

For the Cerebration of the 60th Anniversary of the UDHR

The Nature of Human Rights Learning

For all to know human rights as a way of life.

Shulamith Koenig – PDHRE, People’s Movement for Human Rights Learning

For twenty years, we have worked to understand human rights as based on a holistic vision and what does it mean in ordinary’s people’s lives. Believing that all women men, youth and children must know and act upon this holistic vision of universal human dignity that is integral to human rights, we first created the “Organizing committee for the Decade of Human Rights Education.” I must accept full responsibility for the use of the word “education,” which in Hebrew means learning, understood as a process of internalizing human rights as to become capable of being an agent of change.

Drawing on my experience in helping to organize the Decade of Women in Israel, I acted on the firm belief that people on the ground level can—as women have been doing—change the world if they only know human rights as a way of life and act upon it. These efforts culminated in the United Nations declaring a Decade for Human Rights Education, on the hope and expectation that it would—as the Decade of Women has done—spur action by groups and organizations at the community level to make.

Sharing similar aspirations, Sonia Picado organized a regional meeting of social justice NGOs and educators in Costa Rica. This was the first step towards, which eventually allowed Sonia to bring to the Commission of Human Rights a resolution on a Decade for Human Rights Education. (At that time Felice Gear added a ‘yes’ for the United States.) The Organizing Committee in New York met every month to define and redefine, imagine and re-imagine, the meaning of Human Rights Education. PDHRE lobbied UNESCO in April 1993 in Montreal and then with more than 60 countries in Vienna later that year.

Vienna was an important step in reiterating the universality, indivisibility, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness of human rights by holding discussions on development as a human right, about women’s concerns and issues as human rights, and of course we were able to bring forth the imperative for Human Rights Education at all levels of society. In the Vienna plan of action came a call for declaring such a Decade where the holistic vision of human rights can triumph in communities worldwide.

I share these recollections with much joy and some sadness. The joy is about the excellent resolution we were able to bring through the third committee in 1994, after long deliberations led by Slovenia, Costa Rica, the Philippines, and Senegal to declare a Decade for Human Rights Education. If one takes the time to read this resolution, it is clear that the resolution sought to end imposed ignorance, conceived as a human rights violation. It spoke to the fact that people, for whom human rights were created, did not know about them.

The resolution called on a multitude of groups and organizations to integrate in their work, and add to their agenda Human Rights Learning. Although at the time we mistakenly use the term “education,” our aim was and still is for people to participate in developing democracies as delivery systems of human rights.

PDHRE was concerned at that time about the relative neglect in the international community of economic, social, and cultural rights and was convinced that they could serve as a powerful tool for social and economic justice. We organized in 30 countries workshops of 2-3 days with social and economic justice groups to discuss the value of economic, social, and cultural human rights to their specific goals and for these be integrated in their work, shared with their constituencies and in lobbying for economic policy.

I will never forget the young policemen who came to monitor the meeting in Kenya. Half way through the opening session, he got up and called out, “If this is human rights, come and teach it in my village!” There was nothing more encouraging than this one man internalizing the holistic vision of human rights... --Asserting again and again, that all people in all villages, towns, and cities around the world must know human rights as a way of life. We believe that all people really KNOW human Rights and spontaneously move away from humiliation. If this is true we must take the responsibility for moving this knowledge from the dormant stage to the power of knowledge.

We have a saying in Hebrew that, “if you can save one person, it is as though you saved the whole world.” I say that to give all the accolades to the human rights educators who took over the Decade of Human Rights Education to teach human rights in formal and informal educational institutions. They did, and are still doing it, with commitment and love for their work.

However, this is where the sadness comes in. The world has six billion plus people. The children and youth reached in the Human Rights Education process are a very small fraction of the world, however important for the future. Indeed, it is crucial to have young people know about the Magna Carta, the French Revolution, and the UDHR. But their learning is stifled by growing up in families and communities that do not know the holistic vision and practical mission of human rights, and instead only know human rights through the pain of violations. They need to join intensive learning and discovery of a meaningful realization of human rights to become positive agents of change.

The idea of the Decade for Human Rights Education was to start an international process for all people to know, internalize, and act to achieve their hopes and expectations of thousands of years for equality and lack of discrimination, which human rights is all about. Different parts of the Decade have been implemented in different ways.

Teachers and educators, in more than 60 countries have been spending their energies and commitment day in and day out to develop and implement curricula, pedagogy, and methodology, mostly in educational institutions. Human rights activists have had their approaches. Some shy away from acting on the political implications of treating human rights as an ideology instrumental for improving the life of the community as a whole. This more political interpretation coincides with the vision of Nelson Mandela who calls for the development of a new political culture based on human rights. PDHRE certainly supports the inclusion of Human Rights Education. But more is needed. That need is the development of the kind of autonomous critical thinking essential to democratic governance in which communities need to participate and can so effectively if equipped with the knowledge about human rights as a way of life.

So PDHRE, People's Decade for Human Rights Education, changed its name to PDHRE, People's Movement for Human Rights Learning, this for the purpose of making the clarion call again and again for all to know the holistic vision of human rights as relevant to people's daily lives, and to make a very clear distinction between Human Rights Education and Human Rights Learning. This was done not to diminish Human Rights Education, but to understand that reaching possibly 1% to 2% of the communities in the world, mostly children and youth, will not bring about the holistic vision and practical mission of human rights to grass roots communities. I am sorry for repeating myself, but I feel very strongly that unless we understand human rights as powerful tool in the hands of people, everywhere, anywhere in the world, human rights will stay captive in the hands of experts, teachers, and professionals, mostly top down and informational, and will not find its way from the vertical to the horizontal to be meaningful to people's daily lives those for whom they were created.

We have asked Betty Reardon, a member of our group, who is a world-renowned peace educator, to put in our hands a succinct explanation of the difference between "Human Rights Education" and "Human Rights Learning". And this is what she wrote:

The basic distinction between Human Rights Education and Human Rights Learning is between education and learning. The word "education" has been co-opted by those who determine what is to be taught, to whom and how it is to be taught, not just by the schools, but any authority who has control over information. The purpose of education is usually to get people to believe what and think as the "education authorities" want them to. Learning has not yet been so co-opted. Learning can still be what happens in those who are presented with ideas, issues, values, queries about problems, and through reflection, analysis, assessment and evaluation come to understand and hold independent ideas about their societies and as much of the world as they "learn" about. Education has become mainly input. If it has any authentic output it is learning, but mainly it is socialization to conformity and indoctrination in the dominant value system. Authentic learning happens in and at the will of the learner. Human Rights Learning is more consistent than Human Rights education with the fundamental purpose of human rights concepts and standards, making it possible for all persons to realize their full human dignity. It begins with assuming the rights of the learners to decide themselves what they will believe and develops means through which the learners can acquire information while forming their own opinions and determining their own course of

action about the issues of concern to them. (There are still some places in which education is centered on learning, but few. Education at least provides basic information. For the reflective who can resist indoctrination, it can be the beginning of learning. And where people have none of the tools of acquiring information, it is better than nothing). However, in the absence of authentic Human Rights Learning people will not be able to achieve their full dignity. Education may provide information about human rights, but it will not necessary enable learners to develop the capacity and the motivation to fully realize them.

This statement captures the guiding spirit of our work and this is what hangs in the balance between Human Rights Education and Human Rights Learning.

To make a strong argument about Human Rights Learning at the community level as an imperative, we have been developing over the last 10 years, Human Rights Cities all over the world. There were some beginnings that did not come to fruition, mostly because of lack of funding. But at this very moment, 20 Human Rights Cities are in progress, developing and implementing ways and means for all the inhabitants to know human rights as a way of life and adapt laws, policies, budgets and relationships to advance their life guided by the holistic framework of human rights. This is what we describe as the practical mission of our work. These are learning 'pilot projects' for all to analyze, evaluate and learn from as to the value of neighborhood by neighborhood, organizations and groups, step by step, join to map the future for their community.

We live in a world where a multitude of organizations work to solve the enormous problems humanity is facing one project at the time in a compartmentalized way. PDHRE believing that the holistic, practical human rights framework if known and internalized by women and men at the community level holds the promise for meaningful, positive change. For that purpose PDHRE is facilitating the development of sustainable Human Rights cities around the world. A Human Rights City is where local groups and organizations, those attending to a larger range of social and economic justice issues in the city, join to learn about human rights as relevant to their daily lives. Forming into a Steering Committee they develop learning programs throughout the city, encouraging people to participate in the decision that determine their lives. They develop critical thinking to examine the differences between symptoms and causes of many problems such as violence against women, poverty, and lack of clean water, education, food and employment. These are issues that can be solved if the decisions made by communities are guided by the human rights framework.

During the years, we also developed this definition of a human rights educator at the community level: "A human rights educator is a person, a woman or a man, who is capable of evoking critical thinking and systemic analysis with gender perspective, people learning about political, civil, economic, social, and cultural concerns, guided by the human rights framework that leads to action."

I will never forget another instance when the head of the police academy in the Human Rights City, Rosario, Argentina, said to me at a reflection of a seminar for the police led by Susanna Chiarotti: "There is no other option but human rights." I was quite

jealous that I was not the one to have said it, but have used it ever since. Indeed, there is no other option but human rights.

With the approach of the 60th Anniversary of UDHR, the Elders led by Nelson Mandela, put out a call, "all HUMANS have RIGHTS." I sent them a note asking them, "But do the humans know it?" And no! They don't.

I hope that a strong call comes out of this meeting that distinguishes very clearly between Human Rights Education and Human Rights Learning, not calling it any longer HREL which diminishes the value of what most of humanity need, namely, learning. These are two distinct aspirations and actions and must be understood as such and must live side by side, acknowledging that it is Human Rights Learning at the community level, which stands a chance to make the difference in people's lives. That Human Rights Learning which includes intensive dialogue will focus on the realization of human rights to overcome violation, to chart their lives from a realization point of view, and thus overcome violations.

I call out to community leaders, sociologists and political economists around the world to join nationally and regionally in discussions, investigation, analysis and planning of how to start the process of Human Rights Learning in their community as succinctly relevant to people's lives to be guided by the holistic framework of human rights.

This is not an easy task. And to give it momentum and political will, we initiated with the government of Benin, supported by Austria and Argentina and then the rest of the world, the resolution for the International Year of Human Rights Learning. We expect this International Year to start a worldwide process, locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. We will do all we can and ask for your help to enforce political will and public policy to usher this process. It must be done in a locally, well-thought-out practice that will find ways and means to bring forth the meaning, the relevance, of non compartmentalized societal development. Human Rights Learning through a powerful, viable, creative, thoughtful commitment to have in 10-15 years all people, wherever there are, know human rights as preventive medicine, as traffic regulation, as joining to build the banks of the river, in which life can flow freely.

We must never forget to distinguish between symptoms, such as violence against women or poverty, and causes such as patriarchy and the lack of a viable economic infrastructure. We have to view symptoms as creating solidarity and understanding that by analyzing causes, the world stands to bring about economic and social justice, step by step towards freedom from fear and need.

My hope is that there will be no stone unturned, and no investigation unmade, to start an international process by which all people will know human rights as the rule of the game to get the Olympic Gold Medal . . . - - to join with joy in developing a new way of life determining together the destiny of humanity in the 21st Century.

This must be our responsibility, and we are here to build bridges in positive and creative ways, to make this a reality.

Let us not subsume learning in education, or education in learning Betty makes a real distinction between the two that some times overlap in the process. Let each of us do what we know best. But always remember, with a great sense of social responsibility, and unconditional love, that we must immediately start the unfulfilled call of the Vienna Declaration and the resolution for the UN Human Rights Decade: every woman, man, youth, and child must know human rights as a way of life to affirm that each one is a total human being, yearning to belong in dignity, in community with others and participate as equals and without discrimination, women and men alike.

Allow me to issue a strong plea backed by twenty years of experience in the field, listening to their extraordinary reaction of people when they learn that food education housing, health and work at livable wages are their human rights. And than mostly learning from them of how to relearn and reimagining the vitality and meaning of human rights over and over again.

It is unfair and unjust to spend so much effort on educational institutions and neglect the rest of the world. We must stand up to our responsibility to the people for whom human right can become a life line, a universal now missing support system. Let us do all we can to indentify worldwide the community leaders who will learn about human rights and, each in his or her locality, find the ways and means to engage their community in the learning and dialogue process, so that all will know human rights as a way of life. We have no other option.

Shulamith Koenig, Founding President of PDHRE

Recipient of the 2003 United Nations Human Rights Award

For more information about our work and future collaboration you are invited to browse at www.pdhre.org and/or write to pdhre@igc.org