MANAGING cultural diversity is both a challenge and an imperative, particularly against the backdrop and speed of globalisation, which is creating unprecedented migratory flows and information exchanges.

But it is not inherent incompatibility among cultures that has erected barriers of mutual suspicion among civilisations, people of diverse origins and gender.

Rather, these barriers have been erected by dominant groups which have historically been able to perpetuate their supremacy and preserve their privileges through denying basic rights to those they deemed to be culturally, racially and socially inferior.

Whether by design or culpable omission, the worst manifestations of inflammatory and discriminatory practices have triggered, and may continue to engender, large-scale atrocities. Almost invariably retrospective, our revulsion and horror at these tragedies have yet to eliminate the ingrained suspicions against the perceived "differences" that ignite hatred. And, invariably, the need to find workable models of coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world has become stronger and more pressing.

Yet, while references to a so-called clash of civilisations evoke international tensions and conflicts, relations among diverse groups within a country may ultimately pose the biggest challenge to managing difference in today's fluid environment.

According to the United Nations Development Programme, the world's 192 countries contain about 5000 ethnic groups. Two-thirds of these countries have at least one substantial minority, ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10 per cent of the population. Often the empowering quality of such diversity is reflected in the harmonious and prosperous coexistence of different communities. But at times, diversity is said to be inimical to the raison d'etre of a unitary state, or to communal cohesion, or to the values of a state's majority.

It is undeniable that, despite our best efforts at fostering understanding among cultures and at protecting diversity, values and interests remain largely in the eyes of the beholders, who may not always pursue them with fairness and measure.

Even within the confines of a relatively homogeneous culture, reasonable people disagree over issues that speak to the core of their individual values or their perceptions of identity and interests.

Although we should never be oblivious to such deeply held feelings and convictions, their subjectivity - and possibly partisan limitations - makes them unlikely parameters to understand and to satisfactorily deal with diversity.

In contrast, universal human-rights norms and standards - which are anchored in what unites all of us, that is our common humanity, needs and aspirations - provide impartial guidance for managing and protecting diversity in all its aspects and at all times.

The very foundation of freedom, justice and peace rests on the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration emphasises that whatever their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language or any other status, all people are entitled to exercise their fundamental freedoms and human rights, without discrimination and without any limitations other than those accepted under international law.

Some states have called into question the very universality of the principles expressed in the Declaration. Many voice this criticism in the mistaken belief that universal principles are inimical to the promotion and expression of pluralistic diversity or cultural specificity, or market forces.

Some of these sceptics argue that civil and political rights, as articulated in the declaration, belong solely to Western traditions and agendas, and are not as widely shared as their advocates would make us
believe.

For their part, critics coming from liberal economic perspectives are wary of the Declaration's economic and social rights, which they regard as obstacles bound to hamper free-market practices and/or impose cumbersome obligations on states.

Not only do these positions undermine obligations that states have freely accepted to uphold, they also perpetuate suspicions among communities.

A springboard for dialogue is offered by the year-long campaign marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched last month. Today's worst challenges to human rights, tolerance and co-operation among civilisations no longer come uniquely from strong authoritarian regimes with highly centralised power structures, pervasive propaganda machines and intrusive security institutions.

The threats from weak, fragmented and deficient states, as well as violent non-state actors, equally undermine peace domestically and internationally.

Such threats can neither be contained simply by disdain nor can they be eradicated only by force. Above all, they cannot be confronted without co-operation.

Shared rights and common goals do not diminish the diversity that characterises the international community as a whole, each nation and, increasingly, most social environments. We have multiple affiliations that we are ready to acknowledge and wish to maintain. We should celebrate the diversity of cultures, beliefs and outlooks as positive forces that enable us to confront and find solutions for the challenges of this 21st century - those of inequality and poverty, conflict and injustice.

The Universal Declaration is the most translated document in the world. Since 2008 is also the International Year of Languages, we can perhaps note that despite the multiple forms in which it may appear, the declaration contains one simple and strong message: Tolerance and respect for one another.

Edited extract of a speech given on January 16 to the Madrid Alliance of Civilisations Forum.

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