Human rights education is at the heart of the entire concept and practice of human rights. Rather than an annex that complements the legal enforcement of rights, many see human rights education as the most powerful tool for turning abstract rights into reality. Education is central to the human rights movement; only if we internalise the values of human life and dignity, will we spontaneously respect the rights of others and work to maintain an adequate standard of living for everyone as a matter of course. In other words, human rights education aims to build a culture of human rights.

A culture of human rights needs to be complemented by knowledge of how rights can be enforced legally. The ultimate aim of human rights education is to build a world in which a culture of human rights guarantees that fundamental rights are truly respected by all. This does not mean that laws, conventions and declarations are unnecessary. To the contrary, in the real world human rights are often not respected, and the growing body of international and national mechanisms to enforce human rights are a key achievement of the human rights movement. Striving for a culture of human rights should not be seen as an attempt to replace the rich variety of cultures for one single and simple culture. Rather, it means to promote a minimum set of principles and behaviours that allow the peaceful coexistence of all people and cultures, and that secure a dignified standard of living for every single human being.

CISV has a lot to offer to the field of human rights education and, as CISVers, we can learn a lot from it as well. In this text we introduce some key ideas from the field of human rights education, and what they mean in the context of CISV. To organize this text, we follow the view that human rights education is best understood by looking at it from three angles: educating about, for, and through human rights (see, for instance, Amnesty international 2011). After explaining what each of these mean, we suggest some things for you to do. Throughout, we draw on insights into human rights education from outside of CISV. Our intention, however, is to work out how CISVers can educate about, for, and through human rights.
Educating about Human Rights

“Only people who understand human rights will work to secure and defend them for themselves and others” (Flowers, 2000: 15).

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the central document underlying human rights law globally today. The importance the people who drafted it gave to education becomes clear straight away in the UDHR’s preamble, which states that:

“every individual and every organ of society [...] shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these [human] rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance”.

Some even say that the Declaration as a whole – note that it is not legally enforceable – is primarily meant to promote education for Human Rights. Mary Ann Glendon (2008), an expert on the UDHR, believes that “education in particular is what the Universal Declaration is all about (...) The idea was that through education they would somehow find a way to make these rights a reality”.

Somehow – but how exactly? Logically, we need to first agree on what human rights mean in order to then discuss where human rights are being violated in our present world and throughout history. Only then can we find ways to address the problem.

Second, it can be argued that only if people know about injustices and violations of human rights, can they be expected to be working for social change and the protection of human rights. For instance, it might spur us into action to learn that human rights violations occur in every single country in the world. We would love to be proven wrong on this one; have a look at the Amnesty International country reports and tell us if you find one country that is completely free of human rights violations today.

Third, learning about human rights should include an engagement with the legal and institutional framework that exists to protect human rights in the world today. Having at least some understanding of the legal documents and the organizations that are meant to enforce them is relevant for several reasons. It enables us to understand how international standards and agreements affect our countries and us as individuals. As active global citizens, we should be keen to develop our self-awareness as actors within this legal framework. This helps us to understand how human rights affect us where we live and in our everyday life, and how we can contribute to their protection. Furthermore, knowing which rights have been acknowledged in our countries and in international agreements is important. Only if we can
be specific and precise will others listen when we speak out for human rights. Last, but not least, if we want to engage in the human rights movement, we need to understand the legal mechanisms at work.

Based on our own experience, we think that once you start studying the subject, you realise how much there is to learn about human rights. There is the cultural side, the legal side, how the global and the local levels intertwine, and how abstract rights underpin our daily lives. It’s a long journey and, yes, it is a complicated topic area. But let’s not be put off, it’s worth it in the end. We invite you to have a look at what we have prepared to help you start studying human rights. For an overall introduction, see Adelaida Barrera’s First Glance at Human Rights. Diana Camacho’s human rights timeline provides lots of starting points to explore, and Jonas Lillemoen Skalerud’s The Protection of Human Rights gives you a concise summary of international conventions, treaties and organizations that enforce human rights. Nevertheless, knowing about human rights is not all there is to human rights education.

Educating for Human Rights

Human rights education is the process of understanding and assuming our responsibility to respect and protect people’s dignity. Human rights education aims to empower individuals to commit to the respect and defence of the minimum standards without which none of us can live in dignity. In this sense, human rights education is always education for human rights. And so, as Flowers (2000: 13) points out, “the ‘test’ for this kind of learning is how we act”. What kind of learning process can shape our personal lives and behaviours to align them more closely with human rights and its values? How can it trigger our motivation to actively participate in the defence for human rights in a local or global setting? Certainly, human rights education cannot be limited to imparting or transferring information from teacher to learner. We need a wider concept of education, which CISV offers. CISV’s approach to peace education focuses on experiential learning in order to develop attitudes, skills and knowledge that contribute to shaping a culture of human rights. As stated in the Big Ed (2009: 8), “Peace Education provides us with the attitudes, skills and knowledge we need to become active global citizens”

There are many ways CISVers can put CISV’s approach to peace education into practice. We have been (and you are warmly welcome to join us!) developing educational activities which address human rights. Throughout 2013, Junior Branch’s (JB’s) Right On team are developing six activities for JBers around the world to use; see the Right On facebook page. Our trainers have developed guidance on how to facilitate
experiential learning on human rights in an age appropriate manner for our programmes, and are also working on training sessions specifically around human rights. What themes for camps will you be developing in 2013? Why not use the Right to Education, or the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a starting point?

We trust that CISVers will find creative ways to educate and train for human rights. Just one small example may help, however, to bring out how this could work. Why not ask participants in your session, camp or JB activity to think of and write down a declaration of the basic rights that should be respected for everyone within the programme? That declaration would provide a concrete example of how we can use rights to live together in the way we want. It could be used throughout the session, camp or JB activity to check whether the group is living up to their own standards. It can also help question how rights can be enforced if we don’t live up to the standards we set ourselves. In the debriefing you could use this exercise to point out links to the bigger picture of human rights; for instance, the value of getting together and defining rights and the problem of enforcing rights. Only if everybody contributes can we realistically dream of human rights as a lived experience for all rather than abstract words on paper.

Educating through Human Rights

To educate for human rights we also need to work through human rights. This means that we should create a learning environment in which respect for each other’s dignity and rights is of the highest importance. As Nancy Flowers observes, “No teacher can teach equality and respect for all in a classroom that does not strive to practice these principles” (2000: 38).

For this reason, facilitators of human rights activities should be especially cautious with the way they carry out an educational activity. It is not only the content or the theme of the activity that matters. Just as important is that all participants feel that the activity and those in a position of leadership model greatest respect for all participants. “Do as I say, not as I do”, as the saying goes, is not good enough. For a trainer or facilitator this can mean that they sharpen their attention to the quiet people in the group, to the shy ones, and maybe those least popular in the group. Is really everybody cared for, regardless of their language skills, and regardless of the way they look and think?

On another level, long activities or programmes – like CISV camps – allow for a small community to develop their own culture amongst participants. Here it is important to realise that it is not only the activities within the camp that involve human rights. All the relations that are built when living together are a space for
us to practice a culture of human rights. This does not only mean not to violate any legal rights of the participants, it also means being aware of the wide spectrum of human dignity that goes beyond what is actually written in laws. If some have all the power and others no power at all, or if some are discriminated against based on ethnic or socioeconomic grounds, we should stop and act to ensure that human rights are indeed fully respected in our small communities.

Peace education about, for and through Human Rights

If we in CISV live up to our principles and educational purpose, CISV can contribute to human rights education in all three senses of the word. As active global citizens, which we aspire to be and educate our participants to become, we will know about human rights. We will all want to strive for human rights, because we understand that a life in dignity is a precondition to a more peaceful world. Through being human rights educators who do what we say, we can inspire others to follow suit. A tall order? Yes, certainly. But why not start trying today? In CISV we have a community of people who care, co-operate, and who share the values underlying human rights. So, if we can strengthen CISV in delivering peace education, we can have more impact to create a culture of human rights than when we act alone.

After each CISV programme, camp or weekend, we inevitably return home again. And there the learning and educating continues. Are human rights in our own communities and countries violated? Who is taking action already so we could join forces?

Our CISV experiences of living, learning and collaborating with people from different cultural backgrounds will have prepared us to deal with different interpretations of human rights. So, at home and abroad, inside CISV and out, as active global citizens we will be better prepared to face the challenges of learning and educating about, for and through human rights in very diverse environments.

References


