

Advancing Human Rights Education in Peacebuilding

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In 2000, a research team funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and based at the Center of the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University (CSHR) sought to discover what works best in implementing human rights education in the aftermath of armed conflict. The research question was exploratory in nature: “What is effective human rights education within the context of conflict and post-conflict rebuilding?” The results were reported in *Human Rights Education for Peacebuilding* and were intended to be shared with those involved in ongoing and future peacebuilding operations.

This comparative, policy-oriented study brought researchers to five countries—El Salvador, Mexico (Chiapas), Guatemala, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—where they evaluated the HRE programs that were being conducted by a combination of international agencies and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within their peacebuilding activities. In all five of these countries that were visited (in 2000 and early 2001), interviews were held with local human rights educators, as well as members of UN missions, including peacekeepers and human rights workers who have participated in human rights education or promotion activities. In Angola, the project drew on researchers’ prior teaching experiences there, and in Colombia and Haiti, experts who had worked on peace missions there served as informants.

The purpose of this essay is to raise awareness of recent and past experiences in Human Rights Education (HRE) associated with peacebuilding activities. While this link might seem obvious, in practice, HRE takes many different forms and often does not gain a solid foothold in the overall peacebuilding process. This essay provides a brief look at what works, when, why, and how.

The major finding of the 2002 *Human Rights Education for Peacebuilding Report* was that even human rights education’s own practitioners and conflict managers had no well-defined sense of what HRE is (or of the rationale for HRE within the peacebuilding context). Thus, in addition to finding out what is effective in HRE practice, the other goals became that of determining

exactly how human rights education contributes to peacebuilding, and of identifying the factors that are hindering HRE from playing a more substantial role in peacebuilding.

To address the initial research concern, researchers searched for indicators that a particular HRE had had a positive impact on participants. Invariably such impacts—such as when women had become more intolerant of domestic violence after learning that it constitutes a violation of their human rights—had occurred because the local educator had found creative ways of bringing abstract human rights principles and converted peoples into a higher-level awareness, and had motivated the learners to take action on the basis of their new thinking.

Unfortunately, successes were ultimately overshadowed by many of the failures. Much of the anecdotal evidence garnered for the study was dispiriting, like these thoughts shared by a Guatemalan farmer:

They came [from a human rights organization] in the 1940s, to teach us about human rights, then again in the 1960s; and now you want to tell me the same thing in the 1990s. . . . My wife is sick, and I am worried about getting my goods to market to sell in order to buy her the medicine she needs. I know what human rights are. I know where they come from. What good is that to me, when my wife is dying and I don't have enough money to help her?

Both by word of mouth and by direct observation, researchers encountered many cases like that one of the Guatemalan farmer. Many people had been exposed to human rights education on a variety of occasions and yet learned to shun it because it had, or appeared to them to have, no direct link to their problems. Nor is this experience unique in this regard. Here is what a UN Humanitarian Affairs officer interviewed in 1999 had to say about her work in Bosnia in 1995:

Our job was to disseminate information about human rights and the Dayton Peace Accords through a series of workshops. Since our personnel lacked information regarding teaching methodologies, they presented human rights in a very formal way. They were preaching principles saying, 'You have the right to life,' without any mention of how to go about ensuring that right or how to apply it to the current situation. As a result, many participants did not show up at the following workshop. We realized they had been bored, and to the person who had lost five family members in the war, this information was meaningless. We knew we had to change the approach if we were to make any significant change in peoples' thinking.

One of the chief findings was that better teaching methodologies have to be at the center of all future HRE approaches. Also, however, the teaching itself and the teachers themselves will have to better adapt themselves and their methods to each post-conflict situation in all of its uniqueness. Creative educators, for instance, might have led that Guatemalan farmer to see how the

right to move about freely and safely within one's own nation is a basic human right, and how the lives of rural people like him, whose cash reserves are small, are particularly vulnerable to even short term socioeconomic downturns. Not only was the link between human rights, income level, and health care not apparent to him, but also human rights had never been taught as a tool to achieve a standard of well-being.

Many human rights workers said that talk about rights in the absence of any material conditions to support them made them feel powerless. Similarly, human rights educators, both internationally and local, often complained of their inability to back up their teaching with the material and institutional support that would heighten the security of communities and individuals, and thereby lead the latter to reconsider their belief that human rights education is too abstract to merit the investment of any more of their precious time.

None of what has just been said is to be construed as suggesting that merely more material resources, in and of themselves, can be the magic bullet. Indeed, UN officials who participated in the missions staged in the immediate aftermath of the conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Haiti all said in their interviews that there was plenty of funding available for human rights promotional materials, which usually included radio and television commercials. They all said, however, that they lacked knowledge with respect to providing effective human rights education. Local educators, who seemed to possess the knowledge about what worked, complained that there were far too many scattered HRE projects, with no coherent strategy in place for their interlocking implementation, and they were grossly under-resourced. Policy makers complained that there was little, if any, feedback going back to them from the educators themselves, with respect to what is and what is not working. The problem noted by all of those interviewed in situations that were experiencing much later post-conflict stages was that the initial surge in post-war funding, which even benefited HRE to a certain extent, had already dried up, leaving them on their own to look for scarce funding sources.

One important development is the overall awareness of human rights by multiple actors within many of today's peacebuilding operations. Basic human rights knowledge is now being fluidly and widely disseminated on the ground by the international actors who are engaged in peacebuilding activities under the aegis of international, regional, and national human rights instruments. As Alice Henkin noted, "the actual practice of human rights field work-recruiting and training a pool of human rights officials with field experience, monitoring, supporting NGOS, developing a capacity to assist new or reforming government institutions . . . has also developed significantly."

A second development in the field of human rights education is to be found in the way the field has produced two important intergovernmental

frameworks: The World Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2005) and The World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005–2009). These initiatives, designed to give national HRE planners a sense of solidarity and direction, perform a useful service by delineating human rights education as a field of inquiry capable of standing on its own, apart from such other educational forms like civic education and peace education. The Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005–2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education makes explicit reference to the role that HRE is expected to play within peacebuilding programs: “Human rights education contributes to the long-term prevention of human-rights abuses and violent conflicts.”

In the future, it is possible that these frameworks will become part of all the programs implemented by peacebuilding practitioners and HRE specialists working in countries that are undergoing or are emerging from conflict, and above all, by officials of the newly established UN Peacebuilding Commission. The problem is, however, that the two HRE intergovernmental frameworks do not include any special provisions on human rights education within the peacebuilding context. Human Rights Education for Peacebuilding might prove instructive in regard to helping define the specialized role of HRE within peacebuilding. It defined how the special content of human rights education within peacebuilding programs must take special account of people’s need to know what happened to them (human rights violations); to have informational tools (knowledge of human rights documents) that help them change their current conditions; and to have a setting in which they can envision how a human rights respecting version of their nation could have kept conflict from breaking out in the first place, and can keep it from doing so again.

A third development comes from the existence of an overall greater human rights knowledge base among key actors in the peacebuilding context. This has led to several sub-developments. It was rare ten years ago to find an educator who recognized the importance of translating abstract human rights into local meaning frameworks; most of them either did not recognize the need for this or know how to do it. Many of today’s educators are being taught methods that help them link abstract human rights to the actual needs and concerns of learners. This reverses a past trend whereby human rights were essentially presented in a legal or theoretical manner that most people did not find applicable to their own lives. Human rights discussions tend to be highly localized and thus play into another trend whereby regional bodies are developing a growing body of materials that are imbued with local cultural values. Increasingly, these are being made available to educators for use in their classrooms.

It was also common to present human rights in a relatively non-controversial manner. Back in 2000, researchers found this approach common in many programs, including especially government-sponsored HRE programs.

During a visit in Chiapas, Mexico, for example, human rights educators working for the Mexican Human Rights Commission complained that their training workshops were ineffective because both educators and learners were afraid to speak out against those rights violators who often included government security forces and paramilitary forces. Today, there is a growing acceptance of the fact that human rights education leads to social transformations and stirs a sense of moral outrage.

In their 2004 paper, "Conflict Transformation and Human Rights Education," which looks at the experiences of based human rights workers of Peacemakers Trust, the HRE workers Morris and Aw say this: "As human rights educators, we are often involved in the creation of disputes. This is not because we want more disputes, but rather because the nature of our work calls attention to injuries and raises peoples' awareness that their injuries are related to social, political and economic injustices and inequities." In addition to Peacemakers Trust, another of the several organizations that have refined some methodologies designed to train educators how to resolve conflicts within the classroom.

Substantial literature has sprung up in just the short interim since the 2000 study appeared, all of it pointing, albeit in very varied ways, at the emergence of a human rights culture that is slowly spreading to all corners of the globe. Some studies take a relatively impartial view of the transformations that are being wrought in local cultures by the increasing impact of new globalizing human rights culture. Less impartial is educator Joel Spring. Although he agrees there is a growing consensus among human rights educators that the implementation of human rights doctrines and education will change local cultures, he goes on to insist that the new human rights culture substitute for local cultures: "It is simply and only cultural corrective that eliminates customs, behaviors, and values in local cultures that violate human rights . . . of course, no matter how you describe it, this is a form of cultural imperialism."

Each HR educator must decide where she stands on the worldview issue. And certainly, as human rights practitioners seek to bring universal human rights within the framework of local norms and values, they often face opposition from those who perceive human rights as strictly Western ideals, entirely inapplicable to their own non-Western societies and, in fact, a form of cultural imperialism. Nonetheless, today there is a growing recognition within the field of HRE that conflicts can emerge when local values or religious beliefs are found to be at variance with international human rights norms, and that this conflict might be a useful method in conveying human rights. Out of these cultural discords, some educators are managing to shape discussions that are more alive because they are more contentious. That thereby sparks the classroom participation that leads the learners to begin to view human rights education as something not merely being handed down from on high by Western strangers, but rather very close to their own life circumstances.

In his 2007 working paper for the Center of Human Rights and Welfare at the University of Wisconsin, David Guinn argues that human rights education should serve as the third leg of a more stable tripod of post-conflict justice. He argues that the other two legs—truth commissions and international courts—do not by themselves adequately address “the fundamental malaise of a repressed society created by the loss of gross distortion of its moral sense and understanding.” The mere assertion that a crime has been committed, by those running a trial or a truth commission, “may not be persuasive to a populace whose normative understandings have been shaped by the same forces that supported the desecration of rights in the first place.” In this regard, Guinn points to Rwanda’s Tutsi majority who had been indoctrinated with hatred against the Hutus for many years prior to the outbreak of mass violence. Given the deficiencies of the two other post-conflict justice components, human rights education, he argues, is needed to “address the normative values that make the act wrong.”

Many see HRE as being synonymous with peace, with the working credo being: Peace is established when and if human needs are met. Human needs must be an integral concern that shapes the nexus between human rights education and peacebuilding. The links joining human needs to human rights, and human rights to human rights education, should be at the forefront of all HRE programs. In her chapter, Donna Hicks has reminded us of this. It is precisely because human rights are essentially assertions that human needs must be met, that human rights education looms as an increasingly essential component of conflict prevention education. Many human rights educators take a step further by suggesting that when HRE focuses on social goals and ideals, emphasizes the dignity of all human beings, and the need for laws and institutions that explicitly acknowledge that dignity, it contributes directly to the building of societies based on freedom, peace, and justice.

Julie Mertus and Jeffrey Helsing have looked at the intersection between human needs, rights, and peace. They highlight the positive implications that John Burton’s theory of conflict has for peacebuilding. Over a decade ago, Burton insisted that unmet human development needs are the root causes of conflict, but argued that even when all political and ideological issues seemingly have been worked out through negotiation, and the conflict has thereby nominally been brought to an end, the conflict will still find a way to reappear if any fundamental human needs remain unmet.

Much still needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of HRE within peacebuilding. Two basic components are needed: integration and sustainability. Both of these problems are, to a certain extent, endemic to all conflict management activities, but some spring directly from the confusion alluded to earlier, the confusion found even among the HR workers themselves as to what HRE is, how it is to be laid out conceptually and implemented pragmatically,

and how it is to be fitted in comfortably alongside the other peacebuilding activities.

At the core of the integration problem is the fact that human rights education within nations is still characterized by a smattering of unconnected HRE programs run by a wide variety of local and international agencies having little coordination, too little funding, and an absence of strategic planning. Increased funding may also end up helping this field, in ways as yet unforeseen, in these coordination efforts. The absence of any overarching plan for the implementation of HRE within peacebuilding activities makes it less and less likely that human rights will take deep root in a post-conflict nation, and more likely that the conflict will someday re-erupt.

Some of the newer critiques have confirmed a longstanding impression that all too often, in the immediate aftermath of conflict human rights, education serves as a mere bandage or first aid function, doing so chiefly and often solely, by informing people about their rights so that they can then monitor rights violations. Thus it cannot be underscored strongly enough that human rights education will be of little use until it learns how to respond to needs that evolve over time. A participant in a human rights education workshop in Angola summed it up like this: “It took us a long time to get into these conflict situations and we’ve spent a long time fighting, it too will take us a while to develop a culture of human rights. Therefore, it must be in place for a long period of time.” As many post-conflict planners have insisted about post-conflict activities, planning must entail planning for long-term sustainability of inputs.

The goal of sustainability, however, will never be reached unless the programs incarnate the best principles of HRE—and is fueled by funding that does not dry up right after the initial splurge in post-conflict spending has ended. As things now stand, the various purveyors of human rights education are being reduced to the state of warring with each other, as they scramble for the dollars that will see them through the later peacebuilding stages.

In the years that have elapsed since this study was completed, there have been numerous developments in the field. Human rights education has been a component of peacebuilding missions sent to Bosnia, East Timor, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In those and other places, national education ministries have implemented HRE training programs for teachers; other governmental ministries have provided basic human rights training to civil servants, members of security forces, and justice officials; and nongovernmental organizations have put together smaller scale HRE programs. Yet, despite almost a decade’s worth of advance in the interval between the USIP-funded study on Human Rights Education, more recent publications including those of Guinn and of Flowers and Lord tell essentially the same story: the effectiveness of human rights education within the overall peacebuilding process is unknown, and the field

still seems to be groping for a sense of itself.

Three ideas emerge from this essay may help to advance policy and practice of human rights education in post-conflict settings: the importance of the relationship between human rights, as taught, and the practical realities of life, and the special qualifications human rights educators must possess; the need for strategic planning, as a way of ensuring the long-term sustainability of HRE and the funding to support that; and the possible social goals and long-term impacts of HRE and training.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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