

Know Human Rights, Claim Human Rights

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To begin, please understand the perspective and ethos that is the basis of this intervention, the source of the bias implicit and inherent in my views. I am a Canadian of ancestry in India, the country of my birth, and this gives me a certain perspective on the centrality of inclusion, pluralism and diversity in any holistic vision of human rights.

My act of becoming Canadian also enabled me to contribute substantially to the national discourse of what it should mean to be one. A generation ago, I was among a vanguard of Canadians from diverse origins worried that official multicultural policy served to put people in ghettos, to encourage a benign apartheid wherein cultures were separate and equal. The fundamentally hollow concept of “tolerance” only invited acceptance of something, it did not lead to sharing, discovery and ultimately celebration. We worried about the future of a cultural mosaic where every piece in the mosaic was separate and apart from the others.

We believed there could be a means of preserving seminal identities while sharing our lives and experiences with one another. This sat more comfortably in a country that did not believe in forcing assimilation into some overarching national mythos, as was the experience south of the border in the United States. We were working to reshape a 1970s and early 1980s milieu where “multiculturalism” was defined as giving grants to ethnic and cultural associations to propagate and perpetuate their own traditions. We believed that this would ultimately lead to an abundance of solitudes, if there was no attempt to share across cultures, across ethnicity, across religion. And in this context, we worked to shape Canada as a grand inclusion, in which one could maintain the bonds of heritage and ancestry while bringing them to reshape a dynamic and evolving Canadian identity.

In the early 1980s I wrote an article in *The Edmonton Journal*, titled “Multiculturalism: A Kindly Apartheid?” and was roundly condemned by readers. The subject was so emotional that I could not successfully communicate my intent — to ensure the participation of all those cultural solitudes in the crafting of our collective future. Yet those thoughts of inclusion prevailed and ultimately succeeded in the following years. The future evoked by so many of us fighting for a different country, now exists in my modern Canada. A generation later, my country is one of pluralism, multiple identities, cultural sharing, and a surging confidence in our young.

It is this singularly Canadian perspective that leads me to assert that human rights’ learning is the bedrock of inclusive, participatory, transparent, accountable and democratic governance. It imparts the skills necessary for all people to fully participate in self-governance. It ought to be the foundation of peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. Strengthening individual and societal human rights capacity through learning the holistic human rights framework is a key strategy for conflict prevention, sustainable peace, and social and economic rehabilitation.

Given the vigour of the debate in Working Group 2 at the Hofburg Vienna on 28 and 29 August, it is useful to make concisely the distinction between learning and education: education is a formal process including, but not limited to, formal pedagogy whereas learning is a broader concept founded on sharing experience, knowledge and wisdom in addition to what is “taught.” Learning by its nature includes unlearning. I am participating in this conference as a founder of the Human Rights Cities Edmonton, and my remarks are framed in this context.

The International Human Rights Cities programme is rooted in communities that have chosen to incorporate human rights into their everyday lives; to train and empower citizens to know their human rights in order to claim their human rights. This is an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one, and aims at collaboration and consensus to change the underlying values and attitudes that contribute to violence and misery. It thus differs from “code violation” monitoring like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch in looking for long-term changes in behaviour, rather than the mere chronicling of breaches or violations of human rights. Rather than an imposition, the human rights city evolves from within the community, accommodating its unique cultural norms and behaviours, and its own approaches to consensus and coalition building. The commonality in each Human Rights City is to enable “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” within their own communities.

We further recognise that a Human Rights City, in order to succeed, needs inclusive, participatory and responsive systems of governance. This is found principally within, but not necessarily limited to, democratic models. Yet in its essence, Democracy is strongly related to the principles of human rights and cannot function without assuring the full respect and protection of human dignity. More than participation and representation, it is about INCLUSION, the right to be fully included in the civic life of one’s community, one’s state or one’s country. How fully an individual citizen exercises the right to be included and to participate is at the citizen’s own discretion, yet the right cannot be denied. Along with inclusion, the notion of pluralism is at the heart of democratic governance. This is the very act of overcoming “otherness,” of affirming that many streams of human experience and of the human condition can live together in dignity, under the rule of law, with diversity seen as a source of strength and resiliency. In essence, none with a justified claim to citizenship or other forms of legal residence can be denied inclusion and human dignity. This is the litmus test of democracy.

There is an apparent link between undemocratic structures and human rights violations. Yet even functioning democracies can be weak if they condone the denial of human rights. A violation is a specific breach, but the denial of human rights – which can often be the denial of genuine inclusion and pluralism, is societal and systematic. Even an advanced democracy like

Canada, for instance, a perpetual leader in the United Nations Human Development Index, acknowledges that inclusion has not been achieved for its aboriginal population. In many advanced democracies, the full inclusion of women in circles of power and spheres of influence continues to be denied. In the United States, inclusion and pluralism is an ongoing struggle for minority populations and genders such as homosexuals and lesbians.

Conversely, the failure of inclusion and deficiencies in the practice of pluralism can have calamitous consequences. These were seen in widespread and violent civil unrest in France in late 2005, origination with minority populations. It is seen in continuing tensions in Germany with legal residents of Turkish ancestry, and indeed in the challenges of fully including citizens originating in the former East Germany.

A complete understanding of the obligations of pluralism and inclusion is essential to the healthy evolution of a democracy. Which is why, to this date democracy is indisputably the system most conducive to guaranteeing human rights protection and human security.

Entrenching Human Rights Learning is really an endeavour to build human capacity, both individually and in communities, and to enable the blossoming of human potential. When humans are happy, safe and secure, they will be better citizens, better consumers, better employees and better customers. Apart from a handful of egregious regimes, few governments, no matter how maladroit, would actively impose policies of fear and deprivation on the people they purport to serve. There can be no accusations of “neo-colonialism” in advancing the ability of women, men, boys and girls to live together in community with dignity—the natural “deliverable” of a holistic human rights framework based on freedom from fear and freedom from want. Human rights are not a “western imposed” value unless human dignity is a “western value.” In this context, the Emperor Asoka in pre-Christian India posited non-violence as a way of life, and the foundational notion of harmony in Confucian “great learning” is an essential foundation of “freedom from fear and freedom from want.” In this context, human rights is “too political” in the sense that any organised human society is “too political.” We may need to move away from a “contested” term like Human Rights, and transmute it to “the Right to be Human.” This implies a birthright that exists beyond the ambit of legal codes, governments and governance, and speaks to the human birthright to live together in dignity and in community. By embedding this context and framework for dialogue within, among and between individuals, collectives, institutions, and indeed societies, we can together catalyse the creation of self-learning and self-realization, whence will come one’s own tools for social and economic change.

Behind the thicket of human rights norms, standards and procedures there lies the recognition of our shared dignity as a human being and of the things that endanger this dignity. As long as

a single human being is unable to express the highest potential of what it means to be human, all of our human rights are imperiled. Once again, human rights learning secures our right to be human. It is learning about justice and empowering people in the process. It is a societal development, civic empowerment and human development strategy that enables women, men, and children to become agents of change. It can produce the blend of ethical thinking and action needed to cultivate public policies based on human rights and opens the possibility of creating a human rights culture for the 21st century.

Human rights learning, in order to be transformational, must fit into the context of what that transformation ought to achieve. Generally, we would wish it to lead to the advancement of human rights, human development and human security – three overlapping and interlinked concepts that are the core of an alternative vision of the world. It should be noted that – taken together – they amount to a new way of looking at the world, particularly with regard to the evolution of civil society and notions of global governance. Rather than an international order predicated on relationships between nations, this model goes beyond political boundaries to advocate the wellbeing of the individual citizen, no matter where she lives. Human rights implies freedom from fear and threats to one’s fundamental existence. Human development asserts a claim to the resources and freedoms one needs to develop to one’s full potential. And human security evokes freedom from hunger, war, ecological disaster, corrupt governance and other impediments to a life lived in justice, with equality of opportunity for all. This vision departs from those notions of nation-states guaranteeing security by building significant military capacity, and using economic prowess to secure their own prosperity with scant regard for the progress of others.

Our ultimate goal in human rights learning was aptly launched on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration and in this Year of International Human Rights Learning as designated by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. The goal is to engender societal, civic, economic, and political changes at all levels that serve to reclaim and secure the most comprehensive and fundamental of human rights—the right to be human. This in turn creates happy, secure and productive citizens, living in stable and attractive communities. In essence:

- A Human Rights City is a civic space wherein all citizens learn to use the human rights framework to influence the life of the community, realizing our mutual responsibilities to one another as citizens and as a community.
- People learn about human rights as a holistic vision relevant to their daily lives and as a way of life. Social transformation resulting from the learning process strengthens the foundation for a society where all citizens can fulfill their aspirations and potentials.

- Through dialogue and learning, people move from information to knowledge to consciousness about the imperatives of social justice and the dignity of life.
- They work together to strengthen democracy as a delivery system of human rights. In the words of Nelson Mandela: Developing a new political culture based on human rights.

In the present international order, we know idealism and the intention to do well is not enough. We need to frame our compelling arguments for human rights learning in the context of a “business case” if we are to engage and ultimately change the attitudes of those in power. The purveyors of capital and the prophets of market economies must be made to see that a holistic human rights culture is to their advantage, and in embracing human rights learning they are choosing to be on the right side of history. Our challenge is to create an argument which underscores both the economic and the social need for investment in communities aiming to build lives marked by Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want. A key element which must be considered in societal development initiatives is what are the consequences of failing to make the investment? In a societal-development investment model, a central measure of ROI (Return On Investment) is the quantifiable improvement in the quality of life, and the betterment of both circumstance and opportunity. Mechanisms such as Genuine Progress Indicators (GPI) are used to quantify the return on a societal-development business case, rather than traditional private-sector means. These sorts of measures, which can be captured by a GPI such as the one developed by the Pembina Institute for Appropriate Development (<http://www.fiscallygreen.ca/gpi/index.php>), should be included in any evaluation of return on investment for the purposes of this business case.

Instances of outcomes that could be measured, in looking at ROIs in a community revitalization basis, are changes in poverty levels, income distribution, volunteerism, commuting, crime, drug use, suicide, problem gambling, free time, parenting and eldercare, premature mortality, infant mortality, educational attainment and voter participation. In some cases there is a chance to consider better environmental outcomes and impacts as well. None of these outcomes are singularly economic, social or environmental but they are all interlinked and interdependent. Neither are the means to achieve the identified and desired outcomes subject to simple, quantifiable linear measurements. They often involve longer timeframes and terms than most private-sector business case assessment models.

Those of us who already are empowered, and live in empowered nations and societies, must lead this movement to Inclusion. We must develop strategies to enable us to reach beyond the confines of economic globalisation, to that sphere where society, culture, economics and

politics all intermingle and intersect. We know the answer to terrorism lies not just in police action against perpetrators, but in creating a more civil and more secure world, where the benefits and the opportunities of human civilisation are available far more broadly than they have been. The most excluded often live in places where there is no human security and little human development, and therefore no human rights. If economic globalisation is borderless, so is terror. So is ecological degradation. So is smuggling. So is drug trafficking and prostitution. The challenge then is—can we make opportunity borderless? Can we offer the most wretched of the world some semblance of the life that the most privileged take for granted? We need to create identification and empathy between the powerless and the empowered, and this should be a principal focus of our discussion.

This endeavour becomes all the more significant in the forthcoming United Nations Year of Human Rights Learning, enacted by a resolution of the General Assembly led by Benin. The recent political campaign in the United States compellingly demonstrated that the global hyperpower is much more keenly aware of the importance of partnership and collaboration, and of the foundations of the global order that need to be rooted in justice, inclusion, pluralism and dignity – the key components of a culture of human rights.

We need to give due consideration of every aspect of society and culture, if the benefits of human rights learning, and the establishment of a culture of human rights, can be extended to a far greater proportion of the world's people. Especially in the current international climate, we must sharply delineate the difference between traditional notions of global governance and the emerging creed of human rights, human security and human development as the most desirable basis of relations between countries and peoples. All three of those depend on a strong foundation of economic development and equitable access to economic opportunity and resources.

Human rights are ultimately the foundation of civil society, and without them, no society can truly flourish, no matter how rich its economy. The root of this freedom is non-violence, the grand concept championed by M.K. Gandhi. In its essence, non-violence is the freedom to be safe. Without this freedom, we cannot stimulate human rights learning. Thus freedom from fear becomes not only the essential precondition, but the **FIRST GREAT HUMAN RIGHTS LEARNING!** We have not done nearly enough to address the persistence of poverty, nor have we addressed the growing gap between rich and poor both at home and in the world. It is by setting our domestic house in order—by ensuring that human rights, human dignity and human security are extended to all our citizens – that we will better prepare ourselves to assert global leadership in crafting a more civil world.

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