

# Defending the future

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**O**n December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was given as a precious gift to the people of the world, affirming that all people are born equal in dignity. The General Assembly proclaimed the declaration 'as a standard achievement of all people and all nations, and to the end that every individual and every organ of society keeping this declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms...'

Yet, after 45 years, most people of the world to whom this compelling declaration belongs and for whose empowerment it was intended, do not know of its existence and are not aware of the prophetic moral aspiration it contains for the promotion and protection of

human dignity.

At the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, as part of a four-year campaign to raise the visibility and prestige of human rights education, the following letter was circulated to all government delegations by human rights educators from around the world who are members of the Organizing Committee of the people's Decade of Human Rights Education, 1991 to 2001:

'We write to you with a sense of urgency. Much has been said about the division between North and South on the issue of solidarity, universality, and indivisibility of human rights.

'Human rights are at a crossroads. No longer a mere reference to violations, they are becoming a way of life, a social contract that

**Learning leads to understanding both ourselves and others – and to the creation of trust**



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**Learning about human rights is itself a right; imposed ignorance is a human rights violation**

Contrary to general expectations, the collapse of communism did not automatically resolve human rights issues. Even more acute problems arose and both the East and the West proved unprepared. Nationalism, xenophobia and anti-semitism flared up in countries with established democracies as well as in the former Eastern bloc. In these circumstances the UN and other international organizations concerned with human rights issues should redefine their role and look for new mechanisms of human rights protection. The outcome of the World Conference on Human Rights must be to alert public opinion worldwide to the absolute necessity of respecting human rights in the face of rising nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance.

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fulfils people's aspirations to life in dignity and democracy. The real protection of civil society can only come from its own creators: the people. People want to know that they are in full control of their lives and that their society embodies their uniqueness as people. People need to determine their identity and frame of reference themselves before they can belong to a larger community: the world.

'The process of moving from particularity to universality is a process of learning... leading first to understanding ourselves, then to understanding the other...and finally to trusting one another.

'We, therefore, believe that the language of universality, including the language of trust between North and South, can be developed through education. We are sure you will agree that this is what human rights education is all about. It can play a pivotal role in the promotion and celebration of human rights.

'We have taken the liberty to enclose an Action Plan which we hope will help you formulate national and international plans for human rights education.

'Please affirm the importance of human rights education in your statement to the Conference and in your interaction with other governments so that human rights education will be a legacy of this World Conference. It is important that the governments of the world affirm their commitment to establishing human rights education at home and abroad. Human rights education infused into all sectors of society can be this generation's gift to the next!'

This call for a firm commitment to human rights education, which was preceded with

consultations and statements made at the regional non-governmental organization (NGO) Forums, and reinforced mostly by the day to day work of hundreds of dedicated human rights educators around the world, contributed to the unprecedented special focus given to human rights education at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

Paragraph 33 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, June 25, 1993, 'emphasizes the importance of...human rights education... and calls on all States to do so.' The section on human rights education in the Programme of Action recommends that states develop specific programmes and strategies for ensuring the widest human rights education, establishing international public policy on human rights education and reaffirming its importance.

This public policy is long due realizing that in several human rights conventions the right to human rights education as a human right is recognized as a prerequisite for the sustainability of development, democracy and civil society. It is at this point that we can clearly say that imposed ignorance is a human rights violation.

In a world going through painful transformations in search of a common language that confirms the humanity in all of us, human rights education is a moral imperative. Recognizing the human right to know one's human rights is essential for the survival of humanity.

Through human rights education as a basis for democracy in all sectors of society, a trust in the ability of humanity to overcome all obstacles without fear can be forged and the human condition can be assessed through the instruments that were created to protect human dignity.

Thus, millions of people need to learn what an African popular song expresses so succinctly: 'Human rights is my property, no one can take it away from me', or what a farm worker in Argentina said on the first day of a workshop in human rights education: 'When people know human rights, human rights come about by themselves.' Worldwide experiences in promoting human rights education as relevant to people's daily concerns confirm these simple statements.

As more and more communities engage in learning about justice and the law, social change even under the most difficult situations takes place. Hence, the pursuit of human rights education serves as a powerful incentive for people to organize and coordinate themselves for effective action. The relationship between an active awareness of human rights and the realization of these





**Teaching and education**  
stones of human rights  
and freedoms

rights has been acknowledged worldwide.

'The First Global Revolution', a report by the Council of the Club of Rome, states: 'Acceptance of the postulate that dramatic solutions are unlikely to come from leaders of governments, but thousands of small, wise decisions, reflecting the new realization of millions of people, are necessary for securing the survival of society.' More and more community workers, educators and human rights advocates realize that mass education in human rights and democracy is an answer to the concerns about the future of humanity and how it will reach 'wise decisions'. The moral existence of the citizens in the global village and the role they will play will depend on how they perceive human rights and social responsibilities, and on their ability to maintain a human rights way of life as part of their culture and hopes for the future.

Therefore, the purpose of mass education in human rights is to cultivate learning about

justice, develop a universal human rights culture and create a global community in which abuse and violation are prevented and human dignity is protected by the power of knowledge.

An analogy from daily life may convey what is a 'human rights way of life'. The importance of educating people in all communities about the observance of traffic regulations is never questioned. It is perfectly understood by all that citizens who walk the pavements, or cross the street or drive a vehicle must be conversant with traffic laws and abide by them. Similarly, human rights protect people's movement along the roads of life. In order to achieve free and lawful movement mass education in human rights must be made a routine ongoing activity in all sectors of society.

When the multitude of disempowered communities from North and South become human rights literate, through learning about justice, law and the role of citizens' participation, social and political change will occur and will be sustained. An awareness of human rights will encourage people to avail themselves of the laws already in place, work at changing the laws where necessary and mobilize support and action around particular human rights issues that are relevant to their daily lives. In short they will become citizens participating together in determining their destiny.

In order to cultivate a human rights world view, educators and grassroots activists understand that public education in human rights must demystify the laws that govern people's immediate lives, relate international standards – and more fundamentally the spirit and content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – to people's daily concerns. This learning must draw from spiritual and cultural experiences to be acceptable and meaningful.

Ideally, human rights education will enable even the most isolated, uneducated and illiterate person to understand the universal standards set forth in the International Bill of Human Rights by increasing awareness and deepening the understanding of human rights promoted as both personal and communal.

Human rights will thus be seen as relevant to people's relationships with each other as well as with the state and other entities.

Furthermore, many national and regional NGOs in the South affirm that human rights education is a development issue. They recognize that individuals need to realize their own self-worth and the valuable role they can play as members of participatory democracies, including their participation in all stages of development projects and accountability as a

fundamental condition.

NGOs, community action groups and educational institutions have started to play a role in human rights education. Groups working with such issues as food, shelter, women, children, indigenous people, health, labour, refugees, religion, education, racism and discrimination, development and the environment, among others, are now looking to promote and implement through human rights education a comprehensive and integrated approach to human rights. The holistic approach to human rights includes gender sensitive training and methodology by women about women's human rights and women's perspectives on human rights as a whole.

It is therefore important to:

- expand opportunities for human rights educators and activists to draw upon existing information/education exchange networks; support and extend these networks; and encourage, where necessary, new ones which are decentralized and allow direct access to materials and the training of trainers;
- encourage the creation of effective educational projects, methods and materials, including the review of previous and current efforts to promote human rights education with a view toward adaptation and dissemination of past successes and promoting worthwhile proposals which have not yet come to fruition;
- provide a mantle of protection for all those engaged in human rights education;
- mobilize to inform governments of the growing and vigorous support for human rights education;
- continue to increase the number and variety of groups participating in human rights education;
- assess the needs for a major effort to support the spread of human rights education once the infrastructure of existing educational efforts have been strengthened;
- survey and review the existing and potential sources of human rights education particularly at the community grassroots level: formal and professional schools, the informal public sector, the arts, health, education development, labour, law enforcement agencies, policy makers, and the training of trainers, among others.

All these...walking together step by step, hand in hand toward a truly humane future, protecting the future of the children...as there can be no human rights without all women and men knowing human rights.

People need to learn that:

- there are universal standards of human rights that are applicable to all;
- individuals and governments which fail to

uphold these standards are accountable to their people and the world community;

- their own rights are only as strong as their willingness to acknowledge and defend the rights of others;
- social justice and human freedom can best be achieved through the realization of human rights.

People need to know that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contains the values that protect and the spirit that promotes human dignity.

On March 9, 1993, as a direct result of the proactive strategies developed by educators, social justice community workers and human rights advocates, the UN Commission on Human Rights in Resolution 1993/56, 'Education and Human Rights', has recommended that 'the General Assembly take the appropriate measures to declare a decade for human rights education....' The World Conference added its recommendations to this resolution. This UN Decade of Human Rights Education will start in January 1994, with which the Organizing Committee of the people's Decade will cooperate in full.

Human rights education as a long term proactive strategy is the gift of the world to its children. No longer can the knowledge of human rights be the domain of a few. The first of yet many steps to reach these goals have been taken. It is now time to join in the actions that will make human rights education a routine activity of all sectors of society and an important component of all NGOs' activities.

National organizing committees for human rights education should include educators who develop methodologies, NGOs that bring the constituencies and the 'entry point', human rights advocates who bring the content, and last but not least the media, the artists, the writers, the dancers and the storytellers that will make it truly mass education, by sensitizing the community to accept human rights as a fully comprehensive concept, creating the unique building blocks of law, freedom and culture.

The Organizing Committee of the people's Decade of Human Rights Education, having developed a network in more than 60 countries, has proposed a comprehensive action plan to the UN Centre for Human Rights, introducing strategies and methodologies to meet the needs of human rights education leading to the development of training and resource centres in all nations.

The Organizing Committee hopes that those interested in learning about the Action Plan join in implementing it, facilitate actions, and participate in further developments.