

8.0 Local knowledge: Human rights practices to improve knowledge about particular countries

Each country is unique, having its own history, political institutions, administrative institutions, forms of political organizations and cultural habits. The understanding and practice of international legal and human rights norms must happen through an interaction with these unique characteristics. This means that there will be both areas where cooperation is possible, and areas of conflict. To decide whether to gain cooperation or to fight in favour of international norms when there is a conflict, a human rights organization needs to have detailed knowledge about the society and its governance structure.

By its very nature, a regional organization is situated outside most of the countries in which it works. One of its inherent problems therefore, is that it—and its staff—do not possess a common understanding about all the countries it engages in. A regional organization may have one or more staff from a particular country, as well as staff from many different countries and even regions. This is different to a local organization where all the staff belong to that particular country and have a certain degree of common understanding about it.

If a regional organization wants to be effective in assisting various countries in their realization of human rights, it must gain the relevant knowledge and experience of each country. This knowledge, combined with a knowledge of universal norms and standards, is what will help the organization in developing strategies and action plans for a particular country.

As mentioned earlier, the regional organization can only acquire this type of knowledge through interaction with local groups in each country. Any organization that wants to be effective within a national context cannot opt out of this. The organization needs to gradually recruit people from each country, and provide facilities for them to work out strategies and action plans for their own country. A regional organization may provide opportunities for understanding international human rights norms and standards as well as technical and communication assistance to these persons; these are all but tools for them to develop their own local strategy on specific human rights issues.

Persons coming from completely different environments will need to develop extremely close links within these countries if they are to do any effective human rights work. When the organization recruits such persons, it must provide opportunities for them to do so, which can include living and working with local individuals or associates of the AHRC for a considerable period.

A regional organization stands between each unique country and the international community—meaning the various components of the UN human rights mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council, Human Rights Committee, sub commissions, Rapporteurs, as well as various countries with an interest in human rights. This standpoint needs the organization to be competent in dealing with both. It must not only have a great deal of local knowledge, but it must be able to transmit this effectively to the international community.

To summarize, it is essential for a regional organization to improve its knowledge about each country it works in. Without this, it cannot promote and protect international human rights norms; this knowledge is directly related to the organization's legitimacy. Since 1995, we have struggled hard to carry out our obligations through various means depending on our human and financial resources. There is no doubt

that we have taken many constructive steps and can even claim to be the only regional organization that has consistently pursued this path. However, our work is only just beginning. We are more capable now than in the initial years to engage in improving knowledge through close interactions. There is yet a very long way to go if we are to make the contribution that each of these unique country situations require to improve the understanding and practice of international norms and standards.