



## **A Lockean Perspective on Global Governance and Human Rights Without Borders**

<sup>1</sup>**Professor Idorenyin Francis Esikot**

<sup>2</sup>**Andrew -Essien, Ubong Sunday**

Department of Philosophy,  
University of Uyo.

### **Abstract**

Human rights are often seen as universal principles, but their protection is frequently limited by national borders and sovereignty. Many people continue to face violations of their rights due to political oppression, weak institutions, or neglect by governments. Even smaller and less developed nations are being oppressed by bigger and more developed nations. This situation raises a pressing question: how can human rights be protected effectively in a world divided by national borders and laws? This study explored the relevance of John Locke's philosophy of natural rights in shaping a moral approach to global governance. It sought to understand how Lockean views can guide the international community in protecting human dignity beyond state borders. The study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilising analytical, historical-critical, expository, and descriptive approaches to interpret the relevance of Locke's ideas on natural rights to modern governance context. It analysed the tension between state sovereignty and universal moral obligations, and the role of international institutions such as the United Nations, and evaluated the challenges of enforcing rights in a fragmented world. It is established that global institutions, treaties, and collective consent among nations are essential tools for promoting and protecting human rights. Challenges such as cultural diversity, political interests, and the lack of a central enforcement authority complicate implementation, yet these obstacles do not diminish the ethical obligation to act. The study recommended strengthening international cooperation, ensuring accountability through global institutions, and promoting shared responsibility among states.

**Key words:** *Global Governance, Human Rights, John Locke, State Sovereignty*

## Introduction

Human rights are commonly understood as the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every human being simply because they are human. These rights are often described as universal, meaning they apply to all persons regardless of nationality, race, culture, or political system. In practice, however, the protection of human rights is often tied to the authority of individual states, which are expected to safeguard the rights of their citizens within their territories. This sometimes leads to criminal victimization of interindividual (Ignatius and Denis 36-43). If human rights truly belong to all persons, should their protection depend entirely on the boundaries and decisions of sovereign states? Scholars of political philosophy and international law have long observed that the universal language of human rights often stands in tension with the political reality of state sovereignty (Donnelly 10; Freeman 23).

The philosophical writings of John Locke provide an important starting point for addressing this concern. Locke argued that human beings possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property even before the creation of political societies. According to him, governments are formed through the consent of the people primarily to protect these rights (Umotong 102; John 371). Political authority therefore, does not create human rights but exists to safeguard them. Locke's argument suggests that human rights have a moral foundation that stands above political institutions and laws. If this claim is taken seriously, then the protection of human rights cannot be limited entirely by national borders (Locke 287; Tuckness and Thompson 92).

In the contemporary world, questions about the global protection of human rights have become significant. International institutions such as the United Nations attempt to promote and defend these rights across different countries, yet serious violations continue to occur in many parts of the world. The tension between state sovereignty and the universal character of human rights therefore remains a central issue in global governance. Locke's theory of natural rights can provide a moral basis for thinking about human rights beyond the boundaries of the nation state (Beitz 45; Donnelly 37). This work therefore examines how Lockean political thought can help clarify the relationship between universal human rights and global governance.

## Conceptual Clarifications

**Concept of Human Rights:** The concept of human right has been a prominent daily discourses, especially in socio-political discussions, and this has raised several questions and concerns. Such questions include: what is human right? Do humans have rights at all? On what lies the legality or basis of these rights? While attempting the answer these questions, scholars have been polarized on where they pitch their tent. Esikot and Obot (5) note that this polarization is between the naturalist school and the political school. While the naturalist are of the opinion that human rights are innate and preempted by the very existence of humans, the political school of thought believe that human rights “are derived not from our nature as human beings but out of the political need to maintain universal order and political stability”.

According to Ernst and Heilinger (vii), “... human rights, by their very nature, are held by all human beings either simply because of their common humanity, their human dignity, or because a set of basic needs and interests.” This highlights that human rights belong to every person, not because of status or law, but simply by virtue of being human. This view clearly aligns with the naturalist school. Similarly, Syafrinaldi and Syafridi (275) argue that:

Human rights are basic rights that are inherently attached to all human beings, are universal and

inalienable. Therefore, human rights must be protected, respected, defended, and should not be taken away by anyone. The development of human rights is inseparable from the development of philosophical thoughts, and conceptually, the history of human rights can be traced down to the emergence of constitutionalism in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Thus, this implies that while the law (through the constitution and various declarations of the rights of man) acknowledges the existence of human rights (as argued by the political school), human rights are not merely legal constructs but derive from moral and philosophical reasoning that predates contemporary institutions. The necessity of human rights extends beyond the prevention of overt violations; it also promotes the conditions for peace, stability, and sustainable development.

**Concept of Global Governance:** Global governance refers to the collective management of global affairs through a network of international institutions, laws, and agreements aimed at addressing challenges that transcend national borders (Held and McGrew 56). Global governance arose because many global problems, such as peacekeeping, climate change, fair trade, cyber-attacks, terrorism, and money laundering, were too vast for any single country to manage alone. While some proposed a world government to manage such problems globally, this was not feasible. Instead, global governance developed as a means for countries to cooperate in addressing pressing challenges without forming a world government, thereby ensuring collaboration while respecting national independence (Yuyan, 119). According to Yuyan:

...global governance is a sum of institutions—either rules or organizations—established by state or non-state actors with the intent of addressing global issues. The creation of these institutions is based on consensus reached by stakeholders through negotiation after they have balanced their common and conflicting interests. The fundamental function of global governance lies in the provision of global public goods (119).

Yuyan's description presents global governance as a flexible and negotiated system rather than a rigid world government.

### **Locke's Philosophy of Human Rights**

Locke describes the state of nature as a condition in which human beings live before forming a political society. Locke's account presents human beings as rational, morally responsible, and naturally equal prior to the establishment of political authority (Turner 24). In this state of nature, all individuals are naturally free and equal. Although there is no formal government, no recognised judge, and no established civil law, individuals are still governed by the law of nature, which Locke identifies with reason. This reason teaches that no one ought to harm another in their life, liberty, or possessions (Locke 271; Dunn 43). According to Kelly:

Locke claims that people in the state of nature are both morally free and equal. People are free in the sense of not being subject to the domination or direction of others... As a moral concept, freedom is something that all enjoy as a right of nature, so the state of nature is a condition of moral equality (187).

John Locke's conception of the state of nature differs significantly from that of Thomas Hobbes. While both thinkers employ the concepts of the state of nature and the social contract as foundations for their political theories, Locke advances a more optimistic account of human

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nature. He develops the ideas of natural and inalienable rights, limited government, and the right to dissent. This stands in sharp contrast to Hobbes's portrayal of the state of nature as a condition marked by perpetual insecurity and conflict, where life is characterised by fear and the constant threat of violence (Ganie 58). For Hobbes (143), in the state of nature "the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". According to Esikot (Hobbesian Ethics 51), although Hobbes recognises the equality of individuals in the state of nature, he argues that this equality gives rise to competition in the pursuit of desired ends. Thus, Esikot (51) avers that:

...when two men desire the same thing which they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies and endeavor to subdue and destroy one another... There is a state of insecurity; consequently life and property are insecure... To worsen the situation, men lived in continual fear of danger and violent death.

John Locke describes the social contract as unfolding in two distinct stages. In the first stage, individuals in the state of nature, who are naturally free and equal, mutually agree to form a political community. In the second stage, members of this community enter into a further agreement to establish a government. Unlike Thomas Hobbes's conception of an absolute sovereign who stands outside and is not bound by the contract, Locke maintains that the sovereign authority remains part of the agreement and is therefore accountable to the people. Consequently, governmental power is not unlimited; it is constrained by the obligation to protect the natural rights of citizens and to govern in accordance with their collective interest (Ganie 59).

John Locke's theory of natural rights forms a cornerstone of his political philosophy; it articulates a vision of human beings as inherently free and equal by nature, independent of any human institution. For Locke, natural rights are God-given entitlements that individuals possess simply by virtue of being human, discoverable through reason within the state of nature (Locke 269). Locke placed great importance on the natural rights of individuals. He maintained that individuals possess a right to self-preservation, as well as rights to life, liberty, and right to own "property" (Locke 287). While the right of self-preservation in its unrestricted form was given up with the formation of civil society, Locke argued that the natural rights to life, liberty, and estate continued to endure within this new social arrangement (Locke 357). Among these rights, Locke particularly emphasised freedom from slavery as a core natural right (Turner 5).

### **Locke and the Principle of Sovereignty vs. Global Governance**

The principle of sovereignty is a foundational concept in political philosophy. It is rooted in the belief that each state possesses supreme authority over its territory and population, free from external interference (Held and McGrew 45). Sovereignty embodies self-determination and the right of peoples to shape their own political destinies. In practice, sovereignty serves as the safeguard against domination by foreign powers and ensures the moral and political autonomy of states (Donnelly 102). However, in an increasingly interdependent world, the traditional notion of absolute sovereignty faces moral and practical challenges. It is within this evolving context that John Locke's political philosophy provides both an ethical critique and a moral context for rethinking sovereignty in the age of global governance.

John Locke did not explicitly use the term "global governance," but his writings in *Two Treatises of Government* anticipated many of its moral questions. Locke's vision of global governance is rooted in his broader theory of natural rights and government by consent. Although Locke primarily wrote within the context of national governance, the principles underlying his *Second Treatise of Government* extend naturally to global relations. He believed that all individuals, as

rational beings, are equal members of a moral community governed by the 'law of nature', which obliges them to respect one another's life, liberty, and property (John 371). This universal moral order suggests that legitimate governance, whether local or global, must arise from the consent of those governed and operate to secure their natural rights. In this sense, Locke's thought anticipates the idea of an international society grounded in mutual respect, justice, and limited power, where states act not as isolated entities but as participants in a global community of nations.

Locke envisioned a world where justice and peace emerge not from coercive institutions but from rational cooperation among moral agents (Tuckness 98). For Locke, the moral law of nature binds all human beings, regardless of nationality, and obliges them to respect the rights and dignity of others. Therefore, a Lockean model of global governance would rest on mutual consent, equality among states, and the universal recognition of natural rights. It would neither replace national sovereignty with a global authority nor allow states to act unjustly under the guise of independence. Instead, Locke's vision would encourage a moral community of nations that cooperatively seek to uphold the rights and freedoms of all humanity (Simmons 125).

### **Human Rights in the Contemporary Global System**

In the contemporary world, human rights have become a central concern in international politics and global governance. The recognition that every human being possesses inherent dignity has encouraged the development of legal standards and institutions designed to protect individuals from abuse and injustice. Although the modern state remains the primary authority responsible for protecting the rights of its citizens, the international community increasingly recognises that human rights violations are not purely domestic matters. Instead, they are seen as issues that concern humanity as a whole (Donnelly 121).

This growing awareness has led to the development of international laws, agreements, and institutions aimed at promoting and protecting human rights across national borders. Many of these developments draw philosophical inspiration from the idea of natural rights, particularly the political thought of John Locke. Locke's claim that individuals possess rights to life, liberty, and property before the formation of political society has influenced modern discussions about the universal character of human rights (John 368). In this sense, contemporary human rights law can be seen as an attempt to translate moral principles into legal obligations that apply to all states (Freeman 134).

Despite these developments, the global protection of human rights remains a complex and contested task. Differences in political systems, cultural traditions, and national interests often shape how states respond to human rights concerns (Beitz 123). Critics often warn that such actions may be influenced by political interests or may undermine the principle of national sovereignty. For this reason, the challenge facing the international community is to find ways to protect human rights while also maintaining respect for the political independence of states. Balancing these concerns remains one of the most difficult tasks in the contemporary global system (Beitz 131).

### **The Transition from State Sovereignty to Global Responsibility**

The modern international system is largely organised around the principle of state sovereignty. Sovereignty refers to the authority of a state to govern its people and territory without external interference. For centuries, this idea has served as a foundation for political order and

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international relations. Governments are regarded as the highest authority within their borders, responsible for making laws, maintaining security, and protecting the welfare of their citizens. While this arrangement has helped maintain stability among nations, it has also serious concerns when states fail to protect the basic rights of their peraisedople (Freeman 112). Since states are recognised as independent political units with the power to make laws and regulate social life within their borders, sovereignty has also created difficulties when governments used their authority to suppress or violate the rights of their citizens. In such situations, the principle of sovereignty often prevented outside actors from intervening (Freeman 118).

In recent decades, the growing recognition of universal human rights has challenged the traditional understanding of sovereignty. If human rights belong to all individuals simply because they are human, then the protection of these rights cannot depend entirely on the power or willingness of individual governments. Situations in which states abuse their citizens or neglect their rights raise important moral questions for the international community. This tension between national authority and universal human dignity has encouraged scholars and political leaders to rethink the meaning and limits of sovereignty in a globalised world (Donnelly 89).

The political philosophy of John Locke provides an important perspective for understanding this issue. Locke argued that political authority is legitimate only when it protects the natural rights of individuals. Governments are formed through the consent of the people in order to secure these rights. When a government fails to perform this responsibility, its authority loses moral justification. From this point of view, sovereignty should be understood not simply as power but as a responsibility to safeguard the rights and dignity of human beings (Locke 350). This idea birthed the contemporary democratic governance that is practiced in most nations. According to Esikot (*Democracy in Nigeria* 90), democracy is the rule of the people through majority consent as opposed to dictatorship. He went on to aver that "the rule of the people this approximates the rule of the majority" (91), and this aligns perfectly with lockean views on government by consent. Although sovereignty remains a central principle in international relations, state power must operate within moral limits. Absolute authority over citizens is difficult to justify in a world where human rights are widely accepted as universal. Governments that engage in oppression, discrimination, or systematic violence against their populations cannot easily claim moral legitimacy simply by appealing to sovereignty (Freeman 124).

From a Lockean perspective, the legitimacy of political authority depends on its ability to protect the natural rights of individuals. When states fail to protect these rights, their claim to unquestioned authority becomes morally weakened. The growing acceptance of international human rights norms reflects this changing understanding of sovereignty. International agreements, human rights institutions, and global advocacy movements continue to encourage states to respect the rights of their citizens. Although many challenges remain, the gradual movement from absolute sovereignty toward a sense of global responsibility represents an important development in contemporary political thought (Beitz 118; Donnelly 102).

### **Locke's Influence on International Human Rights Declarations**

Locke's political philosophy remains a foundational influence on contemporary human rights frameworks, particularly in articulating the relationship between the individual and the state. Locke's theory of natural rights, life, liberty, and property, provides a moral and philosophical justification for the protection of individual freedoms against arbitrary authority. As Ganie (511) notes:

John Locke's Political philosophy became the basis of the modern

liberal political system. His ideas like inalienable rights of the individuals such as right to life, liberty, and property, Limited government based on the consent of the people and soon became the guiding spirit of modern democracies.

His works, especially the *Second Treatise of Government*, are considered a forerunner to documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the American and French declarations of rights, which translated his natural rights theory into codified, internationally recognised human rights. Locke's insistence that individuals possess rights to life, liberty and property grounded in natural law supplied a vocabulary that the political movements of the eighteenth century adapted when drafting foundational declarations (e.g., the American and French documents) and which later international framings inherited (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) (Donnelly 21). The UDHR's language and rationale were shaped by this Lockean legacy and its natural-rights apparatus (Przetacznik 74; Spickard 112). As Basilaia would aver:

The ideas and philosophies of John Locke instilled a spirit of respect for every individual. His assertion that "man is born free and equal" has promoted equality in the modern world.... Governments are responsible for protecting lives, property, and liberties but not violating the rights of the individuals... Such an idea appears in current politics. Governments reserve the rights of individuals and rule by the voices of the individuals... In modern nations, the rights and freedoms that are enjoyed by people originated from the beliefs and opinions of Locke (23)

Locke shaped core substantive priorities that reappear in international human rights charters. His tripartite emphasis on life, liberty and property helped seed later formulations that foreground life and liberty as inviolable goods; the UDHR reframed and extended these into a wider catalogue that included social, economic and cultural rights. Textbooks and doctrinal analyses show how the Lockean move, locating rights in natural law and reason rather than solely in sovereign decree, created a moral claim that rights ought to constrain states and provide a basis for transnational moral critique of domestic laws (Donnelly 23; Smith 41). At the same time, later drafters modified Lockean property-centric emphases in light of egalitarian and dignity-based developments, so that property rights were balanced against social welfare and anti-discrimination norms in international covenants. Contemporary commentators stress that while Locke's categories persist, the UDHR and subsequent covenants translated Lockean ideas into a set of legal and moral commitments, expanding the scope of what 'natural rights' could cover and shifting some justificatory language from divine-natural law to secular human dignity and international legal obligation (Donnelly 29).

Lockean theory also influenced the architecture of rights as limitations on state sovereignty, an idea foundational to the notion of an "International Bill of Rights." Locke's argument that legitimate government is based on the consent of the governed and bound by natural law anticipated the later legal idea that states are not free to treat persons in any way; they are constrained by internationally recognised obligations (Smith 58). The normative claim that sovereign power is legitimate only insofar as it respects fundamental human rights is therefore a Lockean imprint adapted to an international legal order that must reconcile diversity of constitutional traditions with universalist commitments (Smith 61; Donnelly 35).

The practical implications of Locke's influence on contemporary human-rights practice are both normative and institutional. Normatively, Lockean ideas continue to provide philosophical support for the claim that individuals possess rights not granted by states but protected against state overreach, a claim that undergirds human-rights advocacy, humanitarian intervention debates and transitional-justice structures. Institutionally, the Lockean legacy contributed to designing mechanisms (treaties, UN bodies, regional courts) that aim to hold states to standards that transcend particular domestic legal orders (Bertoldi 112; Turner 76).

Locke's theory of natural rights and government by consent remains central to the legal foundations of the modern human rights charter. His ideas have transcended national and cultural boundaries, influencing constitutional democracies, international conventions, and global justice movements. The reinterpretation of his ideas in light of modern social realities, such as gender equality, environmental justice, and global governance, demonstrates the adaptability of his philosophy to new contexts (Dunn 198).

### **Evaluation**

The subject matter presents a thoughtful and engaging attempt to connect the ideas of John Locke with today's global human rights system. This argument offers a compelling and morally grounded reading of Locke, especially in the way it connects his ideas to present-day global realities. It does not treat Locke as a distant historical figure but as a thinker whose insights still speak to the challenges of injustice, inequality, and state failure. The emphasis on human dignity as something that transcends national borders feels particularly persuasive, because it reflects the lived experience of a deeply interconnected world. By linking Locke's natural rights theory to institutions like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, the discussion makes a strong case that these bodies are not arbitrary inventions, but practical expressions of a long-standing moral tradition.

At the same time, the argument is at its strongest when it addresses the controversy between state sovereignty and international intervention. The idea that a state can lose its moral authority when it fails to protect its citizens is both powerful and unsettling. It forces one to confront difficult questions about who gets to decide when intervention is justified and how such actions can avoid becoming tools of political dominance. While the Lockean justification for intervention is convincing in principle, its application in real-world situations is often far more complicated. Issues of bias, selective enforcement, and political interests can distort what might otherwise appear as a clear moral duty.

That said, the work leans quite heavily on Locke's perspective, which limits how broadly it engages with other viewpoints. It does not give enough attention to views outside the Western philosophical tradition, particularly those that question whether ideas like "universal rights" apply equally across different cultures and histories. There is also room for a deeper discussion of real-world challenges, such as how states often resist external pressure or how economic inequality complicates the idea of equal rights for all. Even with these gaps, the work remains valuable because it explains complex ideas in a clear and relatable way, and it shows why Locke's thinking still matters when discussing human rights in today's global society.

### **Conclusion**

From a Lockean standpoint, the global protection of human rights is not merely an abstract moral claim but a lived responsibility grounded in the inherent dignity of every person; it recognizes that every person, no matter where they are born, possesses a dignity that cannot be negotiated or

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ignored. Because these rights are universal, they cannot be confined within the limits of national borders or reduced to the discretion of individual states. Human rights existed prior to the state, and for that reason, the state cannot claim absolute authority over them. John Locke presents a vision in which political authority exists primarily to secure life, liberty, and property. Locke's thought feels especially compelling in today's world; it reminds us that political power is not an end in itself, but a trust given for the sake of human well-being. When that trust is broken, the responsibility to respond does not vanish; rather, it expands beyond the state to the wider human community. In this light, global institutions and cooperative efforts are not intrusions, but necessary expressions of a shared moral duty to ensure that injustice does not go unanswered simply because it occurs within a particular territory. In this sense, global institutions become not distant bureaucracies but necessary instruments through which humanity collectively affirms that injustice anywhere demands attention everywhere. Bodies such as the *United Nations Human Rights Council* (UNHRC) and the *International Criminal Court* (ICC), alongside principles like *Responsibility to Protect*, embody this shared commitment to accountability, reminding the world that sovereignty cannot be used as a cover for oppression. A Lockean perspective, therefore, invites the international community to act with moral clarity and restraint, preserving the authority of states while not losing sight of the individual lives that give that authority its very purpose.

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