

Human Rights Education in the Process of Global Social Change

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I am really pleased to be here because in some ways, when I started my work in human rights about 12 years ago, the UN was a very distant planet. I didn't have much connection with the UN. I was not clear on what could be the link between the UN and my own work as a human rights activist. Then I moved to the other side and while being at the UN, I realized that there is a lot to be done together with civil society, if only there was a better understanding of the UN bodies, systems and organs.

Now, I've been going through your questions and most of these questions I was planning to answer in my presentation, so I am happy...it makes my presentation relevant. I will start from your questions and from there, go into my presentation. After my little chat, I will give you the floor again. After looking at your questions, I felt it might be a good idea to start by a little bit of clarification on the UN bodies and then move on to the UN and human rights. Tomorrow we will have time to discuss human rights standards under the UN framework and in particular, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Now, the Charter of the UN starts with the following words: "We the peoples of the UN..." The peoples are all the peoples of the United Nations, all the peoples who are from countries that are members of the UN.

Now, what are the major purposes of the UN? Look at the main purpose under the Preamble, paragraph 3: "One of the purposes is to achieve international cooperation in promoting and encouraging the respect for HR and the fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex and religion." So the major purpose is to promote, protect and encourage human rights.

There are many bodies at the UN, not just one. Briefly, they are:

UN General Assembly

One of the main bodies is the General Assembly (GA), which includes all member states, and all members have the right to vote: one member, one vote. Here is where major policy decisions about human rights are made.

UN Commission on Human Rights

The UN Commission on HR is a body composed of member states, which meet once a year to go deeper into HR problems and violations and remedies that could be undertaken. It is a gathering of fifty-three member states - so, government representatives decide. But in reality, it's not just that. If we look at the Commission, there is a large number of non-governmental organizations that participate. To give you an idea, at the last meeting, there were 250 NGOs and 1900 individuals belonging to NGOs; so even if the Commission is a body of governmental representatives, there is still much participation of NGOs who lobby governments to take action and come back with resolutions and mechanisms for human rights protection.

UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights

Then you have the UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, of which I am a staff member. The High Commission for HR is part of the UN Secretariat, and it is composed of international civil servants. We don't receive instructions from governments, but rather from the High Commissioner of HR, who works under Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the UN. We are about 250 people in Geneva, and this gives you an idea of the little resources the office has. AI (Amnesty International) headquarters has 450 people, with a mandate that is very limited (AI only monitors civil and political rights). The office of the High Commissioner is supposed to look into all human rights issues, for promotion and protection of all human rights.

Now, may I ask you if you have had some experiences with the UN? How is the UN relevant to your work?

Exchange between the Participants and Elena Ippoliti:

Participant

I'm just saying that the UN is a governmental organization. Even if NGOs go to Geneva to lobby, they are not participating in the debate, but rather lobbying. There is a difference between participating and lobbying, and making an impact. My expectation about your presentation is that you will tell us about the difficulties your organization is facing with the objective that the UN has set for human rights, and the fact that the UN has its hands tied by being a governmental organization.

Elena Ippoliti

Okay...I will get back to it. Anyone else? Has anyone got any comments on your perception of the UN? Has anyone attended the Commission on HR?

Participant

I just wanted to say that I am so glad to see you here today. There are interventions that the UN makes, and there have been interventions that the UN chose not to make. It seems the UN chooses where to go...I am glad that you are here to explain this to me today.

Participant

I have been twice to the meeting of the Commission of Human Rights at the Geneva UN Session, in 1999 and 2000, with a lobbying group from Burma. It's like an NGO representative. We worked hard to lobby the other governments to pass the country resolutions against the Burmese military in Burma. But I need to know more about what happens after the country resolutions [are taken]: where do they go and how does the UN implement their work?

Participant

You seem to have made an apology for the UNHCHR, in the sense that you compared it with AI numbers. Is that an indication that the GA doesn't put much priority in your work?

Elena Ippoliti

Perhaps... Any other comments or perceptions of the UN?

Participant

In fact, for our work in HR, whatever we do gets credibility (from the UN), which is lacking in our own organizations.

Elena Ippoliti

So what you're saying is the UN can give you moral support for your organization's work?

The same participant

Yes. Exactly.

Participant

You said that in the GA (General Assembly), all members have one vote. But what about the veto power? What is the basis for some countries having veto power and others not?

Participant

I don't see the relevance of the UN in my work. Maybe it can provide me with HRE (human rights education) materials, but for instance in my country, Ethiopia, HR are very much violated. The government violates HR and while I came here, there are hundreds of political prisoners imprisoned. I didn't see Mary Robinson taking action on government structure - maybe it is not her fault, because the UN, due to its structure, cannot enforce the states most of the time. But I don't see any relevance because the UN didn't take any action.

Participant

My own position on the UN with HR is that it is only on paper... that has been my impression. So many times in Nigeria, human rights lawyers try to reach out to the human rights section of the UN; but the UN always says that it can make policy statements, but it cannot compel a particular country to do what it does not want to do. What is the usefulness if we gain the education, yet we are in bondage?

Participant

I just wanted to share an example of how a very small organization has been able to use the UN to inform our work. I work for the Quaker aboriginal affairs committee and since 1996, we have been monitoring events at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations by going to the UN forum. We also have an office at the UN, which monitors other events of interest to indigenous peoples. By going to this, we understand the issues that are being discussed; we understand emerging thinking on these issues; we learn about our governments' stands on these issues; and we learn how our government represents itself in this forum. We learn how we can make reports to monitoring committees, special rapporteurs and other mechanisms, so we empower our work. We become more visible to our governments. We are able to frame our own discourse with our governments in accordance with emerging international law and our governments' obligations, commitments and pretenses in this forum. We have found this small segment of the UN incredibly useful to our work and very supportive of our participation.

Elena Ippoliti

One more and then I take back the floor.

Participant

I attended the 55th session and I made some observations. While the UN is a very necessary and indispensable structure, it is susceptible to certain attitudes that sometimes push us to say that the UN is an accomplice in some situations. For example, in Rwanda, we know that the UN did nothing to prevent or avoid the genocide, even though it was possible to do so. The UN must be rigorous.

Elena Ippoliti resumes her discussion while at the same time answering various questions asked of her:

I actually agree with various comments that have been made up until now. Yes, it is clear that the UN is an intergovernmental organization, and this is why the decisions, including HR decisions, are taken by member states. Now, about the apology comment, it is clear that the resources devoted to HR are made by member states. The budget given to HR activities is about 1% of the whole budget of the UN. The state of the work of the UN in HR is decided by how much governments want to commit seriously to human rights.

The fact that there are not major enforcement mechanisms in the case of problems like genocide is true, but on the other side there are mechanisms that are being built. For example, various tribunals are being established. This problem of having a mechanism within the UN to enforce HR is a problem that everyone acknowledges and the UN is trying to find solutions. But this is a slow process because at the UN, every decision requires a lot of discussion, negotiation and also faces some opposition.

When I was working at the grassroots, national level, I felt the UN was not useful. But I think that is due to a lack of knowledge about how you can use the UN, how you can participate in the UN work. That is a problem, I think, based on my experience working at the UNHCHR, and I think it is important that you know what the UN is doing, what are the major activities, what are the ways in which you can participate in UN work.

Here are some examples that I have drawn from my work for the Decade for Human Rights Education:

We received NGO letters telling us that there was something happening in a country that was going to impede the work of an NGO - that a law was being passed that would block NGO activity in that country. We brought that letter to the attention of the High Commissioner. The HC has a broad scope of action, in terms of good offices and trying to help people to work together at the national level. So the HC wrote to the parliament of that country asking them to reflect on this law, since it could be detrimental to human rights work. Because of this letter, the law was suspended. This happened in 1997. The law was never adopted. So, HC can use its good offices to try to help. The letter came from an NGO like the ones that you work for. We can be very critical of the UN (I sensed this from your questions), but we can learn how to use the UN. I think this is much more useful for your work.

Let me give you another example relating to the development of national plans of action for human rights education. In some countries under the Decade, national plans have been developed. We have heard a lot of feedback from NGOs that this was not done using a participatory approach, where all different actors at the national level participated. So, what happened was that the HC decided to develop guidelines for the development of national plans of action. These guidelines could be used by NGOs in order to ensure that there was good consultation and participation of your organizations in the development, implementation and evaluation of these plans. Your countries may or may not have

developed such plans. Because of the Decade of Human Rights Education, you have a tool for lobbying for those plans, because the fact that UN instruments are there, they provide a tool for lobbying for human rights in your country. These resolutions, tools, and instruments are adopted by your government. So, the point is for you to understand that you need to learn much more about what the UN can offer and how to participate in UN activities, because you can lobby your government on that basis.

More on the development of plans of action for HRE under the Decade: Different plans have been developed in different countries and NGOs have had different contributions. In some countries, NGOs have had full involvement. For example, in Portugal, the government and the NGOs together formed a committee for human rights education. They developed a plan that was fully funded by the government budget and they are undertaking developing and implementing the plan, dividing some of the different components of the plan. For instance, AI (Amnesty International) Portugal will be working with teachers; the ministry of justice will train the judges and lawyers; the teachers' association will be working on introducing human rights in the school system. So you can see that the fact that there is a plan has helped the establishment of a coalition in the country between governmental and non-governmental bodies for human rights education. If you don't know that there is a Decade for HRE, there are guidelines that can help you lobby the government, and if you aren't aware of the international framework, you can't use it to bring HRE activities and issues to your governments and try to solicit them to do something about it.

Someone said the UNHCHR office can provide some materials and publications. Yes, definitely. This is an important resource that you have. For instance, I had people approach me about the establishment of documentation centers, asking what the UN can do for them. I think that the fact that you can receive all the materials and adapt them to your needs is an important resource. We have also been developing some training materials specifically targeted to some professional groups, such as police or prison officials. These have not been developed sitting in an office in Geneva, but they have been developed through pilot tests in various countries, because under the UN umbrella we do undergo training in many countries. So I encourage you to look through the list of the different materials you have in your bag and see what you can request and what would be useful for your work.

Some materials that are not published are available, and I will make them available at the Foundation. For instance, our training package for prison officials: these packages are based on international standards; therefore, they are very valuable because they start from the commitments that governments have made at the international level about respecting those standards, and then they are adapted to the profession that is concerned. We also have materials for social workers and we are developing materials for judges and lawyers. So these materials will go into how international human rights standards are useful for a profession and how they can be translated into the practice of a profession. This is a second way that we can establish a contact.

Then your colleague was mentioning that she was in Geneva working with a working group. I do think that you should not give up. I heard and read in your questions a lot of criticism about the UN not being useful to us. I am not trying to bring to you all the solutions of human rights in the world. I'm sorry that is not something that I or the UNHCHR can do, but rather, I wish to give you some concrete ideas on how you can use this organization.

About the Commission on Human Rights: Yes, it's true that NGOs are not members of the Commission on Human Rights. But what happens in the corridors of the Commission through the lobbying by NGOs is much more important than what goes on in the main room. I saw it. I can tell you that what NGOs are doing through the lobbying of governments to adopt resolutions about human rights violations or to strengthen the UN mechanisms for the protection of human rights is valuable. Again, it's only the kind of lobbying that can be done if you know how to use the mechanism. I have no time to go into the use of the Human Rights System, but you will have streams about it afterwards. You can also participate in different activities, such as the World Conference against Racism, for example. Did you know that you can participate? There is a whole system for accreditation for all NGOs that want to participate and who are working on racism issues. Does anybody know or has anybody applied for accreditation and for a grant to go to Durban for the World Conference on Racism? [show of hands]. About 10, out of 100 or more? Good!

It's important to know what you can get from these kinds of organizations before having a closed approach. For those of you who don't have this information, how can one go to Durban to participate in the World Conference on Racism? The lady over here has said she has not been invited...but that is not how it works. It is not the HC who sends out invitations to NGOs to participate, but it is for you to use the correct mechanism to get into the Commission on Human Rights. And who will give this information? The office of the HC is there to support your participation in international bodies. Tonight at my presentation on the UN website, I will show you how to get this information, how to participate in the Commission on Human Rights, how to participate in the World Conference on Racism, how to participate in the work of the different mechanisms of the UN that deal with your country. For instance, there are committees at the UN level that review the performance of your country on the basis of the different UN instruments. Have you been sending information to these committees? Do you know what those committees say when they talk about your country?

The UN cannot solve your problem or your country's situation, but it can provide you with some means for addressing your concerns at the international level. What we will do this evening is look into how to get information on how your country has been dealt with by these different UN mechanisms and what have been the findings. I don't go into the technicalities now for lack of time, but the moment they are faced with your country's report on how well it has done, for example, on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they are also looking at all the information that NGOs have been sending to us. If you don't send anything, it is a lost opportunity for you. It is a good opportunity for your government because nobody is saying anything about its

performance. But when NGOs send counter-reports, then these treaty bodies will be able to see what is the *real* performance of the country. So you have a chance to make your voice heard at the UN, if you know how to access it.

While HRE was supposed to be the topic of my presentation, I prefer that we establish a better understanding of what the UN can do for you and what you can do for the UN.

About sharing programs and materials with us. We are developing a resource collection for HRE at the Office of the HC and a database which will contain information about different programs, materials and organizations doing human rights education. Now not only will we be happy to receive your materials, but I encourage you to go through the database. We will do this together tonight. We will see how this database on human rights education can be useful to your work. It will tell you, for instance, which materials have been produced by which organizations for the training of women's groups, or for the training of judges or lawyers. You can request those materials and get in touch with other organizations working on it and this provides you with a platform for information and material sharing. Again, tonight, we will go more deeply into how to get that type of information, through the website of the HC.

The Office of the HC, in principle, is not a funding organization. But there are some ways in which the Office can provide assistance, even financial assistance. First of all, the Office runs a program of technical cooperation. This program is initiated upon a request from a government or NGO, but then is negotiated between our office and the government, in terms of what components the program should have. What we give under technical cooperation is, for example, assistance in developing training programs, in revising curricula, in setting up documentation centers, organizing seminars and workshops, and so on. Now, you want to be in touch with the Office of the HC, and I offer myself as an entry point. Send a message to me, and I will send it to the colleague and relevant contact person who is working on your country. Not only for the question of participating in the technical cooperation program, but also for sending information about violations or education programs in your country. Feel free to use my e-mail to try to get information about who you can contact in the UN for these services.

We have also the Assisting Communities Together Program, which was started for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. This is a project of micro-grants for grassroots and NGO initiatives. We have given, since 1998, 166 grants in 30 countries and you must see the beautiful things that have been happening with such micro-grants, particularly in the area of human rights education and protection. So you are welcome to write to us to find information on how to apply for these micro-grants for your own activities.

Through the thematic funds, specific funds are available from the UN for you as NGOs. For example, if you work for indigenous peoples, that is an area for which specific funds are available for you from the UN. This evening, we will look into the website to see how to get application forms for these grants and how to get in touch with people who are working on this.

On the subject of seeking partnership for ad-hoc activities (national events, translations of the UDHR, others): We have been working in partnership with some of you. When you are running a program, for instance, you inform the Office of the HC and we send messages of support from the Office of the HC. Someone was mentioning the importance of having the support vis-à-vis your government when undertaking human rights activities. For some NGOs, this kind of moral support is even more important than financial support because it provides them with a form of stamp saying what they are doing is right, what they are doing is in line with United Nations system to which their government is party. So this is another way of establishing a partnership on specific documents. I know some of your organizations have been translating the UDHR into their national, local indigenous languages.

Get in touch with local UN offices. There are different UN offices in the countries where you work. One type of office is the UN Information Center. Its job is to disseminate UN human rights materials. Check with them to see what they have available, or contact us at the UNHCHR and we will share what we have available. Another UN office that you may have in your country is the UN Development Program office. The UN Development Program has national offices in most countries. They are going through a major rethinking of their work in development, in terms of human rights, and they are taking an active role in HR promotion and protection. You should check with them to see what means are available through them for undertaking their activities.

Another office that you might look into is the UNHCHR office, even if we have a limited capacity. The comment about the lack of political support from governments is quite true. We get a lot of support in terms of resolutions and declarations. Everyone agrees that human rights education is important, but when it comes to national plans of action, so far there are only 17 countries that have submitted plans. The means our offices, including local offices, are limited because we are supposed to be a kind of coordinator of human rights initiatives: trying to do good offices with all governments and to scrutinize human rights abuses in all countries, serve all treaty bodies and special rapporteurs, organize the Commission on Human Rights and give input on different human rights issues at the UN level; but in the end, our means are limited.

What I'm trying to say is that we have to keep in mind that the UN can't solve all problems, but there are practical ways that the UN and NGOs can work together. I'm trying to make sure that you have access to information, so you can know how to do it. My goal was to bring you a little closer to the Office of the HC, then to talk about human rights education. I will now give you the chance to speak.

Participant

I think the idea of getting the questions ahead of time got us spun off orbit. My problem is that we have jumped several important stages. The challenge being HRE as a tool for change in the world, my expectation was to find out what were the objectives of the Decade for Human Rights Education. Have we achieved anything since the Decade is

nearing an end? Should we establish another Decade? I think this is how we should have started this discussion. Now I think that you are afraid that some people don't like the UN, but only someone who genuinely loves you will criticize you. The UN is ours, and we are critical because we want the UN to be improved and you are the only way that we can get our message across. So we ask you to be the ambassador of the activists who are here.

Elena Ippoliti

Thank you. Now, let's look at what the Human Rights Education (HRE) Decade is about, what the objectives are for the Decade, and the international framework - what is happening at the international level and what should happen at the national level, and where we are. Now, the definition of HRE as given by the General Assembly in 1994, when it launched the Decade for HRE, is "a life-long process by which people at all levels of development and in all of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect in all society." For the GA, this is quite a nice definition. The wording was prompted by an NGO submission to the governments when they adopted the resolution establishing the Decade.

A lifelong process is important because HRE is not only something that is done in schools. It is a broad approach. HRE is done in all different contexts. This UN document provides you with a basis for running HRE in all different contexts and at all different levels of society. It talks not only of respect, but of means and methods of ensuring that respect. Which means that it is not only about human rights standards, but also mechanisms to protect those rights. It's important to know the mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels; it's not enough to know the basic rights. The mechanisms, and how to use them, are critical.

A second definition of human rights education comes from the Decade's Plan of Action. The Plan of Action defines HRE as training, dissemination and information efforts in building a universal culture of human rights, through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the molding of attitudes directed to the respect of human rights. So it is not only knowledge of human rights standards, but also skills. What are the skills that would make people use these standards in daily life? For example, from my experience in training the police, it is not enough to tell the police not to beat up people as a means of crowd control. You must give them skills on how to control crowds without the degradation of beatings, etc. So there is a shift from what is the knowledge to what are the skills. This is because the way in which human rights education can be effectively done is through all the components: knowledge, skills which will bring a change in attitudes, which in turn will bring a change in behaviour. Refrain from violent behaviour vis-à-vis human rights and reinforce positive behaviour. These are things that you have probably experienced in your work, but I am presenting them to you as the result of a long process of developing training methodologies within the Office by doing training in many different countries under our different training programs. You will find more information on this in the materials that you have received in your folder.

The Decade of HRE was established in 1995, effective until 2004. A Plan of Action was developed by the Secretariat and approved by the GA, which talks about 5 different areas of work: formulation of strategies for HRE, strengthening of programs and capacities, development of materials, strengthening of the capacity of mass media, dissemination of the UDHR. This whole program of action is based on two principle points: the need to strengthen national work for HRE, and the need to establish partnerships in each country and among countries for HRE.

People were asking “Where are we with this Decade?” What has happened? What are some good examples of things that have happened? It depends from country to country. And it will depend on what you do when you go back. In some countries, the initiative of setting up a national strategy for HRE was started by a national commission. In some countries, it was the government who started the strategy, and in still others it was the NGOs that organized a workshop where they called on government officials to work together on a plan for HRE. So there is really no general assessment, but it depends on how each actor in each country has taken the Decade as tool for mobilizing people on HRE. When I speak of actors, you are the most active actors when it comes to mobilizing a country.

Let’s look into national plans: how are they developed? Is there any guidance? The UNHCHR has developed guidelines to ensure that partnership was established at the national level, that national plans were developed in a specific way, in this way: national plans that are comprehensive in terms of outreach. Some other countries have developed national plans that are so broad that they are difficult to implement. For example, the national plan of the Philippines is one of the most beautiful plans because it reaches every level of society. But it is so comprehensive that it is impossible to implement because it requires a lot of human and financial resources. So the plans have to be comprehensive, keeping in mind the country’s situation and possibilities. Again, the Office of the HC, through its program of technical cooperation, can support the development of these national plans for HRE. The UN guidelines say that the national plans are participatory in terms of involvement of all different actors in a society. One other example is where, in a country, a plan was developed in the cabinet of the prime minister. It was developed by two people, but one person left for another job, and there was only one person left responsible for implementing the plan. Again, the national plans must be participatory and include all the relevant actors.

Priority should be given to sustainable approaches, for example, the training of trainers and the integration of human rights in existing curricula. Finally, the guidelines say that the national plans are to be developed, implemented and evaluated through a partnership within and among governmental and non-governmental organizations. So you have, in the UN document, a basis upon which you can establish a network with the government in terms of working for the Decade at the national level.

I just wanted to touch upon some of the questions that I received and that are relevant to the Decade of Human Rights Education. What will happen after the Decade? That will depend on the legislative bodies of the UN, such as the GA or the Commission on HR. It

becomes your role to lobby for what you want to happen. For the moment, there is no plan. The question of the Decade, when it comes to the legislative bodies, is that the issue of HRE is very non-controversial. There is very little debate on the resolutions dealing with the Decade on HRE. So what will happen after the Decade depends on the legislative bodies of the UN and what your lobby will be, in terms of what you want to happen. For example, there were three consecutive Decades on the elimination of discrimination. Now there is a world conference. Were the Decades an effective means to advance the cause? I don't know.

Other questions were about self-interest in human rights education. I will tell you about my experience in training in this regard. I must tell you that I have had many experiences where people start out very skeptical about human rights education. This is why we always conduct training with a professional of the same (targeted) profession, so that they can talk to each other, professional-to-professional. It is not up to me to tell a professional how to implement human rights standards in his/her work. But what I can say is which human rights standards are relevant to their work. But there must be a trainer with me who can explain to them how to implement the human rights standards in concrete situations. It has happened that the human rights training was for self-interest. Sometimes, the [beneficiaries of the training] can get promotions. But it depends on the way that you carry out the human rights training. Are you able to touch the persons who are there, who may be very skeptical at first? Self-interest is a concern, but it can be an entry point.

What are some good examples of HRE national plans? There are not so many. But there are some examples of national plans that were developed by someone in an office, but then NGOs became very vocal, saying that it was not done properly. For example, in Japan, there was a major reaction on the part of NGOs, which prompted the government to open its doors to all this criticism and to revise the plan, keeping in consideration the input of NGOs. So there are some cases of successful developments even when the beginning may not be so good.

What are the educational tools we have? In terms of what the Office of the HC can do, we have an information-sharing role. If you are developing a specific training program for a specific group, don't hesitate to contact us, because being in Geneva and receiving all this information, we have a special capacity to share this information with you. We do this through the database on human rights education. We have a small documentation center, and a person whose role is to reply to issues of human rights education support.

What are the definitions of human rights education? I went over the two definitions earlier: Lifelong process, learning standards and mechanisms, molding attitudes and behaviours.

What is the assistance of the Office of the High Commissioner? I hope that my introduction on that was helpful in clearing up how we can work together.

Who has the responsibility for the development of national plans? Obviously, the government has the capacity to reach, through the ministry of education, for instance, all of the schools, with the government designing the curricula. But the responsibility can also be yours. For example, in Slovenia, the AI section organized a workshop and invited the government to come and they started to discuss the question of a national plan. So you don't have to leave it up to governments. You can take the initiative. And if you need support from our office, we can send letters of support to NGOs who are trying to start this kind of process at the national level.

I think this is a starting point for some of you, maybe not for others. Take advantage of it. It depends on you, what you make of it - both of the Office in Geneva, our offices in the field and how you can use us to further your activities at the national level.

Thank you.