Australian Human Rights Information Centre
Diplomacy Training Program

STATEMENT OF WORKSHOP ON ASIA-PACIFIC HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION:

THE RIGHT TO HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

25 AUGUST 1996

Sydney, Australia

Fundamental principles

2. The protection and promotion of human rights are a matter of **legitimate international concern** and the advocacy of human rights can not be considered an encroachment upon national sovereignty. As affirmed in the 1993 *Bangkok NGO Declaration*, there is emerging new understanding of universalism encompassing the richness and wisdom of Asia-Pacific cultures. Historical conjunctures and cultural and religious traditions are relevant in the implementation of international human rights norms. Human rights education efforts should address and respect the real-life struggles and experiences of learners and engage different cultural and religious traditions.

3. All human rights are **indivisible and interdependent**. They are essential for the survival and development of humankind. In human rights education, there must be a holistic and integrated approach to all human rights, civil, cultural, economic, political and social, both individual and collective.

4. **Economic development** in the Asia-Pacific region is often accompanied by wide-scale violations of human rights. Human rights education should emphasise the need for balanced, people-centred development, an integrated approach to civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, equity and social justice, and a fair distribution of income, resources and power. Human rights education should equip learners to hold national and multinational corporations, and national and multilateral institutions of development, finance and trade accountable to international human rights, environmental and labour standards.

5. The protection of the environment and environmentally sound and sustainable resource management practices are essential for the well-being of present and future generations of humankind. Human rights education should promote the concept of people-centred sustainable development and incorporate **education about environmental and developmental rights**.

6. The protection of human rights is achieved most effectively in **secular, democratic societies**. Genuine participatory democracy requires that the people have a voice not only in periodic elections but at all levels of decision-making, including the basic rights of initiative, referendum and recall. Education about participatory democracy is an important element of human rights education.

7. **Human rights education** is itself a **human right**. The right to human rights education is a right of all individuals and groups, irrespective of class, gender or national, ethnic, religious or linguistic background. So too is the right to impart human rights education.

8. All too often, important human rights struggles have been erased in history books and in national memory. There is an important role for human rights education in the **recovery of human rights history and human rights truths**.

9. Human rights education cannot contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights in the absence of **basic structural reforms**. Human rights education must be accompanied by efforts to address deficient monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, a lack of redress and remedies for victims of human rights violations, inadequate judicial institutions and interference with such institutions, where they exist.

15. At the **international level**, as well, there is continuing **inadequacy of mechanisms for the monitoring and enforcement** of international human rights obligations. Inadequate allocation of human and financial resources to UN human rights mechanisms reflects down-grading of human rights among the core purposes of the United Nations. Cynicism and the promotion of self-interest on the part of governments limit the effectiveness of existing procedures. Effective participation by NGOs is impeded.

16. Few Asia-Pacific governments are likely to have the political will to promote actively the objectives of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education. In the Asia-Pacific region, peoples' plans of action and the efforts of human rights educators and NGOs have much to contribute towards the realisation of the objectives of the Decade. In the context of the Decade, it will be essential to respect the autonomy and strengthen the capacity of **NGOs and civil society institutions** to play a central role in the provision of human rights education. In the Asia-Pacific region, the United Nations and its specialised agencies have a particular responsibility to catalyse and support human rights education activities and programs in the non-government sector.

17. The present UN Plan of Action for the Decade envisages a global understanding. But human rights education is ineffective if not contextualised. The Decade's Plan of Action needs to reflect the **priorities, needs and experience of the Asia-Pacific region**. Implementation of the Plan of Action envisages national governments as the primary actors. In the Asia-Pacific context, it is important that national implementation not itself become a mechanism for governmental monopolisation, control and repression of human rights education activities.

Tasks for Human Rights Education in the Asia-Pacific Region

18. In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, a majority of people live in conditions of poverty and are without basic rights to adequate subsistence, health care, shelter and education. There is a close link between poverty and illiteracy. Human rights education must be promoted together with measures for the **eradication of poverty, and the elimination of illiteracy and all forms of discrimination**, as a matter of human rights priority.

19. For those living in poverty, there is particular potential for human rights awareness. The assertion of human rights can be a prerequisite for economic survival and development. In human rights education, an understanding of the **connection between economic conditions and access to rights** can raise awareness about the need for enhanced civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

20. In the Asia-Pacific region, appropriate and effective **strategies for human rights education** should emphasise popular and participatory education. Human rights education must be rooted in the lives of learners, especially those most marginalised and vulnerable. The educational process should be inclusive, action-oriented and empower people and the civil society to improve their quality of life and build a culture of peace based on democracy, development, mutual understanding and respect.

The Workshop urges that an important objective of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education be to liberate human rights education from the clutches of international, national and professional bureaucracies. The Workshop stresses the critical importance of peoples' plans of action to promote the objectives of the Decade.

27. **National Action Plans.** The UN Plan of Action for the Decade calls for the completion during 1995 of **action-oriented national plans** for human rights education to be transmitted to the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Workshop of Asia-Pacific Human Rights Educators urges governments of the region, in consultation with relevant NGOs and peoples' organisations, to catalyse the elaboration of such action plans and to define targets for human rights education.

28. **Human rights education programs**. The Workshop applauds the efforts of human rights education programs and initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region. However, there is an urgent need to strengthen existing capacities for human rights education, as well as to develop new capacities, at regional, national and local levels. During the Decade, there must be coordinated efforts to enhance the capacity of human rights education programs for:

- provision of human rights education to people in difficult situations;
- contribution to sustainable capacity-building through the further education of human rights educators;
- development of strategies for human rights education which address the diverse conditions of learners and build on local concepts and cultural sensitivities;
- provision of public access to primary human rights documentation in relevant forms and languages;
- provision of information about international human rights supervisory procedures, including information about opportunities for NGOs and individuals to participate in those procedures.

Human rights education programs should address:

- particular vulnerable groups, including women, children, indigenous peoples, minorities, refugees and displaced persons, the elderly, workers, peasants, persons in extreme poverty, disabled persons and persons with HIV/AIDS;

- particular professional groups, including security, military, police and prison personnel, judges and lawyers, public officials and decision-makers, officials involved in development cooperation, media personnel, health professionals and social workers;

- the formal education sector, including early childhood, primary and secondary schools, higher education, teacher training; and

- non-formal learning, including general public information, education within trade-unions and women's and youth organisations, and education in difficult situations such as armed conflicts and internal tension.

29. **Formal education.** The Workshop calls on education authorities in the Asia-Pacific region to work with human rights educators to:

- incorporate human rights values and awareness as a key element in education in primary and secondary schools;

36. **National human rights commissions.** In all their human rights education work, national human rights commissions should facilitate non-discriminatory NGO participation. At the same time, human rights education activities of national human rights commissions must not preempt activities in the non-governmental sector. The Workshop urges national human rights commissions to develop, as a priority, cooperative human rights education programs with NGOs. It is essential that the structures and functioning of national human rights commissions comply with the 1991 *Paris Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions*.

37. **UN Secretary-General.** The Workshop urges the UN Secretary-General to implement the request of the General Assembly to establish **a voluntary fund for human rights education**, with special provision for the support of the human rights education activities of NGOs. The Workshop deplores the downgrading of human rights within the core objectives of the United Nations. The Workshop calls on the Secretary-General, as a matter of utmost priority, to increase allocation of material and human resources to human rights within the UN system.

38. **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.** The Workshop calls on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in his role as coordinator of all human rights activity UN-system-wide, to support the human rights education activities of NGOs and peoples' organisations in the Asia-Pacific region. The Workshop urges the High Commissioner to convene regional meetings so that Asia-Pacific priorities, needs and experiences are reflected in UN human rights documents, including those concerning the UN Decade of Human Rights Education.

39. **UN High Commissioner for Refugees.** The Workshop exhorts the UN High Commissioner for Refuges to initiate a global education effort to reinstate its mandate of the protection of refugees and the internally displaced, as a matter of urgent human rights priority. The Workshop urges the High Commissioner to initiate human rights education outreach programs, as well as sensitisation of UNHCR personnel.

40. **UN Centre for Human Rights.** The Workshop urges the UN Centre for Human Rights to expand its capacities within the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, the Workshop calls on the Centre for Human Rights to develop closer relationships with the Asia-Pacific human rights community, including NGOs, and to upgrade the provision of information and services to those engaged in human rights work in the region.

41. **Human rights treaty bodies.** The Workshop emphasises the important role of human rights treaty bodies in the realisation of the objectives of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education. The Workshop calls on the treaty bodies to adopt general comments on the obligations of States with respect to human rights education and public information. The Workshop urges the treaty bodies, in their examination of State reports, to investigate compliance with obligations regarding human rights education and public information.

42. **UN bodies and specialised agencies.** The Workshop calls on UN bodies and specialised agencies, including ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and FAO, to monitor the impact of development on human rights and to foster financial and technical cooperation in human rights education and literacy programmes.

43. **ESCAP.** The Workshop urges the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia, in its efforts to promote economic and social development in the region, to accord higher priority and allocate adequate resources to human rights education.