

6TH IHREC OPENING REMARKS BY DR SEV OZDOWSKI MIDDELBURG, THE NETHERLANDS 17 DECEMBER 2015

Welcoming Remarks

Welcome everyone to the 6th IHRE Conference!

It is great to be here in Middelburg, Netherlands - the country of Abel Tasman - in the city from which the Roosevelt family immigrated to America in the 17th century.

Allow me to acknowledge the people who spoke before me: Dr. Polman, of the Roosevelt Foundation; Dr. Kjaerum, of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and Dr. Bussemaker, Minister for Education, Culture and Science.

My particular welcome goes to all the people who have worked so hard to make this conference possible, and especially to the convenors of the 6th Conference: Prof. Barbara Oomen, Dean, University College Roosevelt and Mr Frank Elbers, Executive Director, Human Rights Education Associates.

Well done, Frank and Barbara – your ability to create this important conference at such short notice - and up to the international standard - is fully acknowledged.

To members of the advisory committee and in particular to those who chaired previous conferences and are here are with us: Prof. Bogdan Szlachta, Convenor, 3rd IHREC in Krakow, 2012 and Prof Shioh-Duan Hawang, Chair of 4th IHREC in Taipei, Taiwan – welcome.

To all those who attended the previous conferences - and I see a number of you here, welcome - but allow me to give a special mention to Dr Reinhild Otte of the Council of Europe and Prof Bogda Bednarczyk of the Jagiellonian University who have attended all the previous IHREC – welcome.

My special welcome goes to young people and volunteers; the future of human rights is in your hands.

My Background

My commitment to human rights education has been formed in the context of communist Poland, my birthplace, then through the refugee experience as a young man after I left Poland and finally during my professional life in Australia where I have made major contributions to the advancement of human rights and to policy of multiculturalism.

Because of the Australian experience, I believe that promotion of human rights culture is of particular importance in societies that are diverse, as human rights provide an internationally recognized set of secular standards that are universal and apply to all peoples regardless of their culture, religion, gender or any other

characteristic. Human rights framework thus provides the agreed minimum standards of human decency and builds peace and understanding.

Therefore, when conceptualizing these conferences I put particular focus on human diversity and on the role played by concepts such as justice, equality and democracy in the management of such diversity. As you would know, about 50% of Australians are first or second generation migrants and Australia has well-established and successful multicultural policies based on the egalitarian concept of “fair go”.

There was also another factor of importance that shaped the origin of these conferences that needs to be mentioned.

In 2001, as Australia’s Human Rights Commissioner, I decided to conduct an inquiry into the mandatory system of immigration detention. There were a number of earlier inquiries that reported breeches of international human rights law, but not acted upon. The key question I was confronted with was the question of how to make the inquiry effective and deliver a change.

After considerable deliberations, I decided to focus the inquiry on children and to adopt a methodology that broadly involved the public; through public hearings, media reports and publicised visits to detention centres.

The inquiry was designed as a battle for the hearts and minds of Australians and, as intended, it contributed to a major shift in public opinion. When I started the inquiry, some 65% of Australians were in support of mandatory detention policies; when the inquiry was completed in 2004 some 65% of Australians were of the view that children and their families should not be subjected to long term mandatory detention. The net outcome was that the government of the day responded to the changing circumstances and released children and their families from Australian detention centres.

The inquiry has yet again demonstrated how relevant are the pioneering writings of Lord Albert Venn Dicey, a British jurist, about linkage between the law and public opinion. I had shown the importance of human rights education pointing to the fact that, in implementation of human rights norms, states will not go further than people allow it.

In 2006 I became president of Australian Council for Human Rights Education which has a program to teach children at schools about human rights. Speaking at different schools, I have found that children in Australia are very interested in human rights issues, but have very little factual knowledge about human rights and their history.

Birth of Human Rights Education Movement

Although there is almost universal agreement since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that human rights education is about societal standards that need to be learned by each generation and transferred to the next, human rights education was only elevated during the post-cold war world conference on human rights held in Vienna in June of 1993.

The Vienna declaration and program of action stated that human rights education is “*essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace.*” (Article 78, part ii). The conference called on all states “*to include human rights, humanitarian law, democracy and rule of law as subjects in the curricula of all learning institutions.*”

The Vienna declaration was followed by a range of educational measures sponsored by both the UN and individual states to advance education about human rights world-wide. For example, in 2015 we have embarked on the third phase of the UN world programme on human rights education that will last to 2019. This initiative requires educational institutions and the media to embed human rights education culture within national radio and TV broadcasters, printed and on-line newspapers and in everyday practices of our media professionals and journalists.

Despite a range of UN and government sponsored initiatives there was no regular place for non-government actors and academics to meet and focus on the contribution of a human rights culture to the good functioning of civil society. A place, where key trends and achievements in human rights education across the world could be examined, where philosophical questions and more pragmatic aspects such as how, what and when, could be explored as well as human rights education methodologies tested.

The International Human Rights Education Conferences

Looking back to 2010 when I was working on the establishment of this series of human rights education conferences, I wanted to ensure that these conferences will bring a social change through educating the public about the international human rights standards, will become a marketplace for human rights education ideas and a solid training ground for future human rights leaders.

Furthermore, I did not want to create conferences that would be of interest to human rights lawyers only, but to ensure participation of a broad spectrum of people working in the human rights field, including: educators, NGO’s such as Amnesty International and HR Watch, government officials, students, participants from developing countries and minorities. It was also important that the conferences would include practical hands-on workshops from which participants could walk away with transferable human rights education skills and knowledge.

Over the past six years, the IHRE conference series has explored the various facets of Human Rights Education worldwide. The inaugural IHRE Conference, ‘*Educating for Human Rights, Peace and Intercultural Dialogue*’ was hosted by the University of Western Sydney in 2010 with successive annual conferences hosted by the University Kwazulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa; Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland; Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan and the American University, Washington DC, United States of America.

Challenges in the Contemporary World

Today the world is facing enormous human rights challenges.

Here in Europe we deal with the mass arrival of refugees and migrants, Islamic radicalisation and terrorism, inter-cultural conflicts, economic inequality and a range of other human rights ills. We need to act to deal with these ills and to work together to find just and effective solutions.

Human rights education needs to be employed as part of such solutions. In fact, in my view, human rights education with its focus on young people, equality and respect and a set of secular values, provides the best framework for long lasting peace.

In this context, I am delighted that the 2015 conference was able to come to the province of Zeeland in The Netherlands – the province from which the Roosevelt family immigrated to America in the 17th century.

Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms; the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear are the most appropriate theme for the conference.

Timing of the Middelburg Conference

This year is a particularly significant year in the history of human rights. It is the 800 year anniversary since the Magna Carta was agreed between King John and his barons and it also marks the 70th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations.

December is also a very appropriate month to have these conferences as it is a very special month for the human rights movement. December 10, 1948 was the birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was co-authored by Eleanor Roosevelt. It recognized, in international law, that human rights are universal and apply to everyone, everywhere and always. It declared that all people are born free and equal in rights and provided certain basic standards such as:

- right to life, liberty and security;
- the right to freedom of opinion and expression;
- right to family and equal rights in marriage;
- right to own property; and
- the right to elect and participate in government.

After 67 years it remains one of humanity's greatest achievements and a key educational tool. To commemorate, we celebrate December 10 each year as Human Rights Day.

In December we also commemorate the passing on of a human rights "patron saint" Nelson Mandela; hero of the struggle against apartheid and racism and the Nobel Prize laureate - who impacted the lives of people in every corner of the world. We said "good bye" to him two years ago on December 15.

I mention him because Mandela, through his exemplary life, has done more for human rights education than thousands of learned books and articles. He demonstrated that peace can be achieved and maintained through focus on human rights and justice.

Mandela knew that: *“to deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”* He knew that human rights education is a key mechanism assisting with the advancement of equality and liberty within the limits of modern liberal democracy.

What about the Future?

By now, through these conference series, we have managed to build a popular movement for human rights education. A movement that builds bridges between people of different religions, cultures and ethnicities. We have contributed to world peace. The continuation of these conferences would not have been possible without the emergence of such a mass movement.

Indeed, I am pleased to announce that these conferences will continue to contribute to human rights education in the future and to the strengthening of civil societies. The next conference entitled *‘Addressing the Challenges of the Civil Society’* will be hosted by the Human Rights Centre, Faculty of Law (Centro de Derechos Humanos, Facultad de Derecho) at the University of Chile, in Santiago on 12th – 15th December 2016; followed up by a conference hosted by Equitas, International Centre for Human Rights Education, Montreal, Canada in 2017; and by the Western Sydney University in 2018.

To close, allow me to quote again the patron saint of human rights education, Nelson Mandela:

‘No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than it’s opposite.’

I wish you a very successful conference.

I hope that you will arrive back home with fresh ideas and new energy to advance human rights for all.

Thank you.