

19th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights:
Human Rights Education and Training
4-6 November 2019, Tromsø, Norway

KEY MESSAGES

Human rights education is essential for creating a culture of human rights – that is, societies in which each of us is encouraged and empowered to take the initiative to respect, protect and promote the full spectrum of human rights for all. With the current global backlash against human rights, human rights education and training is more important than ever.

The 19th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights on the topic “*Human Rights Education and Training*” was organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (nominated by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. The Seminar, hosted by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, brought together 123 official government representatives and civil society experts, representing 44 ASEM Partners to discuss the state of human rights education and training. A Sámi Camp visit was worked into the Seminar programme followed by a panel discussion on “Sámi & Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Arctic Areas” (organised by UiT, the The Arctic University of Norway).

The Seminar convened four working groups which discussed four topics: Human Rights Education in School Systems; Equal Access to Human Rights Education; Human Rights Education & Learning Beyond the Classroom; and Human Rights Education & Professional Training. While a detailed rendering of each working group discussion can be found in the complete Seminar Report, highlights of those key recommendations have been elaborated here. The outcomes of the discussions are also gathered in a Seminar publication that may be used by governments and civil societies as reference on the state of play on the debate on human rights in ASEM countries.

Furthermore, the Seminar series will deliver a capacity-building training component on this year’s theme to support the Series’ overall objective of promoting mutual understanding and cooperation on human rights issues at ASEM level. This is targeted for the first half of 2020 and at early to mid-level practitioners from across the ASEM Partners.

From the very vibrant and open discussions, it is evident that there is no lack of commitments of member states of ASEM expressed through the ratifications of international human rights treaties and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process of the UN Human Rights Council. In addition, all UN Member States have adopted the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education

and Training – although not a binding legal document, it reminds states that everyone has the right to know, seek and receive information about their human rights and fundamental freedoms. This is especially the case for state officials – from law enforcement officials to teachers and others acting on behalf of the state, who have a responsibility to respect and protect human rights. Commitments by all States in Asia and Europe are reinforced by the UN Decade for Human Rights Education as well as the World Programme for Human Rights Education which will enter its Fourth Phase in 2020 (until 2024).

All UN Member States, which includes all ASEM countries, have also committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, including Target 4.7 that commits states to ensure that “all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, through, among others, education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” by 2030.

Several regional human rights treaties that have been ratified/adopted by ASEM Member States – including the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education – refer to the importance of learning about human rights and can be interpreted as obligations on states to provide and facilitate human rights education.

In spite of clear commitments made by states in Asia and Europe, the implementation of human rights education and training has been rather slow. Despite this rather “slow start”, human rights education and training are here to stay in both regions. This was evident since the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia of the late 1980’s and 1990’s, human rights and human rights education have taken root in many societies in Asia and Europe. Learning in, for and about human rights is addressed, in a variety of ways, in school curricula, in institutions of higher education, by civil society organisations, national human rights institutions and by governments and associations of professionals that have a duty to respect, protect or fulfill human rights. Participants shared views that in order to build on the momentum of this global/regional human rights education movement it is important to invest in the human rights education infrastructure: invest in strengthening support for educators, trainers, university instructors and all those others who facilitate learning about human rights; invest in ensuring more coordination and coherence in legal and policy frameworks and guidance for actors involved in human rights education; invest in sharing good practices and lessons learned; and, last but not least, invest in research and evaluation in order to develop educational practice and create the necessary evidence-base for making the case for human rights education. It was noted as well that democratic space is crucial for human rights education and training to be fully embedded in the societies.

While a number of good practices were identified and shared among participants, they all agreed that in recent years, various challenges appear pertinent. There has been a backlash against human rights. Support by both governments have been waning, as illustrated by the fact that in 2019, for the first time ever, insufficient funding prevented the UN human rights treaty bodies to meet on their regular schedule. Many states in Asia and Europe are experiencing “a shrinking space” for human rights, and set-backs to the rule of law. At the same time the emergence of populist and radical political movements have also undermined human rights. The language of

human rights has been abused and misused by state and non-state actors worldwide. We have seen instances of misuse of human rights in the name of security and state effectiveness to combat corruption, terrorism, illegal drugs, criminality, and other issues that have popular support. With the democratic deficit and threat against human rights and human rights defenders, academic freedom has also been threatened, particularly in Asia. At regional and national levels, budgetary constraints and the need to give priority to human rights education and training was a recurring theme of the discussions. Lack of capacities, lack of resources, lack of clear strategies and policies on human rights education and training were likewise identified as major challenges. To note that even in countries where economic development is higher, institutions implementing human rights and peace education still rely on external funding.

While digital technologies can be a very useful tool for innovatively imparting human rights education beyond borders, this digital space can also exacerbate the human rights abuses and misuse of media platform. In this globalised world, where the business sector contributes to growth and development, it can also become one of the greatest human rights violators, especially in countries where government is weak. Despite new technologies and space open for human rights education and training, various barriers prevent some groups, particularly children, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers, LGBTs, those working in informal sector as well as those living in remote areas, from accessing education and are therefore denied human rights education.

Participants are of the view that civil society, and in particularly NGO's, are an essential provider of human rights education in non-formal and information education. Their important role should be recognised and they should be allowed to operate in a legally conducive environment and be supported, including with public funding. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI's) are uniquely positioned between states and civil society as monitors and promoters of human rights. They have a mandate to provide human rights education but often lack the capacity and resources to do so. It is important for governments to strive harder in providing free and accessible basic education for all, regardless of legal or political status. However, in regard to human rights education and the right to education, access to free and basic education is not enough because it is also important for the education system to be adjusted to meet the needs of the children and parents. Further, curriculums should be open to civil societies and various human right organisations to contribute to improving its standards. Also, through the involvement of civil society, there is an increased possibility to promoting educational freedom and equality. In achieving the above, it is also important to have regional cooperation between governments, stakeholders etc. in working towards making human right education compulsory and inclusive. The role of the mainstream media cannot be overemphasised as it provides the opportunity for the transfer of information on human rights education to areas where it is not easily accessible. However, there should be ways to monitor and assess what is being shared on media platforms as it can be used to spread misleading information (on human rights).

The Seminar reminds that human rights education is not just a product of teaching but more a process of learning about human rights, learning through human rights and learning for human rights. It is not just about gaining knowledge and understanding of human rights but it is also about learning to respect human rights of others as well as empowering individuals to exercise their rights which also includes respecting other people's rights. It contributes to foster the attitude and behaviours needed to uphold human rights for all members of society.

General and Specific Recommendations for Furthering Human Rights Education and Training for members of ASEM

1. Human rights education is only successful if built upon a foundation of academic freedom. Relevant stakeholders holding key decision-making positions at regional and national levels should take the responsibility to **affirm and ensure that academic freedom is respected, promoted and protected**. University leaders and teaching staff must play a pivotal role to inculcate academic freedom among students and all concerned individuals, thereby creating an environment that is conducive to free expression and creativity.
2. Preconditions for effective training include institutional commitment, sufficient funding, proper methodology, long-time perspective and assessment plans. Trainees should have access to supervision in the phase when they seek to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the training. **Experimental approaches should be encouraged, but their effectiveness need to be assessed**.
3. To address the implementation gap, more **coordination and coherence** is needed among all actors involved in human rights education. **National Plans of Human Rights Education** are a useful vehicle to ensure such coordination and coherence.
4. Increase support for **teachers** to introduce **human rights in their classrooms and schools**.
5. **Capacity building** for all actors including the National Human Rights Institutions, civil society organisations, government agencies, private sector and media to deliver human rights education.
6. Strengthen **academic research** in human rights education practice.
7. **Online teaching tools** on human rights need to be used more in higher education systems, particularly in Asia where universities still tend to rely on traditional teaching methods.
8. For States to ensure that **at least one human rights course is offered to all students at higher education institutions**. This should be supported with systematic capacity-building tailored to equip lecturers.
9. **Foster collaboration between academics from both Asia & Europe** to strengthen human rights teaching.
10. Non-formal human rights education plays a critical role in reaching those learners that do not have access to formal schooling – be they girls-out-of-school, migrant domestic workers or refugees. Governments should provide **more support** (both financial and in terms of accreditation) **for non-formal learning providers**.
11. European civil society organisations in non-formal and informal education can learn a lot from their Asian counterparts' experience in reaching marginalised groups and it may be desirable to set up a **formal exchange infrastructure in non-formal and informal education** based on similar models as those in higher education.
12. All law enforcement officials, teachers, health and social workers, and others acting on behalf of the state have a responsibility to respect and protect human rights. States should double their efforts to ensure that all **state officials have access to human rights training** relevant to their responsibilities.

13. **Develop more innovative approaches** to reach and teach professionals through **pre-service and in-service training**, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), e-learning and; distributed learning that combine the conventional classroom teaching with on-the-job coaching and e-learning.
14. **Follow up with Universal Periodic Review recommendations** that pertain to human rights education and **open space for both civil society organisations and ASEM Member States**, to monitor their implementation.
15. Use **Agenda 2030 platform and SDG 4.7** to develop and monitor human rights education against international standards, by states and NHRI's. Optimise use of SDG 4.7 to foster convergence and synergy among the different stakeholders.
16. Consider the application of the innovative **blended learning programmes** by ASEM governments and professional associations (especially countries in Asia) to strengthen human rights knowledge of judges, lawyers and prosecutors.
17. Develop a **knowledge hub and network for human rights education** to consolidate knowledge created, resources, and experiences to optimise sharing and exchange, including an ASEM academic publication(s) in research and evaluation in human rights education and training.
18. Actors involved in human rights education in Asia and Europe have a lot to learn from each other. Governments and civil society actors should strengthen existing, and establish new **Asian-European cooperation programmes** in human rights education through cooperation of civil society networks and universities. Strengthening and fostering of intra and cross-regional collaboration is encouraged.
19. **Explore the development of quality standards, competencies, guidelines, or mechanisms** for certification towards professionalisation of non-formal human rights actors.
20. **Make information available in the language(s) that is/are understandable.**