

# **Human Rights Education after September 11 - Empowerment through Human Rights Education**

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last years, the term "human rights education" (HRE) has slipped into the language of ministries of education, educational nonprofits, human rights organizations and teachers - not to mention intergovernmental agencies such as the United Nations and regional agencies (Tibbitts 2002). In the first half of the Decade of HRE a large number of countries have incorporated HRE into pre-school, primary and secondary school level curricula, either as a cross-curricular theme, an optional course, or as "attainment targets" in the overall curriculum. In many countries, there is also a continuous stream of activities regarding human rights issues, initiated by human rights NGOs and individual schools and teachers (...). The 50th anniversary of the UDHR led to numerous media and public awareness campaigns in many countries (...). A large number of web sites was created to celebrate and make people aware of the UDHR ([www.hrea.org/mid-term-summary.html](http://www.hrea.org/mid-term-summary.html)). However, after September 11, we are challenged to path the way for a kind of sustainable human rights awareness! We are facing new kinds of risks and threats. We are confronted with a new "wave" of global insecurity produced by international terrorism. Our tasks are becoming more difficult now: How can we cope with a climate of fear and hate where human rights and tolerance are no more guidelines of our life. "It is a Herculean task to sensitise people at a time when life is becoming extremely difficult and fraught with dangers" (World Peace Center, Pune 2000, 32). In the first part of this paper I will give an overview about goals and challenges of HRE in general and in the second part I will outline the impact of September 11 on HRE.

## **2. Goals and challenges of HRE**

### **2.1 What is HRE about?**

Human rights education (HRE) has developed into a genuine area of human rights development: human rights which remain unknown, human rights which are not understood and human rights which are not defended by the citizens are without any power. No society can guarantee human rights without the effort to develop in citizens an awareness of human rights: the knowledge of your own rights, the willingness to accept the same rights for others and to support the defence of the rights of all people according to one's own possibilities. This effort we call HRE. "It serves in encouraging the ability of pupils to make judgments and to criticize. It should serve in awakening and strengthening their readiness to stand up for human rights and to resist their disregard and violation. Included in this is the readiness to stand up for the rights of others. They should be prepared to use the question as to the realization of human rights as the most important measure in judging the political situation in their own and in other countries (...) Therefore, a human rights education in this vain also fits in well with education of social tolerance, rejection of racism and hostility toward foreigners. The teaching of human rights has to be linked with the aim of enabling pupils to tolerate the differences of others." (A circular from the Ministry of Schools and Further Education in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia dated; taken from: "50 Jahre Allgemeine Erklärung der Menschenrechte, 2. Weltweiter Projekttag der Solidarität", Aktionsmappe '98, Projektbüro Minden)

Of course, there is not only one approach to HRE. With regard to the content we can distinguish between approaches that focus mainly on legal aspects and "on the documents" and those approaches, that focus more on the dimension of principles and values. With regard to concepts we

have different concepts for different learning environments and for different target groups. Finally the context of HRE makes a big difference: Do we practice HRE in older democracies, in post-totalitarian or authoritarian countries, in developing countries or in post-conflict societies. Even though we argue for the indivisibility of human rights, we find different priorities of human rights and HRE in these societies (Tibbitts 2002).

However, taking into account all these differences, within the national and the international contexts of HRE three typical difficulties of HRE can be identified. We call them the Big I's of HRE: *ignorance, incompetence, indifference and intolerance*. *Ignorance*: this means the lack of knowledge about human rights and the institutions of human rights protection, as well as the inadequate understanding of the gain with regard to civilisation, of the idea of freedom and equality of human rights. *Incompetence*: It is easy when it comes to your own rights, but hard to be supportive of the acceptance of the rights of the others. Citizens are lacking the competence for human rights, mainly because they are not willing to accept the same rights for others. *Intolerance*: Even where human rights of others are accepted in an abstract way, intolerance still exists, very often towards what people actually do with their right to be free.

## **2.2 Ignorance versus knowledge and understanding of human rights**

Even though HRE is granted a high structural significance and even though there is a growing need, there is a noticeably big gap between demand and reality, and between reality and effectiveness of HRE. Even 50 years after the passing of the Universal Declaration of the *human rights, human rights knowledge* and human rights understanding among pupils, students and citizens is only fragmentary and one-sided and *human rights competencies* are only rudimentarily developed. "Stop anyone on the streets of any major city around the world and ask", "What are your human rights?" No matter what the age, location or social circumstances - chances are that few people will have a good idea. The sad fact is that most people remain functionally illiterate about human rights. However, most people have only a vague notion of their human rights as reflected in the UDHR adopted in 1948 by the United Nations, especially its guarantee of social and economic rights. Closing this gap in understanding is the focus of human rights education (<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itdhr/0302/ijde/flowers.htm>) Even though evaluation methodologies for human rights education are still in the developmental stage a 1997 study conducted by The Search Institute and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights yielded impressive concrete results and shows that HRE really matters. First of all HRE has to foster knowledge: Why do we need human rights? Which human rights do exist? What are the root causes of human rights violations? How can I complain, if my rights are violated? Which NGOs do defend human rights? However, HRE should not just mediate knowledge, but has to convey the idea behind the rights and the institutions Human rights are the result of a historical learning process. There is a double gain out of this process for the citizens: on the one side legally recoverable rights of the citizen towards the state and on the other side mutual moral rights that citizens can ask from each other. Human rights have a legal and a moral side. From the point of view of a broad understanding of human rights, HRE aims at a competence, which allows citizens to judge actions of the state and to found one's own actions on human rights standards.

## **2.3 Incompetence versus competence**

A willingness to defend one's own rights play a leading role in human rights competence. It is easy when it comes to your own rights, but hard to be supportive of the acceptance of the rights of the others. Citizens are lacking the competence for human rights, mainly because they are not willing to accept the same rights for others. Human rights also include as human rights, the same rights of others, the equal dignity of each individual! An human rights awareness has to include an understanding and embracing of the principles of human equality and dignity and the commitment to respect the rights of all people. This kind of education should not only make the individual aware

of his or her own rights but should also at the same time instill respects for the rights of others. An essential condition for the human rights awareness is to succeed to embody the willingness to accept equal rights. Based on this willingness, it will be possible to strengthen the idea of freedom and equality of human rights against the racist and nationalist ideologies of bondage and inequality.

But we have to recognize that there is a widespread lack of willingness and even resistance to acknowledge equal dignity and rights. This resistance is already widespread amongst children and young people long before it becomes part of a political ideology of adults. It is easy when it comes to your own rights, but hard to be supportive of the acceptance of the rights of the others. The idea or concept of equal dignity and equal rights is not at all self-evident, but it is the result of civilisation. It is one of the main challenges of HRE to convince people of this idea again and again. *Human rights education aims to achieve universal commitment to the dignity and worth of each human person. It should be a collective endeavour of all individuals and agencies; it should be participatory and an exemplary practice of the virtues it proselytizes for others* (People's Decade of Human Rights Education).

## 2.4 Intolerance versus tolerance

In the broad UNESCO understanding of the term HRE, tolerance education is already included, and the distressing manifestations of old and new intolerance give high priority to tolerance education. The living conditions of modernisation force the citizens to shape the growing varieties and diversity of their own freedoms and endure the freedoms of others. At the same time there is a need to explain the inner connections between human rights and tolerance for better understanding. *It is about the connection between acceptance of equality and accepting difference.* Even where human rights of others are accepted in an abstract way, intolerance still exists, very often towards what people actually do with their right to be free and different. Tolerance as a *competence* of citizens living in rapidly changing societies should not just be requested, but tolerance has to be learned. One has to be made *capable* of tolerance, and it is one of the utmost tasks of tolerance education to promote the elements of his capability.

## 2.5 The approach of empowerment

Empowerment is the magic word within the international discourse, that defines approaches which help to develop human rights competencies. Empowerment aims at the development of a balanced self-confidence. Only those who have experienced recognition themselves are able to recognize the rights of others. Empowerment is a pre-condition for sharing rights and responsibilities with others. Empowerment works as prevention against the feelings of fear, stress, insecurity, powerlessness and inferiority which are the fruitful ground for excluding and discriminating others.

It is through *education in human rights* that recognition could be experienced in every day life at school and in the community. We have to make human rights an early life experience. Educational research shows conclusively that attitudes about equality and human dignity are largely set before the age of ten. Human rights education cannot start too young. Taking into account the broad discussion of empowerment within the fields of HRE and of citizenship education empowerment has also a social and political meaning. It can be understood as

1. a process by which powerless or excluded people become aware of the power influencing their lives
2. an educational approach that encourages personal development, a sense of competence and self-confidence
3. a process of learning that helps to develop social and political competencies
4. a process that leads people to perceive themselves entitled and able to make decisions
5. a means to enable people to become aware of their rights and responsibilities
6. a process of power control by developing a kind of counter power of educated people with an human rights awareness and with human rights competencies.

*Human rights education is a way of clearing and preparing the ground for reclaiming and securing our right to be human. It is learning about justice and empowering people in the process. It is a social and human development strategy that enables women, men, and children to become agents of social 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 ( People's Decade of Human Rights Education).*

### **3. The impact of September 11 on HRE**

#### **3.1 The impact of terrorism**

The terrorist attacks of September 11 had a terrible impact on human rights and tolerance: on the one side it was an attack on the culture of human rights, and on the other side the worldwide reactions on the terrorism led to a remarkable pressure on human rights and tolerance. The impact on HRE was more ambivalent: on the one hand we can see an increase of activities to foster human rights of discriminated minorities and on the other hand there is a new reluctance among many learners to human rights and tolerance issues.

The main challenge deriving from terrorism is the reestablishment of a feeling of security amongst citizens. Because of the extreme dimension of the attacks and the deep feelings of insecurity this situation is perceived as stress as well by the citizens as by the political class. Social stress deals with the ratio between social and political demands, on the one hand, and people's capacity to meet them, on the other. In other words, it is about the discrepancy between the pressures caused by problems; and the absence of the competencies needed to solve these problems: social stress is therefore an important element in how people react when they experience this discrepancy. If strain caused by the structure of society, or by social changes, meets limited (or an absence) of the competence and resources needed in order to handle this pressure, the people concerned perceive this constellation as stress: that is, the feeling of being challenged is replaced by the feeling of being overtaxed. Probable consequences will be reactions of defence and escape. Stress and changing perceptions of its immediate causes can also be artificially produced by the discourse of the political class. The fear of being threatened can be aroused and increased by politicians talking. Very often this is a consequence of political power struggles, and the normal accompaniment to this is usually an increase in propaganda and abuse of the media. The consequence is an increase in false perceptions, the allocation of blame, and the search for victims.

#### **3.2 The priority of security**

Under this stressful pressure of how to deal with difficult situations have changed priorities: Now security is seen more important than liberties and human rights. Civil and human rights are being sacrificed in the name of the regain of our security. In many democratic systems we can see an empowerment of the state supported by the majority of its citizens. However, we have to take into account, that once upon a time human rights have developed out of a similar feeling of insecurity and the need for protection. But nowadays the "old threatening state" is perceived as a power to be trusted and as the only power able to fight terrorism. For those citizens who feel panic even the strong state is acceptable. (Of course there is also an interest in the feeling of insecurity by those politicians who are interested in a strong state.) The Washington Post, for example, conducted a study into how people feel about giving up some privacy for greater security, including internet as well as other forms. The results pointed overwhelmingly toward a feeling for the need for increased security. (Cha and Krim, September 2001) In response to the terrorist attacks, AOL Time Warner and EarthLink internet providers are two companies the FBI has contacted to essentially "eavesdrop" in order to find any incriminating information. People interviewed supported any intrusion of privacy for the purpose of increasing safety and security. One such person, Eva Chung, said, "I am very much for what this country was founded on, freedom and the Bill of Rights and everything. But when it's a matter of people's lives and making sure we all have a nice place to live,

then I would definitely give up the privacy part to ensure the other part." (Cha and Krim, September 2001) ([www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/j/sjm275/ist/istindex.html](http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/j/sjm275/ist/istindex.html) )

In "The Ottawa Citizen Thursday, December 06, 2001" we could read from David Coursey, Executive Editor of AnchorDesk: " I hope people who criticize the National Security Agency's Echelon, the FBI's Carnivore, and other electronic eavesdropping tools will appreciate the true nature of the threat to our way of life... I have a much greater fear of my government's enemies than of my government itself." "Desperate times call for desperate measures," he continued. "I am willing to give up my own cyberprivacy for the greater good of stopping future terrorist acts and saving lives - with one caveat. Government surveillance must be focused only on those suspected of planning or perpetrating terrorist acts against the U.S. or its allies." In the weeks since, the public willingness to give up privacy has not waned. Nor is this new mood an exclusively American group-think. A Gallup Canada poll conducted in mid-October indicated that almost three-quarters of Canadians think it more important for police to intercept communication between suspected terrorists than to protect the privacy of the public (<http://www.conscoop.ottawa.on.ca/rgb/freeswan/ottawacitizen-freeswan.html>).

### **3.3 Regression of human rights standards**

The debate on torture has shown that the stress of terrorism leads even to a regression of moral and human rights standards. Even though there has not yet been any report "that September 11 detainees have, in fact, been subjected to torture or drugging", there is great concern about "the suggestion that interrogations under torture or drugging should be permitted in the campaign against terrorism. The right to be free from such mistreatment is one of the most fundamental and unequivocally affirmed human rights. In times of terrorist threats and high public anxiety, the temptation arises to sacrifice rights that appear to impede the quest for security. But that temptation must be vigorously resisted, particularly when such fundamental rights are at stake. The right not to be tortured or physically mistreated is not a luxury to be dispensed with in difficult times, but the very essence of a society worth defending" (<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/11/TortureQandA.htm>).

### **3.4 The increase of intolerance**

The stress of terrorism leads not only to a change in relations among citizens and the state but also to a change within civil society. Human rights lost a lot of its standards setting influence for the relations among the citizens. We had to experience an increase of prejudices, foe images, intolerance and even hate. The tolerance threshold in a society can be conceived as a stress threshold: The higher the social and political stress, the lower the probability that stressed citizens act in a tolerant way. Prejudice and foe images play a crucial role in the subjective response to the handling of stress. People who feel overtaxed are likely to react to stress with prejudice, and false perceptions, with their inherent simplifications and their propensity to feel no respect for those who are different. Prejudice leads therefore to a distorted perception of reality, including the stress situation itself. So that those who are perceived as in some way different are likely to be regarded as the causes of stress. Especially the linkage (constructed) between migration and terrorism reduced the readiness for tolerance. According to Human Rights Watch, a great increased number of hate crimes have occurred since September 11

" ... violent assaults, harassment and threats against Muslims, Sikhs and people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent. These shameful acts against men, women and children targeted because of their religious beliefs, ethnicity or national origin violate basic principles of human rights and justice ... (people must learn) to reject national or religious stereotyping that would blame whole communities for the appalling deeds of a few - deeds, in fact, whose victims included members of some of the same religious, ethnic and national minorities now being injured by retaliation." (<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/09/usreprisal0921.htm>)

### **3.5 The concern of human rights organisations**

In response to these regressive reactions many human rights organizations have developed strong criticism and a variety of activities underlining the crucial role of human rights as an antidote to terrorism. Human Rights Watch states: "Any fight against terrorism is only in part a matter of security. It is also a matter of values. Police, intelligence units, even armies all have a role to play in meeting particular terrorist threats. But terrorism emanates as well from the realm of public morality. Terrorism is less likely when the public embraces the view that civilians should never be targeted - that is, when the public is firmly committed to basic human rights principles. ...Our concern is with the mores that would countenance such mass murder as a legitimate political tool. Sympathy for such crimes is the breeding ground for terrorism; sympathizers are the potential recruits. Building a stronger human rights culture - a culture in which any disregard for civilian life is condemned rather than condoned - is essential in the long run for defeating terrorism. Many of the policies of the major powers, both before and after September 11, have undermined efforts to build a global culture of human rights. These governments often embraced human rights only in theory while subverting them in practice. Reversing these policies is essential to building the strong human rights culture needed to reject terrorism" (<http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/intro.html>).

### **3.6 Responses of human rights educators**

In the field of HRE there are similar activities of NGOs responding to the new challenge of human rights under pressure. Nancy Flowers outlines the reactions in the US: "The creativity and energy of these nongovernmental organizations can be illustrated by the abundance and quality of their responses to the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. In a matter of weeks, the Education Program of Amnesty International USA had published September 11th Crisis Response Guide, a curriculum for middle and high school that addresses these issues from the perspective of both human rights and humanitarian law and offers ideas for taking responsible action. The Constitutional Rights Foundation has produced a series of challenging lessons raising questions that put events in a human rights context, like "Do We Need an International Criminal Court?" and "What is Terrorism?" Many organizations like the American Forum for Global education; Educators for Social Responsibility, Teaching for Change and the Education Development Center have offered resources for educators to confront discrimination and injustice against Arab-Americans, Muslims and other minorities. Other groups such as Global Source Education in Seattle, Washington, and the Bay Area Writing Project in Berkeley, California, have quickly organized teacher workshops and seminars with a human rights emphasis" (<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itdhr/0302/ijde/flowers.htm>).

### **3.7 The need for a new kind of empowerment**

However, all these activities can't let us forget that HRE itself is under stress. Fighting terrorism demonstrates us that sustainable HRE is limited. HRE after September 11 means building a stronger awareness for and about human rights under conditions of extreme insecurity and fear. This feeling of insecurity causes a deep reluctance towards human rights issues and even fosters processes of unlearning of human rights and human rights standards amongst many learners. What is needed is a new push of empowerment of the learners to enable them to cope better with the challenges of insecurity and to counter the feelings of powerlessness. Even if the threat of terrorism cannot be "educated away", it should be possible to prepare people to cope with the feelings that terrorism can provoke. However, first of all, the human rights educators have to rethink their approaches how to overcome ignorance, incompetence and intolerance in times of terrorism. - Which kind of critical knowledge is needed to understand the root causes of terrorism, the options of political decisions, and the possibilities to defend human rights?

- How can sceptical learners be convinced that human rights are part of the solution of the fight or so-called war on terrorism rather than being an obstacle fighting terrorism?

- What are the methods that have to be developed to regain confidence in our human rights which we believe have been reduced.
- How can the willingness to accept the rights of other people be developed when he or she is suspected to be a potential terrorist?
- How the learners can be convinced that a suspect terrorist has human rights and that the acceptance of torture leads to a breakdown of the values of our civilization?
- How can we educate for a sustainable acceptance of equal rights under conditions of social stress and political insecurity?
- Who can provide those resources and experiences, which enable the learner to accept equal rights of others even under the conditions of social inequality and insecurity?
- How is personal empowerment possible so that powerless people among us do not escape from reality and become intolerant?

Knowing that one influential factor for change is the public discourse, we have to think about chances and channels to influence this public discourse on tolerance and on human rights in order to improve the protection of human rights and to build a culture of tolerance.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Human rights education has developed into a genuine area of human rights development. No society can guarantee human rights without the effort to develop in citizens an awareness of human rights: the knowledge of your own rights, the willingness to accept the same rights for others and to support the defence of the rights of all people according to one's own possibilities. However, after September 11, we are challenged to path the way for a kind of sustainable human rights awareness! We are facing new kinds of risks and threats. We are confronted with a new "wave" of global insecurity produced by international terrorism and by the "war on terrorism". The tasks of HRE are becoming more difficult now: How can we cope with a climate of fear and hate where human rights and tolerance are no more guidelines of our life. HRE after September 11 means awarenessbuilding under conditions of extreme insecurity and fear. This feeling of insecurity causes a deep reluctance towards humans rights issues and even fosters processes of unlearning of human rights and human rights related standards amongst many learners. What is needed is a new push of empowerment of the learners in order to enable them to cope better with the challenges of insecurity and to counter the feelings of powerlessness.

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