

The Role of Human Rights Education in the Process of Global Social Change

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Introduction

The United Nations can never replace the essential work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national human rights organizations at the local levels. The main focus of this presentation is to examine how the United Nations can work together with local organizations in order to support their activities.

The Concept of Human Rights Education as Embodied in International Human Rights Legal Instruments

International human rights education instruments are important for local organizations, because they represent international commitments made by individual states regarding their citizens. They are the tools that permit grassroots organizations to lobby government authorities and to demand more efforts on the part of their governments in the area of human rights education. They provide standards to evaluate the practices of the state and also to develop national initiatives that involve all partners.

The United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education started in January 1995 and will end in December 2004. During this period, the international community, governments, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, human rights agencies and national institutions were asked to do more in the area of human rights education. The decade started with a resolution of the UN General Assembly (Resolution 49/184 (1994)). The General Assembly defined human rights education as “comprehensive life-long process by which people at all levels in development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect in all societies.”

“[...] human rights education contributes to a concept of development consistent with the dignity of women and men of all ages that takes into account the diverse segments of society such as children, indigenous peoples, minorities and disabled persons [...].”

What can we take from the definition of human rights education which is in the resolution? Three key elements stand out:

- human rights education is a life-long process, encompassing not only school children within formal education systems;
- human rights education is a comprehensive process which involves all members of society;

- human rights education is an empowering process which should help to enable people to take control of their lives, by identifying violations of their human rights, how to demand rights, and how to use existing legal mechanisms to this end.

The acquisition of human rights education is not an end in itself; its purpose is to bring about social justice and transformation. Many international documents contributed to a global concept of human rights education, including the following: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13); Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 29); Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] (Article 10); Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (Article 7); Vienna Declaration (Paragraphs 33 and 34) and its related Program of Action (Paragraphs 78 and 82).

Defining Human Rights Education

The official definition used in the International Plan of Action for the Decade (Para. 2) mentions the structure and contents of human rights education. It does not speak only of gaining knowledge but also of bringing about a change of attitudes and values.

“[...]human rights education shall be defined as training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes and directed to:

- (a) The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- (b) The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- (c) The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- (d) The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society;
- (e) The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Specialized education (e.g., citizenship education, peace education) is also part of human rights education.

The Objectives of Human Rights Education

The following objectives of human rights education emerge from the preceding definition:

- 1) To reinforce the knowledge of human rights and mechanisms for the protection of these rights (as ensured by international, national and regional law);
- 2) To develop a capacity to apply human rights standards in daily life;
- 3) To cultivate values and attitudes supportive of human rights.

As stated above, human rights education must go beyond merely acquiring knowledge. It must be translated into concrete action by changing negative behaviour and reinforcing positive behaviour in the area of human rights.

Human Rights Education Methodology

The following methodological pointers, based on years of training experience, were taken from “Human Rights Training,” a United Nations document published in 1999 by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights:

- Effective training in human rights must be practical and relevant to the target audience and be related to the activities of the target organization.
- Training by peers can be beneficial for professionals and members of certain groups.
- Interactive education techniques are very effective for learning.
- The importance of self-evaluation and personal experience should be emphasized.
- Evaluation instruments are very important as ways to ensure follow-up of a training program.
- Training of trainers is a way of expanding human capacity and thus multiplying the impact of education.

The United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004)

At the international level, the UN is working on developing effective strategies to promote human rights education, strengthening media’s capacity to contribute to human rights education and circulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights around the world. The UN is organizing and supporting national and local activities and initiatives, as well as reinforcing cooperation among governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, professional associations and others.

At the national level, the UN is encouraging the development of national human rights education plans that are participatory (involving all actors of society) and relevant to all members of society, as well as effective (in relation to educational methodologies). National plans ought to take a sustainable approach. They should develop, adopt and evaluate strategies by cooperating between and within government and non-governmental agencies. Examples of national plans appear in an unedited UN document entitled “Compendium of National Plans of Action for Human Rights Education,” published by the High Commissioner of Human Rights in 2001.

One example of a successful national plan is that of the Philippines. It includes effective approaches such as training of trainers and developing education networks to organize human rights education and to distribute information. The plan also includes integrating human rights education in the curriculum at every level, from grade school up to professional training, as well as using village officials to facilitate its delivery at the community level.

Guidelines for the Establishment of National Plans for Human Rights Education

Local guidelines are developed through the collaboration of human rights education experts and practitioners. The following general principles should be included in any plan:

- human rights education that emphasizes interdependence, indivisibility and universality of human rights;
- the use of human rights education to promote democracy, sustainable development, the rule of law, the environment and peace;
- an analysis of chronic problems and recent difficulties with the goal of providing solutions that respect the principles of human rights law.

National plans must follow certain principles of organization and operation (e.g., representation of a pluralistic society, transparency of operation) and make use of educational activities (e.g., respect and appreciation of diverse opinions, participatory educational methods).

Possible Activities Using the Support of the High Commissioner of Human Rights

In addition to the summary of national plans mentioned above, local human rights organizations can also obtain and disseminate other publications from the UNHCHR, such as training manuals. Specific country information can be accessed at an international level by consulting the web site of the High Commissioner (www.unhchr.ch). Organizations can get involved in information campaigns and circulate information of their own grassroots activities on the human rights education database, by contacting the Office of the High Commissioner, which also offers technical and financial support. As well, it is possible to get institutional support from the UN in order to get funding from other sources. To do this, the UN would need documentation from the organization. Funds available include the ACT project (a collective aid project for communities), which furnishes up to \$5000 US in certain countries. (In 2002, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Haiti, Egypt, Afghanistan, Cambodia, the Philippines, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Uzbekistan received funds.) There are also thematic funds for organizations working on particular issues (for example, slavery, torture, aboriginal people). The inclusion of a country in the ACT project program depends on the participation of its local office in the United Nations Development Program. In all probability, more countries will take part next year.

Question Period

During the question period, IH RTP participants brought up a number of issues. A summary of the presenter's responses is given below.

- **Methodology for Legislative Reforms in the Area of Human Rights.** The High Commissioner works closely with the Inter-parliamentary Union. The Union has a human rights division that examines the work of parliaments in the promotion of human rights at a national level, and has strategies for lobbying members of parliament for legislative reform.
- **Media's Role in the United Nations Decade of Human Rights Education.** When the UN speaks of the media, it is referring to radio, television, newspapers, and electronic media. The High

Commissioner works with the International Federation of Journalists to promote human rights and to prevent human rights violations by members of the media. This NGO has a presence in 90 countries and can be contacted to learn about its human rights educational projects for journalists.

- **Privileged Relations between the High Commissioner and States.** These privileged relations between the High Commissioner and States are important for NGOs and other grass-root organizations that ask for the High Commissioner's support in their efforts to involve their governments in the promotion and protection of human rights. However, the High Commissioner does not always work with governmental agencies. The UN will work with the best partners available. For example, ACT projects join local NGOs together with the Office of the High Commissioner through the office of the United Nations Development Program, without any governmental intervention. Increasingly, the High Commissioner sub-contracts to NGOs with regional competencies in order to establish regional initiatives for which the UN does not have the capability itself. The UN provides grants to finance these initiatives and the NGOs report done back to the High Commissioner.
- **How to Encourage Authoritarian Governments to Undertake Human Rights Education Activities?** It is essential that NGOs furnish information to the High Commissioner about the real situation of human rights and human rights education in authoritarian states. Reports written by the UN (committees, special rapporteurs, special representatives, etc.) and that evaluate the human rights situation in the country are not the property of the government, but are public documents which local NGOs have the right to access. Reports may be accessed on the internet and/or by contacting the local office of the United Nations, if there is one in the country.
- **Alternative Reports on Human Rights Situation.** The High Commissioner has committee members who work specifically on human rights reports alternative to the ones submitted by state governments to UN committees. These alternative reports are very important. It is the responsibility of all NGOs to monitor everything that their governments present relating to the human rights situation in their countries.
- **The High Commissioner's Role in the Establishment of National Human Rights Institutions.** The High Commissioner has a very large section devoted to national human rights institutions and there are several individuals who can be contacted for information.
- **Concrete Gains of the Decade for Human Rights Education.** So far, the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education has not created global changes in human rights education, but success stories, such as that of the Phillippines mentioned above, do exist. To succeed in bringing about in-depth changes, a combination of factors is necessary, including: a government that is committed to human rights education; non-governmental organizations with a strength in the field; and favourable political conditions.