DTP/AHRIC Human Rights Education Workshop

Human Rights Education in the Asia - Pacific

Report on the August 1996 Workshop

Delegates from across the Asia-Pacific region who gathered in Sydney, Australia, from 22-25 August 1996 to discuss the tasks for the UN Decade for Human Rights Education in the Asia-Pacific Region declared, in its Final Statement:

Aspirations of the peoples in the Asia-Pacific region for a better future are increasingly being articulated in the language of human rights. The objectives of human rights education must reflect these aspirations and the context of intense social conflicts within which these aspirations are being articulated. Such education should enable society to achieve the basic changes which are prerequisites for the protection and promotion of human rights, with special emphasis on those sections who have suffered the most intense violations of their rights. Enabling every person to participate fully in bringing about such changes is the primary goal of human rights education.

The Statement was a considerable improvement to the conception and definition of human rights education in the region and internationally. The Statement clarified and elucidated the tasks ahead for human rights educators and their organisations in the Asia-Pacific region.

The workshop, jointly organised by the Diplomacy Training Program (DTP) and the Australian Human Rights Information Centre (AHRIC), was attended by human rights educators and representatives of human rights organisations in Australia, Bangladesh, Burma, East Timor, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The event was financially supported by AusAID, Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands) and The Commonwealth Foundation (London). The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission hosted the workshop at its premises and made available all necessary organisational facilities during the proceedings.

The opening ceremony, chaired by Prof. Paul Redmond, Dean, Faculty of Law, the University of New South Wales, was addressed by the organisers, Dr Sarah Pritchard on behalf of AHRIC, and Dr Laksiri Fernando, Executive Director of DTP, and the invited guest, Mr Chicka Dixon of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

While welcoming the participants to the workshop, Prof. Redmond said "we applaud your timely effort to consider the main tasks for human rights education in the Asia-Pacific region. The range of tasks for human rights educators in the region is no doubt immense. However, given the expertise and commitment of those gathered here, your deliberations will surely make a significant contribution to strengthening the capacities for human rights education in the region." While warmly welcoming the Asia-Pacific participants to Australia, Mr Chicka Dixon said that the "UN Decade for Human Rights Education, unfortunately, appears to coincide with a 'Decade of Disaster' for the Aboriginal people in this country; their funding sources being drastically cut down by the government." The event was graced by an Aboriginal dance, "The Kids from Lapa," organised by the Aboriginal Education Program at the University of New South Wales.

The workshop received an encouraging message from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Jose Ayala Lasso, who regretted his inability to participate. He, nevertheless, assured the participants that he "will follow the results of the programme with great interest."

HRE

The Commissioner stated that the "objective of the United Nations in its human rights educational activities is to teach the 'common language of humanity' to all people everywhere, to make each woman and man fluent in its vocabulary, and to enable each person to translate its terms into their daily conduct."

The Commissioner concluded saying: "You may also wish to be my spokespersons in your own countries (and, of course, within the region), making public opinion and institutions more and more aware of the importance of human rights education and of this common framework constituted by the Decade. Together, we can bring a change and make a difference in our future. For empowering people, combating human rights violations and enhancing peace and tolerance are challenges which will require the concerted effort of all members of the human rights community, and the use of all available tools to this end. The tool of human rights education will be essential to this struggle."

Clarence Dias, discussing the tasks for the UN Decade for human rights education in the Asia-Pacific region, said that "Asia-Pacific NGOs have participated vigorously in conferences leading to the declaration of the Decade. However, their participation in respect of the Declaration and its Plan of Action has been minuscule; and their participation, in efforts thus far, to implement the Plan have been virtually nonexistent." His comments highlighted the importance of the present workshop. "The Decade and Plan of Action are clearly well-intentioned but they do not reflect the priorities, needs and experiences of the Asia-Pacific region."

He further said that "the process of liberalisation of trade and investment, raises the need to ensure that powerful multinational and national corporations be held fully accountable to human rights standards. We are witnesses to a resurgence of patriarchy and violence against women in the region. The rights of minorities and indigenous peoples are under attack in various countries of the region and ethnic identities and relationships are being manipulated to create tragic, ethnic conflicts and bloody secessionist struggles." His main contention was that the conception of human rights education in the UN Declaration and the Plan of Action do not reflect the context of intense social conflicts in society. He argued that "it is sheer self-delusion to believe that 'universal commitment to human rights' can be achieved by 'common understanding and awareness,' unaccompanied by a significant redistribution of power and resources, both within and between the member states of the UN."

The Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Chris Sidoti, addressing the workshop said that the Decade does not seem to have taken off smoothly. It is already the second year. Too many international years and decades also create less interest for new initiatives. No proper funding has been allocated yet. His main contention, however, was the lack of specificity about the objectives for the Decade. "The traditional description of human rights education present it as promoting knowledge and awareness. The implication is that it is a purely academic thing, a head thing." He disagreed and said that "human rights education has to be more about the guts than the head. It is more about what we do, what we experience, who we are than about what data we known what theoretical concepts we can intellectually grasp." He admitted that "data, information, legal knowledge are all important, but not as ends in themselves. They are important only as weapons in the struggle to protect and promote human rights of real people in real situations."

Four inspiring short presentations were made at the closing session of the workshop by Mr Sonny Inbaraj, The Nation Newspaper (Bangkok); Mr Ravi Nair, South-Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre; Melinda Jones, Editor, Australian Journal for Human Rights; Bill Barker, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Australia); and Bruce Petty, a popular cartoonist at the Melbourne Age.

Sonny Inbaraj overviewed the changes taking place in the media with the advancement of new communication technology. He suggested that the distance between the media and its audience has been eliminated. The advancement of satellite television and 'cyberspace' has created a larger 'global audience' for human rights education. He criticised the role of the Asian media and said that the media should promote more and more universal values rather than narrow Asian values. He further made useful suggestions with regard to the role of the media from a human rights education perspective. He called for the need to seek out alternative media channels eg. the Internet and the need to train activists to use alternative media. Human rights educators need to know how to effectively engage and use the media. He argued that alterative media is necessary, as mainstream media has failed to sensitise the world on human rights issues.

Ravi Nair gave a brief and informed outline of the role of information technologies in human rights education. As early as 1974, UNESCO recognised 'information' as a human right. This human right needs to be translated into reality by increased 'access' to information,

including human rights information. Ravi asserted that the personal computer (PC) has been a major advancement in promoting greater access to information. The advent of the Internet has raised much consternation and alarm among who advocate national sovereignty. In Bhutan, for example, there is no satellite TV, whilst in Singapore the government continues to ban contentious web sites. All this shows, Ravi Nair suggested, that governments are "reacting". But, as he further pointed out, "the area of interactive communication is with us and the government intervention in this area is extremely difficult". The Internet is simple to use and we need to work to dispel myths about its use. In closing, he said that we need to democratise the media further.

Bill Barker spoke of the importance of national action plans based on his experience in developing the Australian National Action Plan in 1994 and his experiences in Vienna in 1993. A national action plan provides opportunities to bring together other actors 'to make it easier to move ahead'. Bill Barker asserted that the basic principle behind a national action plan is to facilitate appropriate and non-confrontational action which allows people to act on their own terms. A national action plan is a guide.

The importance of an action plan is to be dynamic, with structured participation in developing the plans and the need for a process of review.

Melinda Jones outlined three new principles/strategies in education that could be used in human rights education. (1) An inclusive target audience is the first principle in education. She argued that the segregation of children with disabilities leads to lower expectations. By integration, other students will adapt to these students and supportive friendships occur. (2) An inclusive school curriculum is equally necessary to eliminate racism and discrimination and to present a positive image of all peoples. (3) An inclusive teaching strategy should be the third principle. The strategy is to teach human rights through activities that require social skills, listening, and group work on tasks to achieve a shared goal. This is a transformative process whereby students compare their classroom to the society around them and learn from that comparison.

By way of cartoon drawing, Bruce Petty showed how the Arts could be used in human rights education. He drew cartoons that were to describe human rights to a lay person. He drew a human brain, one side being the mechanical side, the other the imaginative side. The former representing the rights based on money and power and the competition that exists for those rights. The other imaginative side presents rights based on religion, faith and trust. He then drew power triangles depicting capitalists with their money on top and all others below. Then it was the global institutions on top and others below starting to compete with each other.

A second cartoon depicted education. Firstly, as a series of pipes pouring knowledge from the university to the academic, then to the students. The student already has some knowledge and this should be fished out, or allow backflow in those pipes from the students head back into the teachers head. The cartoon then progressed to depict the mirrors the educators should hold up to reflect the context and history of human rights, to allow the student to see society from a different perspective. Bruce Petty argued that Artists could and should be mobilised in the Asia-Pacific region for the promotion and protection of human rights. During the discussion it was highlighted that a compilation of human rights cartoons should be gathered from around the region for educational purposes. It was mentioned that satire and stand up comedy can also be a useful tool.

Helen Brereton
Laksiri Fernando
David Whitcombe

Communicating with the Human Rights Committee

A New AHRIC Publication

Have you ever thought of communicating with the UN Human Rights Committee? If you haven't thought so, you may need to do so in the future.

This is an excellent guide to the Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It includes:

-a general description of the UN human rights system;

- an overview of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the First Optional Protocol;

an outline of the functions of the Human Rights Committee;

- an explanation of the procedure followed in submitting individual communications to the Human Rights Committee;

- an appraisal of the individual communications procedure; and

- a model communication.

If you wish to order a copy ($5.00), write to: Coordinator, Australian Human Rights Information Centre, Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, Australia. Fax (02) 385 -1175; Ph. (02) 385 1525; e-mail ahric@unsw.edu.au