

# Statement of workshop on Asia-Pacific Human Rights Education: The right to Human Rights Education<sup>1</sup>

Among the peoples of the Asia-Pacific region, there is growing realisation of the deprivation of basic human rights. Voices of protest are calling for fundamental change in order to ensure respect for the human dignity of all. The political regimes which during the past decades have sought to divorce development from democracy are faced with an unprecedented wave of mass protest. Aspirations for a better future are increasingly being articulated in the language of human rights. The objectives of human rights education must reflect the context of intense social conflicts in society. 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 change is the primary goal of human rights education.

From 22-25 August 1996, human rights educators and representatives of human rights NGOs from across the Asia-Pacific region, from Bangladesh, Burma, East Timor, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as Australia, met in Sydney to discuss the main tasks of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) in the Asia-Pacific region. The participants at the Workshop of Asia-Pacific Human Rights Educators agreed upon the following principles and tasks:

## Concept of human rights education

1. Human rights education is not an end in itself, but must aim to promote **social transformation**. The widest participation of all sectors and actors of society is essential to overcome obstacles to the achievement of human rights in different social contexts. As affirmed in the 1993 *UNESCO World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy*, human rights education must be "participatory", "creative, innovative and empowering at all levels of society". Human rights must be brought into all aspects of education and social discourse.

## Fundamental principles

2. The protection and promotion of human rights are a matter of **legitimate international concern** and the advocacy of human rights cannot 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

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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.

10. Documents further elaborating the UN Plan of Action for the Decade for Human Rights Education must reflect regional and sub-regional priorities, needs and experiences, defined through the fullest participation of NGOs and institutions of civil society.

### **Obstacles to the Promotion of Human Rights Education in the Asia-Pacific Region**

11. In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, feudal and patriarchal social conditions, military regimes and authoritarian political systems persist. Increasingly, non-State actors are becoming major violators of human rights. These include civil society actors, national and multinational corporations, and national and multilateral institutions of development, finance and trade. Gross violations of human rights are widespread, including executions, disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention and curtailment of freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Abuse of women, exploitation and neglect of children, attacks on the rights of workers and trade-unions, and violence against foreigners, refugees, displaced persons, indigenous peoples, minorities, persons with disabilities, persons with HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable groups are endemic. The perpetrators of gross violations of human rights and their accessories often enjoy wide-spread *de facto* and *de jure* impunity.
12. Within the Asia-Pacific region, there is a low level of ratification of major international human rights treaties. Where international human rights instruments have been adopted, they are the subject of extensive reservations. There is frequently a gap between the text of human rights instruments and their implementation. Inadequate and inappropriate allocation of resources by national governments is inconsistent with the fulfilment of their international human rights obligations. All too often, there is a failure to incorporate international human rights standards into domestic law. At the national level, there is an absence of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Monitoring and enforcement by national judiciaries and human rights commissions often prove inadequate. Mechanisms for monitoring the human rights impact of the activities of non-State actors, and holding them accountable to international human rights standards, are non-existent.
13. Within the Asia-Pacific region, there is no regional or sub-regional human rights instrument or enforcement mechanism. Efforts to promote regional machinery encounter arguments about cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity, a prioritisation of economic growth over individual human

rights, a lack of geographical agreement on the region and the absence of a regional political system. Opponents of regional machinery also cite the selective invocation of human rights rhetoric in the foreign policy of governments, as well as the discriminatory imposition of human rights conditionalities in development assistance. It will be vital to ensure that any regional human rights arrangements do not derogate from or lower existing international standards.

14. A number of governments in the Asia-Pacific region refer to distinct "**Asian values**" and challenge the legitimacy of international action for the promotion of human rights. The prevailing trend in the Asian media is similarly to champion Asian values. The extreme understanding of Asian values as a unique set of preferences found only in Asia is untenable. Whilst there must be recognition of contextual diversity and cultural specificity in the implementation of human rights, it is incorrect to posit distinct Asian human rights notions.
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.
21. The Asia-Pacific region is characterised by ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. Current trends promoting intolerance, discrimination and inequality frequently produce communitarian and sectarian conflict. Educational processes should promote attitudes of tolerance and pluralism and bring about understanding and friendship amongst different countries and ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. A major task for human rights educators is to foster just ethnic relationships, design anticipatory educational strategies and promote education for conflict resolution and peace-building.
22. In the Asia-Pacific region, there is an urgent need to hold personnel in law enforcement, the administration of justice and military and security forces accountable to international human rights and humanitarian law standards. This requires basic structural reforms and reorientation and sensitisation of personnel through human rights education. Governments have primary responsibility for ensuring such reform and education, with the fullest participation of NGOs and civil society actors.
23. Within the region, there is a particular need for increased awareness of the role of human rights in development cooperation and of the human right to development. Support for human rights education efforts should be provided through development assistance. Officials involved in development cooperation, in both donor and recipient countries, must ensure transparency and

participation in the development process. All development cooperation should be imbued by human rights education.

24. As affirmed in 1974 by the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference, **information** is an essential part of the nation's resources and access to it one of the **basic human rights**. An important task for the UN Decade for Human Rights Education is to ensure international action to prevent increasing attempts at censorship of the internet. There is a need for training human rights activists and educators in the strategic use of information technology.
25. The Asia-Pacific region is home to many indigenous peoples, whose identity as indigenous is frequently denied by governments. An important task for human rights educators is to increase knowledge about the **existence and rights of indigenous peoples** in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular their rights to self-determination, their land and their natural resources.

### **Priorities and Action Plans for Human Right Education Activities**

26. **UN Plan of Action.** The Workshop of Asia-Pacific Human Rights Educators is concerned that the UN Plan of Action for the Decade places **undue emphasis on national structures** for coordination and implementation of human rights education. The Plan of Action marginalises the role of NGOs and institutions of civil society. In many Asia-Pacific countries, national focal points, plans of action and resource centres are likely to become instruments for centralised governmental control of human rights education. Any national processes must exercise a promotional and facilitative, rather than regulative role with respect to human rights education activities. They must respect the autonomy of human rights NGOs. The UN Decade for Human Rights Education must guard against the diversion of scarce financial and material resources away from the human rights education activities of NGOs and organs of civil society.

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;
- revise school curricula to integrate human rights education into the curriculum at all levels of formal education, produce human rights training and educational

materials for students and teachers, and develop in-service teacher training courses;

- ensure that human rights is a subject of teaching in universities, including in schools of law, economics, medicine, politics and social work.
30. **Mass Media.** A media sensitive to human rights concerns can contribute significantly to education about human rights, including amongst persons at all levels of literacy and living in rural or remote areas. Within the Asia-Pacific region, the media have tended to trivialise and sensationalise human rights issues. There is a particular need to strengthen the capacity and role of the mass media in the coverage of human rights issues and furtherance of human rights education.
31. **Information technologies.** The increased use of wire-less data transmission is fashioning information as a powerful weapon in struggles against authoritarian governments and oligopolies. There must be increased efforts to ensure equitable access by the global human rights community to the benefits of this technology.
32. **Human rights education for democracy and pluralism.** There is a need to develop regional and national human rights education strategies with respect to democracy and pluralism. Human rights education should impart skills for the promotion of the space of civil society, as well as for monitoring legislative and other developments which threaten to erode democratic institutions.
33. **Protection of human rights educators.** There is an urgent need for guarantees to ensure the safety of human rights educators and the integrity of their work. During the International Decade of Human Rights Education there must be concerted efforts to ensure adequate standards and procedures for the protection of human rights educators. During the International Decade there should also be efforts to elaborate standards and objectives for human rights education. These should delineate, inter alia, the relationship of human rights educators and national governments in the provision of human rights education.
34. **NGOs.** The Workshop urges the NGO community in the Asia-Pacific region to mobilise to:
- safeguard the integrity of all human rights education activities;
  - undertake evaluation of the impact of human rights education activities;
  - forge solidarity alliances to address the human rights education needs in particularly different country situations;
  - enhance the exchange of experiences, knowledge and skills in the area of human rights education; and



- prevent monopolisation of human rights education activities by national governments and human rights commissions.
35. **National governments.** National governments have an obligation to promote human rights education in all its aspects. The Workshop urges governments to ensure non-discriminatory NGO participation in the planning and implementation of human rights education activities. The Workshop also exhorts governments to respect fully the autonomy and integrity of human rights education activities in the non-governmental sector. Officials in all areas of government should receive human rights education.
  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 Refugees 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.

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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.