
The role of national human rights institutions in advancing human rights education

This report is a summary of the presentations and discussion at a roundtable event held on 20 June 2014. Representatives of national human rights institutions (NHRIs), civil society, academia, and inter-governmental organisations discussed the mandate of NHRIs to promote human rights education, including examples, challenges and future opportunities.



The global human rights education and training centre

CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
The human rights education mandate of national human rights institutions.....	3
Opportunities for NHRIs to advance human rights education.....	6
The challenges for NHRIs and human rights education	7
The role of inter-governmental institutions working with NHRIs on human rights education	8
Discussion	10

Acknowledgements

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A recording of the session is available to [watch online](#).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 12 June 2014, HREA organized a roundtable discussion on the *Role of National Human Rights Institutions in Advancing Human Rights Education*. The roundtable brought together a range of stakeholders who have been involved in human rights education for many years including representatives from national human rights institutions, academic institutions, NGOs and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Using video conferencing facilities, presenters and participants from around the world were able to join the session that was hosted at the HREA offices in Cambridge, MA. The session, chaired by Frank Elbers, Executive Director of HREA, consisted of four presentations and was followed by questions and discussion with participants. A recording of the session is available to watch online¹.

Expert presenters introduced the human rights education mandate of NHRIs and spoke about the structure and framework for NHRIs to deliver human rights education as mandated by the Paris Principles² and other international human rights instruments. The solid mandate for NHRIs to implement human rights education (HRE) initiatives was discussed, also acknowledging that greater attention should be spent on common standards relating to the content or the form of HRE within NHRIs and greater cooperation for harmonizing HRE between NHRIs.

The framework of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE) was considered as an opportunity for NHRIs to shape national human rights education plans, with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) describing several examples of collaboration between the agency and NHRIs. The Irish Human Rights Commission described their training of trainers initiative with civil servant and senior representative from Ireland's national police service and prison service briefly joined the roundtable to explain the benefits of their training programme.

Reflecting upon experiences from around the world and contributions from participants, several lessons learned were identified for strengthening HRE initiatives of NHRIs.

¹ To access the recording of the roundtable, please go to: <http://www.hrea.org/national-human-rights-institutions>.

² Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles). Adopted by United Nations General Assembly resolution 48/134 of 20 December 1993, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/StatusOfNationalInstitutions.aspx>.



THE HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION MANDATE OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS

Prof. Dr. Claudia Lohrenscheit

Faculty of Social Work and Health, Coburg University of Applied Sciences and Arts

Dr. Lohrenscheit presented the strong international mandate for NHRIs delivering human rights education. The first important framework is the Paris Principles, a set of international standards which frame and guide the work of NHRIs. They define the role, composition, status and functions of national human rights institutions and are broadly accepted as the test of an institution's legitimacy and credibility.³ The United Nations resolution 48/134 in 1993 stated that:

The General Assembly, (...) convinced of the significant role that institutions at the national level can play in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms and in developing and enhancing public awareness of those rights and freedoms (...).

A national institution shall, inter alia, have the following responsibilities:

(f) To assist in the formulation of programs for the teaching of, and research into, human rights and to take part in their execution in schools, universities and professional circles

*g) To publicize human rights and efforts to combat all forms of discrimination, in particular racial discrimination, by increasing public awareness, especially through information and education and by making use of all press organs.*⁴

In addition to the Paris Principles, there is a basis for human rights education within several international human rights instruments when taking a human rights-based approach. The shortest description of human rights education can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."⁵

³ Paris Principles: 20 years guiding the work of National Human Rights Institutions, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/ParisPrinciples20yearsguidingtheworkofNHRI.aspx>.

⁴ Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles). Adopted by United Nations General Assembly resolution 48/134 of 20 December 1993, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/StatusOfNationalInstitutions.aspx>.

⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948. UNGA Res 217 A(III) (UDHR), article 26.

Building upon this strong international framework, Dr. Lohrenscheit argued there needs to be greater attention to program implementation on a national level. Firstly, there are currently no common standards relating to the content or the form of human rights education within NHRIs. Secondly, there is no structure or cooperation for harmonizing HRE between NHRIs.

EXCESSIVE DEMANDS

Dr. Lohrenscheit described how NHRIs often find themselves in a situation of “excessive demands”. Whilst not a complete list, the diagram below illustrates the variety of stakeholders, tasks and targets that NHRIs must work with to promote HRE.

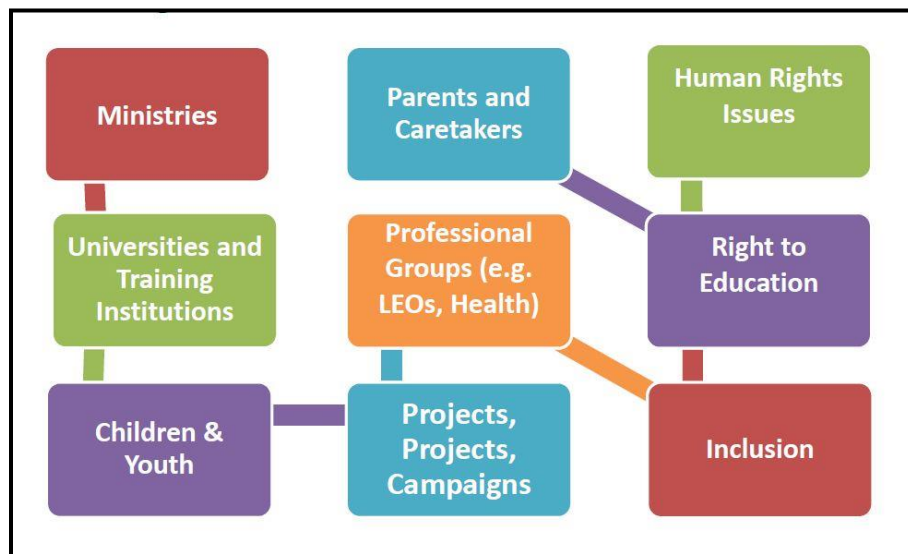


Figure 1: Excess Demands

In order for NHRIs to be service agencies for human rights education at the national level they need to have strong cooperation and good relations with several government ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, in order to adjust to the norms of the formal educational sector. This is also the case with the primary learning and training institutions, such as the universities.

Children and youth are an obvious first target group for NHRIs. Yet it is also important for educators to take consider parents and caretakers. Dr. Lohrenscheit advised NHRIs to promote dialogue and cooperation with these groups because they can be very powerful groups in some countries. She described an example when parent groups would have the ability to block or boycott the introduction of HRE in early education if they believe it is not relevant.

NHRIs must also have a thorough understanding of the concerns of particular professional groups, such as law enforcement officials and health workers, when considering HRE. Ideally this would include trained pedagogues, policy advisors, as well as sector experts.

Dr. Lohrenscheit argued that these numerous and competing demands mean that NHRI need to have a HRE department within their institutions.

DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM

NHRIs must have a strong focus on combating and preventing discrimination and racism. There may be occasions when there is strong resistance from learners or parent groups to a particular HRE programme. Dr. Lohrenscheit described the current situation in Germany where there is a public discussion on the inclusion of LGBT rights in the school curriculum. Large protests are taking place against HRE when it involves sexual orientation and gender identity.

Since they are national institutions, she argued, NHRIs should focus on national programs and campaigns in research and practice. Thus, “natural” cooperation partners are ministries and other authorities dealing with education and training at all levels – from early childhood to continuing education. International programs in HRE can be an asset and might be easier to co-finance in some countries under the framework of development cooperation but should not dominate. Lobbying for HRE in NHRIs is both, an internal as well as an external task. Only few NHRIs have their own department for HRE. Thus, Claudia Lohrenscheit maintained that HRE can be the door opener for a dialogue on other human rights issues. In addition to this, HRE programs can be oriented towards goals, human rights topics or target groups; focus on in-service training and non-formal education when there are decent education and training structures in place.

Dr. Lohrenscheit concluded that before starting any HRE program, it must be understood by the adults that are involved. NHRIs need to ensure that their educators and trainers are prepared to deal with resistance to human rights education. There must be provision for training of trainers in the field of discrimination and racism.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR NHRIS TO ADVANCE HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Fiona Murphy
Irish Human Rights Commission

Ms. Murphy outlined the international instruments that give the mandate to NHRIs to promote and protect human rights. The Paris Principles (1993), the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993) and the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005 - ongoing) all specify a role for NHRIs to deliver HRE.

The World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE) presents NHRIs with a unique opportunity to influence the HRE work of the OHCHR. The International Coordination Committee, which includes the European Group for NHRIs and the Asia-Pacific Group, includes effective systems that enable national institutions to share and support best practice and learning.

With reference to the work of Irish Human Rights Commission, Ms. Murphy emphasized the importance of using a methodology that is firmly placed within the international human rights framework. She introduced the term “human rights-based approach to HRE” to describe the work that overlaps attitudes, standards, values and principles of human rights, with participatory pedagogy.

On the domestic level, Ms. Murphy described the role of NHRIs to lobby and influence government on shaping and implementing the National HRE Action Plan. NHRIs are well positioned to undertake mapping studies of human rights education and training needs within the civil and public service. The Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is currently responsible for the human rights training of trainers within a number of public services, including health services, social workers, police, military, prison service, employment rights, pensions authority and refugee appeals tribunal.

Ms. Murphy introduced two senior representatives from the police and prison service to share their experience of working with the IHRC to conduct human rights training. Sergeant Mick McWalsh, a representative of An Garda Síochána, Ireland’s national police service, described the benefits of the e-learning training the service has undertaken, driven largely by the cost-benefit of reaching a large number of police personnel with a limited training budget. Mr. Ray O’Keefe, Chief Officer of the prison service, has worked with the IHRC to design a bespoke training programme to be the “golden thread between professional competencies and ethics”. The training initiative addresses how the prison service deals with people in custody as well as families of prisoners and the wider community. Of the 2,300 prison staff in Ireland’s prison system, 2,100 people have been trained in one year.

Ms. Murphy noted that the training of trainers HRE module for the civil and public service has been a successful initiative for the IHRC because it enables participants to thoroughly discuss contentious issues within a safe environment. One of the important roles of NHRIs is to bridge the gap, and facilitate productive linkages, between the government and civil society.



THE CHALLENGES FOR NHRIS AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Prof. Dr. André Keet

International Institute for the Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice,
University of the Free State, South Africa

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) was established in 1996 and was largely responsible for initiating the discourse of what it means to be a “human rights state” in post-apartheid South Africa. Their early work can be loosely defined as school curriculum design and human rights training of the police, prison service and other professional government departments. This prompted the creation of the National Centre for Human Rights Education and Training. Looking back, and with the benefit of hindsight, Dr. Keet believes the lack of staff with an expertise as human rights *educators* was something the organisation could have done differently. Just reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights alone is not enough to make people good human rights educators. Since he left SAHRC there has been a drop in the focus on HRE.

Reflecting on his experience in South Africa, Dr. Keet emphasizes how important the context for HRE is and expressed his discomfort with using the terms “transitional democracy” and “post-conflict”. Rather, he believes that democracy is a constant process and social spaces are constantly in transition. Violence is a part of everyday reality across the world and to presume a time and place where there is no violence or conflict is incorrect. He suggested that context has a large influence on HRE, but we should not think of context as a constraining factor. We must avoid the notion of a deficit model, where the context works against achieving HRE objectives. The challenge is not the context, but the language we choose to use about the context. In addition, methodologically SAHRC also comes from an African environment, where different social contracts and relationships exist between the state and citizens.

Dr. Keet discussed the need for HRE to be adapted to the complex needs of individuals and communities. NHRIs must professionalize the field of HRE so that new practitioners emerge and take forward the work. There is a trend for NHRIs to be driven by the protection of human rights, and the short term issues that generate media coverage. However, for communities to observe human rights and maintain peace in the long term,

there must be a greater focus on the slow, patient work to change people's ideas and attitudes.

Dr. Keet identified three lessons for NHRIs working in HRE:

1. There needs to be **greater efforts formalizing and professionalizing the HRE sector**, both in terms of content and standards. This is essential to achieve infusion and integration.
2. **NHRIs have a bias towards work on the protection and monitoring of human rights violations, rather than promotion and education.** This is a misconception of HRE and human rights educators have failed to convince those involved in the protection and monitoring work of the value of HRE and the connection between promotion and protection.
3. **The HRE sector needs an internal, robust critique.** The absence of HRE in the discourse and spaces of the increasing number of protest movements around the world, illustrates the risk of HRE becoming irrelevant. We must avoid the prospect of a backlash against human rights; of social movements developing strategies and interventions outside and independent of the HRE field; and that the daily struggle of people will be increasingly disconnected from the HRE field. A robust critique within HRE is required in order to allow the field to mature intellectually and its practices becoming more acceptable and practical. A discourse with its own critique has higher forms of legitimacy, and can respond to those contesting human rights both locally and globally.



THE ROLE OF INTER-GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS WORKING WITH NHRIS ON HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Elena Ippoliti

Methodology, Education and Training Section
Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Ms. Ippoliti started by introducing the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as the principal human rights official organization of the UN, based in Geneva, New York and also with a national and regional presence. OHCHR supports many aspects of the functioning of NHRIs, including reviewing the draft laws concerning NHRIs to ensure they align with the Paris Principles; providing the Secretariat of the International Coordinating Committee of NHRIs⁶ (ICC); and supporting the work of NHRIs with the international human rights system. In addition to working with NHRIs, the role of OHCHR is to cooperate with other institutions such as the Council of Europe, the European Union

⁶ Website: <http://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/Pages/default.aspx>.

Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

OHCHR's Methodology, Education and Training Section supports the work of NHRIs in three areas:

1. Facilitation of information sharing and the exchange of good practices among NHRIs in the area of HRE and training

A recent example of this work is the conference organized by OHCHR and the Irish Human Rights Commission in December 2013 that brought together more than 90 participants from over 30 countries. The overall aims of the conference were to showcase and share good practices in human rights training for the public and civil service, and to encourage and support the design and implementation of human rights training of civil servants in accordance with the Second Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE).

2. Provision of technical support to NHRIs for national HRE programmes

OHCHR recently received a request from the Rwandan NHRI to help it develop a national HRE strategy and campaign. OHCHR shared examples of national strategies and action plans from other countries, including methodological tools and guidelines. OHCHR has developed training materials including: HRE tools guided by international standards; participatory HRE methodologies; learner-centered methodology based on the realities of the learner, amongst others.

3. Facilitation and delivery of human rights training for staff of NHRIs

On several occasions, OHCHR had been requested to help train staff of NHRIs on a variety of issues including the methodology of human rights work. OHCHR organized a human rights monitoring and fact-finding course for the Thai National Human Rights Commission focused on designing a human rights monitoring framework, developing skills in information-gathering and interviewing. This is one example of training that Ms. Ippoliti said that OHCHR did in response to a specific request from national human rights institutions to train their staff. OHCHR is currently working with the NHRI in Ecuador following a request to develop a training of trainers course on human rights training methodologies.

DISCUSSION

In many countries NHRIs are taking an increasingly prominent role in bridging international human rights standards and domestic implementation. We must be aware that NHRIs have a responsibility to coordinate with **both civil society and government for delivering HRE.**

The issue of **standardization and professionalization** of the HRE sector raised during the presentations generated a range of different responses from participants. Building upon the strong international framework that provides the mandate for NHRIs to deliver human rights education, Dr. Lohrenscheit argued there needs to be greater attention to program implementation on a national level. Firstly, there are currently no common standards relating to the content or the form of human rights education within NHRIs. Secondly, there is no structure or cooperation for harmonizing HRE between NHRIs. Many participants in the roundtable agreed it was beneficial for NHRIs to have a HRE department within their institutions in order to facilitate the development of HRE expertise and deal with completing demands.

Based on his experiences and observations in South Africa, Dr. André Keet emphasized that greater efforts should be made to formalize and professionalize the human rights education field sector, with a need for more thorough self-reflection and robust, internal critique. Evaluation of HRE programming was discussed as one option for such a critique, but prof. Keet argued this self-reflection must go beyond programme evaluation to include an intellectual and academic analysis.

Achieving a balance between improving the harmonization and standards of the HRE sector, and the importance of activism within the sector, was debated. The origins of HRE lie in social movements, yet human rights language is almost entirely absent from currently movements such as the Occupy movement and labour protests. Prof. Keet illustrated that even in South Africa, where there may be high levels of awareness, HRE is not meeting the needs, requirements and local struggles of communities. NHRIs have a responsibility to bridge the gap between influencing government HRE policies and responding to the needs of communities on the ground.