

2023

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Recommended Citation

Martin, J., & Dutt, S. (2023). Evaluating the Past and Charting the Future of Human Rights Education. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 7(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol7/iss1/6>

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Evaluating the Past and Charting the Future of Human Rights Education

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the field of human rights education (HRE) using an input/output schema. It examines the challenges encountered at the delivery points where instructors must contextualize the now extensive corpus of human rights documents and practices to meet the needs, and the political

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and cultural traditions, of their particular target population. The challenges also point to the dominance of prescriptive over evaluative HRE literature, the degree to which HRE is not a stand-alone activity and the limited HRE-specific teacher training. The authors therefore call for more research on the long-term HRE outcomes of human rights education initiatives.

Keywords: Human rights education, input-output schema, diversity, critical pedagogy, teacher training

The Terrain

The content of human rights education (HRE) is based on the general principles enunciated in numerous international and domestic documents, beginning with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and its progeny, on one hand (top-down), and the worldwide *de facto* abuses and violations of human rights, on the other hand (bottom-up). As no single HRE activity¹ can cover all the standards, topics, and realities included in both the documents and the worldwide empirical evidence of abuses, the content of any given HRE program is necessarily selective.

Thai legal scholar Vitit Muntarbhorn (1998) concluded that human rights pedagogy suffers from insufficient critical analysis, emphasis on duties rather than rights, too much dependence on individual teachers, and from being “Eurocentric by nature,” rather than being based on the principles and practices of Indigenous and other marginalized communities (p. 208). Recent academic overviews of the field raise similar issues, underlining the need for more systematic teacher training and more research on the effectiveness of HRE (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997; Tibbitts, 2017; Bajaj & Wahl, 2017). We ask: To what degree has the HRE field outside the world’s institutions of higher education changed today? In practice, the majority of writing on HRE

¹ The premises examined in this essay have in view all forms and levels of HRE insofar as they (a) are substantially based on international and domestic human rights norms, and (b) seek in varying degrees to convey knowledge, values, attitudes and skills designed to influence out-of-classroom behavior and agency. We exclude consideration of rights claimed without close association with the international and domestic regimes.

consists of prescriptive recommendations, while independent empirical and evaluative research of its outcomes, particularly among target populations, is still minimal. Generally, every HRE program reflects prioritizations defined implicitly or explicitly by the delivery actors, notably the donors, project administrators, political and economic actors, as well as, at the delivery point itself, each classroom instructor (or group facilitator in the case of informal HRE). The choices made by these actors bring to bear the different sets of goals, content, pedagogies, values, and legal and ethical assessments to be given priority at the actual delivery points by the teachers or facilitators. We argue that in the planning and development of HRE programs and activities, these elements, whether overt or implied, need to be contextually identified and assessed,² and to emphasize the need for more systematic evaluation of past, existing, and future HRE programs in order to improve their contribution to the evolving challenges facing the world.

One illustrative analogy for HRE initiatives is that of the airplane pilot whose task before every flight is to check on the multiple systems and strict protocols that assure the safety of the plane, all of which have to be in good working order to carry passengers safely. This essay seeks to tease out the various elements involved in HRE that are needed to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability. Our conceptual schema of the black box is one way of identifying the various HRE inputs and outputs without trying to establish precise causal links between specific inputs and particular outputs. Implicit in the model is the premise that successful human rights advocacy, including HRE, requires both bottom-up and top-down inputs to ensure strong contextualization. This perspective is reinforced by the airplane analogy, in that to be effective, HRE needs all the necessary parts in working order, synchronized with one another. Just as one common denominator such as the fact that all planes have wings is not enough to explain why one plane is faster or safer than another, HRE programs rely on the combination of many components and specific configurations or models. Each model contains a selection of legal and ethical principles, practices, and human skills, assessments of

² These questions are separate from debates about whether HRE is or is not a discipline in its own right or how to identify schools of human rights thought.

local needs, financial and political constraints, as well as narratives and theories of social change and a selection of pedagogical skills and methods. By using “reverse engineering,” this article seeks to identify critical components and formulate a checklist analogous to that used by a pilot prior to every flight. The checklist analogy identifies the basic elements of any HRE initiative, but does not endorse any individual approach.

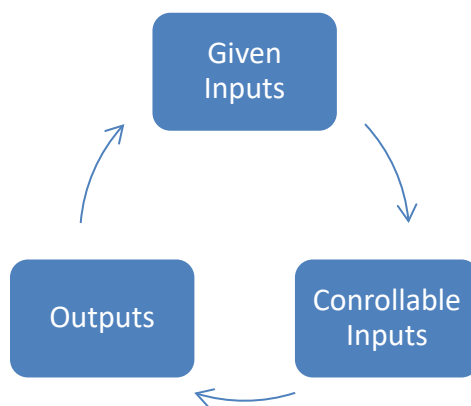
Setting criteria to define indicators assessing the effectiveness of a HRE initiative, however, is more complex than setting a single indicator such as a plane’s safe arrival. HRE has many modes and models. The importance of simultaneous top-down and bottom-up initiatives is reflected in an increasing number of studies on economic and political development and conflict management. This principle of top-down overlaps with that of vernacularizing top-down inputs such as the human rights norms commensurate with the needs, capacities, and inputs of the bottom-up or target group. HRE success, including its sustainability, requires maximizing the contributions of both sets of inputs, namely those of both the educators and their target populations. The importance of identifying the various inputs in a HRE program is the fact that most of those inputs (outlined below) are going to be present in any case, recognized or not. Their relative quality and priority, however, must be assessed in planning HRE initiatives. Some inputs, such as the surrounding social and political conditions, are societal-given, while others such as goals and methods, are components dependent on choice that vary from project to project, even when following the same generic model. Both the societal-given and those fashioned by a particular initiative are always present, active factors in every HRE program, whether recognized as such or not.

Learning from the past decades of HRE calls for more structured and inter-active evaluations and debate about the premises, methods, and models as well as their roots in the different disciplines (Evans, 2005) and their cultural, ideological, and other narratives.³ As many HRE authors and actors affirm, in addition to overall impact assessment, appropriate critical thinking

³ “Narratives” is used in this text generically to describe the conceptual, causal, or empirical context applied to a particular analysis or set of phenomena.

is required in both the planning process and at the delivery points (Tibbitts, 2017; Bajaj & Wahl, 2017; Zembylas, 2017). Among the reasons for the lack of strong evaluative HRE literature are the diversity and complexity of the social conditions of the target populations and the difficulty of, *inter alia*, developing models that assure and measure sustainable outcomes. More studies are needed two or more years after a project is implemented to assess which benefits have been sustained.

The following schema illustrates the multiplicity and diversity of HRE inputs and outputs, showing the many factors that are the given inputs and choices that underpin individual HRE models and their points of delivery; this schema is the framework for this essay. However, this essay is not an empirical but rather a conceptual study. One purpose of our work is to create a framework and to identify the inputs and outputs that require empirical research. Our communication with the Bangladeshi non-governmental organization (NGO) BRAC,⁴ the Canadian human rights education organization Equitas⁵ the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and others illustrates the framework and does not judge the empirical situation.



⁴ Founded in 1972 as the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee and later known as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, BRAC is now global and known as BRAC.
⁵ Canadian NGO Equitas sees the goal of HRE as empowering communities for change and equality by strengthening people’s leadership skills. Equitas’ pedagogy emphasizes the “participatory approach.” For example, using these principles in trainings for children in Senegal, youth are encouraged to share their own experiences, which is then used to shape their learning.

The Given Inputs

- Actors' and target population's respective cultures, loyalties, political circumstances, beliefs, ideologies, preparedness, values, material resources, aspirations, special interests, patterns of discrimination
- The human rights regime with its legal and ethical, domestic, and international normative instruments and agencies
- Political and economic circumstances: positive and negative influential entities, needs, attitudes of target population, forms of discrimination relevant to the target population

The Controllable Inputs

•**Essential Choices:**

- Choice of a strategy, model, goals, pedagogical methods, critical thinking, overall narrative, materials, instructors, physical arrangements, content and adequate funding
- Definable HRE methodology: legal (domestic or international analyses); epistemological/ethical (analysis of principles, theories, ideologies); empirical (fact finding and causalities); remedial recommendations; or combinations of the above

•**Optional Choices:**

- Preparation of educators and training personnel for delivery points.
- Choice of theoretical reference points [narratives, ideologies, potential biases (eurocentrism, de-colonization etc.), academic schools of thought and disciplines, etc.], background research assessment of obstacles and opportunities
- Contextualization of program, primary and secondary target populations
- Modes of assessment and evaluation
- Necessary and potential partnerships

Outputs

- Those specific to a given project
- Ongoing learning support, legal services and funding
- Instructors' and target populations' personal attitudes, beliefs, skills, critical thinking, activities
- Reinforced societal changes: economic development, employment, new organizations, social movements, further education, conflict management, bottom-up/top-down coordination
- The effectiveness of remedial strategies with respect to desired outcomes
- Changes in pro bono, commercial and governmental activities
- Undesired short-term and long-term outputs
- Follow-up planning and reinforcing activities between agents and communities
- Cost-benefit analysis

Table 1: The Inputs and Outputs Schema of HRE

This exploration utilizes the schema above in order to identify the various inputs and outputs rather than focus on particular models which incorporate them. This process enables the identification of the wide variety of inputs, each of which has an impact on the outcomes, even if it is difficult to link any single input to a given output. The schema distinguishes between ‘given’ outputs like the economic and social conditions of the target population, from the inputs “chosen or inspired’ by the agents. The latter, however, includes the actors’ interpretation of the social conditions. In practice most actors may use their own intuitions, experiences, and assumptions rather than a more comprehensive formal assessment of the inputs. With that said, the above schema assumes that HRE facilitators and communities have overlapping roles, where one informs and influences the other. This essay provides an overview of several dimensions of HRE: the actors, the many potential goals and content, its diverse forces, the particular challenges of teaching legal and ethical norms and topics, the degree to which HRE is not a stand-alone project, and the urgency of critical thinking in HRE initiatives. All of these are moving targets requiring systematic monitoring. We aim to define and promote an assessment research agenda focused more on outcomes, as much as on inputs and recommendations.

The Actors

As foreseen in Article 26 of the UDHR, HRE took off as a global initiative on the part of the United Nations (U.N.) at the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights. The U.N.’s subsequent implementation of HRE goals has included the worldwide Decade of Human Rights Education from 1995-2004, followed by an open-ended continuation called the World Programme for Human Rights Education (Mahler et al., 2009). In 2011, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) stressing the importance of HRE at the national policy level for reform (UNDHRET, 2011). However, there is limited evidence of evaluation of the implemented actual policies and delivery point achievements.

The main U.N. leaders and influencers in HRE globally have been the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the International Labor Organization (ILO), with numerous reports on their programs (Page, 2016). Regional inter-governmental human rights organizations have also been active in HRE. Some of the most active have been in Europe where the dominant rubric has been civic education which melds human rights with democratic values and practices, benefitting from the active participation of many governmental and non-governmental organizations (Council of Europe, n.d.). Scholars who insist on making a distinction between civic education, democracy, and HRE on grounds that the two former seek conformity while HRE questions it, tend to criticize this melding (Toivanen, 2009). Regional human rights systems other than the European and the Latin American have so far not played a major role in the development of HRE programs as such. Regional systems show how human rights are universally applicable with enough space for a degree of normative pluralism and legitimacy by serving as authoritative mechanisms contextualizing instruments based on human rights principles (Shelton, 2008). This could be given more attention in HRE curricula formulation as it extends to the contextualization of the various inputs and outputs required by HRE.

The *de facto* roles of individual governments in HRE are difficult to summarize, let alone evaluate. One reason is because the human rights movement as a whole, beginning with its blooming after WWII and continuing through the Cold War and anti-Apartheid movement, portrayed many governments as either major causes of human rights abuses or simply as not fulfilling their obligation to protect all the rights of their citizens. Then again, for some governments, in different ways, human rights as well as HRE became a tool of foreign policy, *inter alia*, to challenge other governments on the basis of their failure to protect the rights of their citizens. For example, U.S. foreign aid policy has incorporated teaching and practices related to women's rights with respect to abortion (Global Health Policy, 2021), while recent events domestically, such as the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, might prove to be contrary to what is promoted abroad. Moreover, almost every

government has had to defend itself for inadequate responses to some abuses within their own jurisdiction or for a lack of commitment to the fate of human beings in other parts of the world. Human rights and governments have a checkered history: governments can either promote rights for some or be a major source of human rights abuses for others, and in some cases can contribute to the co-optation of HRE. For instance, the 1840 American decennial census presented the improbable and incendiary notion that slavery was good for Black people on the grounds that data indicated that freedom led to insanity, specifically that free Black people were more likely than the enslaved to succumb to insanity (Whoriskey, 2020). This manipulation of ‘human rights’ by national entities fuses the understandings of rights and duties rather than highlighting their complementarity. For their own political reasons, they add their own “flavor” to what the national entities understood and wanted people to understand by human rights (Bajaj, 2012, pp. 136-137).

Another group of major HRE actors includes the wide range of domestic and international non-governmental organizations whose HRE activities both push and work with governmental and intergovernmental agencies. Their work is to be found in every country, which allows the promotion of human rights education. The HRE work of the NGOs provides an enormous body of potential evidence with respect to the HRE “lessons to be learned,” but which has yet to be fully mined. The strength of NGOs lies in their numbers, their variety, their access to expertise, and their ability to mobilize political constituencies. One common weakness is their limited funding, and, as a result, their HRE activities are often short-term.⁶

Not always thought of as proponents of HRE are also the increasing number of NGOs that focus on corporate social responsibility by providing monitoring reports, education, and training through informal HRE. In doing so, they educate both their own agents and the various categories of workers and their supervisors with respect to human rights abuses in the workplaces that form the supply lines of a vast array of commercial products. One example is Social Accountability International (SAI), which focuses its advocacy

⁶ The Bulgaria based Sofia Platform Foundation report found that in every region they studied there was motivation for change; however, they all lack access to funding.

and trainings around a workplace code entitled SA8000.⁷ The code is based on human rights principles and practices as applied to industrial and agricultural workplaces. Using trainings (i.e., HRE) and workplace audits, SAI has benefitted social auditors, suppliers, trade unions, non-profits, governments, and academia worldwide (SAI, n.d.) by strengthening a substantial level of respect for human dignity through informal HRE efforts.

Other non-governmental actors are the world's religious communities. Their role is complex in that while some religions profess standards of social justice for all, their practices are often exclusive or discriminatory in one way or another. Religions are central to ongoing major debates and practices with respect to religious freedom in many countries, especially in those with limited tolerance for religions, and where they are considered inimical to state interests. However, in those states, which have laws and practices that criminalize certain forms of religious expression, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA) movements, etc., human rights educators also face major challenges, especially because they seek their legitimacy on the basis of human rights. Irrespective of their limitations, the religious organizations must be seen as substantial purveyors of HRE but with a complex, overlapping agenda; thus, they are also subjects of needed HRE research.

Another characteristic that is now very visible in these different HRE arenas is the dominant role that women play as actors and target populations in the promotion of human rights and HRE globally. This reality was notable in a 2015 study on HRE and peace building that noted that as civil conflicts ended in places like Colombia, Liberia, and Senegal, women were unwilling to return to the past and eagerly embraced the new human rights norms offered by the educators. Human rights education thus became a means to substitute the more oppressive rules and customs they had once recognized in their previous traditional patterns of living (Holland & Martin, 2017). The individual actors are equally varied, including teachers, instructors, labor leaders, facilitators, lawyers, and even military personnel. In this study, we treat

⁷ A workplace code like SA8000 generates a certificate that affirms that the company is safe and offers good working conditions as per local conditions.

these individuals interchangeably. The variety of the actors in HRE is exhaustive and further aggravated by the diversity of HRE in practice.

HRE in Practice

Human rights education is not a stand-alone-project, intellectually and in practice. The treaty language of the main human rights documents, for example, must be adapted to the situation and needs of different target populations. That process is a composite of the political, economic, and cultural factors outlined in the input/output schema above. Implicit within the challenge for HRE agents is the need to recognize the multiple other dependencies, interactions, and potential partners. HRE programs in poor communities, for example, require external financial and technical support. In Peru, programs addressing domestic violence found that to be effective, the instructors had to work not only with the women, but also with their husbands, the local police, and the magistrates (Heise, 2011; Holland & Martin, 2017). Hence, attaining HRE's goals often relies on change within other sectors beyond the target group. Even in formal education, HRE programs must take into consideration forces outside the classroom, notably politics, the economy, and culturally defined practices.

Studies of successful HRE initiatives reveal a wide range of supportive out-of-classroom activities. For example, to assure sustainability, the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas (Displaced Women's League) in Colombia found the best way to protect women from domestic and societal violence was to enable the women to build their own village with all the amenities like electricity, water, and sanitation (Holland & Martin, 2017). This project required extensive education and training, as the women had to develop their own security systems and learn to construct buildings. In addition, the leader—a lawyer—was able to appeal to domestic and international organizations for support and protection. Similarly, the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC has targeted myriad problems faced by young girls and women in Bangladesh through their Human Rights and Legal Education (HRLE) program, which educates women about their legal rights, existing laws, legal aid frameworks, and tools to oppose injustices. This has encouraged a nationwide process for girls to

negotiate their teen years without being forced into marriage (BRAC HLRE, 2016). These studies indicate that programs organized by women for women in the Global South offer exemplary examples of transformative HRE through the defined needs, techniques on how to incorporate support after the formal training, and ways to rely on partnerships with other domestic and international institutions.

Can human rights exist without democracy? Though forms of democracy are generally seen as the ideal in the West, in varying degrees human rights concepts and practices have also found support in non-western, non-democratic countries, notably by their ratifying, albeit with specific reservations, the major human rights treaties. Human rights have thus become an influential institution in international law and diplomacy. With regards to HRE, instructors and facilitators need to be prepared to develop a sophisticated appreciation of the relationship between human rights and democracy, on the one hand, along with other desirable social priorities such as equality, wealth distribution, and political stability, on the other. Can outside agents promote democracy and human rights within another country through HRE? Haiti, for instance, has been the victim of external interference and sanctions since its independence in 1804. International initiatives alone (such the IMF-initiated structural adjustment programs) have not strengthened democratic and economic processes in the country, and citizens do not have the degree of political participation necessary to protect victims of human rights abuse (Labrador & Roy, 2022). HRE hence cannot function without some degree of social order, and the current situation in Haiti illustrates the complexities of teaching HRE and addressing remedial actions.

This leads to the question of how HRE can function in other less violent but non-democratic regimes, for instance in some Gulf countries that adopt human rights language and some practices on *'realpolitik'* grounds. Langlois (2003) describes such 'rights' granted by non-democratic states as 'temporary privileges.' He examines the problem of leaders stirring 'reactionary nationalism' portrayed as 'democratization' and human rights. These regimes promote some human rights without supportive democratic principles and practices, nor widespread acceptance of international human rights as

universal norms. The 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, for example, develops a code of human rights, which prioritizes the Islamic community and Sharia Law. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights prioritizes communities over individuals. In these and other countries, HRE initiatives are conditioned by local laws and politics, as well as by geo-political considerations such as development aid. These circumstances illustrate need for local human rights instructors and the need for those who can adjust content and method to take the local political, cultural, and religious contexts into consideration. In order to be transformative, HRE cannot follow a one-size-fits-all template. One prima facie example of contextualization was a USAID initiative in Afghanistan, which facilitated its women's rights program by bringing Islamic legal scholars from Egypt to show the women that the women's rights in question were compatible with Sharia law. This and many other examples require independent research to assess their methods and effectiveness.⁸

The importance of the attitude of governments to human rights in HRE is illustrated in the case of the Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar in 2016. The Bangladeshi government opened its borders and, in collaboration with local and international organizations, provided assistance and temporary asylum to over 700,000 Rohingya refugees. The Southern Bangladeshi population was initially ambivalent to the prospect of sharing extremely limited space and resources. However, a 2018 Rohingya repatriation survey by Xchange Foundation highlights important perceptions of local communities in Cox's Bazar towards the Rohingya refugees. A significantly higher number of respondents believed that Rohingya presence in Rohingya-populated areas called unions (as compared to those located in unions without Rohingya presence) did not hamper their lives. They had learned about various aspects of human rights and the government's duties from the presence of international and local humanitarian organizations in those areas. In this particular case, HRE was not limited to classrooms or formal programs; but the informal dissemination of knowledge about human rights and refugee rights served as a form of innate decoupling of HRE (Bajaj, 2012) that

⁸ Communication with USAID field officers involved.

occurred organically and served as a form of unique transformative agency in that particular society.

Bangladesh has collaborated with international agencies in order to bring a greater degree of human rights observance to its garment industries by imposing better workplace regulations after the catastrophic Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in 2013. Pressure from human rights organizations along with local and international labor unions, NGOs, and the general public led to the legally binding formulation of an International Labour Organisation Accord on Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh, as well as improved regulatory compliance on the ground, with better working conditions. These initiatives called for a variety of formal and informal HRE activities through diverse agents. Once again, this example exhibits the process of decoupling or indigenization of informal HRE through the mediums mentioned, which forced a reconsideration of the conditions for effective and essential change (Bajaj, 2012). This can also be considered as a form of transformative HRE, which adopted ethics where global ideas offered techniques for instructing critical consciousness about ‘processes of exclusion,’ offering learners the chance to inquire and act upon imbalanced social relations (Bajaj, 2017).

Climate change has highlighted the range of ongoing human rights abuses. As the main duty-bearers of the human rights treaties that they have ratified, states have an obligation to take effective measures to prevent and redress human rights abuses. This comes in a world where nations that have least contributed to the climate crisis suffer its harms most disproportionately. According to the OHCHR, poorer countries need to be significant participants in, and primary beneficiaries of, climate action and must have access to effective remedies. Climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, therefore, are required to be adequate, appropriately ambitious, non-discriminatory, and compliant with human rights obligations (OHCHR, COP21). As the impact of climate change on HRE is only beginning to take shape, it is difficult to recommend nuanced climate-related HRE content in ways that respond to the rights, needs, and capacities of the populations most at risk from climate-related disasters.

HRE proponents argue that human rights are most powerful as a learning tool when discourse centers on remedial actions and social transformation (Monaghan & Spreen, 2015). To achieve these goals, HRE needs to incorporate forms of critical thinking and experiential learning that focus on affirming the rights and the transformative agency of individuals, local communities, and global networks (be it sustained agency, relational agency, coalitional agency, or strategic agency) by exploring gaps between rights and realities, along with the necessary individual and collective work needed to achieve a more just society (Bajaj, 2018). When HRE instructors and their target populations encounter oppressive states, resistance based on religious or other ideologies, HRE advocates have encouraged dialogues that use the human rights regime to create space for deliberation and social change. Much, however, will still depend on the training and skills at the delivery points.

Diversity and Universality

Conceptually and in practice, one of the major persistent targets of human rights advocacy is the elimination of all the numerous forms of discrimination and the acceptance of diversity among human beings. Recognizing and understanding discrimination, its roots, and remedies would appear to be an essential skill for all HRE personnel at all levels and within all sectors of society. Too often discrimination becomes a routine political tool used to exclude, vilify, and even persecute opponents.

The idea that every human being, irrespective of nationality or state legislation, possesses basic inalienable rights that deserve respect and recognition has moral appeal. However, the universality of international human rights has long come under theoretical and political attacks, including in HRE programs, where critics argue that the idea of “universality” does not account for regional, national, and cultural diversity, is foundationally ambiguous, lacks clarity, and assumes a default template of Eurocentricity. Thus, on one hand, human rights are criticized as not being universally applicable and, on the other, the language is used to justify all sorts of claims. HRE programs must grapple with the general human rights principles and

their applicability in diverse cultures and social conditions. This factor gains added resonance among educators as modern societies are becoming more pluralistic; thus, HRE based on universal principles is viewed to have a growing role to play in public education, notably with respect to such topics as non-discrimination and racism (Osler & Starkey, 2010; Donnelly, 1984). In becoming more widespread, HRE initiatives face the challenges and opportunities of human diversity in both literature and practice. Despite its shared common roots in domestic and international law and social change goals, HRE's inherent diversity "colors" virtually all the components identified in our input/output/black-box framework.

In addition to empirical scrutiny, HRE educators must be prepared to address legal and ethical principles, ideologies (Bajaj 2011; Martin et al., 2020), and local conditions, as well as identifying latent and overt cultural and political biases and conditions reflected in supporting narratives and instructional approaches. These contextualization challenges are encountered in many major current debates such as gender questions, the rights of future generations, the claims of the poor on the rich, corporate social responsibility, and actions that impinge on the shared environment. These challenges lead to the question as to whether and how HRE can contribute beneficially to these situations.

Organizations like BRAC underline the need for HRE to be supported by other inputs such as legal advice and access to health care. One of BRAC's goals in their HRE programs is to enable impoverished populations to understand the relationship between their needs and their rights, the rule of law, and thus the relevant obligations of government. HRE agents agree that HRE needs to be contextualized in order to build the capacity of communities to achieve a greater degree of political and economic emancipation. With that being said, HRE is enmeshed in development programs. These enjoy global stature and promote political and economic emancipation and development, all of which are recognized as needed goals for the international community as spelled out in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁹ and also

⁹ SDGs 2030 are the collection of 17 interlinked objectives, serving as an outline for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.

outlined in the UNDHRET's objective of people-centered sustainable development and social justice. This links the economic political goals of the SDGs with the human rights treaty obligations of the world's states. The combination of the two fields reinforces the legal, conceptual, and political relationship between economic and social rights, on the one hand, and civil and political rights, on the other. At the delivery points, the needed contextualization and interpretations depend heavily on the insights and skills of the individual instructors.

Most HRE scholars and educators accept the premise that HRE should be transformative and norm-enforcing (Andreopoulos, 2002). By this they mean that instruction is oriented to societal change outside the classroom, as was seen in the Rohingya host population example. Like the word "contextualization," all change-oriented components of HRE impinge on and incorporate numerous, often sensitive, economic, political, and cultural dimensions in the community at large. This societal change component is often a challenge for instructors, because it requires sophisticated knowledge of both principles and the evolving social environment of the population in which HRE is being implemented. Recommended remedies can be subject to diverse and arbitrary thought patterns and/or even ill-informed or biased opinions.

Cultures and Context

Over the years, human rights debates have gravitated around universalism and cultural relativism. The official or formal interpretation and application of international human rights conventions are primarily the task of the international treaty bodies and the international and domestic courts. In doing so they must resolve priorities among human rights themselves as well as with other social priorities, values, and traditions. The United States, along with other Western countries, places the importance on individual and civil and political rights, whereas many other nations prioritize community, duties, and economic and social rights (Bell, 1991). This division of priorities among rights has permeated virtually all human rights advocacy since,

including within HRE, as the underlying principles are influenced by differing social and political traditions.

A large part of human rights activism and HRE has been a top-down, intercultural process that is dependent on foreign funding and the international human rights language acceptable to donors. Grounding the importation of international human rights ideas in local cultures calls for considering local political, economic, and cultural realities. This demands expertise on the part of delivery agents. It is not a new challenge. To *indigenize* and *vernacularize* human rights concepts such as democracy and rule of law, human rights educators need to recognize and value analogous concepts in the language, experience, and practices of their target audiences. Most communities facing human rights abuses can recognize the abuses as unjust, although they may not use the human rights label. Thus, some human rights educators pose more questions than answers because they believe that answers best come from the people themselves. Such HRE pedagogy is seen to empower both sides to identify human rights problems, invoke human rights norms to find solutions, and form plans of action (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997). In their respective classrooms, HRE instructors at delivery points around the world are “on their own” as they seek arguments and narratives to persuade their target populations of the value of human rights and the applicability of an international regime to their lives. They have to adjust their “inputs” to local conditions.

To reiterate, regional entities can promote, protect, refine, and monitor human rights in their respective geographical and culturally similar regions¹⁰ and help concretize the human rights legal language for their different communities. Thus, in the titles of their corresponding treaties, the Europeans put “fundamental freedoms,” the African Charter adds “people’s rights,” and the American Convention title includes “duties.” A closer reading of their respective charters shows other refinements in their descriptions and

¹⁰ The African, Inter-American, and European Conventions on human rights, established under the auspices of intergovernmental organizations comprising of member states, notably: the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, the African Union, the League of Arab States, and most recently, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

prioritizing of rights. HRE programs, which operate within the overall regional frameworks, can make use of legal flexibilities. In practice, however, teaching about rights reaches far beyond the interpretation of treaty language. As has been argued frequently in this text, content, method, and outcomes depend on all the factors identified in the input/output/black-box schema.

States often use arguments like cultural relativism and national interest to rationalize their actions and policies that conflict with the universal human rights standards (Beitz, 2009). They are also important actors with respect to religious influences within their jurisdictions. A persistent challenge to HRE is composed of the many different ways in which human rights, or at least rights, are labeled. Varying in different social contexts, human rights and HRE are subject to critiques, such as for being “conceptually eclectic, declarationist, conservative, positivistic, uncritical, or compliance-driven” (Keet, 2017, pp. 3-4). Some educators complain that by placing human rights within a legal framework, HRE deters target populations from exploring in depth an understanding of social justice. Such labeling of HRE illustrates different motivations, expectations, and cultural roots, as well as educational theories (Bajaj, 2011). Thus, HRE instructors need to be prepared to explain relationships between local cultures, religions, and human rights as defined by both national governments and international human rights standards and practices.

A practical example of the inherent ambiguities pitting human rights against social customs is visible in responses to the practice of Female Genital Cutting (FGC). It is estimated that over 200 million girls and women worldwide have suffered the effects of FGC, and approximately 3.6 million girls and women are at risk each year. FGC is seen to infringe upon several human rights outlined under international covenants.¹¹ Human rights-based approaches to the eradication of FGC have included the enforcement of laws, education programs focused on empowerment, and campaigns to recruit change agents from within communities. One successful rights-based health

¹¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

intervention in Sierra Leone has been to respect the importance of the passage rites while promoting alternatives that do not involve cutting. The approach includes recognizing the importance of *soweis*, the women leaders who perform FGC by finding for them alternative sources of income (Breault, 2018). These rights-community-based approaches thus preserve communities' cultural heritage and social values while eliminating the practice defined as an abuse of young women's rights. This case illustrates the need to build community-wide trust assuring ongoing dialogue with respect to traditional practices while simultaneously addressing universal human rights norms.

Gender-based discrimination remains a global problem, which takes many forms and has deep roots particularly in rural cultures. A 2019 Indian government investigation reported by Al Jazeera, for example, revealed that not a single female was born in 132 villages over a period of three months in one north Indian state, the cause being female feticide. Traditionally, the desire for a male over a female child is aggravated by the concept that girls become financial burdens on families due to the practice of the marriage dowry, as it exists today, particularly in rural, impoverished regions. These beliefs are deeply rooted in the Indian population of over 1.3 billion and its immense diversity of religions and cultures. There are now numerous HRE initiatives taking place in India, which could expand the data available for researchers interested in the sources of HRE success and failure. For example, Justice Anand, former Chair of India's National Human Rights Commission reported,

It is said that the awareness of human rights is largely limited to the educated sections of society, while ideally it is necessary to create awareness about human rights at all levels. There has been a growing realization that human rights cannot be taught only from formal documents. Indigenization of human rights education thus, can be one of the crucial components of human rights education in India. (Bajaj & Wahl, 2017, p. 147)

In the face of nationwide human rights issues, new HRE programs are needed to reach every stratum of society where abuses are prevalent. This educational task would be to build on a community's sense of injustice and

desire for transformation. Many HRE studies have shown that HRE works best when it responds to people's desire for change and becomes a building block for educators (Holland & Martin, 2017). Sen (2004) also underlines the importance of the interaction between the instructor and the target audience: not only to encourage target populations to adopt new knowledge and values, but also to inspire the development of agency and capability for transformation outside the classroom. Examples of such successful transformations in different communities need a greater degree of critical evaluation.

HRE can be conceived as a space for dialogue, rather than just the application of norms. Noam Chomsky (2014) outlines in his 1969-2013 collection of essays that we do not have to subordinate ourselves to the principal architects of policy and the doctrinal standards of those in power in order to achieve universal human rights. An organized public has the potential to map out space for authentic concern for human rights within their communities, and thereby influence the scope of human rights education, because we can benefit from lessons of past struggles, and because our awareness of nuanced cultural differences between societies has become stronger as the world has globalized. Contextualized HRE thus plays a vital role in the fight against social injustices. Significant HRE experience now has been dispersed among those organizations that work at the delivery points which needs to be collected, examined, and the lessons shared. As HRE becomes more integrated into policy discussions at national and international levels, greater research on what HRE is, does, and means will be needed to ensure how it can be adapted best and expeditiously to specific problems and contexts. The diversity of contexts in which HRE has been successfully implemented is indeed a testament to its relevance, adaptability, and promise as educational reform.

Critical Thinking

Many human rights educators see forms of critical pedagogy as promoted by Paulo Freire (2001) as a core HRE methodology. This method calls for critical reflection on the part of the educator with the goal being to improve societies through learning focused on social justice. It is often seen as an essential "pedagogical input" in HRE teaching, particularly in

marginalized communities where cultural hegemony often displaces and excludes certain social groups from the economic and social service institutions and benefits of society. This methodology makes self-reflection on part of both students and teachers/facilitators paramount. The balance of power between students and teachers is also of primary concern for Freire in calling for limiting a top-down pedagogy that mirrors societal forms of oppression. Hence human rights educators need to pose open-ended questions, use common language, encourage deeper discussions, and assure students that their opinions will not be shared publicly.

One of the other problems examined by Freire (2001) is that the field of human rights is generally “too westernized.” Critical thinking, and critical pedagogy in particular, call for HRE curricula that provide for legitimate forms of diversity, cultural practices, physical environments, and other differences affecting target populations. Like other methods, Freire’s critical pedagogy encourages instructors and students to engage in critical thinking, notably by examining the claims of all sides (Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas, 2017). Examining the presence and impact of any Western bias on the definition of imputed abuse and the choice of remedies would be only one of the tasks confronting an instructor committed to critical thinking. All critical thinking requires examining the evidence and the principles upon which a statement, opinion, theory, or course of action is based. The primary foundations of human rights theory and practice are norms that are legal and ethical principles (Barretto, 2011). The secondary foundations are the relevant empirical facts and theories about causalities. For any given initiative these add up to the extensive potential choices of educational and societal goals, materials and methods, along with cultural and other forms of diversity relevant to every HRE project. The project evaluation challenge is to submit the choices to critical evaluation before, during, and after a HRE program. Only by more systematic evaluation can we learn the lessons from past and ongoing HRE activities. The input/output schema is designed to identify the elements to be evaluated from a critical pedagogical, contextualized approach.

Freire’s theory of dialogical practice argues that we must put aside the understanding of dialogue as just a classroom technique. Rather it calls for

an epistemological relationship, an indispensable scrutiny of the processes of learning, knowing, and living in society. One institutional illustration is BRAC's HRE work in Bangladesh, based on a model requiring the mapping of community needs in order to contextualize their education programs. One of their most unique and effective outreach programs has been through their extensive and targeted training of paralegals. As agents who bridge the gap between the state's mainly under-represented communities, they are equipped to provide information about the rule of law, reduce legal barriers, and complement the larger judicial system by facilitating access to justice. For instance, BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Services Program (HRLS)¹² aims to develop human rights awareness, increase gender sensitivity, create a platform for greater cooperation between local elites and community, and reduce corruption through grassroots administration. With their basic training in criminal law, paralegals play a significant role in court, community, and prisons.

Dialogue at the community level takes the forms of legal awareness and providing legal assistance, organizing community workshops, communicating with local authorities and NGOs, organizing procedures for penal lawyer action, follow up and fact checking. Since the inception of this program, women in 61 districts of Bangladesh have greater access to tools that generate their understanding of basic rights of women and children, and access to legal services. The process coincides with Freire's notion of the epistemological bond in dialogue, whereby learning and knowing is a dialogue between experts and local communities that focuses on core needs of communities. Regular mapping of community needs is designed to deliver effective HRE strategies, celebrates diversity in program development, and assures the capacity to adapt to constant changes in community needs.

As developed above, given its widely accepted goal to incorporate legal and ethical principles resulting in transformative social change, HRE draws on many empirical, disciplinary, and theoretical sources to establish (a) its case for social change and (b) the strategies needed to reach the desired changes. Both of these are separate intellectual and practical processes, but

¹² Communication with BRAC executives in Bangladesh.

which are often intermingled without clear analysis. An example can also be drawn from BRAC's paralegal program, where the power of legal language clarifies the controversies often arising from human rights agendas. The case for social change is based on a presentation of: (a) a *terminus a quo*, typically empirical data on violations of human rights such as the lack of basic education or clean water; (b) an analysis of the causes of the violations; and (c) a *terminus ad quem*, adequate remedies. Each category has its own methodology.

Thus, for example, Osler and Yahya (2017) reflect on their work on HRE in Iraq with regard to the education of women. Their account begins with empirical data on the status of women's education based on Islamic principles and traditional local practices within the Kurdish communities. They define the main HRE goal as substantive equality between boys and girls. They see HRE as a way to recognize and overcome discrimination by the analysis of learning content, teaching methods, assessment styles, management of peer relationships and learning results. The potential remedies begin with analysis of cultural norms within a broad human rights framework. Their work illustrates the numerous variables and critical assessments that have to be taken into account in HRE precisely because it is a composite of ideas that seeks to change other people's ideas, norms, and practices.

Looking Ahead

The purpose of this article has been to begin to map the current terrain of HRE as a major global activity and to call for the research needed to delineate effective and sustainable initiatives with a view to future actors learning from the past. In our input/output schema, we have emphasized the relevance of the many diverse factors that come together in HRE initiatives. If more HRE research is needed, what is needed and who should do it?

To be beneficial, the research must reach the delivery points—namely, the varied group of teachers, instructors, activists, animators, artists, labor leaders, etc. Looking across the whole field of human rights education, most would agree that the content emphasis has been on the norms, institutions, and processes of the international and domestic human rights regimes,

mostly in a prescriptive mode. In practice, this form of education has fed into many domestic and international human rights advocacy activities, including educational programs. This study has argued that HRE requires bringing together both the “legal and ethical normative content,” on one hand, and the “pedagogical principles and skills,” on the other. The confluence of these two dimensions has to be the focus of the research needed to assess the effectiveness of any given HRE initiative.

Moreover, as so much HRE is already cross-national, future research calls for an international institutional network of actors and researchers. Key among the actors would be major teacher training institutions that have integrated both the substantive and the pedagogical dimensions into their teaching and research. Our analysis underlines the fact that HRE teachers need more specific training and future HRE programs need to benefit more from independent research on existing HRE initiatives. To achieve greater sustainability, HRE also needs to be integrated into public education systems and to expand cooperation among all the various agents. To do this, however, potential actors need sufficient funding, and authoritative HRE bodies need to exercise to the limits their persuasive and mobilization powers with respect to states and to the research capacities of the world’s academic institutions, especially those involved in teacher training.

The research agenda would have to be developed, negotiated, and funded at committed teacher training institutions. Based on the analysis of this study, the teaching agenda to prepare delivery point instructors would cover the following:

1. The HRE Field: Inputs and Outputs
2. The Human Rights Regime: legal, ethical, institutional, and ideological elements
3. The Analysis of Social Situations
4. Pedagogical Choices: goals, principles, content, skills, and methodologies
5. Remedies and Transformative Actions
6. Evaluating HRE Projects

That said, this article is not designed to be a final word or analysis. Rather, it is intended to encourage debate on both HRE research and teaching methods. We have sought to flag the topics that need to be addressed, notably identifying the elements of successful HRE initiatives; the quality of underlying pedagogical principles, such of those of Freire; the importance of HRE being institutionally and culturally critiqued and rooted, sustained, and transformative in nature; using delivery points as the litmus tests; and emphasizing the role of critical thinking, while analytically examining these concepts in theory and practice. We aspire to see these questions become a stimulus for others to be able to mine the field of HRE for its wisdom and riches, in the present and future.

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