

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

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#### **Definitions and Objectives of Human Rights Education**

There are many definitions of human rights education. At the start of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, the General Assembly defined it as “a 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.”

There are three key elements of this definition. First, it is a lifelong process, addressing not only school children in formal education systems. Second, it is a comprehensive process that involves all members of society. Third, it is an empowering process that enables people to take control of their lives by identifying violations and learning how to use the existing mechanisms. Thus from a UN perspective, human rights education is not an end in itself, but is a means of transformation and a mechanism to address abuses.

Human rights practitioners may use other definitions of HR education, often quite divergent, reflecting their diverse backgrounds. One useful definition was developed in a 1987 study conducted by the Philippine Normal University. It is available on the HREA listserv ([www.hrea.org](http://www.hrea.org)), and identifies four levels of HR awareness:

1. *Submission and Self-denial*: unconditional and uncritical submission to violations
2. *Passivity/ Lack of Interest*: awareness of human rights but refusal or lack of interest in asserting these rights, due to fear, lack of understanding, etc.
3. *Limited Initiative*: exercise of human rights through commonly accepted ways like filing complaints to the proper authorities
4. *Militancy, Independence, Initiative*: conscious, active and independent defence of human rights.

The multiplicity of definitions of human rights education leads us to consider the objectives of human rights education. There are three major UN objectives: reinforcing knowledge of human rights; developing capacities to apply human rights standards in daily life; and cultivating attitudes and values supportive of human rights.

## **Approaches to Human Rights Education**

There are three models or approaches to human rights education:

### *1. The Values and Awareness approach*

The main focus of this approach is to transmit basic knowledge of human rights issues and foster their integration into public values. Examples include public awareness campaigns and school-based programs. The goal is to encourage respect for human rights through an awareness of and commitment to the UDHR and other key instruments. Topics addressed might include the history of human rights, information about key instruments and mechanisms of protection, and international human rights concerns. The strategy here is to create mass support for human rights that will put pressure on local authorities to respect human rights. In a sense, this approach aims to create “critical consumers” of human rights, who can think critically and apply a human rights framework when analysing policy issues.

### *2. The Accountability approach*

This model addresses professionals, such as lawyers, journalists, human rights advocates and monitors who are already associated with the guarantee of human rights through their professional roles. The threat of the violation of rights is seen as inherent to their work. For advocates, the challenge is to understand human rights law and the mechanisms of protection, and to develop lobbying and advocacy skills. For other professional groups, educational programs sensitize them about the nature of human rights violations and their potential as professionals within their field.

### *3. The Transformational approach*

In this model, human rights education is geared towards empowering the individual and the community to both recognize abuses and commit to their prevention. The target audience includes people who may have suffered abuses themselves, and are thus predisposed to become promoters of human rights. This approach can be found in programs operating in refugee camps, post-conflict societies, with victims of domestic abuse, and with vulnerable populations generally. Techniques used include self-reflection, and support within the community of learners. Human rights are only one component of this holistic approach, which may also include leadership development, conflict-resolution training, vocational training, work and informal fellowship. This model works from the life-experience of the learner, and is the most difficult to implement.

All of the models have a valid place in the process of making human rights education ideals a reality.

## **Opportunities and challenges**

Human rights have the potential to be a shared-value system that could enable peoples to bridge socio-cultural gaps and address the disintegration of their cultures resulting from the forces of globalization.

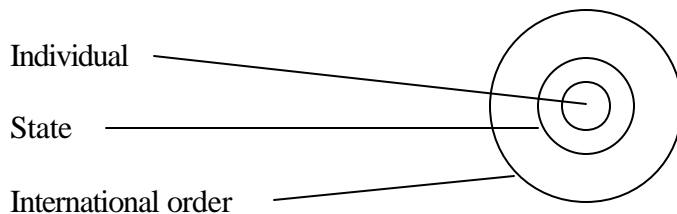
At the UN level, while advances are being made, human rights education represents only 1.6 % of the total budget of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. There is recognition within the UN that NGOs are accomplishing the majority of the work in human rights education. In the High Commissioner's most recent report (59<sup>th</sup> session, available on-line at the HREA site) key resolutions relating to human rights education were passed. First, the development of a voluntary fund to support the work of NGOs; second, a requirement that member states report on their human rights education work; and finally, the report identifies several regions and opportunities for human rights education development.

### **Dr. I. A. Rehman**

#### **Definitions of Human Rights Education**

Ms. Tibbitts has provided several definitions of human rights education. Another definition can be found in the *French Declaration on the Rights of Man*. Its authors identified three levels of rights: individual, state, and the international order. Human rights education must address all three levels.

We can diagram these three levels as concentric circles, the individual is the inner circle, the state is the middle circle, and the international order is the outer circle.



At the individual level, human rights are necessary for self-realization. They can be defined as the fundamentals needed to achieve our potential, such as health, education, work, the rule of law, freedom of expression, etc.

While the individual supports the state, the state also protects the individual. As such, these circles must remain concentric. Problems arise when the circles are not, and one of these levels of rights is compromised by the encroachment of another.

#### **Order and Culture**

Another important dynamic is the interaction of order and culture. Human rights education affects both. An example can be found in the Pakistani law against blasphemy. In Pakistan, no one committed blasphemy until the government passed a law forbidding it. In other words, there was disorder, the government intervened, and this had an effect on culture.

Another example can be drawn from the experience of Bhutan. The king declared that his decisions would be based not on his people's rights but on their happiness. He then decided that people's happiness would be improved by wearing particular clothes. In other words, the king introduced (dis)order, and this has an effect on culture. Human rights education must examine this interaction.

The first UN Decade of Human Rights Education is coming to an end; many countries have not drafted their national plans of action. These states agree with the universality of rights, but not their indivisibility. In this way they pick and choose the articles they wish to implement, leaving others aside. A major challenge facing human rights activists in developing countries is to convince governments of the indivisibility of rights. Activists should remember that rights must be struggled for, and the purpose of human rights education is not only to enable people to know their rights, but also to encourage struggle for the rights that are opposed.

In the past, religious belief posed the greatest barrier to the achievement of human rights. Now, governments use the "national security syndrome" to justify their lack of commitment to human rights. There are many examples of this phenomenon, not only in large and powerful states. In the Maldives, for example, a Christian may enter the country, but he or she cannot carry a bible. But what is the purpose of such a law? A whole range of state abuses are thus justified by the "national security syndrome."

The Johannesburg Principles were developed by a group of journalists concerned with freedom of expression, but they are equally applicable to our contemporary climate of "national security syndrome." There are two principles of particular relevance: First, what is law? Second, what is national security? While all human rights are subject to law, not all law is legitimate. Similarly, not all national security measures are legitimate. The burden should be placed on the state to prove the necessity of its national security measures.

### **Question and Answer Session**

*The following themes were raised during the discussion period:*

#### **Human rights education in the developed world.**

It is essential to recognize the importance of human rights education in all countries, including the so-called "developed" countries. One problem is that in countries with elaborated legal systems, many issues are not framed as human rights issues. For example, in the United States, environmental concerns such as food labelling are addressed through consumer rights law rather than human rights law. Until environmental issues are understood as human rights issues, they will not get the attention needed.

#### **Accessibility of legal mechanisms in addressing human rights abuses.**

In reality, it can be very difficult for victims of human rights abuses to gain access to legal enforcement mechanisms. The procedures are time-consuming, expensive and complicated. The role of NGOs is essential, and in many countries, human rights NGOs will hear complaints and take cases through the local court system or to the media. However, even NGOs must be selective; there is no complete coverage of all individual cases.

**National Human Rights Education Committees.**

As part of the UN Decade, guidelines for national plans of action in human rights education were drafted. If countries have not made progress on these commitments, local NGOs should form coalitions and lobby their governments. However, one must also be aware of the internal constraints of the UN. Although much human rights work is done by NGOs, the UN's clients are member states; thus the UN can only relate to NGOs indirectly.

**Human rights and multi-national corporations.**

Some of the worst abusers of human rights are multi-national corporations. The presence of MNCs in developing nations may be worse than the imperialist powers during colonization. While there have been some anti-globalization protests in the developed world, activists in developing countries also need to denounce MNCs, which are often protected and supported by the local authorities.