

5.0 AHRC policy development relating to communications

In November 1994 when we started the new orientation in the AHRC, it was agreed that one of the most important pillars of the new orientation will be the use of communication technology to protect and promote human rights.

This policy was based on several considerations. The type of human rights problems that exist in the countries in which we were working were little known to the rest of the world, including UN circles involved in human rights and international human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Asia Watch, and therefore enjoyed little discussion. Instead, what often take place are generalized human rights discussions based on principles rather than concrete knowledge about actual violations taking place and their causes. Later we termed this kind of analysis the 'micro-approach' as against the macro approach.

The countries in which we were working at that time were Sri Lanka and Cambodia. At that time Sri Lanka had experienced over 30,000 forced disappearances and in Cambodia the entire institutional structure had been destroyed during the Pol Pot period. Aware of the horrific realities, we felt that global discussions remained ignorant of the situation facing these countries.

With no financial resources available to us at that time, and only two staff, the question before us was how to bring the information to others so they could recognize these weighty human rights problems. The only way was through extensive writing, while disseminating this writing as widely as possible. At this time, personal computers were becoming more widely used, while email and websites were in their infancy. We decided that all our communication should be done through email networking, and organized our setup accordingly, so that we would be able to share our information with a wide group of people.

This strong point allowed the organization to regain its activism, build linkages and communicate the message that we were going to play an active role in regional human rights issues. The mainstream media not being a real option for promoting human rights work, we were aware of the enormous potential that could be opened up for civil society organizations due to the new communication technologies. Many organizations that had tried to obtain greater access to the mainstream media were very often disappointed.

The AHRC had analyzed the issue and was of the view that we would never succeed in getting large scale space in the mainstream media for human rights work. The news in the mainstream media is quite different and much of its considerations are driven by commercial interests. Issues relating to human rights are of little importance to commercial interests; one or two articles may appear on various rights aspects, but these could not become a regular form of information sharing. The primary interest of the mainstream media and those trained to use it are different from that of those involved in human rights or civil society work. **In order to be communication effective therefore, it was important for us to enhance our own communication capacities.**

Many organizations had small networks to whom they would distribute their periodic newsletters or books. These were reaching a few hundred people and were only printed occasionally. Daily publication was not possible due to the costs involved in.

Though print media was difficult for a small organization to engage in from the point of view of costs and the work entailed, it was possible to produce regular publications through the internet. **What was required was a new mental orientation, skills development and communication capacities. We engaged ourselves in acquiring the necessary skills so that we would be able to publish issues of concern to us on a daily basis without depending on mainstream or print media.**

In doing this work, we realized at an early stage that it was not just a lack of concrete information on the relevant countries that was missing in the human rights discussion, but also an analytical approach. Human rights work at the time consisted more of propagating international principles and analyzing why they were not being practiced in various countries. To establish human rights work that is relevant and useful to our part of the world, it is essential that problems relating to the development of institutions and the ways of dealing with these problems should become a central part of the human rights discussion. **Any analysis of the relationship between human rights principles and institutions was not common during that time. People would talk about the need to eliminate torture, but would not discuss in detail why it was taking place. Not only was constant analysis thus needed on these issues, but this analysis needed to be shared so that the discourse could be intensified.**

Related to this was analyzing jargon such as 'creating awareness of human rights' and 'creating the empowerment of the people'; what did all this mean? We found that very often there wasn't much content in such words. We cultivated an awareness of why rights were denied to the people, what were the obstacles to realizing their rights and how these could be overcome. We also encouraged people to improve their knowledge of these problems so they could deal with them on their own. **Empowerment for us meant people thinking through their problems and participating in discussions on human rights.**

It was on this basis that we tried to find other ways of doing this, particularly through the Danish folk school concept under the NFS Grundtvik school of thought. We made extraordinary effort to understand this movement and brought this consciousness into our work. Our early work on human rights education was termed 'Folk School Education'. This concept was incorporated into a book we published under the title of Demoralisation and Hope. We made a deliberate attempt to bring this approach to communications based on historical work of civil society organizations of the past. Thus the idea of awareness building of consciousness was the awareness of the people themselves discussing their own concrete problems and coming to terms with why certain things were happening to their lives and countries and thereby developing strategies to deal with them.

We also realized at an early stage that in order to do this we would have to establish contacts with people outside Sri Lanka and Cambodia (where we were working at that time). **We also felt the need for a new type of human rights activist, who would be prepared to undertake thorough documentation of the causes of human rights violations.** Through our training programmes and other means, we decided to get in touch with people from various Asian countries and train them to develop this component in their work. It was through this process that the AHRC's country work evolved.

To ensure that our work would not be lost sight of or once again suppressed by the macro approach--the dominant approach of developed countries--we had to remain constantly vocal. It is quite difficult to introduce a new approach to human rights work or any work in fact, when there are prevailing dominant

modes in the field. **We had to demonstrate that the old approach had certain defects and that we were able to bring a new approach.**

Today, the fact that we approach our work differently from other organizations is well known in the human rights field. We have made a significant contribution to the human rights field, and the basis on which this was possible was effectively utilizing modern communication technology. **The importance given to advocacy based on communications is a unique feature of the AHRC work, which is not generally followed by any other organization.**