from the standard of individual rights imagined in 1948 to one ‘that emphasized economic development and the collective rights of the nation’. The late colonial context of rights talk was a contingent marker of its increasing conflation with sovereignty and colonial liberation. The flurry of efforts to build and sustain UN pressure on South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal's colonial territories should be set within a wider narrative that describes an evolving human rights regime shaped by the increasing power of Third World nations in the General Assembly. As Burke demonstrates, the influence of the non-aligned bloc in the 1960s was hugely significant in the development of a human rights regime that could hold individual states to account. It was not the diminishing power of nationalism that marked anti-apartheid in the late 1960s but the burgeoning agency of the Third World nation state.

In 1966 the twenty-first session of the UN General Assembly had approved the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Dismissed as ‘something of a curiosity’ by some contemporary observers, Third World and Eastern bloc states welcomed it as a shift in the balance of human rights from individuals to nations. Together, the
Covenant and the Tehran Conference define a moment at which postcolonial and non-aligned states had come to dominate the UN human rights agenda, while Western commentators remained squeamish about contemporary ‘rights talk’. Some of the strongest advocates of this ‘adjustment’ of the principles of human rights were the heads of regimes that equated social and economic rights with the success of state-directed policies of development and modernization. In the late 1960s it seemed that individualistic definitions of human rights were in abeyance, and political rights were deprecated in favour of a renewed focus on economic development. This shift of focus from personal, political rights and freedoms to social and economic rights distinguished the UN debates of 1968 from the discussions, over a decade earlier, at Bandung, where – despite the efforts of Communist states – social and economic rights had been integrated alongside, rather than promoted above, more individualistic conceptions of freedom.

By the late 1960s a distinctive Third World view, with an emphasis upon shared histories of colonization and attendant economic weakness, had come to mark debates around human rights. Western activists were, it seemed, prepared to adjust their own campaigns to suit the prevailing model of rights thinking, as shown when the IDAF and WCRSAPP engaged in UN forums. Indeed, the emphasis on social and economic rights seemed to present no barrier to those who had earlier argued that colonialism and apartheid were primarily repugnant due to their denial of individual rights. In February 1968 an editorial in *Africa Digest* noted the ongoing efforts to persuade governments to align their laws to the principles of the Universal Declaration, but acknowledged that very real economic and political constraints had made African states ‘cautious in committing themselves on Human Rights’. In particular, it noted that obligations towards refugees had been difficult to fully honour in the context of the population displacement that had resulted during the process of decolonization; indeed, by the mid-1970s Africa could be regarded as ‘the continent of refugees’. In this context, new definitions of human rights were beginning to emerge in postcolonial political discourse, shaped more by the contingencies associated with the process of decolonization than by any formal transfer of power.

But economic conditions could also become a point of reference for rights claims in themselves. Quoting from article 25 of the Universal Declaration, dealing with the ‘right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family’, the *Africa digest* editorial called for new thinking and ‘greater generosity’ in Western aid programmes. At a stroke, development could thus be cast as a human
rights campaign, states could be conceived as rights-holders, and the responsibility for action returned to the former colonial power. This line of thought had precursors in the concerns over ‘neocolonialism’ that had emerged in Third World thinking at the end of the 1950s, and had been picked up by Western campaigners thereafter. In 1962 the apartheid activist Michael Scott had told the UN Special Commission on Colonialism that a peaceful transition to a postcolonial world was bound up with struggles against ‘injustice and tyranny and unnecessary poverty and deprivation of rights’. By the latter part of the 1960s, however, African officials, such as Ibrahima Boye, the Senegalese secretary of the UN Commission on Human Rights, were beginning to suggest that economic development was a more pressing issue for Africans than Western concepts of ‘fundamental rights’.

Away from global institutions, the focus on economic development fostered a new, materialist strand of Western humanitarian discourse with an emphasis on the capacity of Third World states to deliver economic and social progress, particularly in postcolonial Africa. Beyond the rights advocacy of the AAM, this represented a parallel but distinct grass-roots movement growing out of NGOs engaged specifically in issues of development. In January 1968 a group of individuals associated with organizations such as Oxfam and Christian Aid came together to articulate their sense of an emerging crisis in the so-called ‘developing world’, subsequently published as the ‘Haslemere Declaration’. This group bridged the transition from rights as an individual issue (as represented by the WCRSAPP and AAM) to a focus on the nation as guarantor of rights, emerging from the postcolonial debates of the United Nations. On the surface, rights talk was absent from the Declaration: political and economic independence and self-determination were highlighted as intimately linked to the eradication of ‘human suffering and deprivation’, but no attempt was made to suggest that such suffering was a betrayal of any universal standards. Rather than viewing Third World poverty as a breach of rights in itself, the Haslemere Declaration saw impoverishment as a symptom of an exploitative system that threatened Western civilization: ‘[A] system that can no longer respond to the individual abroad will deny human rights to those at home.’

The Haslemere Declaration was intended to be a programme of practical measures to rebalance what its authors perceived to be the unequal and exploitative frameworks of international trade and economic relations. While it did not rely on references to fundamental and universal values or rights, it was evidently influenced by contemporary attempts to reframe the parameters of debate around development, trade and
aid, such as the Algiers Charter of Economic Rights for the Third World, drafted at the first meeting of the Group of 77 ministers in October 1967, and the Arusha Declaration, announced by the Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, in February the same year. The Arusha Declaration was explicitly referenced by the Haslemere Group as something that should be supported by developed nations, which ‘should welcome and sympathise with attempts to create societies different from their own’.67 As Moyn has noted, however, the Arusha Declaration, although cast within the moral framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, made only minor reference to the ‘dignity of the individual’ and certainly did not position human rights as any kind of universal code regulating the behaviour of states.68 Nevertheless, the Haslemere Declaration signalled, as did the 1968 Africa Digest editorial, that formerly colonized nations might construe social and economic development as a right in itself.

Economic inequality could, moreover, be positioned as a continuing form of personal oppression that drew formerly colonized peoples, alongside subaltern and deprived groups elsewhere, into humanitarian discussions with a global focus. In March 1969 the Haslemere Group announced plans to hold a convention on Third World poverty at the Roundhouse in London, the spiritual home of 1960s radical intellectualism. The organizers of the ‘Poverty is violence’ conference invited speakers who they perceived to be ‘representatives of the Third World’, who included the Anglican bishop and anti-apartheid campaigner Trevor Huddleston, the Black Panther leader Bobby Seale and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder Câmara. It was the latter’s contribution that was, perhaps, the most significant, in that it elaborated a cyclical relationship between the ‘violence’ of structural social and economic inequality, violent revolt on the part of the oppressed and violent authoritarian repression.69 Câmara, in his subsequent full-length treatise on poverty and violence, acknowledged the difficulties faced when seeking to make connections between material structures and principles of rights: ‘It is not done’, he noted, ‘to talk too much about justice, rights, structural changes’.70 The extent to which Câmara and the Haslemere Group were consciously seeking to embed campaigns around material inequalities within a discourse of rights is not clear; this was, arguably, the language of what Michael Barnett has called ‘alchemical humanitarianism’, rather than human rights.71 But these interventions illustrate the extent to which the language of rights could be remoulded in the light of the unfinished business of decolonization, with an emphasis on the social and economic, in contrast to the fundamental political, and individual, aspects of the 1948 Universal Declaration.
In the wake of the Roundhouse convention, AAM activist Robert Hutchinson proposed a ‘Haslemere-style’ campaign focused on southern Africa. He argued that ‘British capitalism [was] buttressing the racist regimes of southern Africa and collaborating with those regimes to exploit and dehumanise the (mainly) African workers’, and called for ‘publicity and direct action’ against the British businesses involved. Early in 1970 the Haslemere Group launched a targeted campaign against Barclays Bank, centred on the public condemnation of its investments and activities in South Africa. The Barclays protest campaign, with its emphasis on individual direct action, was timed to exploit the public interest that had been aroused by the distinctive ‘Stop the seventy tour’ campaign against sporting connections with South Africa – an action that has been seen as revitalizing the anti-apartheid movement in Britain, effectively exploiting the repertoire of 1960s radical politics in the cause of anti-racism and human rights. Human rights had long been equated with civil liberties in British political discourse, but the connection between civil rights and anti-racism suggests the domestication of central tenets of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid campaigns.

In a striking example of this impact, the Huddersfield ‘Stop the seventy tour’ campaigners announced in July 1970 that they would continue as a ‘human rights’ group, given the success of their campaign. They set up an anti-racist education campaign and provided practical advice on civil liberties issues, symbolically connecting the legacy of advocacy groups such as the WCRSAPP into the materialist discourse on human rights that had emerged in response to the ongoing decolonization process. While the experience of one regional group of activists cannot be considered generalizable, there is a sense in which this shift of emphasis was representative of the trajectory of human rights activism in Britain in the early 1970s. That human rights were equated with civil liberties reflected a long and continuing trend in British political discourse. The practical focus on anti-racism suggests a domestication of the central tenets of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid campaigns, precipitating a shift of emphasis towards racial tension within postcolonial Britain. Looking at how campaigns about the Rivonia Trials, UN conferences on sovereignty and changing attitudes to humanitarianism among NGOs all percolated down to this group of anti-apartheid activists in West Yorkshire helps to draw out the entangled histories of human rights and decolonization. Human rights constitute a fluid and flexible discourse, continually subject to historical contingencies; during the 1960s the process of decolonization was a primary factor in shaping the definition of ‘rights talk’.
Conclusions

The process of decolonization was critical for the development of human rights in the post-war period. By the end of the 1960s freedom from colonialism was understood as a self-evident necessity, underpinned by the most fundamental ‘right’ of self-determination. The conflation of human rights and sovereignty by anti-colonial movements seemingly generated anxiety as much as hope, as the call to ‘seek ye first the political kingdom’ was gradually recognized as a slim guarantee of human rights in the broader sense. Nevertheless, the call for ‘rights’ in the anti-colonial movements of the 1960s became more than a straightforward exposition of the right to self-determination. The notion of human rights underwent a form of mitosis, with distinct and divergent discourses of Third World ‘rights’ emerging, including the strong (and troubling) sense that the postcolonial state could be conceptualized as a rights-holder. ‘Grass-roots’ forms of human rights advocacy, exemplified by movements such as Amnesty International, had focused on the rights of the individual, and legal protections of those rights, through asylum, freedom from arbitrary imprisonment and adherence to due legal process, but Third World governments began to claim the ‘right’ to social and economic development, reframing the development state as the primary agent of human rights. Western activists, nevertheless, continued to place the protection of the individual human at the centre of human rights discourse. It is significant that one key strand of Western anti-apartheid solidarity, embodied in IDAF, framed its campaign in support of South African liberation movements around concerns for the rights and well-being of individuals, and sustained its work through a network of anonymous mediators.

Decolonization also shaped the terrain upon which the concerns of Western anti-apartheid activists were played out, however. The unmaking of the colonial world meant that those networks and relationships that had fostered anti-colonial struggles for independence became transnational, both functionally and ideologically. In functional terms, supranational institutions such as the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity provided transnational spaces in which anti-apartheid activism was enacted; in ideological terms, however, these same institutions, led by representatives of former African and Asian colonial territories, fostered the development of an instrumentalist view of human rights. During the 1960s apartheid emerged as a central focus of concern at key international forums (well beyond the dysfunctional debate in Tehran), in which anti-racism and human
rights helped to stabilize ‘decolonization at the international level’. For international anti-apartheid activists, ‘solidarity’, which had initially connoted a more straightforward advocacy of fundamental principles of sovereign rights, had come to be set within the framework of Cold War geopolitics and ‘neocolonial’ relations within the world economy. In this context, human rights – defined in terms of social and economic rights – became a way of framing debates around development and neocolonialism. The Haslemere Group thus exemplified early steps towards a critique of the structural inequalities of the decolonized world, and demonstrated how the debate had taken shape, from West Yorkshire to the ‘Third World’.

Human rights, as an ‘empty vessel’ into which all manner of ideas and concepts could be poured, was an obvious choice of discursive framework for Western activists seeking to reconfigure their own agendas in the light of the transition to independence in Africa. At the same time, apartheid had become one of the primary issues around which human rights campaigns came to be defined. Human rights discourse was instrumental in shaping anti-apartheid activism in the 1960s, but, equally importantly, apartheid was a critical point of reference that shaped the parameters of human rights discourse at local and global levels. Above all, the unresolved question of apartheid served as a reminder that the process of decolonization was ambiguous and incomplete. Even when the nation state had emerged as the single possibility for postcolonial independence, decolonization continued to exist as a process of becoming, marked not by its possibilities but by its limitations. The ongoing existence of colonialism and apartheid in southern Africa was a constant reminder that Africans’ experiences of independence were contingent upon their place in the world. Apartheid was both metaphor for, and lived experience of, African dependency.